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Required and desired professional profiles: early years workforce issues in Europe

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Background

While both research studies and international policy reviews consistently point to staffing as a key factor in the provision of quality services, systematically assembled data on the early years workforce in Europe is very limited. Between 2007 and 2009, the SEEPRO project (Systems of early education/care and professionalisation in Europe) based at the State Institute of Early Childhood Research (IFP) in Munich and funded by the German Federal Ministry for Family and Youth Affairs, aimed to redress this knowledge gap.

Research Questions

Primary research focus was the early years workforce in the twelve countries to join the EU in 2004 or later. The project team also updated relevant data from an earlier IFP study in the former EU15. Leading research questions in all 27 countries were: Who works in early childhood settings? What are key differences and similarities in professional study routes for core practitioners? What are current workforce issues and challenges?

Methods

These included (for the 12 post-2004 countries): commissioned reports by national experts; five-day research visits and semi-structured interviews with a range of representatives and stakeholders in each country; document analysis; utilisation of international data banks; validation of the SEEPRO country profiles by a national expert.

Frame

Research located within diverse disciplinary theoretical frameworks suggests that our images of children, childhood, learning, and development are initially constructed within specific historical, cultural, economic and geo-political contexts. These 'cultural scripts' not only permeate commonly held conceptions of early childhood centres as a public good, but also prevailing images of those who work with young children.

Research findings

Varying national and cultural understandings of public early childhood systems have led to considerable diversity in terms of workforce requirements and conditions. The paper will trace both differences and commonalities: differences in terms of the formal qualification standards and content orientation of professional studies, and a common lack across systems in terms of strong and coherent policy perspectives on status, pay, gender and career development. Drawing on data from two western and two eastern European countries, some questions for cross-national debate will be raised. One of these is the possible discrepancy between required and desired core practitioner profiles for work in early years settings.