

EDITORIAL

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# Team concepts in ECEC: potentials and challenges of heterogeneous staff teams

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## Team formats and functions in early childhood education and care—an under-researched issue

Staff in early childhood education and care (ECEC) play a key role in shaping and ensuring the quality of ECEC experienced by young children. They are expected to create an environment that promotes children's development and wellbeing, to provide opportunities for exploration and learning, and to engage in meaningful and sustained interactions with the children in their care. Across countries, ECEC staff do not usually work towards these goals individually, but in teams that share responsibility for a setting or a group of children.

Today, an understanding that the quality of ECEC not only depends on individual professionals but also on their collaborative practices as a team, is gaining acceptance in research and policy. This perspective marks a departure from “the notion of the individual professional as the sole expert for his or her practice” (Urban, 2010) and paves the way for a more systemic conceptualisation of early childhood professionalism. This shift is embedded in research that has shown that the composition of teams and the way ECEC professionals work together, the perceived support from colleagues and the promotion of a positive team culture contribute towards staff wellbeing and job satisfaction. Both factors are important for staff retention and serve as a buffer against occupational burnout. In addition, they have been shown to be predictors of higher process quality, which in turn has a positive impact on child outcomes (e.g., Sandilos et al. 2018).

While there are major differences in team concepts and approaches between countries, ECEC teams generally involve some degree of heterogeneity in terms of qualification levels, specialist focus and job profiles as well as roles and status; they may also be diverse with regard to ethnic background or language biography. In an unprecedented situation such as that triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, certain individual characteristics may gain in importance, such as ways of reacting to health risks or individual health behaviours, as we learn from the contribution by *Petra Strehmel and Katrin Lattner* in this special issue.

Although teams are a constitutive feature of work in ECEC, questions of team composition and cooperation in teams have received little attention in the past. Neither in the context of mainstream debates about professionalism in ECEC, nor in political

strategies for quality development, have teams—and team heterogeneity in particular—played a significant role. Furthermore, team concepts are an under-researched issue internationally.

### **Aims of this special issue**

This special issue, therefore, sets out to explicitly address and explore the inherent potentials and challenges of heterogeneous teams. It adds new research and insights to a body of literature that has typically focused on the competence profiles and qualification levels of core practitioners, such as teachers, educators, or social pedagogues, without taking into account the important contribution of assistants and other supplementary staff. And while—at least in the United States—a great deal of research has been conducted to assess the impact of teacher qualifications on child outcomes, there have been no adequate studies highlighting the positive influence of supporting staff, as *Georgenne Weisenfeld and colleagues* note in their contribution to this thematic issue.

More recent publications acknowledge the fact that in most countries childcare assistants, as well as other professionals, e.g., from the health sector, special needs educators or speech therapists, work hand in hand with lead pedagogues (European Commission, 2019; Oberhuemer & Schreyer, 2018; OECD, 2019; Weisenfeld et al. 2022). These various professionals may work together in different ways, depending on the extent to which responsibilities and tasks are shared or divided based on different roles. Especially in the Nordic countries, work in ECEC settings is traditionally characterised by flat hierarchies and little differentiation of responsibilities and functions. However, this tradition is sometimes questioned and discussed, as *Kirsti Karila and Päivi Kupila* show in their contribution with a look at the Finnish case.

Other countries, in turn, have distinct roles and positions for different categories of staff. In the European context, van Laere and colleagues (2012) were among the first to draw attention to the important role and yet problematic status of childcare assistants, who tend to have lower qualifications, receive lower wages, and often work under precarious contract conditions. Drawing on the scarce literature about this staff category, they pointed out that assistants are associated with a caring rather than an educating role. They are often implicitly or explicitly assigned a 'bridging' function, as they may be closer to the socioeconomic and cultural background of vulnerable families and communities served by ECEC services. Similarly, in the United States context, childcare assistants have been found to play a crucial part in raising the educational attainment among Afro-American children by serving as role models and bridging the gap between schools, families and communities (e.g., Abbathe-Vaughn & Paugh, 2009)—an argument also pursued in the article by *Marisa Schlieber and colleagues* in this set of papers.

However, team concepts that include heterogeneous staff profiles are a controversial issue in some countries and undoubtedly mark an area of tension. On the one hand, potential benefits are recognized. As *Elizabeth A. Shuey and Stéphanie Jamet* point out in their contribution to this issue, capitalising on the strengths within a team and allocating tasks according to individual competencies of staff members can help ECEC providers to offer tailored services to children and families with diverse needs and connect with the local community. Such a perspective also fits well with the discussion about multi-professional teams: It is considered enriching for the work with children if team

members bring in different competencies and backgrounds. The contribution by *Jessie Wong* in this special issue offers a convincing and innovative illustration for this argument. On the other hand, the diversification of teams, especially in the context of the pressing problem of staff shortages in many countries, is seen as a challenge to established professional standards.

### **Our interest as guest editors in heterogeneous teams**

Coming from Germany, our engagement with this topic is influenced by the challenges and dilemmas currently confronting the German ECEC system.

First, Germany, like many other countries, faces a severe shortage of qualified educators. This situation has arisen primarily through a considerable expansion of ECEC services, mainly for children under the age of three. Despite successful efforts to expand training capacities, these endeavours have failed to keep pace with the demands of the labour market in terms of producing an adequate number of qualified professionals. As a response to this problem, there has been a quest for alternative solutions. This has involved considerations such as a diversification of the ECEC workforce, which traditionally has been quite homogenous in Germany (Cloos, 2017).

One approach has been to broaden access to the ECEC labour market for various professional groups, including those with lower qualifications. This political strategy, which is described in the contribution by *Mariana Grgic and Tina Friederich* in this issue, has raised concern and debate about a potential deprofessionalisation of the ECEC workforce. Many field experts see in heterogeneous teams a threat to established professional and quality standards. They fear that heterogeneity may undermine efforts for further professionalisation within this occupational field. This debate has been all the more intense because early childhood educators in Germany are still denied full recognition as a profession with an academic background.

Second, the growing diversity of needs in an increasingly pluralistic society has given rise to high expectations for multi-professional teams, which are anticipated to better accommodate the complex range of supports needed by many children and families. Particular focus is usually placed on vulnerable groups such as children with special educational needs, or children from families with lower SES, or with a different family language than the majority population. With 21%, the latter group makes up a considerable proportion of children aged three to six years attending ECEC in Germany; it requires special attention in terms of language education (Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung, 2022). One policy of growing priority in this context, particularly in countries with a similar high language diversity in the population such as Luxembourg, places an emphasis on plurilingual teams and multilingual practices (Kirsch & Aleksić, 2021). This calls for a team composition where it is not only necessary to be able to communicate in several languages but, most importantly, to be open to all parents and children with ethnic minority backgrounds and create inclusive environments. In Germany, too, recent policy recommendations focus on recruiting ECEC staff from the under-represented migrant population in ECEC (Friederich & Gisdakis, 2021).

While working in teams of varying heterogeneity in terms of professional background, cultural identity and history, or role specification has the potential to be an important resource for meeting the multifaceted requirements of working with children and

families, it also poses challenges and tensions for leaders and staff (Odena et al. 2009). Effective teamwork requires specifically allocated time and enhanced social competencies to work towards a shared understanding of pedagogical goals. While diversification may open up new career paths, it affects the organisation and division of labour within teams. This in turn requires competent and supportive leadership and innovative concepts of personnel management, which tend to be underdeveloped in the ECEC sector (Strehmel & Ulber, 2017). Other studies highlight the importance of approaches that establish systematic and sustainable team concepts which consider team heterogeneity as a resource, allow different staff members to use their individual skills and qualifications for the best possible benefit and to regularly engage in informal and formal learning. Undoubtedly, the implementation of such concepts also requires the support of the setting provider and proactive leadership (e.g., Fröhlich-Gildhoff et al. 2021) as well as relevant professional development programmes.

With this thematic issue “Team Concepts in ECEC” we take a closer look not only at the composition of teams (e.g., in nine OECD countries), but also at established (e.g., in Finland) and innovative (e.g., in Hong Kong SAR, China) team approaches. We aim to promote understandings of how these concepts evolved and discuss the potentials and challenges of their implementation in everyday practice. We address the question of what kind of support structures (e.g., professional development or collaborative learning activities) heterogeneous teams need to be able to promote children’s development, learning and wellbeing in the best possible way. To this end, we bring together the policy perspective on regulations and guidelines, country-specific workforce profiles and reform debates, the experiences of frontline workers in their daily work, and aspects regarding different quality dimensions and professional beliefs.

Various understandings of heterogeneity in ECEC teams are discussed throughout, ranging from specific regulatory mechanisms which frame labour market access in terms of qualification status and professional specialism to a very broad definition building on the argument that every person is unique and how this individuality particularly influences teamwork in times of crisis. Each country-specific contribution provides a focused insight into different dimensions of the potential and challenges of heterogeneous teams in the ECEC sector.

### **Introducing the articles in this special issue**

We open up with a cross-national perspective on the composition of teams. *Elizabeth A. Shuey and Stéphanie Jamet* draw on the TALIS Starting Strong 2018 study in nine OECD countries—Chile, Denmark, Germany, Iceland, Israel, Japan, Korea, Norway and Turkey. Differentiating seven pedagogical staffing profiles in centre-based ECEC, they first compare the team composition across countries. Using statistical methods, they relate team composition with the location and the number and characteristics of the children attending, as well as with working conditions, including non-contact time with children, and job-related stress and/or satisfaction. Results are discussed under consideration of the country context and of implications for the workforce of the future, most likely with diverse education and training profiles. Across countries, the authors highlight the need to balance team composition and responsibilities to promote staff wellbeing, and the role of specialist support staff in heterogeneous teams to meet the needs of all children.

Finland is a country with a long tradition of work in multi-professional teams of specialists with mixed professional backgrounds—pedagogy, social work and nursing. *Kirsti Karila and Päivi Kupila* adopt a historical perspective to investigate theoretical, political, and practical interpretations of this multi-professional approach. They argue that although it has been a key element in the Finnish ECEC sector for many years, persistent challenges have been observed by policy makers and researchers in terms of implementation. Despite various attempts to theoretically differentiate and politically regulate and guide these team processes, confusion about profession-based expertise and related roles and responsibilities are still prominent. Using thematic analysis of key policy documents and a systematic literature review of Finnish studies, the authors determine two distinct periods (2002–2012 and 2013–2022) in terms of the interpretation of multi-professional teamwork. Focusing on implementation challenges, and on pedagogy and professional profiles, this paper uniquely illustrates the understanding and implementation of multi-professional teamwork across time.

A red thread running throughout this collection of articles is the issue of staff shortages and their significance in terms of challenging understandings, regulations and practices regarding team composition and multi-professionalism. *Mariana Grgic and Tina Friederich* investigate the context of the severe lack of qualified staff in the ECEC field in Germany and the emerging debate on possible synergising effects in heterogeneous teams. Applying a structured and typological qualitative content analysis of licensing regulations, the paper focuses on the overall composition of the ECEC workforce and on current changes being made in federal state level legal provisions and regulations to accommodate a wider range of staff qualifications in ECEC centres. Three aspects are highlighted which are likely to be of interest for an international readership: access of individuals with non-pedagogical qualifications to the German ECEC labour market; recognition procedures for migrant applicants with non-German qualifications; and current regulations regarding the access of Ukrainian professionals.

The following two articles focus on a US perspective on team composition and supportive factors enhancing the experiences and self-efficacy of team members, particularly those assisting the group leader.

Based on analyses of state regulations in 44 US states and the District of Columbia, *Georgenne Weisenfeld, Kate Schlie Hodges and Abby Copeman Petig* examine the trends and variations in state policies that address the qualifications requirements, compensation, and professional development opportunities for preschool lead and assistant teachers in state-funded preschool programs. While pointing to wide variations they emphasise that most states have a long way to go to ensure equitable compensation and professional growth opportunities for assistants. However, given a high staff turnover and struggle to retain the ECEC workforce, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic, the authors point to the urgency of taking appropriate action.

Against this background, *Marisa Schlieber, Jenna Knight and Tobi Adejumo* shed light on the often neglected work situation of assistant teachers applying a mixed-methods approach and focussing on three US states. They are particularly interested in the job satisfaction of assistant teachers and the factors that influence it. The results suggest that assistant teachers rate teamwork and support from colleagues more positively than any other features of their work environment, such as input and decision-making or

economic factors. Moreover, this positive attitude towards teamwork affects the overall assessment of their perceived work situation most. In turn, their analyses show that teamwork is affected by different factors of centre and individual educators' characteristics. Notably, differences in qualifications had an impact on the collaboration within teams, whereas sociographic characteristics such as ethnicity or language did not.

Particularly in countries with a highly diverse population, bi- and multilingual teamwork is increasingly becoming a stated policy goal. Drawing on a long tradition of enacting this goal in one of the oldest bi-/trilingual kindergartens in Hong Kong SAR, *Jessie Wong* describes staff members' perspectives on collaborative teaching, comparing Chinese (Putonghua and/or Cantonese) and English ECEC teachers. In her qualitative study, the author triangulates semi-structured interviews of Chinese-speaking and English-speaking teachers, internal and public school documents, and experience based observational data to analyze views on collaborative teaching, cooperation practices among teaching partners, and perceived administration support. In this case study, the dynamic whole-school supportive structure is highlighted as a main factor for this centre's success and sustainability. Specifically highlighted is the need to embrace and celebrate the diverse educational, cultural, and language backgrounds of the teachers for the promotion of the children's development and learning, as well as for the teachers' personal development.

Among the contributions to this thematic issue, *Petra Strehmel and Katrin Lattner* take the broadest view on team heterogeneity, going down to the level of personal characteristics and attitudes. They argue that any ECEC team is per se heterogeneous, due to the individual team members' unique characteristics. This can become particularly visible and challenging in times of crisis, as the authors show with reference to the COVID-19 pandemic. Synthesising two qualitative interview studies on the experiences and perceptions of heightened challenges for team leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic, this paper describes ECEC centre leaders' battle with high absenteeism and staff shortages, decreased interactions between staff members, as well as anxieties and personal health risks among staff. Findings suggest that during this unprecedented period, these additional challenges significantly affected the leaders' team management ability. Moreover, they suggest that team development measures may provide a way to strengthen resilience of ECEC centres in times of crisis.

### **Concluding remarks**

The special issue attempts to take a closer look at established and innovative team approaches in various countries. The authors do so from different angles, providing deeper insights not only into countries' strategies to handle staff shortages and meet the demands of a diverse population, but also into the work situation of ECEC staff with diverse qualification backgrounds and different roles and positions. Ways of organising cooperation in heterogeneous teams are in focus as are the challenges facing these teams, be it in terms of meaningful interactions between team members or for ECEC leadership.

Although problems and challenges are highlighted, a vision also emerges of ECEC settings that encourage collaboration and shared professional growth among all staff, creating "cultures of collective success and efficacy", as Weisenfeld and colleagues put it in

their contribution. While the articles in this issue do not present a coherent narrative, they all promote a perspective of valuing the diverse resources, skills and backgrounds of staff and making the most of them—for the benefit of children and staff alike. To this end, equitable working conditions are as important as systemic support for teams. Sustainable team development, as many of the contributions in this volume suggest, can offer an important approach to strengthening professionalism in ECEC and is likely to lead to more cohesive and supportive experiences for children.

#### Abbreviation

ECEC Early Childhood Education and Care

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