

The forgotten ECEC staff working with birth-to-3-year-olds: The imbalances between the workforce policies and ECEC staff employment conditions in Spain

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Abstract

In response to an international focus on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), Spanish scholars have recently started to explore the participation of early years practitioners in their educational organisations and their views on working conditions. However, a comprehensive review of the current challenges experienced by the Under 3 s early years educators and the examination of the imbalances in workforce policy and working conditions on literature, has thus far not been conducted. Three themes are identified related to the professional developmental path within the school settings that the Spanish ECEC educators follow. The first relates to the educators' initial ECEC education and training, who the staff caring for this age group are, and how prepared they are. The second is linked to the ECEC programs available for children from birth until they reach three years, and how and where the inclusive programs are delivered to this age group, as well as the early years educators' working conditions and the impact of the professional roles. Whereas the third relates to in-service professional development derived from interaction and collective learning. The article concludes with suggestions on how the practitioners' professional development could operationalise policy requirements in order to achieve more inclusive and child-centred learning.

Keywords

early childhood educators, working conditions, early childhood educators, professional development, professional learning community, inclusive education

Introduction

Globally, the quality of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is championed both by international organisations (Adema and Clarke, 2019; UNESCO, 2019), such as through the Global Education Agenda 2030 (UNESCO, 2015) and the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994; 2020), as well as in EU policies. The quality framework for ECEC (European Commission, 2019) highlights that Europe has improved the education offered for children under three (Motiejunaite-Schulmeister et al., 2019). The European Quality Framework (EQF) on ECEC, was developed by a thematic working group consisting of 26 EU member states and a stateholder group. It is comprised of eight statements that have been modified into five (European Commission, 2021a). Among them, one statement argues that the EU countries should promote

professional development and learning opportunities to ECEC practitioners, more specifically by well qualified staff through initial and continuing training and by supportive working conditions (European Commission, 2014a; 2021a; Peleman et al., 2018). Academic scholars have also highlighted that support of professionalisation of staff and working conditions deserves wider attention (Kay et al., 2021). There is an historical lack of research on early years workforce, while recent studies highlight that added training for ECEC professionals is needed (Ingleby, 2018; Silva et al., 2020). In some international contexts, these professionals

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have faced both marginalisation and discrimination in the workforce context (Andrew, 2015; Osgood, 2021).

Remarkably, in order to obtain the desirable professional status, professionals in Spain need a substantial improvement of their working conditions (León et al., 2019). Previous analysis of ECEC settings indicated that working conditions and professional development in educational policies could directly influence the dynamics in the early years setting. Furthermore, quality in the early years is a systemic issue (Peeters et al., 2018). High quality ECEC inclusion is fundamental and means removing barriers to learning and increasing child participation (Devarakonda, 2012; Devarakonda and Powlay, 2016; Robinson-Pant, 2020). After all, the inclusion for all children is a goal and a process, not a state, in which distributed leadership and vision are vital (Heikka and Hujala, 2013; Higham and Booth, 2018). As Krischler et al. (2019) stated, education practitioners must assume their role as leaders with an in-depth understanding and knowledge of inclusive practices and child-centred learning to become competent in implementing inclusion. Also, leadership comes with expertise and opportunities to share knowledge and an understanding of inclusive values (Pijl and Frissen, 2009; Shaeffer, 2019). At the micro-level, this needs to be complemented by collaboration among the stakeholders. However, the following two elements must then be present: the preschool leaders must be motivated to implement inclusion and acknowledge the cultural diversity of all the learners, and the preschool staff must engage in the process with a sense of agency (Colmer, 2017; Loreman et al., 2005). For the purposes of this paper, professional development is the expert knowledge that educational professionals consider valuable for application in the classroom (Daley and Cervero, 2016; Doğan and Adams, 2018).

This article identifies a significant lack of peer review and international academic research about the working conditions of Spanish ECEC staff (Silva et al., 2020). Lera (1996), León et al. (2019) and Sandstrom (2012) are among the few international researchers who have explored the characteristics of the ECEC workforce for children under three years in Spain, while also highlighting a significant need for future research. It is vital to understand how these teachers view their initial professional development and their continuous professional development (CDP) (Lee et al., 2018). Due to the nature of the concept, the way ECEC is delivered differs widely (Jensen and Iannone, 2018). Educational policies in the Spanish context vary across regions and practitioners thus follow different procedures in each of the 17 Spanish regions (Motiejunaite-Schulmeister et al., 2019). Therefore, this article provides concrete illustrations of what teaching in the early years in the Spanish contexts entails.

Methodology

This narrative literature review (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2016) is guided by the following research question: What are the imbalances between the workforce policies and the Under 3 s ECEC staff working conditions during their professional

development path, from their initial training to their in-service training? We have used a systematic approach to search, evaluate and synthesise the literature, and the databases used were EBSCO-HOST, Dialnet, Scopus, ERIC, Google scholar, Proquest, PsycINFO, Web of Science. For our review, we have used articles that focus on working conditions and pre-service and in-service professional development for the staff working with children under three years in Spain. More than 80 documents from the last ten years were selected, including both international and Spanish language peer-review articles. A thematic analysis was then conducted to gain insight and identify current themes and coding information (Clarke et al., 2015). The thematic analysis identified three main themes: The first relates to the teachers' initial ECEC education and training. The second to the professional roles, characteristics and working conditions, while the third relates to professional development derived from interaction and collective learning.

Spanish early years initial education and training, and Pre-service professional development

In Spain, the initial training of early years staff is either conducted at universities or vocational educational centres ("modulo superior de educacion infantil"). Since 2006, guided by *the artículo 92 de la Ley Orgánica 2/2006 educational policy*, there are two different educational paths that produce EC educators. EC educators employed in state institutions with children from 3 to 6, were obliged to obtain a bachelor teaching degree in infant education (Grado en Educación Infantil). The early childhood education teachers are trained by the universities to work with children aged zero to six. The four years academic degree consist of 240 European Credit Transfers (ECTs) which is equivalent to around 6000–7200 working hours and included 950 h of practicum, as well as a the requirement of B1 English certification (MEFP, 2006). There are two years of vocational training for those working with under 3 s, known as the post-secondary diploma / higher technician in early childhood education, which is comprised of 2000 h of academic courses and include 400 h of praxis in 0–3 settings (ANECA, 2005; MEFP, 2007).

Evidently, there is a matter of urgency as the Spanish curriculum competencies for infant education initial training in response to the Bologna Process, formally initiated in 1999 (Eurofound, 2014; Geraldo et al., 2010). The Bologna process was an opportunity given to the higher educational system to change the programs from a professor-centered system to a more student-oriented system (Wulf, 2019). In VET, the Bologna process brought significant change to the VET teacher profession and consequently the academic learning of students doing their practices (Marhuenda, 2018). Unfortunately, at higher educational institutions, there are only very few pilot studies that have revised their pedagogical tools and the Spanish universities are still lacking staff prepared and

able to train teachers who will be working with a diverse population (Pozo and Ribot, 2014). Gómez- Pérez (2010) from the department of Teaching Education at the University of Malaga (Andalusia region), found that the students learning processes were stimulated by self-directed learning and active participation. Moreover, at the University of Jaume I de Castellón teaching is also adapted to the academic units/subjects and uses a variety of workshops, self-reflection, self-evaluation, and shared evaluation with different evaluation tools, such as portfolios, diaries, open talks, team projects, interviews and life-histories (Serret-Segura et al., 2016). Lately, the flipped classroom-model has been evaluated as an effective tool to motivate students from the infant education bachelor degree at the University of Jaen (Ortiz-Colón et al., 2017).

Currently most universities still adapt their plans to meet common grounds between the theory and praxis. At the University of Cordoba the praxis period is guided through pedagogical documentation and educational pairs that works together fostering professional dialogues (Serrano et al., 2020). The competency based approach allow universities to develop a model of specialisation that complement the needs for the individuals with the one from the society, in this case with the educational community (Obedkova et al., 2020). However, 15 years on there is little coordination between university scholars and vocational school teachers (Andrés-Viloria, 2015; Sánchez-Marín et al., 2019). This means that these competencies remain vaguely defined and less transferable in the context of the European credit (transfer) system for vocational education and training.

Regardless of which course the prospective teachers attend, Abellán-Hernandez et al. (2019) confirm a gap between theory and practice. All aspiring teachers, both with and without experience, believe that inclusion is critical, and acknowledge their responsibility to implement curriculum flexibility, modified spaces and adapted communicative strategies. However, during the last year of their degree, they do not feel that their training has provided them with the necessary skills and confidence for a quality performance (Abellán-Hernandez et al., 2019). Furthermore, owing to the issues mentioned above, students find it challenging to implement inclusive strategies and working with a cultural diverse classroom (Barreto et al., 2017).

Cobano-Delgado Palma et al. (2020) points out the vast differences between the two educational profiles. During the practicum, the competencies acquired are evaluated based on a paper report and a note from the designated nursery teacher working at pre-nursery institutions. Practicum teachers located at the early years settings instruct on what to do and then evaluate their practices based on their expectations. Critically, the university does not form part of the relationship building process. The schools simply accept what they are implementing. There is no systematic projects implemented in the schools via the university. This leads to an educational system with little room for change or innovation. Although the European framework is highly beneficial to unify

competences among early years professionals, it is not nearly adequate. University scholars, teachers at training institutions, and nursery supervisors should have a more personalised academic relationship to help their students grow.

Following the European Commission (2014a), the Spanish teaching degree and the early childhood education vocational module integrate compulsory training for teaching children with SEN (Special Needs Education). Castaño-Calle (2012) states that during their degree, students with theoretical knowledge from their degree in special needs education indicate a higher predisposition towards inclusion. However, they claim a lack of direct experiences with young children with disabilities during their teaching degree (Rodríguez- Sánchez, 2016). Álvarez and Buenestado (2015) note that some of the students from the teaching university degree at the University of Cordoba, Andalucia, have had contact with children with SEN during their practicum or praxis period. However, the students claim that their practical skills were still deficient (Tejada-Fernández et al., 2017). Sancho-Gil et al. (2017) also identify significant shortcomings. Firstly, in the duration and distribution of the practicum throughout the semesters. Secondly, in the way praxis settings and mentors are selected, and the lack of specific training for both university and praxis setting mentors. And lastly, in the fragile or complicated relationships between these two professional categories, as in, university versus vocational school students and their respective institutions. Adding to this, the drawbacks of poor working conditions some preschool tutors endure.

The professional role of staff and their working conditions

Through strategies such as the Barcelona European Council (Council of the European Union, 2002; 2019), the European Commission (2014a,b) has set a target where a minimum of 33% of all children under three years should be enrolled in ECEC settings. In response, and relatively quickly, Spanish policymakers and leaders put great effort into adapting and implementing the state educational system to include free early childhood education for children under three (Paz-Albo Prieto, 2018; Zabalza, 1996). They provided non-compulsory universal quotas for the under three age group (Gandasegui et al., 2017). Spain also increased the allocations so that more children could attend, with a “universal” coverage of the 35.7% of the under three population (Serrano- Castellanos and Perondi, 2018). Spain, was furthermore one of the first countries to provide formal childcare to a more significant number of children. According to statistical data from 2019–2020, 60% of two year old children and 40% of one year old children were enrolled in an educational institution. For children over the age of three the attendance was 100 per cent (INE, 2021). As a result, there were challenges in capacity, leading to educational quality and resources being affected. Early years professionals were required to address diversity and monitor

practices amidst precarious working conditions regarding job quality (Oberhuemer et al., 2010; Cohen and Korintus, 2017, León et al., 2019). When it comes to job quality, the Spanish government has also carried out a study evaluating the quality and characteristics of the activities implemented in this educational level. Due to the low level of quality of practices, researchers advocate for change. The nurseries evaluated were not reaching the minimum quality expected in 8 of 10 levels evaluated (space and furnishing, personal care routines, languages and books, interactions and programme structure). Only the gross motor and the IT skills were exceeding the mean, while the promotion of cultural diversity was deficient (Otero Mayer et al., 2021). This was especially the case for staff working with children under three in the expansive private education sector and unauthorized educational businesses (Ortiz and Estevan, 2016). Furthermore, and following OECD (Clarke and Miho, 2019), the responsibilities of preschool educators dramatically increased.

The number of enrolled children depends on financial factors, so the percentage of children attending each Spanish regional community vary considerably, as does mobility between preschools. Some regions, such as the Valencian regional government, pay private preschools directly through quotas per student and fill up the classes at the beginning of the academic year. In contrast, other regions, such as the Andalusian, offer parents a monthly amount of money that can be used either for private or state preschools (MEFP, 2006). Financially, it is more efficient for the regional government to offer allowances than opening new state-managed educational settings (Calvo, 2019). Although some kindergartens are privately owned firms, they still receive funds from the regional government as neoliberal ideologies trust in the market.

As more children attended ECEC, the educator role became more complex than ever (Hunkin, 2019). In 2018–2019 there were 200,000 more children in the first stage of infant education at authorised infant Spanish schools, than in 2008–2009 (MEFP, 2020a,b). In the previous academic year, 2017–2018, more than 34% of children between two and three years old attended an early year setting in the EU. In Spain, this percentage rose to 60% (MEFP, 2020a,b). Which is a significant change considering that only 41.5% were in the educational system in 2008–2009 (INE, instituto nacional de estadística, 2019). However, this data is not conclusive. Unauthorised educational businesses also offer childcare to children under three years. Still, the number of children registered in these businesses, widely known as “ludotecas” (full-day care playgroups), are not included in the national data. There are Spanish regions, such as Andalusia, where ludotecas have been through inspections and closed down by the administrative authorities (Díaz, 2020). Following the regional governmental legislation in Catalonia Government (2021) the ludotecas are licenced as private entities and directed by a self-employed owner, who is covered by the pedagogy or psychology professional umbrella. Notably, they do not follow specific rules or legislation from the education department of each regional community. Furthermore,

their evaluations are mainly focused on the health and working conditions of the workers. Some play groups and pre-school groups in Spain open as toy libraries, shops or leisure centers, and, pointedly, people working there do not need the educational pre-requisites nor training to work with children. From the incorporation of the new policy, LOEMCE, these centres have an extra of 8 years to change their status to be authorised by the educational authorities (MEFP, 2021a). Spain is a country where pre-schools authorised by regional authorities is the only permitted educational option. Only in Madrid, Navarra and Galicia are the childminders (*madres de día*) regulated (Vélaz-de-Medrano Ureta et al., 2020).

In a number of other countries, such as England (Melhuish, 2016; Sylva et al., 2003), there is evidence to suggest that the quality of provision is less reliable in the Private, Voluntary and Independent sector (PVI), which tends to include private and voluntary day nurseries and playgroups run by parents or voluntary sector and the private nursery schools. Although all registered educational providers in England follow strongly regulated inspections from the OFSTED (Hryniewicz and Luff, 2020), there are certain disparities. The private services have a lower quality provision in England and in Spain.

In England, fewer than half of the PVI setting employing a YET (Early Years Teachers), while all maintained nurseries have access to a qualified teacher and they have higher structural quality (Archer and Merrick, 2020; Brogaard and Helby Petersen, 2021; Lloyd, 2017; Paull and Popov, 2019). Of the 60% of two and three-year-olds enrolled in authorised infant schools in Spain, 33.9% attended private pre-schools. Save the Children published a report in 2019 in which the Madrid Community state that only 17.6% of the places are maintained pre-schools. There is a lack of vacancies in public nursery centres and families with a risk of exclusion, due to either a low socio-economic background or a disability, mainly cover those places (Jiménez-Delgado et al., 2016). At the same time, most of the areas where there is a higher population density from lower socioeconomic status, families are not covered with the public vacancies. In these areas only 8% of the potential population are covered within the public pre-school system, resulting in a inequality where only a 57% of the children from 0–4 from specific areas with a low socioeconomic status attend pre-schools. In contrast 84% of children with a high socioeconomic status use pre-school services (Save the Children, 2019).

The new Policy of education approved in January 2021, called the LOMLOE Organic Law 3/2020, highlights that the administrations will progressively increase the offer of public places in the first cycle in order to meet all requests from zero to three years (MEFP, 2021a). However, regional authorities still haven't specified their future plans. In 2020–2021, the greatest number of places were offered at nursery classes at state and “state-subsidised” schools, totalling 96.2%. At the next educational stage, the one taught to children aged from three to six, the percentage of children who attend

private schools in the second cycle of infant education decreased to 3.8% (MEFP, 2021b).

Since the 1990s, Spain adheres to the Ley de Ordenación General del Sistema Educativo (LOGSE) policy (MEFP. (Ministerio de Educacion), 1990), which implies that infant education staff should have a university degree in preschool teaching (“maestro de educación infantil”). However, this policy does not require a degree for professionals working with children under three in private pre-nurseries. These educators only need to gain higher vocational education in teaching/ ECEC specialist (técnico superior de educación infantil), also known as a senior technical advisor in early childhood education. These qualifications impact their working conditions and contract of employment, resulting in their professional category as a level 3 early years educators. Even though their motivation and competences as a graduate early years teacher are proficient, this categorisation negatively impacts their income (Agut et al., 2014).

ECEC practitioners cannot fulfill their professional roles in the way they have been trained, they are over-educated and their salaries are lower than the well-matched workers (Garcia-Mainar and Montuenga, 2019). Spain is the country with the highest rates of overqualification in Europe with 53.9% of younger from 16 to 29 overqualified (Serrano Pascual and Martín Martín, 2017) and also on the top of the list regarding overqualification of native workers in the ages 20–64 years (Eurostat, 2019) This is particularly important considering that only 10% of all Childcare Workers come from other European countries (Oberhuemer, 2018). At the Spanish private infant schools, early years staff, including qualified teachers, are simply required to have modest qualifications and therefore fall within the minimum wage bracket, regardless of their actual capability. Staff are often overqualified, or at the very least have significant capabilities beyond their official qualifications, while at the same time being underpaid, and notably undervalued (Ortiz and Estevan, 2016). As a result, they receive a working salary that does not match their actual qualifications or align with the minimum wage (Eurofound, 2014).

The Collective Agreement for Educators has not raised their wages since 2013, with an ECEC specialist earning 837 net euros per month. Conversely, the public sectors average salary is 1343 net euros per month (CCOO, 2019). The system seems to disregard that to ensure emotional warmth and deliver care, educators must be highly competent, motivated and committed (Osgood, 2010; 2011). In some cases, low pay or even harmful employment conditions have exacerbated the problems of quantity and quality in working conditions (León et al., 2019; Lloyd and Penn, 2014). Therefore, the various professional roles significantly differ, with the professionals working with children under three often underestimated and reduced to adult-child assistants (INE, instituto nacional de estadística, 2019). Furthermore, the lack of resources for quality educational performance often reduce the educator role essentially to that of an assistant (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019). The structural quality of care,

such as group size and child-teacher ratio of ECEC under these schools’ conditions, is at least questionable. As a result of these differences, and after analysing both Spanish and Italian ECEC settings, León et al. (2019) have also identified a significant difference in working conditions. The staff working with children under three practice in challenging conditions. The EU’s staff-child ratio for children under three ranges from five to eight children per adult (European Commission, 2019). Spain has the highest staff-child ratio in the two years and under group (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019): for children below one year, it is eight children per adult; for children between one and two years of age, it is 13 children per adult; and for children between two and three years, it is 19 children per adult (Eurydice, 2021; MEFP, 2008; Save the Children, 2019). The numbers may though vary slightly due to regional legislation (MEFP, 2020a). However, remarkably there is not a specific regulation by law that stipulate a change in the ratio due to inclusion of children with disabilities (MEFP, 2021a). Following the latest report from the union of families association (Union de Asociaciones Familiares) and COFACE (Confederation of Family Association in the European Union), staff/pupil ratios do not decrease when children with special educational needs (SEN) are included, and no additional support resources added (UNAF, 2012). Navarro-Montaña et al. (2013) describe how Spanish early years staff reflect on the direction of the current circumstances in their early years centres and in practices, and on their management of children’s learning processes. The authors highlight the difficulty of maintaining a healthy learning environment when staff try to implement child-centred strategies. Spanish pre-nursery staff also worry about the gravity of responsibility, particularly when limited by factors such as a large number of children and a lack of time and resources. These factors take an even more significant toll when working with children with SEN (Navarro-Montano and Gordillo, 2014).

Another significant challenge for staff educating and caring for children under three years is the lack of protocols for connecting early intervention programs delivered from the state with the relevant institutions (CCOO, 2019; González del Yerro Valdés et al., 2019). Thus, early years staff are working without any support from other professionals. Indeed, solo teaching is common practice without innovative practices and flexibility. Furthermore, there are no early intervention programmes for under 3 s linking external services with the nurseries. Consequently, no other professionals are working together with the ECEC staff or contributing to their professional development (Díaz, 2020). Yet, despite all these inequities and challenges, scholars state that staff are proactive about all students positive inclusion (González-Gil et al., 2016).

The new national law, LOMLOE, stated that a curriculum plan with the content from the academic period of 0–3 years will be elaborated and that the curriculum will start to be implemented in the academic year 2022/23 (MEFP, 2021a). This is a very important step as the majority of the administrations didn’t have a defined curriculum for this ECEC educational stage (REDIE, 2019). Being a

draft of 8 pages with unspecific and broad pedagogical objectives (MEFP, 2021c), Spanish early years staff are free to create and develop a curriculum adapted to their group, as long as they target three specific areas of development: growth in harmony, discovery and exploration of the environment and the communication and representation of reality (MEFP, 2021c). By law, each organisation must create a detailed pedagogical response as a curriculum document that the regional authorities must evaluate before offering the opening license (MEFP, 2003; 2004). However, only seven out of 17 regions have a clear legislation with criteria for implementing ECEC services, and their primary, and only concern, is health and safety regulations (Eurofound, 2014). This context leads to a proliferation of private nursery franchises around the country (CCOO, 2019).

In service-professional development and collective learning

Following Baker-Ericzén et al. (2009), in-service training programmes on inclusion for early years staff seem to promote high-quality practices, changes in attitudes and a stronger sense of competency in implementing inclusive procedures. In a study of early years settings located in Andalusia, Polo Sánchez and Puerta (2018) suggest that early years professionals involved in several topic-specific training sessions changed their attitudes towards and attained competencies for inclusion. A significant challenge these professionals face is that they often, if not exclusively, have to face all these issues independently. Thus, loneliness is a defining characteristic of Spanish educators, including the early years' staff (Sandstrom, 2012). Spanish early years teachers work with large groups of children and bear the responsibility alone (Azorín, 2020). These circumstances have little to do with being a highly skilled and dedicated professional. Instead of providing a legitimate staff/child ratio or implementing co-teaching to aid staff, the system asks these professionals to accept any given situation. Beraza and Cerdeiriña (2020) noted that staff suffer from emotional burnout and uncertainty during their efforts to create an equitable classroom environment. Therefore, implementing inclusive practices is essential for continuous, intensive, and high-quality pre-service and in-service training with these professionals (Pancsofar and Petroff, 2016). Their professional development should also include dealing with stressful situations (Beraza and Cerdeiriña, 2020).

After analysing 27 European educational systems, Davydovskaia et al. (2021) found that governments often promote the CPD of teachers in early years settings, with half of the countries making this compulsory. Nonetheless, only five countries offer lifelong, in-job education to those teaching children under three. This is not the case in Spain, where any type of training is free of charge exclusively for teachers who work for the government. However, 49% of professionals teaching children under three work in the private system (MEFP, 2021b).

Consequently, a vicious cycle is created, where underpaid (Conde-Ruiz and Marra de Artífano, 2016) and overworked staff cannot personally afford further training and their companies aren't delivering staff developing opportunities, as also expressed by early years practitioners in the English context (Bury et al., 2020). Neither do they have the time nor the emotional availability for such endeavours. In line with Bury et al. (2020), they have identified that they are inspired and highly motivated professionals although they were continuously doing a burdensome task involving emotional and physical labour. This puts them in a disadvantaged position where they cannot continue to learn and develop as professionals.

Additionally, further improvements can still be made to the in-job training for teachers who work for the government. Only a few regions focus on professional learning to enhance professional capabilities. 70% of the training selected by the teaching training association (CFIES) for teachers working in public nurseries is focused on emotional development and emotional intelligence (Llamazares et al., 2017; Reina and De la Torre Sierra, 2018). This number reveals that the teachers are not provided with the freedom to choose, and that the options are scarce.

Adults also learn more if new information is delivered inclusively and adapted to their needs (Huebner, 2009). Following scholars, it is also recommended that they learn in a supportive environment or through mentoring relationships (Nolan and Molla, 2018; Nutbrown and Clough, 2004).

Listening to the experiences of young children is crucial in understanding their positions and how they want to be educated. This understanding will allow them to develop inclusively and learn about life (Messiou, 2019; Murray, 2019; Siraj et al., 2019). However, Brown and Weber (2016) argue that educators could struggle when reflecting on their practices because of an overwhelming workload, which does not leave them time to explore these ideas daily and, indeed, in a meaningful way.

In Spain, specific training is mainly provided by local authority staff and voluntary agencies, more particularly those working in a classroom with children with congenital disabilities, such as ONCE for blind children (Montellano et al., 2018). Agencies focus on school staff by catering to different needs. This way staff gain confidence in their practice and experience, particularly by liaising with professionals outside their place of work, collaborating with colleagues and developing links with parents/carers (Luff and Webster, 2014), as well as gaining satisfaction from their chosen profession (Murray, 2019).

Organisational knowledge creation is the process of making available, as well as broadening, the knowledge of individuals by connecting it to an organisation's knowledge system (Nonaka and Von Krogh, 2009). Leaders create significant differences in the institutional policies implemented at schools, particularly in regard to the opportunities for the staff development, flexibility in timetables and spaces (Arnaiz Sánchez et al., 2021). Beraza et al. (2011) state that staff and preschool in leadership positions in Spain should coordinate further, for example by offering opportunities, space and place for meetings, sharing

resources, collecting data about practices and analysis opportunities, and forming improvement plans. Carrasco et al. (2012) suggest professional training to all staff within the preschool premises. The staff should also be able to make collective decisions about the medium- and long-term needs when responding to urgent matters. There should furthermore be regular times for professional development within the work schedule, analysis through planning of specific practices, and expert involvement in solving any significant issue.

Meaningful policies are also needed to develop strong relationships with the community of learning, including early intervention professionals in partnership with parents, as families who need more support often do not rely on ECEC (Owen, 2019; Rogers, 2011; Väyrynen and Paksuniemi, 2020). This situation is especially problematic for children with SEN (Pölkki et al., 2016), finding themselves in a context where families are ignored (Vilaseca et al., 2019).

Educators are also expected to educate and take care of a diverse population, especially as children with severe disabilities and SEN are increasingly included in mainstream settings (Rogers, 2013). The most prominent challenge stems from a lack of external or specific support for staff who identify a child with SEN. Following the 'Libro Blanco de Atención Temprana' of the Spanish government, which is a national guide that explains how to proceed when children need early intervention, this process does not commence until the child is three years old. Which also is the age when they are enrolled in state schools or special centres for the second early years stage (Ministerio de Trabajo y Asuntos Sociales, 2005).

Spanish families with children under three should request an evaluation from the health ministry local office, who will establish the dependency level ("grado de discapacidad") with certain corresponding free services, such as tutoring for speech therapy, counselling sessions or physiotherapy. This strategy has serious, tangible consequences since parents turn to services external to the nursery environment. As a result, nursery educators do not receive information or specific resources to help them work with children with SEN (Robles-Bello and Sánchez-Teruel, 2013). On many occasions, the specialised evaluations come from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that work with a specific disability focus group. Furthermore, this work is often paid for by parents (Rogers, 2007). As stated by the latest report from the CERMI (2008), there is no coordination between the external professionals and the pre-nursery staff, as there is no legal protocol to monitor this. Therefore, Llorent (2013) recommends that immediate family or tutors stay at home with their children under three, with a focus on supporting the parent-child bond. Another alternative would be to bring children to infant schools only when their autonomy and independence is more developed. However, education cannot survive simply on heroic educators, but needs a radical reform of both the early years settings and stakeholders to achieve an inclusive culture (Andrews et al., 2019).

Scholars moreover claim that prejudice and negative attitudes have excluded specific groups. In the region of Frutos and Abellán (2018) highlight that native families believe

having their children together with children from immigrant background results in difficulties in the developing learning processes of children within their own culture. In contrast, a pilot study show that an inclusive community promotes and facilitates the learning for native children (Serrano et al., 2017). Assembly time is one particular exercise where Spanish early years setting professionals work together. Here, early year educators, parents and children participate in activities which develop social and communicative skills (Rodríguez and Aragón, 2016). Staff also collaborate in preparing activity centres or play corners ("rincones de aprendizaje") (Algaba et al., 2015).

Conclusion

In this article, we review the challenging working conditions encountered by Spanish educators of children under three. Academic literature and policy documents point to systemic challenges in the Spanish education system, drawn from the lack of fair wages, professional development and support from other professional branches. As the threat of COVID-19 is likely to define many aspects of educational life, it is more necessary than ever to provide educators with safe working conditions. Furthermore, the Spanish staff-child ratio is the highest in Europe, and there is no changes after the approval of the new policy (MEFP, 2021a). Consequently, these professionals have been cast under a shadow of neglect, with severe consequences for children to be included. For the system to change, the under-three teaching staff should be empowered, through better work conditions and strategies. This can enable them to improve their practices both through reflection and action (Clarà et al., 2019; Hargreaves, 1997). Above all, teaching professions must to be rewarded as a research-based profession. Being a 'reflective practitioner' is synonymous with early years' professional development (Liu, 2015). Early years practitioners ought to have the opportunities to "listen" to the children. As Cohen (2008) states, educational staff have a professional identity as experts in education or knowledge production, and as agents of change engaging in critical analysis to plan action.

There is limited research on the individual or collective practice and learning conditions of the Spanish early year professionals, which should be viewed as a part of their job and not an additional extra (Ballet et al., 2006). The alternative is to disseminate methodological techniques through collaboration between researchers and professionals (Gutierrez and Kim, 2017). Further studies should also address this issue following up on the experiences of staff, families and children (Waller, 2014). Critical reflection could be explored in a collective manner using the tools of storytelling, reflective and reflexive conversations, reflective dialogue, reflective metaphors, reflective journals, reflection on critical incidents, repertory grids, and concept mapping (Seres, 2018). Several scholars indicate that professional knowledge is a way of empowering early years practitioners and reconceptualising professional knowledge. This is intertwined with the practitioners' personal motivation and quest to understand their expertise and recognise what influences affect their practices.

Subsequently, they gain the tools needed to empower them to make a difference (DuFour, 2007; Lichtenstein, 1991). The teachers use this frame of reference to better fight against rigid structures. Also, school policies would no longer be restrictive if the staff and children are regarded and treated as shareholders (McAnelly and Gaffney, 2019). When such shifts in approach takes place, both staff and educational community could finally play a crucial role in analysing, negotiating, and participating in their development (Fenech and Sumsion, 2007).

Reflecting on their teaching, maintaining accurate records, communicating with families, participating in professional communities; these are all components of an early year educators' professional development (Borko, 2004; Danielson, 2007). Following the recommendation from the ECEC Quality framework from the European Commission presented in 2014, it is essential that the element of leadership should be a key for creating opportunities for observation, reflection, planning teamwork and collaboration (European Commission, 2021b). This framework of action is, without a doubt, fundamental to assist early years teachers who want to acknowledge the significance of their practices. People who are more aware of the necessary changes are more interested in learning how to make those changes (Girvan et al., 2016).

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