How does innovative continuous professional development (CPD) operate in the ECEC sector? Insights from a cross-analysis of cases in Denmark, Italy and Poland

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Abstract
This article offers insights into what characterises innovative continuous professional development (CPD) in the field of early childhood education and care (ECEC) by analysing similarities and differences from case studies of exemplary approaches to innovative CPD in Denmark, Italy and Poland. The comparative analysis focuses on four features that are particularly relevant for innovation in CPD in the field of ECEC: the social dimension of innovation as a strengthening component; the benefit of dynamic learning processes aimed at integrating theory and practice; the role of key figures in the quality of CPD; and measurements of CPD impact, outcomes and sustainability. This analysis sheds light on the effects of dynamic factors (e.g., regular team-based reflection sessions based on documentation and observation), the importance of work conditions (e.g., contractual obligations to provide time for reflection), the critical role of pedagogical leaders (coordinators, principals and head teachers, supervisors), the importance of inter-organisational networking at a local level and the facilitating role of collaboration with research institutes.

1 | INTRODUCTION

This article aims to contribute to the existing debate on what characterises innovative Continuous Professional Development (CPD) in the field of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) by exploring similarities and differences from case studies of exemplary approaches to CPD in Denmark, Italy and Poland. The cases were part of the CARE project (http://ecec-care.org), a collaborative project funded by the EU within the Seventh Framework Programme (FP7-SSH-2013-2) to address issues related to quality, inclusiveness and benefits (individual, social, and economic) of ECEC in...
Europe. As a first step, Jensen and Iannone (2015) undertook a comparative study of CPD in 10 European ECEC systems, including an analysis of innovations (Jensen & Iannone, this issue). Their findings inspired further exploration into innovations of the three case studies (Bove, Mantovani, Jensen, Karwowska-Struczyk, & Wysłowska, 2016) highlighted here.

Key European policy documents and research identify teachers’ professional qualifications as one of the core issues in qualifying early childhood services (OECD, 2006, 2012) and shed light on the need to invest in innovative in-service professional development (often referred to as CPD) as a key long-term strategy to promote ECEC quality (Peeters et al., 2014; Vandenbroeck, Urban, & Peeters, 2016). Implementing high-quality CPD to promote learning and qualifications for those already working in ECEC is considered an essential component of structural quality and high quality provision (Slot, Leseman, Verhagen, & Mulder, 2015) grounded in international evidence showing the correlation between teacher qualification levels and rich learning environments that provide pedagogical stimulation for children. However, qualifications alone are not sufficient: the content, form and characteristics of CPD also matter (Fukkink & Lont, 2007). How, or indeed if, different approaches to CPD can be used in various sociocultural contexts needs further investigation. It was therefore the object of the three case studies referred to in this article. They were selected as examples of well-established approaches to innovative CPD with little or no international coverage (previously confined to national level, non-English publications). Results are documented in detail, together with policy recommendations, in the CARE project report (Bove et al., 2016).

In this article, we analyse our findings in a cross-contextual perspective by focusing on the level of innovation (i.e., how innovative CPD operates in practice) in the hope of encouraging and facilitating a better transfer of experience between countries.

2 | INNOVATION AND ITS LINKS WITH CPD IN THE FIELD OF ECEC

Research has demonstrated that innovation occurred when CPD addressed particular professional needs: innovation is essential if CPD is to update, improve and renew professional competences, skills and knowledge (Urban, Vandenbroeck, Van Laere, Lazzari, & Peeters, 2011). Hence, we propose moving beyond an economic concept of innovation as the commercialisation of new ideas/products by developing, as Jensen and Iannone (2015) have argued, a broader concept of innovation as one that embraces a social process (Jensen & Iannone, this issue). In relation to ECEC, it makes sense to develop the idea of social innovation as a collective process of transforming ideas, values, theories and strategies into new processes of quality as related to CPD (Dawson & Daniel, 2010). Hence, what differentiates social innovation from the traditional economic concept is its scope. A match between teachers’ needs and selected CPD activities is critical to ensure that the latter have a positive effect at the classroom level. The Eurofound report (Molinuevo & Ahrendt, 2015) on the impact of CPD on ECEC quality, child-staff interactions and children’s outcomes highlights three necessary elements if CPD is to enhance children’s outcomes: ‘First, the CPD intervention must be embedded in a coherent pedagogical framework or curriculum that builds upon research and addresses local needs. Second, practitioners must be actively involved in the process of improving educational practice in ECEC settings. And third, CPD needs to focus on practitioners learning in practice, in dialogue with colleagues and parents: therefore, a mentor or coach must be available during the non-contact hours of ECEC staff’ (Molinuevo & Ahrendt, 2015, p. 59). Additionally, in Peeters et al. (2014), a fourth requirement is highlighted: that CPD interventions require changes in work conditions, most especially in the availability of non-contact time.

Effective CPD provision therefore requires the capacity to meet the local needs of professionals to support ‘a model of learning as an experience deeply rooted in the context’ (Hirsch, 2011, p. 28). Innovation in ECEC teachers’ learning is about learning how to learn (Bruner, 1997), transforming knowledge into practice and developing new forms of CPD that encourage practice changes. Results of international reviews show a broad consensus that the following innovative approaches to CPD can potentially enhance teachers’ learning: coaching, mentoring, counselling and supervision; teamwork, collegiality and co-learning; (pre-)school-university partnerships and research-based initiatives; and networking; and reflexivity (Urban et al., 2011; Zaslow, Tout, Halle, Whittaker, & Lavelle, 2010). All can be provided
either face-to-face, through distance learning or by hybrid methods (NAYEC, 2011, p. 9), depending on the specific needs and characteristics of the learners.

There is broad agreement regarding the need to promote different forms of CPD in order to support changes in the ways in which teachers think and act (Fukkink & Lont, 2007), but empirical studies of how best to cultivate innovation through CPD in ECEC settings are limited. As Sheridan, Edwards, Marvin, and Knoche (2009) argued, it is important to address ‘questions of how’ and ‘why’ certain PD [CPD] efforts promote or impede growth rather than ‘what’ professional development forms affect change in early childhood educators’ (Sheridan et al., 2009, p. 381). It is therefore wise to emphasise sustainability within innovation criteria (Bove et al., 2016) and look for examples of innovative CPD practices that are particularly effective in encouraging practice changes in a system or network by developing a community of learners, improving educational practices and sharing new competences over time. We argue that the conditions supporting the sustainability and flexibility of CPD at all three levels (micro, meso, and macro, see Jensen & Iannone this issue) are crucial for generating innovation in ECEC.

Based on the first part of CARE’s results in terms of continuous professional development, including a literature review and comparative analysis of the CPD systems across 10 European countries (Jensen & Iannone, 2015; Jensen & Iannone, this issue) and a comprehensive review of research on innovative CPD approaches (Bove et al., 2016), we hypothesised that innovation in CPD had the following characteristics: it is marked by non-episodic and systemic (i.e., involving whole areas of networks) features, it requires initiatives that go beyond the initial scope and target groups in order to provide as many professionals as possible with learning opportunities, it supports concrete and long-term processes of knowledge transfer (not replicating practices), consolidates and updates workforce competences and reinforces the sharing of competences between mentors/experts/trainers, experienced ECEC teachers and newly-enrolled personnel. The ultimate goal is to make significant changes, improve educational practices and spread new competences that transgress resistance and inertia (the tendency to maintain existing knowledge, habits and behaviours). It requires implementation and sustainability at all levels: if a new idea or project cannot be achieved or is not possible, it is not innovative.

The cases presented in this article were chosen for their insight into what innovation means at a local level, how practitioners in different national settings perceive its impact and the conditions, priorities and traditions that make CPD innovative in different countries.

3 | RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHOD

The main goals of the three case studies referred to in this article were: to strengthen the conceptualisation of innovation in CPD through an in-depth exploration of three selected innovative approaches to CPD; to understand the means and ends of innovation in the field of ECEC (what is traditional and what is new); and to analyse practitioners’ perspectives on what makes CPD innovative and effective in encouraging practice change. For each individual case, specific features were examined in the pursuit of these goals.

This study was conceived as a multiple case study (Yin, 1994) with embedded subcases for in-depth analysis. In each of the three country contexts, an example of good CPD practice was selected, based on a set of common criteria drawn from the literature on innovation. Each of the three national CARE project teams applied the case study method in exploring their particular programme/approach/system in Denmark, Italy and Poland. In each case, various qualitative (interviews, focus groups, video-observations) and quantitative (questionnaires) data sources were combined and existing and new data were considered. The data analysis was carried out by each research team, independently.

3.1 | The VIDA professional development and innovation programme in Denmark—a social and practice-based approach

This case is set in Denmark where the national ECEC context is characterised by a 98% participation rate among children between the ages of 3 and 5 (Statistics Denmark, 2015) from all cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. It focuses on a two-year (2011–2013) in-service innovative continuous professional development (CPD) programme (VIDA) that was offered to 120 daycare institutions in four municipalities and involved 7000 children. VIDA was
structured according to the systematic and dynamic cooperation of all staff from formal and non-formal educational backgrounds and certification levels. In addition, the programme followed Danish legislation for educational learning plans and curricula (Danish Ministry of Family and Consumer Affairs, 2007) to improve practice, whilst also opening the possibility of enhancing policy for all children and, more especially, disadvantaged children.

VIDA adopts a social and practice-based approach (Ellström, 2006, 2010) to innovative CPD which focuses on enabling ECEC professionals to improve upon pedagogical changes in order to tackle inequality. The CPD programme refers to theories of social innovation based on Dawson and Daniel (2010, p. 9) who state that ‘social innovations are triggered by an interest in improving the well-being of people in society’, as well as to the perspectives of communities of practice (CoP) (Wenger, 1998) and communities of innovation (Col) (Engeström, 1998). VIDA’s innovative approach to CPD was designed as a method that promoted the integration of theory and practice through the education of and knowledge sharing between preschool teachers, teaching assistants and managers in ECEC organisations (Jensen, 2014, p. 11). The design was based on the premise that a systematic, long-term, research-based CPD programme that places practice, research and teacher training on an equal footing enhanced professionals’ consciousness and motivation to establish creative and innovative practice changes towards inclusive teaching. The pedagogical changes were deemed innovative in terms of method, scale and scope compared to previous CPD in Danish ECEC. These presented stagnating or reproductive risks in relation to fostering inequality, as also highlighted by other international studies (Burger, 2010; Duncan & Sojourner, 2013; Peeters & Sharmahd, 2014; Siraj-Blatchford, 2004; Vandenbroeck, 2010).

The impact of the CPD in the VIDA programme was measured using a mixed methods design. A randomised controlled trial, register data (provided by Statistics Denmark) and other quantitative data (surveys and information from municipalities) enabled changes in the effectiveness and influence of structural factors to be measured throughout the programme. Qualitative data (interviews and observations) were used to examine dynamic aspects of innovative processes. Results showed that this socially innovative approach to CPD had a positive effect on all children at multiple levels (subscases of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)). However, benefits for culturally, socially and/or economically vulnerable and disadvantaged children were not as pronounced as for the overall population. This may have been influenced by heterogeneous daycare characteristics and conditions, such as a high ratio of disadvantaged children in certain ECEC centres and classrooms and high staff turnover rates (Jensen, Jensen, & Rasmussen, 2017). Other outcomes highlighted the processes that enabled professionals to change practices through continuous transformation and extended development, making use of critical reflection and analyses within CoPs and CoIs (Jensen & Brandi, 2017).

VIDA led to further innovation in the Danish ECEC system at macro level following the conclusion of the initial programme. Several municipalities have adopted its methods and the Ministry of Social Affairs has used it as a strategy to improve ECEC practices that tackled inequality (Jensen & Iannone, 2016). VIDA’s social innovation approach through CPD strongly emphasises both continuity and flexibility, as it provides opportunities to transform existing practices and the ongoing creation of solutions in ECEC, with particular attention to inequality and disadvantage. As defined by Dawson and Daniel (2010, p. 16), social innovation also refers to collective idea generation, co-creation and the selection and implementation by people who collaborate to meet social challenges. The analysis of the social innovation resulting from VIDA addressed the micro, meso and macro levels (practice, organisation and system) which were likely to contribute to the positive outcomes for children and staff.

Overall, the case demonstrated that the VIDA approach to CPD was different from other interventions that were documented in international studies in two ways. First, it focused on innovation in the CPD of preschool educators, enabling them to reflect on, analyse and co-create for better practices related to issues of social inequality in ECEC via a renewed inclusive pedagogy. Second, it was developed to be implemented in a universal public daycare that served almost all children participating in ECEC. In addition, we saw how the CPD programme could be used as a social innovation driver, thus elevating its purpose and value from that of individual competence development of qualification to a societal-level innovation (Jensen & Brandi, 2017, p. 12). These findings reflect and reinforce current views on the nature and impact of innovation, especially that tackling disadvantage in ECEC in today’s society requires the co-creation of solutions at all three levels of a system (Jensen, Iannone, Christy, & Rolls, 2016). Innovation in ECEC
depends on CPD, as well as on the coordination, leadership and policy systems that prioritise the co-creation of changes in policy and practice.

3.2 | Reggio Emilia and Milan in Italy: fostering innovation and bottom-up professional development at city level

This case-study focused on two cities with innovative approaches to CPD that contribute to what is considered the most advanced ECEC systems in Italy: Reggio Emilia (RE) and Milan. RE is a medium-sized city which has benefitted from long-lasting political and administrative continuity and has worked not only locally, but also by networking in the region and Italy to develop its high quality ECEC system. RE is internationally renowned for offering a model of ‘diffused pedagogy’ (Giudici & Castagnetti, 2016) with a focus on children’s rights, parent’s participation and documentation (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2011). Milan is a large city that is impacted by the socio-cultural complexities of a metropolitan area: an example of an urban ECEC innovation laboratory with its integrated 0–6 ECEC system, its history of high quality ECEC services, the large number of children and families involved and its focus on inclusiveness. Both are large-scale ECEC systems and examples of innovative collaboration between ECEC services, local authorities and local research institutions with a focus on life-long education and collegiality. RE has developed an integrated public system comprising a total of 84 ECEC settings, of which 66 are run by the municipality, supporting the work of different providers (state schools, private schools and cooperatives). In Milan, there are approximately 330 municipally-run ECEC settings which practise a tradition of regular and recurrent CPD in partnership with local universities and associations.

In both cases, CPD is an integral part of the job for everyone working in the ECEC field (both a right and a duty), in line with national regulations based on city investments in human resources and regular CPD practices in connection with research. In RE, opportunities and resources for CPD are provided by the Malaguzzi International Centre. Here, CPD is defined as a reciprocal process whereby teachers, educators, mentors or pedagogisti work together and learn from each other through systematic exchanges during the weekly staff meeting (Giudici & Castagnetti, 2016). In Milan, the responsibility for planning and organising in-service CPD falls on the local authorities which work in collaboration with the ECEC providers, families, universities and local associations (Mantovani, Bove, Cescato, & Braga, 2016). In both cases, CPD takes place synergistically between the staff meetings of the single preschools and infant-toddler centres, the system-wide professional development programme of the educational services and the educational and cultural opportunities provided at the local, national and international level.

The main aim of the study was to describe the CPD model, in both cases developed at municipal level, through the in-depth description of key examples (centres or CPD projects). A specific focus was on practitioners’ perceptions and thoughts on what CPD meant and entailed. Multiple sources of data were combined: semi-structured interviews with professionals (30), focus groups discussions with professionals involved in the subcases (3), observations of team-based sessions or workshops and analyses of existing documents.

At the macro level, findings revealed the innovative nature of CPD approaches based on a socio-constructive approach to learning where communities of learners and networking played a crucial role in a situated-systemic framework (Lazzari, Picchio, & Musatti, 2013). A shared perception of how innovation occurred emerged: a highly contextualised CPD inspired by the needs and desires of the practitioners; requiring active participation and research-based initiatives; marrying theory and praxis (reflexivity connected to a systematic analysis of practices); developed within a framework of continuity for children aged 0–6 through the key role of the pedagogisti; and pursuing the exchange of perspectives and professional roles through workshops, teamwork-based sessions, video-based observation and documentation, ICT and other new methods that have gradually replaced a more traditional approach to learning.

An analysis of the interviews at the micro level indicated that innovation in ECEC was not only a matter of providing training employing new methods, but also of providing systematic support and mentoring to ensure that what was learnt was put into practice. Observations in Milan and documentation in RE emerged as particularly significant tools to ensure that CPD remained relevant for teachers’ everyday experiences and promote context-specific planning based on the evaluation of children’s learning as it progressed, as other studies have highlighted (Picchio, Giovannini, Mayer, & Musatti, 2012). Cross-cultural experiences with a video feedback were effective in changing teachers’
thoughts and practices (Moran, Bove, Brookshire, Braga, & Mantovani, 2017). In both cases, the involvement of children and families as equal partners in CPD activities was a key feature that deserves further exploration. One of the results of the CPD programme developed in Milan was the involvement of the ECEC sector, families and the whole city in developing new pedagogical guidelines for the 0–6 sector: a participatory, bottom-up CPD process aimed at curricular innovation (Mantovani et al., 2016).

These findings reflect and reinforce current views on what CPD can mean in large-scale ‘competent systems’ within ECEC (Urban, Vandenbroeck, Van Laere, Lazzari, & Peeters, 2012) and reinforce the need to link innovative methods to issues of time and group stability in order to encourage the development of a common mind-set of learning by doing, team-work and reflexivity rooted in everyday practices. Involving practitioners in all stages of the CPD experience as from the planning phase emerged as a key issue from the study.

3.3 | The Łódź Public Crèche Network in Poland. Accompanying the child in his/her development

This case study is set in Łódź, the third most populated city in Poland. The Polish ECEC system is split and participation rates among the youngest children have been increasing since 2011 when the responsibility for 0–3-year-olds was transferred from the Ministry of Health to the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy (2011: 3.7%, 2016: 9.3%). There is therefore a great need for a growing number of qualified practitioners to address higher enrolment rates. This case focuses on CPD for those employed in the Łódž Public Crèche Network which is the second largest educare provider for children aged from 20 weeks to 3 years in Poland. It includes 30 ECEC centres of different sizes (1–5 groups) catering for a total of more than 2500 children. The network is under municipal jurisdiction. In Poland, CPD for practitioners working with the youngest children is not addressed in any laws or other public documents and no resources are set aside for this purpose. Hence, the number of CPD programmes is limited. However, acknowledging the value of research-based CPD, the network has established partnerships with the University of Łódź in the area of pedagogy and the Medical University of Łódź with regard to nutrition in order to stimulate the CPD of caregivers in these areas. Additionally, the network has three supervisors in the fields of pedagogy, nutrition and administration whose tasks include monitoring CPD among its workforce. The network’s approach to CPD was identified as exemplary and innovative in the Polish context because: collaboration with researchers and specialists results in changes of practice; systematic yet dynamic cooperation among staff at all levels aims at sustaining high quality educare services (regular meetings between the director, researchers, caregivers, supervisors and centre managers); everyday practice is based on critical reflection, continuous transformation and adaptation to children’s needs; it is open to new ideas; the director and the pedagogical supervisor are involved in developing the first legal act regulating the work of ECEC centres for 0–3-year-old children in Poland (Ustawa z dnia 4 lutego 2011 r. o opiece nad dziećmi w wieku do lat 3) and the document National Standard of Competences; Professionals working with young children (Krajowy Standard Kompetencji; Wychowawca małego dziecka; number 234202); and there are several publications by researchers working with the network as well as two books written by caregivers about their everyday practice, experiences and ideas. Furthermore, the network initiated the organisation of regular national seminars (under the same heading as the pedagogical approach: Accompanying the child in his/her development) on the topic of educare for 0–3-year-old children, thereby creating a platform for practitioners from the whole country to share experiences, concerns and achievements.

The main aim of the study was to explore the nature of the innovative approach to CPD. The general question addressed by the Polish research group was: What are the characteristics of CPD undertaken by practitioners in Łódź at the micro, meso and macro levels? Both existing and new data were analysed: semi-structured interviews with caregivers (n = 5), the head of a selected crèche, the pedagogical and nutrition supervisors, the network’s director, researchers cooperating with the network (n = 2); grey literature (the network’s internal documents); master theses (n = 10); presentations by caregivers at the national seminars Accompanying the child in his/her development (n = 2); drafts/comments from professionals concerning the National Standard of Competences; Professional working with the young children (Krajowy Standard Kompetencji; Wychowawca małego dziecka; number 234202) and the Act of 4 February 2011 on the care for children under the age of three; collaborative projects between researchers and practitioners; and
the pedagogical project of a selected crèche (a document under continuous development regulating the settings' work).

The qualitative analysis of the data was conducted to shed light on the practices and mechanisms which encourage innovative CPD at the micro, meso and macro levels. Findings show that innovative CPD is embedded in social processes characterised by a mix of top-down and bottom-up approaches. It involves the engagement of stakeholders (practitioners, supervisors, families and researchers) and is strongly contextualised, reflecting their specific needs, resources, knowledge and beliefs. Key seems to be the role of leaders/supervisors who are not just suppliers of new knowledge or ready-to-use practical solutions, but moderators of the practitioners’ professional development. The importance of a respectful, trusting and safe environment emerged as a necessary condition to establish a space for open and critical reflection. Participation in action-research was identified as particularly valuable in developing practitioners’ ability to translate theory into practice. All interviewees highlighted the need for paid time devoted to CPD as a pivotal condition for organising discussions involving all practitioners and leading to changes in everyday practices. Importantly, all the identified practices and mechanisms are in accordance with Accompanying the child in his/her development, an approach rooted in non-directive pedagogy elaborated by practitioners and researchers through a process of negotiation and reflection on day-to-day practices. Further research is needed, however, to explore the transferability potential of the identified CPD strategies and mechanisms that encourage the development of communities of practitioners with particular attention to the roles of key figures.

4 | COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Despite the differences between the cases, our findings reveal many commonalities. The main common finding concerns the social dimension of innovation in CPD and its impact on professional consciousness and motivation in terms of networking, participatory practices and the improvement of ECEC quality, although certain differences emerge in the ways this is translated into sustainable CPD initiatives at the micro, meso and macro levels. The influence of culture, traditions and conditions, for example, socioeconomic, political priorities in the interpretation, design and effectiveness of CPD practices is one interesting result of the study.

In our comparative analysis, we chose to focus on four significant features that are particularly relevant aspects of innovative CPD practices across diverse contexts.

4.1 | The social dimension of innovation as a strengthening feature of CPD in ECEC

The social nature of ECEC innovation emerges as a common finding of the three cases, although its meaning seems to be interpreted differently: in the Danish case, the social aspect of the VIDA programme is seen as a prerequisite for encouraging social innovation in the ECEC sector that is able to tackle inequalities and interpreted as ‘a driver of social innovation’. The Danish case illustrates how positive outcomes are more likely when a CPD programme is designed as a mixture of top-down and bottom-up processes that also tap into horizontal and wide-reaching networks and draws from theory and practice where research, political, leadership, community actors and staff members work together on a common goal in continual steps of reflection, action and co-creation.

In the Italian case, social refers to bottom-up community experiences of civic engagement and mutual learning among practitioners, families, citizens and children (Lazzari et al., 2013), thus reflecting the tradition of democracy and civic participation of the Italian municipal ECEC systems (Putnam, Leonardi, & Nanetti, 1994). Sharing, collegiality and exchange are key elements in Italian ECEC pedagogy (Mantovani, 2007) and are therefore key components when designing CPD programmes. The Milan approach to CPD is an example of a bottom-up systemic project designed to engage practitioners in experiential learning, processes of exchange and collaboration with other practitioners, families, pedagogical coordinators and researchers at different level (Mantovani et al., 2016). The RE approach to CPD is an example of a long-standing tradition of community processes of learning through active participation and documentation (Giudici & Castagnetti, 2016).
In the Polish case, social refers to the areas of cooperation among caregivers as well as between caregivers and supervisors at the micro and meso levels in terms of systemic exchange: the interplay between innovation and collegiality is evident in the case of Łódź. A mix of bottom-up and top-down approaches based on the collaborative engagement of caregivers and stakeholders characterise this case as a social community of learners and innovators. Poland developed the ECEC curriculum by considering both the pedagogical and social processes of innovation.

This central characteristic of the social nature of innovation in CPD across contexts highlights the need to further develop upon our conceptualisations of innovation in ECEC. These must consider social cohesion, collaboration, mentorship and co-creation in CPD processes that enable ECEC to respond to the learning needs of all children and society’s ongoing changing challenges.

4.2 | The benefits of dynamic learning processes that integrate theory and practice

In the three cases, innovation is linked to dynamic learning approaches in CPD. Each also reflects the link between theory and practice as a crucial aspect for renewing educators’ skills and competences.

In the Danish case, learning laboratories were designed in order to enable professionals to become co-creators of new practices through pedagogical experiments, with the aim of changing routine practices that were not inclusive, thus avoiding the risk of reproducing social inequalities. Participants found this approach effectual in integrating theory and practice within CPD. Similarly, educators in the Italian and Polish cases recalled the benefits of their participation in workshops where they were involved both as observers and as actors, enabling them to replicate and implement what they learned in their everyday practices.

In all three cases, reflexivity emerged as a key component of innovation. Deeply anchored in observations of daily practices, it encourages the redesign of actions and practices with children, including critical attitudes to ongoing innovation, adaptation and competence development.

Links to research environments are found in each case, although their form varies according to context. In Denmark, VIDA is considered innovative because its ties to research differentiate it from other CPD initiatives. National findings highlight the process whereby professionals involved in VIDA were ready to work with new ideas and combinations of theory and practice and use reflection tools and CoPs (Jensen & Brandi, 2017; Jensen et al., 2016).

Italy has a long tradition of collaboration between ECEC services, local municipalities and universities in both pre-service and in-service training and a culture of investing in research-based CPD (action research, participatory research, etc.). In many Italian ECEC settings, research is encouraged: in the RE case, research is included as part of working hours and is a key component of ECEC professionalism as a ‘permanent attitude or way of thinking’ (Rinaldi, 2006).

The Łódź network is a unique innovative example in the Polish context as it encourages action research partnerships and collaboration between ECEC providers and universities and conceptualises training as involving all educators so as to ensure changes in work and practices.

CPD is more likely to encourage positive results in terms of practice changes when deployed as dialogical and dynamic top-down and bottom-up processes of learning and knowledge exchange that are deeply rooted in the analysis of everyday practices where ECEC professionals are positioned as agents rather than objects of change, involving them in long-term collaborative experiential learning.

4.3 | The role of key figures in innovative CPD

The role of key figures (pedagogical coordinators, supervisors, leaders, managers) emerges as a crucial factor for innovation in CPD. In Denmark, ‘managers’ were trained as key figures in VIDA in order to nurture the implementation of this CPD and lead its facilitation, co-created evolution and future. In Italy, the role of the ‘pedagogical coordinators’ is considered the main factor in determining ECEC quality in terms of the continuity and sustainability of CPD. In Poland, ‘supervisors/leaders’ are viewed as ‘moderators of practitioners’ personal growth, rather than just suppliers of new knowledge.’ Further efforts are required in order to inspire and contribute to the design of effective long-term CPD across Europe. In all three cases, leadership and key figures emerge as influential for innovative CPD across contexts.
Still to be discussed is how to train these in order to improve their role as multipliers or key elements in sustaining long-term processes of transferring theory into practice and implementing innovation in the ECEC sector, also through the training of trainers.

4.4 | CPD impact, outcomes and sustainability

Interesting differences with respect to measuring the impact and outcomes of CPD on children’s learning emerged from the cases. In the Danish case, questions were addressed and data were provided on the impact of VIDA on child outcomes and the effects for socially disadvantaged children (Jensen et al., 2016; Jensen et al., 2017). In Denmark, they examined pathways to effectively work in childcare programmes serving vulnerable children and explored the CPD programme’s impact by involving practitioners in analysing how participating in the CPD, based on a social innovation approach enabled them to enhance quality (Jensen & Brandi, 2017; Jensen et al., 2016).

Child outcomes are not discussed in the Polish and Italian cases. Instead, each analysed the effects of CPD on practitioners’ attitudes and ways of thinking about their own professional development. Change was viewed as a long-term result of CPD that may also extend beyond the scope of a particular CPD (Bove et al., 2016). In the Italian context, this required time and a gradual process of re-designing and re-interpreting educational values and practices through the use of innovative tools (i.e., video observations, video feedback, virtual communities of learners). In the Polish case, impact was evidenced in the changes of the educators’ ways of thinking about their role in accompanying children (Telka, 2007).

The three cases show that the impact of innovation in CPD is multi-levelled. However, measuring CPD impact remains a delicate issue: for what purpose, who should be involved, how and what should be counted as and measured for impact, and what consequences would result from such evaluations? The need to develop contextually sensitive approaches to measuring and evaluating CPD impact is clear. Furthermore, sustainability—in terms of breadth and depth of CPD initiatives—should figure in considerations of short-term and long-term impact and outcomes. These three cases serve as a reminder of how the more engaged practitioners and the community are at the various levels of ECEC, the more embedded transformations become.

5 | CONCLUSION

This study contributes to research by arguing that the conditions that support the sustainability and flexibility of CPD must occur at all three levels (micro, meso, macro) in order to generate innovation in ECEC. There is a need to consider innovation in CPD as a contextually sensitive concept which requires a good balance between local practices, traditions, values and goals, as well as a broader, societal perspective.

CPD practices are framed by social, cultural, organisational and pedagogical aspects that influence their interpretation, impact and effectiveness, as well as the practitioners involved. The Danish case is an example of how to create innovation in ECEC institutions through organisation-wide CPD by enabling professionals to deal with the co-creation and change of ECEC practices through a combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches and with a specific focus on social disadvantage. The Italian case includes two examples of participatory ECEC city laboratories in which innovation spreads from local contexts to other cities and different partners (RE) and from parts of a city to an entire city (Milan). The Polish case illustrates how a local network of ECEC institutions can influence the national level of ECEC.

ECEC contexts vary according to case. Denmark and Italy are updating existing and extensive CPD practices in order to create a consolidated system and develop new and sustainable practices, whilst Poland is in an earlier phase of developing and implementing CPD practices. In contributing to the field of CPD in ECEC, we uncovered four significant features that are relevant for innovative CPD across contexts: the social dimension of innovation strengthens CPD; dynamic learning processes that integrate theory and practice as well as bottom-up and to-down approaches enhance innovation; the role of key figures is central to the co-creation, facilitation and future of innovation; yet, the measuring of CPD impact, outcomes and sustainability remains somewhat intangible. As a result, further studies
focusing on these aspects, including the detailed descriptions of CPD models across countries would encourage a greater exchange of new knowledge and cross-cultural learning. Innovation in CPD has historically been overlooked, yet through the CARE project and this issue of the Journal, it is recognised for its role in addressing the changes of ECEC in our changing contexts.

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ENDNOTES
1 Depending on a country’s tradition and pedagogical orientation, people working within the ECEC system are referred to in a variety of ways. In this article, we refer to them according to each country’s context (i.e., educators, teachers, caregivers or pedagogical coordinator, leaders, managers).
2 A more detailed description of the criteria adopted in the study is presented in the report by Bove et al. (2016).
3 The focus was on socio-emotional competences, that is, children’s behaviour and wellbeing, as measured by the five subscales of the SDQ scale (Goodman, 1997). Effects were analysed by measuring differences between the control and intervention groups—from baseline, mid-line and end-line measures of SDQ.
4 Some of the practitioners involved in VIDA published their experiences in VIDA—I praksis (VIDA—in Practice) (Jensen & Haarh-Pedersen, 2013) where they narrated how theory could be used to co-construct new pedagogies.

REFERENCES


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