



## **In-service training as fundamental part of systemic change. Experiences of 4 countries.**

Establishment of 'integrated' structural, pedagogical, and professional patterns is at the core of the development of educational continuity across the early years. In this context, competent in-service training programs, bringing together professionals employed in different educational services (pre-school, ECEC), have an absolutely fundamental part to play in the support and consolidation of emerging patterns of continuity across the education systems.

But how should 'integrated' trainings of this kind be organized and run?

What qualifies as a 'competent' integrated in-training course?

How can we, in other words, *seize the opportunity* provided by programs of professional development?

What are the key components of an in-service training program that succeeds in consolidating emerging good practices of continuity?

And, in broader terms, why are moments of in-service training given such strategic importance?

The questions above have multiple and varied valid answers.

On one hand, 'integrated' training programs provide the ideal space and the perfect opportunity for educational staff operating at different levels of the system to interact, know each other and their respective work in detail, share experiences, and in general find the room to develop a common sense of purpose.

Integrated training sessions may be regarded to possess their single most strategic value precisely in these "shared moments" they create. The importance of these is of course made all the more special by the proverbial fragmentation of the ECEC sector. A scenario in which one cannot overstate the significance of levers and tool useful to bridge boundaries between professional "cultures" - not only vertically, across the different segments of the educational system, but also horizontally, bringing together staff employed in public, not-for-profit, and private providers.

Moving beyond interprofessional cooperation, bringing different workforces together for common, integrated trainings should be also seen as a strategic opportunity to develop or fine-tune the reflection on pedagogical continuity. Practitioners coming together from different educational levels for participatory, 'situated' training programs offer an ideal ground for identifying relevant topics and learning objectives across traditional educational divides, thus paving the way for the co-construction of a shared pedagogical approach beyond institutional boundaries .

It comes without saying that in order for continuous professional development programs to play their strategic, "generative" effect on integrated practices - promote awareness of inter-professional practice and collaboration - a strong participatory component need be incorporated in the design of integrated training programs. Trainings need to be 'situated' in the daily experiences of practitioners, who in turn should be encouraged to take an active role in gearing the programme towards learning objectives that are relevant, meaningful, and supported by the reality of educational practice.

Moreover, 'competent' in-service training designs geared to integrated, continuous education seem to share some basic normative principles - that could also serve as premises in an argument about what should be the commitment, or the foundational values, of ideal continuous professional development. What is the role of in-service training within the larger context of a competent ECEC system? What should a competent in-service training programmer look to emphasize? What is the role of daily practice?

In the first place, 'competent' 'integrated systems should regard investments in in-service training as a central component of improving the educational offer. Professional development should be seen as a basic entitlement of all ECEC personnel. Training is the lifeblood of any professional working in education - as such, it should receive a designated space and time within the organizational model of ECEC centers and linked inextricably to schools/day-care centers' pedagogical projects. Mid-level governance structures - such as local educational authorities - should operate to ensure that workers can access their entitlement to training. In this spirit, it seems extremely important to introduce clear and rapid procedures to make sure that schools and local educational services are able to access training without bureaucratic complications.

### **IN-SERVICE TRAINING AS A 'CONTEXT-DEPENDENT', 'SITUATED' PRACTICE.**

Secondly, continuous professional development schemes should be highly inspired by the specificities of the contexts in which educational activities regularly take place. Training patterns should be 'situated', that is they should take their lead from the characteristics - both physical, personal, and relational - of the learning environment on which they aim to intervene. Beyond environmental features, situated training also means taking daily life at ECEC centers as the lead for developing programs of learning and support for the personnel employed at the services. That means critically reflecting on the concrete pedagogical practices enacted by teachers and educators in ECEC institutions. Why are specific educational and caring practices carried out in a certain way? What are the values and understandings underpinning pedagogical practice and approaches (i.e. child image, parents' image, understanding of learning and development, understanding of family participation...)?

### **IN-SERVICE TRAINING AS A TOOL TO IMPROVE DAY-TO-DAY PRACTICE**

The centrality of daily practices to in-service training programs has one key implication: the acceptance and commitment to the complexity of educational work. Professional development programs that aim to start (and end) in daily practice should be anchored to a vision of educational work - collegial, pragmatic, multi-faceted - as the true engine of ECEC services. It was often the case in the past that the "voices" of real education - those of professionals, families, and children - were ignored and not included in the development of training programs. Competent in-service trainers should be mindful to detach themselves from this rigid, top-down legacy - towards participatory approaches geared to provide practical, hands-on solutions to "real problems", as they are perceived and defined by ECEC practitioners in different contexts.

### **IN-SERVICE TRAINING AS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR SELF-IMPROVEMENT**

An inherent opportunity to these 'situated' types of training is the more active role assumed by participants - in particular, when compared to traditional more top-down approaches. From an organizational standpoint, the most striking difference between these approaches - the traditional top-down training model on one hand, and the situated participatory ones on the other - lie perhaps in the fact that the latter allow a much larger room for practitioners to shape the contents of the training. In other words, they are granted a central responsibility in the identification and selection of the topics and learning objectives to be included in the program.

The trainers involved in this type of 'reflective' training practices need of course to be well-disposed towards a model of professional development highly focused on participants as de facto "co-trainers" - or at least "co-contributors" to the design and implementation of an interactive and participatory learning experience. In order to facilitate a training of this kind, tutors should pay particular attention to five crucial components:

- **Planning**, referring to the capacity to design training activities and identify learning objectives -with the crucial contribution of the participants to the course - that are relevant and meaningful to the daily practice of all participants, regardless of their institutional belonging (ECEC, preschool, out-of-school care, primary education); and **Re-cognition**, referring to the awareness and acceptance by the tutor that problems and challenges to be discussed and analyzed throughout the training will be identified and selected together with the participants, through a participatory, negotiated process. This emphasis on participation does not mean that competent tutors should relinquish their 'expert role' during the delivery of the training. To the opposite, their expertise remains of paramount importance to the well-functioning of the program.

Both the planning and re-cognition components put the spotlight on the importance to ensure that the training design is as aligned as possible to the experiences - and in fact the needs - of the participants. It thus encourages those that are in charge of setting up the training programs to reach out and engage professionals and/or senior stakeholders during the design phase.

*In this respect, the design of the [Italian ToT](#) program relied heavily on the analysis of interviews with expert stakeholders in the local ECEC sector, conducted as part of the prior stage of the project. Key insights that emerged from the interviews had a significant influence on the design of the ToT. In a couple of cases, the stakeholders interviewed during the [WP2 policy analysis](#) phase were asked to partake as 'external experts' during relevant sessions of the training course*

- **Cross-checking**, referring to the importance of consistently monitor whether the training activities implemented and learning objectives towards which the training seems to be directed are in fact the same as those stated in the original planning; **and Promotion of Exchanges**, referring to the belief in the importance of peer exchange and peer learning, which functions as an essential precondition for the successful implementation and performance of this type of trainings.

Once again, the centrality accorded to the participatory, critical, 'hands-on' dimension of the training should not overshadow the importance played by the tutor in facilitating and moderating these activities. Trainers have a crucial role to play in providing a general conceptual/theoretical background for the peer exchange - setting up, in other words, the broad framework within which the more 'reflective' phase would later take place.

*This two-part training structure was evident in both the [Italian](#) and [Belgian](#) ToTs. In both cases, training sessions would open with a keynote 'expert' input (meant to inspire the reflection among participants), to be followed by a reflection period 'co-constructed' by tutors and trainees (Belgium), or by smaller thematic working round-table to which participant were assigned on the basis of geographic origin (Italy)*

*Whereas the 'expert input' moment meant to provide participants in turn with a general sense of the legislative and institutional context in which the ToT occurred, or with examples of good practices and tools to support the establishment of continuity, the periods dedicated to peer exchange aimed to enhancing cooperation among professionals and relational expertise - while increasing awareness of each other's work, opening opportunities for collaboration across institutional boundaries.*

*For this reason, the [Finnish](#) ToT dedicated two entire sessions to discussing the themes of how to bridge the boundaries separating ECEC and preschool professional cultures, as well as to the importance of developing relational expertise among practitioners.*

- **Assigning value to professionalism**, referring to the trainer's awareness of the importance of investing in horizontal set-up, geared to promote co-creation, participation, and self-evaluation among the professional practitioners attending the course. The importance and value accorded to the professional background of the participants can also be reflected in the special attention devoted by training organizers to the composition/construction of the trainee group.

As InTrans ToTs were set out to foster dialogue and cooperation across professional boundaries, it comes without saying that a 'mixed' sample of participants – representing a variety of professional backgrounds - was perceived as essential value for activating reflective dynamics within the trainee (sub)groups, leading to negotiation of pedagogical meaning through an ongoing process of de-construction and co-construction.

*Depending on the context, national partners followed slightly different patterns in selecting participants. The recruitment strategy implemented in [Italy \(Emilia-Romagna Region\)](#) once again drew heavily from the insights that emerged from the expert interviews conducted as part of the policy analysis working package, which suggested to focus recruitment efforts on pedagogical coordinators in ECEC centers and pre-school leaders which already played a key-role in sustaining educational continuity projects across 0-3 and 3-6 services.*

*In [the Flemish Community of Belgium](#), a two-step recruitment strategy was followed. The first centered on building awareness of the upcoming training among targeted groups of potential participants, so as to reach a large number of applicants to the course. The second step focused on carefully selecting the most "suited" candidates, through a real selection procedure in which applicants were requested to provide a letter of motivation and even commit to set up a 'continuity program, to support on the one hand childcare or preventive family support teams and on the other hand preschool teams'.*

Similar attention to the selection of personnel was paid in [Finland](#) and [Slovenia](#), where ToT organizers made sure that participant groups included a variety of municipal, pre-primary and primary education leaders and coordinators (Finland); preschool practitioners, primary school teachers and preschool counsellors (Slovenia).

- **Documentation and follow-up**, referring to the classification and storage of learning materials and contributions by participants, in view of future re-use, re-elaboration, reflection of the work carried out.

In the context of the [Italian ToT](#), participants were divided into subgroups (based on geographical provenance). This set-up was chosen to facilitate exchange and participation, allowing trainees employed in different positions and services to become more aware of common challenges. Team-work occupied an important part of the overall training time - each session dedicating on average at least one hour to discussions in sub-groups. Teams were the space in which trainees developed small-scale experimental projects focused on trajectories of educational continuity (such as targeted actions to support children and their families during transitions), that were later implemented during the months after the ToT. The 'restricted' set-up in smaller working groups proved effective both in facilitating a participatory reflection on which local priorities were to be addressed for improving continuity, as well as in relation to the actual elaboration and design of experimental initiatives to tackle such issues.

The [Belgian ToT](#) followed a similar set-up to the Italian one, the main difference consisting in the fact that whereas in the latter case participants were divided in working groups after the beginning of the training (and maintained a certain degree of autonomy, as to which geographical groups to join), in the Belgian case the subdivision of participants into working groups (interprofessional tandems or trios composed of one person working in childcare/family support, and another in the preschool sector) happened before the beginning of the training - which participants thus joined having already been assigned by organizers to a team. Besides, each tandem/trio had a pre-assigned 'working project' relating to supporting trajectories of educational continuity. Specifically, seven out of nine teams worked on improving warm transitions and pedagogical continuity by establishing collaboration initiatives between different services within the existing split ECEC system, whereas two out of nine went beyond that, developing new integrated pedagogical practices that start from children's and families needs and rights.

[Finland's ToT](#) also followed a largely similar pattern, whereby mixed working teams were established, consisting of participants employed in different services. Working teams were the context in which trainees reflected and discussed on the various topics addressed during the ToT course. Teams were also assigned a number of tasks throughout the course - although, unlike in the case of Italy and Belgium, none of these entailed further advocacy/experimental actions to be undertaken beyond the duration of the course.