

## Supporting early childhood education and care staff in the beginning of their careers

This policy brief draws on data from the OECD Starting Strong Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS Starting Strong) 2018 and focuses on novice staff in early childhood education and care (ECEC). Novice staff are defined as having three years of experience or less in the ECEC sector, in contrast to experienced staff who have worked in the sector for longer than three years.

The brief first explores novice staff's education profiles and participation in ongoing professional development, then looks at their beliefs and practices with children. Next, novice staff's satisfaction with their salaries and feelings of being valued as professionals are examined. The brief highlights cross-country differences, as well as differences between novice and experienced staff within countries.

The brief concludes with policy pointers that can help support novice staff adapt to their jobs, stay in the profession, and deliver high-quality education and care for young children. Policy pointers include ensuring that initial training helps novice staff to adapt to their jobs by providing relevant knowledge on working with children, supporting novice staff to continue their professional development and clarifying how novice staff can progress professionally.

## Introduction

ECEC staff with whom young children interact each day are central to promoting their development, learning and well-being. Growth in ECEC enrolment in recent years means that more ECEC staff are needed to meet demand in this sector (OECD, 2022<sup>[1]</sup>). Novice staff, those with three years of experience or less in ECEC, are critical to maintaining and growing the supply of ECEC. Data from TALIS Starting Strong 2018 indicate that across participating countries, 27% of ECEC staff are novice staff, based on this definition (OECD, 2020<sup>[2]</sup>).

These new staff can bring fresh energy and ways of thinking to ECEC centres, but they are, by definition, new to their jobs. Novice staff need support, guidance, and time to improve their skills and adapt to the tasks they face. Supporting novice staff adequately in their initial years is a key challenge for enhancing quality in ECEC centres and for developing new ECEC professionals. Building novice staff's career pathways for greater professionalisation of the ECEC workforce can help retain them and thereby provide stability to children, while also making the profession more appealing to potential candidates. This policy brief explores support structures for and perspectives of novice staff, and factors that can help retain novice staff in the ECEC sector.

The nature of work in ECEC centres requires staff to multi-task and shift frequently between different demands. Different professionals can work together in different ways in ECEC centres, depending on the extent to which their various job responsibilities are shared or separated based on the roles (OECD, 2022<sup>[3]</sup>). A shortage of ECEC staff may mean that novice staff need to take on additional roles in their centres, or different roles than expected based on their education and training. Thus, preparing new ECEC staff for their future job demands is not straightforward, and the best strategies for supporting novice staff and attracting more people in the profession are not simple.

## What is TALIS Starting Strong?

The OECD Starting Strong Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS Starting Strong) is an international, large-scale survey of staff and leaders in early childhood education and care (ECEC). TALIS Starting Strong uses questionnaires administered to staff and leaders to gather data. Its main goal is to develop robust international information relevant to developing and implementing policies focused on ECEC staff and leaders and their pedagogical and professional practices, with an emphasis on those aspects that promote conditions for children's development, learning and well-being.

TALIS Starting Strong 2018 included nine countries: Chile, Denmark, Germany, Iceland, Israel, Japan, Korea, Norway, and Turkey. All of these countries collected data from staff and leaders in pre-primary education (ISCED level 02) settings. In addition, four of the nine countries (Denmark, Germany, Israel and Norway) collected data from staff and leaders in settings serving children under age 3. The objective of the survey was to obtain a representative sample in each participating country of staff and leaders providing ECEC for each level of ECEC in which the country participated. The international sampling plan for TALIS Starting Strong used a two-stage probability sampling design: staff were randomly selected from the list of in-scope staff in each of the randomly selected ECEC settings. The leader of each setting (i.e. the person with the most responsibility for administrative, managerial and/or pedagogical leadership) was automatically selected for participation as well. A more detailed description of the survey design and its implementation can be found in the *TALIS Starting Strong 2018 Technical Report* (OECD, 2019<sup>[4]</sup>).

Data were collected prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The effect of the pandemic on the ECEC sector cannot be assessed in this policy brief. For example, data collected in 2018 may underestimate current

levels of staff self-efficacy around use of digital tools in ECEC, given the acceleration and intensification of the use of digital technologies spurred by the pandemic.

Denmark did not meet technical standards on response rates; its results are therefore not shown in figures presenting international comparisons but are discussed in the text.

Note: The International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) is an instrument for compiling statistics on education internationally. Home-based settings were included in the TALIS Starting Strong data collection for children under age 3 in Denmark, Germany and Israel, but they are not included in this policy brief to facilitate comparability with findings from the pre-primary sector (ISCED level 02) and across countries.

Source: OECD (2019<sup>[4]</sup>), *TALIS Starting Strong 2018 Technical Report*, <http://www.oecd.org/education/talis/TALIS-Starting-Strong-2018-Technical-Report.pdf> (accessed on: 8 January 2024).

## Education, training and professional development of novice staff

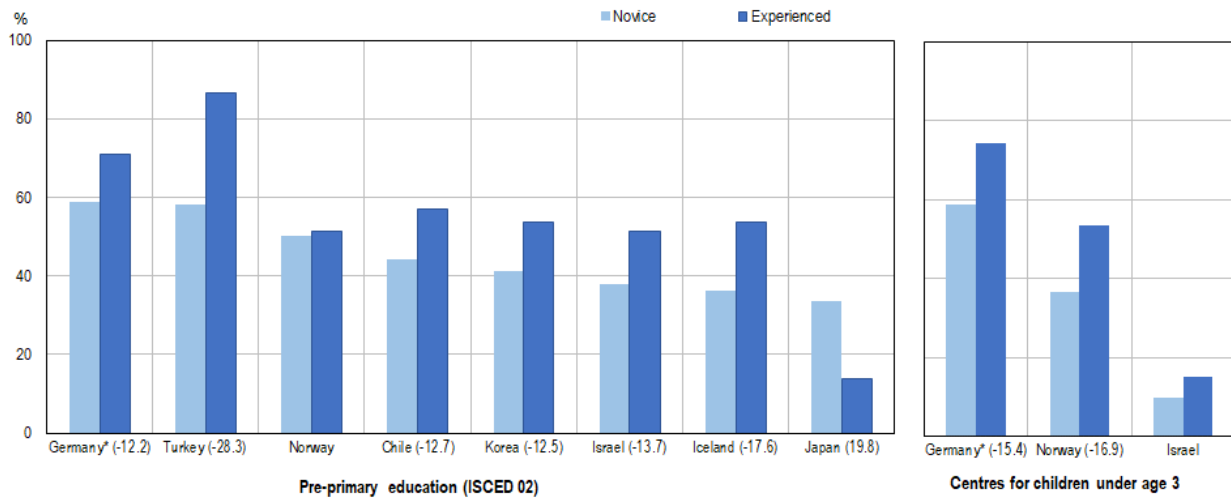
Providing education and care to young children requires specialised knowledge and skills. As expectations for high-quality ECEC have increased, demands on ECEC staff have also become greater and more complex, requiring them to have a wide range of competencies. Initial education and training programmes to work with children are critical to prepare novice staff to support children's learning, development, and well-being in ECEC settings, and to face new and emerging challenges for the profession. In turn, ongoing professional development is key to maintaining a high-quality workforce and retaining staff by offering options for skill upgrading and career progression. Staff shortages are common in many countries. To overcome this challenge, staff with lower educational attainment, particularly compared with primary school teachers, are often recruited to work in the ECEC sector. Thus, despite policy interest around increasing ECEC staff's educational requirements, professional development opportunities are especially critical for this workforce.

TALIS Starting Strong 2018 offers an opportunity to understand how initial and ongoing education and training may be evolving to meet the demands ECEC staff face, compared with the education and training that was received by staff who are more experienced.

International data show that in most of the participating countries in the Survey, overall, novice staff tend to be less educated than experienced staff in terms of both educational attainment level and education or training specifically to work with children. In eight of the nine countries, the proportion of novice staff who have a bachelor's degree (or equivalent) or higher is lower than that of experienced staff, although the difference is not statistically significant in all cases (Figure 1). Only in Japan are novice staff more likely to have a bachelor's degree or higher than experienced staff (34% versus 14%). Similarly, across participating countries, fewer novice staff report having initial training specifically on working with children compared with experienced staff, with statistically significant differences among pre-primary staff in Chile, Germany, Iceland, Israel and Norway, as well as in all four countries with data from staff in settings for children under age 3 (Table 2).

**Figure 1. Educational attainment of staff, by experience (2018)**

Percentage of staff who report having a bachelor's degree or equivalent or higher (ISCED level 6 or above)



\* Estimates for sub-groups and estimated differences between sub-groups need to be interpreted with care (OECD, 2019<sup>[5]</sup>).

Notes:

Statistically significant differences between novice and experienced staff are shown next to the country name (novice – experience; p-value < 0.05).

Data from Denmark are excluded from this figure due to low response rates in the survey that may result in bias in the estimates reported and limit the comparability of the data.

Countries are ranked in descending order of the percentage of novice staff who have a bachelor's degree or equivalent or higher (ISCED level 6 or above).

Source: (OECD, 2019<sup>[6]</sup>), TALIS Starting Strong 2018 Database, [Table 1](#).

The fact that the ECEC sector generally has difficulties recruiting staff may contribute to the recruitment of staff who have not been trained to work with children. Given growing demand for expanding ECEC services to include more children, ECEC centres may have little choice but to hire candidates with lower education and less specific training. These results could also suggest that in the participating countries, novice staff's areas of education and training are diverse, rather than focused on preparing them to become ECEC professionals specifically. Although this diversity in training backgrounds can bring richness to the experiences of staff and children in ECEC centres, it is essential that staff working with young children have the necessary competencies to provide high-quality ECEC.

It is also possible that ECEC staff begin their careers before completing their education and continue to work towards higher degrees while simultaneously working in ECEC centres. This does appear to be the case in at least some countries (e.g. Chile, Israel); however, data on participation in courses or seminars in the 12 months prior to the Survey indicate that novice staff are generally less likely than their more experienced colleagues to have participated in this type of ongoing professional development. In contrast, novice staff engage more in induction and mentoring activities (OECD, 2020<sup>[2]</sup>).

Participation in professional development activities can help staff to enrich or deepen the knowledge acquired in their initial education and can be especially valuable for novice staff who have less experience to draw on. Participation in professional development can also help to retain novice staff by building professional identity, increasing job satisfaction, and creating opportunities for career development (OECD, 2020<sup>[2]</sup>). Yet, data show that staff with lower levels of initial education are often less likely to participate in this type of ongoing training (OECD, 2019<sup>[5]</sup>).

Across countries, more novice staff than experienced staff report a strong need for additional professional development in several areas such as “classroom/playgroup/group management” and “working with

parents or families” (OECD, 2020<sup>[2]</sup>). Novice staff may need more professional development support in a particular area, given that they have less experience and often less formal training. Another interpretation could be that novice staff may want to revisit topics included in their education or training because their previous education or training was effective and triggered further interest. Regardless of the reasons, these findings indicate the necessity of supporting novice staff through induction, mentoring and professional development activities, especially for those who have not been trained to work with children and/or have lower levels of educational attainment. Novice staff’s assessments of priority areas for professional development can be an important input for efforts to design more effective professional development programmes as well as initial education and training programmes.

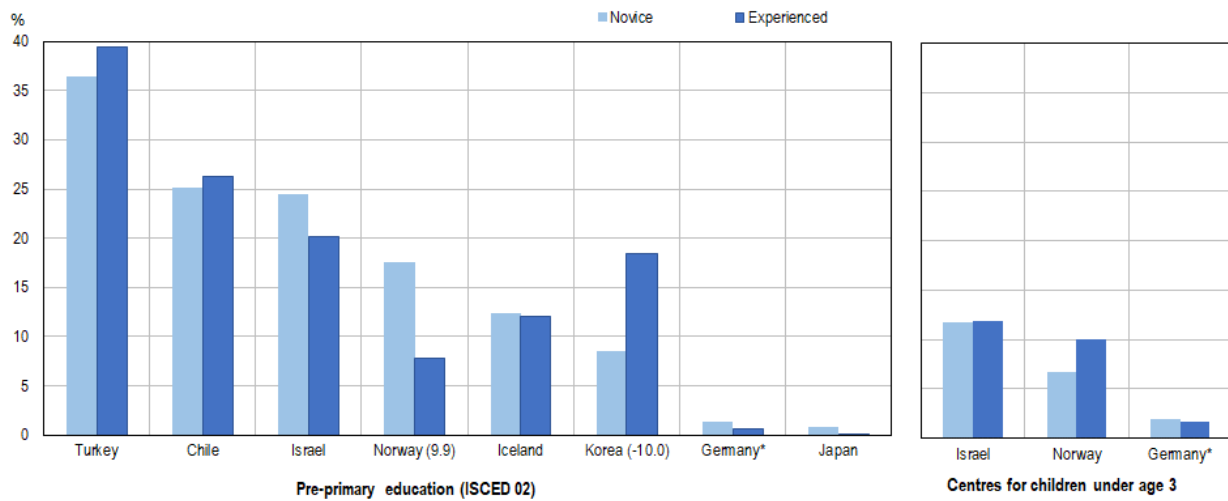
## Staff beliefs and practices

Staff self-efficacy refers to staff’s own judgement about their capacity to plan and implement specific instructional and care practices and to promote children’s development, learning and well-being (OECD, 2020<sup>[2]</sup>). In TALIS Starting Strong, staff reported on their self-efficacy for twelve different tasks related to their work with children. With only a few exceptions across countries, novice and experienced staff in centres for children under age 3 report very similar levels of self-efficacy. In contrast, some differences emerge between novice and experienced staff at the pre-primary level. These differences are most pervasive in Iceland and Korea (where novice staff report lower self-efficacy for 10 and 11 of the tasks, respectively) and least pervasive in Germany and Denmark (with low response rates) where there are no differences based on staff experience, and Norway where novice staff actually report greater self-efficacy around using digital technology than their more experience colleagues ([Table 3](#)).

Overall, digital technology is an area where staff express low levels of self-efficacy (OECD, 2020<sup>[2]</sup>). The use of digital technology (e.g. computers, tablets, smart boards) to support children’s learning is an area where novice staff could be expected to have received more relevant training in their preparation programmes, leading to greater self-efficacy compared with experienced staff. This is the case in pre-primary settings in Norway, where novice staff are significantly more confident than their more experienced peers in this respect. In contrast, in Korea novice staff are significantly less confident than their more experienced peers in the use of digital technology (Figure 2). With non-significant differences in all other participating countries, this finding highlights that successfully integrating digital technologies in ECEC is not straightforward, and novice staff in general do not perceive themselves as having an advantage with respect to using these tools.

**Figure 2. Staff sense of self-efficacy for using digital technology to support children’s learning, by experience (2018)**

Percentage of staff who feel that they can use digital technology (e.g. computers, tablets, smart boards) to support children’s learning “a lot”



\* Estimates for sub-groups and estimated differences between sub-groups need to be interpreted with care (OECD, 2019<sup>[5]</sup>).

Notes:

Statistically significant differences between novice and experienced staff are shown next to the country name (novice – experience; p-value < 0.05).

Data from Denmark are excluded from this figure due to low response rates in the survey that may result in bias in the estimates reported and limit the comparability of the data.

Countries are ranked in descending order of the percentage of novice staff who feel that they can use digital technology (e.g. computers, tablets, smart boards) to support children’s learning “a lot”.

Source: (OECD, 2019<sup>[6]</sup>), TALIS Starting Strong 2018 Database, [Table 3](#).

In addition to asking staff about their self-efficacy for different aspects of their work, the Survey included questions about the practices staff use in their work with a specific group of children. The Survey examined the extent to which staff use practices adapted to children’s interests and needs (“adaptive practices”) to facilitate their development, learning and well-being. The Survey also looked at staff use of “behavioural support” strategies, encompassing practices to ensure that children’s behaviour is supportive of development, learning and well-being in the classroom or playroom. When controlling for staff and centre characteristics (e.g. staff level of education, number of children in the target group, ECEC centre location), few differences emerge across countries in the use of these practices among novice and experienced staff. The exceptions are in pre-primary centres in Chile and Iceland, and in centres for children under age 3 in Norway, where novice staff report that they less often adapt their practices to the needs of children, compared to experienced staff ([Table 4](#)). Adapting practices to individual children is a cornerstone of good process quality (i.e. the quality of interactions children have with staff and others) in ECEC centres and therefore a competency that deserves particular attention to help novice staff develop.

Given that novice staff are less confident in some areas compared with more experienced staff, initial education and training may need to be adapted to better prepare staff for these aspects of their roles, and ongoing professional development is once again a key support. The areas where novice staff indicate a stronger need for ongoing training compared with experienced staff are partially aligned with their reports of self-efficacy and practices with children. For instance, considering that novice staff are less confident in “adapting work to an individual child’s needs” and that they do this less in practice in some countries, may

reflect their stronger interest in professional development on child development. Professional development programmes on the developmental stages and capabilities of children at different ages could be an important support for novice staff. On the other hand, given novice staff are relatively confident and report regularly using behavioural supports in their work with children, their interest in professional development on classroom/playgroup/group management may suggest that this is an area where ongoing collaborative exchanges with more experienced staff to address particular challenges could be beneficial. In general, information on novice staff's self-efficacy, the practices they report using with children and their needs for professional development can be important inputs for efforts to design more effective education and training programmes.

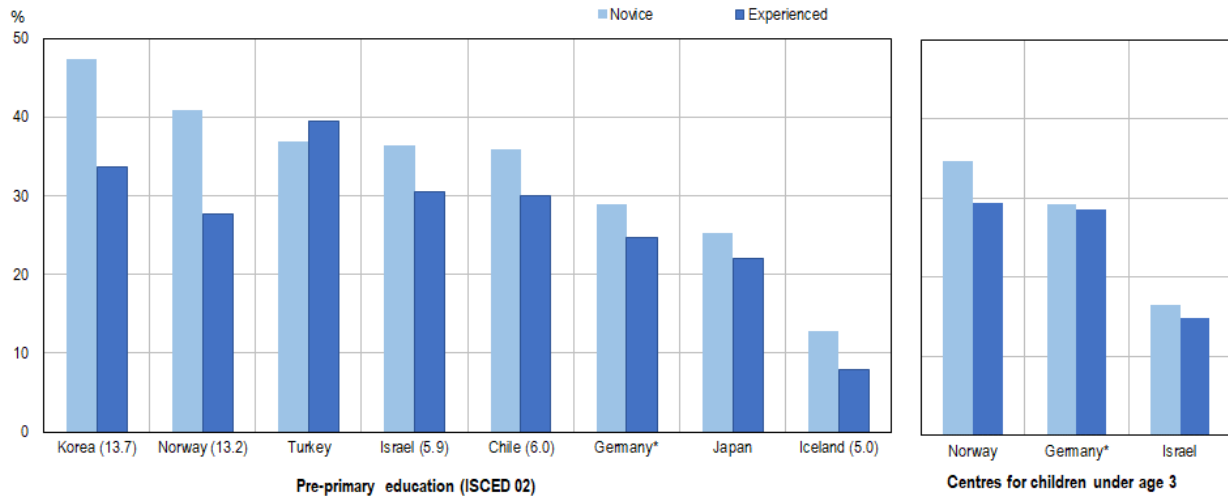
### Staff satisfaction with their salaries and feelings of societal recognition

Staff salaries and their feeling of being valued in society can provide important professional reward for the efforts of ECEC staff. Ensuring that salaries are aligned with education and job expectations, and that the profession is viewed positively in society are also important ways to improve staff retention and the capacity of the ECEC sector to attract good candidates to the field. The ECEC sector is generally known to propose relatively low salaries. However, given the diversity of educational backgrounds among ECEC staff, as well as the number of ECEC staff who do not work full-time, some salary differences are due to characteristics of ECEC staff and their contracts (OECD, 2019<sup>[5]</sup>).

Overall, staff in TALIS Starting Strong report low satisfaction with their salaries (Figure 3). As fewer than half of both novice and experienced staff indicate they are satisfied with their salaries, these data suggest that salary concerns are present from the beginning of ECEC staff's careers, and entry salaries may not be seen to increase enough with experience. In several countries (pre-primary settings in Chile, Iceland, Israel, Korea and Norway), novice staff show a significantly higher level of satisfaction with their salaries than more experienced staff. As novice staff's educational attainment is lower than experienced staff in four out of these five countries (the exception is in Norway), salary expectations may also be somewhat lower for novice staff in these countries. Indeed, looking at the association between staff's educational attainment and their satisfaction with their salaries, in several countries (pre-primary settings in Turkey and Denmark (with low response rates) and settings for under the age of 3 in Israel and Denmark (with low response rates)), staff reporting that they have higher education levels (at least ISCED level 6, a bachelor's degree or equivalent) are less satisfied with their salary compared to those with lower levels of educational attainment (ISCED level 3, upper secondary education or below) (OECD, 2020<sup>[2]</sup>). In these countries, retaining high qualified staff may be complicated.

**Figure 3. Staff satisfaction with salary, by experience (2018)**

Percentage of staff who “agree” or “strongly agree” with the statement “I am satisfied with the salary I receive for my work”



\* Estimates for sub-groups and estimated differences between sub-groups need to be interpreted with care (OECD, 2019<sup>[5]</sup>).

Notes:

Statistically significant differences between novice and experienced staff are shown next to the country name (novice – experience; p-value < 0.05).

Data from Denmark are excluded from this figure due to low response rates in the survey that may result in bias in the estimates reported and limit the comparability of the data.

Countries are ranked in descending order of the percentage of novice staff who “agree” or “strongly agree” with the statement “I am satisfied with the salary I receive for my work”.

Source: (OECD, 2019<sup>[6]</sup>), TALIS Starting Strong 2018 Database, [Table 5](#).

Feeling valued in society can be an important aspect of ECEC staff professional well-being and motivation to stay in the sector. There are large variations across countries in this regard. In Iceland only 38% of novice staff in pre-primary centres feel ECEC staff are valued in society, compared with Israel where this is the case for 81% of novice staff in pre-primary centres. In around half of participating countries (Iceland, Israel, Japan, and Korea at pre-primary level, and Denmark (with low response rates) and Norway for staff working with children under age 3), a significantly higher percentage of novice staff report that they feel ECEC staff are valued in society compared to experienced staff (OECD, 2020, p. 133<sup>[2]</sup>). This finding suggests that dissatisfaction grows along with staff experience. To some extent this finding mirrors those found for satisfaction with salary and indicates that salary and social status may go hand in hand (OECD, 2020<sup>[2]</sup>).

However, it is once again difficult to disentangle experience and education: novice staff’s stronger belief that ECEC staff are valued in society may be partly due to their lower level of educational attainment compared with experienced staff. In fact, staff who have higher education levels (at least ISCED level 6, a bachelor’s degree or equivalent) do not agree that ECEC staff are valued in society as much as staff with lower levels of educational attainment (ISCED level 3, upper secondary education or below) in around half of participating countries (in pre-primary settings in Chile, Israel, Turkey and Denmark (with low response rates) and settings for under the age of 3 in Norway and Denmark (with low response rates) (OECD, 2020, pp. 133-134<sup>[2]</sup>).



## Policy pointers

Policies to support novice ECEC staff must be adapted to the different country contexts and systems in which the staff are located. Yet, given similarities across countries in the challenges for supporting novice ECEC staff, policy approaches can include:

- **Ensuring that initial education prepares novice staff for their jobs by providing relevant knowledge, specifically on working with children**

Initial education is the foundation that staff bring with them to their work in ECEC centres. As countries aim to increase not only access but also quality in their ECEC systems, having a workforce that is well-prepared to effectively engage with young children and their families is critical. With lower overall educational attainment among novice staff compared with more experienced staff in many countries, it is all the more important that training programmes are targeted to the specificities of ECEC and the demands of working with young children. Ideally, such training also includes a practical component to gain hands-on experience while learning from more experienced staff. Regular assessment of training needs and competencies of novice staff can improve alignment between initial education and training and the job demands that arise in the ECEC profession. Furthermore, this brief suggests that novice staff may feel less confident or be less likely to adapt their practices to the needs of children compared to experienced staff. Nonetheless, a broader understanding of novice staff's practices and their implications for children is needed to design training policies and recruitment criteria that best support high-quality ECEC for children. Understanding how initial education contributes to retaining novice staff in the profession is also an important direction for further inquiry.

- **Supporting novice staff to engage in professional development**

In addition to initial education, supporting continuous professional development is one of the most important ways to facilitate novice staff's adaptation to the needs of the job. Policies can encourage employment contracts that include protected work time without children, so that novice staff can engage in ongoing training. Policies can also require or incentivise formal induction programmes for new ECEC staff, to ensure there are mechanisms in-place in all ECEC centres to facilitate the integration of new staff members. Formal strategies to ensure that novice and experienced staff work together, such as assigning novice staff across settings with more experienced peers, can capitalise on the strengths that experienced staff bring to their work as a way to support novice staff. In addition to more formal activities, ECEC centres can help novice staff develop as ECEC professionals by providing more flexible forms of professional development, such as through mentoring and collaboration among staff. These types of learning can leverage the assets of more experienced staff, as well as those with different educational backgrounds.

Dedicated funding for novice staff to participate in professional development can also facilitate their participation. Once again, training content should be tailored to the needs and interests of novice staff. For example, trainings that are specifically targeted to novice staff can be beneficial to fulfil their need for knowledge in areas such as “classroom/playgroup/group management” and “working with parents or families,” where novice staff in TALIS Starting Strong report stronger professional development needs. The areas where novice staff report lower levels of self-efficacy, which vary across countries, can also be good candidates for targeted professional development among novice staff.

- **Clarifying how novice staff can progress professionally**

A sense of professionalisation of the ECEC workforce rests in part on its members having clarity about what they need to do to transition to more senior professional roles. Relatively low salaries together with limited career progression opportunities can act as a barrier to attract and retain novice staff in the ECEC sector. In some countries in TALIS Starting Strong, dissatisfaction of staff

## 10 | No.89—Supporting early childhood education and care staff in the beginning of their careers

with salaries and with feeling valued in society grows along with their experience. This may be partly due to the lack of steps in the career progression and of possibilities for salary increases for ECEC staff. Notably, salaries are only one piece of this picture.

It is important to review whether there are clear career pathways that involve opportunities for advancement across a progression of clearly articulated steps, and to consider how initial education requirements and continuing professional development can provide meaningful career progression (OECD, 2022<sup>[7]</sup>). One possibility that would benefit both novice and experienced staff is to encourage and formally recognise collaboration or mentoring, highlighting the value of the expertise more experienced staff bring to their work and acknowledging their role in supporting new colleagues. These types of programmes can be within ECEC centres, or across centres through professional networking opportunities; even informal supports that more experienced staff provide to their colleagues can be recognised as part of their expanding professional roles.

### The bottom line

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) staff are central to promoting young children's development, learning and well-being. Novice staff, defined as staff with up to three years of experience, account for 27% of staff in TALIS Starting Strong 2018. Novice staff are generally less educated than experienced staff in terms of the level of educational attainment and education or training with a focus specifically on working with children. More novice staff than experienced staff report a strong need for additional professional development in several areas, including “classroom/playgroup/group management” and “working with parents or families”. Policy approaches to support novice staff in ECEC can include ensuring that initial education prepares novice staff for their jobs by providing relevant knowledge specifically on working with children, supporting novice staff to engage in ongoing professional development, and clarifying how novice staff can progress professionally.

## TALIS Starting Strong

This document was prepared by the TALIS Starting Strong team at the OECD.

The Starting Strong Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS Starting Strong) provides early childhood staff and centre leaders with an opportunity to share insights on their professional development; pedagogical beliefs and practices; and working conditions, as well as various other leadership, management and workplace issues. TALIS Starting Strong is the first international survey of the ECEC workforce.



### For more information

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See: [OECD TALIS Starting Strong](#)

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This Education Policy Perspective has been authorised by Andreas Schleicher, Director of the Directorate for Education and Skills, OECD.

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