Context and Implications Document for: Conceptualising and measuring domain-specific content knowledge of early childhood educators: A systematic review

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Authors’ Introduction

Empirical evidence suggests that educators play a fundamental role in providing high quality early childhood education. Engaging children in activities rich in content is an important influencing factor in supporting children’s learning in early childhood. Research in the last decades focuses on early childhood educators’ professional competence and professional knowledge and how it contributes to high quality early childhood education. While pedagogical knowledge is traditionally seen as part of early childhood educators’ competence, the role of content knowledge, on the other hand, is often not regarded as relevant for early childhood education. Some scholars have argued that childhood educators need to have a strong knowledge base which goes beyond the content knowledge acquired in general school education. The aim of the systematic review is to understand how early childhood educators define and conceptualise content knowledge.

Implications for Practice

Our systematic review of studies on early childhood educators’ content knowledge in different domains shows that content knowledge in early childhood settings is defined rather differently to that in primary or secondary school teachers. In the early childhood settings, content knowledge moves on a continuum between a scientific related
perspective (i.e. the knowledge of key concepts, facts and rules relevant at all phases of education) and a practice related perspective (i.e. knowledge of key concepts, facts and rules explicitly relevant for teaching in early childhood education). We relate this finding to how teaching and learning in early childhood settings compares to teaching in primary and secondary school settings. Taken together, we draw the following three implications for early childhood educators’ initial training and professional development:

- In most countries early childhood training offers little learning opportunities on domain/subject-specific content knowledge relevant for teaching in early childhood settings. Our systematic review shows that these learning opportunities might be highly relevant not only for early childhood educators’ competence but also for teaching quality and maybe also for children’s domain-specific learning. We suggest that domain-specific content knowledge be given more attention in early childhood educators’ training.

- However, while it is still unclear specifically which content knowledge is relevant for teaching in early childhood settings, the review suggests that early childhood educators’ content knowledge should not be limited only to knowledge taught in primary, secondary or upper secondary school, but also be explicitly relevant to the early childhood setting. Pre-service training of early childhood educators could be encouraged to adopt this broad perspective of content knowledge.

- The review found no evidence of an effect of professional development on early childhood educators’ content knowledge. Future research could investigate whether professional development that focuses on domain-specific content knowledge could enhance early childhood educators’ domain-specific competence.