

4. Recognition and appreciation for ECEC as a profession – The idea and practice of ‘profession branding’

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Modesty is a virtue, yet the self-representations of ECEC workers are frequently an exercise in self-deprecation. One of the aims of the German federal model programme ‘MEHR Männer in Kitas’ (MORE Men in ECEC Centres) was to improve the profession’s image, while one of the challenges remains to convince ECEC workers and administrators themselves that their profession is actually attractive.

The question of what actually makes working in early childhood education desirable frequently elicits awkward silence and self-scrutiny. The increasingly frequent public statements on the profession’s value, however, show that society no longer looks down on ECEC workers, but rather has a good deal of respect for them.

‘ECEC? How is a man supposed to support a family on the pay? ‘Career opportunities?’ I don’t think so. Let alone being taken seriously.’ These are frequent reactions by both ECEC administrators and teachers when asked how men’s enthusiasm for the profession might be increased. Interestingly, the same disgruntlement is not voiced when it is a matter of getting women excited about the profession. Those involved are generally unaware that the view and thus the image conveyed have little to do with enthusiasm. They fail to see that the profession has a lot to offer, and that they have stuck with it, in some cases for decades, for that very reason. It seems that there is a stance in ECEC that constant criticism is necessary and that one cannot be satisfied with the situation in the profession, paired with an attitude that trivialises working with children in an ECEC centre. There is a stubborn public preconception that ECEC workers do little more than engage in play and a bit of handicrafts, and otherwise spend all day drinking coffee.

Historical reasons for this self-deprecation

The causes also lie in the history of the occupational field. The profession was traditionally regarded as the vocational continuation of ‘motherliness’ and associated with a nurturing mandate. Accordingly, it was work for women only. It was not until the 1960s that the training was regulated by the state and established at colleges of social pedagogy (*Sozialpädagogik*), as it is known in Germany.

For cost reasons, confessional providers kept the qualification levels of ECEC workers deliberately low up to the mid-twentieth century. The focus was on childcare work. Nobody in those days spoke of early childhood education. The profession was thus not taken seriously in West Germany until reunification, while in the GDR kindergarten teachers enjoyed equal status and pay with primary school teachers. Only after the fall of the Wall was the childcare system reformed to correspond more closely to that in other European countries. The conferences of ministers of youth, education and culture, now for all of Germany, developed a common

framework for early education in ECEC centres in all the federal states. Since the publication of the results of the Pisa study in 2001, the profession of ECEC was increasingly associated with an educational mandate. This long history of professionalisation naturally made it more difficult for ECEC workers and administrators to develop professional self-confidence. The outmoded images of a trivialised task, which was automatically assigned to every mother with the birth of her child, remains in people's heads even nowadays.

Mechanisms for perpetuating preconceptions

The critical manner of speaking about the field has developed a dynamic of its own in the meantime. Even among those new to the profession, who do not yet have a concrete idea of their future work, the relevant preconceptions tend to become solidified within a very short time. It would be hard to find another profession that is so closely associated in the public discussion with the problem of salaries as ECEC. And it is not even among the worst paid occupations in Germany. People tend to forget that the pay is proportionally lower for part-time positions and that many ECEC teachers work part-time by choice. A part-time employee in a garage is also unlikely to be able to support his family on his own. The life models nowadays are a good deal more diverse and go beyond the classic model of the sole breadwinner. After all, the majority of ECEC workers actually have families. There are, however, also examples of ECEC workers who are single mothers with full-time positions.

Thus it is insufficient to attribute the paucity of men in ECEC centres to salary levels alone. One can safely say that the salary of trained ECEC workers is no lower than that of car mechanics. The difference to the other classic skilled occupations that interest boys is that the training period is unpaid. This is one of the greatest obstacles especially for lateral entrants. Equally decisive are the low social recognition for the occupational field and traditional role assignments in choice of occupation (on this, see the guidelines 'Jungen und Männer für den Erzieherberuf gewinnen'). These emotionally charged arguments become repeatedly intermingled in the discussion, which underlines how deeply rooted the struggle for respect and recognition is. It is easy to overlook the fact that there is a reciprocal relationship between salary and recognition. The one can be attained through the other.

How much do ECEC workers earn?

For the majority of municipal ECEC centres, the public sector wage agreement (TVöD) applies. It regulates payment, holidays etc. According to the payment table for 'Social and Care Services' an ECEC worker just starting out receives a gross monthly salary of around **2,220 euro**. If one is single, not a member of a state church and childless, this comes to about **1,490 euro** net. After one year one attains the next salary level and earns **2,440 euro**. Those who have completed a probationary year after training college begin working at this higher level. In subsequent years, one rises to the sixth level, where the gross salary is currently **3,120 euro**.

Source: TVöD für den Sozial- und Erziehungsdienst, valid from 1 August 2013–28 February 2014

A learning process for more self-confidence

ECEC workers are very reluctant to speak as confidently about their profession as medical doctors do, for instance. They are not accustomed to communicating about the positive aspects of their field. They are often unable to articulate the respect for their work that they miss. Instead, their self-descriptions mirror the way society already views them, and consistently revolve around the same points of criticism, further solidifying the negative ideas about their work. It frequently happens that an ECEC worker who is a single mother states with conviction that there is no way to support a family on her pay. This underlines how much effort and education are necessary in this discussion in order to point the way for a different type of self-presentation and shift the emphasis.

A respectful representation of one's own profession has lasting positive effects on a variety of levels and makes it easier, for example, to demand higher pay. After all, no employer is likely to be convinced to raise salaries simply because the employees need more money to live on. The goal here is to present one's particular abilities and successes with self-assurance. A look at the business world shows how this might work.

Learning from 'private enterprise'

Given the growing demand for professional and executive staff, enterprises have long positioned themselves in the labour market with their unique selling points and have profited on all levels. They engage in what is known as employer branding. What businesses have been doing strategically for years to recruit staff, namely creating name recognition through a brand and thus attracting and keeping personnel in the company, is just beginning in the social and educational field.

As a strategic approach, employer branding promises more than just the possibility of presenting one's own facility with outstanding unique selling points. The measures are also intended to help enhance the motivation of all employees and the corporate culture. The basic idea is a simple one: Just as brands such as Coca Cola, Volkswagen or Nivea, which are rich in associations, create a high degree of recognition and emotionality, associations can also be established between employees and the enterprise they work for. Satisfied professionals who identify themselves accordingly are usually more committed than others and more likely to be actively involved in processes of change.

From employer branding to profession branding

What promises to be successful for an individual enterprise can be translated to an entire industry or field. The campaigns developed by the Germany-wide model projects 'MORE Men in ECEC' to gain more recognition for the ECEC profession may be understood as profession branding, analogous to employer branding. If an entire occupational field acquires a clear image of what distinguishes it from others, and establishes itself as a brand, this strategically facilitates personnel

recruitment and applications for public support. Creating a sharper profile also promotes internal cohesion, since ECEC workers can identify more readily and explicitly with their profession.

The model projects have shown with their publicity measures that an authentic and positive discourse can shift the societal image of ECEC workers and accelerate processes of change. The idea here is not to gloss over aspects of their work, but rather to open our eyes to the attractiveness factors and show what distinguishes ECEC from other fields and makes it unique. For only if portrayals of the profession are consistent with what people interested in it find in reality will the success be lasting. That means that the negative conditions that exist in all professions should not be concealed, but also not overemphasised. The aim is to motivate ECEC workers to take their own profession seriously and regard it as important.

Administrators assume a key function

Those responsible for running ECEC centres play a key role in this process. They are the most important ambassadors in the branding process, both inwardly and outwardly. The motivation of ECEC workers stands and falls with the function of ECEC centre administrators and provider programme directors as role models. If the goal is to develop a motivating image of the profession, the attitude of administrators is the starting point. In order to shine outwardly, one must first radiate inwardly.

If ECEC centre administrators or provider programme directors are not convinced of their occupational field and its work, or are even critical of the profession of ECEC workers, this fundamental attitude affects the working atmosphere immediately and lastingly. After all, one's own profession is a source of self-confidence and pride that should not be underestimated, and only flows from recognition and respect. This presupposes, however, that those on the leadership level are persuaded of the meaningfulness of their own work and also show this openly.

Thus people inside the enterprise, as indirect brand ambassadors, contribute decisively to creating an image within the institution and society. They pass on the esteem and pride that they experience (or do not experience) within their own occupational field as ECEC workers to their own circles of friends and relatives. The internal effects of stereotypes and resentments from the field of ECEC itself cement preconceptions within society and profoundly damage the image of ECEC. The fact that the profession of ECEC often does not receive the public recognition that it would appear to deserve given its area of responsibility is thus also rooted to some extent in the self-image of ECEC workers and administrators. After all, how can one expect others to respect a profession whose trained professionals do not respect it, or consider it inferior?

The most important determining factor for profession branding: Motivation, not demotivation

How do ECEC professionals view their own profession? It is worthwhile for ECEC centre teams to take a critical look at this question. How do ECEC centre administrators or provider programme directors talk about it and how do ECEC workers feel about their work? How would they explain their profession to people from outside, or get potential entrants excited about ECEC? The

discussion can take up the question of why their field of endeavour deserves more public recognition. It quickly becomes clear that motivation efforts need to highlight the positive aspects of the profession and not cement and intensify the negative ones.

Focusing on the proverbial half-full glass creates team satisfaction and promotes loyalty among all staff members. Using motivation and esteem, ECEC workers can become established as credible ambassadors for their profession and their respective institutions. Thus the motto 'Do good and tell people about it!' can be supplemented with 'and encourage others to spread the word!' Soon the new ambassadors will notice in conversations with friends and acquaintances how much recognition they can get from outside when they start actively contributing to it.

This was also confirmed by ECEC centre administrators from Hamburg at a forum event organised by the Coordination Centre. They expressed the wish that ECEC workers would develop a new self-assurance. They should speak of their profession just as proudly as business people or schoolteachers. They also acknowledged that ECEC professionals often confirm clichés and preconceptions in public instead of confidently refuting them and providing a more realistic picture of their own responsible work. Profession branding always emerges in interplay between self-image and public image.

What makes ECEC attractive in contrast to other professions

The first question that comes up is thus which aspects of the occupational field can contribute to improving its image and making the profession special, also in comparison to others. Campaigns such as 'Strong Fellas for Strong Kids' from Stuttgart or 'Diversity, MAN! Your Talent for Hamburg's ECEC Centres' from Hamburg emphasise the broad and varied nature of the profession.

Variety, adventure and outdoor activities are part of everyday life at ECEC centres, along with imagination and creativity in all their guises. Above all, working with children means no day is just like the next. ECEC workers also repeatedly cite that as one of the things that attracted them to the profession. Naturally there are daily routines, but a feeling of boredom rarely arises.

The girls and boys are in a different mood every day. The work requires teachers to slip into a wide variety of roles and change their perspectives constantly. ECEC workers have the opportunity to bring in a diversity of talents, passions and personalities to meet the challenges they face. ECEC workers have more opportunities than virtually any other professionals to apply their individual talents to encouraging and supporting children. Innovation and embarking on new paths are considered highly desirable here. Many providers promote this with extensive opportunities for further training. Those who make good use of their professional options will find that ECEC is not the oft-invoked one-way street. This also gives ECEC centre administrators the chance to develop an individual profile for their institution using the creativity of their professional staff. The aspect of diversity is outstanding in the interests of profession branding and in comparison to other occupations. Staff in other fields can only dream of these advantages offered by ECEC as a profession.

Accompanying ECEC workers on their way into the future

The multifaceted nature of ECEC is combined with an additional bonus that ECEC professionals and administrators often completely underestimate. The public are still convinced that ECEC workers are relatively poorly paid and that this is the main reason why more men do not choose the profession. ‘Just pay better and the problem will solve itself’ is a common suggestion. Experience from other European countries such as Sweden, which pay higher salaries and still have a low proportion of men in ECEC, however, shows that the solution is not quite so simple.

The counselling activities of the Hamburg model project ‘MORE Men in ECEC’ also reveal that many men who are interested in working in an ECEC centre are not primarily motivated by high salaries. Instead, they are looking for meaningful work, a degree of freedom and self-realisation. Since the autumn of 2011, the Hamburg Coordination Centre has received more than 500 telephone enquiries. Most of them were from potential lateral entrants who, after several years of working in sometimes well paid but unfulfilling occupations, had begun to ask themselves ‘Is that all there is?’ The matter of future salaries virtually never came up in these conversations. The experiences of the Stuttgart model project with more than 300 counselling sessions confirmed this.

These men are searching for work they can identify with and that means something. This insight often meets with incredulous looks from ECEC centre administrators. But even private enterprise is aware of the fascination of fulfilling, meaningful tasks. Since businesses are frequently unable to offer meaning based on their entrepreneurial mandate, many firms invest in social initiatives or sustainability projects in order to appear aware of their responsibilities in the world.

Work in early childhood education is not simply meaningful; it has essential significance and implies taking social responsibility for our future—children. The profession offers the chance to actually affect and change something and to participate actively in shaping the future. Rearing and educating (!) children is demanding work and fundamental to our society.

Job security and work-life balance

The many sides of the profession of ECEC, together with its high degree of meaning, sets the occupation apart from others. The increased demand for places on ECEC training courses demonstrates that these factors play a preeminent role in vocational orientation and need to be emphasised far more clearly by ECEC centre workers and administrators.

In other areas, too, the ECEC centre is quite an attractive workplace. Not all of the working conditions are less than desirable. In many areas, ECEC frequently offers a good deal more advantages than other professions. There is plenty of competition for ECEC workers, for instance. ECEC centres are already complaining of personnel shortages. In coming years, the need for qualified ECEC professionals in Germany will further increase with the expansion of crèches. Officially recognised ECEC teachers, for example, need not fear for the security of their workplaces, which does not go without saying nowadays and increases the attractiveness of the profession.

When it comes to work-life balance, ECEC also has quite a few advantages over work in private enterprise. The atmosphere in ECEC centres is family-friendly, and for that reason the working hours are generally also conducive to family life. The oft-criticised part-time models also give staff a good deal of scope, for example for their ambitions outside of work or to devote themselves to the family. Working part time does not always mean only working half the time. Many ECEC teachers only reduce their working time by a few hours a week. In other fields such as advertising regular working hours are rare, and part-time positions rarer still, so that it is extremely difficult to combine family and employment. Expecting people to gracefully accept any amount of overtime is also considered normal—unthinkable in ECEC centres.

New emphases in public relations

In conclusion, one can say that the discourse on the profession of ECEC has undergone a positive change over the past two years. Society and the press have in some cases been ahead of ECEC workers and administrators here. Many people, both men and women, from all walks of life and throughout Germany have expressed their unconditional interest in and respect and support for ECEC centres—in some cases also because they feel that their own profession is missing something that they believe can be found in early childhood education. Nevertheless, the discussion about the field repeatedly focuses on and is limited to salaries and general conditions.

The public relations work by the model projects ‘MORE Men in ECEC’ has shown that it is high time we set new priorities in society in order to gain more recognition and respect for the profession. In order to do so we need concerted efforts, beginning with ECEC workers themselves, with ECEC centre administrators setting an example and providers continually communicating. Only in this way can we guarantee that the work, with its sphere of responsibility and educational mandate, will be taken seriously on a broad scale.

The model projects have accomplished a good deal of educational and networking work in this direction. For example, they have been involved in numerous ECEC centre administrative consultations for different providers. The topic has also been taken up regularly at networking events and professional conferences. Presenting the various projects, those responsible have drawn attention to the issue that the profession’s image can only be improved if ECEC workers devote themselves to the task. In the long run, a positive and authentic representation of the profession will be reflected in personnel recruitment. ECEC centres should be encouraged to become conscious of their role as employers and to use convincing arguments to bind young entrants to the institution while they are still trainees. Raising consciousness is the first step to developing a feel for the associated theme of employer branding.

This investment in the future will pay long-term dividends: Many examples of employer branding underline the lasting effect on enterprise success. Fluctuation is reduced, the company’s good reputation increases staff motivation and the quality of work in the corresponding

workplaces rises. Successful profession branding could do the same thing for the entire field of ECEC. And by the way, with more self-confidence, ECEC workers and administrators will also be able to negotiate better conditions more easily and successfully.

Literature:

Koordinationsstelle "Männer in Kitas" (2013). Jungen und Männer für den Erzieherberuf gewinnen. Handreichung für die Praxis. Berlin