

## Professional competencies of practitioners in family and parenting support programmes. A German and Dutch case study



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Professional competencies  
Family and parenting support programmes  
Trust  
Outreach  
Implementation quality

### ABSTRACT

To combat inequality at its root, in many countries family and parenting support programmes have been developed and implemented to assist families in creating stimulating home learning environments for their children. Practitioners working in these programmes are often confronted with highly complex, changing, and diverse work environments. However a clear description of the competencies these practitioners need to be successful does not currently exist. We conducted a qualitative case study and obtained in-depth knowledge about the necessary professional competencies from the perspective of financiers, providers, practitioners, and participants across three cases of family and parenting support programmes in Germany and the Netherlands. Results indicate that achieving family and parenting support programmes' main objectives (high outreach and good implementation quality) requires practitioners to have the following professional competencies: high motivation, knowledge (didactical, pedagogical, tacit, content, and programme knowledge), and beliefs based on openness and respect towards diverse family lives, as well as adaptability, self-regulation, and cooperation and reflection skills. Further, the competency to establish trust and use trusting relationships with target groups facilitates the associations between the other competencies and objectives. We integrated our findings into a novel model of professional competencies for practitioners working in family and parenting support programmes, which can be used for further research and practice, as we also discuss in the article.

### 1. Introduction

Parents directly influence their child's development by providing their first home learning environment (HLE), in guiding their learning and in undertaking activities together. Numerous studies make particular note of the important role of a rich HLE for child development; evidence indicates that the HLE at least partly explains differences in children's competencies (Adi-Japha & Klein, 2009; Bradley, 2016; Kluczniok, Lehl, Kuger, & Rossbach, 2013; Rodriguez & Tamis-LeMonda, 2011; Skwarchuk, Sowinski, & LeFevre, 2014).

To narrow these differences, family support services are needed to support families in providing a stimulating and rich home learning environment for their children.

The concept of family support, which encompasses a wide variety of practices and theoretical approaches, is not clearly defined (Frost & Dolan, 2012; McKeown, 2000). For example, Dunst and Trivette (2009, p. 127) describe all services that help families to "influence and

improve the behaviour and functioning of parents, family and child" as family support services. In line with the definition of Daly et al. (2015, p. 12), we use the term 'family and parenting support programmes', where 'parenting support' focuses more on the improvement of resources for raising children and 'family support' generally focuses on the stability and well-being of the family. The programmes that are subject of this paper are examples of family and parenting support services mainly aiming at supporting parents in providing children with high quality stimulation at home to ensure the well-being of children and families.

A broad range of initiatives, programmes, and activities for parents and children have been developed and implemented worldwide to specifically target the needs of disadvantaged parents. The programmes differ by way of the potential challenges they face and their factors of success concerning their different target groups, as well as with regard to their objectives and underlying theoretical frameworks, the levels of governance and service organization, and the delivery modes (Blok,

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Fukkink, Gebhardt, & Leseman, 2005; Cadima, Nata, Evangelou, & Anders, 2017; Canavan, Pinkerton, & Dolan, 2016).

The professionals who carry out the programmes play a significant role in the success of these family programmes (Canavan et al., 2016). Previous studies on process quality in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) suggest that variations in the delivered process quality can be traced back to facets of professional competencies of the staff members (Anders, 2012; Baier et al., 2018; Egert, 2015; Jensen & Rasmussen, 2016; Markussen-Brown et al., 2017). However, considering the workforce in family and parenting support programmes, a high diversity in terms of the educational and professional background of the practitioners can be assumed. In the present study, we use for this reason the term practitioners (Urban, Vandenbroeck, van Laere, Lazzari, & Peeters, 2012), which includes professionals and paraprofessionals. Aligned with Slot, Romijn, and Wysłowska (2017, p 11), practitioners are understood “as agents within a wider context of the school, institution or organisation” working with children and parents directly in the setting of family and parenting support programmes. In this context, the question arises as to whether practitioners working in family and parenting support programmes represent a form of joint profession: Building on this, the consequent question would be which competencies and requirements practitioners need. Empirically, other than for ECEC professionals or social workers, there continues to be a lack of knowledge about the requirements of the family and parenting support practitioners’ professional competencies (Klein & Gilkerson, 2000).

The aim of the current study is to provide an in-depth insight into the professional requirements of practitioners of family and parenting support programmes from the perspective of participants, providers, and financiers by using the example of three successful family intervention programmes in the Netherlands and Germany. Based on this, the study aims to propose a new model of professional competencies for practitioners in the field of family and parenting support programmes.

In the following, the characteristics of successful family and parenting support programmes will be presented in order to subsequently examine existing theoretical models of professional competencies and their transferability to the field of practitioners in family and parenting support programmes. After presenting the research question, we describe the sample and the method of analysis. The study concludes with a discussion of the results within recent theoretical and empirical evidence.

### 1.1. Context and conditions of family and parenting support programmes

This study examines programmes aimed at supporting parents in providing a rich and stimulating home learning environment for their children. Improving the HLE is a broad concept, and as such numerous programmes have been developed and implemented in the field of social services for families.

In general, the field of family and early childhood social services is described as a “highly complex and demanding field of working professionally with young children, families and communities” (Urban et al., 2012, p. 508). Due to deregulation, privatisation, decentralisation, and deinstitutionalisation (AIEJI, 2011; Van Ewijk, 2004), the field is characterized as heterogeneous and highly fragmented, comprising numerous separate fields and activities with specific professions and institutions (AIEJI, 2011). Further, family and parenting support programmes as a service for families with young children are allocated to different systems (health system, education system, social services, etc.) with corresponding overlaps which require cross-sector collaboration. Family and parenting support programmes thus also have the function of integrating qualified practitioners with diverse professional backgrounds, e.g. ECEC pedagogues, adult educators, social pedagogues, social workers, nurses, and paraprofessionals without an official qualification for their work in the field (Musick & Stott, 2000). In summary, family and parenting support programmes are characterised

by a high variance in the working conditions, contexts, and qualifications of practitioners, not only in Germany or the Netherlands, but also throughout Europe. Data on the characteristics and qualification of the practitioners are limited (CWDC, 2008). The studies of Oberhuemer, Schreyer, and Neuman (2010) and Boddy and Statham (2009) revealed varying conditions for ECEC professionals and family support workers across different countries, e.g. various professional backgrounds, job titles, qualifications, and functions.

Against this background, it can be questioned if practitioners working in family and parenting support programmes meet the criteria of an established profession (Curry, Schneider-Munoz, & Carpenter-Williams, 2012). According to Dewe and Otto (2005), a profession is characterized by the existence of scientific training with expert and practical knowledge, an autonomous establishment of a scientific discipline, the formation of a professional and technical authority body for the organization and qualification of professionals, explicitly articulated and evaluated professional ethics, standards of professional practice and visibility in professional organizations, and its own forms of publication. Dewe and Otto (2005) refer to the field of social work, but their understanding of profession can also be used in the context of family and parenting support programmes. The professionalization of a field is also linked to an expectation that the work performed in that field will be of a high quality (Thole, Roßbach, Fölling-Albers, & Tippelt, 2008; Otto, Polutta, & Ziegler, 2010; Urban et al., 2012). This raises the question as to both the prerequisites for and potential descriptions of the professional competencies of practitioners in family and parenting support programmes.

Family and parenting support programmes can be distinguished on a number of dimensions. First, Gordon (1983) distinguishes between universal and target group-specific approaches. The former contains programmes aimed at all families, having a universal preventive character. The latter describes programmes referring specifically to families with potential risk factors (e.g. low income, low level of education, or a migrant background). Second, there are many differences in the curriculum of the programmes (Brooks-Gunn, 2003). While some programmes are purposely designed with a broad perspective, offering support in a variety of areas (e.g. social and economic support, parenting skills, interaction skills), other programmes offer specific content focusing solely on certain aspects of the home environment (e.g. helping parents to create more stimulating learning activities). Third, there is a distinction between the methods of delivery. Home-based programmes aim to directly promote the home environment by training and guiding parents in order to improve their parental skills and by indirectly stimulating children’s development, e.g. during regular home visits. Parents receive tools to better understand and respond to their child’s needs. These programmes are often more individual, focusing on one family each session. In contrast, centre-based approaches provide children with direct learning experiences, for example in preschool settings (Blok et al., 2005). These are often group programmes where multiple families come together. When taking place at an early education setting, centre-based approaches can provide easier access to early childhood education for families at risk, and aim to strengthen the partnership between parents and preschools in order to support the families (Cadima et al., 2017). A combination of home-based and centre-based approaches seems to be the most effective, although the research evidence is not always unambiguous (for a meta-analysis, see Blok et al., 2005).

Family and parenting support is not just a set of services or a form of organisation, but it also includes a style of practice (Canavan et al., 2016), which, can be described as child-centred, strength-based, inclusive, partnership-based, easily accessible and building on the capacities of families. These characteristics are also found in family system approaches that implement capacity-building practices (Dunst & Trivette, 2009). The recipient, in this case the family, is not perceived as the cause for the problem, but rather it is assumed that families have the capacity and competencies to meet the challenges and make good

decisions. Five features characterize this capacity-building paradigm in family-system models: promotion, empowerment, strength-based, resource-based, and family-centred. Therefore, it forms a contrast to deficit-oriented approaches (Dunst & Trivette, 2009).

Family and parenting support programmes face two challenges at the same time: the outreach to the target group and ensuring the quality of implementation. It seems to be particularly difficult to reach out to socially disadvantaged families, families with a migrant background, and high-risk families (Boag-Munroe & Evangelou, 2012; Cohen & Trauernicht et al., 2018; Phoenix & Rosenbaum, 2019; Snell-Johns, Mendez, & Smith, 2004). Given the increasing cultural and linguistic diversity of the target families in Europe, specialized functioning outreach strategies are needed to overcome cultural and linguistic barriers. Cadima et al. (2017) found that a low participation threshold and a deliberate lack of stigmatisation characterise successful outreach and effective parent support approaches. However, the challenge is to reach the respective target groups and to persuade them to participate in the first place. Furthermore, strategies that seem to promote the outreach of the programmes, such as the involvement of target group members as practitioners, do not always foster the quality of the implementation and the outcomes of the intervention itself. This is especially important given that Cadima et al. (2017) show that high process quality and high quality programme implementation constitute successful family and parenting support programmes.

The aforementioned literature mainly focuses on either the general conditions or the structure of the family and parenting support programmes. However, little is known about the specific competencies of practitioners that drive the success of these programmes to reach the target families and to effectively support the families.

## 1.2. Theoretical models of professional competencies

Working in multi-professional, multi-disciplinary teams is common in social service settings (Musick & Stott, 2000; Slot, Romijn, Cadima, Nata, & Wysłowska, 2018). Numerous studies have shown, in this context, the relation between competent practitioners and delivered quality (implementation quality/process quality; Anders, 2012; Baier et al., 2018; Egert, 2015; Jensen & Rasmussen, 2016; Markussen-Brown et al., 2017). Structural aspects, such as professionals' qualification levels, fail to capture a complete understanding of the professional's influence on process quality (Early et al., 2006; Leach et al., 2008), which leads to the need of a stronger focus on professional competencies.

Weinert (2001) describes competencies as "necessary prerequisites available to an individual or a group of individuals for successfully meeting complex demands" (p. 62). Professional competencies combine intellectual abilities, aspects of knowledge, domain specific strategies and routines, motivational and volitional aspects, and values and beliefs (Commission of the European Communities, 2007; Weinert, 2001); these specific elements can be thought of as "the prerequisites required to fulfil the demands of a particular professional position" (Weinert, 2001, p. 21).

Considering that practitioners in family and parenting support services will increasingly be working in complex, diverse, and changing contexts, dealing with unpredictability and continuing to provide high implementation quality in daily practice will become crucial aspects of professional competencies (Urban et al., 2012). In conclusion, practitioners working with at-risk families and children need to have broad competencies as well as specialist knowledge (Moss, 2008; Peeters & Sharmahd, 2014; Peeters & Vandebroek, 2011; Urban, 2008; Urban et al., 2012).

In line with the definition of competencies we use here, theoretical models of professional competencies for different professional fields have been developed that combine different generic and profession specific characteristics. Professional competency models have also been developed for staff working with children in pedagogical settings

(school), and particularly ECEC settings, which define concrete requirements (Anders, 2012; Aubrey, 1997; Kunter et al., 2013; MacCray, 2008; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002; Slot et al., 2017; Tirosh, Tsamir, Levenson, & Tabach, 2011; Urban et al., 2012). These models encompass the following key components: knowledge, beliefs, and motivation. Professional knowledge refers to aspects of content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, and general pedagogical knowledge (Baumert & Kunter, 2013; Shulman, 1986). While content knowledge is defined as the deep understanding of the professional content regarding a topic, pedagogical content knowledge encompasses the knowledge necessary to make a certain content accessible to the recipient. General pedagogical knowledge includes principles and strategies to optimize learning situations in educational contexts (Kunter et al., 2013). The motivational aspect comprises the affective aspects, e.g. self-efficacy, interest or anxiety (Anders, 2012; Baumert & Kunter, 2013). Beliefs are the assumptions that a person holds to be true; they are relatively stable and give the professional daily practice a basis. Beliefs refer to the attitudes and values regarding an educational objectives, one's own professional identity and role, and what constitutes good practices (Anders & Rossbach, 2015; Lee & Ginsburg, 2009; Oppermann, Anders, & Hachfeld, 2016; Slot et al., 2017).

Besides the key components of knowledge, beliefs, and motivation, other models include additional components, for example self-regulation (Baumert & Kunter, 2013). Self-regulation relates to the effective handling of the demands of everyday working life (e.g. a low tendency for resignation in case of failure) and is considered to be important in models for ECEC professionals as well (Anders, 2012). Moreover, Urban et al. (2012) and Fröhlich-Gildhoff, Nentwig-Gesemann, and Pietsch (2011) stress the importance of constant and critical reflection as a key competency of ECEC practitioners, meaning to take a critical look at their own and the ability to relate knowledge, practical experience, and values.

Based on assumptions of the capacity-building paradigm as described above, Dunst, Boyd, Trivette, and Hamby (2002) describe characteristics of family-oriented models with respect to the role of professionals and the conceptualisation of family. They emphasise the resources and own capacities of families to make informed decisions. In a family-centred framework, Dunst et al. (2002) described the actual practices of family support in more detail, distinguishing technical qualities, including knowledge and skills of practitioners, but also relational practices and participatory practices. Both practices are relevant for the effectiveness of programmes (Dunst, Trivette, & Hamby, 2007), although participatory practices are more common in family-centred programmes (Dunst et al., 2002). The prerequisite for these different practices, however, are competencies of the professionals. Compared to that, the theoretical model of Fröhlich-Gildhoff et al. (2011) focuses on professional competencies and distinguishes between the foundations of action, the willingness to act, and the realisation of action. In line with this model, we assume that competencies as the foundations of action enable professionals to act in complex situations. Action guiding beliefs and values create a professional attitude that is the prerequisite for actions and reflections of practitioners in practice.

Further research results on help-giving practitioner competencies are shown in related disciplines. Aubry, Flynn, Gerber, and Dostaler (2005) examined the core competencies of support providers working with people with psychiatric disabilities. They asked staff members and clients what competencies are needed before starting the job and what competencies can be learned on the job. The interviewees mentioned a person-centred approach and personal attributes as needed before starting the job, while they considered knowledge and specific skills for working with people with psychiatric disabilities as competencies that can be learned along the way. Various models of professional competencies have been developed for the field of education, but transferability of models and research results to adjacent professional working fields is limited, for example when the composition of the staff, the target group, or a programme's objectives are taken into account. In

In addition, it is not clear whether the work of practitioners in family and parenting support programmes is solely pedagogical activity. Rather, the work is interdisciplinary in the sense that it is social work at the interface of counselling, educational work, and clinical intervention (Curry et al., 2012). Professional competency models for pedagogical professionals and other help giving practices can be inspiring because they deal with related fields of activity. However, the setting-specific tasks that practitioners in family and parenting support services face in their daily work must be taken into consideration. Compared to ECEC settings, professionals in family and parenting support programmes, e.g. home visitors or course leaders, face a number of specific challenges and tasks. More than in ECEC, outreach to non-universal target groups is a core objective in all family and parenting support programmes. Further, service systems must be prepared to invest deeply in a broader range of challenging family conditions than in ECEC in order to deliver tangible changes. Further, the joint work with families often takes place outside an institutional framework, e.g. in home visit programmes where practitioners work in the families' homes. This gives them the – potentially very positive – opportunity to get a more comprehensive insight into the family's life, which can, however, be more challenging for both families and practitioners, since meeting at a more neutral place can be less intimidating and can provide more practical support (e.g. sufficient space). Each practitioner has to deal with high fluctuation of families, and personal contact is often limited to a single meeting per week. Moreover, building temporary but nevertheless personal one-to-one relationships is crucial; of course, they need to be maintained over the course of non-daily contact. And last but not least, there are also specific topics and contents that vary according to the programme and are the focus of the cooperation with the families.

To summarise, practitioners working in family and parenting support programmes face specific situations and conditions in their daily work; these include the strong focus on outreach, working with at-risk groups, less standardised procedures, and the extreme flexibility that has to be shown in everyday work, as there are not always clearly defined work spaces, curricula, and target groups. However, work contexts partly overlap with other pedagogical contexts, such as ECEC settings, that are also often characterized by complex, unpredictable, and not standardised interactions (Fröhlich-Gildhoff et al., 2011; Urban et al., 2012). Nevertheless, to date there is insufficient empirical research on what facets of professional competencies are needed in the field of family and parenting support programmes.

Building on existing literature on the necessary competencies of professionals working with families and young children, we aim to develop in this qualitative case study in-depth knowledge of the required professional competencies of practitioners in successful family and parenting support programmes from the perspective of financiers, providers, practitioners, and participants. The comparative analysis aims to identify common facets of professional competencies across three programmes in two different countries.

## 2. Method

In order to understand common facets of professional competencies as well as their interrelations, we chose an exploratory approach to gain a deeper understanding of the underlying mechanisms (General Accounting Office [GAO], 1990). Within a multiple-case study design (Yin, 2009), we used a research strategy focussing on three cases of family and parent support programmes in two European countries. For the analysis of the cases, we applied the qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2014; Kohlbacher, 2005).

### 2.1. Sample

Family and parenting support systems in the Netherlands and Germany, in particular, have similarities and build on experience of transferring programmes from one country to the other (Cadima et al.,

2017). In both countries, the support of all parents is a part of a strategic political inter-agency framework that integrates intervention and prevention services through collaboration between the education, health, and social sectors with a strong preventive character (Cadima et al., 2017). Further, both countries are characterized by the implementation of numerous evidence-based and successfully evaluated programmes.

For this study, we selected two family and parenting support programmes from Germany — *Chancenreich* and *Stadtteilmütter in Neukölln* — and one family and parenting support programme from the Netherlands — the *Stap programme*. We based our selection on the rational of best practice cases to find out which competencies account for effective programmes (GAO, 1990). Therefore, all three programmes were part of an inventory aiming at gathering and comparing family and parenting support programmes across Europe (Cadima et al., 2017), as well as of an in-depth case study of success factors of thriving family and parenting support programmes in four European countries (Cohen & Trauernicht et al., 2018) in the context of the European ISOTIS project. Based on that, the selected best practice programmes meet the following characteristics: the promotion of HLE in families with young children, a high outreach to the target group and the implementation of a successful evaluation that proves the effectiveness of the programme. In the following, we describe all three programmes in more detail.

#### 2.1.1. Family and parenting support programme I: *Chancenreich*, Germany

*Chancenreich* [English translation: full of opportunities] is a regional programme in Germany with a universal approach and an innovative bonus system. This means that all participating families receive a bonus of 500 euros after completing certain programme modules. In a modular structure, it offers various support services (e.g. parenting courses, home visits) to families with children from birth up to the age of three years. The programme was positively evaluated by Anders, Hachfeld, and Wilke (2015; see also Anders, Schünke, Ulferts, & Wilke, 2017; Wilke, Hachfeld, Anders, & Höhl, 2014).

#### 2.1.2. Family and parenting support programme II: *Stadtteilmütter in Neukölln*, Germany

The programme *Stadtteilmütter* [English translation: district mothers] specifically targets migrant families in Neukölln, a district of Berlin, Germany. Through home visits and presence in the community, staff members support migrant families in their children's upbringing and integration into the German (educational) system. The staff members are unemployed, but they are trained mothers with a migration background themselves. They can therefore be described as para-professionals. Koch (2009) evaluates the programme positively; however, the evaluation focused mainly on the self-reported aspects of parental satisfaction, leading to a restricted validity of the results.

#### 2.1.3. Family and parenting support programme III: *Stap Programme*, the Netherlands

*Stap* [English translation: Step] in the Netherlands is a national comprehensive family and parenting support programme for educationally disadvantaged families with children aged one to six years. In a modular approach for different age groups and with different session formats, *Stap* aims to improve young children's cognitive and linguistic development, to improve the emerging learning attitude of the children and to improve the. The programme has been positively evaluated in several studies (e.g. Leseman & van Tuijl, 2001; Sann & Thrum, 2005; Van Tuijl & Siebes, 2006).

All three programmes can be defined as families and parenting support programmes, as the programmes include services that focus both on general support of families (e.g. networking with official institutions) and on the promotion of parental skills, e.g. in form of parenting courses.

## 2.2. Data collection

Within the three cases, we focused on four different groups of people involved in the programmes at different levels and with different positions to represent a diverse spectrum of perspectives on the topic. We interviewed financiers, providers, staff, and participating parents.

Financiers were included in the case study because they tend to take on a higher-level management role with an economic perspective, which is also important in order to set up and maintain programmes in a resource-oriented manner. Further, they were in our cases also involved in the development of the programme (e.g. Chancenreich). Providers were interviewed because they conceptualise programmes and give directions. In a coordinating role, they also work directly with the staff and have expectations that are more concrete on staff competencies, particularly with regard to outreach and implementation quality. The staff perspective was important to get very concrete information about what works well in their own and their co-workers practice. Finally, the parental perspective was important to us because parents are the main stakeholders of the support programs. As such, what they find important could help to increase the uptake and lower the dropout rate of family and parenting support programs.

We carried out two types of interviews for each programme: expert interviews and focus groups. Generally, expert interviews were conducted one-on-one with representatives of the service providers and financiers, and focus groups were conducted with the staff and the parents. In total, four financiers, four providers, 17 staff members, and six parents were interviewed. All interviews were conducted between December 2017 and July 2018. Expert interviews and focus groups lasted 30–90 min. Prior to the beginning of each expert interview and focus group, the purpose of the study was explained and the informed consents were distributed, discussed, and signed by each participant. Each focus group was audiotaped and subsequently transcribed. In the following subsections, we describe the interviewees in more detail. The interviews were unstructured but followed the same general guideline, and both translated and adapted open ended questions to the specific interview partners. Due to the embedding of the study in a larger project with a different research purpose (see Section 2.1), the interview guideline comprised a great variety of topics that did not only focus on the competencies of practitioners. These topics were motivation, perceived success factors, expectations, challenges, outreach, use of cooperation, use of information and communication technologies, dealing with multilingualism, and requirements of practitioners. However, for the present study, we focused on the interview statements regarding the professional competencies that were discussed throughout the whole interview.

### 2.2.1. Interviewees of Chancenreich

For *Chancenreich*, the interviewed provider is the chairman of the association with which the project is affiliated. His involvement reaches back to the beginning of *Chancenreich*. The interviewed financier, a business administrator, is a member of the executive board of the foundation that originated, developed, and (mainly) funded *Chancenreich*. Our focus group of practitioners consisted of seven female staff members — including three family visitors, three currently active course leaders, and one retired course leader — with diverse professional backgrounds (e.g. nursing, social pedagogy, and social work). Most of the interviewees had been involved with *Chancenreich* for several years. The focus group of participating parents consisted of three mothers; however, only one mother was currently involved in the programme. The others had participated when their children were younger.

### 2.2.2. Interviewees of Stadtteilmütter

The interviewed provider of *Stadtteilmütter*, a pedagogue, plays a major role in the project's management and helped develop the concept in the first place. The interviewed financier is a woman who is the

project lead at county level with diverse tasks, including organising rooms and equipment to regular funding. She represents one of the four financing institutions. The focus group of practitioners consisted of six so-called *Stadtteilmütter* [neighbourhood mothers] who originate from Lebanon, Turkey, Rumania, and Egypt. All had been involved as staff members for one to three years. The parent group interview consisted of two mothers who had previously participated in the programme.

### 2.2.3. Interviewees of Stap

We conducted two provider interviews for *Stap*: one with the national coordinator, working at the Dutch Youth Institute, and one with the local coordinator of a selected municipality. This municipality was selected because a high percentage of target group families (especially non-Western migrant families) can be found there, and this municipality implemented all modules of *Stap*. Two policy representatives from that municipality, working at the Early Childhood department, were interviewed in the perspective of their role as a financier. The focus group consisted of four staff members. Each practitioner works within in a different module of *Stap*, has previous working experience in ECEC settings, and two of them have a migrant background (Turkish and Moroccan). We also conducted a parent interview via phone with a participating parent.

## 2.3. Analytic strategy

The interviews were analysed with the method of qualitative content analysis according to the guidelines by Mayring (2014). We used a two-step procedure: First, we conducted a qualitative content analysis for each interview for each programme and country. In the second step, we compared the results across programmes and countries. The analysis was done using a coding frame from the larger study mentioned before; however, in this study we only used interview segments coded with the main category requirements of practitioners. Subsequently, we inductively derived a coding frame for multiple subcategories relating to the requirements of practitioners, e.g., 'tacit knowledge regarding the culture of the target group' and 'balance between distance and relationship'. Then, each text segment was coded by matching it with a subcategory from the coding frame, which was developed in an iterative process. Following Barratt, Choi, and Li (2011), who discussed cross-case analysis as more effective with regard to generate new theoretical models, we compared the subcategories of all programmes across countries. New subcategories were continuously added and adapted to previously coded transcripts. The transcribed interviews were coded by one researcher, and at least 20% of the interviews were double-coded by two authors on each site to assure a high inter-rater agreement. Inconsistencies in the double coding were discussed between the coders until consensus was reached. The inter-rater reliability using Cohens Kappa was on average across all interviews 0.81 for the German team and 0.77 for the Dutch team.

## 3. Results

Inductive and deductive content analysis of all interviews revealed five key themes with regard to the professional requirements of practitioners working with families and children in family and parenting support programmes: motivation, knowledge, beliefs, skills, and trust. Apart from trust, these findings tie in with the existing literature on professional competencies. Nevertheless, several interesting specifics can be identified which are described in detail below.

### 3.1. Motivation

One professional requirement for successful work in family and parenting support programmes which was described as necessary by all interview partners was to be fully engaged in the project and to be highly and intrinsically motivated. "It is all about passion. [...] You can

see it in their faces when they start talking (about their work). [...] It's the involvement!" (*Stap*, local coordinator). Passionate practitioners who enthusiastically work with the target group, and who are willing to build partnerships with the parents, seem to possess a crucial quality. The motivation of the practitioners is generated by the programmes' mission, but also by the feeling that they can achieve something meaningful. They feel "it is a lot of fun helping people. Helping women who aren't managing here" (*Stadtteilmütter*, practitioner).

A practitioner of *Stap* reported: "You need to be motivated and enthusiastic in order to get parents motivated". This quote describes the impact of motivated practitioners; their motivation and convincing communication regarding the programme's content or mission motivates parents to participate. Furthermore, if practitioners see a high meaningfulness in their work, they also display a high level of commitment and endurance, despite demanding working conditions and working hours, because "this is not a nine-to-five job, but once the families have gained trust, they call at 11p.m." (*Stadtteilmütter*, practitioner).

Particularly for the *Stadtteilmütter* programme, which involves a relatively high amount of paraprofessionals compared to the other two programmes, it became clear that some practitioners reported fear and a lack of confidence at the beginning of their involvement. One practitioner said: "You really have a lot of worries at first, 'are they [families] accepting this or not?' I thought I'd never find a woman who'd listen to me" (*Stadtteilmütter*, practitioner). They reported insecurity on how to represent the programme and how to address families in an empowering way. Experience, training, and supervision were important for them to increase the knowledge and to finally gain self-confidence in their role and motivation for their job.

### 3.2. Knowledge

Our analysis revealed, furthermore, the importance of different facets of knowledge as requirements of the practitioners' work within the families. We found evidence that practitioners need *didactical and pedagogical knowledge* on how to address families, how to establish professional relationships, on ways of learning and supervising, and on group leadership. Parents were very clear about the importance of practitioners treating them as equals and considering them as partners. They perceived the practitioners as knowledgeable, "but never in a lecturing way, but really exemplary [...]. (This is) very, very pleasant, because otherwise I would quickly leave" (*Chancenreich*, participating parent). Practical support, listening, and being a role model in communication with a child seemed to be successful empowering strategies.

Another aspect of knowledge that appeared to be relevant was implicit or experiential knowledge, mainly regarding the target groups and local contexts, which is derived from practitioners' own experiences. This kind of knowledge cannot be trained in the usual way and it is not standardisable. It was mainly emphasised by participating parents, financiers, and providers, but not as much by the practitioners themselves. This so-called *tacit knowledge* was specifically reported in the context of successful outreach strategies. Practitioners with the same or similar linguistic and/or cultural background, or practitioners who might have experienced similar life stages or crises, were considered to be "someone who understands [...] their] reality of life" (*Chancenreich*, provider). A participating parent of *Stap* underlined the helpfulness of cultural closeness in this way, "What we think, for instance, is important for our family, they also think that about family. It helps to understand each other". Similarly, a participating mother of *Chancenreich* elaborated on the importance of shared experiences as a mother, "But that certain something that you as a mother learn and pass on, you will not be able to read from books."

The interviewees emphasised that tacit knowledge facilitates communication, understanding, and trust towards the practitioner. It further supported the positive reputation of practitioners in the neighbourhood. Practitioners from *Stap* explained:

But they could also identify with me; I came there as a Moroccan lady, they were all Moroccan parents, and therefore they had something like, well, we cannot say no to her, we cannot tell her to stay outside. So they let me in and they started talking about their problems, their challenges.

In conclusion, all aspects of tacit knowledge were important for parents and those responsible for developing and leading programmes for successful outreach and gaining trust of the target group. In this context, tacit knowledge has the potential to work as a gatekeeper for hard-to-reach communities and to integrate women with a migrant background into the workforce.

One final, but important part of the necessary knowledge covers the *knowledge* of the programmes' *content and structures*, such as the main objective and the number and kind of services (e.g. courses, home visits). This is especially important for programmes with non-qualified practitioners who still need to develop a professional identity and the accompanying knowledge.

### 3.3. Beliefs

Another important aspect mentioned by all interviewees is that a practitioner should hold certain beliefs. In our sample, we found that openness with regard to the diversity of the families and perceiving the parents as equals were crucial beliefs. The following statement emphasises both aspects:

It is really so important to be able to empathise with other cultures and [to have] the willingness to do something together. Growing together, standing next to the parent, not above the parent. Not playing the teacher, just being together as a partner. That is really, really the most important thing, I believe. Then you can teach them [the parents] anything you want. (*Stap*, practitioner)

According to our interviewees, the practitioners of family and parenting support programmes should perceive the families' particular needs, not judging but respecting them, and they should be conscious of admitting their own mistakes. "I always start my parenting course with the statement: 'I made a lot of mistakes in the upbringing of my children and they still made it'" (*Chancenreich*, practitioner). Building on these beliefs, practitioners should work to identify the resources of the families and strengthen them.

### 3.4. Skills

The analysis of professional requirements also revealed several competencies which can be grouped under the umbrella term *skills*. These skills enable practitioners to apply knowledge to specific and practical situations in their work life in family and parenting support programmes. As elements of successful work with families and children, practitioners, providers, and financiers mentioned adaptability, self-regulation skills, cooperation skills, and reflection skills. We explain each of the subcategories in more detail below.

What we describe as adaptability is the ability to flexibly adapt the content and structure of the programme to the parents' needs and conditions, such as their language skills, specific interests, or material means. For example, if a parent does not understand the host language, practitioners might need to communicate "with hands and feet", a German figure of speech meaning making oneself understood non-verbally (*Chancenreich*, practitioner).

Self-regulation skills in the context of working in a family and parenting support programme involve the ability to manage your own thoughts, behaviour, and feelings while working with families. For instance, professionals should maintain a balance between openness and flexibility towards the parents' needs and demands on one side, and keeping a professional distance to families in terms of working times, the closeness of relationships, and not making the family's problems

their own, on the other side. It is important that practitioners “are also able to distance themselves, [...] they must also be aware of what they can do and what they are allowed to do and what they cannot and are not allowed to do” (*Stadtteilmütter*, provider). Practitioners need to be able to keep inner boundaries for mental hygiene and “they need to know their boundaries with regard to abilities” (*Stadtteilmütter*, provider). Further, self-regulation skills comprise the ability to show “a lot of time and patience” (*Stap*, local coordinator), as well as persistence in reaching out to certain groups of families and in seeing the results of their work.

Cooperation skills are required to build professional relationships with external local institutions that are relevant for the target group or programme, such as medical services and other social services. In this way, practitioners are better able to reach out to the families, to make the programme known in the field, to step in as a mediator between families and services, to provide families with up-to-date information, or to refer parents to appropriate experts. The provider of *Stap* noted:

Our practitioners should be able to work together very well and know what is happening in the neighbourhood. They should keep close contacts on the back burner, so when something happens, they can easily refer [the family]. So the network includes, of course, the pre-school and school, the local community centres, GP and other partners.

Finally, interviewees reported the need for reflection skills, to be able to consider the specific situations, to adapt to changing needs and contexts, and to bring about substantial changes for participating families. As such, the promotion of these skills should be part of the basic qualification as well as of constant professional development. A quote from a national coordinator of *Stap* makes this point very clear:

There are also moments in which you think ‘well, let’s try something else’. Or still do the same activities, but adapt them a bit. Yes, I think we are still developing, also the families are completely different than 5 years ago. The problems might have become more severe, or the diversity in languages increases which makes it difficult, so you just keep developing. (*Stap*, national coordinator)

### 3.5. Trust

“I believe the main success factor [for family and parenting support programmes] is the kind of relationship between the family visitors and the family” (*Chancenreich*, provider). “Trusting people, getting together and empowering these mothers, that is most important” (*Stap*, local coordinator); “that connection helps you to improve” (*Stap*, participating families). These quotes illustrate another important result of our analysis of countries and programmes: the importance of establishing and using trustful relationships towards the target group. Here, relational bonds and existing networks were seen as most effective outreach strategies. Existing relationships and natural points of contact, in turn, also serve as the tacit knowledge that we outlined above.

Further, trusting relationships were perceived as highly necessary for high implementation quality, more specifically in cooperating with parents and in intervening if necessary. “Once they trust you, they tell you their most secret things” (*Stadtteilmütter*, practitioner). Similarly, in both German family and parenting support programmes, practitioners and participating families considered the differentiation between practitioners of the programme and the staff at governmental youth welfare offices as a very important way to create trust and openness. Interviewees described the relationship of target families with the youth office or other official institutions as often being fearful and negatively connotated.

To foster closeness and to create trust, interviewees often perceived it as helpful when practitioners shared similar experiences or (cultural or linguistic) backgrounds as the target group. A migrant practitioner of *Stadtteilmütter* explained: “I tell stories in our mother tongue. Because we can tell stories very well, and then it is easy to understand. And she comes back [to participate in the programme].”

It became particularly clear that personal, face-to-face encounters

between practitioners and family members made it more likely for families to participate in the programmes. For successful relationship building, the interviewees underlined the importance of the practitioners’ beliefs, such as meeting parents with respect and as equals, as we reported above. These beliefs lead families to feel empowered, respected, and valued, which in turn helps to build trust.

In sum, our analysis across programmes revealed five main concepts regarding the professional competencies required for successful family and parenting support programmes.

## 4. Discussion

Supporting families in creating rich and nurturing home learning environments helps to reduce educational and social gaps for children from disadvantaged families. Important instances providing this kind of support are family and parenting support programmes. Despite their often challenging and complex work environments, there is often a lack of professionalisation of these programmes, and the question as to whether the activities of practitioners in family and parenting support programmes meet the requirements of a profession remains unanswered. Within this case study, we aimed to establish in-depth knowledge about the professional competencies of practitioners necessary for successful family and parenting support programmes. For this, we collected information from diverse perspectives of financiers, providers, staff and parents involved in family and parenting support programmes across two different European countries. Our analyses revealed various demands on practitioners in the field, which require special prerequisites, especially facets of professional competency. The presence of these requirements underline the need to understand working in family and parenting support as a profession (Curry et al., 2012, Dewe & Otto, 2005), which is why a model of the professional competencies in this field of work is needed.

Based on the analysed competencies, we proposed a model for professional competencies to relate competencies with each other and to inform professional development initiatives with regard to the necessary qualities of the practitioners.

### 4.1. Model of professional competencies in family and parenting support programmes

The proposed model of professional competencies in the field of family and parenting support programmes relates the five derived main concepts to each other. The model distinguishes between the input and the outcome (see Fig. 1). While the input comprises four dimensions of practitioners’ competencies of practitioners, the output comprises the two main objectives of a family and parenting support programme: outreach and implementation quality. The model distinguishes between both objectives, as the analyses revealed that different strategies are necessary to achieve them. This also changes the weighting of different competencies in relation to the different objectives. Successful programmes use two strategies to achieve effective outreach: the establishment and the use of trusting relationships, and a strong adaptability and flexibility towards the needs of the target group in a given context (Cohen & Trauernicht et al., 2018). To implement these strategies, professional competencies are necessary, which are reflected in the four dimensions knowledge, skills, beliefs, and motivation. The interviews highlighted the importance, in particular, of tacit knowledge, e.g. sharing the same linguistic and/or cultural background, in establishing a relationship of trust and in facilitating access to the families. The establishment and use of trustful relationships is a prerequisite for all other work processes between the practitioners and the families but particularly for the outreach to the target families. We assume that practitioners with the same linguistic cultural background are already equipped at the first point of contact with an initial degree of familiarity and shared values between the parents and the practitioners themselves. We further assume that practitioners will have knowledge of a

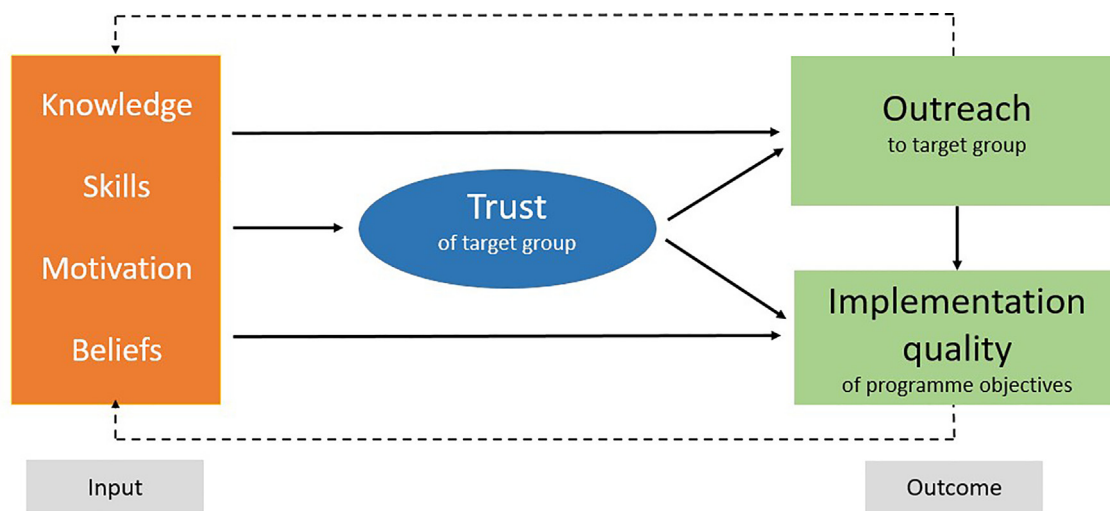


Fig. 1. Model of professional competencies of practitioners in family and parenting support programmes.

target group's cultural origins and everyday practices, in order to practice successful outreach, to avoid misunderstandings, and to allay fears and uncertainty. A similar mechanism may apply to practitioners who are known in the community (i.e. a familiar face) or who are mothers themselves. These practitioners receive a level of initial trust that helps them to get in touch with the families quickly, which gives them the opportunity to convince the families to participate in the programme. Further, high adaptability towards the target group, as one aspect of professional skills, plays an important role for effective outreach. In order to implement a high degree of adaptability in practice, both a high level of motivation regarding the programme and beliefs evincing an open attitude towards the families are necessary.

While reaching out to the target group is essential to achieve the programme's objectives, implementation quality is another important aspect in the model. The *implementation quality* consists of the actual processes of work between the practitioners and the families to achieve the objectives of the programmes, e.g. to promote the home learning environment of the family. To deliver a high implementation quality in a programme and to continuously improve the programme's development, motivational aspects, beliefs, sufficient skills, and explicit and implicit experiential knowledge are crucial; for instance, knowledge about the aims of the programme. Furthermore, adaptability, self-regulating skills, a self-reflective attitude, and cooperation skills form the basis for the perception and interpretation of everyday pedagogical practice and its challenges.

An effective outreach to the target group and a high implementation quality, in turn, offers practitioners the opportunity to reflect upon and further develop their knowledge, skills, motivations, and beliefs, hence implying a bidirectional relationship between the input and outcome factors.

In extension to the connection between competencies on the one hand and outreach and implementation quality on the other, the model proposes *trust* as a facilitator between the professional competencies and the outcomes of the programmes. While professional competencies can directly influence the success of outreach and the level of implementation quality, trust is a facilitator to create a positive, respectful, authentic, and effective relationship between practitioners and parents in a setting that has no institutional or standardised framework, and where professionals need high adaptability to the targeted families. Trust is a mechanism that makes it easier to articulate professional purposes, to intervene, and in turn to contribute to the trustworthiness of the programmes.

Compared with other theoretical models of professional competency, which were described in the introduction more detailed (Fröhlich-Gildhoff et al., 2011, Kunter et al., 2013, Urban et al., 2012),

the role of trust in particular is central. Further, even if individual facets of professional competency can be found in existing models, aspects such as tacit knowledge or adaptability are more strongly emphasized in our model.

Our proposed model reflects particularly that the general objectives of family and parenting support programmes are twofold: These programmes need to reach out to their target groups and they aspire to high implementation quality. Both objectives require diverse and various aspects of professional competencies from practitioners, and might occasionally create tensions. For example, highly professionalised staff representing official organisations might not be trusted at first, whereby paraprofessionals from the same community as the target families themselves benefit from immediate trustworthiness. However, a high level of implementation quality might be harder to reach with paraprofessionals when compared to professionalised staff. Our analysis showed that programmes do not always reflect that both objectives are necessary, and that both might require different strategies and staff competencies. One could come to the hasty conclusion that programmes cannot be successful in both outreach and implementation quality, or that both areas are in conflict. To counter this, our model makes an analytical distinction between the two objectives of the programmes and proposes that professional competencies for achieving them must be considered separately, although they can be achieved simultaneously. Below we elaborate on the professional competencies that we have established as important for achieving these two goals.

We identified five key themes that reflect the professional requirements necessary to reach out the target group and to provide high implementation quality: motivation, knowledge, beliefs, skills, and trust. Each of them is important in its unique way in order to reach out to the programmes' target groups and to ensure high implementation quality. Only if the practitioners are highly engaged with their programmes' mission and inherently motivated to work in their positions will they be able to convince families to take part and to engender positive change. High motivation is also important for the success of other educational contexts, such as schools (see Baier et al., 2018). Another interesting finding is that confidence and self-efficacy in one's role as a practitioner, as an aspect of the dimension of motivation, is a particularly relevant topic for the practitioners in the programme *Stadtteilmütter*. This programme employs only non-qualified paraprofessionals, mothers from minority groups in Germany. Although the practitioners of the *Stadtteilmütter* programme complete a training of about six months, the element self-efficacy may coincide with a certain level of qualification and can be seen as an aspect of developing a professional identity. This supports our results with regard to the relevance of content knowledge, particularly for these paraprofessionals.



For this reason, a professional development infrastructure needs to be adapted to the needs of the practitioners.

We also established the importance of different aspects of knowledge which can be seen in other research (e.g. Baier et al., 2018). The importance of *knowledge based on experience* and biographical events stood out particularly, and has also been demonstrated in previous studies (Evangelou, Coxon, Sylva, Smith, & Chan, 2013; Vagli, 2009). It is also a recognised aspect of other professional knowledge-based models (Boddy, Cameron, & Petrie, 2005; Fenstermacher, 1994; Shulman, 1987). Tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1966) conveys authenticity and is implicitly perceived, but not consciously. It is described as intuition, common sense, or practice wisdom (Schön, 1983); practitioners are not actively aware of it, linked as it is to implicit learning and their own experiences (Eraut, 2000), so it is particularly relevant for educational settings and further professional development (Verloop, van Driel, & Meijer, 2001). However, focusing only on high adaptability, flexibility, and the application of the tacit knowledge of the practitioners creates a potential challenge when these elements need to be incorporated within the curriculum and implementation quality of a programme. Further, the implicit learning process of tacit knowledge raises the question as to how implicit or tacit knowledge can be translated into explicit knowledge (Eraut, 2000; Shulman, 1988). This point is particularly interesting in the light of the inclusion of non-qualified practitioners or paraprofessionals. Our results show that programmes make particular use of paraprofessionals for the task of outreach, in their function as ‘door openers’. This strategy has been criticised (Asquith et al., 2005; Musick & Stott, 2000) because the consequence could be a lack of fulfilment of the professional requirements, and as a result, little evidence for the effectiveness of a service. It raises the question: what is a good balance between qualified and unqualified practitioners (Boddy & Statham, 2009)?

For practitioners to have certain beliefs was another key theme identified as crucial for professional practice in family and parenting support programmes. Practitioners need to perceive parents as partners and as equals and they need to display a certain openness for the diversity of family contexts and circumstances. Thus, we also find references in our findings to relational and participatory practices of professionals (Dunst et al., 2007). However, we also assume that beliefs and values, interpersonal behaviour and flexibility must be considered as core competences, which are as important as knowledge and skills and which contribute to effective outreach and implementation quality both by building trusting relationships and by a direct influence.

We also identified several key skills, such as the ability to apply knowledge to specific and practical situations. Practitioners also need to be good at cooperating with others (both inside and outside the programme), to be flexible, to be able to regulate themselves, and to be able to reflect on their experiences. Aubry et al. (2005) found that professionals considered the competency to be able to adapt quickly as not essential. In contrast, the interviewees in our study perceived flexibility as a very important competency. The reason for this could be the context and the objective of the particular programme that influences the priority or necessity of competencies. Working with families might be way less predictable than working with people with psychiatric disabilities, especially in an institution, where they experience a high level of structure. A central and novel result of our study is the important role of *trust* as a facilitator between professional competencies and the outcomes of the programme. The concept of trust is also applied to related services for families and children. In a therapeutic setting, a relationship based on trust is a decisive step in the recovery process of the client (Laughton-Brown, 2010). Furthermore, the concept of trust is widely discussed in educational contexts, e.g. for relationships between parents and preschools (Dunst, Johanson, Rounds, Trivette, & Hamby, 1992; Janssen, Bakker, Bosman, Rosenberg, & Leseman, 2012). According to Adams and Christenson (1998, p. 6), trust is the “confidence that another person will act in a way to benefit or sustain the relationship, or the implicit or explicit goals of the

relationship, to achieve positive outcomes for students”. In the context of family and parent support programmes, this means that trust is useful for developing and maintaining a strong and lasting connection between practitioners and family members in order to be able to apply strategies that support families’ functioning and children’s and parent’s well-being.

Professional competencies need to be therefore used to build, gain, and maintain trustful relationships with the families and thus to intervene and work effectively with them in line with a programme’s specific intended outcomes. To do so, practitioners need to be perceived as trustworthy by the families (Behnia, 2008). Trust can help families to minimise uncertainty and fear by way of positive expectations regarding the other person’s ability to be caring and not to be potentially harmful (Behnia, 2008). Trust reduces the complexity of life and minimises feelings of vulnerability. Tacit knowledge, particularly a professional reputation in the community, plays an important role in building initial trust; trust is also essential for maintaining relationships that are necessary for successful cooperation (Behnia, 2008). Our model shows how trust can be represented in the relationship between practitioners’ competencies and both objectives of the programme.

#### 4.2. Limitations

The current study took an explorative approach by developing a new model for the professional competencies of practitioners in family and parenting support programmes. However, several limitations should be taken into account.

We only investigated three cases, only two of them had been sufficiently evaluated beforehand. Although all three programmes are considered as promising and well-implemented programmes, thus ensuring effective outreach and high implementation quality, further research should include other types of family and parenting support programmes with different focus to see whether the proposed model is applicable to other programmes. Within this study, we looked at different perspectives by involving different stakeholders. Future research could enrich the different perspectives, by including the perspectives of the children as they are an important element within the programmes. In our study, we could only conduct interviews with a small group of participating parents. Future studies could benefit from a more diverse and larger group of parents, particularly from marginalised backgrounds or parents that have already completed the programme and can reflect upon its value. Conducting in-depth qualitative analyses and developing a model is a strength of the present study; however, further investigations should also apply standardised quantitative measures to validate our results and confirm the model on a larger scale. Given the novelty of the proposed model, especially with respect to the role of tacit knowledge, the facilitating role of trust, as well as the inclusion of two separate, but equally important programme objectives, this study has potentially strong implications for future research and practice.

#### 4.3. Implications

The present article depicts the working environment of family and parenting support programmes as highly complex, demanding, and quickly changing. Diverse and multi-layered competencies are required in order to ensure success in outreach and implementation quality. This case study promotes a professional understanding of family and parenting support programmes and its employees, both for research and practice. The following paragraphs describe further implications for research and practice.

##### 4.3.1. Implications for research

Future research should empirically enrich and/or validate the proposed model with a larger sample of family and parenting support programmes and interviewees throughout Europe or even worldwide. Researchers should put special emphasis on exploring the mechanisms

behind the noteworthy facilitator trust — one of our most pivotal and novel results. Further, we also need deeper insight into the mechanisms of competency acquisition and into the role of the macro-system into which the programme is embedded: Do parenting programmes get sufficient support to improve their professionalisation? How can other systems (such as schools or other family support systems) improve the collaboration with family and parenting support programmes to strengthen the competencies of these professionals?

During our process of analysis we established that numerous respondents thought that practitioners of family and parenting support programmes should have the same cultural background as the participating families. Others proposed that practitioners need to be mothers or to know the target group very well. Based on this, we concluded that practitioners need tacit knowledge, especially to gain trust and to improve the outreach of the programme. However, further research should shed light on the role and mechanisms of a shared cultural background between practitioners and families, especially for migrant families. Sharing the same background with professionals can decrease cultural and linguistic barriers for the families, but on the other hand, inter-cultural contact through a trusted person might improve the integration of migrant families into wider society. Further, our study only focused on identifying relevant competencies of professionals and linking them to the outcomes 'outreach' and 'implementation quality'. We did not investigate and integrate the equally important aspect of practices, linking professional competencies of practitioners with the respective outcomes. Future studies should examine and integrate existing research on action practices in this context.

#### 4.3.2. Implications for practice

The extensive range of required competencies points towards a certain level of role separation: some practitioners may specialise in competencies or are deployed in positions more related to effective outreach, and others may focus more on areas of work connected to high implementation quality. Some practitioners might have stronger tacit knowledge, others more pedagogical knowledge. However, it seems to be crucial that all elements depicted in our model are represented. Next to monitoring outreach and implementation quality, all practitioners, including paraprofessionals, should be continuously trained in the relevant competencies. This is especially important given the increasing diversity of the societies in which these programmes are implemented. Strategies for thorough and consistent professional development are crucial in the development and implementation of programmes.

Our results make very clear that practitioners in family and parenting support programmes need to be highly adaptable to effectively work with diverse and changing families. For staff recruitment and professional development, this means that people in leadership should put a focus on reflection skills, on tacit and local knowledge, and on multicultural and open attitudes in general. Another very important aspect for effective outreach and implementation quality is to select practitioners with a high motivation to work as a part of the programme and the ability to maintain their motivation over time.

Finally, the central role of trust in our case studies and the proposed model is new and should be discussed more in the practical field. Competencies themselves are not enough if the trust of the families is not gained. Conversely, those competencies must be used to gain trust, which improves both the outreach and the effects of the programme. If the professional competencies discussed in our model can be promoted within the framework of professional development strategies, it will be possible for family and parenting support programmes to ensure both a high outreach to families and high implementation quality, and thus to support families successfully and effectively in providing a high quality HLE.

## Funding

This research was supported by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme [grant agreement No. 727069].

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Franziska Cohen:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing. **Mareike Trauernicht:** Methodology, Investigation, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing. **Ryanne Francot:** Methodology, Investigation, Writing - review & editing. **Martine Broekhuizen:** Investigation, Writing - review & editing. **Yvonne Anders:** Conceptualization, Writing - review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Funding acquisition.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declared that there is no conflict of interest.

## Appendix A. Supplementary material

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105202>.

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