QUALIMENTARY

IMPLEMENTATION OF QUALITY DEVELOPMENT PROCESSES IN EARLY EDUCATION AND CARE INSTITUTIONS

REPORT: EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

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under close cooperation of the project team of the University of Graz

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1. Introduction

The project made use of a comprehensive quality management system which ensured quality at all three levels of the project's implementation: the process level, the product level, and the impact level. This evaluation report considers these three quality-levels within each intellectual output.

The aim of the QUALIMENTARY project was to support knowledge and professional competencies of early childhood educators. On the basis of a Needs analysis, it was established what specialists already know about pedagogical quality with a particular focus on the quality of adult-child interactions in institutional education and care settings. Secondly, an assessment measuring the quality of adult-child interaction was carried out in educational institutions (8-10 institutions/nation). Based on these findings, an online training program with 20 thematic modules was designed, tested and evaluated. The aim of the online training was to enable early childhood educators to develop and ensure the quality of adult/child interactions on an individual basis. The advanced training program consisted of diverse learning inputs (50%), live group interaction and reflection (30%) and individual coaching sessions (20%). The training program took place online, which enabled the early childhood educators to participate effectively in the program under the conditions caused by the covid-19 pandemic in all project partner countries.

The aim of the report is to evaluate the implementation of the project concept and efficacy. Dr B. Loudová Stralczynská monitored the implementation of the project from September 2020 and, after studying the project agreement and additional documentation provided in July 2020, she participated in all German-speaking online meetings within IO2. In addition, she created the evaluation questionnaire for IO2 in spring 2021 and subsequently analysed the data collected from the QUALIMENTARY-training participants (n=49). The data in this evaluation report is based on a content analysis of the project documentation, on the observations of online meetings and from the questionnaire data.

2. Evaluation of the Project Time Schedule

The timeline of the project was defined clearly and with enough time reserve. The realisation period of the IO1-IO3 were effectively interconnected. This enabled the project partners to react on the unexpected conditions and situations occurring during the project implementation (especially covid-19 restrictions in fall of 2020 and spring 2021). The flexible and adequate time schedule was also positively mentioned by some respondents who participated on the IO2 evaluation. The effective setting of the implementation of individual parts of the project made it possible to obtain quality project outputs in a specified time.

3. Evaluation of IO 1 - Needs Analysis

Phase 1 - September 2019 to February 2020

The first intellectual output of the project was the Needs analysis. Knowledge of the pedagogical and interaction quality of the professionals within the education and care settings was observed on the basis of a Needs analysis. To ensure the achievement of project goals and target results, the project countries agreed on the following preparatory process measures:

1) The Needs analysis was carried out via an online questionnaire which had been previously piloted.

2) Questionnaire results were discussed within the partner countries and the evaluators consider this process to be sufficiently adequate to ensure that all country conditions and socio-cultural differences could be considered as stated in the project agreement.

3) Assessment of the quality of interaction between pedagogical workforce and children in the participating pre-school institutions were assessed with a proven instrument known as GrazIS. This tool was translated into the project languages and adequately tested. The assessment process was undertaken by trained local experts, so that specific national differences within each early childhood education and care institution could be accounted for.

The evaluators consider the preparation and process phases described in the project documentation as sufficiently adequate, transparent, and in agreement with the project objectives and quality measures. The two assessments for the Needs analysis have been evaluated mainly quantitatively and the data was used as the information basis for IO2. The IO1 Needs analysis results are published on the project website in a form of the "Report: Evaluation of the Needs analysis"[1].

The report covers the structure and contents planned in the project agreement and other project documentation which are well written and professionally produced both in terms of form and content. The report also presents the statistical data and highlights the main findings resulting from the QUALIMENTARY-training program. The text provides regional country data from all partner countries which allow further comparison of the results obtained from both questionnaires and at the end of the report qualitative data is presented. The report states: "This is a preliminary descriptive evaluation of the observations with GrazIAS, of March 2020. The data is not complete (March 2020), there will be a few observations after the Corona-Crises." (p. 32). The data from the additional observations will be added, so that the final version of the report covers the full set of data.

4. Evaluation of IO 2 - Modular Training

Phase 2 - February 2020 to March 2021

The QUALIMENTARY-training program was developed according to the main findings from the IO1 Needs analysis under the leadership of University Graz. The training program consisted of:

1) **Moodle course** - Blended learning inputs (50%): The materials were structured into 20 modules focusing on different aspects of the quality of interaction with children. The modules were also published in a Handbook[2] and the contents of the modules were available in all project languages, including English. Participants worked individually with digital materials published on the Moodle platform of the University Graz.

2) **Online meetings** - Live groups (30%): Individual participant work on the modules was discussed and reflected upon during online meetings which were conducted in project languages and lead by the expert institutions.

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[1] https://static.uni-graz.at/fileadmin/projekte/qualimentary/Evaluation_of_the_questionnaire_survey_finish_inkl.Questionnaire.pdf
[2] https://static.uni-graz.at/fileadmin/projekte/qualimentary/Handbook_onlinefurthertraining_English.pdf (English version)

3) **Individual Coaching Sessions** (20%) enabled the participants to reflect upon their strategies, methods and experiences with the experts.

According to the evaluators, these three parts of IO2 were well designed and supported the participants with theoretical input on each topic. The online meetings facilitated reflection and enabled the participants from different regions and countries to meet and effectively share their questions, knowledge and approaches. The evaluators consider the regular program of online meeting to be very supportive and motivating for the participants and that the online meetings were assessed very positively because the participants felt supported by mutual information sharing during covid-19 pandemic when many pre-school facilities were closed, and educators faced new pedagogical, social and emotional challenges. Each session ensured that theoretical study was combined with some social exchange as well as the necessary time for individual self-reflection. The experts performed the role of mentors, and their assessment of each practitioner's practice was assessed very positively by the participants.

4.1   Content analysis of the QUALIMENTARY Moodle Course

The Moodle course was designed for all participants in the training and consisted of 20 modules in all project languages. Each module involved a slightly different set of contents: introductory activities (mind map, forum, instructions etc.), theoretical inputs (present in all modules), quizzes, videos, assignments on the movie clips and transfer assignments.

The evaluators accept that the contents of the modules are relatively brief (esp. theoretical inputs) and serve as inputs for further reflection and discussion. This means that the modules do not replace deeper study of theoretical and methodological resources, but the function of the theoretical inputs and videos is to introduce self-reflection, discussion and eventually an interest in further literature study. The contents of the modules reflect current trends in CPD training – the materials are strongly connected with practice and orientated towards the needs and interests of the participants. In this way, the QUALIMENTARY Moodle Course fully corresponds with modern teaching materials and presents many possibilities for further use.

The Handbook[3] contains all module activities and serves as a basis for sharing the project contents with others and the evaluators would like to highlight the variety of options for further development and use of this material. The modules can be used by universities and educational institutions providing both initial professional study (IPS) in early childhood education and care facilities and continuous professional development (CPD) for qualified professionals. The thematic focus of the modules can be used in different countries and different pedagogical and socio-cultural contexts, because the orientation towards interactions with children is a common and general topic.

In total, 80% of 49 respondents in the evaluation questionnaire of IO2 (during 5-7/2021) took part in the 4 obligatory modules, additionally 20% of respondents (n=10) stated that they participated in more than 4 modules. The Hungarian practitioners were the most motivated with 7 out of 10 respondents completing the optional modules. These respondents most often stated that they were motivated to participate in online consultations. The main reason they mentioned was their interest in the topics of the training and their interest in discussing the contents of the modules. One Hungarian stated that they were supporting the other Hungarian participants and so completed all the modules their colleagues chose. Another participant stated: *"The topics in the modules covered my professional interests and, in these areas, I hoped to gain new impetus and knowledge for my day-to-day work."* The participants took part in 279 (193 obligatory and 86 optional) modules in total.

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[3] The evaluators suggest to add titles of modules in headings at pages 6–9.

Although some respondents stated that they did not have enough time to take part in optional modules.

The following chart (Fig.1.) displays the list of modules, the number of respondents who participated in these modules and distinguishes between obligatory and optional modules. The most preferred obligatory module was "Introducing rules and adhering to them" (23 participants), followed by "Supervising conflicts" ($n_{obligatory}$=21) then "Offering and allowing sensory experiences" ($n_{obligatory}$=17) and then "Considering individual needs" and "Supporting the regulation of emotions" ($n_{obligatory}$=16).

If we look at the preferences of the respondents, it is clear that they deal with the issues of conflict resolution, working with rules with pre-school children and maintaining a balance between rules, order and the needs of children. This also corresponds to the results of the IO1 Needs analysis and the observations of the evaluator during the online meetings (see Report: Evaluation of the needs analysis, pp. 10-11).

Respondents were least often interested in language issues with only 8 choosing one of the three language modules as their obligatory module ("Thinking together linguistically" – $n_{obligatory}$=3, "Language-promoting questions" – $n_{obligatory}$=3, "Redirecting language" – $n_{obligatory}$=2). In the area of language however, respondents often chose an obligatory module focused on the development of children's vocabulary ("Expanding the children´s vocabulary" – $n_{obligatory}$=14 or "Shaping language" – $n_{obligatory}$=9).
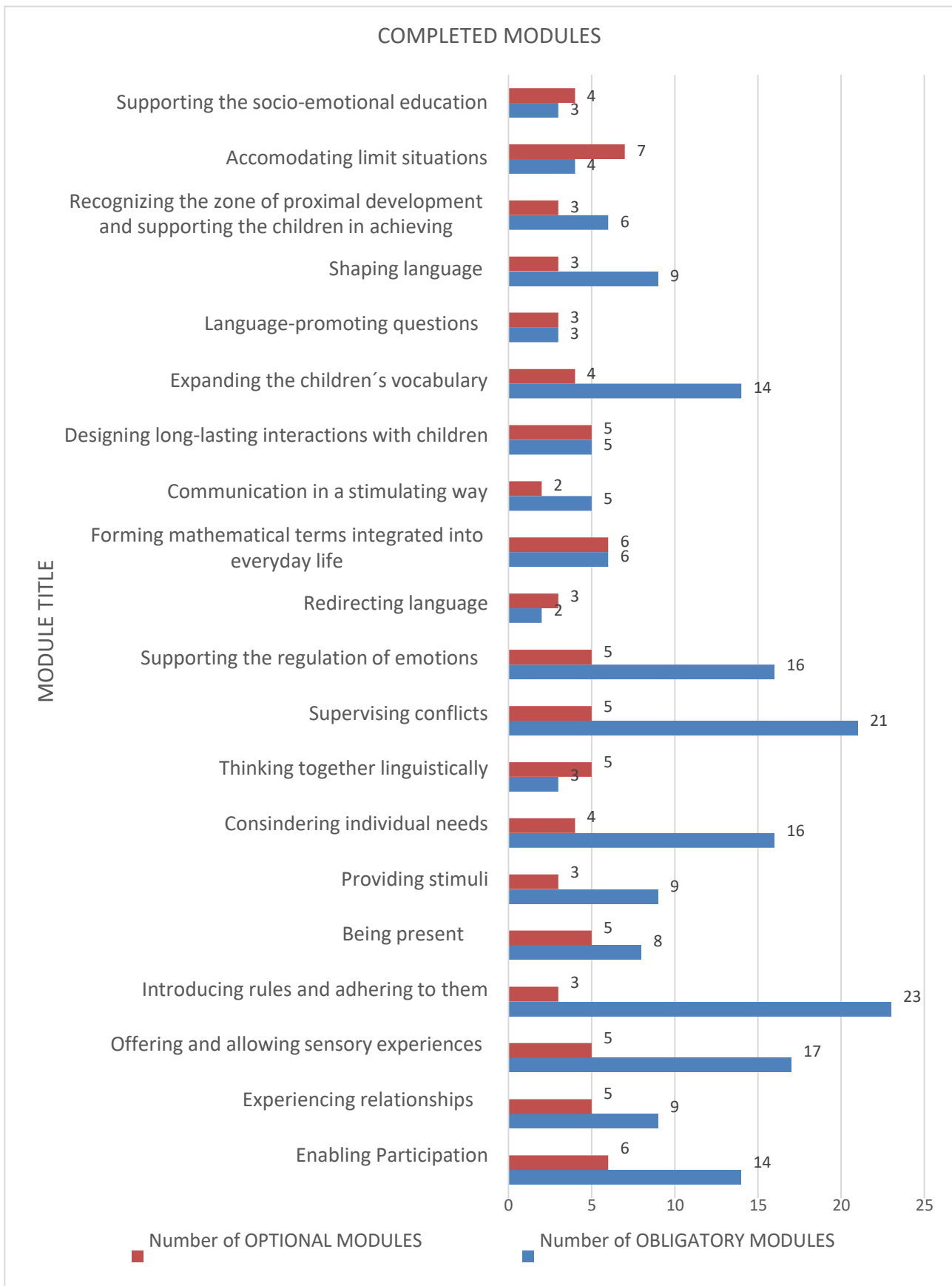
Fig. 1. Obligatory and Optional Modules Completed by the Participants

The respondents assessed the completed modules by stating whether they increased their professional competency, and especially the quality of their interactions with children, by using a 4-point-scale (Agree / Rather Agree / Rather Disagree / Disagree). A total of 226 responses were very positive and considered the impact of the completed modules on their professional competency to be very high. According to 59 responses, the modules did not increase their professional competency while 13 respondents did not complete this question, 2 assessed only one module and one completed just 2 modules.

"My professional competency and especially the quality of my interactions with children, have increased."
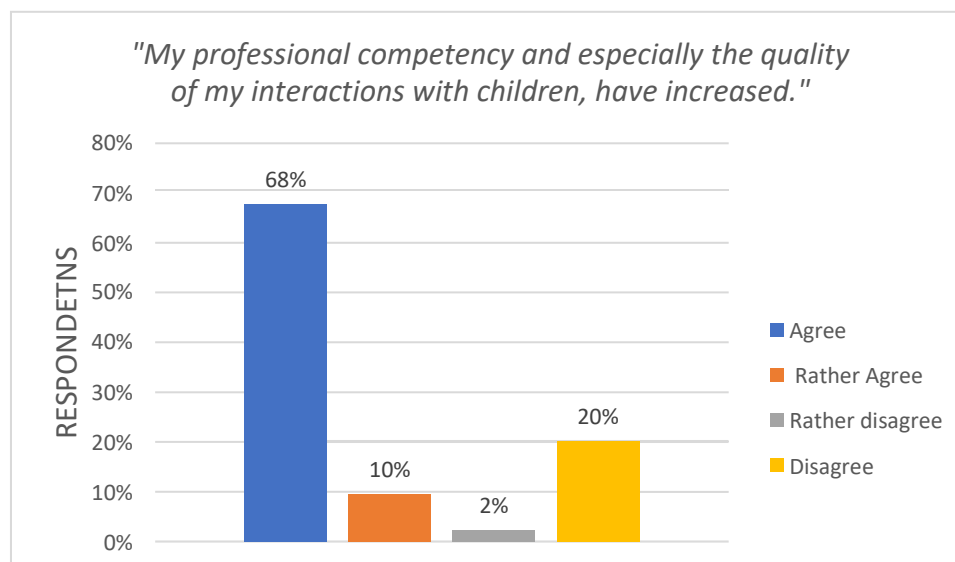
Fig. 2. Participant Evaluation of the Impact of Modules on Professional Competency.

For the evaluation of the contribution of the modules, the scale was given a value (Agree = 1, Rather Agree = 2; Rather disagree = 3; Disagree = 4) and the 292 answers were converted to numerical values before being processed. Each module had a nearly even amount of evaluations from the respondents (x=14,5; x̃=13,5).

The modules had a generally balanced rating, and their impact was predominantly very high (x̄=1,79; x̃=1,08). The differences between the project countries can be seen by the different number of respondents from each language group (German n=14; Hungarian n=7; Portuguese n=8; Italian n=2 and Slovenian n=5). In each language group (excl. Italian) there was at least one respondent who assessed the impact of the modules as low, which heavily influenced the outcome.
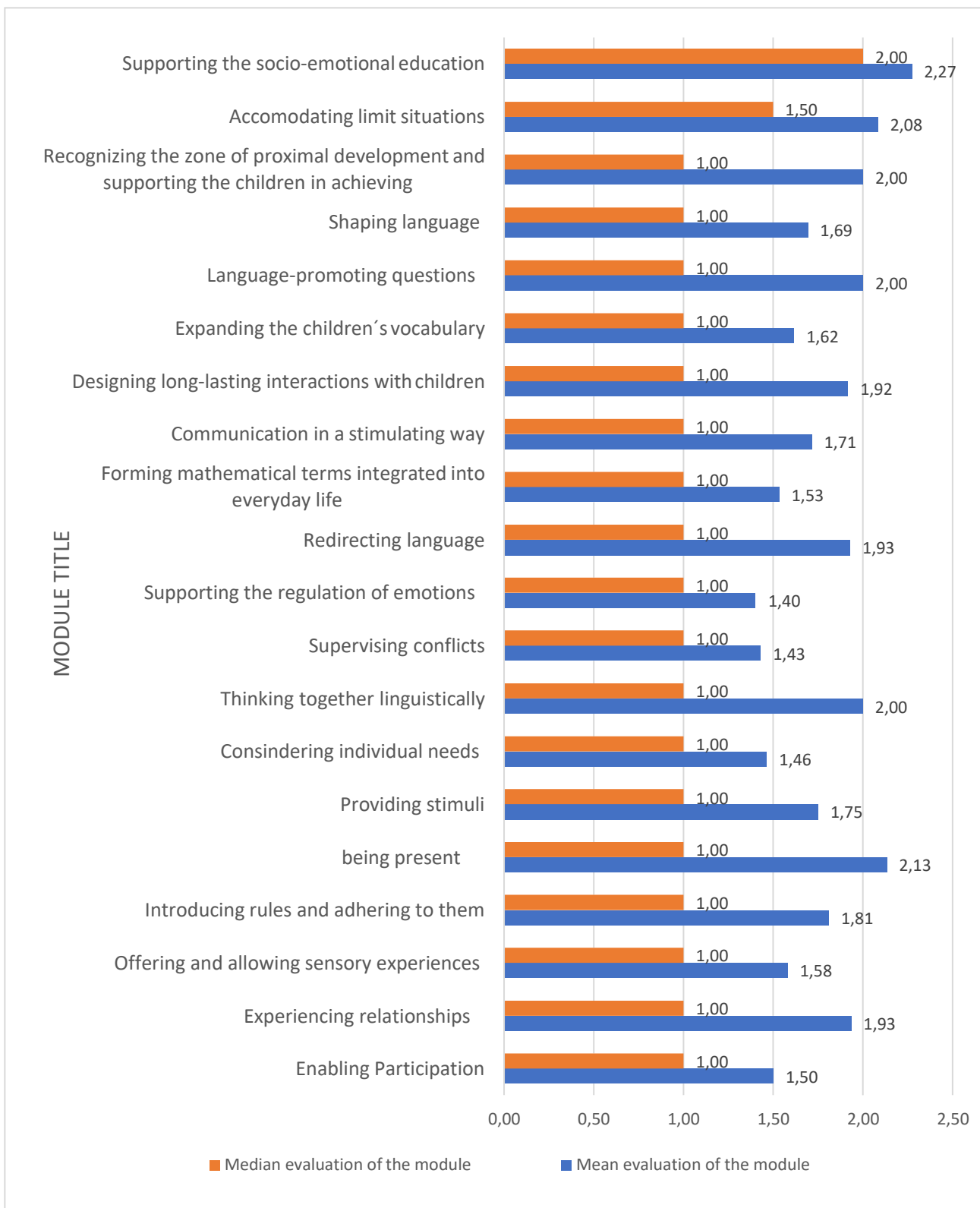
Fig. 3. Ranking of the Impact of Modules on Professional Competency

The participants answered 11 questions concerning the content-quality of the modules. The rating scale and answers (n=535) were based upon the following numerical values (Agree = 1, Rather Agree = 2; Rather disagree = 3; Disagree = 4) and then statistically processed. 94% responses were very positive and considered the quality of the modules to be very high.
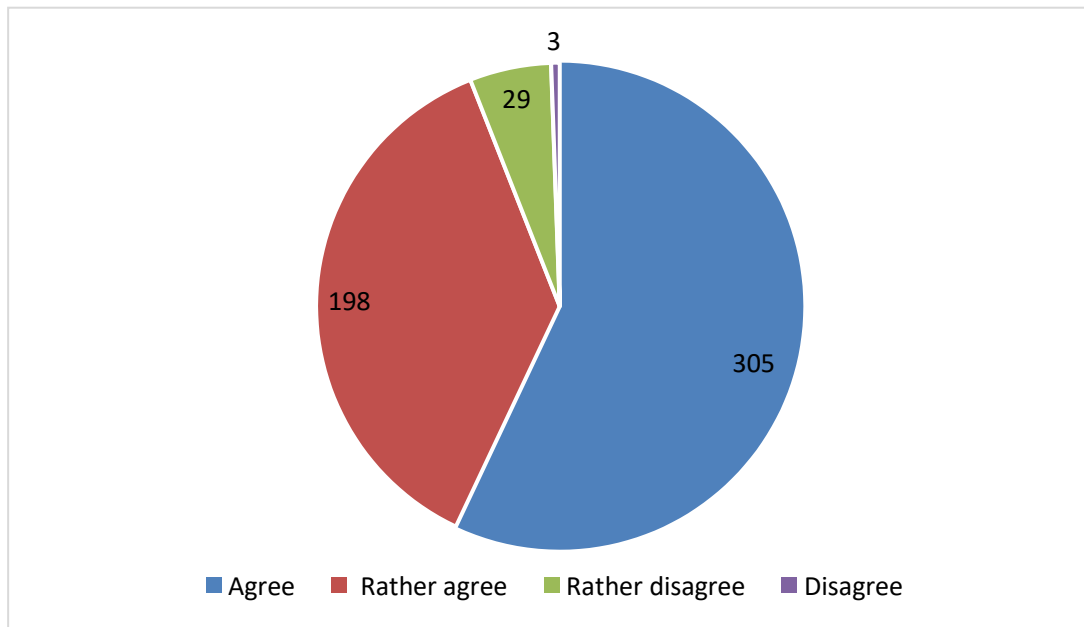

Fig. 4. Evaluation of the Quality of Completed Modules (n=535)
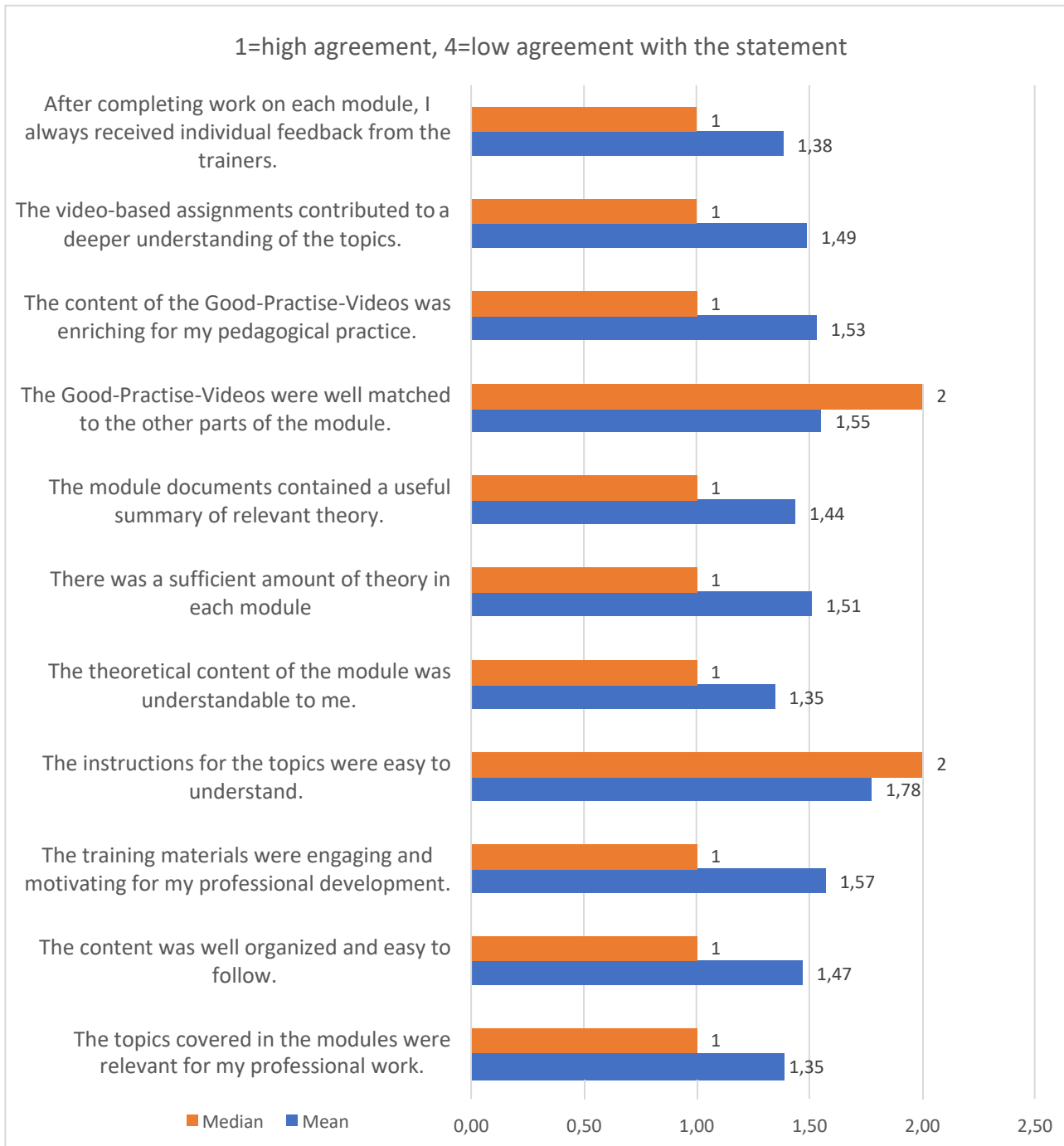
Fig. 5. Evaluation of Module Content and Quality by Question

There was a generally balanced rating across the modules and the quality of content was assessed to be very high overall ($x=1,49$; $x̃=1$). The results confirm the satisfaction of respondents with the materials offered on the project platform however, some concerns were raised about the instructions for the topics within the modules, which confirm the findings in part 3.4 (p.9) in the "REPORT: EVALUATION OF QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY".

Respondents reiterated the contribution of the individual work with Qualimentary-modules to their practice. There was a repeated emphasis on self-reflection, interaction with other educators, cooperation in team or motivation of the educator to be present for children. For many respondents, the modules meant repeating theoretical knowledge and re-awareness and deepening understanding in the issues. Several respondents also mentioned re-sensitization to children, their needs and activities. More respondents stated that they feel empowered, more confident in their pedagogical work. They are also aware much more of the facts that they haven´t been able to notice before. As with the previous question, some respondents are aware of local differences in the pre-school provision in project countries. The high number of children was mentioned several times as an obstacle to the full application of the approaches presented in the modules. The answers of the respondents also included an effort to pass on the acquired knowledge to colleagues. However, participants mentioned that this was not always fully possible and that more support was needed.

The teaching program was conducted online. This might have caused some challenges for the participants. Therefore, the evaluation of the online teaching program focused also on question if the participants had to face any technical difficulties during the online training. In total 15 participants stated that they didn´t have any difficulties. However, 34 participants had to face some technical challenges.

4.2   Reflections on the Online Meetings

The online meetings were conducted in project languages and each Early Childhood Educator completed at least 4 modules of the online course and attended an initial and a final meeting (in total 8 hours). The objectives of the online meetings were to reflect upon practice and their studies during the online modules and to talk about the written practical assignment completed in their "learning diary". The meetings were usually structured into plenary work and group work on specific questions and tasks.

The course leaders were experts in theory, but they also had good knowledge of pre-school practice and the work with the children by the individual participants.

Discussions took place on each of the individual modules and the trainers also gave feedback on each participant's ability when interacting with children, as well as the strategies of developed by individual participants between meetings. The meetings retained a thematic continuity during the online training and repeatedly returned to topics that were important for the participants.

The evaluation of the participants was always made on a formative basis and the trainers strongly encouraged and supported the participants. The course leaders paid close attention to the individual professional development of the participants, which included their professional wellbeing. The trainers recorded notes on the individual participants and in the introductory part of each meeting related to the previous statements of the participants by asking what had changed, recalling previous moments, and highlighting any change in practice and personal reflections on the topics covered.

The participants really shared their difficulties and were not afraid to talk about the challenges they faced in different areas of their practice, (including their personal difficulties) and of course they also shared their successes in working with children and colleagues in their pre-school. The trainers supplemented the reflections with references to professional knowledge, theoretical sources or their own practical experience.

The evaluators appreciate these strategies of QUALIMENTARY trainers and consider this as an example of good practice for other projects and providers of professional development courses.

The high-quality implementation of IO2 was also confirmed by the evaluation questionnaire of IO2 undertaken between May and July 2021. One half of respondents (n=49) took part on the 4 obligatory meetings, additionally 23 respondents stated that they participated in more than 4 meetings. One participant supported some other participants in the training and so she also participated in the 4 Hungarian and 4 German online meetings. More online meetings were offered at the request of the participants.
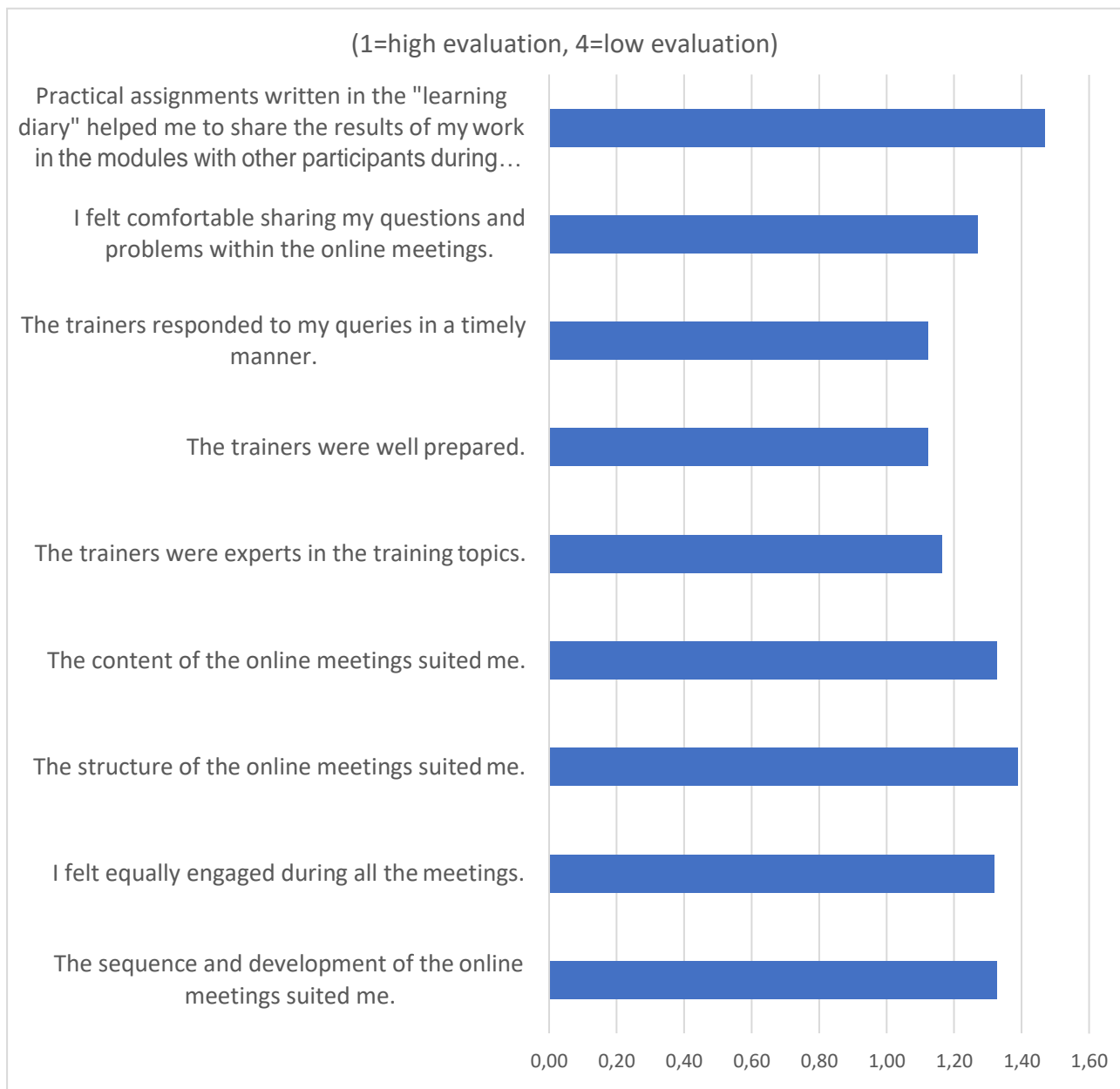

(1=high evaluation, 4=low evaluation)

Fig. 6. Evaluation of the Content Quality of Online Meetings

The participants were asked to answer 9 questions concerning the content-quality of the online meetings. The rating scale and answers were based upon the following numerical values (Agree = 1, Rather Agree = 2; Rather disagree = 3; Disagree = 4) and then statistically processed.

The online meetings had a generally balanced rating, and the content and quality of the process were assessed highly overall ($\overline{x}=1,28$; $\tilde{x}=1,32$) confirming that the respondents were very satisfied with the online meetings.

Participants mentioned very similar topics as in the evaluation of modules. In addition, the online meetings allowed them to jointly reflect on topics and exchange views and experiences. In the online contact, they could share their questions with other participants. They also appreciated the discussion and exchange of knowledge and experience with staff from professional institutions. Only one respondent mentioned that the online sessions tended to have less impact on her/his practice. However, the reason was that the respondent has already "answered the question through the modules".

Each online meeting was expected to take 2 hours and the respondents were asked whether this corresponded to the actual time spent on the meetings. 56% of respondents stated that 2 hours corresponded to the time spent for each online meeting and a quarter of participants (23%) said that the online meetings took them longer than 2 hours and nine respondents chose the option 'Different meetings took different amounts of time'.

In summary, the time allowance for online meetings mostly corresponded to the time specified in the project agreement and (with one exception) all the respondents made full use of the allocated time or needed more time for online meetings.

4.3 Evaluation of Individual Coaching

In the original project plan, 2 individual coaching meetings of 8 hours each were designed for the spring of 2021. In total, 39 participants completed the individual coaching according to the plan however, 10 participants completed this part of the project under a different arrangement (1x online, 1x in person). In most cases, the duration of the individual coaching was shortened due to circumstances caused by the covid-19 pandemic situation in Europe or due to the personal circumstances of some participants.

The respondents mentioned very similar effects as for the online meetings. Individual coaching meetings allowed a more personalised exchange of ideas and a deeper reflection with the trainer on the topics. The respondents highlighted that individual coaching allowed them to share different points of view and materials and provided further stimuli for their pedagogical work. For many respondents, the individual coaching meetings affirmed their pedagogical approach, enabled them to discuss their strengthens and weaknesses in a safe environment and learn from deep reflection. The respondents indicated that they felt the mentors were very professional and experts in their field.

The evaluators consider the individual coaching provided in the QUALIMENTARY project as an example of good practice for providers of CPD and mentoring. The trainers used GrazIAS materials for the individual sessions which provided a standardised theoretical framework for the coaching. The sessions were designed to meet the needs of the participants. Additionally, the trainers provided the observations and individual coaching twice in each early childhood and care facility and therefore this strategy enabled them to follow the professional development of the IO2 participants.

5. Evaluation of IO 3 - Digital Self-Evaluation

Phase 3 - March 2021 to August 2021

A digital self-evaluation tool was developed to evaluate the quality of interactions between the participants and children. During the last period of the QUALIMENTARY project, participants of IO 2 were asked to complete the IO 3 digital self-evaluation tool and evaluate its effectiveness when supporting them with self-reflection.

The respondents were required to indicate their overall level of agreement with statements about the self-evaluating tool listed below. The rating scale and answers were based upon the following numerical values (Agree = 1, Rather Agree = 2; Rather disagree = 3; Disagree = 4) and then statistically processed. In total, 91% of respondents assessed the self-evaluating tool as helpful, showing new areas of development and supporting reflection on their practice. Overall, the quality of the self-evaluation tool was assessed as very high ($\overline{x}$=1,60; $\tilde{x}$=1,5).

Respondents assessed the importance of the self-evaluating tool in that they could reflect on their practice, return to some issues and look at the practice from other perspectives. Most participants assessed the tool positively and appreciated its use and functionality.
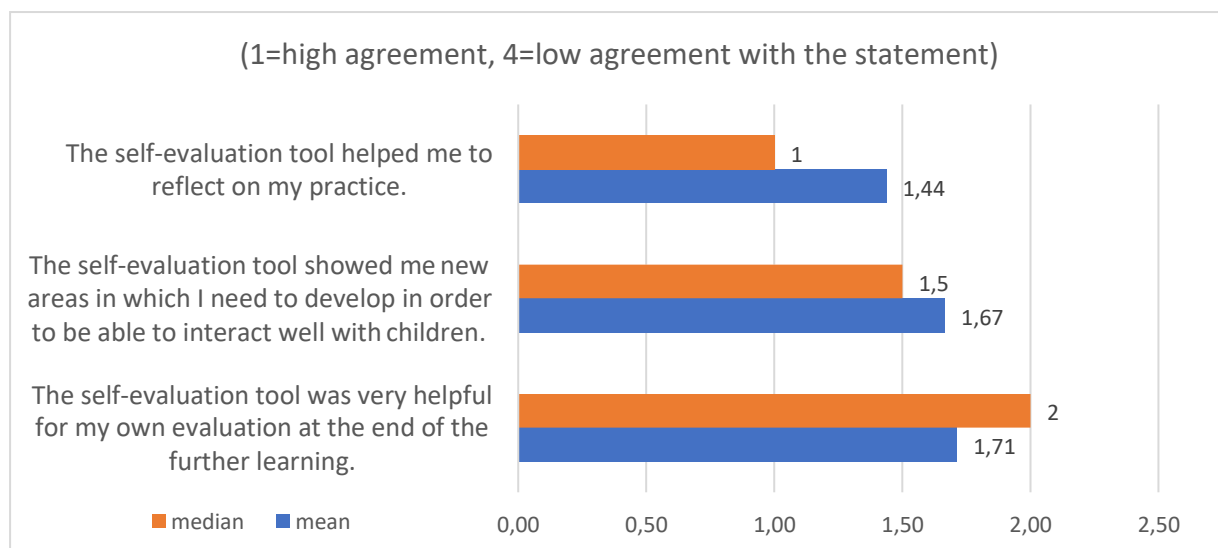

Fig. 7. Evaluation of the Self-Evaluation Tool

The evaluators also assessed the individual items of the self-evaluating tool. The tool is evaluated as beneficial in a number of aspects. The self-evaluating tool views the interaction between the teacher and the child in terms of a wide range of areas and leads him to self-reflection and his own pedagogical actions. The tool includes basic information about the teacher and his preschool institution, which allows you to evaluate the quality of his work in the broader context of the conditions of the preschool. The tool monitors relevant information about the preschool facility, the pedagogue, the pedagogical team, the children's group in terms of its size and the specific educational needs of children. The evaluators suggest considering the addition of the item "child from a socio-culturally disadvantaged background".

The individual parts of the tool are clearly processed and the content of important information about the pedagogue's approach to the child in a wide range of situations and specifics. The evaluators rate the tool as high quality in terms of content.

6. Reflection on the Multiplier Event

June 2021

The multiplier event took place on 1.6.2021 and was very professionally organised. Although the conference was held online, careful organisation not only included plenary speeches by keynote speakers, but also the sharing of examples of good practice from individual project countries and pre-school institutions.

A presentation by Prof. Dr. Catherine Walter-Laager with title „The meaning of interaction-quality in Early Childhood Education" opened the plenary session and was followed by a Film clip entitled „International insights in Early Childhood Facilities". This variety of contributions enabled the conference participants to reflect on practice and to be able to relate this to the presentation „QUALIMENTARY" by Ass.-Prof.in Dr.in Eva Pölzl-Stefanec which introduced the main finding from the questionnaires completed during the project. This presentation was followed by panel discussions "Ensuring of interaction-quality in challenging times" which concluded the event.

The evaluators want to emphasise that the organisation of the whole event was clear, professional and kept to the times and timing of each section. They also noted the clear communication by the organisers including timely instructions for participants as well as clear and easy-to-manage instructions for registration. The organisers also coordinated the individual language versions of the online conference and although there were some technical difficulties related to online connection the conference coordinators managed to overcome them.

The evaluators consider the content of the conference to be appropriately conceived for online meetings and well-chosen parts. The contributions were varied and complementary (theoretical input, project outputs linking research data with experience from the training, panel discussions and appropriately and interesting questions related to the topics of modules and discussions during online meetings).

7. Evaluation of the Effects of the Project

In terms of the project effect, it is possible to assess positively that the project implementers met the set criteria in terms of quantitative and qualitative, in accordance with how the quality criteria and project effects are described in the document QUALIMENTARY - IMPLEMENTATION OF QUALITY DEVELOPMENT PROCESSES IN EARLY EDUCATION AND CARE INSTITUTIONS (pages 44-46).

The effects of the project were also assessed in the evaluation questionnaire implemented at the end of the project among the participants in the QUALIMENTARY-training (IO 2). Many participants stated in the project evaluation-questionnaire that participating in the project meant for them, above all, confirmation and strengthening of the ways of pedagogical work that they had been striving for so far. Respondents stated that the project motivated them to change their practice, to try to

implement new methods and to consistently develop interactions with children and to cooperate more intensively in the pedagogical team.

Many respondents stated that the international dimension of the project and the sharing of experience across borders were important to them. The respondents also showed the awareness that they would need to participate in the project more than once for the change to be really extensive. But the respondents highlighted that they wanted to try and implement high-quality pedagogical strategies from the project despite there not always being favourable conditions such as poor staffing ratios.

8. Summary

The main objectives of the project QUALIMENTARY was to strengthen and extend the competencies of the ECEC pedagogical workforce. The results of the external evaluation confirm that the project was implemented according to the project agreement and the main objectives have been achieved. The intellectual outputs have produced high-quality materials with great potential for use in the future. The project has shown that these materials can positively impact the quality of pedagogical practice within ECEC institutions and make a significant contribution to the continuous professional development of the ECEC workforce in EU countries.

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