



SUPPORTING THE COLLABORATION BETWEEN ECEC CORE AND ASSISTING PRACTITIONERS

Experiences of two Belgian pilot schools



PARTICIPATING INSTITUTIONS

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Aarhus University (DK)
VBJK - Centre for Innovation in the Early Years (BE)
Erasmus University College (BE)
Karel de Grote University College (BE)
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Value diversity
in care and education

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1.

INTRODUCTION

1. INTRODUCTION

In this Belgian Pilot Report, conducted as part of the VALUE project, we examine how collaborative learning between ECEC core and assisting practitioners can be supported as part of sustainable CPD (Continuous Professional Development) path in the context of Flemish community of Belgium.

Belgium ECEC has a split system. And, despite the international consensus on the importance of the conceptual integration of caring and learning in 'educare',¹ the relationship between caring and learning is a rather controversial topic in Belgium / Flemish preschool education. Previous research shows a continuum in which, on the one side some preschool staff members (mostly the assisting practitioners), problematized the lack of care in preschool education - building on a conceptual coexistence of caring and learning. At the other side of the continuum preschool staff members (mostly core practitioners) often understand care as a burden for preschool education - building on a conceptual *hierarchy* between learning and caring.² This conceptual hierarchy between care and learning is also visible in the workforce profiles of preschool teachers (i.e., core practitioners) and assisting staff in the Flemish community of Belgium: teachers are mainly responsible for learning, whereas assisting practitioners - in a rather invisible position - are mainly responsible for care.³

In Flanders, two VALUE learning paths have been set up in two pilot schools:

- ▶ In the city of Anderlecht, Brussels: The Chameleon, facilitated by two facilitators of

the Erasmus Brussels University of Applied Sciences and Arts;

- ▶ In the city of Antwerp: Maria Boodschap, facilitated by two facilitators of the Karel De Grote University College in Antwerp.

The two VALUE learning paths aimed at improving the educare approach of a diversity of children and families by enabling a good collaboration between core and assisting practitioners and raising their professional identity.

Both VALUE learning paths included several meetings over the period of one school year. The meetings were supported by facilitators from the Erasmus Brussels University of Applied Sciences and Arts and the Karel De Grote University College in Antwerp. The novelty of this approach in the context of the Flemish community of Belgium, is that both pilot schools were supported in their reflection and action process by two experienced facilitators, working at the same University College but in different departments. One facilitator has a background in teaching future preschool teachers (for children 2.5-6 years) and the other has a background in teaching future pedagogical coaches in childcare (for 0-3 years).⁴ By merging their expertise it can be assumed that this challenges the historical engrained belief that learning and care of children are separate entities. The four VALUE facilitators of the two pilot schools also regularly met in an intervision trajectory, facilitated by two staff members of VBJK, the Centre for Innovation in the Early Years.

In this report we first contextualise the Belgian VALUE pilots by clarifying the historical and so-

1. Kaga, Bennett, & Moss 2010; Penn, 2009; European Commission, 2014, 2018

2. Van Laere & Vandenbroeck, 2016

3. Van Laere, Peeters, & Vandenbroeck, 2012; Wyns, 2015

4. In the Flemish community there are three University Colleges that offer the Bachelor Pedagogy of Young Children

cio-cultural development of the ECEC system in Belgium (Flanders). Because this context influences the roles, tasks and professional identities of both assisting and core practitioners. Secondly, we elaborate upon the two different pilot schools: 1) in the city of Antwerp, and 2) in the city of Brussels. As they have a different design we describe the pilots in two different chapters. We explore the perspectives of both the VALUE facilitators and the school teams on the process, the content, and the influence of the VALUE learning paths in both schools. Data includes reports of the VALUE meetings, the focus group interviews with the preschool staff and overall intervision moments. Continuous reflexivity helped to encounter ethically important moments in the pilot and by doing so transcend merely procedural ethics.⁵ Also, information on the stakeholders group is provided. Finally, we present overall concluding reflections, lessons learned from both pilots and overall recommendations.

5. Guillemin & Gillam, 2004

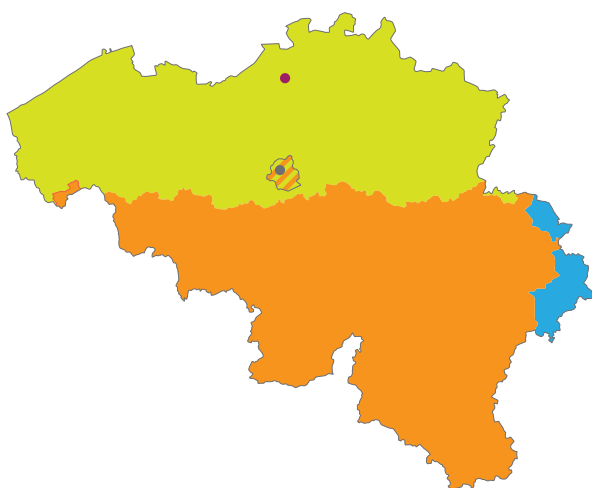
2.

SITUATING THE VALUE PILOTS IN THE BELGIAN (FLEMISH) CONTEXT

2. SITUATING THE VALUE PILOTS IN THE BELGIAN (FLEMISH) CONTEXT

The two VALUE pilot schools are situated in:

- ▶ **Anderlecht**, which is part of the capital city of Brussels, partially part of the Flemish community of Belgium;
- ▶ The city of **Antwerp**, part of the Flemish community of Belgium.



 FLEMISH COMMUNITY

 FRENCH COMMUNITY

 GERMAN COMMUNITY

- VALUE PILOT 1 IN BRUSSELS
- VALUE PILOT 2 IN ANTWERP

2.1 HISTORICAL AND SOCIO-CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT OF BELGIAN ECEC

Belgium⁶ (Flanders) is historically characterised by an ECEC split system. This implies that child care services for children up to three years of age (kinderopvang) are under the auspices of the Minister for Welfare, whereas preschool institutions (kleuterschool) for children from two and a half to compulsory school age (6 years) are under the auspices of the Minister for Education. The two types of institutions have distinct curricula, professional profiles and child-staff ratio.⁷

This split between childcare and preschool education started in the 19th century.⁸ The institutional split between childcare and preschool education unintentionally perpetuated the ingrained idea that care and learning of young children are two completely different aspects of human life:

- ▶ care of young children belongs to the private domain of family education and/or to childcare institutions;
- ▶ learning of young children belongs to the formal (pre-)school settings.

Because of this institutional and conceptual split between caring and learning, childcare centres are historically dealing more with emotional and physical care; preschool institutions have historically more focus on learning. One of the main issues that have occasionally been addressed

6. Belgium is a federal state with 3 communities (Flemish, French, German Community) and 3 regions (Flanders, Walloon, Brussels-Capital) next to the federal level. Since policy areas such as education, family services, childcare services, youth work and welfare are regulated at the community level, we focus on our pioneers work in the Flemish community and the Flemish governed schools in Brussels. However, the discourse on assisting staff is rather similar in the other communities.

7. Peeters & Pirard, 2017

8. Oberhuemer, Schreyer & Neuman, 2010

by different stakeholders since the 1970s is the fact that preschool education is not always well adapted to the caring and learning needs of the youngest children throughout the whole school day. One of the ways to deal with this problem has been by deploying assisting practitioners with a childcare qualification in preschool education.⁹

In the 80s various experiments took place and since 2000, preschool teachers have received support for a number of limited hours per week from a qualified childcare worker. These childcare workers help with the caring tasks of the youngest children in pre-school (2.5–4-year-olds), such as potty training (as a main public and mediated issue).¹⁰ Due to a lack of budget, however, mostly people with no specific childcare qualification supervise the in-between moments of the school day.

*One could argue that this division of tasks does not necessarily jeopardise a holistic view of education where both caring and learning are addressed.*¹¹ Nevertheless, while it may not necessarily jeopardise it, it does present an obstacle. Because a ‘higher status professional’ is mainly responsible for one task, and a ‘lower status professional’ responsible for another, a perceived hierarchy emerged between the tasks themselves, between learning and care. The concept of ‘education’ seems to have been narrowed to denote merely teaching and learning, which excludes and is considered superior to ‘caring’.¹² This decontextu-

alized approach to learning may result in situations when during crucial moments (e.g., contact with parents, meal time, and free playtime among peers) unqualified or low-qualified staff are solely responsible. This might downgrade the educational value of these moments. In other words, ‘care’ is often seen as a simple matter that ‘women naturally do’ and which does not require any specific training or professional development. Important interactions such as feeding, putting children to bed, and accompanying them to the toilet, ... risk being stripped of their educational value and intentionality. These perceptions reduce education to cognitive development, leading to a lack of continuity in the child’s care and education.¹³ This hinders a holistic conceptualisation of education in its broadest sense, in which learning is inherently connected with care and caring is educational in nature.¹⁴

By connecting research, policy, and practice a lot is happening currently in order to challenge this conceptual split between caring and learning because:

- ▶ the hierarchy between learning and care does not benefit children and parents;
- ▶ assisting practitioners are considered as invisible ‘Cinderella’s’ in preschools.¹⁵

The Flemish government recently decided to attribute more money to preschools, and one of the

9. Van Laere, 2017

10. The same happens with the puéricultrice in the French community of Belgium.

11. Quote from: Van Laere, Peeters & Vandenbroeck, 2012, p. 534-535

12. Isaksen, Devi & Hochschild, 2008; Twigg et al., 2011; Wolkowitz, 2006

13. Van Laere et al., 2012

14. Broström, 2006; Hayes, 2007; 2008; Kaga, Bennett & Moss, 2010

15. Declercq, B., & Van Dormael, R., 2013, Van Laere & Wyns, 2017; Wyns, 2015

2. SITUATING THE VALUE PILOTS IN THE BELGIAN (FLEMISH) CONTEXT

current proposals¹⁶ is to invest in the deployment of more childcare workers (*'kleuterverzorgers'* or *'kinderverzorger'*).

In addition, Flemish policy makers have major concerns in finding sufficient teaching staff to work in pre- and primary school education. This is especially a problem in cities such as Brussels and Antwerp.¹⁷ Enabling alternative qualifying trajectories for assisting staff to become preschool teachers themselves could be a future pathway for the ECEC and broader primary school sector. Two inspiring examples are:

- ▶ the Baobab Project: this is a small-scale project in Brussels, initiated by NGO Eva and supported by the Flemish Community Commission (VGC). 8 motivated Brussels inhabitants are now working as assisting practitioners in preschool classes, while following a qualifying trajectory to become a preschool teacher (also in the Erasmus University College). For 4 years they will receive intense support in order to find a job as a preschool teacher in the city of Brussels.¹⁸
- ▶ In order to counter the growing teacher shortage, the University Colleges have special programs for students who combine work and study. Especially assisting practitioners in preschool education make use of the opportunity of getting an official qualification whilst continuing their job.

In general, Flemish preschools have a high degree

of autonomy.¹⁹ This allows each school to develop its own educational policies, as well as to appoint its own staff, decide on the child-staff ratio, and decide on the type of classes. Hence, some preschools opt for entry classes (*instapklassen*) or reception classes (*onthaalklassen*) for children who are between two and a half and three years of age (age-specific classes). In other preschools, the youngest children attend the first-grade class of preschool, which comprises children from two and a half to four years of age (age heterogenous classes). Flemish preschool classes typically consists of 20–25 children with one preschool teacher.²⁰

2.2 PROFESSIONAL PROFILES OF ECEC STAFF AND COLLABORATION IN BELGIUM (FLANDERS)

In Flanders, preschool core practitioners often have additional support from a childcare worker for a few hours per week, depending on the number of toddlers. The deployment of assisting practitioners (so called childcare workers, *'kleuterverzorgers'* or *'kinderverzorgers'*) is mostly framed as a support for the core teachers or to unburden the core teacher.

The assisting practitioners are typically responsible for caring tasks for the youngest children (e.g., potty training, meals and snack time) while the core practitioners (preschool teachers) are responsible for the learning activities.

All preschool teachers hold a bachelor's degree

16. Vlaamse Regering, 30/09/2019

17. De Backer, & De Clercq, 2017

18. <https://www.onderwijscentrumbrussel.be/diensten/studiedienst/nieuws/meer-brusselaars-voor-de-klas-dankzij-de-baobab>

19. OECD, 2011b

20. Hulpia, Peeters, & Van Landeghem, 2014; Van Laere, Vandenbroeck & Peeters, 2011

in pre-primary education (ISCED 6).²¹ Assisting practitioners usually have a secondary vocational degree in childcare (ISCED 3B).²²

Many preschools collaborate with the after-school care services either within or outside of the school building. After-school care workers organise the leisure time of children after school and may also supervise the children between educational activities and during the lunch break. They have a minimum of three months of training and many hold a secondary vocational degree in childcare (ISCED 3B). In addition, many staff members without any specific childcare qualification can be responsible for the supervision of play time outside and lunch time.²³

The professional profile of the preschool teacher encompasses a clear educational role in which, e.g., supporting physical and health aspects of the development of children is important. However, there is a recent tendency of the government and Ministry to reduce the educational (opvoedende) role in favour of a sole focus on the teaching (onderwijzende) role of preschool teachers.²⁴

Whereas childcare workers have a professional profile related to the services they provide children from birth until three or out-of-school care, they do not have a professional profile describing the specific responsibilities nor required competences for their work in preschools. Hence, their tasks and positions vary, largely dependent on the

school or educational network.²⁵ For the schools that are fully funded and run by the government, their function is described as 'having a supporting and caring function aiming to unburden the preschool teacher and increase the well-being of children.' More concretely, they are expected to execute the health policies of schools in order to develop the general well-being and health of children and to prevent neglect. And, in addition, he/she has to communicate with colleagues and parents about the children's health and well-being. The childcare workers are also expected to support the preschool teacher in teaching children social skills, self-reliance, values and norms.²⁶

CPD and support for the core practitioners (i.e., the preschool teachers) is structurally provided by educational advisors or guidance centres and schools receive funds for this in-service training. This is rarely the case for assisting practitioners. Also, preschool teachers have 2 child-free hours a week.²⁷ Assisting staff have no structural child-free hours, as they often have to move from school location to school location to work a couple of hours. This implies that the opportunities for assisting practitioners to access professional development are limited in comparison to teachers (core practitioners).²⁸ So, in VALUE we aimed to establish a professional development process that strengthens the collaboration between core and assisting practitioners in order to raise the professional identity, within an educare approach.

21. ISCED (International Standard of Education Classification, 2011)

22. Van Laere, et al., 2012

23. Hulpia, et al., 2014; Van Laere, et al., 2011

24. Vlaamse Regering, 5/10/2007, 23/07/2014

25. Educational network = the umbrella organisation that a school is affiliated to

26. *Model functiebeschrijving Kinderverzorger BaO*, 2007

27. This is mostly during gym-hours – so often this is not a team-moment.

28. Van Laere et al., 2011

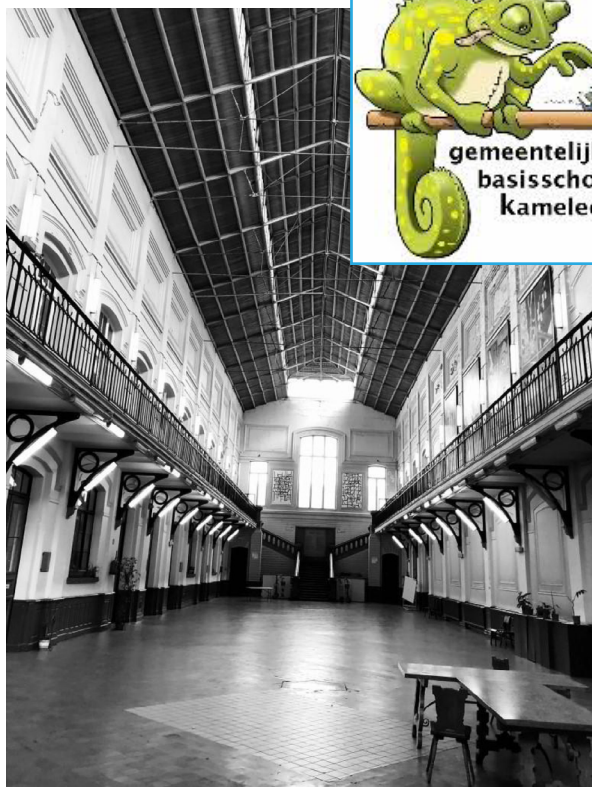


3.

**THE VALUE PILOT
IN BRUSSELS**

3. THE VALUE PILOT IN BRUSSELS

3.1 PRESENTING THE BRUSSELS VALUE PILOT SCHOOL: THE CHAMELEON



3.1.1 Working in an urbanised and underprivileged area of Brussels

Brussels Erasmus University of Applied Sciences and Arts, together with the pedagogical guidance organisation of Brussels (OCB) selected the school 'the Chameleon' as a pilot school for the VALUE learning path. The Chameleon is situated in Anderlecht, an urbanised area near one of the three main stations in Brussels and one of the poorest areas of Brussels. It is a municipality located in the western part of the Brussels-Capital Region. The population consists mainly of young and large families with a migration background. More than 25% of its population is younger than 18 years old. One in three children is born in a family with no income generated through labour.²⁹ There is a discontinuity in the population as the area is a transit zone, a stepping stone to neighbourhoods with better provision and better facilities. Only the poorest and most vulnerable stay.

The school mirrors its surrounding neighbourhood. This results in a very diverse school population (e.g., in ethnic background, SES,...). The reality shows families living in a low socio-economic situation. A lot of children did not attend childcare (only place for 1 child in 6 in childcare centres for children between 0-3). Hence, the school is the first formal 'educational' environment outside the family. The preschool defines vulnerable children in terms of poverty, vulnerable situations at home, low-educated parents and multilingualism. The total percentage of vulnerable children at the preschool is more than 97,5%, and approximately 95% of the children do not speak Dutch in the home environment.³⁰ Seen that Anderlecht is a transit zone, the school

ID of the school	The Chameleon (<i>De Kameleon</i>)
City	municipality of Anderlecht, Brussels
Country	Belgium
Number of pupils	184 in the whole school (2,5-12 years old), 76 pupils in preschool education (2,5-6 years old) divided in 4 classes (K0-K1-K2-K3)

29. Bisa, 2020

30. Dutch is one of the national languages of Belgium and the instructional language in Flanders.

is confronted with the fact that throughout the year new children start school time, and regularly children don't return to school due to families moving.

3.1.2 Pedagogical vision of the school

Because the local context is characterised by many social inequalities between children, the school strives to create equal opportunities for all children. As a chameleon, the school is capable of changing colour, and adapt to a variety of situations.

«Individual differences are important. It is important to see, recognize and respect children's differences. A class group is seen as a reflection of society and people must learn to cope with differences. The sooner the children learn this, the higher their tolerance of society, good integration and social respect.»

(School principal, VALUE baseline study)

The developmental goals, found in the Flemish governmental ECEC curriculum, take the uniqueness of every child and the context into account. From that perspective, the school wants to use play and experience-based learning to connect with the world of children and their families. The school principal defines the pedagogical vision as follows:

«Children should be able to develop in their own pace. In this, parents are perceived as partners. The school strives for parental involvement. Collaboration and communication, with the aim of improving the well-being and developmental opportunities through an equal partnership, positive and open attitude and getting to know each other. An important role is attributed to the connection with parents. They strive for an equal partnership.»

(VALUE baseline study)

Because of the diverse population, the school principal stresses that 'care' has a special place in the school. She indicated at the start of the VALUE project that education and care are linked. In recent years, there has been more focus on care, especially for the youngest children. When referring to care, one usually refers to care for learning opportunities (including remediating learning 'delays') instead of physical, mental and emotional care. The school principal also mentions that the resources are too limited (i.e., financial resources and limited number of staff). Hence, some teachers feel that certain children need more stimuli to learn.

3.1.3 A dynamic and welcoming team

The school tries to stimulate collaboration in the team through working groups and meetings. However, these working groups are composed of solely teachers. There is no written or formal vision regarding collaboration among professionals with different educational backgrounds yet.

3. THE VALUE PILOT IN BRUSSELS

«The team can always count on me.»

(assisting practitioner)

The team defines itself as a dynamic and welcoming team. The core practitioners are all-white and all-female preschool teachers with a Bachelor's degree. They are supported by three assisting practitioners (one male, all with migration background). Two of the assisting practitioners have the title of **assistant educator** ('hulpopvoeder'), a position created and paid by the municipality of Anderlecht. According to their job description, defined by the municipality, their main task is to provide quality care for children and support the preschool teachers and childcare workers before, during and after school time. These assistant educators need to have insights in developmental psychology and develop good relational competences (s.a., good communicators with staff, children and parents; good listeners; demonstrate empathy; be flexible). Notwithstanding, these assistant educators do not need to have a formal qualification to work with children. The third assisting practitioner has the title of **child-care worker** ('kinderverzorger') in preschool, a position created by the Flemish government. She holds a formal initial qualification of childcare. However, the number of hours that she works in the school is limited. According to their municipal job description, her main task is to support the preschool teachers in caring tasks (both physical, social and emotional and health care) and strengthen the social skills of children. The childcare worker is responsible to formally and informally inform parents on the total personality

development of the child. This job description also stresses the importance of collaborating with other staff members in the sense that every pedagogical intervention that she wants to do has to be discussed beforehand with the preschool teacher.

«My place is on the playground...»

(assisting practitioner)

The assistant educators work in shifts from 7am till 13pm or from 12 till 19pm. They provide before and after school care, supervise the lunch breaks, and support teachers in the classroom (in both preschool 2.5-6y and elementary school 6-12y). They also play a role in communicating with parents.

Although the school strives to work together as a team, in practice the assistant educators work where help is most needed. Sometimes they replace sick teachers, care for the children on the playground or help during school trips. The assistant educators are not involved in the preparation of classroom practices, nor on deliberation or evaluation of the practices. Upon arrival their tasks and responsibilities for the day are shortly briefed.

The core practitioners are all native Dutch speakers,³¹ who commute every day to Brussels. The core practitioners do not represent the diversity of the neighbourhood. In contrast, the assistant educators have a migration background and live in the neighbourhood. The openness of the team makes them a vigorous group to work with. The entire team of core practitioners initially shared a feeling

31. Dutch is one of the national languages of Belgium and the instructional language in Flanders.

of unity and positive collaboration. The core practitioners value the work of the assistant educators on a personal level: “They are friends, I really like them.” But although the teachers welcome the assistant educators, they are searching to connect better as a team on a professional level.

3.2 FACILITATORS’ VIEWS ON THE VALUE LEARNING PATH

3.2.1 Initial goals of the VALUE learning path

The initial aim of the Brussels VALUE learning path is related to the general aim of VALUE: Improving ECEC quality through the professionalization and interprofessional collaboration of the whole staff (both core practitioners and assisting practitioners) and strengthening the professional identity and an educare approach.

The general goals for the Brussels VALUE learning path are:

1. The primary goal is the **creation of awareness** within the ‘Educare professionals’ about perspectives on ‘education and care in a broad sense’. Through the VALUE learning path the VALUE facilitators want to raise professionals’ awareness of the values that are the implicit foundation of their actions, as ideas about education, the professional identity and the child image that influence the practitioners’ behaviour and intentions.³²

2. The second goal is to install a climate that enables and valorises **multi-perspectivity** and working in diverse teams. The VALUE facilitators strive for an open culture and the

implementation of concrete actions that facilitate this (such as interdisciplinary team meetings, a job description that makes the invisible practitioners visible). The goal is to give agency and voice to all members of the team.

3. The third goal is strengthening the intrinsic motivation to enhance pedagogical practice and make sustainable changes. Through the exchange about values and perspectives on educare and the role of professionals, pedagogical quality from within is created.

3.2.2 Process of the VALUE learning path

The foundations of the VALUE learning path in Brussels were created in collaboration with different departments of the Brussels Erasmus University of Applied Sciences and Arts: the Bachelor of Education: Preschool Education, the Bachelor of Early Childhood Education and Care (Pedagogy of young children) and the Knowledge Centre Urban Coaching and Education. The expertise in **(narrative) coaching**, collaborative approaches and group dynamic formed the foundation of the VALUE learning path. The expertise in education, didactics and pedagogy were the basis for the translation into the language of the field of preschool education.

To reach the abovementioned aims the VALUE facilitators created a learning path inspired by ‘narrative and collaborative’ approaches: **‘Coaching from a reflective perspective’**.³³ The focus is the exploration of values and meaning making. In this approach coaching is seen as a conversational process through which the coachee uncovers

32. Golombek, 2017; Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2014

33. Stelter, 2017,2018; Drake, 2007; Verhaeghe, et al., 2017

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deeper insight. Narrative coaching tries to obtain a conscious professional identity. Attention to 'the role of the coach' and the creation of 'narrative space' are crucial.³⁴

Through working on group dynamics and the creation of a shared goal/narrative, the VALUE facilitators want to establish a culture in which diversity is valued. The involvement of every member of the team is pursued by starting from the narrative and strengths of every person. It is important to give voice to the perspective of all team members and have a constant attention to approach the team as a team.

The VALUE learning group exists of seven pre-school teachers, three assisting practitioners, one coach of the Brussels' pedagogical guidance organisation (OCB) and the coordinator of the out-of-school care.

The VALUE learning path consisted of four phases through which the role of the VALUE facilitator and the creation of the narrative space changed:

- ▶ **Phase 1:** Uncovering insights in the subjective reality of individuals and the group dynamics; building trust (moment 1- lab 1,2).
- ▶ **Phase 2:** Confronting and contesting perspectives, multi-perspectivity (lab 3-4).
- ▶ **Phase 3:** Making choices, realization, and sustainability (lab 5-7).
- ▶ **Phase 4:** Implementation of the Educare Approach by the whole team (ongoing).

The documentation of the VALUE learning path was done by meeting reports, reflections of the

VALUE facilitators and transcription of interesting moments, words... of all professionals involved.

3.2.3 Design of the VALUE learning path

Phase 1: Uncovering insights in the subjective reality of individuals and the group dynamics - VALUE facilitator as facilitator

- ▶ Moment 1: Building trust activity (Sept 2018): opportunities were created so the team and the VALUE facilitators could meet in informal ways.
- ▶ **VALUE meeting 1:** Getting to know you (Oct 2018): discover the story of every individual and insights in the group dynamics using 'abstract coaching cards' and 'metaphors'
- ▶ Thinking reflection exercise: 'What do you think?' narrative questions
- ▶ **VALUE meeting 2:** 'Image of the job' and 'image of the child' (Nov 2018): unlock the internal compass of the professionals through individual and group reflection and brainstorming
- ▶ Thinking reflection exercise: 'the Educare professional'
- ▶ Core team: involving the invisible practitioners

Phase 2: Confronting and contesting perspectives, multi-perspectivity - VALUE facilitator as confronter

34. Verhaeghe, et al., 2017; Verhaeghe & Den Haese, 2020

- ▶ **VALUE meeting 3:** The words we speak and dilemmas (Dec 2018): confront the team with their own words. Daring them to take a stand and try new perspectives, such as:
 - ▶ 'Brussel has eating- and sleeping schools' (quote from VALUE meeting 2)
 - ▶ 'My place is on the playground' (assistant educator, quote from VALUE meeting 2)
 - ▶ The team and appendix' (teacher, quote from VALUE meeting 1)
 - ▶ 'Parents don't see the importance of the early years; it's only taking care of the children' (quote from VALUE meeting 2)
- ▶ **VALUE meeting 4:** What's in a name? 'assistant educator, child caretaker...'. (Jan 2019). In this meeting the participants rethought what was taken for granted. They contested different perspectives and gave voice to what was silent. Two groups were made: teachers and assisting practitioners.
 - ▶ Thinking reflection exercise: 'little stories, big VALUE'
 - ▶ Core-team: 'Making choices'
- ▶ **VALUE meeting 5:** The choices we made and what they mean (March 2019).
- ▶ **VALUE meeting 6:** The Chameleon's got talent, let's make a plan. On our way to become a 'child ready' school. (April-May 2019) During this meeting an action plan was created with the focus on the involvement of all members of the team and involvement of parents.
 - ▶ Team teaching? Or the pedagogical involvement of the 'assistant educators' as a team member?
 - ▶ The reciprocal relation with parents as active agents.
 - ▶ Enhancing transition suitcases in cooperation with the parents
 - ▶ Lower the barriers for parents by class involvement
 - ▶ Core-team: diversity in the team and strengths
- ▶ **VALUE meeting 7:** What the future will bring...? (June 2019)

Phase 4: Implementation of the Educare Approach – VALUE facilitator as companion

- ▶ Core-team: Staying on track
- ▶ Focus-group

Phase 3: Making choices, realization and sustainability – VALUE facilitator as co-creator and inspirator.

- ▶ **VALUE meeting 5:** The choices we made and what they mean (March 2019).

In Phase 2 there was some resistance in the team. This resistance was used as a starting point to clearly discuss what everybody wanted. Two themes were central:

3.2.4 Results of the VALUE learning path

RESULTS REGARDING THE INITIAL GOALS

During the VALUE learning path, the VALUE facilitators observed **a growing awareness** of the staff's own **professional identity** and perspectives on education and care. Due to the changes in the role of the VALUE facilitator (from facilitator,

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over confronter, to co-creator) a more conscious professional identity was established and the goals and intentionality that govern the actions regarding Educare were uncovered.

Plans to more **formally involve assisting practitioners** in pedagogical reflection, planning and execution were implemented. The team decided to continuously look for further steps in this direction if possible. All participants have the aim to let voices, of especially assistant educators, be heard louder.

On an institutional and municipal level, steps have been taken to update and deepen the **function description** of the assistant educators. As a result of the VALUE project the school principal wants to make the role and importance of assistant educators more explicit. New responsibilities will be incorporated.

By building a climate of trust and sensitivity towards the perspective of the other, all participants felt **safe** to speak out and take part in the discussions. Especially, the assistant educators showed a significant growth in **participation and confidence**, thus using diversity as a strength and catalyst. However, it is important to notice that during the process there was a **breach of trust at the end of phase 2** (lab 4). The confrontation of the team with contesting perspectives did not go as planned. One VALUE facilitator was out due to illness and was replaced by another facilitator. In this session, to enable the voice of the assistants, the group was split into two groups (a group of teachers and a group of assistant educators). The focus was on the role of the assistant related to their professional identity. The assistants tried to explain their role in the school. Central questions where: What are the most important aspects of the job, what do we value, what do we want to get rid of...? The substitute coach stirred up unexpected resistance by questioning the

difference between the two roles and proposing the possibility of one 'educare professional'. In doing so, the terms co-teaching or team-teaching also became quite charged. This incident compromised the role of the VALUE facilitators and resulted in a relapse. To re-establish a safe 'narrative space' the VALUE facilitators went back in the 'facilitating role', listening to all involved, instead of confronting.

The continuous **tension** between the **goal-oriented approach**, which is typical in a lot of Flemish schools, and the **reflection-oriented approach** of the narrative coaching method, was not always an easy hindrance to overcome. The creation of time and space to 'linger' on ideas, values and ideals was not perceived as efficient by some of the participants nor by the school principal. Even though all participants indicated an appreciation of the methods and time taken to reflect and broaden their perspective, some still stated to miss 'tangible' and 'direct' outcomes (such as the transition suitcases). For example, the school principal aimed for a more action-driven approach. However, the VALUE facilitators are convinced that given more time, the team could have fully realised their own aims and goals, the tangible, as well as the less tangible.

Also, the VALUE facilitators assume that **intrinsic ownership** was not fully realised. The top down working culture of the school inhibited ownership from the various core and assisting practitioners.

RESULTS REGARDING THE VALUE CORE CONCEPTS

Professional identity

The VALUE facilitators saw a significant growth in awareness of professional identity. For the VALUE facilitators this growth is strongly connected to the focus on reflection on the internal compass

(role perception, image of child, ideals about education). The reflection and intervision made the different perspectives of the practitioners visible. For the assisting practitioners it seemed the first time they were confronted with this kind of reflection exercises. Although at first there was **hesitation**, after a break-in period **confidence grew** and from VALUE meeting 4 on, a sense of professional identity emerged. We underline that a key objective of the coaching dialogue is to strengthen the coaches' ability to reflect. This ability is differently distributed among the different team members. Another factor is their degree of familiarity with the techniques and methods. It is important to observe the team and all its individuals and adjust the coaching style if needed.

Collaboration

The insight in one's own perspective made it possible to establish a stronger collaboration. Ideally, the participants realise that their position and opinion is only one of many possibilities, only one worldview. Hence, **open-mindedness and curiosity** about whether others see the world in different ways or how they regard a specific task, is extremely helpful in the negotiation process or social discourse.³⁵ The VALUE facilitators used **openness, curiosity and empathy** as key concepts in their own attitude as coach.³⁶ This modelling helped the team to be more sensible to the voice of the other team members.

Educare

'Educare' was the plotline of the VALUE story in Brussels. It wasn't the starting point, it wasn't a goal, but it was the indirect direction. **Educare**

was always implicitly present through the content that was brought, through the complementarity of the VALUE facilitators, through the multidisciplinary of the team, through the selected words or pictures... in the VALUE meetings. The participants became an Educare team organically. **Educare was used as a 'topic'** to enhance the interprofessional collaboration in the diverse team.

3.3. VIEWS OF THE SCHOOL TEAM ON THE VALUE LEARNING PATH

The views of the school team on the VALUE learning path are based on following data: data of (in) formal evaluation moments during the process of the VALUE coaching, the informal evaluation (final VALUE meeting) and the final focus group with the team and the interview with the school principal. Participants of the focus group were: three core practitioners, two assisting practitioners and one person of the pedagogical guidance organisation. The two VALUE facilitators facilitated the focus group, and one VALUE researcher from VBJK took notes. All conversations were registered during the focus group interviews. Important to note is that the members of the focus groups were invited by the school principal. For some participants the aim of the focus group interview was, however, not clear (they expected a VALUE meeting, instead of a focus group interview). There was an individual interview with the school principal.

The focus group interview and the individual interview took place after the summer holiday in 2019. In reconnecting with the team, it became apparent that after the holiday period of two months (between phase 3 and 4), the first month

35. Stelter, 2009, p. 213

36. See 3.4.: Figure 1: narrative attitude

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of the school year was very challenging and difficult for the team due to turnovers in the team. This, in fact, caused a second breach of trust, internally this time. The team was clearly occupied with internal issues. This possibly influenced the results of the focus group interviews. It appeared that the focus and progress made in phase 1, 2 and 3, was partly 'forgotten' over summer holiday, and some relapsed into old patterns and ways of thinking. The goal-oriented approach gained in presence again. For example, responsibility and accountability for the plan of action, formulated by the team, was merely placed in the hands of the VALUE facilitators, in contrast with the growing ownership of taking action in the previous school year.

In the following part, the changes in the three VALUE core concepts (professional identity, collaboration and educare) are described.

3.3.1 Professional identity

Throughout the VALUE learning path, **the awareness of one's own professional identity** of core practitioners, but especially the assistants, grew. This was noticeable in the way they talked about themselves, the way the core practitioners talked about them and how they engaged and interacted during the VALUE meetings.

«We are more aware of the different roles. It was nice, especially with the assistant educators, we almost never did this.»

In the first VALUE meeting teachers described the assisting practitioners as *"the playful friend"*, and an *"appendix of the team"*. **Being appreciated for what they do and who they are as indi-**

viduals, but they were not seen in full potential of their professional role, nor being a real part of the team. *"We like them, they are kind!"* (teacher); *"If we ask them to do something, they do it without hesitation."* (teacher). So, at the start of the VALUE learning path the core practitioners were positive about the assisting practitioners. The core practitioners appreciated the work of the assisting practitioners on a personal level: *"They are friends"; "I really like them"*. When the assistant educators talked about their role they spoke about what they do and the tasks they had to carry out. *"I arrive in the morning and play with the children on the playground. Then the school principal tells me where to go."* (assistant educator). During the VALUE learning path, the way the core practitioners talked about them changed and as a result the way the assistant educators talked about themselves changed simultaneously. They were appreciated in their professional role, not just in their personal role. *"They have an important role regarding the contact with parents."* (teacher); *"They know things about children and their context we don't."* (teacher); *"There is another dynamic in the class when X is present, children are excited to see him."* (teacher). This also became clear in the final focus group: *"They are worth gold"; "They are always outside, whether it's raining or not"*. And in relation to the children too: *"X is a like a father for a lot of children"*.

When discussing the role of the assistant educators, **their bridging role** with the parents and the important role they play for the **emotional well-being of the children** was central.

«I talk to the children when I see they are sad.»

(assisting educator)

«Parents come to me and ask questions about their children.»

(assisting educator)

The VALUE learning path also revealed that teachers and assistant educators had/have **a different role** in the pilot school. There was some resistance in the discussion on talking about 'educators' for all the members of the team. Through the discussion it became clear: core and assisting practitioners perceived both **roles as complementary**.

«They are not teachers, but this does not mean they are not important.»

(teacher)

«I don't want to be a teacher, I do not teach, I love my job.»

(assistant educator)

This complementary role was also acknowledged by the core practitioners.

«I'm sometimes to strict, children like it to engage freely in the space.»

This complementarity of roles also became clear when the staff members were asked to situate themselves in the school (during Phase 1). The

teachers situated themselves in the teacher's room at the table. One assisting educator mentioned: *"You still have a place at the table, we haven't"*. The assisting practitioners saw themselves outside at the playground, which is also in line with the perception of the core practitioners. The assisting practitioners have a role on the playground during lunch break, before and after school time. But they also have a role in assisting the teachers in the classroom when there are external activities, or when they 'replace' teachers that are on sick-leave or absent. The assisting practitioners can take over the class when the teacher is absent: *"He took over my class on Wednesday. Before he asked me: 'What can I do?'. So, I explained that I was working on colours, and he took over that activity."*; *"If they take over the class, I let them free"*; *"It's not our expectation that they come up with new activities, but they ask what we would have done, and also the starting activities (joined opening of the day), they have seen that so many times, they can take over, when we're absent."* The school principal also mentioned the **supportive role**: *"They are not expected to prepare an activity on their own. That's not a part of their degree / diploma. But sometimes they take over a class, or they help the teachers in the classes e.g. reading with the children."*

In VALUE meeting 5 the team (teachers and assistant educators) made the choice to strive for more **'formal' pedagogical involvement** of the assistant educators in the school.

«It would be good if an assistant is present during intake conversations with parents.»

(teacher)

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«There is a thematic group working about parental involvement, why isn't one of the assistants part of this group?»

(teacher)

«I would love to know in advance, what themes the class is working on.»

(assistant educator)

The interaction during the focus group interviews also **showed a growth in the way the assistant educators dared to speak up**. They were talking as much as the core practitioners and they were really involved in the conversation. They did not hesitate to share and interact.

3.3.2 Collaboration

From the beginning of the VALUE learning path, the team stated they already had a good collaboration. But during the VALUE meetings it became clear that talking to each other, having a friendly relation and doing something together is not the same as a strong collaboration with all. The VALUE process facilitated a more **professional way** of cooperation, next to the more personal connection in the team. One core practitioner directed herself to a colleague and mentioned that one colleague (also present during the focus group interview) is now more visible and talks more about her private issues, which was not the case before.

During the focus group interviews, the interviewees stated that now they see themselves as a **strong team**. And, they state that the assisting practitioners are now really part of this team. However, the assistant educators remain uninvolved in team meetings (due to practical reasons, even if they believe it could have an added value). This is something the school principal wants to rethink, but, unfortunately, she does not see any options to change this.

Through observation, an evolution in the involvement of the assisting practitioners during the VALUE process was noticeable. From a few short interventions, only when asked, to active involvement in the last VALUE meetings. From being hesitant and a bit anxious to come to the meetings, to being happy to be part of the VALUE learning path. This change was facilitated by a change in the way of working in the VALUE meetings. At the start, the assistant educators showed difficulty in reflection exercises. Then the VALUE facilitators changed the working method from talking and discussing to preparing and presenting. This helped the assistant educators to **speak up**.

When the assistant educators were asked if they felt part of the group. The assistant educators themselves answered: *"Off course, that's logic."* Also, the core practitioners answered *"Yes, for sure they are"*.

During the VALUE learning path there was a discussion on team teaching. The VALUE facilitator³⁷ opted that team teaching could imply that the roles of core and assisting practitioners could switch: that core practitioners can be on the playground before and after the school hours, and that assisting practitioners could prepare the activities. This led to a lot of commotion.

37. This was not the regular VALUE facilitator who was out due to illness, but a substitute facilitator.

«The role of the assistant educators and the core practitioner are different but complementary.»

To conclude, team-teaching is not what they want but collaborating as a team in the classroom, improving each other's strengths is.

3.3.3. Educare approach

During the VALUE process there was a change in the way the professionals talked about the parents and 'care'. In the second VALUE meeting there was a discussion on the parents and their role in educating their children. The parents were blamed and shamed in some ways. The perception was that children are not potty trained, are tired, do not 'have good manners', are unable to eat on their own, ... Underlying there was a feeling of 'giving care' as having a lower value than teaching. Even a feeling of undervaluing 'giving care' in the school system all together.

«The parents do not know how to properly educate their children.»

(teacher)

«They do not care.»

(teacher)

«They think we just take care of their children and do nothing else...»

(teacher)

During the VALUE learning path this changed into a more nuanced perspective. The core practitioners became aware of their frame of reference and exchanged ideas with the assistant educators, who live in the neighbourhood and are part of urban life. Over time they learned to contextualise and take the situation of some parents into account. Awareness grew that they do not know (the stories of) the parents and the consequences of living in a poor, deprived neighbourhood and underprivileged situation.

«They all come to the big party of the school. If their children are involved, they come to see them. So, they do care.»

(teacher)

«Some parents are not able to find somebody to take care of the children at night.»

(assistant educator)

During the final focus group, a relapse in the way the team spoke about parents was noticeable. The core practitioners struggled with the entry level of the children: *"They come here, they know nothing, they often didn't attend a child care service, ... It's tough."*; *"The potty training is terrible, they*

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just poop in the playground, we thought it couldn't get any worse, but it did."

In the description of the role of the assisting practitioners, the school principal made a distinction between education and care: *"When one child had an 'accident' and has to go to the toilet, the core teacher can continue her work."*

It is evident that the pilot school is searching for different ways of interacting and searching for the educare approach. But sometimes they relapsed in old patterns and ways of 'getting things done'. In times of stress and adversity, members tend to rely on old ways of interacting. Although all involved staff members indicated they want to strengthen new pathways, in times of difficulty the road 'most travelled by' is the path taken. This results in some quick wins, but not in sustainable change for the future. The VALUE facilitators assume that this could be the case at the start of the new school year (after the VALUE learning path, and the focus group interviews).

Nevertheless, the VALUE facilitators firmly believe that the groundwork laid in the VALUE meetings is strong and fertile. New ideas and pathways will sprout again.

3.4. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

3.4.1. Crucial conditions

PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY AND OWNERSHIP AS A STARTING POINT

As mentioned above, awareness about one's own professional identity is a crucial step in the VALUE process. Besides that, ownership is a key concept. All voices should be valued. But it is also important to acknowledge the fact that some people feel good in their role as it is.

Some assistant educators are ok with the mere executive nature of the job, as it is formalised today. Professionalization, professional identity, deepened collaboration, structural pedagogical involvement were not the things they wanted to pursue. All involved staff members were more aware of their own and each other's role, which laid the foundation for a strong interprofessional collaboration.

FROM DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES TO MULTIPERSPECTIVITY

Something that was strived for in the VALUE learning path was the insight in the individual's narratives, and to combine them in a co-created story. To establish this fully, there must be a combination between individual and team coaching. Nuanced insight in one's own perspective of all involved needs more deep reflection. But this takes more time than provided in the VALUE project. The VALUE facilitators were only able to do this on a base level. But the groundwork for further deepening is completed. So, more time is needed for sustainable changes.

THE ROLE OF THE VALUE FACILITATOR AND A SAFE CONTEXT ARE CRUCIAL TO CREATE A SENSE OF BELONGING

The role of the VALUE facilitators was crucial in the VALUE process. Giving voice to all participants, creating a narrative space, having insight in group dynamics and use them to benefit the process. The combination of one VALUE facilitator specialised in the sector of education (2.5-6 years old) and one in the sector of 'care/welfare' (0-3 years old) held many advantages. To speak the professional jargon and language of both the teachers and the assisting practitioners helped to give everyone a sense of recognition and belonging.

Also, the changing roles from facilitator to confronter and co-creator is an interesting way to work. Starting with group dynamics and building trust facilitated the creation of the safe space to speak. Even though during the VALUE process there were some challenges, the VALUE facilitators managed to keep the space open for everyone. More specifically, at the end of phase 2 (lab 4) there was a breach of trust that needed to be solved before the process could go on. Luckily, the VALUE facilitating duo was able to quickly resolve the issue and proceed.

Next, the reflection process of the VALUE facilitators on their own role was crucial. After every session they reflected using written reflection or verbal intervision. The VALUE facilitators reflected on how they establish the narrative attitude, making use of the elements presented in Figure 1. The VALUE facilitators must be aware of the own bias and how this can steer the conversation, a meta-level that is always present. By reflecting on the attitude after every session, the VALUE facilitators managed to let the team lead the process, to be at the wheel.

FIGURE 1: NARRATIVE ATTITUDE (VERHAEGHE, DEN HAESE & DE RAEDEMAER, 2018 IN VERHAEGHE & DEN HAESE, 2020)



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LEADERSHIP AS PRECONDITION FOR SUCCESS

The VALUE pilot shows the strong importance of management involvement, and this on different levels:

- ▶ Being part of the core-team was instrumental to guide and understand the dynamics within the school, but also on an organisational level. On the decisions of the municipality,³⁸ the school principal was able to provide us with more insight than the teachers. These guidelines and interactions at a meso level have an important impact on the job organisation and the school life.
- ▶ In some VALUE meetings the school principal was present. However, this turned out to be inhibitory to the process in the VALUE meetings. The installed trust and the safety of the narrative space, was breached. A balance between involvement hands on and from the side line, needed to be found. This implores a sensitivity from the school principal.
- ▶ What is certainly clear, is that there is a need for a clear and shared vision on CPD. A CPD-path as the VALUE approach, needs to be incorporated in a broader and more comprehensive plan of team development or vision for a multidisciplinary team. Only in such a manner, time spend and efforts can be effective.
- ▶ It takes a competent system³⁹ to create quality. The individual, the team, the school management, but also the inter-organisational and governmental level must align.

Things as child ratio, teaching hours, job description... have an important influence on the possibilities and the capacity of the team to develop a continuous culture of collaboration and quality. The availability of 'mental room' entirely depends on it.

3.4.2. Future steps in the school

- ▶ The school principal wants to install pedagogical meetings for the diverse team every 6 weeks. This is a start. The involvement of the primary teaching corps will be necessary. Also a change in organisation urges itself. This is an issue on a higher, national level.
- ▶ It will be important to think about who will take the role of VALUE facilitators in the school, to sustain the process. We strongly believe that a 'pedagogical coach' could be an added value to the school team. Another possibility is to strengthen coaching skills of a number of team members who have a facilitating and pioneering role by offering a train the trainer program, organised by the Pedagogical guidance organisation and/or University College.

38. That is the educational provider for the Chameleon

39. Urban et al., 2011



4.

**THE VALUE PILOT
IN ANTWERP**

4. THE VALUE PILOT IN ANTWERP

4.1 PRESENTING THE PILOT SCHOOL IN ANTWERP: MARIA BOODSCHAP



ID of the school	<i>Maria Boodschap (Annunciation Catholic School)</i>
City	Antwerp, in the social residential area 'De Luchtbal'
Country	Belgium
Number of pupils	315 in the whole school (2.5-12 years old), 135 pupils in preschool (2.5-6 years old) divided in 6 mixed age groups (2*3)

4.1.1 Working in a social residential and underprivileged area of Antwerp

The Maria Boodschap school is situated in a social residential area called 'de Luchtbal'. It is a large-scale social residential neighbourhood in the northern part of Antwerp. More than 40 different nationalities live in the area, but there are little facilities and shops.

The diverse neighbourhood is also reflected in the student population. The school principal characterizes the neighbourhood as low SES, with high cultural diversity. Approximately 90% of the children do not speak the dominant language Dutch at home, and the number of children who have a mother not born in Belgium is approximately 70%. The children mainly have Maghreb and African (Congo and Cameroon) migration backgrounds. The percentage of children with special needs at the preschool is 10%.

4.1.2 Pedagogical vision of the school

The Maria Boodschap school wants to stimulate learning and play of children in a holistic way in which the head, heart and hands of children are addressed. Every child should be approached in its uniqueness and has the right to experience wellbeing and belonging in the school community. The new 'Eagerness to live and learn' curriculum of the educational network of catholic schools in Flanders (ZILL, Zin in leren en leven), helps the staff to see, recognize and respect children's differences and learn children to cope with differences.

As the neighbourhood of the pilot school is very diverse, the school team considers the school as a harmonious mini society that can serve as an example of coexistence in a broader society where respect and tolerance are central values. The school wants to be an open school to the

parents, whom they consider as important co-educators.

Because many children have low SES and do not speak the dominant language at home, the school receives extra resources to enable a policy that increases the equal opportunities of children. Due to this context, the school principal and care coordinator emphasise the importance of care in the school. They search for possibilities in the school e.g., mixed age groups, allow parents to come to the classroom (instead of waiting outside the school door until the school bell rings and their child leaves school), set up a room where children can sleep, ...

The care coordinator stated: *“The school uses these extra resources⁴⁰ as efficiently and effectively as possible. The extra SES-teachers support children and teachers, working in the class. The SES-teacher and core practitioners can swap roles. Every trimester, meetings are held with all SES-teachers regarding the goals, actions and focuses at the school level. SES-teaching can also be organised across classes (e.g. groups for play, physical skills, language, reading or math drawn from different classes and age groups). The use of allocated SES-resources is flexible: where it is needed, it is used.”*

4.1.3 A dynamic and engaged team

The school Maria Boodschap has a preschool and a primary school. In total, the preschool staff consist of 12 members: 1 school principal (who is also the school principal of the primary school), 1 care coordinator, 6 preschool teachers, 3 extra SES-teachers and one assisting practitioner with a childcare degree. According to Flemish regulations the assisting practitioner works for

9 hours in the school, depending on the number of the children in the school. The assisting practitioner has the title of ‘childcare worker’ (‘kinderverzorger’) in preschool, a position created by the Flemish government, holding an upper secondary degree in childcare.

Both preschool teachers and the assisting practitioner have a **job description**, developed by the catholic educational network in Antwerp (CKSA). The job description of preschool teachers addresses the importance of teaching or ‘providing lessons’ to children. Besides these teaching duties, that are defined as purely pedagogical tasks, preschool teachers also need to strengthen the social skills of children and take up caring tasks to ensure the general physical and psychological well-being of children. The latter is also the core task of the assisting practitioner, combined with increasing the self-reliance of children, by working on positive self-image. Whereas both job descriptions stress the importance of collaboration, the job description of the assisting practitioner is rather specific on who and how to collaborate. The job description of the preschool teachers is rather vague about this, not specifying the nature of collaboration with the assisting practitioners. Both job descriptions underline that core and assisting practitioners are responsible for their own professional development by for example attending conferences, workshops, interventions, trainings, read professional literature, etc... CPD is also strongly stimulated by the school principal, and the school is involved in several innovative projects, which can lead to a ‘professional learning organisation’. This innovative culture is stimulated by the school principal, but shared by and set up in a participative manner by the school team. For example, the assisting practitioner in this school is also following

40. With these extra resources from the Flemish government the school can opt to appoint a SES-teacher

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a qualifying trajectory to become a preschool teacher.

In contrast to a dominant way of working (i.e., a teacher working in his/her private classroom practice), this school is characterised by a team culture in which staff members support each other and reflect together on what they can do. For example, the school principal arranged child-free hours for 6 meetings for the VALUE project.

The school also has a culture of participating in innovative projects on diversity and welfare. So, the whole team perceived this VALUE project as a way to enhance their practice. They know the importance of care and at the start of the VALUE learning path they believed that they already do a lot from an educare perspective. They were eager to learn more and to be inspired. They hoped to become a good inspiring practice for other schools that deal with the same level of diversity and also have to combat social inequalities. Although there are some extra resources, the school principal states that the school still has too limited resources and deals with a lack of teaching staff (for example when staff members are ill).

Next to these professionals, five volunteers are responsible for the children during lunch break and before and after school. These volunteers receive a small fee and previously had children in the school. They all live in the local neighbourhood and have Maghreb backgrounds. In the beginning of the VALUE project, the volunteers were included in some of the VALUE meetings. Although there is a lot of mutual respect be-

tween the professionals and the volunteers, it was decided by the VALUE team not to include them further in this project on collaborative learning for professional staff.⁴¹ Therefore, in this VALUE pilot it was decided to make the professional staff more aware of the importance of educare throughout the whole day of a child.

4.2 FACILITATORS' VIEWS ON THE VALUE LEARNING PATH

The achievements of the VALUE project in Antwerp can mainly be situated on the level of recognition and insight, beliefs and values. The project was able to realise a shared vision, as well as an action framework for VALUE as a strong foundation for change in practice. Moreover, the VALUE project was seen as an opportunity to adapt the new 'Eagerness to live and learn' curriculum of the educational network of catholic schools in Flanders (ZILL, Zin in leren en leven) to the needs of the youngest children in the school. Due to the VALUE learning path the school principal and the school team feel committed to focus more on care for the youngest children and to support each other as a team.

4.2.1 Content of the VALUE learning path

PHASE 1 OF THE VALUE LEARNING PATH: THE PREPARATION PHASE

The VALUE project started with a **kick-off day**. All the staff members and the two VALUE facilitators met during a visit to an inspiring practice in the field of "educare" (i.e., Hippo's Hof Gent). During this kick off, during observations and

41. It was decided not to involve the volunteers in the VALUE meetings. There is a risk that the volunteers need to comply with professional expectations, but without getting paid and having the support they would need. There is risk of deprofessionalisation of the ECEC workforce. The problem remains, however, that these volunteers in many Flemish schools have to do care tasks in moments where there is no school responsibility. They have no degree, are not paid well and have to deal with groups of sometimes 80 children by themselves during lunch breaks. This is a structural problem that will be addressed in the policy recommendations.

meetings at the school, the strengths, needs and aspirations were detected, and goals were set. Also the VALUE facilitators worked on a relationship of trust.

In addition to the kick-off day, the VALUE facilitators were **present** at the school and in the neighbourhood. Due to this, they got to know all professionals and their working conditions, and the living conditions of the families in the neighbourhood. There were observations and meetings to get to know the way of working, beliefs, strengths, thresholds and learning questions in the school. Together with the kick-off day, this ensured that everyone involved could get used to each other and a relationship of trust emerged.

Crucial in this first phase of the learning circle was the **respectful attitude** of the VALUE facilitators. From the start, attention was paid to the efforts already made and the achievements of the professionals and to their opinion. The VALUE facilitators showed empathy in the working context of the professionals. The combination of the different backgrounds of the VALUE facilitators (preschool education 3-6 years old and childcare 0-3 years old) was a strength, on the one hand for recognisability and on the other hand to be able to take a different perspective.

PHASE 2 OF THE VALUE LEARNING PATH

The actual VALUE learning path consisted of **six VALUE meetings** (every six weeks of approx. 2h30) to learn from and with each other. The VALUE meetings were tailored to the questions of the staff of the school.

New insights and opportunities were offered in this second phase of the learning circle. The professionals were challenged to take different perspectives and reflect. Here, again, the combi-

nation of the different backgrounds of the VALUE facilitators was valuable. At first sight both VALUE facilitators took a certain perspective (education versus care). However, in reality they both linked care and education, which simplified the process.

PHASE 3 AND 4 OF THE VALUE LEARNING PATH

In the third and fourth phases of the learning circle, the professionals set respectively their own goals and choices for change, offered support to make changes, and developed positive learning experiences. New skills were worked on here. In order to achieve sustainable change in practice, the prior phase focussing on beliefs, proved to be crucial.

The following major themes were discussed during the VALUE learning meetings:

- ▶ What is care, what is learning, what is play? What does care mean for yourself, for children, for parents? Do we focus on care at school? Who is involved in the care at school? Who does what? Which type and moments of care are important, from the perspective of children throughout a school day?
- ▶ Expecting more self-reliance from children, is that care? Difference between self-reliance as an educational goal (autonomy) and as a mean to class management?
- ▶ Frustrations about the daily care tasks of the preschool teacher. Why are day-to-day care needs perceived as limiting the educational practice? How do we look at the task and responsibility of the teacher, the childcare worker, the parents? "School-ready children or child-ready schools?" Who takes on which task? Why?

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- ▶ What is educare? What can help you to work in your concrete day to day practice from the idea that care is learning and that learning is care?
- ▶ Differences in the approach to childcare (0-3 years old) and preschools (2,5-6 years old) and the difference for children and their parents. What can we learn from each other?

4.2.2 Process of the VALUE learning path

The VALUE project was first initiated by the school principal, but gradually developed by co-creation and self-management of the professionals.

The assisting practitioner with childcare profile ('kinderverzorgster'), did unfortunately not always participate in the VALUE meetings. She works only nine hours in the preschool for three different classes and also follows a qualifying trajectory to become a preschool teacher. The unforeseen absence of the school principal for a long period (due to illness) and the absence of the assisting childcare worker had limitations for the VALUE learning path. Respectively, in terms of decisions to be made at school level and in terms of encompassing a childcare perspective in the group reflections.

During the **kick-off day**, the importance of a warm transition and care for the youngest children was framed within the context of the split system of care and education in Belgium and the existence of other systems. Opportunities to work within this split system to care for the youngest children at school were made concrete through inspiring practices during a study visit. Professionals received inspiring ideas in the field of classroom and school design (e.g., placing a diaper table in the classroom). They recognized

that care for the youngest children is important. Wellbeing and involvement were recognized as an important basic for learning. Care for the wellbeing and involvement of the professionals was also mentioned as an important condition. Care for this at your own school is experienced as positive. However, the care at the national policy level is seen as a shortcoming. The responsibility of parents to make children self-reliant in order to function well at school turned out to be a tricky issue. Remarkably, it seems that the staff wants to take a responsibility and role in the 'care' of the children. In the beginning they limited this care to e.g., changing diapers, potty moments, In the beginning, they considered care as a 'necessary evil'. Before the VALUE learning path, all staff members pointed to the responsibility of the education policy and the need of sufficient adult child ratio. In addition, the team was strongly convinced that parents were responsible for taking care of their child and at the same time bear a responsibility to the school (such as potty training). Hence, a lot of attention and time was spent on the perceptions concerning these care outsourcing beliefs, and discussing the educare approach.

During the **school's observations and meetings of the VALUE facilitators**, the school and every individual professional appeared to take a lot of care. However, in addition to the deployment, there also appeared to be difficulties, but also opportunities. During the first VALUE meetings the team reflected on the design of the classrooms, and the playground, and the interactions in the classroom and on the playground, with children and with parents. The strengths were highlighted, such as the presence of a sleeping class, toilets close to the classroom, the homely atmosphere, and sensitive interactions in the classroom. Focus on wellbeing and involvement, an eye for emotional experience, were seen as the strengths of the teachers who work

with the youngest children. But, the disruption between the class and the playground was striking. For example, there is no link between what happens in the classroom and what happens on the playground (e.g., during the observations the theme in the classroom was farm animals, but this was not extended to the playground). Another example is the corridor with room for coats, bags, gymnastic slippers, water bottles. Every child is supposed to find their own material with the help of a symbol. It was striking that in the corridor there are lists on every classroom window which indicate what each child can do. This opened a discussion about self-reliance, which was mentioned during the first VALUE meeting. There was also a critical reflection on the playground: the needs of the children, the responsibilities of children, teachers, volunteers, parents.

In the second VALUE meeting, further consideration was given to the role of all staff members and how better collaboration and communication can be made. After this, logistic actions were taken, e.g. placing diaper tables in the classroom, including ideas about the layout of the playground in the new building plans. At class and school level professionals wanted to facilitate 'care learning' more. And it became clear that a diaper table in the classroom soon was not the solution.

In the next phase of the VALUE learning circle, teachers indicate that they do not see potty training as their task, but as the task of the childcare worker. Hence, instead of just looking for practical solutions, the VALUE facilitators together with the professionals looked critically at tasks and **how care tasks can also be learning moments**. The VALUE facilitators brought in the pedagogical perspective of childcare workers and the theory about 'educare'. To be able to look differently and to reflect more deeply, it also

turned out to be important for teachers to place one interaction such as a nuisance moment in a whole class event. We took a closer look at the set-up of a class event and the basic principles, such as a 'fixed' preparation of practices.

By observing in the childcare centre (0-3 years old) and reflecting on it together in one of the VALUE meetings, the teachers as a team came to a different understanding and saw opportunities in their own practice to really integrate 'educare' as an approach. The observation in the childcare centre also revealed the discrepancy between the care of same aged children (2,5) in childcare and in preschool. The teachers were astonished by the difference.

Being able to situate 'care' in the third phase of the VALUE learning circle in the new 'Eagerness to live and learn' curriculum of the educational network of catholic schools in Flanders (*ZILL, Zin in leren en leven*) was also helpful in achieving further integration of educare in the actions (both individual and team transfer). Personal goals are now much more focused and precede the knowledge goals. The new curriculum is binding, as is the idea that the teachers and the childcare worker can learn a lot from each other to come to an educare practice.

The VALUE meetings showed how collaboration can have a strengthening effect. The VALUE meetings created a commitment to VALUE among all staff members. That attitude is binding in itself.

However, for the VALUE facilitators it was striking how after all these debates and reflections on the collaboration with parents, the professionals did not explicitly formulate objectives in this area during the third phase of the VALUE learning circle. The VALUE facilitators followed the pace of the professionals. Just before the VALUE

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learning path, some concrete changes had been made to the procedure to work more tailored and welcoming to parents. A homely atmosphere, being able to feel welcome, ... are seen as important for parents and children.

The final stage of the VALUE learning cycle was a **retrospective and a preview**. The professionals documented an interaction of themselves with a child as a good 'educare' practice and formulated agreements at individual and team level. The interactions can all be described as strong. One of the staff members illustrated how she evolved in her own class practice from a fixed prepared offer within a theme to an **'emergent' curriculum** starting from observing the experiences of children and using this as a starting point for the day to day practice in the classroom.

4.2.3 Results of the VALUE learning path

Every professional in the pilot school recognizes the emotional and physical caring needs of the youngest children and realises that care is an important part of their work. They recognise that care is a condition for learning, but also something that cannot be viewed separately from learning: **care is learning and learning is care**. Every professional became more aware of the importance of a **warm and welcoming school environment and making the care of children visible to parents**. Seeing the impact of a homely atmosphere and 'being there', not only for children, but also for the parents (something different than allowing parents to come to / in the classroom) required a **mind shift**. Connecting the idea that caring for and communicating with parents means also caring for children has replaced the idea that parents are solely responsible to make their child school ready.

Based on the VALUE learning path the school focuses on changes in the design/equipment,

materials and approach to make 'educare' a reality in the classroom.

Staff members experienced a lot of mutual strengths in this VALUE project. This, by getting to know each other's work better, exchanging ideas, sharing expertise, and reflecting on practices and thresholds. As a result, new ideas and possibilities arose, e.g., familiarisation moments, an emergent curriculum, etc. This strengthened professionals at an individual level. But it also strengthened the collective level: the professionals had the feeling that they are not alone, but really a team.

4.3 VIEWS OF THE SCHOOL TEAM ON THE VALUE LEARNING PATH

The views of the school team on the VALUE learning path are based on following data: data of (in)formal evaluation moments during the VALUE process and the final focus group with the team. Participants of the focus group were: one school principal, one care coordinator, two preschool teachers and one intern pedagogical coach. It should be noted that the assisting practitioner could not participate in this focus group. One VALUE facilitator from Karel De Grote University College and one VALUE researcher from VBJK facilitated the final focus group. All conversations were registered during the focus group.

As the two VALUE facilitators focussed at first on the idea of educare in which care and learning are interwoven. They started from the caring and learning needs of young children and their families. From that perspective they gradually incorporated the different roles and functions of core and assisting practitioners in the VALUE meetings. Therefore, first the changing mind-sets are described in relation to educare. Then professional identity and collaboration are discussed.

4.3.1 Educare approach

Throughout the final focus group it became clear that during the VALUE learning path the mind-set on education and care of the professional team drastically changed. In the beginning the staff considered care as subordinate and a necessary evil. But at the end of the VALUE learning path they believed it changed to a merged idea that learning and care are inseparable. This was expressed in various ways:

FROM ALLOWING TO EMBRACING CARE THROUGH OBJECTS

The discussions in the focus group on the realisation that care is important, were often framed from allowing certain objects (pacifiers, diapers, nursing pillow, ...) in the preschool.

«Changes are in small things. I used to think that pacifiers did not belong in the classroom. We could not give in to allowing pacifiers in the classroom. When a child comes to school, I will now give him/her time to have the pacifier. When a child is ready, he/she will give the pacifier away. A couple of months ago they were in childcare. Why does it need to change so abruptly for children?»

«Now we have a caring table with a nursing pillow in each group of the youngest children. This is a bit a way to give in to care. For a long time, we have fought the idea of having a nursing pillow to change diapers in the classroom. We assumed that children had to be potty trained and could not wear diapers anymore. I think we have giving in to this now. It still causes some resistance within us. But this is reality and that is how we have to do it. It really helps us to have the care table with nursing pillow. Outsiders often react 'if you start with having this, where will it end?' But we think: now this really helps us. Even if there is no care table, diapers will enter the school and then we make it more difficult for us to stay in that attitude.»

From this perspective pacifiers, diapers and the nursing pillow symbolize the problematic position of including or excluding children as embodied human being with bodily and caring needs in preschool education.⁴² In line with the concerns of the VALUE facilitators, the teachers even experience that these 'caring' objects are influencing their thoughts and professional practice. Having these objects in the classroom enables them to take the time they need to take care of a child.

42. Van Laere, Roets, & Vandenbroeck, 2019

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«By physically giving a place to the care table with nursing pillow, this causes in my head the idea that I should take time to have a caring moment with a child. Before we thought 'damned, somebody peed his pants while we are doing an activity'. While now we will take individual time to take care of the child and then we can focus on more teacher guided activities.»

Nevertheless, the above citations also demonstrate that they are on one hand convinced about the importance of educare. But, on the other hand, still struggle by having to accept this 'harsh' reality. This could be related to the fact that many preschool teachers in the Flemish community of Belgium have many children in the classroom. Therefore, it is not always easy to balance attention for the group and the individual attention for children.

SEEING CARE AS INHERENT OF PEDAGOGY OF YOUNG CHILDREN – A CHANGING CHILD IMAGE AND CURRICULUM

It is interesting to see how the staff members addressed the aha-erlebnis that their view on children changed in preschool.

«We started realising more and more: these children are actually very young. We were used to think that it is normal that children come to school and have to adapt to the school. That was just the way it was. But, since last year I really started thinking more in a different way. Also my own children are still so young. But in the professional school context I have never made this reflection on the young children in the classroom. So, we all realised that these children are actually very young and they really need our care and comfort in certain moments.»

This may be partially clarified by the fact that preschool education is mainly understood as a 'prep school' in which the significance of preschool education lies in later stages of life.⁴³ This phenomenon has been labelled as the 'schoolification' of preschool education.⁴⁴ Children are seen as students and - as a side effect - the bodily care, emotions, and relationality is less addressed.⁴⁵

Other criticisms on schoolification deals with the more technical conceptualisation of professionalism and the focus on prescribed learning goals and curricula.⁴⁶ Conversely, the participants in

43. Ang, 2014; Vandenbroeck, Coussee, & Bradt, 2010

44. Moss, 2013; OECD, 2006

45. Garnier, 2011; Löfdahl & Folke-Fichtelius, 2015

46. Oberhuemer, 2005

the focus group addressed how the new curriculum 'Eagerness to live and learn' of the Catholic educational network (ZILL), in combination with the VALUE meetings helped them to challenge top down schoolification pressure and implement a changing resilient child image from bottom up. Throughout the VALUE learning path, this was considered one of the key milestones.

The new ZILL curriculum, together with the VALUE project, gave the staff the opportunity to build a pedagogy that starts from the actual strengths, abilities and needs in terms of caring and learning. Instead of focussing on 'what children cannot yet do' it changed to 'what children can and love to do'.

«In terms of curriculum, we really attribute more time and meaning to personal competences besides the cultural competences (transferring knowledge). The new ZILL curriculum values the personal and culture bound competences in an equal way. Before we took it for granted that children need to feel well. We automatically assumed we were working on it. But actually now we know this is not the case if you don't devote sufficient time to this. The cultural bound competences in the sense of transferring knowledge had more priority.»

«We used to think related to age, what was not going well yet. We thought: they need to be able to do this. But what were the steps before, we didn't know and were not aware of this. Based on steps before we find a better ground to stimulate the development of the child.»

Based on the focus groups, it seems that they are evolving from a top-down preparatory curriculum to an 'emerging curriculum', taking time to value and start with which experiences children bring themselves to the classroom.⁴⁷ They decided to let go the top down daily planning, and instead enrich spontaneous learning.

«It used to be more important that children knew the different colours, instead of feeling good in the class.»

47. De Greve, et al., 2018; Van de Weghe, et al., 2017; Jones, Evans, & Rencken, 2001

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«We used to have a daily planning – from 8 until 12. While now we work more with a week planning. We don't connect certain activities anymore to certain days except cycling. We see what the day brings and if children are open for these things. And also when we are ready and open to do that specific activity... There is always enough happening in a class group that you can start from without me always having the feeling I have to get the most out of it by doing planned, organised activities.»

TRANSFORMING CARING ACTIVITIES FROM A TECHNICAL TO AN EDUCATIONAL MATTER

When the VALUE-participants referred to care, they referred to: 1) caring activities (toileting, eating, sleeping, ...), and 2) creating a caring atmosphere by adopting a caring attitude as a teacher. The participants addressed that they took more time to really focus on care, one on one interaction with children and making these moments richer and more 'educational'.

«When somebody pees his pants, I will take time to put the clean clothes on the ground and ask the child: 'So, what do we need now?' Trousers, clean underpants?»

«Respondent A: Before we also had these skills to combine caring and learning, but we feel just, let's say more relaxed (laughter). Respondent B: Yes, and spontaneous learning. We teach children already a lot of vocabulary by taking time in care: naked belly... . It's fantastic that children can learn and be enriched with these words. That we can really do this in such a caring moment.»

«Working on wellbeing is more than just feeling good. You also work on social skills, how children can make clear that they need something, We devote time to this and we try to give this words and language... even when children are not able to say it clear... . The children learn a lot of vocabulary in this way: naked belly, feet; This is unbelievable rich and educational for children. It concerns also a feeling of safety and trust. So, the learning effect will become stronger anyhow.»

The staff members proudly address that the teachers of the next class group are very positive of the language skills of the children since the new educare approach. It feels like children are able to learn more by taking time to focus on small things in a thorough way.

«We hear more and more from the teachers from the next class group: they already are able to do so much! It was the first time we got positive feedback: they know for example their body parts already. Before we only heard how much they were not able to do, like: they don't know colours etc. What caused even more stress for us. So, by taking time with children this improved.»

EDUCARE AS BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS – A NATURAL PROCESS LIKE IN THE HOME ENVIRONMENT

During the focus groups, the VALUE participants underlined several times the fact that they are building a better relationship with children which has positive effects on the child, but also on the teachers.

«We used to think: this child doesn't feel at ease yet. But we didn't really look for an explanation: What could be the cause? When does this happen? What can we do to help this child? Now we make more time for this. So, we will take a child easier with us by the hand. You play with the child; you see more interesting things in his/her play by interacting with the child. So, we can really build on constructing a relationship with the child. And then we notice how a child automatically feels much better.»

«When we didn't have the caring facility to change diapers, things had to move on quickly. We would take the clothes of the child. The quicker, the better. We did not really have real contact with the child in a caring moment of changing diapers. While now, I do it more like I do this at home with my own children. Now we really feel that we have contact with the child, we interact with the child.» Principal: "Is hugging too much?" Teacher: "No, we also hug or give a high five after changing the diaper. Yeah, we really talk with the child.»

(teacher)

The VALUE participants associated the new way of establishing relations and being more consciously caring for children with their own home environment and position as a parent. They explained that care and learning and their interrelatedness seems to be a natural, spontaneous phenomenon in the home environment of the family. They reflected on how they could have these dynamics more in the preschool setting. This is also in line with the views of care ethicist who wondered if it is possible to build schools that are more based upon the model of the family, in which care and learning is spontaneously addressed.⁴⁸ In institutional life, this needs to be more directed and well thought out, as the teachers experienced.

48. Noddings, 2002

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«It also causes a different start of the day. You can think: I enter the classroom and have to do this and this from my programme. I will learn the children this and this input. Or you enter the classroom and you live as a big family in the class. Of course, in the back of your mind, you have some things you want children to learn. But you evaluate more whether this is the good moment. Sometimes it is not the right moment and we need to dare to let go.»

WORKING TOWARDS CO-EDUCARE: PARENTS AS PARTNERS

The VALUE participants became more aware of the position of the parents as well. They were more able to put themselves in the shoes of the parents. From a parent perspective the pedagogical approach, or way of working, or rules of the school are not always clear.

«For us our practice is taken for granted and clear, but not for the parents.»

Although it seems that much more could be done, the first steps of awareness started during the VALUE learning path, showing that it is up to the school team to lower the thresholds for parents. This can be done by showing classroom practice and enable dialogue with parents.

«We used to organize information moments and familiarisation moments. We have changed this many times (laughter). At a certain moment I was talking to X (VALUE facilitator). She came to observe our practice and asked me the question whether there is an opportunity for parents to formulate their expectations, to give their first impressions and to ask questions. I thought there was some opportunity... Now we organise the information moment in the classroom of their child with a limited numbers of parents. So, now, parents can see the classroom of their child and this will automatically lead to more questions they can ask us.»

4.3.2 Professional identity

For the professionals, professional identity and their role in enabling educare was brought more to the foreground throughout VALUE. Before the VALUE learning path, the teachers believed that care in preschool education did not fundamentally belong to their professional repertoire. But during the VALUE trajectory this changed.

«There used to be a lot of frustration coming from the preschool teachers in terms of: 'I'm a teacher and I have the feeling that I'm only caring.' But now we say: 'it is ok to see the caring aspect as educational.'»

«Before we experienced more stress of the expectations that we have to do all kinds of activities with children, like learning how to count. In our head, we had to do two things at the same time: changing diapers and doing a teacher guided activity. While now, we organise ourselves in a different way. Now we ensure that one of us can leave the collective group, in order to have an individual care moment with a child. We used to put a lot of pressure on ourselves to do as many activities as possible. Nobody was happy with that.»

Important to note is that the assisting practitioner with a childcare profile, did not participate in the final focus group. Also, in the VALUE process she was not always present. Nevertheless, due to the changing mind-set in educare, the teachers also changed their perspective on the role of the assisting practitioner.

«The childcare worker in our school is also able to do pedagogical tasks. In the new plans of the government, in what way will you continue the idea that this is the teacher for learning moments and this is the childcare worker for cleaning piss and poop of children?»

«Now when a child peed his pants, I find it easier to see this also as my job and to help the other teachers.»

It became clear that educare should be a shared responsibility of both teaching and assisting staff. This awareness was also demonstrated when the school principal criticised the instrumental approach of hours of childcare and childcare workers that have been addressed in the new governmental plan. For the school principal, this gives the message to the educational and public audience that care is something that can be outsourced and is separate from education, which is not the case.

«A childcare worker gets deployed for the care aspect. We have three classes for a few hours of childcare assistance. This is absurd. I wonder if the deployment of more childcare workers according the plans of the Flemish government means a kind of outsourcing of care. But can the two [education and care] be considered as inseparable?»

4.3.3 Collaboration

Due to the VALUE learning path, the teachers and school principal are internally motivated and convinced to involve the childcare worker more in the team meetings.

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«The idea of co-teaching and team-teaching as a leading concept in primary school: as a school principal you facilitate the communication between the staff members. So, as in a happy and healthy marriage, people keep on talking about the things that matter and do not assume everything just goes well. Keep talking about the way of collaborating. Besides the content level, this relational is important. Also, the childcare worker is an equal partner in the school and not the subordinate of the teacher.»

«We could take time to reflect, to share thoughts and could really listen to each other during the VALUE sessions. It seems to me that that is one of the achievements of the VALUE learning path as well.»

The participants of the focus groups also thought that their innovative work in the early years could be inspirational for the primary school staff. In order to challenge top down schoolification pressure, solely preparing children for what comes next, taking the holistic child development of children is essential, also at an older age.

«Sometimes I hear the teacher of the 6th grade saying: 'They have to go to secondary education, so they have to be able to do this and know that.' Actually, this is not our responsibility. It is also up to the secondary schools to consider who are the children that start school. What is their beginning situation? It is pointless to 'fill a child' with things that don't pervade, that do not become a part of themselves. It is more meaningful to learn: who are you? what can you do? what do you want to invest in? which skills do you need in order to do these things?... I would really like to bring the renewed early years class practice and vision to the foreground and put it as an example. Dare to let go and achieve a higher return. But this requires courage and power!»

(school principal)

4.4 CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

By taking time for educare of young children, the VALUE team in the pilot school in Antwerp has noticed how the general atmosphere is more at ease. Not only for the children, but also the professionals underline that they feel more at ease. By taking into account better the caring needs (e.g., including a physical care table to change diapers), they noticed how parents are more reassured and relieved that the school takes time for this. Also, all staff members were convinced of the educare approach as the teachers of the older pupils stated that the children acquired

better vocabulary, and felt good and more confident to learn.

Unfortunately, the assisting practitioner could not participate so much in the VALUE learning path, nor in the final focus group. Nevertheless, in the focus group it became clear that from a changed pedagogical vision on educare the importance of involving the assisting staff was underlined by the school principal and the core teachers. It seems that they needed this mind shift towards educare in order to re-evaluate from their own inner motivation the position and mandate of the assisting staff member.

Next, the VALUE participants had the ownership and engagement in the development of their new views and practices. And, educare became an important view for them.

In evaluating the VALUE pilot process, the participants presented a double view. On one hand, it became clear how VALUE and the work of the two VALUE facilitators influenced their thinking and changes in their mind-set. On the other hand, the VALUE participants argued that the process was not enough focussed on what they had to do in daily practice. As this is only a one year pilot, it is interesting to see how they, on the one hand, acknowledge the influence of VALUE path, but, on the other hand, attributed their changed mind-set also to other things. This is 'normal' in a good pedagogical guidance process, were participants themselves present their own internally created new pedagogical beliefs. Often they will not see or recognise the pedagogical coach in this effort. This should be considered a positive thing in their change process.

«At first we found it a bit difficult to come together. Often we had the feeling that we did not have a lot of concrete ideas to apply in our practice. We like to do things. Afterwards, we realised, however, that our mind-set did change by the thinking exercises we did in the VALUE learning path. It is important to take the time to hear how your colleagues see the pedagogy of young children. Together you construct views and therefore new practices.»

4.4.1 Crucial conditions

- ▶ The VALUE facilitators need to speak the language of and / or create recognisability for all professionals. It was an added value that the VALUE facilitators had different backgrounds (childcare & preschool education) and, hence, could make connection with the own child curriculum.
- ▶ Install a learning circle based on building trust between all involved professionals.
- ▶ Knowledge of, and respect for the context and personal experience and commitment, personal strengths of all involved professionals.
- ▶ Participatory approach (e.g., by having all stakeholders involved to formulate their own choices and objectives, constantly give their own voice).
- ▶ Tailor-made approach. This includes, next to the participatory approach, a continu-

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ous coordination with the school leaders between all meetings, to refine and adjust the objectives and approach of the VALUE meetings.

- ▶ Have confrontational eye-opening experiences and observations in other services (such as inspiring childcare services or school practices).
- ▶ Document the changes and reflect on these changes from various viewpoints (i.e., based on reflections on each VALUE meeting, based on the focus groups, based on reflections of the VALUE facilitators during the intervision sessions with the other VALUE pilot and VBJK, ...).
- ▶ The VALUE facilitators need to have conceptual knowledge on change-processes and facilitating skills.
- ▶ Care and self-care for the wellbeing and involvement of all staff.
- ▶ Importance of developing a shared vision and knowing how to translate this in actions and practice, in order to change the mind-set of the participants and come to AHA-erlebnis.
- ▶ Importance of a child curriculum that values both learning and care. This is the case in the new 'Eagerness to live and learn' curriculum (ZILL) of the catholic educational network. This new ZILL and the VALUE project were perfectly related to each other.
- ▶ Necessity of creating child free hours. During these child free hours all staff members could plan, prepare, reflect, evaluate, ... with other colleagues. The school principal created this for the VALUE project by having more hours of physical education by the gym teacher for the children. However, this should be a structural option and should be inherently part of the school organization.
- ▶ Having more helping hands in the class and smaller class groups. This ensures that all professionals can deepen educare in a way that is tailor made for all children. These extra helping hands should not lead to a strict task division of care vs education. Instead, the extra hands can lower the adult child ratio and work towards a holistic educare approach.

4.4.2 Future steps in the school

The VALUE participants addressed following aspects to further work on:

- ▶ Work on involving parents more in what is happening in the classroom. Hence, they are reassured on the pedagogical approach of care and learning.
- ▶ Involve the assisting practitioner more in the staff meetings, and stimulate inter-professional collaboration.
- ▶ Work more on transition to the first class in preschool and the second class in pre-school.
- ▶ Inform the professionals of the class groups of the older children on the educare approach and taking time to address children's learning and caring needs
- ▶ Wishes towards local and the Flemish policy: more professionals in the preschool and smaller class groups. Assisting practitioners need more hours in the preschool in line with the new governmental agreement.



5.

THE VALUE STAKEHOLDERS GROUP

5. THE VALUE STAKEHOLDERS GROUP

A VALUE stakeholders group for the Flemish Community of Belgium was established in order to:

- ▶ raise the awareness of the difficult and invisible position in which assisting practitioners often find themselves in Flemish preschool education;
- ▶ provide advice on the content of the overall VALUE project;
- ▶ follow- up and give advice on the design, process and results of the VALUE pilots;
- ▶ discuss the structural bottlenecks that hinder interprofessional learning and collaborative practice of core and assisting staff in preschool education;
- ▶ co-create policy recommendations;
- ▶ create support for and disseminate the VALUE project results and policy recommendations.
- ▶ The VALUE stakeholders group consisted of representatives of core partners:
 - ▶ the two departments: the Department of Education and the Department of Welfare (agency 'Opgroeien' (Growing Up), the former Child & Family);
 - ▶ the different educational networks (catholic education, education of the Flemish Community, and municipal education);
 - ▶ the University Colleges that offer both a bachelor in preschool education and a bachelor in pedagogy of young children;
 - ▶ the city of Antwerp, Ghent and Brussels which have a clear vision and mission on developing an educare approach;
 - ▶ professionals from the pilot schools;
 - ▶ the project officers of VBJK.

During the VALUE project period (2018-2020), the VALUE stakeholders group met 3 times in person. Due to the COVID19 health crisis, the final meeting was an online consultation meeting.

During the VALUE stakeholders meetings attention has been paid, firstly, to discussing the position of assisting practitioners from different angles (regulative framework, pedagogical viewpoint, professional viewpoint, gender viewpoint, ...). The stakeholders helped the VALUE project officers to collect 'missing' data on the assisting practitioners. Secondly, the design, process and results of the VALUE pilots have been followed up and discussed with the stakeholders. The main questions here were: What is at the heart of the autonomous character of the schools and how can they use this better to ensure interprofessional collaboration between core and assisting staff in order to strengthen the professional identity and educare approach? Where do they see structural bottlenecks that an individual school cannot transcend? Thirdly, inspiring practices and policies from the other VALUE countries have been discussed with the stakeholders. Based on these different types of sources of information, the VALUE stakeholders group co-constructed policy recommendations for the Flemish Community of Belgium.



6.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMENDATIONS

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMENDATIONS

6.1 OVERALL CONCLUSIONS ON THE BELGIAN (FLEMISH) VALUE PILOT

Two VALUE learning paths have been set up in Belgium (Flanders): one pilot in the Chameleon in Anderlecht (Brussels) and one pilot in Maria Boodschap in Antwerp. Both schools are characterised by a high diversity in children and family population. The aim of the VALUE learning paths in both schools was to improve the educare approach and strengthening the professional identity by enabling a good collaboration between core and assisting practitioners. Both learning paths included several VALUE meetings over the period of one school year. Each VALUE learning path was facilitated by two facilitators from the Erasmus Brussels University of Applied Sciences and Arts respectively the Karel De Grote University College in Antwerp, both from two different departments (i.e., childcare 0-3, and preschool education 2.5-6). Although each pilot school had a different way of working and a tailor made process, they both showed that it is imperative that a VALUE CPD path is simultaneously focussed on the three VALUE core concepts:

- 1) educare approach;
- 2) professional identity;
- 3) collaboration.

The collaborative learning trajectories in the Flemish VALUE pilot focussed on creating a new understanding of educare in relation to social inclusion and working on equal professional partnerships in the team while not losing ones' own professional identity.

The focus groups revealed that the VALUE facilitators succeeded to create a meaningful VALUE learning path. These VALUE learning paths made all staff members aware of the importance of

interprofessional collaboration to discuss the artificial divide between care and learning of young children, and the professional role and professional identity of both core and assisting professionals in order to work from this educare approach. Although this is an important AHA-erlebnis, more time is needed to translate these important mind-shifts into actions that actually make long lasting differences for children, families and staff members in daily practice. The VALUE pilot lasted only one school year. This limited time does not by definition guarantee that essential changes in mind-set and actions (on the level of children, parents and team) are already part of the DNA of the schools. So, in order to have sustainable changes the following preconditions remain crucial: engagement of all involved participants, strong leadership, ownership, having competent facilitators, a safe context, time for planning and reflection, and a tailor-made learning path.

6.2 SIX ANCHOR POINTS FOR ECEC POLICIES BASED ON THE VALUE PILOTS

Based on two Flemish VALUE pilot trajectories and discussions with the stakeholders group, we have developed overall recommendations for regional Flemish policy, local policy and school policies. We decided in the stakeholders group that the governmental declaration of the new Flemish government and the policy plan of the new Minister of Education since 2019, served as a good starting point for the recommendations. In both the governmental declaration and the Ministers' plan, the deployment of more childcare workers in preschool education is seen as an important investment in order to unburden teachers and ensure that they can focus on learning. The childcare workers are specifically meant to solve the perceived problem of children not being potty trained at the age of 2,5, the age they start

preschool education.⁴⁹ Although it also could be risky, the stakeholders group agreed that this is an important step stone and by elaborating this ambition more in depth, we aim to broaden the perspective and prevent that childcare workers are purely instrumentalised in a discourse in which care is subordinate and even a burden to real learning. Another point that the Flemish government considers very important is ensuring that people can have ‘Workable Work’ (*werkbaar werk*). This means that employees should consider work as something motivating, as something that offers enough learning changes, something that doesn’t evoke stress and that ensures a good work-private balance.⁵⁰ Merging these policy ambitions and actions, brings us to the following core question:

How can a smart deployment of childcare workers in preschool education lead to:

- 1) effective quality improvement for children and families
- 2) Workable Work for all ECEC staff

We decided to name these recommendations anchor points (ankerpunten). As many people agree on the necessity of having more childcare workers in preschool education, we do not want to sail to quick but first we anchor and take time how

to achieve the above goal. Just as the strength of the anchor is only felt when we have to endure a storm, the current COVID19 health crisis shows that good cooperation between caring and educational professions is vital in the here and now, but also in the unpredictable future context of preschools. In total, we have developed 6 anchor points for ECEC policies on the regional (Flemish community of Belgium), local and school level. Taking into account that the French community of Belgium has a similar history in preschool education, these anchor points may also be of interest to them.

Create visibility for childcare assistants as important educators for preschool children

In Concreto

Revise and use the professional profile of a childcare worker in ‘out of school’ care also in the preschool setting itself. In doing so, change the name of *kinderverzorgster*⁵¹ into *kinderbegeleider*⁵² to explicit the pedagogical role of this professional group.

Childcare workers have an **indispensable role** to play **for young children and families in preschool education**. They support children in physical care (toilet training, eating, sleeping,) and hygiene. In their position they can support

49. <https://www.vlaanderen.be/publicaties/beleidsnota-2019-2024-onderwijs>, pg. 42: “Om meer handen in de klas te krijgen, verhoog ik zowel de werkmiddelen als de omkadering voor de basisscholen. Daardoor wordt het aantal leerlingen per leraar kleiner. Mensen en middelen zijn vooral bedoeld voor onze kinderen en scholen, eerder dan voor overkoepelende structuren. Dankzij meer ondersteuning kom ik tegemoet ik aan de toegenomen zorgnood in de klas. Ook voorzie ik extra kinderverzorg(st)ers in het kleuteronderwijs. Voor de directies in het basisonderwijs voorzie ik in extra administratieve, pedagogische en beleidsondersteuning en dit op basis van het aantal personeelsleden in de school.” / <https://www.vlaanderen.be/publicaties/regeerakkoord-van-de-vlaamse-regering-2019-2024>; pg. 13: “Het kleuteronderwijs zal evenveel werkmiddelen als het lager onderwijs krijgen. Bijkomende kinderverzorgers zorgen voor extra handen in de klas”

50. https://www.serv.be/sites/default/files/documenten/20181214_Akkoord_ActieplanWerkbaarWerk.pdf
https://www.serv.be/sites/default/files/documenten/StIA20200302_WBM2019_Onderwijs_RAP.pdf

51. Literal translation: ‘childcarer’, yet care (*verzorging*) here in Dutch has a technical, executive function.

52. Literal translation: ‘child educator’/‘child companion’

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children also in emotional care and give them individual attention. Because teachers, according to the childcare workers, focus more on the learning processes in group, they try to ensure that children can feel safe and comfortable at school. Especially when children are not yet familiar with life in a group or do not yet sufficiently understand the school language, they give them extra 1 on 1 care and attention. Many childcare workers experience that children are unable to learn if they are not feeling well.⁵³ Their role and job is much more than supporting the toilet training of children. They are not instruments to “relieve” school teams, but they are equally professional educators in a school community with their own dreams, ambitions and commitment to young children and their families.

The VALUE pilot schools show that it is very important to strengthen the **professional identity** of childcare workers in preschool education. Often they have no say in a school practice and policy, and as a result they themselves have doubts about their own professional actions. It is also difficult to collaborate with teachers if people do not always feel seen and appreciated. By focusing on team learning and establishing a professional dialogue between the two professional groups, the participants indicated that they valued each other more, that they evolved from a friendly relationship to a professional relationship and that better words were found to support learning, and discuss the socialization process of children together. This made childcare workers feel considerably more competent and involved in the school team.

In order to make the profession more visible and to strengthen the professional identity of childcare workers, it is recommended to clarify the interpretation of this profession and to translate

this into a professional profile. Although there are some job profiles available in the various umbrella organizations, childcare workers lack a widely supported pedagogical **professional profile** that can be used in a preschool context to better value their role and thus better support their function in a staff and professionalization policy of a school or school umbrella. In line with the professional profiles of preschool teachers, there is an urgent need to provide more clarity at the Flemish level about the interpretation and expectations of the job of childcare worker. The professional profiles of the preschool teacher and childcare worker cannot be seen separately from each other because of the cooperation aspect in co-educating children. To avoid ‘reinventing the wheel’, the professional profile of a childcarer that works in out-of-school care could be extended to the preschool context. In practice, it is often the same people who are responsible for the children. An integrated profile has the advantage that the educational vision and pedagogical continuity for children and families can be better guaranteed.

A caring and educational preschool (EDUCARE) for children and families builds on a good cooperation between childcarers and preschool teachers.

In Concreto

Introduce a cooperation model in which both preschool teachers and child care workers have an important role to play. In that sense it concerns ensuring ‘educare’: learning, raising and caring for young children together

At both international and Flemish level, there is a growing consensus that care and learning should

53. Wyns, 2015; Van Laere & Wyns, 2017

be integrated for young children between 0 and 6 years old. From this perspective, care cannot exist without learning and vice versa. This means that care activities such as eating, drinking, going to the toilet are essentially pedagogical and educational, while supporting cognitive, social, motor and artistic learning processes also requires a caring attitude from the teachers and child care workers. The better this is integrated, the more parents dare to entrust their child to preschool on a regular basis. We experienced in one of the pilots that such a naturalistic approach that better encounters age-specific needs, also results in better language development of children. Both internationally and in Flanders (e.g. quality lever in the new preschool framework of the education inspectorate), we are talking more and more about the importance of EDUCARE for preschool children and their families. An addendum to the International Convention on the Rights of the Child also emphasizes that for young children between 0 and 6 years old, the right to development (Article 6), the right to good health (Article 24) and the right to learn (Articles 28 and 29) should be considered as a whole.

Good cooperation between preschool teachers and child care workers is indispensable to further shape this quality approach. How can teachers and child care workers better utilise each other's strengths and expertise to better integrate learning, care, education and socialisation of young children? This requires a **collaborative model that is based on EDUCARE**, in other words learning, raising and caring together for children. This means that teachers and child care workers have the space and time to prepare, implement and evaluate together. It is in the joint reflection on the action that the cross-fertilization of different strengths and expertise can take place. Without reflection, the actions will start from a rather traditional conception of learning and care, a

division that does not reflect the needs and rights of young children and their families.

Support a cooperation model between childcare workers and preschool teachers by having democratic leaders who can install sustainable professionalisation trajectories within the school

In Concreto

Invest in strong democratic leadership in the schools that creates and enables a framework for constructive cooperation between teachers and childcare workers. Leaders can ensure a good cooperation model between teachers and child carers by investing in professionalisation trajectories close to the workplace. In this context, joint reflection processes are developed and evaluated.

Child care workers do not always have an easy position in the classroom and within the school. They often support the preschool teacher from a subordinate role. There are certainly examples of positive collaboration, but it is mainly based on being able to interact with each other in a friendly manner instead of a professional collaboration in which there is room to research together what children and families need. Such professional cooperation does not come naturally and should be supported and facilitated by a school leader. Both VALUE pilot schools in their own way demonstrated how democratic and distributed leadership is an important feature of a good professional learning climate in a preschool. The pilots showed the importance of **good leadership**, in order to enable organisational and structural aspects (such as enabling child free hours to meet). But the leadership should also enable a mental and safe space in which all staff members have time

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to (re)search, reflect together, analyse, and act by trial and error. Staff members need to feel secure enough to be unsure of the outcomes of their thinking and actions. This requires leaders who understand that **time, process and experimentation should be valued** and supported instead of quick fixed approaches.

The VALUE pilot only lasted one year. However, in order to have sustainable changes in the mindsets of all professionals, leading to changes in the daily practices with children and families, follow up is needed. The experiences in both VALUE pilot schools revealed that having an **internal ‘pedagogical coach’** is indispensable in order to support a diverse team and support reflection and multiperspectivity. A member of the team that focuses on and is trained in the professional development, collaboration and team interactions would be an asset. A professional that engages in reflection can create a new dynamic. His/her knowledge about the holistic development of children, his/her focus on systemic thinking, his/her engagement to involve parents as partners, his/her validation of innovation and diversity,... makes an internal pedagogical coach a crucial asset to support the three VALUE core concepts. This can be done by any member of the school team (the school principal, the care coordinators, the core or assisting practitioners). However, they could be supported by the pedagogical guidance centres of the educational networks or the University colleges who train pedagogical coaches in ECEC⁵⁴ or who train future preschool teachers.

‘Workable Work’ (Werkbaar Werk) for teachers and childcare workers and Pedagogical Continuity for children goes hand in hand

In Concreto

Ensure a more sustainable and continuous deployment of child care workers instead of deploying them a few hours per week in multiple school locations. Reduce the number of children per adult and create a sound care infrastructure in the schools.

In addition to more clarity about the interpretation of the job of childcare worker in preschool, it is essential to **improve the working conditions** of child care workers. Flanders subsidises an hour package for child care workers. This hourly package is calculated per school on the basis of the number of regular toddlers on a fixed counting day and the number of establishments of the school. From 35 preschoolers, a school receives 8 hours of “childcare”, for each additional 55 preschoolers 1 hour is added. For a full-time child childcare worker, a school needs 1355 preschool children. The hourly package cannot be recalculated in the course of a school year. However, the individual hourly package of the deployment of child counselors is a structural bottleneck, both from a pedagogical point of view for children and families and a Workable Work principle. Almost every childcare worker indicates that **more hours and even full-time positions in schools are needed** to provide good continuous care and learning opportunities for children. At the same time, contact between child care workers and parents could improve significantly because parents have many physical and emotional care needs when their child enters preschool. Both the teacher and the childcare worker can enter into a dialogue with parents about this so that parents feel reassured to send their children to preschool. A child care worker could also participate more

54. In the Flemish community there are three University Colleges that offer the pedagogy of young children. Professionals with this qualification can play a role here.

in the team life in the school (e.g. having a coffee with colleagues during a break). Now they are often just 'fleeting visitors' to a school.

Compared to many other countries, Flanders is characterized by a high number of children per adult in preschool education. Giving concrete figures is difficult because the school has the autonomy how to divide the classes. On average we speak of 24 to 26 children per class in preschool education. However, some preschool classes from the very youngest go up to 30 children at the end of the school year. If we really want to make preschool a springboard to allow every child to develop his or her talents to the maximum and reduce the workload of staff, we must **decrease the large number of children per adult** and invest in **age-appropriate care infrastructure** in the preschool. Although there are already good examples, it is important with renovations or new building constructions that an care infrastructure can be provided close to or in the classroom of children, where a teacher and childcare worker have the literal space to be able to install care moments in a pedagogical and stress-free manner. Care infrastructure of childcare centres could serve as inspiration.

Embrace diverse school teams by making better use of the 'side-inflow' (*zij-instroom*)

In Concreto

Ensure that low- or non-qualified staff have access to alternative trainings trajectories that lead in the end lead to the qualification of child carers, preschool teachers, pedagogical coach of young children or social workers.

Some of the assisting practitioners in the VALUE project have no formal qualification to work with children. At the same time, they are facing low wages just above the poverty level. In November 2019 for example the 'assistant educators' in the Brussels pilot protested together with the trade union and other 'assistant educators' against the municipality in order to increase their salaries.⁵⁵ It is important to keep on thinking how staff members in this position can have access to qualifying trajectories. These **qualifying trajectories** can strengthen their expertise in working with children and families in diverse context, working in a collaborative way. But, also, they have to experience better **job mobility**, better working hours, and better salaries. There exist already inspiring possibilities, such as:

- ▶ the Baobab Project, which is a small-scale project, initiated by NGO Eva and supported by the Flemish Community Commission (VGC). In this project 8 motivated Brussels inhabitants are now working as assisting practitioners in the preschool class, while following a qualifying trajectory to become a preschool teacher (also in the Erasmus University College). For 4 years they will receive intense support in order to find a job as a preschool teacher in the city of Brussels.⁵⁶
- ▶ In order to counter the growing teacher shortage, the University Colleges have special programs for students who combine work and study for many years. Especially assisting practitioners in preschool education make use of the opportunity of getting an official qualification whilst continuing their job.

55. <https://www.bruzz.be/samenleving/anderlechtse-hulpopvoeders-staken-woensdag-2019-11-19>

56. <https://www.onderwijscentrumbrussel.be/diensten/studiedienst/nieuws/meer-brusselsaars-voor-de-klas-dankzij-de-baobab>

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However, more and other projects can be set up to stimulate qualifying trajectories for assisting practitioners. Especially as Belgium is facing a major lack of preschool teachers as well.

Consciously and professionally working with EDUCARE and cooperation starts in the pre-service training and continues in the in-service training

In Concreto

Put the educare approach and the cooperation model at the heart of the initial training of child carers, preschool teachers, pedagogical coaches, social workers and school directors. Organise in-service training by a joined collaboration between trainers who have expertise in preschool education and trainers who have expertise in childcare (within a split ECEC system)

This project further confirms the idea that educare should be inherently part of the initial training program of future preschool teachers and pedagogical coaches. At Erasmus Brussels University of Applied Sciences and Arts for example, the explicit choice is made to put the concept of educare at the heart of a joined project and course unit for future educational professionals. Pedagogical coaches as well as preschool teachers work together at a mutual meaningful vocabulary on working with young children and their families. They construct a joined vision and jargon that enables them to bring the two different fields of expertise together in a joined strive for smooth transitions and a complete comprehension of education, care and learning. They translate theoretical framework(s) into practice in a complex urban context. They compose a 'cahier of recommendations' that they submit to the participating schools and organisations. In doing so, the

Erasmus Brussels University of Applied Sciences and Arts aims to create a rapprochement of both sectors that resort under different governmental entities. In deploying students, both the sector of formal education and the sector of child care are engaged and encouraged to work together on a more permanent basis. In making students co-create across sectors the seeds for future collaboration are planted.

The novelty of this VALUE approach in the context in the Flemish community of Belgium, is that both VALUE pilot schools were supported in their reflection and action process by a tandem of two experienced facilitators. In both pilot schools each VALUE facilitator had a different background and expertise. They worked at the same University College, but one has a background in teaching future preschool teachers and the other has a background in teaching future pedagogical coaches in childcare. Merging their expertise was a successful strategy in challenging the historical engrained belief that learning and care of children are separate entities, and in strengthening the professional identity of core and assisting practitioners and in stimulating interprofessional collaboration. Also, for the VALUE facilitators it was fruitful to work in tandem in order to plan and share reflections. This way of working is promising for the whole ECEC sector in Belgium (Flanders). Moreover, it also opens a door to enable in-service training partnerships of a trainer working in preschool education with a trainer working in childcare.

The four VALUE facilitators also had regular 'supervisions' with two coaches of VBJK, centre for innovation in the early years. In these supervisions the VALUE facilitators were supported to reflect together on a meta-level on the VALUE core concepts: educare, professional identity and interprofessional collaboration. They could discuss specific issues with each other and the VBJK coaches. Hence, sufficient support for the VALUE facilitators is also key.

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