

VALUE ROADMAP

Pathways towards strengthening
collaboration in early childhood
education and care



PARTICIPATING INSTITUTIONS:

VBJK - Centre for Innovation in the Early Years (BE)
ERI - Educational Research Institute (SL)
DPU - Danish school of Education, Aarhus University
Aga Khan Foundation (PT)
ESE - IPSantarém (PT)
Erasmus University College (BE)
Karel de Grote University College (BE)

AUTHORS:

Sandra Van der Mespel, Mónica Brazinha, Hester Hulpia, Bente Jensen, Maria Marquard, Mateja Režek, Joana Sousa.

With the contribution of:

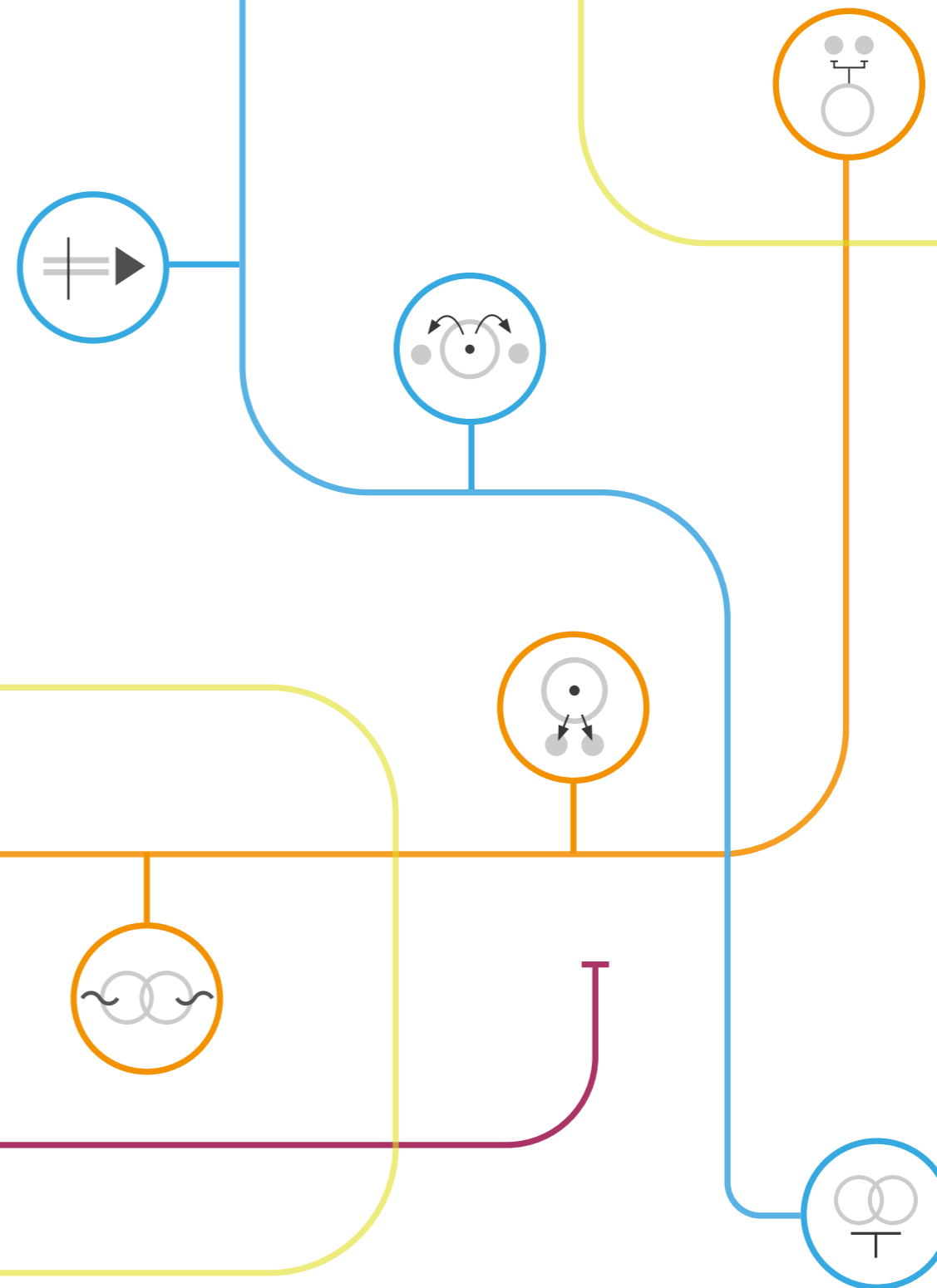
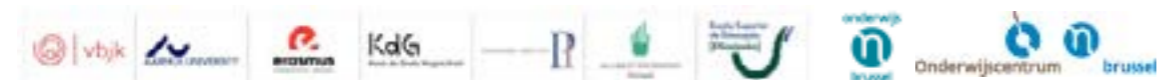
Maria João Cardona, Jerneja Jager, Alexandra Marques, Tina Mervic, Isabel Piscalho, Leen Rosiers, Marta Uva, Jo Van de Weghe, Sabine Van Houte, Katrien Van Laere, Kaat Verhaeghe.

PLEASE CITE THIS PUBLICATION AS:

Van der Mespel, S., Brazinha, M., Hulpia, H., Jensen, B., Marquard, M., Režek, M., Sousa, J. (2020). VALUE Roadmap. Pathways towards strengthening collaboration in early childhood education and care. Belgium: VBJK.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

We would like to thank all the children, parents and professionals from the ECEC centres in the four participating countries (Belgium, Denmark, Portugal and Slovenia) for taking part in the VALUE project. Special thanks to the European Commission, DG Education and Culture. Without the financial support of the Erasmus+ fund this innovative work would not be possible.'



'This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.'

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INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS THE VALUE ROADMAP ABOUT?

The ambition of this roadmap is to inspire you, as a reader, to strengthen collaboration between assisting and core practitioners in ECEC. The underlying idea is that better collaboration strengthens individual practitioners and teams in addressing all aspects of children's well-being, development and learning needs. In other words, the diversity and the multiple perspectives within the team are used as a resource with a view to enhancing an educate approach, i.e. a holistic way of working with the care and education of young children.

In ECEC centres in most European countries, not only early childhood educators, teachers or pedagogues (the core practitioners) work with children and families. Many other practitioners are directly involved in the care and learning process, for example teaching assistants, childcare workers, Roma assistants and special needs assistants. This roadmap mostly focuses on the collaboration between core practitioners and 'assisting' practitioners, but also includes collaboration with ECEC leaders.

In order to strengthen collaboration between assisting and core practitioners, this roadmap presents both a framework and ideas to develop pathways for continuous professional development, engaging both assisting and core practitioners, as well as leaders. In this publication, this is referred to as a VALUE pathway.

WHY A ROADMAP ON COLLABORATION BETWEEN ECEC PRACTITIONERS?

Involving all employees and strengthening collaboration among various ECEC professionals in daily work can open many perspectives and nuanced reflections, which improve the professional work with children.

Through team learning and collaborative work, ECEC professionals have the opportunity to observe and address more aspects concerning the well-being, development and learning needs of children. The different competences and the multiple perspectives within a team of professionals become a resource for developing sustainable solutions for complex challenges in contexts of diversity (Rutar et al., 2019; Jensen et al., 2020).

Research (Peeters, Sharmahd & Budginaitė, 2016) shows that there is a need to improve collaboration among ECEC practitioners. In particular, the collaboration between core and assisting practitioners is not always self-evident. Assisting practitioners are often not involved in planning and professional development initiatives. The result is that assisting practitioners lack opportunities to strengthen their professional role and identity. Assisting and core practitioners also lack opportunities to participate in common professional development initiatives. This is important because these initiatives provide mutual learning through dialogue and reflection on their own daily practice, roles and collaboration.

In this roadmap, the challenges and opportunities providing collaboration and recognition of diversity among all ECEC practitioners will be addressed.

WHO IS THE ROADMAP FOR?

This roadmap is for all ECEC professionals with an interest in improving educare practices through strengthening collaboration and valuing diversity among staff.

The roadmap might also be of special interest for initiators, participants and facilitators of professional development initiatives in ECEC in which assisting, core practitioners and leaders collaborate on an equal footing.

An initiator could be, for example, a principal or pedagogical coordinator of an ECEC centre or school. Initiators could also include employees in ECEC organisations or the local municipality or regional authority.

Facilitators could be either external or chosen from the in-house staff.

Others who might be interested in reading this roadmap include lecturers in the initial training of ECEC professionals, trainers of in-service training institutions and trade unions.

WHAT INSPIRED THE ROADMAP?



This roadmap builds upon the experiences and new knowledge achieved during the VALUE project, funded by the European Commission. Training and research centres based in Belgium, Denmark, Portugal and Slovenia received funding to experiment with professional development initiatives that strengthen collaboration between core and assisting practitioners in different ECEC settings. Nine ECEC centres engaged in setting-up an initiative, involving assisting and core practitioners and, in some cases, leaders employed in the ECEC centres.

Throughout the professional development initiative, the ECEC teams discussed and reflected on how they address the learning and care needs of children in everyday practice and how they contribute to this, both individually and as a team. The professional development initiatives developed in the four countries were, of course, based on the different cultures and backgrounds of the ECEC system in the different countries. In this roadmap, the cultural differences are taken into account and provide a variety of perspectives.

The content in the roadmap is inspired by the experiments developed, tested and evaluated in the pilot projects. More precisely, the roadmap builds on the following background studies:

- A [baseline study](#), which was based on a survey sent to the participants in the pilot projects and built on quantitative data and statistical analyses.
- Four [country reports](#), reporting the process and results of the professional development initiatives in each country.
- An [endline report](#) presenting the overall evaluation and highlighting the findings from the professional development initiatives in the four countries.

HOW TO USE THE ROADMAP?

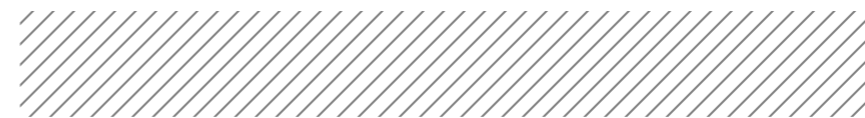


The roadmap has two parts.

A [WHAT-part](#) describing the three core concepts of a VALUE pathway.

A [HOW-part](#) describing four orientation points that can guide you in the development of this pathway as well as questions, suggestions and options in relation to the different stages of the pathway.

The roadmap does not describe the only route towards a professional development pathway involving different practitioners in ECEC centres. There is not simply one way to go. You, as a reader, will have to create your own pathway, together with your colleagues. Sometimes you might get lost. If that happens, the roadmap can be a helpful inspiration. The roadmap is illustrated with stories of the ECEC centres and facilitators involved in the VALUE project.



WHAT IS A VALUE PATHWAY ABOUT?

VALUE pathways, as a means for strengthening collaboration between assisting / core practitioners and leaders in ECEC settings are based on three core concepts:

- professional identity;
- educare;
- collaboration.

This section describes how the core concepts are understood in this roadmap. The definitions can function as a starting point for discussing and developing your own understanding and definition of professional identity, educare and collaboration.

PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

“ Inside my classroom I felt more valued. I felt that, along with the children having a voice, I also had a voice. ”

ASSISTING PRACTITIONER, PORTUGAL

Professional identity includes the following experiences of the core and assisting practitioners:

- feeling competent;
- having one’s work acknowledged by managers and colleagues;
- being involved in teams.

All three elements are regarded as vital prerequisites for successful professional ECEC work with children and families, as well as for meaningful participation in team collaboration.

Professional identity is not static, it is fluid. “It is strongly influenced by how we see ourselves, how we perceive others, how others perceive us and how we are viewed by society at large” (Beijaard, Verloop & Vermunt, 2004).

Collaborative processes, in which different practitioners engage together in dialogue, negotiation and reflection on educare practice on an equal footing, influence the professional identity and growth of the practitioners involved.

EDUCARE

“Caring moments, such as changing diapers or having lunch, are good moments to invest in the relationship and interaction with an individual child. These are moments of spontaneous learning.”

TEACHER, BELGIUM

Educare is a holistic way of working with care and education of young children. Well-being, learning and playing are seen as inseparable and equally important. Educare is more than the simple assurance that children feel emotionally and physically well within the ECEC setting. It also represents belonging and creating an inclusive environment for a diversity of children.

Educare implies a role for ECEC practitioners as attentive observers and listeners who are able to understand the needs and goals of children (not only future goals, but also current ones) and to provide relevant responses and equal opportunities.

The context influences whether an integrated perspective on educare can be implemented. A tradition and culture where education and care are understood and addressed as separate tasks may hinder an educare approach. In this respect, in some countries (e.g. Belgium) an educare approach is rather new and unfamiliar, while it is a cornerstone of the national curriculum in others (e.g. Denmark, Portugal and Slovenia).

COLLABORATION

“Knowing how we will work and what we would like to achieve, is a necessary basis for good educational work.”

ASSISTING PRACTITIONER, SLOVENIA

Collaboration is a continuous process. It takes place daily and is incorporated into all aspects of working with children and families, but particularly on these three:

- collaboration in planning activities within everyday practice;
- collaboration in implementing these activities;
- collaboration in collectively evaluating the child's wellbeing and involvement and/or of the processes and pedagogical activities.

Collaboration is a process in which core and assisting practitioners work together, on an equal footing, on shared goals. They share ownership of the knowledge and actions developed. The practitioners (and leaders) acknowledge each other's role and expertise. This does not mean that core and assisting practitioners can or should be able to do the same things, but both contribute to the overall goals and understanding of the child.

INTERPLAY AMONG THE THREE CORE CONCEPTS

There are strong links between collaboration and professional identity. Collaboration leads to improved communication among professionals, which, in turn, leads to more mutual learning, better relationships among colleagues and a stronger sense of shared identity.

Collaboration and professional identity are also inherent in an educare approach. The way the teamwork is organised and structured has an impact on the work with children. For example, think of the presence of an adult who is aware of which children may need support or whether any child is being left out. Providing time and space for core and assisting practitioners to plan and evaluate educare practice can lead to better understanding of the different perspectives and, from there, to developing more appropriate and sustainable solutions.

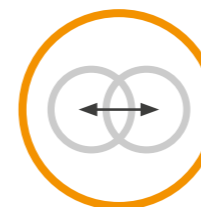
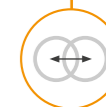
ORIENTATION POINTS OF A VALUE PATHWAY

The following orientation points can guide you in the development and implementation of a VALUE pathway:

- a participatory approach;
- reflection on and for practice;
- the role of the facilitator;
- involvement and support of ECEC leaders.

Throughout the preparation and implementation, they can act as a kind of compass for reflection on current and next steps in the work.

A participatory approach



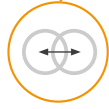
A PARTICIPATORY APPROACH

“ We don't have a manual for the VALUE learning pathway. It's about trying to be the investigator and observer and really just looking at what the problems are, what problems we need to solve, instead of just being given the answers. ”

SCHOOL LEADER, DENMARK

Engagement from the beginning

Handling a participatory approach implies that all staff (assisting and core practitioners and school management and leaders) are engaged from the beginning. In this way, the ownership of the learning journey is strengthened. This can be done, for example, by carefully discussing and deciding the project idea with staff, finding connections with existing (professional development) initiatives in the ECEC setting and starting from the challenges expressed by the staff. In addition, other 'companions' (e.g. children, families and local communities) must be involved right from the start.



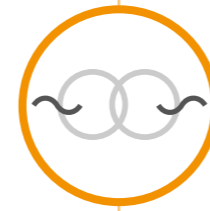
Practice-based

A participatory approach means that the work in the VALUE pathway is closely connected with the practitioners' practice and daily life in ECEC settings. The participants decide what challenges they want to work with. They reflect on and expand the work they are doing, as well as gain new knowledge and develop a shared understanding about a topic they are working on. Starting from everyday practice stimulates the engagement of each practitioner and makes it possible for everybody to add something to the common cause.

Giving voice to each participant

Some practitioners might experience some hindrances. For example, it could be that they are not used to being involved in professional development, to talking about their professional role, to taking the floor in a group or to actually being responsible for the content and learning process. It is the task of the facilitator and the group to secure structures and working methods that both enable and require activity from all participants.

In doing so, practitioners feel strengthened to engage in collaboration, but also to listen more, to step back and to allow more space for others to participate.



REFLECTION ON AND FOR PRACTICE

“ There is no way to grow professionally, if you do not reflect on your work. ”

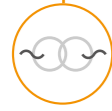
ASSISTING PRACTITIONER, SLOVENIA

Building on the participatory approach, a second orientation point of the pathway is shared reflection on and for practices. This implies that the staff works collegially and continually analyses their practices aiming to improve them.

Using different perspectives

In order to analyse and reflect on practices, practitioners make use of a number of different perspectives:

- The perspectives of children and families: Observations, documentation and dialogue with children and parents are important tools here.
- The perspectives of the different practitioners involved: Each practitioner has his/her own perspective on an individual child and group of children. By exploring the experiences and perspectives of the different practitioners involved, a more nuanced picture of the children, families and pedagogical practices is created. Through facilitated dialogue, diverse participants challenge each other, the status quo and identify challenges and opportunities.
- The perspectives of theoretical knowledge and frameworks: Through facilitated dialogue, participants discuss and relate theoretical knowledge and frameworks on educate and inclusion to their daily practice.

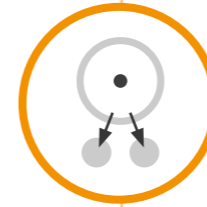
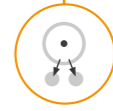


Reflection for change

The aim of reflection is to improve and change practices. In order to do this, there must be a constant interchange between action and reflection:

- Participants reflect on existing practices. By sharing real situations in their daily work with children, colleagues and families, they reflect on images, concepts, beliefs and intentions underlying those situations. In doing so, they widen perspectives for themselves and others.
- Participants plan and take action so as to better address the needs and rights of children. They agree on how they collaborate in this action, acknowledging the expertise and roles of others.
- Participants reflect on the actions undertaken. They improve their thinking and deepen their understanding of their practice, which again leads to adopting appropriate changes.

This combination of action and common reflection strengthens the quality of future actions.



ROLE AND TASKS OF THE FACILITATOR

“ The openness that fellow practitioners showed throughout the pathway has helped me feel more comfortable giving opinions, sharing ideas and suggesting activities ”

ASSISTING PRACTITIONER, PORTUGAL

The facilitator plays a crucial role in the VALUE pathway. The facilitator frames, organizes and supports the process and the reflective meetings, ensuring that all staff participates on an equal footing. He/she creates an opportunity for a creative and democratic learning environment, rather than being an expert with all the ‘right’ answers.

The facilitation includes both process and content knowledge and can be done in tandem: one facilitator with content knowledge, one with process knowledge. Alternatively, both of them can share the task equally. Facilitation with two persons has some advantages. The facilitators can complement each other (e.g. in their expertise and knowledge or the roles and tasks during the learning process) and they can share reflections on the ongoing process.

Different levels of facilitator-guidance and participant responsibility

A VALUE pathway builds upon a participatory approach in which participants engage in working together to create new ideas and bring new ideas to life in a workplace community. This implies that the facilitator supports the participants in such a way that they are given, and must take responsibility for developing the content, the visions, ideas and decided actions. In other words, the participants are also owners of the pathway.



Different levels of participant-responsibility and facilitator guidance are possible. This can be seen as a continuum with, on the one side, a facilitator who prepares the content for the professional development pathway, hereby considering the context and needs of the learning group. And on the other side of the continuum, you have participants who are entirely responsible for the content. The facilitators confine themselves to introducing a framework for shared reflection and collaboration. The answers to the question of who is responsible for planning the content and deciding the key issues may depend on:

- the extent to which the topic and the requirements have already been decided externally;
- the background and previous learning experiences of the participants;
- the need for some overall professional subject knowledge;
- the timeframe in the process (e.g. in the beginning or at the end of the VALUE pathway);
- the purpose of the work: for example, to create the foundation for the participants' own ability to create a sustainable model for continuous development of daily work or implement a new pedagogical approach or method;
- the real opportunity for the participants to decide versus limited real possibility for creating own solutions;
- the primary motivation of the participants: external motivation and the ability of the facilitator to inspire and create energy or inner motivation, being given influence, meaningfulness related to own work? Possibly a combination of the two?



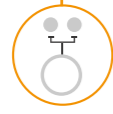
Consider which level of participant-responsibility and which facilitating role are the most appropriate in a particular context and a particular target group. The level of participant-responsibility can also change throughout the process. Moreover, the role of the facilitator can change depending on the needs of the group and the process (e.g. observer, confronter, co-creator ...).

Establishing a creative and democratic learning environment

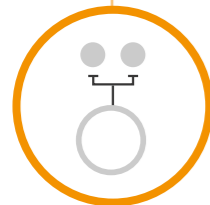
In a VALUE pathway, practitioners with different roles and background participate and collaborate. Creating an open and safe environment is fundamental in order to instigate 'real' participation and collaboration. To achieve this, the facilitator must provide a secure time and place for all participants to express their thoughts and experiences, to have their expressions, ideas and inputs taken seriously and thereby be actively involved in the whole process.

The following suggestions might be helpful in establishing such a creative and democratic learning environment.

- Invite the participants in such a way that everyone understands what will happen and how they can prepare.
- Jointly develop the agreements on operation of the group at the start of the VALUE pathway.
- Work with a recurring structure (be both flexible and structured) in the sessions of the professional development pathway. This will provide guidance to the participants.
- Focus on everyday practice. This makes it possible for everybody to contribute to the work and discussions.



- Use methods for facilitated group discussion, hereby ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to contribute to the meeting. Make sure that you politely stop those who are more dominant so that you can give the word to the more reticent ones.
- Give participants the possibility to first prepare their contribution (alone or with a small group) before speaking up for the entire group.
- Mediate between different actors involved by adopting a listening attitude that does not take sides and giving the participants the tools to deconstruct perceptions and build bridges that lead to collaboration.



ENGAGEMENT AND SUPPORT OF ECEC LEADERS

“Leadership is the key. Leadership gives encouragement, motivates staff, proposes structure and presents it to staff. It is important to give staff the autonomy. In this way, they gain confirmation and start acting proactive, not just waiting for instructions.”

The engagement and support of leaders through the entire process is pivotal. By engaging ECEC leaders from the beginning, they become involved in the process of constructing a collaborative approach to respond to care and learning needs of diverse children and families. In this sense, they are also part of the learning journey. This gives



the leadership awareness of the changes and the conditions needed to create such a collaborative environment. ECEC leaders include school principals, middle management, pedagogical coordinators, representatives and consultants for local authorities responsible for ECEC services in their municipality.

Creating an environment facilitating collaboration and educare

In order to create a collaborative environment, ECEC leaders must encourage and support employees to take initiatives, actively participate in discussions, collaborate with colleagues and dare to take on new roles in their work with children and families.

Moreover, ECEC leaders need to be engaged in developing the organisational frameworks for collaboration and educare. This could include timetables that enable collaboration, the organisation of teamwork, collaboration as part of job descriptions and staff evaluations, the extent to which collaboration and educare is expressed as part of the values, vision and mission of the organisation and spaces and materials facilitating an educare approach (e.g. availability of ‘caring’ materials like a nursing pillow and table).

Resources for a VALUE pathway

Finally, the engagement of the ECEC leaders is important for ensuring the resources needed to develop and implement a VALUE pathway.

The ECEC leaders need to provide the working hours and resources, which allow practitioners (not only core practitioners) to participate in the professional development pathway over time. To safeguard the resources needed, it is important to discuss with them that sustainable learning and change require time, process and experimentation. There are no quick fixes.

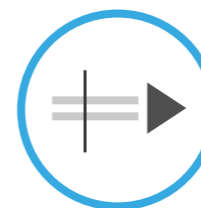


STAGES OF A VALUE PATHWAY: QUESTIONS AND OPTIONS

In this next section, the roadmap elaborates on more practical questions and options you may consider at the different stages of a VALUE pathway:

- the initiation of a pathway;
- the facilitation of shared reflection and co-creation;
- the evaluation and consolidation of process and results.

Although the roadmap subsequently describes the different stages, in reality these stages are not so straightforward, because the different stages overlap. Sometimes it might even be useful to go back to the questions and considerations linked to initiating the pathway.



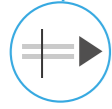
INITIATING A VALUE PATHWAY

Questions to consider at the initial stage:

- What structure and workings method will be best to engage key decision makers from the ECEC centre and make the necessary decisions on the set-up of the pathway in co-creation with them?
- How can different practitioners (core and assisting) be involved from the beginning on? How to encourage engagement and enthusiasm for the pathway?
- What are strengths, challenges and needs for the work together in the VALUE pathway?
- How will the pathway be organised?
- What approach, with regard to participant responsibility and facilitator guidance, will be taken?

Setting up a core team supporting the pathway

Throughout the preparation and implementation of the VALUE pathway, several decisions have to be made. Think about with whom you have to discuss and decide this. By setting up a core team (or steering group), it is possible to create the engagement of the key decision makers in the ECEC centre right from the start. The conditions for facilitating an open dialogue and shared responsibility for the overall planning have then been implemented in the preparatory phase.



Who these key decision makers are, depends on the context: they could include the director of the ECEC centre, team leaders and/or representatives of the local municipality. The next topics can be helpful for this core team at the initial stage:

- How do we embed the VALUE pathway into the ECEC centre system of professional support for practitioners?
- How do we organise it in such a way that it is included in a sustainable vision on continuous professional development for all staff?
- What initiatives or ideas are already in place in relation to improvement of the work with children and families?
- How do we create a project idea together with the practitioners, children, parents, other actors involved? How do we engage them right from the start?
- How do we explore the context and needs in collaboration with the different actors involved?
- To what extent, and how, are different practitioners (assisting and core practitioners) currently involved in professional development initiatives and in the planning, implementation and evaluation of pedagogical practice?

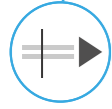


- What needs to be changed or developed in the work with children and families?
- What opportunities and possible pitfalls should be taken into account throughout the VALUE pathway?
- What will be the role of the core team members throughout the VALUE pathway? How can they best support the work?

Engaging the whole ECEC centre right from the start

A participatory approach implies that all ‘actors’ (staff, children, families and/or local community) are involved in each step, right from the start.

One of the ways to do this, is to involve all staff by organising a kick-off event or session in which all employees of the ECEC centre(s) participate. During this event, all of the employees have the chance to learn about the aims, ideas and working methods. Expectations, questions and possible ideas for content are then discussed. Via interactive working methods and facilitated discussions, all participants will be given a preview of the common professional development pathway. It is a good idea to inform the children, families and/or local community about the aims and processes.



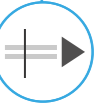
Exploring contexts and needs

One important part of the initial stage is to explore the context and needs of the ECEC centre(s). This will help to develop a VALUE pathway which is then based on the context, questions, strengths and challenges of the ECEC centre. Moreover, it increases the chance of embedding the VALUE pathway into a sustainable vision on continuous professional development for the staff.

The following topics are interesting to explore in order to identify strengths, challenges and needs for the work together:

- What are, according to the different actors involved, the strengths, challenges and needs in relation to the three VALUE core concepts: professional identity, collaboration and educate? The [description of the three concepts](#) in this roadmap can act as a starting point for discussing and exploring them.
- What are the expectations and ideas when setting up a VALUE pathway?
- What are the opportunities and possible pitfalls to take into account when developing the VALUE pathway?

As mentioned above, the core team considers how the exploration can be done in participation with the different actors in the ECEC centres. These include leaders, core team members, assisting and core practitioners, families and children



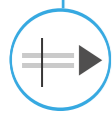
Various methods to explore and collect information can be used. A few examples:

- Setting up facilitated discussions and methods supporting group work, ensures that the ideas and experiences of all participants are explored and expressed.
- Conducting interviews or setting up a focus group with the different actors.
- Participation in and/or observation of the day-to-day life at the ECEC centre, and informal talks with, among others, the leaders, practitioners, children and parents.
- Visiting another ECEC setting with a mixed group of leaders, assisting and core practitioners and afterwards reflecting on the observations. Such a visit can be an eye-opening experience and can be helpful in making needs and challenges visible.

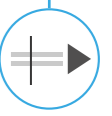
Mapping out a VALUE pathway

The above steps give the core team valuable information for mapping out the professional development pathway and deciding on the approach and overall set-up. Some questions to discuss and decide with the core team are:

- What will be the overall set-up of the VALUE pathway?
- Who will directly participate in the pathway? At what moments will we work with mixed or homogeneous groups (assisting and/or core practitioners and/or ECEC leaders), taking into account the available options for bringing different functions together, the context and culture of the ECEC centre? For example, in some cases it might be important to begin with activities which can empower special groups of employees (e.g. assisting practitioners) so as to prepare them for further collaboration. It could also be important to start activities with leaders in order to strengthen the understanding of VALUE aims.



- What is the envisioned size of the group directly involved in the pathway? What criteria will be used to select participants? What support and conditions are needed to enable them to fully participate?
- What will be expected of the various participants with respect to, for example, attendance at each session, translation of the new insights into action and the involvement of other practitioners who are not participating directly in the pathway?
- Which type of learning activities will be set up? These could include learning sessions or labs, presentations, group work, a visit to another ECEC centre, observations, networking and peer learning between ECEC centres.
- When and where would the learning activities take place and how often?
It must be noted that the sessions should be planned during working hours. Quite often, this is a serious challenge because of mismatched schedules of assisting and core practitioners and/or the lack of childfree hours. It might need quite some creativity to solve this issue.
- Who will facilitate the pathway and the various learning activities? What will [the role of the facilitator](#) be? Which level of participant responsibility and which role of facilitators are the most appropriate to support the VALUE aims in this particular context?
- How will the other employees -- those not directly participating in the VALUE pathway -- be involved?

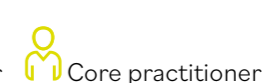
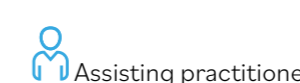
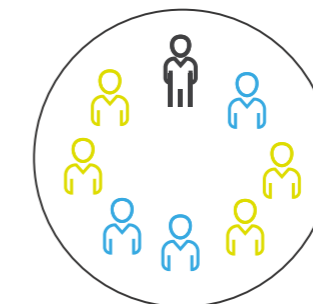


Different set-ups of a VALUE pathway

Depending on the context, the culture and the goals envisioned, there are different ways to set up a VALUE pathway. Below, several set-ups are described and illustrated with examples. These examples stem from [experimentations with VALUE pathways](#) in different countries.

Mixed learning group of practitioners working in the same ECEC setting

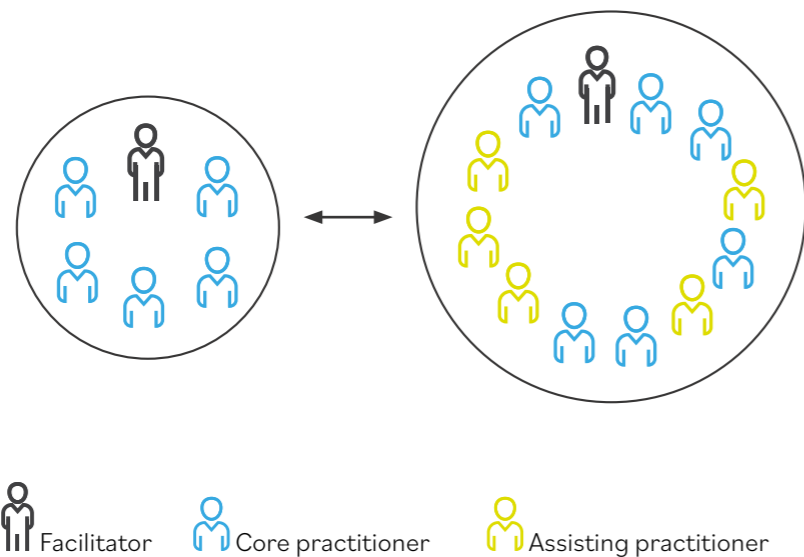
A pre-school (for children from 2^½ to 6 years old), working in a context of super-diversity and a high number of families living in poverty, starts a working group consisting of preschool teachers, assisting staff (a childcare worker, care coordinator, SES teachers and volunteers involved in the afterschool care) and the school principal. This working group collaboratively explores how they can improve their educare practice in order to better address the care and learning needs of the families of the youngest children. The work of the group is facilitated by two external coaches with complementary expertise (childcare for 0 to 3 years old and preschool education for 3 to 6 years old). During six meetings (every six weeks of approx. 2,5 hours) the group analyses and reflects on current practices and experimentations. At different points in time, a meeting is planned with the entire pre-school staff to share the process and the results with the colleagues who were not directly involved in the pathway.



Facilitator | Assisting practitioner | Core practitioner

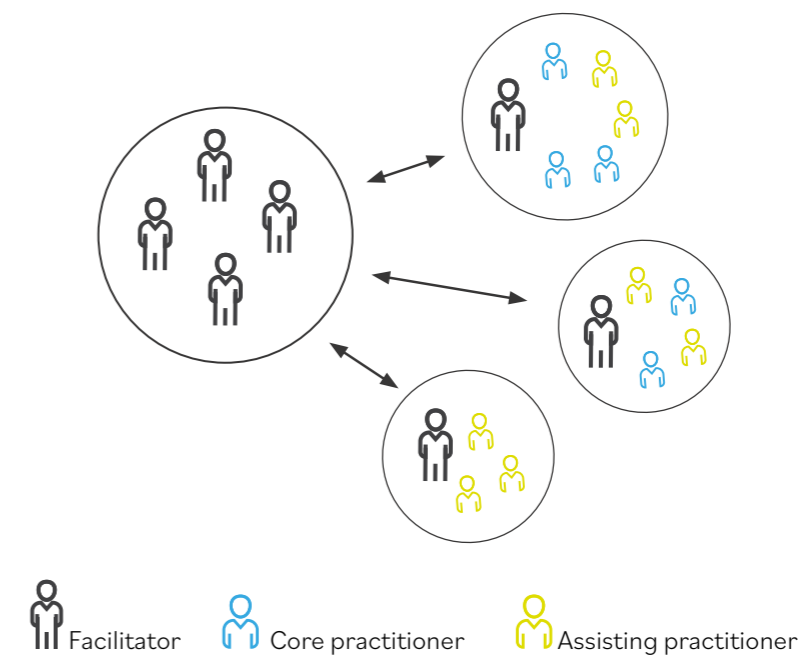
Homogeneous learning group of practitioners working in the same ECEC setting

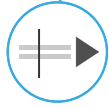
A pre-school (for children from 3 to 6 years old) situated in a highly diverse neighbourhood creates a learning environment to enhance a participatory, collaborative and inclusive pedagogical approach. The learning environment entails a pathway involving assisting practitioners. During several sessions (on a fortnightly basis), the assistants discuss a participatory, collaborative and inclusive approach, focussing on their professional identity (perceptions, expectations, actual doing, learnings) and their daily work with children, colleagues and families. Next, the learning environment consists of team meetings between core and assisting practitioners on a quarterly basis, with a view to installing a collaborative dialogue between the two professional groups. The entire process is facilitated by two internal facilitators with expertise in professional development and participatory and inclusive pedagogy.



Group of facilitators of a professional learning community within their own ECEC setting

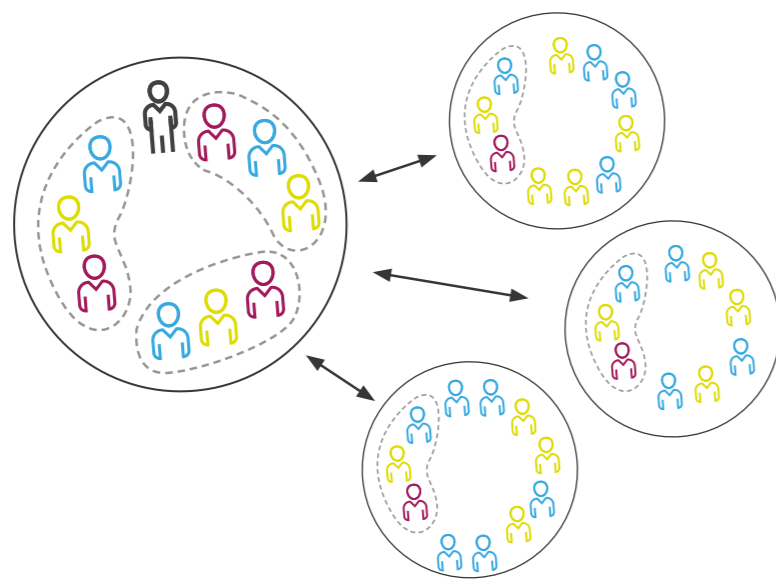
A large kindergarten for children aged 1 to 6 creates a supportive environment for all professionals by developing professional learning communities (PLC) within the kindergarten and by training practitioners (core practitioners as well as assisting practitioners) to become facilitators of such a PLC. Their aim is to bring the whole staff together to deepen the understanding of inclusion, diversity and values of democracy. The PLC's consist of core and assisting practitioners. The PLC facilitators are trained and supported by two external trainers / facilitators with expertise in developing professional learning communities and child-centred pedagogy. The external facilitators meet on a regular basis with the internal PLC facilitators. These meetings also include representatives of the managerial staff. During these 2-hour meetings, the participants reflect on the process in their PLC's and discuss new / additional methods for development of shared understand and strategies for dialogue between members of a PLC.





Learning group of practitioners and leaders coming from different ECEC settings (cross institutional)

A local municipality and three nearby preschools (for children aged 0 to 8 years of age) create a collaborative learning process with a focus on the inclusion of a diversity of children. The process is facilitated by a process experienced facilitator and a researcher within the field of ECEC. The process is based on the concept of learning labs (LL). From each institution, three employees (one teacher, one assistant and one manager) participate in six joint learning labs lasting four hours, spread across a 6-month period. The three participants from each institution form a coordination team with the task of translating the methods and insights from the joint learning lab into local LLs in their own school. In other words, between each joint LL this coordinating team implements a local LL and discusses the experimental work to be implemented. There is a constant interchange between the joint LLs and the local LLs. The group of nine employees is supported in a facilitated process which includes: a. investigating own practice, b. analysing practice based on the concepts of educare and inclusion, c. individual and common reflection, d. developing and trying out ideas for new actions, e. common evaluations and future work.



Facilitator



Core practitioner



Assisting practitioner



leader of ecec centre



FACILITATING SHARED REFLECTION AND CO-CREATION

Questions to consider at this stage:

- What resources, methods and activities should be in place to facilitate shared reflection and co-creation?
- When and what shall be communicated with the core team in order to discuss the process, results and implications on an organisational level?

In what follows, we introduce various activities and methods that can be used to support shared reflection and co-creation of knowledge and practice. This roadmap does not describe standard working methods or materials. The methods and activities will depend on the context and exact learning needs, as well as your approach as a facilitator.

Observing and reflecting together

Observation means trying to see what is happening. It means looking at when something happens, for whom it happens, who is involved before, during and after the observed situation, etc.

A VALUE pathway includes several employees (assisting and core practitioners) who are involved in specific situations or in the work with a specific child within the observations. Different employees see different perspectives.



Preparing the observation

There is a concrete situation or there are specific children where there is a need to improve actions and to better understand challenges. An observation scheme or framework to support the observations can be set up by the involved participants: in which situations or context will we observe children and/or parents? On which dimension of the educational environment will we focus (e.g. spaces and materials, activities and projects, adult-child or child-child interactions, interactions between practitioners)? This observation scheme will help practitioners not to 'drown' in the overload of information.

Make a joint decision on the timeframe for the observation, e.g. three days or a week. All involved note their observations during the said period and keep their minds open for new insights.

There are also other aspects during preparation. These include learning to observe without normative judgements and interpretations and agreeing on what is needed to ensure mutual trust. Being observed might cause stress. Therefore, it is important to clarify and discuss how to deal with the observations respectfully. Take into account that learning to observe requires training.

Observations can take place in one's own institution. However, it can also be interesting to observe in a different setting. This can be an eye-opening experience.



Common reflection

The involved employees meet and share their observations. To get all perspectives, it is important that each of the employees share their observations before the discussion starts. Once the observations have been shared, the discussion can start. These could include what the observations express and what can be done to improve the ECEC work with the child or the situation. The varied perspectives from "many eyes" can be a very rewarding base for the co-creation of nuanced professional and relevant solutions.

New actions

New actions can now be decided upon. The new actions can also be linked to the curriculum and formal requirements: how can these actions contribute to the implementation of our curriculum, framework or school vision?

Exploring narratives

In this method, the focus is on the link between personal and professional identity. The assumption is that an internal compass steers the actions of professionals. Their ideas about education, professionalism and child image influence behaviour and intentions. In the first phase of this process, the focus is on obtaining insight into this subjective reality of individuals and the team. The goal is to create awareness of one's own narrative. The facilitator and participants ask open questions concerning 'educare,' the view of parents, children and the job image of the assisting and core practitioners. The facilitator ensures that the different perspectives can co-exist without judgment.

In the second phase, different views and perspectives of others are explored. Imaginative techniques, such as metaphors,



art, poetry and play can be used. An artistic and imaginative approach can support participants in arguing and debating with nuance and understanding.

Next, a new common narrative is constructed cooperatively. This includes making choices for the future, translating these choices into actions and organisational changes enhancing an educare approach.

Introducing theoretical knowledge in relation to educare and inclusion

A VALUE pathway is characterised by shared reflection and co-creation between different practitioners, including leaders. Therefore, it is not about giving a course to assisting and core practitioners in which an expert is ‘filling’ the participants with expert knowledge. Nevertheless, this does not mean that theoretical knowledge cannot be a part of a VALUE pathway. Common research-based presentations on relevant topics can give inspiration and open up new perspectives. The participants relate the new knowledge to their practice and analyse their practice making use of the theoretical knowledge presented. In other words, theoretical knowledge is, at that moment, one of the various perspectives provided to analyse practice. In this way, the concrete choices and ideas as well as the responsibility for the developmental work, remain in the hands of the participants.



Developing reflected actions through learning labs

In learning labs, practitioners and leaders work together to question existing practices and critically reflect on existing and new practices. Here, they focus on drawing up goals for improvement. Throughout several learning labs, the participants go through seven phases:

1. Questioning existing practice / identifying problems.
2. Analysing practice.
3. Developing a model for causes and solutions.
4. Exploring this model, using an experimental approach.
5. Implementing and reflecting to reach a deeper understanding of inherent conflicts and the possibilities for overcoming them.
6. Producing knowledge, based on this deeper understanding, regarding the need for further change and what direction to take.
7. Implementing a new model for action, consolidated by all participants in a broader context: new rules, professional standards, new communities and new divisions of labour and roles.

In between the learning labs, the participants do ‘homework’ to enable them to follow up on the discussions and agreements made in the previous learning lab and to prepare for the next learning lab. Below are some examples of such homework:

- Observing and documenting concrete situations where problems occur to obtain a broader understanding of the problems.
- Experimenting with and documenting new ways of acting in concrete situations.
- Involving colleagues and implementing new structures for collaboration among diverse staff.



Documenting educare practices and experimentation

Documenting practices and experimentation helps in seeing, reflecting, understanding and transforming the education and care practices developed with children. Promoting such activities as filming, photographing and taking descriptive notes of experiences practitioners develop with children, fosters specific evidence-based dialogue among participants. It allows collaborative analysis of the actual practices and a look at how they are serving children, families and communities. It also brings up the question of how they can do better. Documenting is the practice of making everyone's actions, interactions and relationships visible. It also creates a link between what one thinks, does, and wishes to improve upon. Documenting educare practices and experimentation is therefore a collaborative work of the entire team.

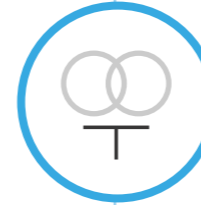
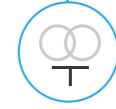
Documenting learning processes of individual practitioners

Along the VALUE pathway, the practitioners build a personal learning portfolio with the purpose of gathering information resulting from the VALUE sessions, as well as information about the experiences that emerged from the co-creation of various focal points. The construction of this document also includes the compilation of reflective written records that mirror the perceptions, feelings, and learning achievements of the author with respect to the creation of educational environments based on a holistic and integrated view of education and care.

A possible index for such a learning portfolio could be:

- presentation of the portfolio's author;
- presentation of the pathway;
- description and reflection of the VALUE learning journey;
- self-assessment.

These individual documents reveal the impact of the VALUE pathway on their professional learning and daily performance.



SUPPORTING EVALUATION AND CONSOLIDATION

Questions to consider at this stage:

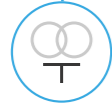
- How to support participants to document and evaluate their personal process?
- How to support the team to document and evaluate the process and experimentations?
- How to engage the core team in order to maximise the impact and sustainability of the learnings and actions developed?

Evaluating the process and results

From the beginning, evaluation has been an ongoing process within the VALUE pathway, both for participants and facilitators. Analysing and assessing practices is at the core of the learning process for all involved. After each step, the participants and facilitator(s) reflect on the process and results, and think about what is needed to create a framework for the next steps.

Alongside of this continuous process, it is important to give the group, at the final stage of the pathway, the opportunity to look back at the process and results and look forward to how to continue the work. Within this evaluation moment, a number of questions can be discussed:

- What actions or experimentations were implemented during the pathway?



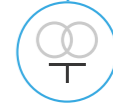
- What changes occurred with respect to the three VALUE core concepts: professional identity, collaboration and educare?
- What eye-opening or a-ha moments happened?
- What are their expectations and ideas regarding the future? What must be done in order to consolidate and further enhance the collaboration and educare practice?
- What other stakeholders (including local municipality, leaders of other ECEC organisations, regional or national authority with a responsibility towards quality ECEC) need to be informed about the results and experiences?

Pedagogical documentation and individual learning portfolios developed throughout the pathway can be used. For example, by making use of documentation and portfolios, participants present a situation they experience as ‘good practice’, resulting from their learning journey. They explain what changes occurred in their thinking and practice. Based on the presentations and stories, the group formulates shared learnings for the future.

What questions to ask and methods to use, will again depend on the context and the needs of the group. Consider how you want to engage the participants in preparing this evaluation moment.

Sharing and discussing results with different actors

A participatory approach implies that all ‘actors’ (staff, children, families and/or local community) are involved from the initial stage. The same goes for the final stage. By the end of the



pathway, the results are again shared and discussed with all relevant actors (other colleagues, children, families, local communities and/or key decision makers in the field of ECEC). The documentation developed throughout the pathway can be useful in sharing the results. In addition, at this final stage, it is good to consider how core and assisting practitioners can both play a role in presenting the results. Giving assisting practitioners the opportunity to present the work to families and/or other colleagues, can help them feel more competent and acknowledged.

Following-up with the core team

The evaluation and the discussion with different actors is again a starting point for the core team to discuss follow-up actions for continuing the process started through the VALUE pathway.

The following topics can be helpful for discussion and review with this core team at the final stage:

- How can the process of shared reflection be embedded into the centre’s vision and system of continuous professional development for all staff?
- How can the collaboration among the various practitioners on planning, implementing and evaluation of pedagogical practice be continued and further elaborated?
- How can the changes in relation to educare practice be consolidated and further elaborated?
- What strengths, (new) needs and challenges arose by the end of the pathway? How did professional identity improve? How do we follow up on this?



LET'S HIT THE ROAD

We hope that you were inspired by this roadmap to initiate and facilitate your own VALUE journey together with your colleagues in the ECEC centre (including ECEC leaders, assisting and care practitioners, children, families). It is very likely that this will not be a straightforward journey. Along the route, you will be facing unexpected difficulties as well as wonderful opportunities. It is now up to you and your companions to map out your own route towards a strengthened collaboration in early childhood education and care. Bon voyage!



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FURTHER READINGS

EXAMPLES AND FINDINGS OF VALUE PATHWAYS IN DIFFERENT COUNTRIES

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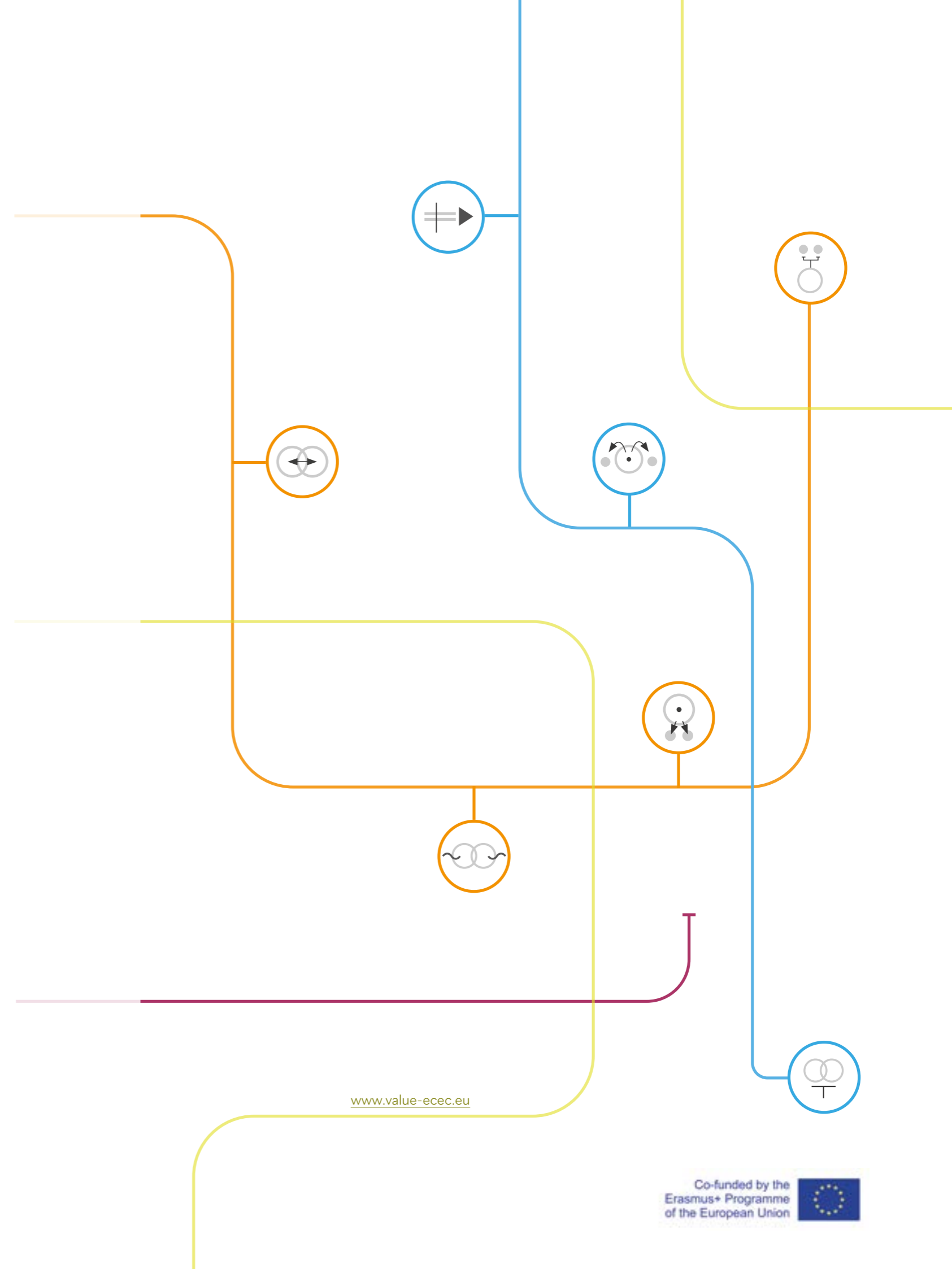
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