



SUPPORTING THE COLLABORATION BETWEEN ECEC CORE AND ASSISTING PRACTITIONERS

Literature Review
in four countries (BE, DK, PT, SL)



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PLEASE CITE THIS PUBLICATION AS

Rutar, S., Jensen, B, Marques, A., Cardona, M.J., Van der Mespel S & Van Laere, K, (2019). *Supporting the collaboration between ECEC core and assisting practitioners. VALUE Literature Review in 4 countries (BE, DK, PT, SL)*. Ljubljana: ERI.
<https://www.value-ecec.eu>

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank all the members of the stakeholder groups from the four different countries (Belgium, Denmark, Portugal and Slovenia) for helping to collect data. And 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.'

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Value diversity
in care and education

Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union



'This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication solely reflects the views 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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1.

INTRODUCTION

1. INTRODUCTION

There is a broad consensus among researchers, organisations and policy makers that the quality of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), and ultimately the outcomes for children and families, depends on well-educated and competent staff. At the European level, the importance of a qualified workforce is acknowledged in the revised priorities for strategic cooperation in the field of education and training (European Commission, 2015); it identifies professionalisation of staff as one of the key issues in ECEC. The role played by the ECEC workforce in contributing to enhance pedagogical quality of services for young children is underlined by the European Quality Framework for ECEC (2014, 9), which states that *'professional development has a huge impact on the quality of staff pedagogy and children's outcomes'* (European Commission, 2014, 2018). The competences of ECEC staff can be improved, not only by increasing the official entry level requirements of the job position, but also by providing existing staff with Continuous Professional Development (CPD) opportunities (Urban et al., 2011; Vandebroek, Urban & Peeters, 2016; Peeters et al., 2015).

In Early Childhood Education and Care centres (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, e.g. teaching assistants, childcare workers, Roma assistants, special needs assistants, ... In VALUE we refer to them as 'assisting practitioners' or 'pedagogical assistants'.

Assisting practitioners in ECEC mostly do not have official competence profiles, either for their profession or for their training. Even when the position and competences of assisting practitioners are recognised by national regulations or in individual settings, they are at risk of being

perceived as merely technical workers (Urban et al., 2011). Whereas the role of core practitioner is generally perceived to primarily involve 'teaching', assisting practitioners are generally perceived to assume a more 'caring' role. They are responsible for children's hygiene, protection and emotional well-being so that the teacher can focus on the learning process (Garnier, 2009, 2010, 2011; Vasse, 2008). This division is predominantly seen in preschools for children aged between three to six in split systems, yet it is present even in some unitary systems, despite notable exceptions. In services for the under-threes in split systems, there is less of a division, since the core practitioners, mostly women, share a short vocational qualification and a caring profile with the assisting staff.

As stated by Van Laere, Peeters and Vandebroek (2012, p. 534-535), *'one could argue that this division of tasks does not necessarily jeopardise a holistic view of education where both caring and learning are addressed'*. Nevertheless, while it may not necessarily jeopardise it, it does present an obstacle: since a higher status professional is largely responsible for one task, and a lower status professional responsible for another, a perceived hierarchy has 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' (Isaksen, Devi & Hochschild, 2008; Twigg et al., 2011; Wolkowitz, 2006). This decontextualised approach to learning may result in situations when during crucial moments—contact with parents, mealtime, and free playtime among peers—unqualified or low-qualified staff are solely responsible, thereby effectively downgrading the educational value of these moments. In other words, 'care' has come to be 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 (Van Laere et al., 2012). 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 (Broström, 2006; Hayes, 2007; 2008; Kaga, Bennett & Moss, 2010).

If we want to value the job of assisting practitioners and improve working within a holistic educare approach, assisting and core practitioners need to improve their relational and reflective competences to enhance the collaboration. However, this cannot solely be their responsibility as this also requires competence systems in which conditions are set to enable initial and continuous professional development for all groups of practitioners working with young children and their families (Urban et al., 2011).

AIM OF THE LITERATURE REVIEW

The aim of this literature review, conducted as part of the VALUE project, is to explore sustainable solutions in the professional development of assisting practitioners, but beyond their sole individual responsibility. More specifically we aimed to:

1. gain a more detailed understanding of the position and the working conditions of ECEC assisting and core practitioners in each of the VALUE countries involved: Belgium (FI), Denmark, Portugal and Slovenia.
2. gather and analyse literature and methods on how to support the collaboration between ECEC core and assisting practitioners.

In the report we first clarify the ECEC systems and existing professional profiles in each country. We hereby pay attention to the role of the historical and socio-cultural development of ECEC as a key influence factor on the roles, tasks and professional identities of both assisting and core practitioners. In the process of writing this literature review, a process of discussion was established, which gave all participating countries opportunities to reflect on their own historical and organisational context to have a better understanding of the phenomena of assisting practitioners. In the second part of this report we highlight the importance of Collaborative Practice and Learning as a way to offer context-based joint CPD for core and assisting practitioners. Based on studies and articles on CPD methods in ECEC and the broader social sector in the four different countries, we have selected some interesting methods that could enable the collaborative practice. Moreover, we have included conditions that are needed in order to stimulate learning between core and assisting practitioners. In conducting this review, an exploratory approach has been adopted to provide a meaningful and purposeful overview of existing research and grey literature: studies written in the languages spoken in the countries participating in the project (Slovenian, Portuguese, Dutch and Danish) and some additional English language studies were included.

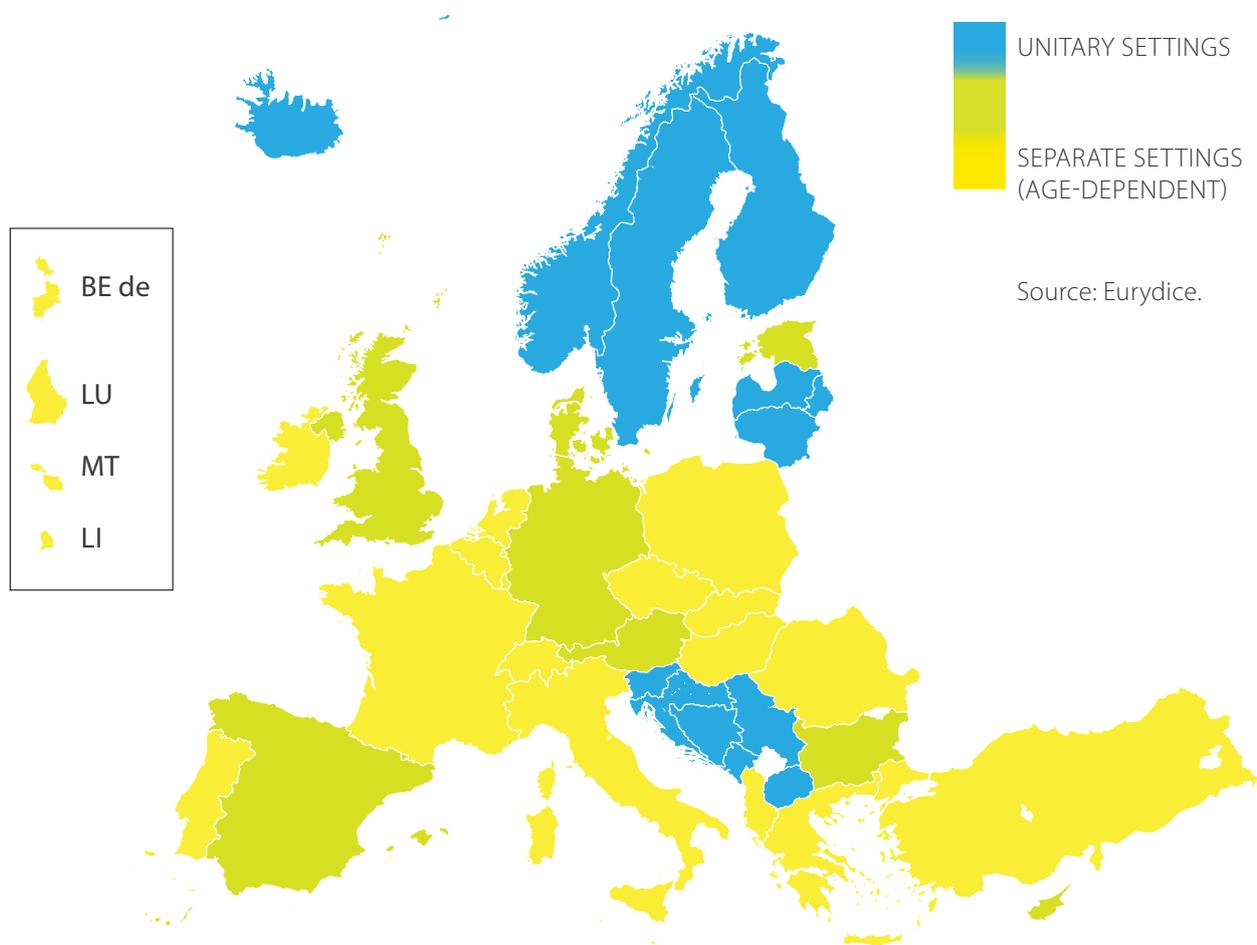
2.

OVERVIEW OF ECEC SYSTEMS AND STAFF PROFILES IN VALUE COUNTRIES

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In order to understand the composition of the ECEC workforce and the relationship between core and assisting practitioners, it is important to understand the political goals and rationales of preschool education. Why do countries choose to invest in ECEC and what does this mean for the pedagogical approaches in ECEC? Rationales of preschool education in each country are often reflected in the organisational structures of preschool education, including how to organise the ECEC workforce, the qualification levels required and the installed power relations between different professional groups. One needs to understand that different countries have different histories in ECEC systems. Some countries have a split ECEC system, with child-

care services for the youngest and preschool education for the oldest, mainly organised under different ministries. When childcare is offered under the Ministry of Welfare, often there is an underlying socio-economic rationale to ensure employment of women in the labour market and/or social argument to support the welfare of families. When preschool education is offered under the Ministry of Education, this is more characterised by an underlying educational rationale (supporting children's learning and development) and the socio-economic argument that children should have the opportunity to be successful in schools and further in the labour market and/or the social argument that children learn to be and become citizens in society.



Others countries have a unitary ECEC system in which integrated services exist from birth until Compulsory School Education (CSE), mostly under the Ministry of Education, but also possibly under the Ministry of Welfare. The UNESCO report of 2010, *Caring and Learning Together*, demonstrated how unitary systems are more likely to adopt an integrated educare approach instead of split systems in which childcare is focused on care and preschool education on cognitive and social learning (Kaga et al., 2010; Broström, 2006). The VALUE project is interesting in this regard as it encompasses different countries and histories such as Slovenia & Denmark (unitary ECEC systems) and Portugal & Belgium (split ECEC systems).

From this point of view, the position of assisting practitioners seems to be more complex in preschool education in split systems as the phenomenon of assistants often legitimises the hierarchy between learning and care. Yet in unitary systems, too, there is still some work to include them in good professional continuous development pathways. From the CoRe Study (Urban et al., 2011) and the NESET II study (Peeters, Sharmahd, & Budginaitė, 2016), we know that in many countries part of the ECEC workforce is represented by assisting practitioners who help and assist core practitioners in especially caring for children. The ‘invisibility’ of the ECEC assistant staff in research and policy documents stands in sharp contrast to the number of assisting practitioners working in ECEC services, which in some countries can be quite high (40–50% of the workforce). They often have a minimum more practically oriented qualification or no social or educational qualifications at all and there are few opportunities for them to start a path towards the same qualification as that of a core practitioner. Assistants have fewer opportunities of continuous professional development than core practitioners do. Time to plan and reflect

together as a team with core practitioners is also lacking. Besides a few notable exceptions such as Slovenia, most European countries still do not fund non-contact time for staff, and when this time is allocated, it is usually to core practitioners alone, not assisting staff. Most of the time, assistants stay in the same job position, without much possibility of job mobility, which can be quite demotivating in the long run (Van Laere et al., 2012; Peeters et al., 2016).

2.1 BELGIUM (FL)

Belgium is a federal state with 3 communities (Flemish, French, German Community) and 3 regions (Flanders, Walloon, Brussels-Capital) next to the federal level. Policy areas such as family services, childcare services, education, youth work and welfare are regulated at the community level. In this desk research we have focused on the Flemish community. However, the discourse on assisting staff is rather similar in the other communities. Belgium (FL) is historically characterised by an ECEC split system, where child care services for children up to three years of age (*kinderopvang*) are under the auspices of the Minister for Welfare and preschool institutions (*kleuterschool*) for children from two and a half to compulsory school age are under the auspices of the Minister for Education. These two types of institutions have distinct curricula, professional profiles and child–staff ratio (Peeters & Pirard, 2017).

2.1.1. Historical and socio-cultural development of Belgian ECEC

Belgium is characterised by a split between childcare and preschool education starting in the 19th century (Oberhuemer, Schreyer & Neuman, 2010). The institutional split between childcare and preschool education unintentionally perpetuated the ingrained idea that care and

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learning of young children are two completely different aspects of human life: care of young children is a matter that 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 with a lack of focus on learning and preschool institutions are historically dealing with a lack of emotional and physical care. One of the main issues that have occasionally been addressed by different stakeholders since the 1970s is the fact that preschool education is not 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 deploying assisting practitioners with a childcare qualification in preschool education (Van Laere, 2017).

In the 80s various experiments took place and since 2000, preschool teachers have received support only for a number of limited hours per week from a qualified childcare worker, to 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 mediatised issue). The same happens with the puéricultrice in the French community of Belgium. Due to a lack of budget, however, mostly people with no specific childcare qualification supervise the in-between moments in the school day. By connecting research, policy, practice a lot is happening currently in order to challenge this conceptual split between caring and learning because 1) the hierarchy between learning and care does not benefit children and parents and 2) assisting practitioners are considered more as invisible 'Cinderella's' in preschools (Van Laere & Wyns, 2017; Wyns, 2015). Since the Flemish government recently decided to attribute more money to preschools, one of the current propos-

als now is to invest it in the deployment of more childcare workers (*'kleuterverzorgers'*) (Vlaamse regering, 30/09/2019)

In addition, policy makers in Belgium (FI) have major concerns in relation to finding sufficient teaching staff to work in pre- and primary school education. This is especially a problem in big cities such as Brussels and Antwerp (e.g. De Backer, & De Clercq, 2017). 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.

2.1.2. Professional profiles and collaboration in Belgium (FI)

Preschools enjoy a high degree of autonomy, which allows each school to develop its own educational policies, as well as to appoint its own staff and decide the child-staff ratio (OECD, 2011b). In many preschools, entry classes (instapklassen) or reception classes (onthaalklassen) are organised for children who are between two and a half and three years of age. 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. A preschool class typically consists of 20–25 children with one preschool teacher (Hulpia, Peeters, & Van Landeghem, 2014; Van Laere, Vandebroek & Peeters, 2011). Preschool teachers often have additional support from a childcare worker for a few hours per week, depending on the number of toddlers. The deployment of childcare workers is mostly framed as a support for the teachers or to unburden the teacher.

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

ing activities. All preschool teachers hold a bachelor's degree in pre-primary education (ISCED 6)¹ and assisting practitioners usually have a secondary vocational degree in childcare (ISCED 3B) (Van Laere et al., 2012). 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 them 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 (Hulpia et al., 2014; Van Laere, et al., 2011).

Although the professional profile of the preschool teacher encompasses a clear educational role in which, among other things, supporting physical and health aspects of the development of children is important, there is a recent tendency of the government and Minister that tends to reduce the educational (opvoedende) role in favour of a sole focus on the teaching (onderwijzende) role of preschool teachers (Vlaamse Regering, 5/10/2007, 23/07/2014).

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 and required competences for their work in preschools. Accordingly, their tasks and positions vary, largely dependent on the school or umbrella organisation that they happen to work in. For the schools that are fully funded and run by the government, their function, for example,

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 (*Model functiebeschrijving Kinderverzorger BaO, 2007*).

The opportunities for assisting practitioners to access professional development are limited in comparison to teachers. Whereas support for preschool teachers is structurally provided (educational advisors, guidance centres, schools receive funds for in-service training), this is not the case for assisting practitioners. Preschool teachers have 2 child-free hours a week and assisting staff have none as often they have to move from school location to school location to work a couple of hours (Van Laere et al., 2011).

In order to increase the job mobility of assisting practitioners and diversify the ECEC teaching staff, a promising project BAOBAB recently started in the city of Brussels. In this small-scale project, initiated by NGO Eva and supported by the Flemish Community Commission (VGC), 8 motivated Brussels inhabitants are now working as assisting practitioners in the preschool class, while following a qualifying trajectory to become a preschool teacher. For 4 years they will receive intense support in order to find a job as a preschool teacher in the city of Brussels. Preliminary results show how this also enhances the relationship between children, families, local

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

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communities and the preschools as often the teaching staff predominantly consists of female teachers without migration backgrounds who do not themselves live in a big super diverse city as Brussels.²

2.2. DENMARK

In Denmark, the ECEC system is a unitary system, governed by the Ministry for Children and Social Affairs (Børne- og Socialministeriet). The responsibility for implementation of the national curriculum is placed at the municipality level. The Danish policy and professional development systems (pre-service and in-service) are aimed at strengthening educational attainment and competence development among ECEC staff in order to lead to improved professional competences in meeting new demands and challenges. The newest demand at a legal level is "Ny styrket læreplan" (Ministry of Children and Social Affairs, 2018) focusing on a common pedagogical foundation with a number of key elements, e.g. play, child communities and a broad learning concept. This foundation constitutes an understanding of and approach to the work with 1) children's well-being, learning, development and education in childcare centres. 2) The establishment of a pedagogical learning environment throughout the day, e.g. in routine situations, planned activities and child-initiated play. 3) Descriptions of the themes of the six learning plans as well as new broad pedagogical objectives for the correlation between the learning environment and children's learning. 4) The pedagogical curriculum must relate to vulnerable children, parental collaboration on children's learning, the correlation between nursery schools, and collaboration with the

surrounding society. 5) The establishment of an evaluation culture in childcare centres. The entire pedagogical approach to ECEC in Denmark needs to be understood in the light of the national curriculum that internationally is known as an educare approach.

2.2.1 Historical and socio-cultural development of Danish ECEC

Denmark is characterised by a historical long-standing unitary system. It is not only a structural integration of care and learning, but also characterised by a conceptual integration of caring and learning. This educare approach is inherently typical of Nordic countries and is often used to make a clear division between a more solely cognitive learning focus of education and holistic education in which upbringing, socialisation, caring and learning are inseparable (Bröström, 2006; Einarsdottir et al., 2015). Learning through play is an essential feature of this approach. Conditions are set so children can be present in time. From this perspective, tasks between pedagogues and assisting practitioners are fairly egalitarian. They plan together and the dialogue with parents is more the responsibility of the pedagogue. In general Denmark and other Nordic countries are characterised by lower power differences, less distance, and less hierarchy in decision structures and organisations.³

At the same time, even the unitary ECEC systems in Nordic countries are put under pressure due to an increasing international schoolification. In these countries there is a tendency that ECEC curricula have to focus more on academic competence requirements and unintentionally

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

3. <http://norden.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:701322/FULLTEXT01.pdf>

focus less on bodily care, emotion, relationality and solidarity (Broström, 2015; Löfdahl & Folke-Fichtelius 2015; Löfgren 2015; Samuelsson & Sheridan, 2010). However, in Denmark the curriculum represents a holistic approach to child learning, well-being and education. The educational opportunities and requirements for professional staff in ECEC have developed though many years, following the same trends as the common development in the educational system: on the one hand, a stronger focus on academic competence requirements and on the other hand enabling more educational opportunities for uneducated staff. This holistic approach to ECEC means that professionals in Denmark, both core practitioners and assistants are used to collaborate on all kind of tasks, both care and educational aspects of the pedagogical work, and these educare principles implies that the professionals are responsible for both.

2.2.2 Professional profiles and collaboration in Denmark

The term *pædagog* in Denmark refers to a generically trained social pedagogical profession. By taking a degree in social education, students become pedagogues, a position that includes work with “development and care assignments within the following areas: children and young people (including working in day nurseries, day care centres, preschool classes, recreation centres/school-based leisure time facilities, after-school clubs, 24-hour service institutions); institutions for children, young people and adults with reduced psychological or physical capacities; adults with social problems (homelessness, substance abuse, psychological disorders); family institutions; and child and youth psychiatric hospitals. Additionally, the education leads to qualification for working in

the field of crime prevention in neighbourhoods, for example, as well as working within the Prison and Probation Service.

In 2006, there was political will to reform the initial training of pedagogues. The background for the reform was an evaluation from 2003, which documented a need for strengthening both the professionalism of the educated ECEC staff and the learning and competence development of students. As part of the reform, the new education became a bachelor’s degree in social education, (ISCED 6), with higher academic and professional requirements than before. In 2011, a monitoring group under the Ministry of Education recommended a stronger and more intensive (academic) professional content.⁴ It is possible to study the Bachelor of Social Education programme, both as an ordinary full-time course or as a part-time or full-time course in the Adult and Continuing Education system. It is possible to have a validation of prior learning and competences, which can shorten the course. This type of education is provided by university colleges.

The term *Pædagogmedhjælper* refers to a pedagogical assistant. There are no specific qualification requirements for assisting staff (min. ISCED 3), although those with specific vocational childcare qualifications as a pedagogical assistant (*pædagogisk assistentuddannelse* – PAU) are placed at a higher pay grade. Often, assistants are students who need to have at least two years of relevant work experience in order to get accepted for further education. In the ordinary system, the education for a childcare worker and care assistant is offered both as full-time vocational upper secondary education for youths and part-time adult vocational training / adult VET. As part of

4. <https://www.ft.dk/samling/20111/almdel/FIV/bilag/205/1118757.pdf>

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the reform of the education for assisting staff in 2008, the theoretical part of the education was extended from 52 to 54 weeks and the internship was prolonged to 52 weeks. The changes were part of the political tripartite negotiations, which emphasised the importance of competence development of uneducated staff. It is possible to have a validation of prior learning and competences, which can shorten the course. This course is provided by basic health care colleges and university colleges (Olsen, 2007).

The legal framework in Denmark makes no stipulations in terms of mandatory qualification requirements for those working in day care for children up to the age of six, whether centre-based or home-based. Municipalities are required to ensure day care staff have the 'necessary' qualifications regarding ECEC provisions as part of the task of quality assurance and monitoring, but these requirements are not further stipulated and are the responsibility of each Danish municipality. With the new legislation professional development courses are offered and financed by the Ministry of Children and Social Affairs (2018). Qualification as a pedagogue is mandatory for those staff members working in school reception classes (six-year-olds). Similarly, the first three primary school grades (between the ages of seven and nine) are taught by qualified teachers, but pedagogues may perform certain tasks and play a supportive role.

2.3 PORTUGAL

Portugal is characterised by a split system of childcare (0–3 years) and preschool education (3–6). The Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity is responsible for childcare, while early education is governed by the Ministry of Education. Provision for children up to the age of 3 encompasses infant-toddler centres and family day

carers, and centre-based preschool provision for children from 3 years up to primary school age (6 years). Both sectors are centralised, i.e. responsibilities at the level of ECEC financing, monitoring and curriculum development are set at the national level (Araújo, 2017).

2.3.1 Historical and socio-cultural development of Portuguese ECEC

During the repressive regime which ruled the country from 1926 to 1974, the care and education of young children were seen as a purely private matter, a responsibility solely for the family. Pre-school education had no priority in official policy and the Ministry of Education was stripped of its responsibilities in this area (Oberhuemer et al., 2010). Early Childhood education in Portugal developed especially after the revolution of April 1974. Parallel to the development of the institutional network, the training of the childhood education professionals was developed. Because of this later start of public ECEC, the split and hierarchy between care and learning is less dominant than in other countries with long-existing traditional ECEC split systems such as Belgium and France.

The Basic Law of the Education System (Law no. 5/1986, of October 14) integrated the childhood education (by naming it, however, "pre-school education") in the formal education system and the Framework Law on Preschool (Law no. 5/1997, of 10 February) defined preschool education as the first stage of basic education. At the same time, curricular guidelines for pre-school education were defined by the Ministry of Education (1997, updated in 2016). But this evolution did not fit education to children less than 3 years old that is still not an integral part of the education system, being the responsibility of Social Affairs and there are no curricular guidelines for children aged 0–3.

Since 1986, the training of early childhood education professionals has belonged to higher education, and training is similar (with the same qualification) to the training for basic education. There are specific training courses for assisting practitioners but this is not compulsory. The assisting staff should have completed compulsory education, corresponding presently to a minimum of 12 years of schooling.

It is mandatory that practitioners are professionally trained to work with children (the age of compulsory school entry). Portuguese regulations do not prescribe the need for an Early Childhood Teacher in 'rooms for infants' (*berçário*), which means that the monitoring and supervision of babies up to 12 months is guaranteed by two auxiliary staff members per group (Araújo, 2017: 4). The assisting practitioners have their functions defined in the legislation as already mentioned but have a very differentiated status of that of preschool teachers. As a consequence of the historical evolution, this differentiation was established. Yet, reviewing the identity of these professionals and investing more in their training is a matter of urgency in early childhood education, especially in working with children under 3 years of age.

2.3.2 Professional profiles and collaboration in Portugal

Assisting practitioners are called educational action auxiliaries (or educational action assistants, or operational assistants). The Education Act establishes that assisting staff should have completed compulsory education, corresponding presently to a minimum of 12 years of schooling. The functions of assisting practitioners are described in Decree Law 184/2004, 29 July (Ministry of Education) and include the logistical support of the preschool teacher, hygiene and cleaning of spaces, space security and surveillance/supervision of

children indoors and outdoors, and guaranteeing the opening and closing times, including welcoming the children and being there when the children are picked up by their parents.

The level of qualification required for educational action assistants is the ISCED level 1, for individuals born before December 31, 1996; the ISCED level 2, for individuals born between January 1, 1967 and December 31, 1980; and the ISCED level 3 for individuals who enrolled in the first year of primary school, from 1987/1988 on. The level of qualifications required for preschool teachers is the ISCED level 7 (Master's degree). The assistants of Portuguese schools are poorly paid, often work in difficult and precarious conditions and are insufficient for the existing needs. This situation appears in various studies (Araújo, 2017; Formosinho & Figueiredo, 2014).

In the Curricular Orientations for preschool education, teamwork is emphasised, involving all pedagogical staff (teachers and assisting staff and other technicians) as well as the active involvement of children and families throughout the educational process. Studies in school administration have shown how in a democratic working model, assisting practitioners have an essential role in the collaboration with both teachers and families, in order to have a positive impact on the child's development. Therefore, schools should undertake measurements to value and clearly acknowledge their educational role (Silva, 2009). Notwithstanding, the collaborative practice between preschool teachers and assisting staff is very dependent on the institutional dimension. It depends on the characteristics of the institutions in the way they favour teamwork, existing working conditions, and access to in-service training. Consequently, the diversity of organisational settings in ECEC generates different power dynamics in the collaboration and different self-identities of assisting

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staff namely regarding the sense of belonging to a professional group (Rodrigues, 2009).

Usually the collaborative practice is done through meetings with the pedagogical coordination of the institution. In some institutions in the team work carried out, the assisting practitioners are not always integrated into the team meetings. The meetings of the pedagogical team sometimes include only preschool teachers. The collaboration between teachers and assisting practitioners often happens in an informal and timely manner. The preschool teachers nevertheless always have the function of supervising the work of assistants. A study of Santos (2013) demonstrated how assisting practitioners perform their tasks in an insecure way due to a lack of professional knowledge.

2.4 SLOVENIA

In Slovenia, ECEC provision is organised as a unitary system. In 1993, the age-integrated ECEC institutions for children aged 11 months up to statutory schooling, generally at age six, came under the auspices of the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport. Slovenia was one of the first countries in political transition that transferred the responsibility for ECEC from the then Ministry of Health, Family and Social Security to the then Ministry of Education and Sport (Vonta & Jager, 2017; Marjanovič Umek et al., 2011). The government's concrete responsibilities include issuing relevant legislation and providing an ECEC curriculum. Municipalities have a duty to provide sufficient places and to ensure that the national curricular framework is implemented. Slovenian pre- and primary schools have an overall average level of autonomy, with a high level of local control over hiring and dismissing teaching staff compared to other OECD countries, and a below average level of local control over curriculum decisions and student assessment in schools (OECD, 2016).

2.4.1 Historical and socio-cultural development of Slovenian ECEC

In the 19th century, various forms of child care centres (shelters and children's places for entertainment) were established and financed by charities and church organisations. In 1869 the Public Schools Act children's shelters and children's places for entertainment became the concern of the state and the municipalities, and were organised only in major cities and industrial sites as part of elementary schools (Marjanovič Umek et al., 2011). From 1883 preschool teachers had to attend one-year-long educational training for preschools (preschool gardeners) (Pavlič, 2006).

After the Second World War, ECEC became an increasingly recognisable pillar of social, health and educational protection of children. Preschools, which were initially called the "home of games and works", were open through the whole day, sometimes even during the night. Later, they were renamed preschool institutions or educational and care institutions (Šolstvo na Slovenskem skozi stoletja: katalog stalne razstave, 2002).

By the 20th century, the proportion of female employees rapidly increased the need for greater participation of children in preschools. According to the General Law on Education (1958), preschools were established by municipal committees, and economic and social organisations. In the 60s and 70s of the 20th century, the first upper secondary schools for preschool teachers were established. Until 1980 assisting practitioners were not professionally educated (mainly on the level ISCED 2). In the 1980s assisting practitioners were expected to complete a two-year training programme for assistants after completing lower secondary education (ISCED 3).

Since 1995, the Step by Step Programme (supported by the Open Society Foundation and

International Step by Step Association) has been implemented in Slovenia. The educational philosophy of this programme includes the collaboration between preschool teachers and assisting practitioners: they are trained together to plan, implement and evaluate the SBS Programme. Influenced by the SBS programme, a new curriculum was introduced in the 1990s. This was a pivotal moment as it became less prescriptive and more child centred and respected children in what they are already capable of doing. Due to this new curriculum the professional qualification level of teachers and assisting staff also increased. Before that, people with a nursery degree could work in ECEC. This has now changed to educational profiles based on a broad educational holistic concept. For this reason, Slovenia has developed a tradition in which core practitioners and assistants collaborate in a very egalitarian way (even when salaries are different). Core practitioners are more involved in the bureaucratic requirements as well.

2.4.2 Professional profiles and collaboration in Slovenia

Since 1996, preschool assisting practitioners have been expected to complete (four-years of) professional upper secondary school (ISCED 4) and preschool teachers a Bachelor's degree (ISCED level 6). From 2009, it has also been possible to study the second (Master's, ISCED 7) and third (PhD, ISCED 8) study level programmes of preschool education at faculties of education (Kaga et al., 2010). Many assisting practitioners continue schooling at the faculty as part-time students to become preschool teachers. According to a study of Rutar and colleagues (2018), these students very consciously decide what kind of practice and principles they would like to implement and develop when they start working as preschool teachers. During study and after finishing undergraduate study some assisting practitioners continue to work as teaching

assistants, and later take the opportunity to apply for preschool teacher positions.

Due to the professional development of teacher assistants and teaching assistants the collaborative practice and professional discussions were more enriched.

According to the curriculum (Ministrstvo za šolstvo in šport: Zavod za šolstvo, 1999), it is expected that professional staff cooperate in the planning process within the group (teacher and teaching assistant), between groups and within the preschool, among preschools and with other educational, professional institutions.

More specifically, preschool groups are organised according to ages; the first age groups include children aged 1 to 3 years and the second age groups include children aged 3 to 6 years. However, in reality, there are no organisational boundaries between different age groups of children. Different practices in rotation of professional staff are:

- ▶ teachers and assisting practitioners work together with the same group of children all years (from 11 months of children till they start basic schools);
- ▶ children and teachers go to the next room the following year, while the assisting practitioners start to work with a new group of children;
- ▶ assisting practitioners and children go to the next room the following year, while the teachers start to work with a new group of children;
- ▶ every year children have a new teacher and assisting staff, and the room also changes.

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Preschool principals are mostly aware of the importance of professional continuity, which is why mostly at least one person—teacher or assisting practitioner—stays with the group of children the following school year. These rotation processes lead to collaboration between different experts in ECEC in Slovenia. Information needed for professional continuity from different people irrespective of their work position is more important in professional discussions than their working roles.

According to the law (Pre-School Institutions Act), teachers and assisting practitioners are the same profession.

«The work obligation of a preschool teacher includes preparation for educational work, planning and implementation of educational work, working with parents, and participation in the organisation of life and work in the preschool. The work obligation of –assistant educators includes cooperation with planning, implementing and preparing educational work in the department, independently performing certain activities of pre-school education, and participating in other activities and performing other tasks related to the activity of the kindergarten. The full weekly working time for preschool teachers with children.»

(Pre-School Institutions Act, Article 40)

Supported by counsellors, teachers and assisting practitioners work together to develop and implement inclusive pedagogical practice for all children. Together with the parents, they participate in the process of observation and documentation of all children's learning and well-being and in developing individualised trajectories to include children with special needs. They also cooperate in activities with parents (everyday communication, individual meetings with parents, workshops, ...). It is assumed that teachers, assisting practitioners and counsellors each know the child from their own point of view and each of them can help them in their own way; they can cooperate in solving problems. Together they can determine the situation, collect and analyse the data, plan changes and improvements together (Programske smernice. Svetovalna služba v vrtcu, 2008). A study of Lepičnik Vodopivec and Hmelak (2015) demonstrated how preschool teachers understand their role as a monitor evaluator and resource investigator. Assisting practitioners saw themselves mostly as innovators and coordinators. Interestingly, another study underlined that assisting practitioners are more critical in their observations and assessments of participatory practices in comparison to preschool teachers (Rutar & Štemberger, 2018).

The legislation does not expect preschool teachers or assisting practitioners to attend training based on their work positions, but according to their professional needs. The idea is that both of them, those who work with a group of children, need to have the same knowledge to plan and realise improvement in their professional practice – work with children and their parents/families. In Slovenia, awareness and the care for permanent professional development is built into the legislation regulating the area of education, especially the Rules on In-service Training of Educational

Professionals and their amendments (Official Journal of the Republic of Slovenia, 64/04, 83/05, 27/07, 123/08, 42/09) and in the Rules on the Title Promotion of the Employees in the Education and their amendments (Official Journal of the Republic of Slovenia, 54/02, 123/08, 44/09, 16/09, 16/2010, 18/2010), defining the forms and ways of permanent professional education of teachers and other workers in education and assessment and ways of taking this training into consideration in the teachers' professional career. The collective agreement for the area of education in the Republic of Slovenia (Ur. list, 53/94) in paragraph 17, article 53 estimates that pedagogical staff with at least secondary level of education is enabled by their employer to participate in training at least 5 days a year or at least 15 days in three years (Valenčič et al., 2011).



3.

THE IMPORTANCE OF COLLABORATIVE PRACTICE AND LEARNING

3. THE IMPORTANCE OF COLLABORATIVE PRACTICE AND LEARNING

There is a broad consensus among researchers, organisations and policy makers that the quality of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), and ultimately the outcomes for children and families, depends on well-educated and competent staff. The role played by the ECEC workforce in contributing to enhance pedagogical quality of services for young children is underlined by the European Quality Framework for ECEC (2014, 9), which states that *‘professional development has a huge impact on the quality of staff pedagogy and children’s outcomes’* (European Commission, 2014, 2018). The competences of ECEC staff can be improved, not only by increasing the official entry level requirements of the job position, but also by providing existing staff with Continuous Professional Development (CPD) opportunities for all practitioners working in ECEC (Urban et al., 2011; Vandebroek et al., 2016; Peeters et al., 2015).

The VALUE project wants to contribute to this international debate on ECEC quality and professionalisation by emphasizing the importance of organising **joint CPD opportunities for core and assisting practitioners** in all the European member states. Silva (2009) demonstrated how the relationship between assisting practitioners, teaching staff and families can significantly contribute to the quality of the pedagogical work developed with children. A study of Formosinho and Figueiredo (2014) showed that participatory educational teams including assisting practitioners develop more effective pedagogical and interactive skills and are more likely to reach out, in a spirit of equity and social justice, to disadvantaged children and families. In general, it is known that collaborative practice *“can be considerably greater in scope and value than the cumulative effect of the performance of individual practitioners or educators working separately”* (Bil-lups, 1987, p. 147).

In sum, joint CPD opportunities can expose core and assisting practitioners to critical co-reflection, in order for them to develop new inclusive educare practices that meet the diverse needs of each child, parents and local community members of their specific social contexts (Peeters and Sharmahd, 2014). In our vision joint CPD is characterised by following starting points:

- ▶ **Experiment & Reflect:** many studies have shown that experimentation in practice contexts and shared reflection were the most meaningful and facilitative strategies for professional learning (Sousa, 2016; Formosinho, & Formosinho, 2012; Araújo 2011; Mesquita-Pires 2012; Urban et al, 2011).
- ▶ **Learning in Context:** Formosinho and Formosinho (2012: 591) emphasised that this context-based CPD is a way to *“change the pedagogical praxis, the transformation of educational contexts and the construction of empirical knowledge about complex educational realities.”* It results in a significant increase in the well-being, participation and learning of children (Araújo 2011; Bove et al., 2018; Mesquita-Pires 2012; Jensen & Iannone, 2018).

As more context-based and joint professional learning between core and assisting practitioners is urgently needed in the European ECEC workforce, we use the term **Collaborative Practice & Learning** for core and assisting practitioners throughout this VALUE literature review.

3.1 TERMINOLOGY

Many terms in literature and practice exist to describe the importance of Collaborative Practice and Learning. Below, we summarise some terms and concepts that overlap or are very similar in meaning:

Professional Learning Communities

Internationally and in many countries like Slovenia and Belgium the term 'Professional Learning Communities' is often used in relation to ECEC. These communities can be described as *"a group of people sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an on-going, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting way"* (Stoll et al., 2006, p. 223; Vanblaere, 2016). The purpose of professional learning communities is to share among ECEC staff, both emotionally and professionally, by allowing each other to critically reflect on their own teaching and to share concrete ideas on how to improve the well-being and the learning experience of a diversity of children and families. In other words, the primary goal is not 'being or becoming a professional learning community', but in the end improving the well-being and learning for children and families by also focussing on good collaboration and job fulfilment of the staff (Sharmahd et al, 2017). Specifically for this project, we would like to stress that professional learning communities should also include assisting practitioners.

Learning Laboratories

In Denmark the meaning of more people working together is understood as Learning Laboratories that encourage the involvement of relevant parties in working together *"to search for opportunities to collaborate in public governance and public service quality so as to safeguard the welfare society despite unfavourable economic conditions"* (Hviid & Plotnikof, 2014, p. 373, our translation; Højrup, 2004). Hviid & Plotnikof (2014) highlight that *"dialogue and collaboration are discursive processes that have a meaning-constitutive and possibility-creating effect"* (ibid., p. 380, our translation). This influences both form and content. At the same time, discourses and dialogue among people can both develop and phase out practices and

relations between stakeholders in a community. Discourses should be understood as micro-social and as linguistically meaning-making. Dialogue between stakeholders can potentially bring about organisational change. It is through dialogue that polyphony can emerge on a number of levels: personal, social and organisational (Hviid & Plotnikof, 2014). Specifically for this project, we would like to underline the important role that assisting practitioners can play in the Learning Laboratories. Learning laboratories is based on theories regarding communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), innovative communities and change laboratories (Engeström, 1999, 2013) and social innovation (Dawson and Daniel, 2010).

Interprofessional & Interdisciplinary Practice

Internationally and in Dutch-speaking countries like Belgium and the Netherlands the term Interprofessional or Interdisciplinary Practice is frequently used in the general social training field and HRM. De Waal (2018) defines interprofessional practice as *"forms of collaboration in teams between professionals with different expertise."* The aim of the collaboration is to develop an integrated and innovative approach starting from a shared vision, which must lead to a better response to certain needs of the target group. Katzenbach & Smith (in Aasen, 2010, p.15) define an interdisciplinary team as *"... a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable"*.

According to Dahl (2001), the focus in interprofessional activities can be on:

- ▶ the coordination, administration and management of subtasks during collaboration;
- ▶ the creation of additional knowledge across professions;

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- ▶ strengthening educational practices by making use of the combined body of (complementary) professional expertise, thereby taking advantage of diversity.

Interprofessional practice is, however, not something to be taken for granted. Van Staveren (in De Waal, 2018) identified 3 dimensions which need to be cared for in interprofessional teams:

Collaboration as a profession → content dimension

Collaboration as a relational process → social dimension

Collaboration as an innovation strategy → creative dimension

Team & Co-Teaching

A popular term used in the international educational field is Team and Co-teaching. Polak (2012) stated that a team is formed in order to set and achieve common goals which could not be achieved by individuals, by individual professional staff in preschools. Wenzlaff and colleagues (2002, p. 14) agree that co- or team teaching is *“two or more individuals who come together in a collaborative relationship for the purpose of shared work... for the outcome of achieving what none could have done alone.”*

Team teaching is based on common (team-set) goals, trust and positive interdependence in the implementation of common goals. Meirsschaut and Ruys (2017) and Fluijt, Struyf and Bakker (2016) emphasise that team teaching is also a concept applicable to more professional profiles than only teachers e.g. assisting staff, child carers, occupational therapists, social workers, and so on. Therefore, they suggest the following definition of team teaching: *in team teaching several educational professionals (onder-*

wijsprofessionals) collaborate in the preparation, implementation and reflection on their shared tasks to realise high quality education for all students (Meirsschaut and Ruys, 2017, our translation). Fluijt et al. (2016) also add to the definition: ‘during a longer period’ because of the importance of continuity in the collaboration. In team teaching all staff members collaborate in the preparation, implementation and reflection on their shared tasks to realise high quality educare for young children.

3.2 WHAT ARE THE CONDITIONS TO ENABLE SUSTAINABLE COLLABORATIVE PRACTICE?

In the literature we found some crucial conditions to implement and ensure sustainable Collaborative Practice and Learning for core and assisting practitioners in ECEC.

Positive recognition and appreciation for all staff members and professional activities from an educare viewpoint

The first and foremost important condition for collaborative practice is positive recognition and appreciation of all different staff members and professional activities in preschool settings, as inseparably connected activities and practices that support children’s learning and development (Carreira, 2007). That statement could be grounded on a comprehensive, holistic understanding of child development, connection of care (social, health) and education (upbringing and education), which is a part of the traditional aim and mission of early childhood education and care settings, from Pestalozzi and Friedrich Froebel on.

Collective Responsibility

There is investment in ‘collective responsibility’, as school improvement is no longer consid-

ered to be the sole responsibility of a principal or a single teacher, but rather a collective one (Sharmahd et al., 2017). Core and assisting practitioners are expected to cooperate on daily bases, to work as a team in the planning process, in realisation and assessment/ evaluation process. It is important to expect cooperation and shared learning at the level of professional staff within the class, between classes and within the preschool; at the level of other schools and services (health, social, cultural). Within the class, professional staff have to work together, cooperate between the classes and within the preschool. Staff are also to be expected to work on collaborative practice in relation with other institutions, including in the process of transition from home to preschool and from preschool to primary schools.

Shared vision and set of values for the team

Ejrnæs (2006) in Denmark suggests that members of the same profession might be expected to share experiences and perspectives, with substantial differences between the experiences and perspectives of different professional groups. In reality, however, one is just as likely to meet a member of one's profession whose opinions and attitudes differ from one's own and to have much in common with a representative of a different professional group. At the same time, the challenges of collaborative practice are not necessarily the result of professional groups' differing perspectives on the children in their care; instead, problems in interprofessional practice often arise (Højholdt in Miskar, 2008) when the focus shifts away from the children and the collaboration itself becomes the primary goal. Rather than a coherent, holistic perspective characterising the work with children, it is often individualistic. Tasks of core and assisting staff might be different but all employees in ECEC have to be focused at

the same time on the same social pedagogical goals and mission, sharing the same values (Rijsdijk, et al., 2018). It is, therefore, important to reach a shared vision and set of values, based on children's rights and respect for diversity. This forms the basis for shared, collective, and ethical decision-making. (Sharmahd et al, 2017)

Deprivatisation and sharing of classroom practices

Staff move from the classroom doors in a 'deprivatisation of practices', by observing each other's practices, giving feedback, planning jointly, building relationships with the neighbourhood, and engaging in dialogue with parents (Sharmahd et al, 2017).

Child-free hours for both core and assisting practitioners

An important condition for successful collaborative practice is that child-free working hours are specifically set aside (Miskar, 2008; Meirsschaut & Ruys, 2017) Consequently, staff members can frequently engage in 'reflective and in-depth dialogues' on educational matters based on their daily practice (Sharmahd et al, 2017).

Mental space and safe learning environment

Besides the effective time to sit together and reflect, making a mental safe space in which both core and assisting practitioners can "receive and share from and with others" (Dahl, 2001, p. 17, our translation) is an essential condition. Derksen (2018) describes this as the 'team development space' (*teamontwikkelruimte*) to enable collaborative practice: Room for each other, for the individual expertise and qualities of the diverse team members in order to use the available knowledge, expertise and

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skills. This 'team development space' can be created by engaging as a team in four activities:

- ▶ Creating the future: defining together the team results in the short and the long term;
- ▶ Organising: agreeing about who is doing what, when, within which budget, in which timeframe, etc.
- ▶ Reflecting: looking and evaluating from different perspectives;
- ▶ Dialogue: exploring and questioning.

Engaging in the above-mentioned activities looks easy. However, this is not the case, because there is a constant tension between these activities.

They can be divided into two orientations:

1. On the one hand, the orientation toward performance in which a team tries to achieve results as quickly as possible. Defining team results (i.e. creating the future) and organising are more linked to this orientation.
2. On the other hand, there is the orientation towards shared meaning making in which a team tries to search for, explore and evaluate alternatives through dialogue and reflecting.

In order to be successful and innovative, a team needs both orientations and needs to balance constantly between these orientations, and accompanied activities. This is visualised as follows:

Creating the future and organising (orientation towards performance)	Dialogue and reflecting (orientation towards shared meaning making)
Speeding up	Slowing down
Result-oriented	Process-oriented
Focusing	Widen the scope
Answering	Questioning
Solving	Explore
Forward	Stand still or look back
Focus on action	Focus on consideration

Derksen, 2018, p. 89, translated by author.

In the ideal 'team development space' team members feel free and invited to share their knowledge and experience. They trust each other and dare to experiment, take risks and give divergent opinions. They are able to discuss and investigate these different and sometimes conflicting opinions. At the same time, they are focused on attaining the intended result. (Derksen, 2018)

Working on professional identities and self-confidence

Collaborative practice can also challenge professional identity, which seems to be important to professionals. To benefit from collaborative learning, opportunities to develop, reflect and modify one's own professional identity and allow the others to modify their professional identity is needed. According to De Waal (2018), professional identity expresses itself in the concrete professional practice and is linked to the standards and values that should be common in the professional group.

Developing good social relations and collaborative skills of all team members

Another important condition for collaborative practice is that all parties are supported in developing collaborative competences (Dahl, 2001). It should be noted that working on good social relations between the team members will enable fruitful team collaboration.⁵ On the individual, team member level, the following skills seem to be important (Norsen et al., 1995 in Hall, 2005; Meirsschaut & Ruys, 2017; Rijdsdijk, et al., 2018):

- ▶ Cooperation: Acknowledging and respecting other opinions and viewpoints while maintaining the willingness to examine and

change personal beliefs and perspectives.

- ▶ Assertiveness: Supporting one's own viewpoint with confidence.
- ▶ Responsibility: Accepting and sharing responsibilities, and participating in group decision-making and planning.
- ▶ Communication: Effective sharing of important information and exchanging of ideas and discussion.
- ▶ Autonomy: Ability to work independently.
- ▶ Coordination: Efficient organisation of group tasks and assignments.

Avoiding the tendency of disciplinary territoriality

It should be noted that experts DeWitt and Baldwin (2007, p. 32) are disheartened that even after years of promoting interdisciplinary collaborative practice, *"overwhelming barriers of disciplinary territoriality and systems inertia persist" so that 'each generation seems to have to repeat the experiences and frustrations of the past'*. However, even where interdisciplinarity has thrived for some time, Franks et al. (2007 in Smith and Clouder, 2010) note that there is always a tendency to default to disciplinary positions where disciplinary structures are perpetuated.

Leadership has to support team work and regulate power relations between professions

The presence of good 'leadership' is a powerful factor in transforming a school's culture

5. <https://www.eva.dk/ungdomsuddannelse/teamsamarbejde-blandt-undervisere-paa-erhvervsuddannelserne>

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(Sharmahd et al, 2017). Leaders and managers have to have autonomy to appoint appropriate staff (according to specific needs of concrete settings) to ensure quality of ECEC. Staff quality is also maintained by leadership that motivates and encourages working as a team, information sharing and professional staff development (OECD, 2006). A study of the Danish Evaluation Institute demonstrated how practitioners need the support of leaders in order to develop clear goals for team collaboration.⁶ Good leaders are, moreover, responsible for regulating power relations between different professions and work positions. They have to eliminate hierarchical relations between different professionals and work positions, discourses that perpetuate power relations, such as “teachers work with children, they educate children, teaching assistants help them”. This discourse explicitly shows unequal positions in relations and unequal positions during the educational process. This kind of relations has become problematic information and a role model that children are exposed to. From this position they learn hierarchical positions in societies.

The study conducted by Vidmar and colleagues (2017) indicates that the role of the settings’ head is very important since the head’s understanding of pedagogical, professional and developmental continuity for ensuring smooth transitions is crucial. Preschool professionals (teachers, teaching assistants, consultants, principles) and basic school professionals could organise and realise activities together: introducing developmental appropriateness, approaches and learning expectations to each other, introducing school work, organisation and the school environment to the parents and children.

Supported and regulated by government

More sustainable collaborative practices in ECEC can be established when policy and structural conditions are met. In the overview of the different countries this is often not the case:

- ▶ **Assisting practitioners need to have a good initial qualification or have access to a qualifying trajectory**

Qualification level plays a key role in ensuring high-quality ECEC. In all observed countries assisting practitioners are less educated than teachers. According to the OECD study Encouraging Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care (2011), better educated practitioners with specialised ECEC training are more effective in providing stimulating staff-child interactions, warm and supportive interactions leading to longer term positive impacts (OECD, 2011a). Qualified teachers are better able to engage children, elicit their ideas and monitor their progress (Barnett, 2004). Highly qualified staff can also have positive influence on those who work with them and who do not have the same high qualifications (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010).

- ▶ **Preservice and in-service training of professionals employed in preschool settings has to include team work knowledge and collaborative interdisciplinary skills oriented on an educare viewpoint**
- ▶ **Both core and assisting practitioners in ECEC need to have the possibility of continuous professional development**

The CoRe study (Urban et al., 2011) informs us that even though teachers’ level of qualification

6. <https://www.eva.dk/ungdomsuddannelse/teamsamarbejde-blandt-undervisere-paa-erhvervsuddannelserne>

level is important to ensure quality in education, the competences to implement in a competent system are more than just the knowledge, skills and attitudes of individuals. Thus, adults employed in ECEC have to be educated (skilled, trained, professionalised) to work with each other, in teams, institutions and with governance. The opportunities for assistants to access professional development in many countries are limited in comparison to teachers. (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014, 2019). Preschool settings have to also guarantee free hours for professional training and meetings at the level of the ECEC for all those employed in preschool settings, regardless of their work position.

3.3 WHAT ARE POSSIBLE METHODS TO STIMULATE COLLABORATIVE PRACTICE & LEARNING?

Based on studies and articles on CPD methods in ECEC and the broader social sector in the four different countries, we have selected some interesting methods that could enable the collaborative practice.

3.3.1 Team and Co-teaching

Bacharach, Heck, & Dahlberg, (2008, p.3) and Meirsschaut & Ruys (2017) introduced some co-teaching strategies that could be used as universal organisational orientation when planning co-teaching process. These strategies were introduced as strategies in higher education, but it can be easily adapted for preschool learning situations and environments.

Strategy	Definition/application
Observation Model I	When using one teaches, one observes , one teacher has primary instructional responsibility while the other gathers specific observational information on students or the (instructing) teacher. The key to this strategy is to focus the observation – where the teacher doing the observation is observing specific behaviours. In the discussion afterwards the focus can be on how the teacher can better support the specific educational needs of the pupil.
Observation Model II	One teaches, one drifts is an extension of one teach, one observe. One teacher has primary instructional responsibility while the other assists students with their work, monitors behaviours, or corrects assignments, often lending a voice to students or groups who would hesitate to participate
Observation & Coaching model	When using one teaches, one observes the focus of observations can also be on the colleague. The one teacher supports the other teacher – who is responsible for the class practice – from a coaching perspective. The coaching can start from a specific question of the teacher (consultation). But it can also be the case that the coaching / supportive teacher takes the lead in the coaching.

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Strategy	Definition/application
Station Teaching model	<p>Both teach at different stations in class</p> <p>For station teaching the co-teaching pair divide the instructional content into parts. Each teacher instructs one of the groups. Groups then rotate or spend a designated amount of time at each station. Often an independent station will be used along with the teacher-led stations.</p>
Parallel Teaching Model	<p>Both teach in split groups</p> <p>In this approach, each teacher instructs half the students. The two teachers address the same instructional material. The greatest benefit to this approach is the reduction of student-teacher ratio.</p>
Alternative (Differentiated) Teaching	<p>Both teach with different teaching strategies</p> <p>Alternative teaching strategies provide two different approaches to teaching the same information. The learning outcome is the same for all students, but the avenue for getting there is different.</p>
Sequential Teaching Model	<p>Both teach in rotation</p> <p>Teachers divide the learning content or instruction activities. Each teacher is responsible for a comparable part of the courses. Teachers work only together when each of the teachers takes up a specific part of the teaching phases.</p>
Assisting Teaching Model	<p>One teaches collectively, one supports individually</p> <p>One teacher is responsible for giving instruction to the group. The other teacher walks around in the classroom and supports pupils who need extra support. In this model the roles can be switched regularly. The teachers themselves who takes up the specific roles , taking each other talents/competences into account.</p>
Team-Teaching Model	<p>Plan and teach together</p> <p>Well-planned, team-taught lessons exhibit an invisible flow of instruction with no prescribed division of authority. Using a team-teaching strategy, both teachers are actively involved in the lesson. From a student's perspective, there is no clearly defined leader as both teachers share the instruction, are free to interject information, and available to assist students and answer questions.</p>

Bacharach et al. (2008), p. 3; Meirsschaut & Ruys (2017), p. 27 - 29, translated by author.

They used the following criteria to differentiate and describe these different forms of team teaching:

- ▶ Appearance of team teaching;
- ▶ Degree of collaboration in the different phases of the educational process; the authors point at the importance of collaboration in different phases of the educational process; moreover, collaboration is needed in the preparatory and the implementation phase as well as in the reflection/evaluation phase. Recent studies show that in a lot of team-teaching situations the reflection phase is limited or absent.
- ▶ Position of teachers towards each other (same or different position);
- ▶ Focus of teachers involved (on development of students or of colleague).

Studies on co-teaching in the context of inclusion of children with special needs show that teachers often stay with the assistant teaching model, based on the assumption that a special education teacher is not able to fulfil the needs of all students. The subordinate role is attributed to the greater professional knowledge of the general education teacher. Moreover, the general teacher wants to take the lead and be autonomous in his/her classroom. As a consequence, the ownership of the learning process of the students is not equally shared between the co-teachers (Scruggs et al., in Meirsschaut and Ruys, 2017).

This is similar to findings in the context of collaboration between Early Childhood Educators and Kindergarten Teachers (Underwood et al., 2016). Underwood et al. (2016) state that the co-teaching model provides a framework to both teach educators alternative ways to work in partnerships, and to train teachers and ECEC in team approaches

to support better implementation of the team-teaching policy.

Results from different studies on co-teaching partnerships and practices show that to maintain effective teaching practices educator teams should attempt several approaches, and the team members should take on the different roles within each approach (Friend & Cook, 2010 in Underwood et al, 2017).

3.3.2 Learning Laboratories

The working principle of Learning Laboratories is enabling intersubjectivity as “...*the possibility of sharing the knowledge we live in with others*” (Hviid & Plotnikof, 2014., p. 383, our translation). Intersubjectivity is relevant when focusing on diversity among stakeholders.

Trust is fundamental in this dialogue, both in terms of trusting the other’s assertions and of trusting the other to understand one’s own assertions. “Trust conquers mistrust” (Hviid & Plotnikof, 2014, p. 384, our translation), albeit not in the sense that differences between stakeholders disappear, but the presence of trust in dialogues where stakeholders represent differing perspectives allows mistrust to be overcome (Hviid & Plotnikof, 2014). Ambivalence is closely tied to people’s experiences as well as to trust and mistrust. When encountering new problems or tasks, the subject constantly looks to develop new understandings where ambivalence constitutes the differences between the familiar and the unfamiliar for the subject (Hviid & Plotnikof, 2012).

In summary, this way of thinking about laboratories as a method for change helps us combine intersubjective and subjective processes in order to understand the importance of:

- ▶ Discourses

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- ▶ Dialogue
- ▶ Intersubjectivity and otherness
- ▶ Trust contra mistrust
- ▶ Ambivalence

Knowledge-based efforts for socially disadvantaged children in daycare” (VIDA project) is an example of interprofessional practice based on installing learning laboratories. The project was developed, implemented and evaluated in Danish ECEC facilities during the period 2010-2013. The goal was for ECEC professionals, including assisting practitioners, to develop new approaches that strengthen inclusion in ECEC among children aged 3-5 years through new interprofessional relationships and new organizational frameworks for collaboration. This collaboration was intended to improve institutional and organizational frameworks for taking care of and including socially disadvantaged children (Jensen, Brandt & Haahr-Pedersen, 2013).

3.3.3 Co-Creation

Adding to the innovative approach of learning laboratories is another perspective—co-creation (Knudsen & Møller, 2018; Ramaswamy & Gouillart, 2010). According to Agger & Tortzen (2015) co-creation can be defined in relation to innovation in a number of ways and based on varying criteria, applying the perspective of collaborative innovation, social innovation, co-production or co-creation. The following elements are highlighted as at the core of co-creation: “Active involvement of citizens based on partnerships and shared responsibility. All parties contribute resources, particularly in the form of knowledge and thinking. An assumption that ‘ordinary citizens’ possess

valuable knowledge that can help develop the quality of public services” (Agger & Tortzen, 2015, p. 8, our translation).

Co-creation aimed at innovation and learning does not begin with an idea, according to Bason (2010). Rather, the first step is to think about an issue or problem in new ways or to identify new possibilities. The process comprises four elements: 1) Framing, 2) Knowing, 3) Analysing, and 4) Synthesising. Idea generation, selection and concept development can occur. Through innovation laboratories, which Bason (2010) sees as platforms for creativity and ideation, the co-creation process is developed. Innovation laboratories offer possibilities, tools and resources for involving people in the process of creating and implementing new solutions to problems.

There are many different co-creation methods. A Danish public organisation called MINDLAB has experimented with many different co-creation processes; Ex Development questions, Proto- & prototypes, Plan of change, The journey, Portrait, Perspective cards, Idea development, Concept poster, Priority grid etc.⁷

Based on experience using MindLabs for co-creation, Bason (2010) talks about “*co-creation for a better society*”. This process starts with “*thinking in a different way about the problem or by identifying a new opportunity*”. Innovation is understood as a result of “*casting away existing mental maps of what we are delivering and how we do it, and replacing them with new ones*” (p. 176)

3.3.4 ECEC professional learning communities

In the International Step by Step Association, professional learning communities are a com-

7. <http://mind-lab.dk/en/methods>

mon method to enable collaborative practice and learning. In Slovenia, for example, more than 40 preschools work with this method and the ISSA principles.⁸ The meetings of the professional learning community are structured as follows:

1. Warming-up

- ▶ Warming-up exercise, creating a sense of unity and strengthening cooperation among members. (5–10 min.)

2. Reflecting on performed activities

- ▶ The preschool staff who report speak briefly about the activities, impressions, dilemmas and ideas for improvement, etc. (10 min.)
- ▶ Other preschool staff ask questions and seek clarification, offer their ideas for improvement, solutions, etc. (15 min.)
- ▶ The speaker gets an opportunity to say which proposals she/he found useful. (5 min.)
- ▶ Everybody gets a chance to give their opinion (5 min.) (all together 30–45 min.)

3. Developing a common understanding of quality

- ▶ Discussion on one quality indicator initiated by an article, text, video or similar. (20–25 min.)

4. Planning next steps

- ▶ Each preschool staff member writes his/her own individual professional development plan. (5–10 min.)

5. Closing the meeting

- ▶ Closing remarks, conclusions, evaluation. (5 min.)

Each professional community selects the area of the preschool teachers' and teaching assistants' practice they wish to enhance. In addition, each community independently determines which segment of work they wish to tackle within this area and the time they will dedicate to it. The goal is to guide the learning community towards the development of quality child-centred practice, and at the same time allow the freedom for each professional learning community to plan their own vision. During all meetings, the community members discuss some of the aspects of quality (Areas/Indicators belonging to the Principles of Quality in ISSA definition), discuss how to meet the quality indicators in their work, and how ultimately to develop a "professional development plan" describing what they plan to achieve or change in their practice by the next meeting, what actions they will take, what resources they will need, and who can help them.

While meeting with colleagues at the learning community meeting, preschool staff members present their thoughts after the plan has been carried out. During each meeting, all members briefly present how they carried out activities in their groups, how the children reacted, what would they have done differently, etc. After that, one educator presents in detail his/her reflections on the implemented activities and her/his reflection.

During the community meetings, all preschool teachers and assisting staff have the opportunity (regardless of whether they are presenting

8. Tankersley, D. (2015). Roads to Quality: Strengthening Professionalism in Early Childhood Education and Care Systems https://www.issa.nl/sites/default/files/pdf/Publications/quality/ISSA-Roads_to_Quality.pdf

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examples from their practice or not) to analyse, assess and ask questions on the content and process which took place in their classroom, connect theory with practice, link goals and tasks, beliefs and behaviours and assess different aspects of their practice.

3.3.5 Working with biographical stories

Fluijt et al. (2016) argue that sense-making by reflection about what can be considered as good education—good teaching and good learning—is essential when co-teachers want to understand or change their practice or relationship with their partner. They argue that existing instruments lack reflection on underlying beliefs and opinions, such as values, standards and beliefs. Based on the work of Kelchtermans (2009) they developed a set of questions that can be used for reflection on these underlying beliefs.

Therefore, Kelchtermans (2009) developed the idea of using the biographical stories of teachers as a source for professional development. Kelchtermans (2009) developed a set of questions for teaching which can give insight into his/her 'professional self-understanding and 'subjective educational theory', the two components of the personal interpretative framework every individual teacher develops throughout his/her career.

Kelchtermans (2009) distinguishes five aspects of 'professional self-understanding': self-image as teacher, self-esteem, job motivation, task perception and future perspective. These aspects stimulate teachers to reflect upon their values and beliefs about several issues. The 'subjective education theory' refers to the combination of knowledge and opinions about education of a teacher. The subjective educational theory 'reflects the teacher's personal answer to the questions: 'how should I deal with this particular situation?' (= what to do?) and 'why should I do it

that way?' (= why do I think that action is appropriate now?)." (Kelchtermans, 2009, p264).

Based on this set of questions, Fluijt et al. (2016) developed a tool/questionnaire ('team-anchor-portret' or team anchor portrait) to reflect with co-teaching teams on their work, values and professional ideas. The aim of the tool is to develop an image of the co-teaching with 'anchors' giving guidance for the educational process and the collaboration.

- ▶ Subjective educational theory: how do we as a co-teaching team make our values and vision visible in our work?
- ▶ Professional knowledge: what knowledge and concepts about the development of students do we have?
- ▶ View of effective strategies: what do we see as effective didactical strategies in our shared educational work?
- ▶ What rules do we use to organise our education/teaching?
- ▶ Knowledge of group dynamics: what group dynamic ideas are important for us as co-teachers to guide the class group and individual students?
- ▶ Professional self-understanding: what are our values and beliefs in the co-teaching team?
- ▶ Portrait of our team: how do we describe ourselves as a team? How do others describe us as a team?
- ▶ Self-esteem: in our view, how well do we do our job? How satisfied are we with the way we work? What feedback (from students or others) do we receive about our work?

- ▶ Professional motivation: for which reasons do we choose to work as a co-teaching team? Or in a broader perspective: what motivates us to be part of a co-teaching team and not to work somewhere else or in another way?
- ▶ Task perception: What do we see as our moral duties towards our students? When do we feel satisfied about what we do as a co-teaching team? What do we see as our core tasks?
- ▶ Future perspective: what are our expectations concerning our co-teaching team and what do we think of this?

(Fluijt et al., 2016, our translation)

Starting from the reflection on this set of questions, teams can develop a shared understanding of values and beliefs about good education and collaboration, what were crucial moments in their work as a team and what needs to be developed.

3.3.6 Narrative coaching

A lot of coaching methods are goal or problem oriented (Stelter, 2009). There is a focus on behaviour. Why we act in a certain way stays unconscious and pre-reflective. The personal interpretative framework steers the actions of the early childhood professional. Ideas about education, the professional role and the child image influence behaviour and intentions (Golombek, 2017; Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2014). These ideas are formed by the upbringing and experiences we obtain throughout our lives. They are co-created through the interaction of past, present and future. Especially in educational professions these influences are unmistakable. To understand actions and convictions the identity of the early childhood professional is taken into

account: their narrative is the starting point to create pedagogical quality from within. (Verhaeghe & Den Haese, in press, 165).

Narrative coaching is part of what Stelter and Law (2010) call third generation coaching. Coaching from a reflective perspective. The focus is on the exploration of values and meaning-making. "Things become meaningful when we understand our own way of sensing, thinking and acting, by telling certain stories about ourselves and the world in which we live." (Stelter, 2009, p.212). Coaching is seen as a conversational process through which the coachee gets deeper insight. "It wants to unravel the current view on reality" (Stelter, 2007, p.191). A conversation where one transfers the tacit knowledge into language thereby making actions reflective and present (Stelter, 2007) "The stories people tell in coaching are windows into their identities" (Drake, 2007, p.284). Values are the implicit foundation of action, connecting actions and conviction. A lot of the time the coachee is not conscious of his/her values. "They will usually lie dormant under the surface of action" (Stelter, 2017, p. 338). To explore these values, we need time. "Coaching, as a way of lingering, a process of slowing down to think and reflect" (Stelter, 2018, p11). Narrative coaching creates a cultural awareness which can be a point of departure for the creation of alternative narratives. Through co- and reconstruction of our stories we can grow. Narrative coaching tries to obtain a conscious professional identity. (Verhaeghe & Den Haese, In press, 166).

3.3.7 Valuing and analysing practice together

Some methods emphasise the importance of valuing each other's practice proactively. A known HRM working model is appreciative inquiry which seeks to engage stakeholders in self-determined

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change.⁹ It focuses on what participants want more of—not what they want less of. This creates momentum and intrinsic motivation among the participants. It is easier to create change by amplifying the positive qualities of a group than by trying to fix the negative qualities.

The method has 5 phases:

- ▶ Definition: What is our focus? What do we want to enhance and strengthen?
- ▶ Discovery: Identify which factors are positive for successful practice
- ▶ Dream: How will it be if the factors from phase 2 are present more of the time?
- ▶ Design: How do we make the dream phase come true? Planning and prioritising
- ▶ Delivery: Implementation of the design.
- ▶ Visionary phase: All participants try to envision an ideal future, to draw an exaggerated picture of future possibilities. This is a brainstorm phase where you try to imagine that everything is possible—there are no limits. After the brainstorm you sort the ideas into broader themes and go into depth with the different themes. The ideal futures are presented to the others.
- ▶ Implementation/realisation phase: The critique and the visionary phase are linked. The ideas found are checked and evaluated in regard to their practicability. At the end people agree on which actions should be implemented and agree on who does what before meeting again.

In a Danish project appreciative inquiry was, for example, used in To Do Future workshops.¹⁰ This project had the following phases:

- ▶ Preparation Phase: the method, its rules and the scheduled course of the workshop (in accordance with the participants) is introduced.
- ▶ Critique phase: The problem is investigated critically and thoroughly. First of all, a visualised brainstorming is performed and a general and critical question concerning the problem is framed. The main points are summed up.
- ▶ Specifically in the field of ECEC, the WANDA method¹¹ has been developed in Belgium, which is partially inspired by appreciative inquiry and partially by the French CPD method 'Analyse de Pratiques' (Fabre, 2004). It shares the philosophy of other reflective methods, with the strength of bringing reflection into practice through specific phases that support the group and the individuals towards:
 - ▶ Professional development: participants grow in their profession as individuals and as a group.
 - ▶ Increasing and rediscovering appreciation towards the work (motivation) and towards the people involved (children, colleagues, parents, yourself, community).
 - ▶ Dealing with the increasing diversity in society through appreciation and critical (self-) analysis.

9. <http://appreciativeinquiry.champlain.edu>

10. <http://nvl.org/Content/To-Do-A-Way-of-Integrating-the-Newcomers>

11. www.wanda.community

WANDA can be organised within a team of different practitioners/teachers that work together, or by creating a group made by people that work in different institutions, have the same role or function and want to reflect on their practices (De Schepper et al., 2015; Van Laere & al., 2012).

3.3.8 Observing and reflecting together

Within the START project on warm and inclusive transitions across the Early Years,¹² practitioners and researchers from Italy, Slovenia, Belgium and England (UK) have developed an observation method to be used in a professional learning community.

Observing & reflecting is the basis of educators who act pedagogically. By different groups of practitioners making observations in the different settings, professionals from both childcare and preschool will start to discover that children are already very capable once they arrive in childcare or in preschool. When professionals from different backgrounds (childcarers, teachers) observe together and discuss how children act and learn, the necessity of a holistic viewpoint in which caring and learning are inseparable is automatically brought to the foreground. With the exercises 'observing and reflecting', competences of teachers and childcare workers to become more sensitive and responsive to the needs of each child and parent will be strengthened. The pedagogical coach has an important role in guiding the observations made by teachers and childcare workers. Observing and reflecting requires mutual trust. With this tool, we focus on peer learning activity. 'Learning from each other' is an important objective of the learning network. Besides observing in your own setting/context, it is also interesting to visit a colleague in 'his/her' own setting/context.

This tool covers three steps

1. One-day training session, warming-up by using external movie fragments and/or photos.
2. Observe an action within your own organisation.
3. Observing an action within another organisation.

In order to gradually build up the process of observing, giving words to what they see and eventually sharing reflections, this method includes different steps, at least over a course of 6 months. In the first step, movie fragments or photos of children and families in ECEC and primary schools are used to observe and reflect upon. In the second step, staff members observe the classrooms or playgroups of their colleagues in their own institution (at a time when both child and parent are in the classroom, and with the child alone). The observations and reflections are shared, preferably supported by a pedagogical coach in the ECEC centre or school. In a third phase, professionals from different settings visit one another and observe similar moments. These observations are discussed with all the professionals in the inter-institutional learning network. When sufficient time and support is given to the professionals, they will come to a point at which they discuss the meaning of educating and caring for young children.

12. <http://start.pei.si/results>

4.

CONCLUSIONS

4. CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this literature review, conducted as part of the VALUE project was to:

1. gain a more detailed understanding of the position and the working conditions of ECEC assisting and core practitioners in each of the VALUE countries involved: Belgium (FI), Denmark, Portugal and Slovenia.
2. gather and analyse literature and methods on how to support the collaboration between ECEC core and assisting practitioners.

The overview of the different countries in the first part of the report gave us insights into the fact that the collaboration between core and assisting practitioners strongly depends on the history and socio-cultural specific context in which the ECEC system has developed. Our data indicate that the position, job tasks and possibilities for collaboration and continuous professional development for assisting practitioners are significantly better in countries with unitary systems in which a conceptual integration of care and education exists in combination with a fairly democratic approach of staff management.

The role played by the ECEC workforce to enhance the pedagogical quality of services for young children is underlined by the European Quality Framework for ECEC,¹³ which states that *'professional development has a huge impact on the quality of staff pedagogy and children's outcomes'*. Developing education and training programmes for all staff working in the ECEC context (e.g. preschool teachers, assistants, educators, family day carers, etc.), helps to create a shared agenda and understanding of quality'. This is still a challenge in Europe, where stronger investment is needed in joint continuous professional development (CPD) for both assisting

and core practitioners. In most European countries, when CPD paths exist, they usually involve the core practitioners only, not the pedagogical assistants. When they include assistants, the paths for the latter and for core practitioners are separated, which means that pedagogical assistants and core practitioners usually don't have opportunities (nor time) to reflect, learn and plan together, yet they are both involved together in daily important tasks and interactions with children and families.

As an essential part of the professional competent system we have focussed on the importance of Collaborative Practice and Learning as a way of organising joint context-based CPD for core and assisting practitioners. More specifically, we have summarised the conditions and some examples of methods for how to enable a sustainable collaborative practice and learning between core and assisting practitioners. During this research process we discovered many already implemented successful collaborative practices in the participating countries, but mostly not enough reflected on national decision-making level to become part of the structural and professional expectations in ECEC.

From the beginning of our common discussions all participating countries believed in the importance of collaborative practice, implemented with respectful interactions between all individuals working in competent ECEC systems. We hope that this literature review, undertaken with a lot of patience, respect and dialogue in the process of developing shared and common meaning with all the colleagues from participating countries (Belgium, Denmark, Portugal, Slovenia) will inspire other European stakeholders to make the position of assisting practitioners in ECEC more visible and invest in collaborative practice and shared learning in ECEC for both core and assisting practitioners.

13. DG Education and Culture. Proposal for key principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care. Brussels: European Commission, 2014.

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Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

