Building partnership
with parents
in inclusive ECEC

Two case studies from Belgium



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Two case studies from Belgium



1 Introduction

> *"It's easy to say we see parents as experts. We all started this project with the conviction that we already considered parents as experts. But the more the project was advancing, the more we noticed how little we know about what this really means 'to see parents as experts', and how much we can still explore and learn in how to adjust our practices and our actions to really enact it."*
>
> - *Be-In* partner

This statement that came out at the last meeting of the Erasmus+ *Be-In* project, a three-years transnational project over building partnership with parents in inclusive Early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings, with partners from Belgium, Iceland and Portugal. In this country report, we focus on the trajectory of the local project team in Belgium (Flanders), composed with different partners: *Ghent University* (Department of Special Needs Education), *VBJK* (Centre for innovation in the Early Years), *City of Ghent* (and ECEC centre *De Bron*) and *De Blauwe Lelie* (and ECEC centre *De Kleine Wereld*). Since 2022, we stepped into this three-year international project to explore in-depth two topics that are closely interrelated: inclusion in ECEC and partnership with parents.

We knew from the start that both topics were intrinsically complex and nuanced and required to bring all partners into a long-term reflective process to transform everyday practices. It is why this project was designed as a collaborative action research, to explore context-specific conditions, visions, practices and to propose avenues for actions that are embedded in each country and in each centre. For all partners, it was in a certain way a path of humility: daring to reflect on their own practices, to rethink 'why', 'how', 'for whom' again and to accept that changes come out of small little actions and steps. It was also a path of discovery: a lot of inspiring 'aha'-moments, of challenging discussions and of captivating encounters, which created positive impacts in the practices of our two pilot centres. We were able to concretely notice changes in different aspects of their practices: daily encounters with parents, guidelines to support meetings with parents, vision on inclusion, professional development support offered to each team, etc.

In both pilots, the actions proposed, and the changes observed were closely linked to their context. As such, their stories are not shared here with the idea they can be integrally reproduced somewhere else. But we believe a lot can be learned from the process of each pilot: the centres documented their baseline situation in inclusive ECEC and in collaboration with parents in order to formulate learning questions and design an action plan for the centre. We mapped together the actions they experimented with, and documented what they learned along the way – and how – and what were the conditions necessary to initiate and support those transformative processes.

2 Context of the action research

2.1 Macro-context: Inclusive ECEC in Flanders, Belgium

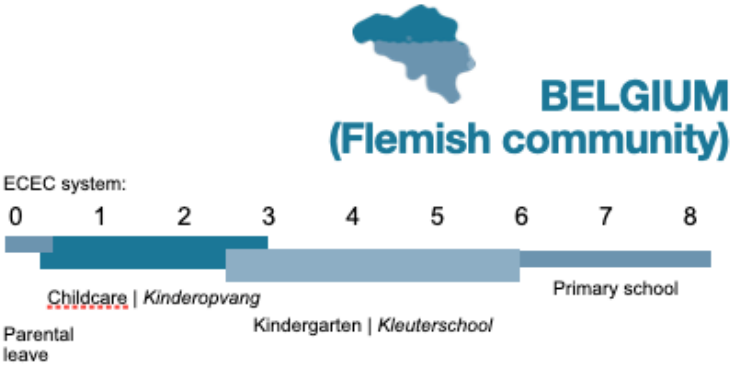


Figure 1. Organisation chart of the education and ECEC system

Flanders is one out of three (regional and language) communities in Belgium, each having their own system of (ECEC) since 1984. In general, the three communities offer the same services but with slightly different emphasises. In this project, both pilots are under **Flemish legislation**.

ECEC in Flanders is organised as a **split-system**. The provision of childcare for children aged 0-3 is the responsibility of the Department of Public Health, Welfare & Families and administered in tandem with the governmental agency *Opgroeien.* They provide regulations, allocation of places, funding, quality standards and management. Their responsibility also encompasses school care & preventive family support. Different private and public providers, subsidised or not, organise and provide daily childcare services. Childcare in Flanders is provided in a centre-based setting or a home-based setting. All settings are required to have a license based on various requirements such as hygiene, safety measures, infrastructure, and staff qualification. Licenses are regularly inspected by the care inspectorate. The *Opgroeien* agency takes their report as a basis for evaluation. Pre-primary education or preschool for children aged 2,5 to 6 is an integral part of 'primary education' and falls under the authority of the Flemish Ministry of Education and Training. Preschool settings, mostly linked with primary schools, are provided either by local authorities or private settings. Most schools also provide before and after school care. This action-research study focused on **childcare for children aged 0-3 years old.**

Access to childcare services

Parental leave is divided between 15 weeks' leave for the mother, starting at the earliest 6 weeks before and at the last 1 week before the due date and 20 working days' leave for the other parent (that can be taken during the first 4 months of a baby's life). Both leaves are financed by the Federal Health Insurance. For each child, a parent has the right to 4 extra months parental leave that can be consumed up to the child's 12th birthday. Parental leave can be taken flexibly: full-time or various part-time options.

Places in Flemish childcare are **scarce and unequally accessible**. Parents need to decide on a place in childcare very early in the pregnancy. In and around the cities, the problem is even more urgent, and a place is not guaranteed. 30% of all children in Flanders attend childcare at the age of 2 to 5 months and 70% of children 1 to 2 years. 24% of the families attending childcare are families with migration backgrounds; 22% live in

poverty – both groups are significantly underrepresented. The number of average days spent in childcare decreases when one of the following criteria comes in: other than Belgian nationality, other than the Dutch language and low education level of the mother. Places in regulated childcare settings are partly financed by the government agency *Opgroeien* (subsidised by the Flemish government) and partly by parents, based on their income. 70% of all places in childcare are income related. Places in private settings are mostly financed by parents at a general price for one day.

Children from the age of 2,5 are permitted a **free place** in pre-primary education. Local authorities and pre-primary settings are activated to focus on toddler participation.

Focus on inclusion in the policy

Inclusion of children with special needs is an important focus of the policies of *Opgroeien* as part of an international framework on children's rights and respect for diversity in childcare. The goal is that every child should have equal access to high-quality ECEC. Since 2001, childcare settings can receive a financial incentive when they take care of a child with special needs. In 2014, *Opgroeien* accredited 16 **Centres for Inclusive Childcare** (*Centrum voor Inclusieve Kinderopvang [CIK])* whose mission is to provide inclusive care for young children with special needs (0 to 12 years), and to spread expertise on inclusive practices to other ECEC providers. Each centre has one or more inclusion coaches. The inclusion coach has 3 tasks: (1) provide inclusive services with special needs in their childcare services, (2) support other childcare providers within the local region and (3) build a regional network supporting inclusion of children with special needs. Our two partners in this project, *De Blauwe Lelie* and *City of Ghent* are CIK's with both an inclusion coach.

While childcare settings recognise the value of inclusive childcare and the number of participating children with special needs has increased, it remains very low in Flanders. A lot of children with special needs stay at home or go to specialise childcare facilities because of a lack of options (*Opgroeien*, 2018). There is a strong **need to raise awareness on the value of inclusive childcare**.

Staff in ECEC

In centre-based childcare settings, the **staff-child ratio** was recently taken down (with a transition period until 2027) from 1:9 (1 childcare worker for 9 children) to: 1:5 for children until 18 months, 1:8 for children from 18 months to 3 years, and 1:7 for mixed groups. Groups should not exceed 18 children (with 3 childcare workers). Home-based settings care for a maximum of seven children. Many children make part-time use of childcare settings. There is a lot of pressure from parents and childcare workers to reduce the staff-child ratio. This was certainly impacting on the daily practices of the ECEC-centres that joined the pilots.

Most childcare workers hold a **qualification**, either a secondary vocational degree (ISCED 4) or a certificate from adult education. Since 2011, a new, higher-level education program was introduced: the bachelor's degree in *Pedagogy of the Young Child*. Graduates of this program take on roles such as pedagogical coaches, supporting childcare settings through coaching and management and also direct engagement with children and families. However, salaries are generally low, which, combined with high job demands, has led to significant staff shortages and high turnover rates. Many professionals leave the sector due to the intense workload and challenging working conditions, making retention a persistent issue.

In 2014, a **pedagogical framework** was developed by *Opgroeien*. The framework explains pedagogical quality and gives guidelines towards how to achieve it by focusing on the six dimensions of pedagogical quality: (1) well-being, (2) engagement, (3) emotional support, (4) educational support, (5) environment and (6) families and diversity. Dimension 6 specifically focus on the relationship with parents: to have a partnership with

parents, to exchange information continuously, to let parents participate and have input in the decision making, to support parents and to show respect for diversity of/in families. Childcare settings are expected to be able to demonstrate how they implement this framework in their everyday childcare.

Childcare centres are **evaluated** by the agency *Opgroeien*. The 2014 decree on the organisation of daycare set out a quality manual describing structural features of home- and centre-based childcare. The research project 'Measuring and Monitoring the Quality of Childcare for Babies and Toddlers – MeMoQ' has been a recent motor in developing an instrument to assess the quality of the ECEC sector in Flanders, an instrument for the inspectorate to evaluate the centres and a self-evaluation instrument. These instruments are now commonly used in the sector.

Possible external support for inclusion and partnership with parents

Preventive medical, psychosocial and pedagogical consultation is available for every child and parent, free of charge. The consultation office of ***Kind & Gezin*** (under the umbrella of the agency *Opgroeien*) contacts every new parent after birth and schedules 10 appointments between 0 to 2,5 years where the child is measured, vaccinated and preventively seen by a paediatrician. During those consultations parents receive advice and support regarding education, parenting, nutrition, sleep... ***Huizen van het Kind*** provides local collaborations between different organisations in the lives of children and parents (childcare, health care, spare time, parenting support...). It is a place for encounter for children and parents. Sixteen Flemish low threshold support teams are connected to these local centres. They provide parent support for vulnerable families from pregnancy until the child is 3. The more intense support teams offer meeting places, play groups, courses among other services for families. **The Flemish Agency for Persons with a Disability (VAPH)** provides services for families with young children with special needs. Among their provisions of 'directly accessible support' parents can rely on family support, support for children and parents, as well as professionals that guide families of young children in childcare or at school.

Challenges for ECEC in Flanders

The ECEC sector is currently **under fire** and frequently in the news. There is the question of lowering the adult-child ratio and investing in the sector to create (more flexible) access. Also recurring topics: the low wages for staff that make the job unattractive and the general lack of qualified staff. Parents have been attending the Flemish Parliament with their children for days to stress the urgency of their demand to attend to the precarious quality of childcare in Flanders. Parents hesitate to have confidence in the childcare sector. Especially some parents with a child with special needs doubt if Flemish childcare can provide their child with suitable care and education.

The **transition from childcare to pre-school** remains a challenge due to the split-system that seems to separate 'learning' from 'care' and juxtaposes 'caring' and 'teaching' roles. Childcare in Flanders is to this day still undervalued in its pedagogical and social role. The sector could benefit from a holistic vision integrating learning and caring, from investing in collaboration between both settings and creating warm and inclusive transitions. Such transitions could be characterised by continuity of pedagogical vision and care, continued connections with families and local communities, long-term connections in terms of professionalisation as well as in structural characteristics.

Finally, **collaborating and connecting with parents** is dependent on the initiatives of the setting and is not structurally embedded. Through the split-system, the older the children become, the more distance emerges between the parents and the setting.

2.2 Description of the two local pilots

The Be-In project has its origin in the collaboration of two inclusion coaches, respectively based in *City of Ghent* and in *De Blauwe Lelie* in Bruges. In their supportive coaching interventions, centred on the inclusion of children with special needs, they noticed that they also often needed to address how to include the voices of parents and how to develop a partnership. They noticed that although their coaching was about simple aspects of the interactions with parents - how you welcome parents, avoiding tips in upbringing, creating time to build dialogue, both formal and informal – it was not that easy to accompany ECEC professionals on this aspect. The need became even more prominent after the Corona pandemic, where contact with parents had been weakened.

In March 2021, both inclusion coaches, together with VBJK, wrote the first lines of what would become the Be-In project. At the same time, they started searching to develop a tool to strengthen the professionals in connecting with parents to support the coaching process of ECEC professionals in the daily practices and to support partnership with parents, with a special focus and care for parents with a child with special needs.

When the Erasmus+ Be-In Project was approved, in March 2022, both pilots put out an internal call to select both one pilot among all their childcare centres. *De Bron* in *City of Ghent* and De *Kleine Wereld* in *De Blauwe Lelie* in Bruges were selected.

De Bron (Stad Gent)

De Bron is an ECEC managed by the municipality of Ghent. The City of Ghent's Childcare Services Department fulfils two key roles in the sector: it oversees and regulates all childcare services within the city while also actively operating as a childcare provider itself.

De Bron offers daycare for children 0-3 years in 5 different vertical groups for a total capacity of 96 places. They have been profiled for many years as an inclusive childcare facility. The city of Ghent is a recognised Centre for Inclusive Childcare (in Dutch, *Centrum voor Inclusieve Kinderopvang*), but already with a long tradition in inclusive childcare. All childcare settings in Ghent have a mission for inclusion, but *De Bron* is characterised by a proactive inclusion policy: they reserve places for children with special needs and create various possibilities to meet the diverse needs of children and parents. In addition to their vision on inclusion, their practices are guided by strong principles of diversity and accessibility, with a foundation in the concept of a competent child. However, the coordinator of *De Bron* recognised the need for further team efforts to create a welcoming environment for both children and parents while continuing to reduce barriers to access for diverse families in a dense, vibrant neighbourhood with many challenges around poverty and migration.

They put together a multilayered project team:

- the inclusion coach, who works on a higher level in the organisation of childcare in *City of Ghent*
- one of the 3 ECEC coordinators of *De Bron*, with an overview of the whole team,
- one pedagogical coach with an internal mandate who works both at organisation level, at team and group level
- one childcare worker who brought insights from her own work practice in her group.

Despite the high staff turnover in Ghent, as seen across the ECEC sector, the entire project team remained intact and actively engaged throughout the action research, following the process from start to finish.

De Kleine Wereld (De Blauwe Lelie)

De Kleine Wereld is an ECEC childcare centre in Bruges, that is part of *De Blauwe Lelie*. *De Blauwe Lelie* is a public welfare organisation, linked to *OCMW Brugge* (Public Centre for Social Welfare, which is organised by the municipality of Bruges). *De Blauwe Lelie* is also accredited by the Agency *Opgroeien* as a Centre for Inclusive Childcare.

In *De Blauwe Lelie*, the *Be-In* project was at first more rooted in the pedagogical team, with two principal protagonists, the inclusion coach and a special project coordinator. They involved one of their centres in developing the action research process, piloting, and documenting concrete actions that could influence the entire organisation and extend to other centres. *De Kleine Wereld*, conveniently located next to the offices of the pedagogical team, provided an ideal setting for experimentation, allowing for close collaboration and daily accessibility for the project team.

De Kleine Wereld welcomes about 140 children in 6 vertical groups (in total 102 places). The choice was made, at the beginning of the Be-In project, to work first with one group, *De Zonnetjes* (Little Suns) from which one of the childcare workers was immediately involved as an active member in the project team. The coordinator of *De Kleine Wereld* was initially not actively part of the project team. However, it became quickly clear that developing action research in an ECEC centre cannot be supported only by external coaches. As such, one of the two coordinators of *De Kleine Wereld* took part in the project team from year 2.

Unfortunately, the project team of *De Blauwe Lelie* suffered from staff turnover during the project. The inclusion coach, which was initially the main project coordinator, changed functions after a few months. Coordination of the project team in *De Blauwe Lelie* was taken over by the head of the pedagogical team from the end of the first year until the end of the project. A new inclusion coach integrated the project only during the second year of the project (2024). The special project coordinator also left her function after a few months. During the third year, the ECEC coordinator from *De Kleine Wereld* and the involved childcare worker from *De Zonnetjes* also left. A pedagogical coach, assigned to *De Kleine Wereld,* took therefore the mandate to follow the implementation of the Be-In action plan at the centre level for a few months.

During the last year of the project, the implementation and documentation of the Be-In action plan was piloted by:

- the pedagogical team coordinator of *De Blauwe Lelie*
- the inclusion coach of *De Blauwe Lelie*
- the pedagogical coach of *De Kleine Wereld*

3 The action research path in Flanders: step by step

Action research aims to take the stakeholders, as co-researchers, into a longitudinal, learning journey that we can broadly divide into three phases: development phase (year 1), implementation phase (year 1 to year 3) and concluding phase (year 3).

3.1 Baseline research – coming to the learning questions

To start such a journey, we first needed to identify which learning questions would guide our path. To define, together with the two ECEC centres, their own learning questions, we documented their baseline situation, using the reflection tool ***'What if Marit's or Abel's parents knock at your door?'*** developed by Ghent University[1]. The tool proposes teams to read a case description of Marit, a child with special needs and her parents in their first steps towards a childcare setting. It allows teams to reflect on their own practices in inclusive childcare and connective partnership with parents. Both centres did this exercise with their project team and brought it together in our first local intervision meeting. The results prompted a reflection on the gap that exists in every organisation between written policies and actual practices, as well as the questions, projects, and aspirations that shape their daily operations.

We enriched those reflections with the questions proposed by a **self-reflection tool**[1] developed by the European agency for children with special needs.

During the first year, Ghent University also conducted semi-structured **interviews with parents** in each centre to bring in their perspectives into the exchanges and action plan. The interviews with parents highlighted several key insights about their experiences and expectations regarding childcare:

- First, the process of finding suitable childcare varied greatly among parents—while some were able to secure their first choice, others faced significant challenges and uncertainty. Trust in the medical world also shifted over time, with initial confidence giving way to scepticism when medical predictions did not align with reality.
- Across all interviews, the importance of encountering the 'right' people were emphasised—having someone to help navigate the childcare system, offer support beyond working hours, or provide crucial connections made a significant difference.
- When it comes to childcare, parents highly value a low child-to-caregiver ratio, access to outdoor play and nature, and patient, flexible caregivers who adapt to each child's needs.
- Warm, transparent, and honest communication fosters trust between parents and caregivers, allowing for a collaborative partnership where concerns can be openly shared. Daily updates about their child's experiences and a non-judgmental approach—both towards parents and children—are crucial in making families feel accepted and supported.
- Safety remains a top priority, with some parents expressing specific concerns about certain group structures, such as vertical grouping.
- Additionally, they appreciate variety in play materials and the presence of a diverse group of children, which they see as enriching for their child's development.

This helped the two centres to prepare a presentation of their setting and work at the first international venue: a **training week** in Portugal in October 2022. The training week allowed us to agree on a shared definition of

[1] See *Be-In: Catalogue of inspirational resources*, Tool A and B (www.vbjk.be/en/project/be-in).

the main concepts in this project: inclusive ECEC and partnership with parents (or rather, as we were to discover during the course of the project, to initiate this process of defining those concepts). Both centres then started **formulating their learning questions** for this project, which would constitute the base of their action plan. Those questions were indirectly inspired and refined through the **international job shadowing trajectories**. During the spring 2023, for 4 days each time:

- *De Kleine Wereld (De Blauwe Lelie)* received two colleagues from playschool *Múlaborg* (Iceland)
- *De Bron* (*Stad Gent*) received three colleagues from *Crèche Shalom* (Portugal)
- *De Kleine Wereld (De Blauwe Lelie)* (3 colleagues) went job shadowing in Bela Vista (Portugal)
- *De Bron* (*Stad Gent*) (3 colleagues) went job shadowing in playschool *Sudurborg*, in Iceland

De Bron settled on four learning questions:

- How can we strengthen the relation of trust between parents of children with specific needs?
- How can we take parents as experts and a resource to include their child?
- How can we have better communication with parents?
- How can we connect parents with each other?

De Kleine Wereld focused on the following three learning questions:

- How do we create a safe base for parents in order to consolidate the communication between parents and childcare setting?
- Which specific actions can support our communication with parents who speak a different language or who experience another barrier?
- How can we keep an inclusive attitude in our team, even when there are no children with extra needs in the location/when there is a big turnover of staff?

To translate those learning questions into an action plan, both pilots did extra consultations with their project teams. It was a long process – longer than we thought initially, as it continued through the first months of the second year (while the implementation of actions was already started). But this time allowed them to really picture it as a team process, which impacted the sustainability of what was achieved during the process.

De Bron dedicated a pedagogical team meeting to the topics of the Be-In project at the end of the first year (April 2023). To start discussions and collect different perspectives and needs of childcare workers regarding inclusion and partnership with parents, they used a game developed by the city of Ghent, named **All-inclusive game**[2], conceived with the goal to point out the experienced needs of the team and trigger discussion of the whole childcare team. To get the whole team more involved, the same methodology was also used by the team of *De Kleine Wereld* in December 2023.

3.2 Implementation phase of the action plans in both centres

Each centre was independent in the implementing their action plan and followed their own course and pace during this phase. To support this process, **regular intervision sessions** (5–6 per year) were held with both ECEC centre project teams, Ghent University and VBJK. These sessions provided dedicated time for work and

[2] See *Be-In: Catalogue of inspirational resources*, Tool C (www.vbjk.be/en/project/be-in).

reflection, allowing participants to discuss ongoing actions, share ideas, inspire one another and address challenges and barriers that emerged during the action research. The sessions brought a sense of tempo to the project, offering a platform to articulate actions, evaluate observed impacts and deepen collective reflection. Each session was documented, and it became clear that participation in those sessions led to a stronger understanding of the key concepts. Additionally, the sessions served as an entry point for new participants, helping them integrate into the project during the implementation phase. Creative solutions also emerged from these sessions, as for the participation of students from Ghent University in the two settings, as an answer to a consistent feeling of not having enough time to work on all the actions that were possible and viable. The students allowed some actions to become concrete and materialised, while the project team in both centres remained in charge of the processes. It sped up the actions without losing ownership over the process.

In parallel, three **online international intervisions** in Iceland, Portugal and Flanders were held during this implementation period and the evolution of each action plan was followed.

Throughout the implementation phase, a dedicated workgroup, led by both inclusion coaches, developed further the Flemish version of the **reflection tool *Connecting with Parents***.[3] This tool is designed to capture the complexities of coaching childcare professionals in their interactions with parents, particularly those of children with special needs. The workgroup's efforts ran parallel to the implementation phase in both settings, ensuring that insights from practice informed the tool's development and vice versa.

3.3 Concluding phase: bringing together what we learned

We documented and analysed the entire process in both ECEC settings, compiling a comprehensive overview enriched with interviews from key stakeholders. This was analysed by Ghent University and presented multiple times, including during intervision meetings with the Flemish team, an international gathering with partners from Portugal and Iceland, and a dissemination event in Brussels. With each presentation, we refined the analysis, delving deeper into the actions taken by both ECEC centres and the key insights gained from their experiences. It was written up and deepened by VBJK in dialogue with Ghent University and both ECEC settings.

To conclude the action research, we presented the three-year process during team meetings at *De Bron* and discussed it at *De Kleine Wereld*. We ensured that the case study accurately reflected the experiences of both project teams and gathered their feedback on several occasions. Additionally, together with our policy partner in this project, the Agency *Opgroeien*, we explored ways to sustain and further implement the *Be-In* goals—fostering inclusive childcare and strengthening collaborative relationships with parents in the two centres and beyond.

[3] See tool ***Connecting with Parents*****,** available in four languages at: www.vbjk.be/en/project/be-in.

3.4 Key elements in the process of the action research in *De Bron* and *De Kleine Wereld*

Allowing time to work, reflect and create sustainable changes

Action research involves collaborating with diverse partners from childcare practices as co-researchers. It positions the Flemish project team as critical friends, working together on a shared and accessible journey of co-constructing actions, solutions and meanings. The processes in both pilots required time — something often scarce in daily childcare settings. A three-year project was essential to allow all partners to grow, develop confidence and recognise the value of their contributions. Through reflection, the centres became very active to observe their practices, apply insights in action-oriented ways and gradually transform ideas into meaningful, concrete changes in all layers of their organisation.

We aimed to balance giving each partner the freedom to explore their own path while providing structured guidance or intensive coaching when needed to support progress. One such approach was the introduction of concrete action plans in both settings. In *De Kleine Wereld*, where staff turnover was high, VBJK occasionally suggested more top-down interventions to keep the project moving forward. In hindsight, these interventions did not always effectively advance the process, as they were not fully integrated into the action research in a whole-ECEC setting approach. Additionally, the pace and needs of the already involved and new actors were not always adequately considered. However, as discussed later, these efforts to realign the action research also did spark movement and change, planting seeds for the long-term impact within the organisation. Throughout the process, we learned to adapt to the varying needs and challenges of each ECEC team, though this was not always entirely possible within the constraints of the Be-In project.

Multi-layered and consistent project team

In *De Bron*, a stable project team, supported by strong leadership on all existing layers, enabled the development of a multi-layered team that effectively advanced the objectives of the Be-In project. Throughout the action research, they could rely on a core team consisting of a childcare worker, a pedagogical coach, one of the centre coordinators and the inclusion coach from the city of Ghent. Each level of involvement brought diverse perspectives and leadership styles, fostering a rich and dynamic learning process to the entire Flemish project team. This multilayered project team in *De Bron* ensured continuity and facilitated early dissemination of insights, both within De Bron and at the municipal level.

The participation of ECEC coordinators and pedagogical coaches played a crucial role in creating the structural conditions necessary for the action research to succeed in the ECEC centres. It enabled educators to take extra time and feel confident enough for in-depth collaboration with parents on an everyday basis, despite operational constraints. We believe this model should be encouraged in similar projects, as it prevents fragmented actions and instead embeds them within a broader, multi-layered approach to inclusive ECEC and connective partnership with parents.

Importance of looking over the wall of an ECEC childcare organisation

For both Belgian partners, the regular intervision meetings in Flanders and international online exchanges positively facilitated their reflection processes and action research. It kept them very alert and active in their own reflection and actions in the research process.

The job shadowing activities played a facilitating role in a more indirect way, because the contexts of the 3 countries were very different. However, it gave the local projects another dimension. In each centre, staff still talks about the visit of the Icelandic's and Portuguese's partners. They became aware of what was going on in the Be-In project. *De Kleine Wereld* notably included a childcare worker in the exchange with Iceland, not just pedagogical staff, emphasising the importance of making such opportunities more accessible to frontline professionals and recognising their contributions and innovative potential. Coordinating the job-shadowing with international partners strengthened their sense of ownership over the project. The four-day stays, conducted in small groups, deepened relationships between partners and, most importantly, fostered critical reflection by exposing participants to alternative practices shaped by different cultural and organisational contexts.

Concrete co-creation of the tool *Connecting with Parents*

Early in the process, we decided on the format of one of our key outputs—the reflection tool *Connecting with Parents*—not just as a final dissemination product but as an integral part of the Be-In project. This decision allowed us to establish a local workgroup dedicated to developing the tool, enabling both teams to test, refine and evaluate it throughout the project. It provided a concrete framework for fostering connective collaboration with parents, running parallel to the more reflective intervision meetings on action research.

Working on the tool together also deepened our understanding of each other and strengthened our grasp of the two central foci of the *Be-In* project. Working with parents of children with special needs has long been a sensitive and complex area. However, the strategies and support that benefit these parents also prove valuable for all parents. By emphasising this broader value, professionals are more likely to engage effectively. Through discussions about wording, reflective questions and inspiring quotes, we not only shaped a practical resource but also refined our shared comprehension of inclusive practices and parent partnerships.

4 The case study of *De Bron:* where little steps pave the way towards the destination

4.1 Baseline: an ECEC centre with an inclusive profile and a lot of questions

ECEC centre *De Bron* is one of the oldest childcare settings in the city of Ghent and very early on it was profiled as an inclusive ECEC centre. This means that the centre kept structural places for children with special needs. The city of Ghent evolved in the meanwhile in their vision towards an inclusive ECEC provider where all centres are working on inclusive early childhood education. Nevertheless, a strong vision on inclusion was very palpable in *De Bron* and is a necessary answer to the superdiversity in the neighbourhood where the centre is located.

However, they still had a lot of questions:

- When parents of a child with special needs knock at the door, should we check first with the team of childcare workers whether inclusion for this child is possible here, so that everyone feels comfortable and engaged?
- The coordinator reserves a lot of time to personally receive, guide, and listen to the parents. However, how can the whole team be involved?
- We know how important the contacts with parents are during the informal arrival and departure moments, to build a partnership with them, but we still struggle to do this and be sure that every child carer does it. How can we do it in another way?
- There is a lack of documents to support the intake period and no time to work on it.
- Increasing diversity and multilingualism of parents brings new challenges in contact with parents, which adds pressure on having flexible tools, as well as time and support to implement these in the daily work.
- We have the feeling that parents with children with special needs find their way to us, as the setting is known to be welcoming and inclusive. But we keep asking ourselves: what about the other parents? Where are the parents that don't find their way to us? What is our role as ECEC centre?

4.2 From learning questions to actions

Even though the project team already had some ideas about what the Be-In project would allow them to do, like creating a conversation guideline to support each childcare worker during the first meeting with the parents, they took time to consult again the whole team, from the two foci of Be-In very central: realising inclusive education and a connective partnership with parents.

Playing the *All-inclusive game* with the whole team gave a lot of insights. They listened a lot to the existing needs of the staff, to better comprehend what they already did, what could be better, and why this was not happening yet. This is not only the responsibility of the coordinator, but they handle a whole-team approach:

> *"Communication with parents is very important. I want to spread and implement this more in the team with all childcare workers."*
>
> - ECEC coordinator, *De Bron*

They defined the following learning questions:

- How can we strengthen the relation of trust with parents of children with specific needs?
- How can we take parents as experts and a resource to include their child?
- How can we have better communication with parents?
- How can we connect parents with each other?

"I think we already were open to everything related to parents, so all the stimuli that came in on that front... and with this project - it makes you even more sensitive - and then you start paying even more attention to everything, in all your interventions, and in contact with parents, with partners. You actually always see more confirmation and much more deepening of what you actually already felt. On top of that, we can now put more words to it, grasp it so much more"

- inclusion coach, *City of Ghent*

It resonates with the image proposed by one of the Portuguese partners that the commitment to *Be-In* led to a Jimmy Cricket voice to grow in our heads, just like the grasshopper in Pinocchio's head, which reminds us to constantly question our contacts with parents, our posture, our vision on inclusion, until those reflections become a natural reflex.

This profound internal change did not happen from one day to another in the team of *De Bron* and on a municipal level - nor did it happen in the same way or rate for everyone. It is the result of a process filled with small actions and well-thought consistent steps over the three years.

"I've always said that change goes slow, and we should be happy with every little step, as it will be."

- ECEC coordinator, *De Bron*

4.3 Low threshold meetings among parents in the group

Small, meaningful changes in parent engagement





Encouraging parents to feel comfortable in the childcare setting does not always require large, centre-wide events. Traditionally, *De Bron* invited parents to collective gatherings, such as New Year celebrations or Mother's/Father's Day events. However, these occasions often attracted the same group of parents, while many remained unseen and uninvolved. Additionally, these formal events did not always provide enough opportunity for parents to connect with one another and build relationships. During her visit in Portugal, the childcare worker observed how informal relational support was naturally embedded in the centres there. Inspired by this, she and her colleagues introduced low-threshold moments of interaction within their own group, creating relaxed opportunities for parents to engage with their child in the centre. One successful

initiative was organising informal shared meals, where parents joined their children for small, everyday moments rather than structured events. This approach helped bridge connections among parents and created a more welcoming, inclusive environment. Encouraged by the childcare worker's enthusiasm, the pedagogical coach and coordinator invited other groups to observe and consider implementing similar initiatives.

Strengthening everyday parent-childcare worker interactions

> *"Now I start with an idea in my head, and I pass this on to colleagues. You always need to think, even if the perspective of the parent is different from yours, it's all in the best interest of the child. That's one of the strongest things that I always keep in the back of my mind."*
>
> - childcare worker, *De Bon*

Through reflections in intervision meetings, the childcare worker repeatedly emphasised how she had become more sensitive and responsive to sharing meaningful updates with parents about their child's day. Instead of simply stating that the day had gone well or providing routine updates about food and sleep, she made a conscious effort to share one personal observation about a child. She realised that these small, individualised exchanges made a big difference to parents, showing them that their child was truly *seen*, understood, and valued.

This practice became second nature to her, and she recognised its significance—especially in a system under pressure, where high child-to-staff ratios often make such personal connections challenging. Her approach also had an impact on her colleagues—not as a directive, but as an encouragement to step beyond routine exchanges and build more informal, meaningful connections with parents. She became a voice within her team, reassuring others that trying new things and engaging with parents in simple, authentic ways were both possible and valuable.

4.4 Zoom in on familiarisation process

> *"The conversations are now happening with more attention for the parent, more attention for the reciprocity of familiarisation. It is not just us who want to get to know the child, it is also the parent who needs to get to know you, and we also want to get to know the parent and the family."*
>
> - coordinator of De Bron

One of the key foci that emerged during the action research at *De Bron* was enhancing the familiarisation process for new children and parents entering the centre. Rather than treating the intake conversation as the primary moment for meeting families, the team restructured the process to unfold over the three interconnected stages of the familiarisation process. This extended timeline created more opportunities to build trust and establish a meaningful relationship between the child, parents, and childcare workers:

(i) Initial intake conversation – A first meeting focused on familiarisation between the child, parents, and childcare worker.

(ii) Familiarisation period – A series of moments where the child gradually integrates into the centre, both with and without their parents, allowing time for reflection and adjustment.

(iii) Well-being conversation after two months – A follow-up discussion with parents to reflect on the initial experiences, reassess expectations, and strengthen communication.

The first concrete action in this process was revising the familiarisation conversation guideline (*wenbundel*), which serves as a guide during intake conversations with parents. Instead of merely collecting information about the child's care routines and parental expectations, *De Bron* sought to transform the document into a foundation for building relationships. They deliberately avoided developing a questionnaire for parents to complete at home, prioritising interactive discussions where parents—recognised as experts on their child—become partners in the ECEC process.

A new version of the familiarisation document was co-created with input from all key stakeholders: parents, childcare workers, pedagogical coaches, coordinators, and the inclusion coach from the City of Ghent. This collaborative approach ensured the document was not just a tool for gathering information but a meaningful support for dialogue.

A design-driven approach to refinement

Using a design-inspired method, several prototypes of the familiarisation conversation guideline were developed and tested, with help from the university students, who incorporated feedback from the team at each stage. They explored a variety of formats, emphasising clear language, visual aids, layout. Accessibility was a crucial consideration, seeking ways to ensure that all parents—regardless of language proficiency or familiarity with ECEC — could engage in the process. Another goal was also to make parents feel valued and reassured that the centre genuinely cares about getting to know them and their child.

The next phase focused on training and coaching the childcare workers to confidently use the familiarisation conversation guideline. This was done in close collaboration with the pedagogical coach and coordinator of *De Bron*, supported by an intern student. Through iterative feedback loops, the document and approach were continuously refined, allowing small but impactful adjustments to emerge. These included:

- Shifting to open-ended, reflective questions rather than yes/no formats.
- Adding more white space for notes, making it easier to document child-specific insights.
- Using a first-person perspective to make the document feel more personal.
- Simplifying language and replacing difficult terms with more accessible wording.
- Including a personal introduction of the childcare worker, not just the parent.
- Providing parents with a copy of the document, ensuring transparency in the process.

By fine-tuning these details, the document became a tool that fostered parental involvement and childcare worker confidence in initiating meaningful conversations. The team also experimented with functional multilingualism, using pictures, reformulated questions, and translation apps to bridge language barriers and support non-Dutch-speaking families.

Beyond a checklist: a tool for relationship building

> *"Some people have difficulty starting the conversation with parents, but now it is out in the open: I think this is difficult, what can I do? They are excited because the standards are much higher than before, but they notice they know a lot more and they feel the connection with parents."*
>
> - pedagogical coach, *De Bron*

It quickly became clear to all involved that the familiarisation document was not just a bureaucratic checklist, but a conversation guideline that encouraged genuine dialogue and partnership with parents. Parents were given the space to share their stories, while childcare workers refined their ability to listen without judgment

and tailor their questions to truly understand the child's needs. This shift reinforced the idea that building trust is the foundation for working effectively with each individual child and family.

This in-depth focus on the first step of the familiarisation process strengthened the entire team and shaped next steps in deepening parent relationships:

- Increased flexibility: the team adapted the process to respect the unique pace of each child and family. Familiarisation is no longer a fixed timeline but a responsive process that adjusts to individual needs.
- Follow-up conversation after two months: familiarisation is now seen as an ongoing process rather than a one-time event. They used the same design-based process, with the help of two other students, to develop the conversation guideline for the second structured conversation, that helps check whether families and staff remain aligned, offering space to discuss new observations and strengthen shared care. Throughout this process, every childcare worker was again actively supported in leading those conversations with parents.

Narrative of T., mother of B. on being a parent in De Bron

T., a mother of three, navigates life with her youngest son, B., who has a rare genetic condition. At four years old, B. faces significant developmental delays, struggles with communication, and has severe feeding issues, which led to the use of a feeding tube. Finding the right ECEC setting was a turning point for the family. The ECEC setting became more than just a care centre: it was a space of learning, progress, and belonging. It became clear that B. needed a setting that could provide tailored support for his unique developmental challenges. De Bron offered a structured environment where specialists worked closely with him, helping him develop essential skills at his own pace. The collaboration between the family and the centre was invaluable: childcare workers at De Bron coordinated with T. to ensure B. received consistent and personalised care. This partnership eased the burden on the family, offering not just education but also therapy and medical guidance. The holistic approach at De Bron reassured T. that B. was in the best possible hands, giving her the confidence to focus on his long-term well-being. This collaboration ultimately became a lifeline, demonstrating the power of specialised support in improving both the child's development and the family's quality of life. Afterwards, the family chose a specialised program tailored to his needs, where he could thrive in a structured and supportive environment. This decision provided not only individualised attention for B. but also a sense of relief for T., knowing he was in a place where his unique challenges were understood. Despite ongoing concerns about his long-term care, the collaboration with De Bron gave the family hope, proving that the right environment can make a profound difference.

Learning beyond the project

The team of *De Bron* not only deepened their understanding of parental partnership, but also learned how to co-create innovation at a team level. Every team member played an active role:

- Each childcare worker implemented and refined the process.
- Students collaborated closely with the pedagogical coach and the coordinator to develop improvements.
- The coordinator ensured alignment with the centres' broader vision and her vision on collaboration with parents.
- The inclusion coach from the city of Ghent provided external feedback, reinforcing the reflection process.

Additionally, VBJK and Ghent University facilitated structured feedback loops in intervision meetings with *De Blauwe Lelie*, discussions with students, and team reflections. By embedding continuous feedback mechanisms and actionable short deadlines, the project ensured that progress was both measurable and meaningful—not just about *what* was being developed, but also *how* it was being implemented. Through this structured yet flexible approach, *De Bron* laid a strong foundation for sustainable improvements in familiarisation, inclusion, and collaborative care with parents.

4.5 Defining synergy and roles into the multilayered team

The involvement of a diverse and well-balanced team, representing various professionals within the ECEC centre, has been a key strength in the *Be-In* action research at *De Bron*, as highlighted in the previous section. This mixed-team approach created a strong foundation of cohesion, ensuring continuity throughout the project. It allowed time for leadership and action to develop at every level of the organisation, strengthening a sense of ownership, mutual respect, and engagement among staff. Different professionals inspired and energised each other in building connective collaboration with parents, fostering a dynamic environment where ideas and initiatives could flourish in order to bring inclusion and collaboration with parents in the DNA of *De Bron*. Keeping this momentum going and channelling it into the broader team, with the guidance of the coordinator and the pedagogical coach, has been essential to sustaining progress.

For the childcare workers: a supportive environment for growth

"My opinion matters."

- childcare worker, *De Bron*

Throughout the action research process, the childcare worker involved in the project experienced a transformative realisation as she recognised that her ideas and actions at the group level had a meaningful impact. Over the course of the project, she gained confidence in articulating the value of her daily work and connecting it to a broader vision of partnership with parents and inclusion—one that resonated deeply with her practice.

As part of the project, she participated in the transnational meeting in Portugal, where she visited local childcare centres. When she first shared the news that she would be travelling to Portugal as part of her job, she was met with surprise and amazement—an eye-opening moment that reinforced how important her role was in realising an inclusive learning environment and connective collaboration with parents. Taking her participation seriously, she spent the week observing and reflecting on how the practices she witnessed could be adapted to her own daily work. Upon returning, she was eager to put her ideas into action, immediately trying out new approaches with her group.

At *De Bron*, the *Be-In* project team provided a strong foundation of support, encouragement, and guidance throughout the journey of the childcare worker. This empowering environment allowed her to take initiative, experiment with small yet meaningful actions, and develop her own approach to building stronger partnerships with parents. Her experience illustrates how personal growth and team-wide transformation are deeply interconnected—when childcare workers are given the space, confidence, and support to innovate, their efforts create ripples that positively impact the entire ECEC setting.

Translating a vision into practice: the duo coordinator and pedagogical coach

The pedagogical coach played a particularly supportive role in helping childcare workers build effective communication with parents, embedding coaching as a valuable tool for professional development. Together, the pedagogical coach and the coordinator championed a culture of collaboration—both with parents and within the organisation itself. They worked in tandem, spreading and reinforcing this professional vision across all teams. Their leadership and support were crucial in creating an environment where childcare workers felt both confident and safe enough to experiment, take initiative, and strengthen relationships with parents. Knowing their team well, they remained clear and transparent about how they envisioned the *Be-In* project shaping their organisation.

Discussions about the *Be-In* project were embedded into team meetings, allowing every staff member to contribute ideas and express their perspectives. The question was never *if* they would work towards inclusion and stronger partnerships with parents—it was about *how*, at what pace, and in what way. This approach embodied true empowerment: not just informing childcare workers about the project but actively recognising and valuing their expertise in fostering inclusive practices and parent partnerships. It wasn't just about making space for their voices to be heard but integrating their insights into meaningful actions, documents, and ongoing improvements.

Both the pedagogical coach and the coordinator deeply understood the collective power of their team and worked strategically to harness it, even in the face of significant challenges. They operated in a setting where full-time operations were not always possible, where staffing shortages were persistent, and where childcare workers had widely varying levels of experience and competencies—all within the context of an ECEC centre located in a challenging neighbourhood. Yet, their commitment to the *Be-In* vision and their organisation remained unwavering. As the action research evolved, as they felt the support of the inclusion coach and the Be-In project team, they continuously fuelled each other's determination, reinforcing their shared belief in the transformative potential of their work.

Piloting dissemination in the broader network: the duo coordinator and inclusion coach

> *"Actually, I think an inclusion coach should be a good networker. You can't do anything alone. You have to find partners and look at who can provide support from which angle. And from there, build a network with them."*
>
> - inclusion coach, *City of Ghent*

Another remarkable aspect of the *Be-In* project was how its lessons extended far beyond *De Bron*, progressively integrating into the broader ECEC landscape of Ghent. This dissemination was not a final step but an ongoing process throughout the entire project. In Ghent, multiple *Communities of Practice* focus on different themes within ECEC, bringing together professionals such as the pedagogical coach, ECEC coordinator, and inclusion coach. These key figures actively shared insights from *Be-In*, offering valuable perspectives and inspiring other childcare centres in the city.

The coordinator of *De Bron* took a proactive role in spreading these insights. During her regional meetings with other ECEC coordinators in Ghent, she frequently shared her centre's experiences, emphasising practical applications of action research. She saw it as her responsibility to ensure that *Be-In*'s key lessons reached wider networks and workgroups, helping to shape practices beyond her own setting.

Similarly, the inclusion coach played a crucial role in bridging *Be-In* with broader inclusive networks in Ghent and across Flanders. Acting as both a facilitator and a critical friend in the research process, she used her

extensive network to carry the project's findings into various professional circles. Rather than creating new dissemination events, she strategically leveraged existing platforms, continuously integrating *Be-In* insights into discussions on inclusion. Through this process, her own message about the importance of building partnerships with parents to foster inclusion became even more nuanced and impactful.

This strong dissemination process highlights both collective and personal contributions to *Be-In*. Each participant internalised the project's themes, translating them into their own context and sharing them in different ways. The continuous exchange between *De Bron*, the city of Ghent, and other childcare centres underscored the power of shared ownership and collaboration. Effective integration of *Be-In*'s principles required active communication and engagement at every level—within individual childcare groups, across locations in Ghent, through the *Dienst Kinderopvang*, and within the *Opgroeien* agency—demonstrating that meaningful change takes repeated, multi-level actions across the ECEC system.

4.6 Key outcomes for Be-In at De Bron

Towards shared care and shared responsibility

> *"You cannot build a relationship of trust with parents if you do not take responsibility for fully including their child in the group. It is through the effort and commitment to inclusion that trust is strengthened. As a childcare worker, you take parents along on this journey, and in turn, they guide you in the search for better inclusion."*
>
> - inclusion coach, *City of Ghent*

The inclusion coach of the city of Ghent consistently highlights the intrinsic link between collaborative engagement with parents and fostering true inclusion within ECEC. But creating a true partnership between ECEC centres and parents—where responsibility and care are shared—is a complex and ongoing process. Inclusive learning environments and strong parent partnerships are deeply interconnected, reinforcing each other when actively prioritised within an organisation. At *De Bron*, dedicating time and energy to these themes fostered a culture of mutual empowerment for both parents and childcare workers.

While it is easy to declare *"Parents are important"* or *"We are inclusive"*, the real challenge lies in translating these statements into practice. It requires humility, self-reflection, and a willingness to examine every detail—from the centre's vision and policies to daily routines, transitions, and parent interactions. The *Be-In* project provided space for deep reflection, allowing the team to challenge assumptions, analyse practices, and refine their approach. What once seemed obvious became more nuanced, opening the door for meaningful discussions that reshaped their understanding of inclusion and partnership with parents.

Indeed, the work did not stop with the conclusion of the *Be-In* project—*De Bron* continues to refine and expand its approach to ensure the process remains effective and meaningful.

From small snowballs to transformative actions

At *De Bron*, small actions—like rolling tiny snowballs—gradually gained momentum, leading to meaningful changes at all levels of the ECEC setting. What began as simple initiatives, such as a childcare worker introducing *parent moments* after being inspired in Portugal or a coordinator creating thoughtful gestures of appreciation for her staff, evolved into a larger cultural shift within the centre. These changes were often sparked by insights gained from transnational exchanges, demonstrating how fresh perspectives could be adapted to everyday practice.

Small but intentional efforts—like fostering a more welcoming atmosphere, sharing personal stories about each child's day, and finding new ways to connect with parents during drop-off and pick-up—had a profound impact. Parents not only observed how childcare workers engaged with their children, but they also found opportunities to connect with one another, strengthening the community within the centre. The pedagogical coach, coordinator, and inclusion coach (even from a distance) provided continuous support, encouraging childcare workers to step beyond their comfort zones and gain confidence in their ability to engage meaningfully with families.

These seemingly small actions proved to have a significant effect on relationships with parents. The *Be-In* project demonstrated the power of fully immersing an organisation in a theme—embedding inclusion and parent engagement into the very culture of the centre while reinforcing it through tangible actions and professional development. This transformation required deep commitment, energy, and collaboration from everyone involved.

The project also laid the foundation for long-term change, as seen in the inspiring journey of *O.*, a mother of a child with special needs at *De Bron*, who became a childcare worker herself through the *Be-In* project. Her story exemplifies how fostering an inclusive and supportive environment can create pathways for parents to become active contributors to the ECEC setting.

New spaces for reflection and dialogue on parent partnerships and inclusion

"The project allowed me to get a mandate to talk about it."

- pedagogical coach, *De Bron*.

While she had always valued parent collaboration, she struggled to find natural entry points to integrate these discussions into her coaching sessions with the team. The *Be-In* project provided structured opportunities to bring these topics to the forefront—initiating formal team discussions, introducing a guiding framework, and co-developing a more intentional approach to the *familiarisation process* for new families.

Through this process, the pedagogical coach and coordinator found a shared language and deeper understanding of what parent partnerships and inclusion truly meant in practice. It gave them the confidence to question routines, challenge ingrained habits, and guide the team towards a more reflective approach: *"Remember the framework we are using—what does it tell us about the importance of informal contact with parents?"* Similarly, childcare workers felt empowered to voice their concerns and uncertainties within a supportive team environment.

By embedding these discussions into daily practice and fostering a culture of shared reflection, *De Bron* has taken significant strides towards a more inclusive, responsive, and connected ECEC setting—one where both parents and professionals feel valued, involved, and equipped to support each child's development together.

Narrative of O., on being and becoming a parent and childcare worker in De Bron.

O., a mother of six, was overwhelmed when she found out she was expecting twins, S. and M. —especially when she learned that one of them, S., had a disability. The news came during her pregnancy, and while doctors painted a difficult picture, S. defied expectations, walking, playing, and engaging with the world in ways no one had foreseen. Despite this, the first months after birth were incredibly difficult. The twins required constant care, and with no immediate family support, O. found herself physically and mentally exhausted. The search for childcare became a breaking point. She encountered rejection after rejection—no available spots, no clear answers. The lack of support from Opgroeien in her hometown left her feeling abandoned. O.'s journey to finding suitable childcare for her twins was filled with frustration and exhaustion. After months of rejection, she was finally connected to De Bron, an inclusive ECEC centre in Ghent. This was made possible through G., a home care worker and H., the inclusion coach of City of Ghent, who had been supporting her and recognised the urgent need for childcare. From the very beginning, the collaboration with De Bron proved to be essential not just for the care of her twins, but also for O.'s own well-being.

During the familiarisation period, the centre allowed O. to stay with S. and M. for extended hours, recognising that S. had significant difficulties separating her from her mother. Unlike her brother, who adapted quickly, S. struggled with new faces and unfamiliar surroundings. The staff at De Bron played a crucial role in ensuring a smooth transition, offering flexibility and reassurance. They did not rush the process but instead respected S.'s pace, creating a sense of safety that allowed her to gradually open up. Beyond just childcare, the centre maintained open communication with O.. The caregivers provided daily updates on the twins' activities, eating habits, and emotional well-being. They also observed S.'s development closely, reassuring O. that despite her diagnosis, she was thriving in ways previously unexpected. This helped ease O.'s fears and reinforced her belief that her daughter was capable of more than what the initial medical assessments suggested.

The collaboration extended beyond just daily care. The centre worked with O. to adjust their approach based on S.'s specific needs. For example, when it became clear that the standard sleeping arrangements caused S. distress, the caregivers adapted, ensuring she had a more comfortable sleeping environment. Similarly, when O. raised concerns about the lack of diverse play materials, the staff took her feedback seriously and made adjustments to include more engaging toys. Perhaps most importantly, De Bron provided O. with a sense of community and trust. She felt heard and respected, which was a stark contrast to the dismissiveness she had experienced earlier in her search for childcare. While she remained highly attentive and sometimes worried about details like illnesses or minor accidents, the transparency and warmth of the staff reassured her. The partnership between O. and De Bron was built on mutual respect, patience, and adaptability. It was more than just a childcare arrangement; it was a support system that allowed her twins—especially S.—to flourish while giving O. the space to regain her own strength.

As time passed, O.'s involvement with De Bron deepened in ways she had never expected. Motivated by her experience as a mother navigating the childcare system, she decided to pursue training as childcare professional. Despite the challenges of balancing studies and raising six children, she completed her diploma and began an internship at De Bron. Her experience as a parent gave her unique insights into the needs of both children and families, allowing her to connect with parents in ways that many caregivers could not. Eventually, her dedication and passion led her to a full-time position at the centre. Now, she not only supports children like her own but also works alongside the same team that once helped her through one of the toughest periods in her life. The transition from struggling mother to professional caregiver has given O. a renewed sense of purpose, proving that with resilience and support, life can take unexpected yet fulfilling turns.

5 The case study of *De Kleine Wereld*: staying on track in changing conditions

5.1 Baseline: a central vision that needs to grow strong roots in every team

De Blauwe Lelie started this project as an organisation with a strong legacy from their past years of being a Centre for Inclusive Childcare (*Centum voor inclusieve kinderopvang* – CIK). With their inclusion coach, they had put in words their vision about inclusion and partnership with parents and how it should be implemented at different levels in the organisation:

- They have flexibility in the childcare centre to adjust the familiarisation period to each family and to be able to maintain some home routines in the transition to the centre. For children with special needs, familiarisation periods should never be seen as a 'trial' period. The question is never 'can we include your child', but 'how can we do it'.
- They had developed a familiarisation document, *Het Spiegelboekje*, meant to strengthen the voice of all parents from the first meetings on.
- Adapting their work to the needs of each child is central in the pedagogical vision in *De Blauwe Lelie,* with well-being and involvement as core concepts.
- In the selection procedure for staff, new workers are systematically asked about their vision on inclusion of children with special needs. In the first staff training, this topic is also strengthened, as all new employees get to play the *All-inclusive Game*[4].
- In *De Blauwe Lelie* they also appoint a 'representative' for inclusion (*aspectbehartiger*) in each centre, whose role is to share a vision of diversity and inclusion with others.
- They encouraged the reflex of the centres to systematically involve the inclusion coach when they have questions, so she can step in, help listen to the parents, to their needs and look with them for all the possible options. However, they wanted to give the other pedagogical coach a more active 'first line' role in it and keep the inclusion coach in a coordination and support role.

The inclusion coach's mandate covers the whole organisation and partners in the region of Bruges. The *Be-In* project would give her the chance to work closer with the one pilot centre *De Kleine Wereld* who is part of the bigger organisation of *De Blauwe Lelie.* It gives the inclusion coach the opportunity to get a better understanding of how this inclusive vision is enacted on the workflow. Indeed, vision cannot be transmitted top-down only with training and tools, it has to be grounded in their professional practices, beliefs and knowledge. The inclusion coach also suspected that some practices to support partnership with parents had taken a step back since the Corona period.

5.2 Determining learning questions and developing an action plan

The initial project team started with a general learning question: How do we strengthen our communication with parents who experience barriers with a specific focus on parents with children who have extra care needs? There was a strong desire to know about the position of parents and to learn from them.

[4] See *Be-In: Catalogue of inspirational resources*, Tool C (www.vbjk.be/en/project/be-in).

The inclusion coach did a more in-depth reflection with the childcare workers from one group in *De Kleine Wereld*. She asked those childcare workers what they were already doing, which challenges they experienced, what they would like to implement and why it did not happen already.

Together they wrote a first set of learning question, focused on what was relevant in *De Kleine Wereld*:

- How can we give a safe feeling to parents about our work with their child?
- What concrete actions can support our communication with parents who have a different home language?
- How can we go in communication with parents on questions or topics that are less discussed?
- How can we highlight/use the formal and informal network around the parents in this setting?

They decided to start small-scale experimentation with that one pilot group, to let later the actions spread towards the rest of the centre in a second phase. At the start of the implementation phase of the action research, the childcare worker, who was part of the transnational meeting in Portugal, and her colleagues, started with small concrete actions in her group to strengthen partnership with parents. Some of these included:

- Engaging parents in conversations about their home languages by asking for key words in their native tongue (e.g., “How can I welcome Emma in her home language?”).
- Discussing parents' formal and informal support networks, exploring whether they knew other parents in the centre or if there were other families who spoke the same language.
- Experimenting with alternative communication methods to better reach parents, such as making personal phone calls to invite them to activities instead of relying solely on written invitations.

> *“The childcare worker from the pilot group played a key role in bridging the gap—bringing these ideas into practice on the work floor, making that extra call to parents, and taking the additional step to engage them.”*
>
> - pedagogical team coordinator, *De Blauwe Lelie*

These actions were then shared in team meetings and Be-In intervision sessions, where reflections and adjustments were made collectively. They soon recognised the need to involve the entire team at the centre—not only to gain a clearer understanding of the needs but also to drive more meaningful and transformative change.

At that stage of the project, the team in *De Blauwe Lelie* underwent significant changes. The pedagogical coordinator of *De Blauwe Lelie* stepped in as a permanent member of the Be-In team and prioritised gathering deeper insights into the dynamics within the centre.

To undertake concrete actions, a group of students from Ghent University also joined the initiative for a few months. They did interviews with parents while they were entering or leaving the centre on what they found important in the care of the child and how they experienced the interaction with the childcare workers. They also (re-)introduced the ‘All-Inclusive game’ to the entire team inspired by an intervision session with the Be-In project group in Ghent. This approach helped strengthen engagement and commitment across the centre. The pedagogical coordinator of *De Blauwe Lelie* teamed up with the team coordinator of *De Kleine Wereld* for those steps. They noticed several things:

- Inclusion often seemed like a separate topic that faded into the background when there were no children with special needs in the group or centre.

- There was also noticeable inconsistency in how partnership with parents was approached across different groups. The tool designed to facilitate these conversations, the '*Praatplaat*', was shortly discussed during pick up of the child and handed to parents to read at home, with the option to follow up if they had questions. Some educators had not fully reinstated the direct and meaningful conversations with this tool with parents about their child since the corona pandemic. While they continued to engage with parents during the initial familiarisation meetings, ongoing discussions about the child's development and observations were often missing. Over time, as these conversations with the 'Praatplaat' became less frequent, some childcare workers began to lose confidence in their ability to use the tool for having individual conversations with parents about the daily observations.

This made the team at *De Kleine Wereld* realise that the implementation of their vision on inclusion relied heavily on key individuals who could bring it to the work floor and support its integration into daily practices. When these 'gatekeepers' were unable to fulfil their role—whether due to staff turnover or other factors—it directly impacted how inclusion was translated into vision and practices within the ECEC centre.

There was a strong commitment to the Be-In project, with every question addressed and continuous support provided to ensure the Be-In team at *De Kleine Wereld* was well prepared to take action. When the team coordinator of *De Kleine Wereld* stepped out of the project, two new staff members, a new inclusion coach and a pedagogical coach, joined the Be-In team, bringing fresh perspectives and energy. The pedagogical coordinator of *De Blauwe Lelie* aimed to keep them closely connected to the groups and actively involved in preparing for the transnational presentation of the action research.

The turnover of the Be-In team brought them challenges, but also opportunities to reanalyse their baseline, readjust their strategies and review the prioritisation of actions. They settled on those main learning questions:

- How do we create a safe base for parents in order to consolidate the communication between parents and childcare setting?
- Which specific actions can support our communication with parents who speak a different language or who experience another barrier?
- How can we keep an inclusive attitude in our team, even when there are no children with extra needs in the location/when there is a big turnover of staff?

Each new partner within the project introduced fresh insights and ideas. However, it became clear that they were not immediately given the time or mandate to take ownership of the project and implement concrete actions with the team. The inclusion coach and pedagogical coach also learned that settling in required time — not only to understand the project and their respective roles but also to build trusting relationships with the staff at *De Kleine Wereld*.

"I would have liked to have joined the project earlier. I believe my experience would have been quite different, and now it sometimes feels like I'm really struggling to find my way in the project."

- inclusion coach, *De Blauwe Lelie*

"I'm new, and there are many new childcare workers. Some of them may need more guidance, but I believe they will be more open to it once they know me well enough."

- pedagogical coach, *De Kleine Wereld*

This realisation led to a broader reflection on the pace of such action research and the need to adjust expectations, ensuring that new partners are given sufficient time to find their footing, take ownership, and develop their leadership. What proved most helpful in facilitating this transition was a focus on small, concrete actions and dedicating time to explore specific cases, situations and tool development in greater depth. However, on an organisational level, this remains a challenge. With pressing crisis in early childhood education across multiple areas (on staff shortage, child ratio...) and from organisation choices and priorities, it was not always easy to allocate appropriate resources in a way that provides opportunities for new staff members to fully integrate into the project from the start.

5.3 Small and concrete actions at different levels

Throughout the Be-In project, despite staff turnover, there was a strong sense of involvement among all those who participated. This commitment led to the implementation of a wide range of actions at diverse levels within the organisation.

Strengthening parent-childcare conversations at *De Kleine Wereld*

At *De Kleine Wereld*, a clear focus was set on revitalising conversations with parents about their child's development using the observation tool and the *Praatplaat* tool ("The Talking Sheet"). This child-centred tool was designed not just to provide information but to serve as a conversation guide, fostering meaningful two-way dialogue between parents and childcare workers. The decision to emphasise this approach stemmed from several key reasons:

- It is aligned with the centre's broader priority of reinforcing a positive image of the child.
- It involved all groups and childcare workers, ensuring a centre-wide impact.
- It allowed for small, concrete steps that could be easily implemented.
- Some childcare workers expressed insecurity in engaging parents in discussions and requested coaching.
- The centre already had a tool focusing on the child's positive experiences and developmental progress, but its use in conversations with parents could be enhanced with insights from the Be-In project.
- It provided an opportunity to test the *Connecting with Parents* coaching tool.

Implementation across the teams

To ensure a smooth roll-out, each childcare team was engaged in individual planning sessions to determine how best to integrate these conversations into their daily practices.

- Observations were planned for each child, with a renewed focus on a positive child image, guided by the Connecting with Parents coaching tool.
- Each group determined how and when to engage parents in conversations — whether during evening meetings, departure moments, or planned interactions at times that suited the parents.
- Childcare workers could receive individual coaching from the pedagogical or inclusion coach to prepare for discussions with parents, but there was not a systematic way of implementing this in the daily work.
- Follow-up discussions allowed teams to reflect on their experiences and refine their approach.

Balancing voluntary and structured coaching

Feedback and coaching were made available to childcare workers upon request rather than being systematically imposed. However, this led to discussions during intervision sessions about whether coaching should always remain voluntary or, in some cases, be required. The Be-In project created an opportunity to introduce more structured and intensive coaching sessions with the goal of fostering learning and growth with childcare workers. Each coaching moment presented a valuable opportunity to explore broader aspects of parent-childcare collaboration, sometimes uncovering unexpected insights.

> *"It's very often about, 'We have a concern and don't know how to address it.' Or they feel uncomfortable sharing something with parents and don't know how to start. By thinking through these challenges together as a team, we begin reflecting and brainstorming—how can we approach this?"*
>
> - inclusion coach, *De Blauwe Lelie*

Lasting impact on parent-childcare dialogue

This period of intensified focus led to a tangible shift in the culture of *De Kleine Wereld*. According to the pedagogical coordinator, the changes extended beyond structured meetings, influencing everyday interactions:

> *"There is now much more space for dialogue. It's not just about setting up a process, but about building a deeper awareness. There is a real exchange now. We no longer just inform parents—parents inform us, too. That shift in perspective has been significant."*
>
> - pedagogical team coordinator, *De Blauwe Lelie*

Scaling up at the organisational level of *De Blauwe Lelie*

Beyond *De Kleine Wereld*, *De Blauwe Lelie* also took significant steps to embed the principles of parent partnership into its broader organisational framework. An existing workgroup had already been reviewing the familiarisation document, and the pedagogical coordinator used this platform to incorporate insights from the *Be-In* project. As a result, questions were refined to be more attuned to parents of children with special needs.

> *"My first reflex is now always to think, 'Yes, but what about the parents?' Whereas before, my thinking was more along the lines of, 'As an educator, I believe this would be best for the child."*
>
> - pedagogical team coordinator, *De Blauwe Lelie*

The deeper focus on parent-childcare dialogue in *De Kleine Wereld* led to significant changes in the conversation guidelines at an organisational level. Drawing from their experiences, a new manual was developed to emphasise the importance of two-way communication:

- **Previous approach:** "At an arrival or departure moment, briefly explain the core of your observation, but you don't have to go over everything as parents can take *Praatplaa*t home."
- **Revised approach:** "At an arrival or departure moment, invite parents to schedule a conversation to discuss observations. Make time for this exchange. Explain what the *Praatplaat* is about and come back on what was discussed with the parents in the first encounter. This conversation is a dialogue where both parents and childcare workers gain a deeper understanding of the child. First, ask parents to share about their child, complement this with your observations, and check whether parents recognise these insights. Offer parents the opportunity to ask questions."

The importance of remaining available to parents beyond the initial conversation was also incorporated into the guidelines, acknowledging that parents may have additional questions after processing the discussion. Across *De Blauwe Lelie's* centres and partners, the importance of fostering a sense of trust and belonging with parents remains central—just as it does with inclusion. These topics are continually revisited, discussed, and strengthened through ongoing dialogue.

> *"I realise the impact we have on children and families—we can truly make a difference. The question now is, how can we do even more?"*
>
> - Pedagogical team coordinator, *De Blauwe Lelie*

Narrative of B., a mother, whose children went to a family daycare in De Blauwe Lelie

When B. first arrived in Belgium from Ghana, navigating an unfamiliar system while raising her young children felt overwhelming. With her husband working night shifts as a cleaner and her own job at the city of Bruges, finding quality childcare was a priority—but also a challenge. She wanted a place where her children would feel safe, cared for, and welcomed, a place that felt right. Her search led her to De Blauwe Lelie, where she was given options for childcare near her home. She still remembers the moment she and her husband stepped into the family daycare. The warm welcome, the cleanliness, and the way the childminder spoke with them made an instant impression. "My spirit told me this is the right person," B. recalls. Trusting her instincts, she enrolled her first child there at just four months old.

Over the years, all four of her children followed the same path, starting in the family daycare early and staying until they transitioned to school. The childminder became more than just a caregiver—she became part of the family. Her open-mindedness, patience, and ability to communicate in both Dutch and English made all the difference. So much that the childminder was asked as the child's godmother of the youngest child.

Childcare, for B., was never just about looking after children — it was about relationships. She valued the small, thoughtful ways the childminder engaged with the children, like preparing meals tailored to each child's preference. She appreciated the fact that when she picked up her children, the childminder took the time to share meaningful details about their day, not just whether they ate or slept well, but also small personal observations that made her feel seen as a parent.

When her eldest son started school, she noticed that he had some difficulty concentrating. Because she had concerns about his speech development early on, she trusted the doctors and followed their advice, seeking further support when necessary. Now, he is thriving in special education, where he learns in smaller groups. "The more he grows, the more he changes," B. says with pride, seeing his progress in both school and at home.

Her journey as a parent has been one of resilience, trust, and taking initiative. She reached out to the right people—the childminder, a social assistant, the school director—who helped guide her through a system that was new to her. She trusted those who showed her kindness, and in return, she was met with support. "Maybe I had luck," she says, reflecting on the positive relationships she has built. But it's clear that more than luck, it was her determination to ensure the best for her children that shaped her path.

Now, as her children grow older, B. sees them thriving—her daughter dreams of becoming a doctor, her son wants to play football. She hopes to continue building a stable future for them, with dreams of one day owning a home. But most importantly, she wants them to grow up to be kind, respectful, and strong individuals. "I always tell them, when you are good with people, people will be good with you."

For her, De Blauwe Lelie was not just a childcare organisation — it was the first step in feeling at home in a new country, in finding a community, and in knowing that her children were cared for in a place where they truly belonged.

Shaping conversations: strengthening inclusion through the *Connecting with Parents tool*

At the regional level, within the local *Be-In* team and the Inclusive ECEC consortium, the inclusion coach played an active role in shaping the reflection and coaching tool *Connecting with Parents*. Her involvement extended beyond reviewing and refining the content—she contributed to strategic decisions, carefully considering how each word reflected the broader vision of inclusion and parent collaboration. This process opened in-depth discussions, not just about the tool itself but also about the challenges childcare workers might face in practice and real-life examples of complex situations. By engaging in the detailed work of refining the tool, the inclusion coach of *De Blauwe Lelie* helped create a space where deeper reflection could emerge, strengthening the foundation for a more thoughtful and inclusive approach to working with parents.

5.4 Towards strengthening cohesion and sustaining impact

While the Be-In project led to valuable reflections and meaningful individual actions, its impact across the entire organisation remained somewhat fragmented. The absence of strong cohesion within the Be-In project team and the lack of a sustained structure on the work floor meant that many of the promising initiatives did not fully embed themselves into the daily practices of the inclusive ECEC. Despite the dedication and strong intentions of those involved, the transformation remained during the project mostly at the level of a collection of individual efforts and actions, and did not reach the level of a deeply rooted organisational shift.

Weaving together small actions for greater impact

At *De Blauwe Lelie*, various initiatives related to inclusion and partnership with parents evolved in parallel throughout the project. However, these actions sometimes felt fragmented, lacking a follow-up and an integration. What became evident was the need for a team of 'relay' persons at different layers in the organisation: people who could connect different actions, align them with the overarching vision, and ensure that each initiative or action reinforced and kept reinforcing the others.

Despite these challenges, the project illuminated the importance of creating a structure that enables actions and ideas to be linked across different levels of the organisation. By analysing the action-research process, *De Blauwe Lelie* gained deeper insights into the roles and responsibilities needed to sustain inclusion and parent collaboration: Which team members should lead these efforts? How can they remain connected to the needs of staff and families? How can different levels of responsibility be better aligned to strengthen the organisation's vision? These reflections continue to shape their approach moving forward.

> *"When I arrived, the previous inclusion coach had just left, and I had to figure things out on my own. Now, with the new inclusion coach, I finally have someone to align with and exchange ideas."*
>
> - pedagogical coach, *De Kleine Wereld*

This underscores the importance of fostering strong connections between different roles in the organisation, ensuring that expertise and leadership are continuously supported.

Sustaining inclusive childcare and parent partnerships amid organisational priorities

With many competing priorities within the organisation, a key challenge is ensuring that "inclusive childcare" and "partnership with parents"—central themes of the Be-In project—remain a lasting focus rather than being overshadowed by other pressing matters. While it may not be feasible for every team or site to fully engage in this work at the same time, it is essential to identify and support trailblazers who can act as

incubators for new ideas. These pioneering teams can develop and refine inclusive practices, allowing them to take root and expand across the organisation.

To ensure that this process is deeply connected to daily practices, it must start from and maintain strong ties with the childcare teams and pedagogical coach on the work floor. In October 2025, it will be implemented in the entire *De Blauwe Lelie* and all professionals are committed to actively embedding these approaches. The question now is how to structure this learning process to make it sustainable and impactful at an organisational level.

Building further on the action-research experience from Be-In, can a learning network of pedagogical coaches and team coordinators be established to drive this initiative forward? How can this process be supported to ensure that knowledge is shared, reflections are ongoing, and meaningful changes are implemented consistently across different teams? Additionally, how the content and vision developed through Be-In can be preserved, reinforced, and adapted over time?

By creating a structured yet flexible framework—where insights from trailblazing teams feed into broader organisational learning—*De Blauwe Lelie* can ensure that inclusion and parent partnerships remain embedded in daily practice rather than being treated as temporary initiatives.

Balancing a tailored and collective approach

Individual coaching by the pedagogical coach/inclusion coach, when it occurred certainly played a role in this process. It is necessary to provide continuous space and time for staff to express concerns, refine their skills, and build confidence in their interactions with parents. One childcare worker shared:

> *"I chose to start with parents I already had a strong relationship with. It was my first time, and I told them that at the beginning of the conversation. I also reassured them that we could adjust based on their needs."*

Through discussions and the use of the *Connecting with Parents* coaching tool, such questions led to broader team reflections.

> *"Some staff members question how to balance the task of discussing developmental concerns while maintaining a focus on the child's strengths. There is a need for a team-wide conversation about this."*
>
> - pedagogical coach, *De Kleine Wereld*

By continuing to invest in individual coaching, *De Kleine Wereld* aims to further integrate these reflections into everyday practices. The question of whether coaching should only by 'on-demand' or sometime universally provided, main also gain from further reflection. When an ECEC coordinator was actively involved, it became easier to prioritise topics in team meetings and respond to issues raised by childcare workers piloting the *Connecting with Parents* tool. However, the lack of consistency in team structure over time affected this 'relay' role, making it more challenging to maintain coherence across all levels.

Embedding leadership for lasting change

The importance of leadership in driving meaningful transformation was a key takeaway from the Be-In project. When leadership at every level in the organisation is actively solicited, the impact of initiatives is more deeply embedded. The pedagogical team coordinator from *De Blauwe Lelie* reflected on this:

> *"When I look at the path we've taken, I see how essential it is to have the ECEC centre coordinator on board. That's the key link to embedding a project deeply into daily practice. We had one coordinator with us for a while, which opened up new possibilities, but when she left, we lost that connection. I really missed that continuity throughout the project."*

Through the Be-In project, valuable progress was made, and crucial learning opportunities emerged. The next step is to build on these insights, creating structures that foster lasting transformation—where small actions are woven together into a strong and cohesive organisational approach.

5.5 Key outcomes from *De Kleine Wereld*

A lot of different actions contributing to trusting and partnership with parents

One of the biggest realisations that emerged during Be-In was the critical importance of partnership with parents. The shock of realising that, since the corona pandemic, conversations and meetings with parents around the *Praatplaat* had drastically declined, has created a turning point. *De Kleine Wereld* had unknowingly shifted to more distant, minimal interactions concerning their observations of the children —where once-thriving partnerships with parents had become more transactional and routine-based.

This insight sparked action. The pedagogical coordinator, the coordinator of the team, the pedagogical coach, and the inclusion coach all took various steps to rebuild and strengthen relationships with parents. They recognised that trust and partnership must be actively nurtured and cannot be taken for granted. Conversations and reflections led to a renewed focus on prioritising real-life exchanges, creating intentional moments for dialogue, and ensuring parents felt truly seen, heard, and valued.

Although substantial progress was made during Be-In, they also recognised that this is not a one-time effort—it is something that requires ongoing attention and persistence. The deep investment in building trust with parents and providing enough professional support was a key outcome of the project, and maintaining this momentum will be essentially moving forward.

A vision that resonates at every level

> *"I think it's important to consciously create moments of reflection and ensure they resonate with the team. Sometimes, they don't realise how things they see as routine can have a big impact on parents."*
>
> - pedagogical coach, *De Kleine Wereld*

A strong vision is one that exists at every layer of an organisation. At the organisational level, it provides a clear direction to strive towards. But for a vision to truly take roots, it must also be embedded also at the ECEC centres level, for all of the staff to feel a sense of ownership and are able to translate it into their daily interactions and practices.

One key learning from Be-In is that internalising a vision takes time. It's about developing reflexes—like going beyond a routine exchange with parents to genuinely engaging with them in a way that fosters trust. It's about pausing to consider:

- How do they feel at this moment?
- What could make them feel more at ease?
- Did they have the space to truly express their concerns and ask their questions?

- How did I, as a professional, feel about this exchange?

All small, targeted actions become meaningful when they are linked to a broader vision. To ensure this cohesion, it is crucial to have 'relay' persons at different levels of the organisation that are connected in collaboration with each other. For example, when a childcare worker expresses concerns about a child's development and wonders how to discuss it with parents, this concern should connect to a larger network—a workgroup focused on inclusion or the inclusion coach who can provide deeper insight. *De Blauwe Lelie* is already moving in this direction, and the Be-In project provided valuable experience to further strengthen synergy and shared ownership across all stakeholders.

A flexible and progressive process at different paces

In transformative projects, flexibility in pacing is key. Just as ECEC professionals adjust to the unique needs of children and parents, *Be-In* showed how essential it is to adapt the tempo of a project to each centre's specific context. A slower pace at one point may allow for acceleration later on. First and foremost, teams need a sense of stability before they can fully focus on inclusion and partnership with parents. Time must be given for new staff members to settle in, ensuring they feel comfortable in their position and in collaboration with the teams before being expected to implement change. Additionally, every childcare worker—and every team—starts from a different point in their professional development journey.

In *De Kleine Wereld*, the pilot group approach proved to be an effective way to test small changes and build momentum from those most eager to engage. However, for this approach to have a lasting impact, it must be a team that stays consistent over time and really can continue to grow over this theme and to 'contaminate' the broader organisation. Then it is possible to strategically connect what happened in this pilot project to a larger vision—ensuring that what starts in one group does not remain isolated but influences the broader team and organisation. While the steps of the project may not be fixed, the overall direction and purpose must remain clear and consistent to prevent fragmentation and keep progress moving forward.

A continuous cycle of reflection and learning together

Sustainable change in practice is never a one-time process—it must be cyclical, iterative, and continuously evolving. One of the most powerful lessons from *Be-In* is the importance of ongoing reflection and reassessment when working on parent partnerships and inclusion. Children, families, and staff change over time. New challenges arise, new dynamics emerge, and needs evolving practices. By consistently questioning, analysing, and refining their practices, ECEC teams can ensure that their approach remains relevant and effective.

De Blauwe Lelie demonstrated this mindset throughout their process, repeatedly critically examining their practices to learn and grow from each iteration. This commitment to reflection will continue to guide their next steps—an ongoing journey of learning, adapting, and improving.

> *"I found the discussions with the childcare workers really valuable, particularly the inclusion game we played. That activity provided useful insights for my role, highlighting what still needs attention in the workplace. It showed where things are working well and where there's room for improvement."*
>
> - pedagogical team coordinator, *De Blauwe Lelie*

By embracing this culture of continuous reflection, *De Blauwe Lelie* is ensuring that inclusion and partnerships with parents remain a living, breathing part of their daily practice—one that continues to evolve, grow, and deepen over time.

6 Reflections from the Be-In journey: lessons for transformative change

The Be-In action-research process in Flanders was a rich and deeply connected journey—one that reinforced the importance of mutual care for children, parents and professionals, with a particular focus on inclusive practices for children with special needs. Across the two ECEC centres, the project cultivated valuable insights, connections, and learning experiences, shaping a more reflective and intentional approach to connective partnership with parents and inclusion in early childhood. The lessons learned from this journey are shared here as an inspiration for other organisations embarking on similar transformative processes. As one childcare worker so powerfully expressed:

> *"Parents entrust us with what is most precious to them... It is our duty to ensure that their child feels welcome and that the family feels welcome. Parents need to know that their child is safe and well with us."*

Fostering a culture of dialogue

At its core, building strong partnerships with parents is a process of ongoing dialogue and effort—not just with parents, but also within and across ECEC teams. While it seems easy to say that parents are the experts on their child, this belief must be actively and continuously reinforced in daily practices. In reality, childcare workers do not always feel confident in fully embracing this perspective, and genuine dialogue requires space, reflection, coaching and shared ownership. This becomes even more difficult when the child has special needs.

Understanding what truly happens on the work floor—why certain practices persist, where barriers exist, and how staff feel about engaging with parents—is essential. Rather than imposing solutions, co-developing actions and possibilities together creates a more sustainable and meaningful shift that needs iterative support and attention at all layers in the organisation.

However, genuine listening—the kind that challenges assumptions and reshapes practices—takes time. The Be-In project provided this time and space through local and international intervision sessions, coaching, job shadowing, and collaborative work moments. Every small action in the two pilot sites contributed to a larger transformation, allowing teams to engage in critical reflection and professional growth. As one ECEC coordinator insightfully noted:

> *"Judging and forming opinions happens quickly—'Ah, those parents, always late!'—but when we take a step back and reflect on our expectations alongside parents, we begin to recognise our own assumptions. The real question is: How do we learn to become aware of these judgments?"*

The Be-In journey reaffirmed that inclusion and connective partnership with parents are not just policies or statements—they are ongoing, evolving practices that require commitment, open-mindedness, and continuous dialogue at all levels of an organisation.

Small and concrete actions knitted together towards a clear goal

Meaningful change is not about grand gestures—it is about small, concrete actions, intentionally woven together towards a clear and lasting goal. As one pedagogical coach observed:

"Some childcare workers found it difficult to start conversations with parents, but now it is openly discussed: 'I find this challenging, what can I do?' They are excited because the expectations are higher than before, but they also recognise how much they have learned—and they feel the connection with parents more strongly."

At first glance, the steps taken within the Be-In project may seem small—simple conversations, minor adjustments, little moments of reflection. Yet, beneath these seemingly modest changes lies a profound and sustainable shift in mindset during the action research. Childcare workers were coached to see their role differently, understanding that partnership with parents is not an extra task, not a burden or interference, but an essential part of their work.

However, small actions only create lasting change when they are connected and supported—when they are part of a bigger narrative about inclusive childcare and parental collaboration in the organisation. For this to happen, there must be clear structures and shared responsibility to ensure continuity. The question must always be asked: What if the key person leading this change leaves? How do we ensure this remains embedded in the organisation?

The Be-In project demonstrated that real transformation happens through the accumulation of these small, intentional actions. When they are nurtured, supported, and consistently reinforced, they lead to a deep cultural shift—one that does not just rely on individuals but becomes part of the very fabric of an ECEC centre's vision and practice.

The power of multilayered leadership

"Good leadership is essential to take our team along. For me, leadership is about co-creation and collaboration—it becomes a strong pillar for the entire team."

- pedagogical coach

Long-term projects like Be-In create opportunities to build strong, interconnected leadership at multiple levels. The involvement of a diverse project team reinforces synergy among different professionals, ensuring that leadership is not concentrated in a single role but shared across layers of the organisation. When professionals actively respond to one another and take collective ownership of a vision, it leads to a more sustainable synergy and deeply embedded transformation.

However, staff turnover remains a significant challenge. While strong individuals are crucial, the real key to long-term success is ensuring that vision and practices are not dependent on any one person. Smooth transitions and well-structured handovers become essential, allowing new team members to step in without losing momentum. Change happens when leadership is distributed, shared, and continuously reinforced across all levels.

A continuous learning journey

"You can feel how immersing an ECEC centre so deeply in inclusion and parent engagement accelerates their progress. The Be-In project has truly made a difference."

- inclusion coach

The true impact of Be-In goes beyond the specific changes in inclusive practices and parent partnerships—it lies in the shift in mindset within the teams. The project has shown that innovation and transformation are possible. More than just implementing new actions, they now carry with them a deeper habit of reflection, a readiness to question, and a confidence to evolve.

This journey does not end with Be-In. Instead, it marks the beginning of their next phase. Both pilot centres leave the project with new questions to explore, fresh perspectives, and an eagerness to continue growing. The learning process is ongoing—each step forward opens doors to new possibilities. In this way, Be-In has not only sparked change but embedded a culture of continuous learning and improvement, ensuring that the commitment to inclusion and partnership with parents will continue to evolve long after the project itself has concluded.



The Be-in Belgium project team, from De Blauwe Lelie, City of Ghent, VBJK, Ghent University and Agency Opgroeien, with some of the partners from Portugal and Iceland during the local dissemination event in Brussels (November 21, 2024). What a journey!