



vbjk

Vernieuwing in de
Basisvoorzieningen
voor Jonge Kinderen



Key question

Which competences, including professional values and reflections, are needed/considered important for creating innovative approaches to socially inclusive ECEC (for 0-8 years old children) in urban environments in Europe?

Context

Belgium is a federal state and consists of three autonomous Regions (Flemish Region, Walloon Region, Brussels-Capital Region), three language Communities (Flemish, French, German-speaking) and four language areas (Dutch, French, German and bilingual Brussels, French/Dutch). In this review we only cover the Flemish community, the main policy level for ECEC and education.

Sub questions

1. Which national academic debates on social inclusion (if any)? (Definitions, ideas, critiques)

When talking about social inclusion, we talk about accessibility – in the broad sense of the word – of children to ECEC provision and the policies that facilitate that. The focus here lies on children from families that are living in disadvantaged situations such as poverty, migration background, low level of education, disability etc. These living conditions that can lead to less opportunities to enjoy ECEC services. Increasing accessibility and creating systems that promote equal opportunities, by paying attention to all responsibilities, is therefore the core of the debates on social inclusion.

Our societies today are characterized by a diversity that surpasses the idea of simply one majority and one minority group, but rather presents itself as a mixture of several groups into a 'superdiverse' society (Crul, 2013. Geldof, 2013). In a city like Antwerp e.g., over 160 nationalities are registered (Geldof, 2013).

Research shows that high quality ECEC can contribute to bridging the gap between children from the mainstream group and more vulnerable groups (poverty, minorities, migration...) (see e.g. the EPPE-studies, NICDH, and the Lancet). Many studies show also that children need to feel that they belong, they need to be involved and motivated in order to learn (Malaguzzi, 1972). This means that ECEC will need to answer to the double challenge of linking ECEC practice to the diverse family backgrounds and cultures as well as delivering high quality services overall, which means connecting the educational and social functions of ECEC (Vandenbroeck, 1999). We need thus a holistic and ecological child-centred approach, able to take into account children, families, communities (Vandenbroeck, Coussée, Bradt and Roose, 2011, European Commission, 2011; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014; UNESCO, 2010; EQF, EC Thematic Group on ECEC, 2014; Van Laere, Peeters & Vandenbroeck, 2012).

Within a holistic framework, high quality ECEC services become an instrument to tackle inequality from the very early years, considering accessibility as an essential part of quality. This is a crucial aspect to be taken into account, since the PISA results show that our educational system reproduces inequality rather than diminish it (European Commission, 2016). The important role of accessibility in ECEC quality is underlined also in the EU quality

framework for ECEC (European Commission, EQF, 2014 p.9), where is written that 'the potential benefits of high quality universal provision are particularly significant for children from disadvantaged and/or marginalised groups. ECEC provision should be made available from birth to the age at which children start compulsory primary school. To respond to parental circumstances and encourage all families to use ECEC services, provision needs to offer flexibility in relation to opening hours and the content of the programme'. Linking all this to social cohesion, the EU quality framework states that: 'successful inclusion in ECEC is based on: a collaborative approach to promoting the benefits of ECEC which involves local organisations and community groups; approaches which respect and value the beliefs, needs and culture of parents; an assurance that all children and families are welcome in an ECEC setting/centre; a pro-active approach to encouraging all parents to use ECEC services; a recognition that staff should be trained to help parents and families to value ECEC services and to assure them that their beliefs and cultures will be respected [...]' (European Commission, EQF, 2014, p. 9).

While the beneficial effects of high quality ECEC have been underlined again and again, reality still shows that children from more disadvantaged backgrounds are overrepresented in ECEC provision of low quality (Vandenbroeck, 2010. Bennett, 2012). This is caused by much more complex reasons than parental choice. High quality ECEC services are less available and accessible for some groups than others, which means that in fact good services are lacking exactly in the places where they could make a real difference. We need therefore a change in the implemented policies, since, as Vandenbroeck (2010, 2013) underline, policies that favour funding by local or central authorities are more effective in enhancing accessibility than market-oriented policies.

Access and non-discrimination are also some of the driving issues in the work of international networks such as DECET (www.decet.org) and ISSA (www.issa.nl) and these issues have also moved up on the agenda of e.g. Unicef and other international organizations (see e.g. the UN SDG's <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/education/>).

At the Ghent University, Department of Social Work and Social Pedagogy, structural accessibility has been analysed and defined by way of 5 criteria (Bouverne-De Bie, 2005) and 'translated' to the ECEC sector (Vandenbroeck, 2016):

- **Availability:** it is important to have high quality services in the areas where vulnerable families live, as they are often less mobile. However, we see that those areas either do not have sufficient services or they have often services of a lower quality.
- **Affordability:** families need to be able to pay for services. Different systems exist here, but the cost is still often a huge barrier. When public funding is available, provision is either free or related to the parent's income, making the services more affordable and having a higher equalising potential than targeted services.
- **Accessibility:** dealing with the many barriers (e.g. cost, language, procedures, waiting lists, administrative requirements...) requires careful planning, analysing those barriers on the local level, creating partnerships, and e.g. outreach work to build relations of trust.
- **Usefulness:** families need to know that ECEC services can serve their actual needs, that they can be supportive. This also goes beyond mere practical issues (opening hours, language...) and these services really need to be known and 'make sense', to relate to diverse families' needs and habits. ECEC provision needs to answer to the

demands of local communities, and in order to do so there needs to be a dialogue with parents and local communities.

- **Comprehensibility:** making sense also refers to the extent in which ECEC is open to negotiate on values, beliefs and educational practices of both the service and the families. It requires designing participative structures and practices, involving families in democratic decision-making processes. This is also linked to engaging diverse staff, which potentially means creating more connection between professionals and families.

In this framework, entitlement, funding and affordability of ECEC provision are considered crucial factors for increasing the access of children from ethnic minority and low-income families. Public policies that address comprehensively the issues of availability, entitlement and cost of childcare provision – within a general regulatory framework for quality – are proven to be the most effective in reducing inequalities in ECEC participation rates (Vandenbroeck & Lazzari, 2013).

At the same time, specific literature (Vandenbroeck, 2010) describes respect for diversity as one of the quality criteria that correlates most with positive outcomes for children with a disadvantaged background. As said before, in order to learn and develop well, children need to feel comfortable, recognized for who they are, welcomed. As elaborated by Laevers (Laevers et al, 2013), well-being and involvement are major criteria for educational quality: to feel that children are respected and that they can be who they are, it is necessary that the learning environment at young age, the first step into society, reflects and represents the diversity of their background, as described also in the DECET principles (www.decet.org). This means, as Vandenbroeck says, that a child-centred curriculum must always be a family-centred curriculum. In this framework, the balance should be sought between denial of diversity ('all children are the same') and essentialism (by which a child is reduced to his/her background only).

In order to take into account all these aspects and respect diversity within the ECEC system, we need what the CoRe research defines as a 'competent system' (Urban et al., 2011; Vandenbroeck et al., 2016), which includes collaborations between individuals, teams and institutions, as well as competent governance at policy level.

2. Which national and municipal education and policy contexts?

Flanders has a split ECEC system with childcare residing under the Ministry of Welfare and pre- and primary school under the Ministry of Education. This divide causes major differences on many levels and issues, such as the different legal framework, but also required qualifications, quality framework, curriculum, adult/child ratio, parent involvement etc.

On an introductory note, it is important to point out that Belgium is one of the 6 Member States that has achieved both objectives of the Barcelona Targets, with 99% of enrolment in pre-primary education and over 50% in childcare (Kind en Gezin, 2016, p. 110 ev. Peeters, 2015). Even in times of economic crisis, policy makers, researchers and stakeholders in Belgium invested quite a lot in increasing the accessibility of vulnerable groups and in making childcare and pre-primary school affordable for all parents.

This Flemish split system, keeps a clear division of responsibilities for 'education' and 'care' (OECD, 2006). As of the age of 2,5 to 6y children attend the *kleuterschool* (pre-primary education), which reside under the general auspices of the Ministry of Education. Children

under 2,5y can attend childcare provision, mostly regulated by a public agency, *Kind en Gezin*, under the Ministry of Welfare.

As said before, participation rates are quite high in Flanders and in the Dutch speaking schools in Brussels: 82% of the 2-year olds and 99% of the 5-year olds are enrolled in a *kleuterschool* (pre-primary education).

It should be noted however that fewer children from poor and migration background attend the first years of pre-primary education (Onderwijs Vlaanderen, 2015): about 1,5% of all children between 2½ and 6y are not enrolled at all and not all toddlers attend all that regularly. The issue here is that this is most often the case in our major cities and that these numbers are increasing. One needs to question why that is the case, why some parents decide not to send their children to *kleuterschool* (even when it is free of charge), which is linked to usefulness and comprehensibility of schools for all families (Vandenbroeck, Lazzari, 2013), considering that schools should be not only available and affordable, but also 'desirable'. The government has developed strategies (e.g by informing parents on the importance of preschool, home visits of the district nurses of *Kind en Gezin* or the introduction of a maximum 'invoice' for expenses like school outings) to ensure that all children attend pre-primary education, because they strongly believe that this is essential for later school success in primary education.

In childcare attendance rates are generally quite lower (around 50%), and the vulnerable groups are clearly underrepresented. Different issues of accessibility are at stake here: there is a shortage of places, not all parents have sufficient information on (the existence and importance of) childcare and still not all childcare services are as welcoming or open to the more vulnerable groups.

In the Flemish community, ECEC has been characterized by a policy focusing on equal opportunities and accessible services for all. The underlying notion is the one of 'progressive universalism': developing universal services for all, with specific attention – including additional public funding– for certain groups. The targeted approach, focusing on either groups or areas, has not been the choice of the Flemish policymakers, who preferred to invest in making services accessible for all, with additional funding for certain groups. The decree on childcare for babies and toddlers (2014) contains regulations on minimal quality, on qualifications, on pedagogical coaching, and also on subsidy schemes. There are different levels of subsidies, which increase when services make additional efforts to serve vulnerable groups (low-income families, parents in training or looking for work...) and reach over 20% or 30% of these families. The decree also states that there is a 'right to' childcare, which is a strong principle, but until now the shortage of places makes this hard to fully implement.

In the educational sector (preschool, primary and secondary) a policy on equal opportunities has been established over the past 15 years. In this policy, the basic public funding for schools can be increased in line with the attendance of children who comply with certain criteria (e.g. low level of education of parents, low family income, different home language...), so that schools can develop additional actions, where needed, depending on the socio-economic background of the children attending (e.g. invest in extra staff for educational support). All schools need to have a clear vision and plan on 'care' for children who need additional attention (e.g. because of a foreign home language, learning difficulties etc.) and the whole teachers team needs to be involved, even though there can be additional support of specific counselling teachers as well. Not much data is available on the results but it is clear that still a lot depends on the way a school's policy is developed and monitored by the principal and school board (Peeters in VVersterk, 2015). Public funding is also provided for pupils without legal residence.

The split system is also reflected in the qualifications required for work in these two different sectors (Peeters, Seepro, 2017). Core practitioners in pre-primary education receive their professional bachelor training alongside teachers in the school system. In the Flemish Community, 90% of the workforce of the preschools is qualified on bachelor level and there are around 10 % assistants who are qualified at secondary vocational level. Practitioners working with the children in services for the under-threes are mostly infant care workers (secondary vocational level). The management staff are medical nurses or social workers (Bachelor level). The new decree on childcare for the 0 to 3y (2014) does stipulate that everyone working in childcare has to have some kind of qualification by 2024 and that every childcare worker has the right to pedagogical guidance from a pedagogical coach. Every provider of childcare will now have to guarantee pedagogical guidance for all the employed childcare workers. This is also the case for the family day carers in Flanders (for which there were no formal qualification requirements before). It must be added though that the decree allows for quite a long transition period of ten years to meet all these requirements.

In addition, a new bachelor training for pedagogical coaching was established in 2011 in 3 community colleges (Brussels, Antwerp and Ghent). In 2014, the first Bachelors in Pedagogy of the Young Child (Pedagogical Coach) graduated. They are being employed as pedagogical coaches or advisors in ECEC provision (e.g. designing the pedagogical policy, supporting non-qualified staff towards qualification, stimulating the work with parents etc.).

3. Which pedagogical approaches to social inclusion are recommended or used?

There is ample research giving evidence to the beneficial effects of ECEC, especially for children from vulnerable groups, provided that it is of high quality (see above). Without getting into the debate on what quality really entails and who should be involved in defining it, it has also been shown that the quality of the workforce is a major factor contributing to the quality of (delivery of) ECEC services.

In the context of social inclusion, the ECEC workforce has an important role to play in trying to meet the dual challenge of guaranteeing access for all to ECEC – including children from vulnerable groups – while maintaining the quality in services rendered (Lazzari, Peeters & Vandebroek, 2013).

Several studies, such as the CoRe research (Urban et al., 2011), have looked into the question of what competences are needed in the ECEC workforce to be able to serve children from the most vulnerable groups (low-income and migrant families).

Peeters and Sharmahd have elaborated on this (2014) and looked into 3 studies on the required professional development for ECEC practitioners working with 'children at risk', or, in other words, working with a diversity of children and families, including low-income families, families with a migration background, or belonging to minority groups. They conclude a.o. that 'being competent in working with children and families at risk is not an individual responsibility' (Peeters & Sharmahd, 2014, 422). Throughout the studies they analysed, some common notions become clear, such as the evidence of the importance of pedagogical support (of long term and coordinated by specialized staff) for the development of reflective thinking on practice and for building new knowledge and practice on the job. In order to be able to work in contexts of diversity, we need to look beyond theoretical and 'technical' knowledge. What is needed is professionals becoming 'actors of change', willing and able to reflect – both individually and in teams – on how they work, on why they do what

they do. One of the conclusions of the authors is also that a lack of higher pre-service training can be partially compensated by in-service training, as long as this is of sufficient intensity and length. This can happen when a strong support is present, through reflective work by means of pedagogical documentation, team discussions, parental involvement, learning communities. Staff can grow professionally and learn different ways to respond to the diversity among the families they work with. What is needed, are professionals who are committed to continuously look for better ways to address the needs of the children and families they work with, who are in other words, willing to question themselves and to reflect on their practice. As said, this is not possible on your own: reflective and 'agentic' practitioners need to be supported in this, be able to feel safe and appreciated. This requires a lot more than the individual professional; it requires a competent system (Urban et al., 2011; Vandebroek et al., 2016).

In order to respect diversity, a competent system should invest in several areas, such as:

- Investing in the initial training of the ECEC staff, with attention to reflective and relational competences. Initial qualification is important, but it cannot fully predict quality on its own, since high quality services are a result of a plurality of factors.
- Building strong systems of CPD (continuous professional development) for the staff, which means investing in the in-service trainings of sufficient length for all staff (Fukkink & Lont, 2007), and also foreseeing a strong system of pedagogical coordination to accompany the group reflection of staff on daily practices. As stated in a recent systematic review conducted for Eurofound (Peeters et al, 2015), "long term CPD (continuous professional development) interventions integrated into practice, such as pedagogical guidance and coaching in reflection groups, have been proved effective in very different contexts: in countries with a well-established system of ECEC provisions and a high level of qualification requirements for the practitioners, but also in countries with scarcely subsidised ECEC systems and low qualification requirements. [...] By enhancing practitioners' reflectivity both at individual and at team level, CPD activities allow ECEC professionals to strengthen their capacities and address areas for improvement in everyday practices". Through the support of pedagogical coaches, practitioners can co-reflect on practices in group, thereby creating a circular process between theory and practice (Bove, 2009), which helps in contextualizing each situation, rather than wishing for general standard solutions. The latter never works in a context of diversity, where every situation needs to be reflected upon and analysed in a contextualized way. Due to societal changes, it is impossible today to define a single model of 'the family', of 'the child', of 'the childcare service' (Jésu, 2010; Jubete, 2002). However, it becomes urgent to reflect on these concepts and to deconstruct their meanings, in order to rediscover them in a negotiating process (Mortari, 2009; Pourtois & Desmet, 2004). The international research Children Crossing Borders (Tobin, Mantovani, & Bove, 2010) shows that ECEC services are places where 'implicit' ideas about what education is are exchanged. These 'taken for granted' concepts need to be questioned and discussed by 'reflective practitioners' (Schön, 1983) within a context that helps them to negotiate and deal with uncertainty (Urban, 2008). Pedagogical coaches become 'facilitators' that support practitioners in addressing diversity by encouraging diversity within their own team (Peeters, Sharmahd, 2014). In this way professionals question taken-for granted opinions in a profound way and think not only about 'doing things right' but also about 'doing the right things' (Coussée et al, 2008).
- Involving parents and families in a meaningful way, within the concept of co-education (Catarsi, Fortunati, 2005; Jésu, 2010; Rayna, Rubio, 2010). ECEC centres

are in fact meeting places between diversities and commonalities (Silva, 2011), between public and private, between different identities (Vandenbroeck, 1999). The continuous need of negotiation makes ECEC centres important “democratic micro-societies” (Dahlberg, Moss, 2005), where participation becomes a way to build an active citizenship, capable of linking freedom of choices to social responsibility, thanks to the construction of a feeling of “belongingness” which creates the desire of “being part of” (Malaguzzi, 1972). A real partnership between services and families would benefit the wellbeing of all the actors involved (children, families, practitioners, community).

- Increasing diversity within the ECEC staff, considering gender, socio-economic background, ethnic-cultural diversity etc. An interesting and not yet enough studied input in this direction comes from the recent NESET II study (Peeters, Sharmahd, Budginaitè, 2016), commissioned by the European Commission, and focused on the presence of assistants (staff that assists core practitioners in daily tasks) within the ECEC staff in 15 European countries, Belgium included. In many countries the percentage of people with an ethnic-minority background or from a lower socio-economic status in society, as well as gender diversity, is higher amongst assistants than amongst core practitioners. Research shows that in some cases families with a vulnerable background seen to prefer a relationship with this group of staff than with core practitioners, because they feel more at ease (Crépin, Neuberg, 2013). This brings interesting questions and possible paths to be explored within an approach that wants to respect diversity and guarantee the professionalization of ECEC staff at the same time. The NESET II study concludes that new adapted pathways towards a qualification and a system of CPD for all staff are needed (Peeters, Sharmahd, Budginaitè, 2016).
- Investing in pedagogical documentation, which means making practices visible and open for reflection and discussion among all involved parties: staff, children, parents, community, and local authority. ‘By facilitating communication amongst actors, as well as with colleagues from other services, pedagogical documentation favours the development of a real intersubjectivity (an exchange of perspectives amongst the actors involved). This exchange gives voice to the diversity within the group and becomes the basis to co-construct meanings’ (Peeters, Sharmahd, 2014, 416). Documentation can be seen as both an individual and a group knowledge-building process, which enables those involved to reduce their intellectual ego-centricity. Observing and documenting are not just ‘tools’; they are in fact ‘a way of living, thinking, doing’, ‘a habitus’ (Galardini, 2003), a way to listen and give voice, thus a way to express and built democracy (Rinaldi, 2009; Malavasi & Zoccatelli, 2012; Malavasi et al., 2013).
- Linking research to practice. Participatory research in ECEC services can be a strong way to support reflection within the team, helping in connecting theory and practice (Bove, 2009). By taking part to research about their practice, professionals are motivated to reflect on what they do and to question it.
- Investing in specific structural conditions, which would give to the staff the chance to realize what mentioned above: for example, child-free hours (paid hours without children) are needed in order to meet, reflect, plan; the working conditions need to be improved; there should be an investment in the employment of staff from diverse background.

Taking all this into account, specific attention should be put on the staff competences, which makes a great part of the ECEC quality. Several studies tried to formulate competences,

paying attention in not creating just a 'list of tasks', but rather focusing on broad competences open to discussion, reflection and negotiation.

The studies underline that the competences that practitioners need in order to work in a highly heterogenic society are complex, and need to be supported by a system capable of guiding them.

More specifically, from the study on professionalism conducted within the Department of Social Work and Social Pedagogy of the Ghent University in collaboration with VBJK (Peeters, 2008; Peeters, Vandebroek, 2011), among practitioners working with children aged 0 to 3 years, researchers concluded that working with children and families requires the following categories of competences (Peeters, 2008, 248-255):

1. The ability to look for solutions in contexts of disagreement.
2. The focus on meeting with the Other, the one we do not know.
3. The ability to co-construct knowledge with others (colleagues, parents, children).
4. Acting with a focus on social change.

Similar conclusions are to be found in the work pack on professionalism realized by DECET & ISSA (2011), under the coordination of VBJK. A survey in Belgium, England, France, Ireland, Mexico, Morocco, Scotland, Serbia, Spain and The Netherlands among practitioners working with children aged 0 to 6y, points out 5 competences that, from the point of view of the practitioners themselves, are fundamental when working with children and families:

1. Working towards social change.
2. Open communication.
3. Critical reflection: exploring complex issues from various angles.
4. Learning from disagreement.
5. Co-constructing new practices and knowledge with children, parents and colleagues.

4. Which practices open up the schools to parents and local neighbourhoods?

(As we have not much info on this from literature reviews, we added some inspiring practices)

The BIEM¹ project in Ghent (ISSA-BVL 2016)

With Roma having become a significant group in the Ghent population, the city council started a mediator's project in 4 primary schools, with highly diverse population, among which about 250 Roma children in total. The challenges for Roma children are: limited school attendance (especially pre-school), learning and development delay (with negative effects on school career) and little or no parental involvement, often due to a lack of trust of the Flemish school system. At the same time, frustration and incomprehension was noticed among school staff. The idea was to work on better connections through mediators in this area.

The BIEM mediators were appointed, one in each school, to build bridges between families and schools, with the overall aim to secure the right of every child to have access to education. All mediators were of Eastern-European descent with an in depth knowledge of the Roma culture as well as the Belgian one. They also received training and at the same time got involved in a 3 year training as social workers.

¹Acronym in Flemish for Mediation in Inter-European Migration.

The role of the mediators was quite substantial: supporting parents (and their children), sensitizing the school teams and cooperate with neighbourhood organisations. The mediators needed to work in, out and all around the schools in building relations of trust and mutual involvement (fighting prejudices as well), linking schools with the community, increasing pupil's access and attendance. In short, building bridges between schools and family life as well as with the outside world.

These processes take time and considerable effort. One of the complexities in this work is that the mediators need to keep a certain level of neutrality as they are serving both the families and the schools. Besides, in working with families, extra work and emotional strain was added by supporting parents with other welfare and administrative issues. At the same time, this additional support proved to be beneficial in building a relation of trust and in creating an environment in which children could do better in school.

The mediators at times also reached families where mainstream services had not succeeded. By encouraging parents to partake in little, more informal activities (e.g. a cup of coffee at school), they could familiarize them with life in school and also lead them towards more formal involvement as well. Such activities, and really seeing what goes on in school, did not only affect the parent's general educational awareness but also empowered them as parents.

In the other direction, the mediators would share their (growing) knowledge of the target groups with the school teams and the community organisations. They helped to improve school attendance, increased contacts between families and schools (and so defusing conflicts) and provided useful information back and forth. Within the wider urban context, the mediators became trusted go-betweens between these vulnerable families and relevant services (social services, library, leisure...).

At the core of this project was the building of trust, which the mediators succeeded in by their continuous active commitment and high level of personal involvement. In order to make this work, however, an explicit policy is needed as well, both on the level of the city and the schools.

Social function of childcare – Brussels (Vandenbroeck & Vandekerckhove, 2016)

For over 10 years, the local Brussels Government funded a project for accredited Flemish childcare centres to develop a social intake policy, increase accessibility for vulnerable families and promote the idea of a 'social mix' in childcare provision. VBJK was engaged in this process, coaching and supporting a growing number of acceding childcare in regular meeting of learning communities, introductory training for new coordinators and working on the design of a structural intake procedure that would no longer favour the 'first come, first served' principle, but give every family equal chances to access and guarantee places for specific groups (such as newcomers, parents in training or looking for employment, ethnic minority groups).

The project was characterised by a continuous interplay of policy and practice. Childcare centres were free to engage in the project (and did so in increasing numbers) but did get some stimuli from the local government if they did (free of charge training and intervision, some financial stimuli). During the intervisions in regional groups, coordinators of childcare centres exchanged experiences on how to make their service more accessible, how to change their intake policies, how to support their team in working with a growing diverse group of families etc. Discussions went on about benefits of priority rules, about the benefits of childcare for vulnerable groups, about how to develop inclusive policies within a context of scarcity of places and about the kind of support that is needed.

The project started with 3 childcare centres, focusing on (the growing numbers of) newcomers and working alongside the Brussels service on integration. At the end of the project, after several years of continued support, about 90 to 100 centres were involved in the project, that was by then extended to all vulnerable groups and the overall issue of accessibility and social inclusion. This was possible thanks to the ongoing support and investment of the local authority and the commitment of the centres and the professionals. Over the years, the results were quite positive: there was a higher attendance in childcare of children from vulnerable groups, as well as an increased awareness among professionals of existing barriers and methods how to tackle that.

In 2013, the 'project' ended by the Brussels local authority investing in a structural follow-up, creating an permanent support organisation for all Flemish accredited childcare centres, taking over the work of VBJK, in supplying pedagogical coaching, training programmes and a common registration and intake system for the participating childcare centres.

5. In which ways do professionals deal with transitions in and out of pre-schools?

As there is no political window for a major reform towards a more integrated edu-care system, it is mostly up to professionals to develop ways to ensure a smooth or 'warm' transition, from childcare or from home to preschool and onwards.

In their research review, Peeters et al. (2012) describe the different existing views on transitions and point to the fact that smooth transitions are an element of quality and offer better chances for children to retain the benefits of ECEC. Smooth transitions facilitate a positive start in school, help children to perceive school as an important place and foster a positive learning attitude. When attention is given to a smooth or 'warm' transition, several barriers, especially for children from more vulnerable groups, can be taken out, so that transition to school is no longer an issue of 'a culture shock' where 'each day brings too many challenges or wrong kinds of challenges'. Barriers that can affect the smooth transition process mostly relate to the structural difference between ECEC systems and compulsory schooling, various views of ECEC and school educators on child's development and school readiness, communication gaps between educational levels and families and communities. Based on several research results, the main factors influencing transition are: school age, socio-cultural background, coordination between education levels, visions and expectations of scholastic skills, changes in group and teachers, non-compulsory ECEC, difference in teaching methods and schedules and the level of parent involvement.

In the same article transition is described as related to different issues:

- School readiness
- Strong and equal partnerships between ECEC, primary school, children, parents, teachers and communities
- Vision on meeting places

Giving time to children, families and professionals to begin a relationship is also crucial. The initial period of 'familiarization', during which parent and child can stay together in the service, and then gradually separate, with respect of the individual timing, represents a delicate and important moment for all the actors involved (Mantovani et al., 2000). It is a way to get to know each other, to build trust, to work within a co-educative perspective.

All this shows that more attention is needed for the different levels by which transitions are influenced:



When looking at transition as a process, rather than a one-moment event, different levels of continuity are needed to support these smooth transitions:

- Structural continuity
- Pedagogical and curriculum continuity
- Professional continuity
- Continuity on the home and community level.

This last part may be crucial in this SIEUPYC-project: in the context of diversity, parental involvement and partnerships between ECEC and schools are crucial to have ECEC and schools able to work with ethnic, cultural, socio-economic, linguistic and other forms of diversity and promote and facilitate social inclusion.

Nolan et al. (2009) summarized the important outcomes of positive transition experience:

- Children feel safe, secure and supported in the school environment.
- Children display social and emotional resilience in the school environment.
- Children feel a sense of belonging to the school community.
- Children have positive relationships with educators and other children.
- Children feel positive about themselves as learners.
- Children display dispositions for learning.
- Families have access to information related to the transition to school tailored to suit the family.
- Families are involved with the school.
- Relationships between families and the school are respectful, reciprocal and responsive.
- Educators are prepared and confident that they can plan appropriately for the children starting school.

All these outcomes positively affect the further development and performance of a child and contribute to the development of child's resiliency (Niesel & Griebel, 2005). In terms of system characteristics, successful transitions are usually more cost-effective and likely to reduce the necessity of later compensatory educational support policies (Fabian & Dunlop, 2006). Good practice examples are found in France, in the French community of Belgium and in Norway (Neuman, 2000), where special attention is given to curricular and methodical continuity. These solutions demand serious curricular and structural reforms but, as presented, are possible.

6. Which government structures and policies support socially inclusive approaches?

Above, we already mentioned the Flemish policies in childcare and (pre)primary school, working towards progressive universalism, with funding schemes that can facilitate a higher accessibility for all but especially for the more vulnerable groups.

By doing so, a response is being developed in some research conclusions such as:

'Cross-country comparisons show that countries considering ECEC as an entirely public matter, despite facing some problems of access for newly arriving immigrants, have far better results in enrolling children from diverse and poor backgrounds' (Morabito & Vandebroek, 2014)

'We find that government involvement in the availability, affordability and quality of service provision is related to lower levels of inequality in childcare use' (Van Lancker & Ghysels, 2016).

But of course, we also know that efforts in ECEC alone, will not solve all social inequality and exclusion. More efforts will also be called for in areas like employment, integration, housing, social security (including child support and parental leave schemes) and so forth, but this goes beyond the boundaries of this paper.

On a more local level, we can add an example of where and how local policy can make a difference: the Ghent case (see Peeters, 2016). In this case study the question was a.o. where practitioners acquire competences to work with families with ethnic minorities, disadvantaged and/or low-income background.

Seeing how experienced staff (even with little initial training) showed high levels of professionalism and had an open approach to disadvantaged groups, the study concluded that this was induced and supported by the long-term pedagogical coaching, which has been a long standing tradition in the Ghent ECEC services (with methods such as analyse des pratiques, Wanda, pedagogical documentation). This long tradition has taken shape in many ways, also through the work of VBJK, with specific projects focused on group reflection methods (Wanda project) and on pedagogical documentation (Zig Zag project). The aim has always been to learn from each other and to support professionals in reflecting on their practice in order to improve and transform it when necessary, with specific attention to respect towards diversity.

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