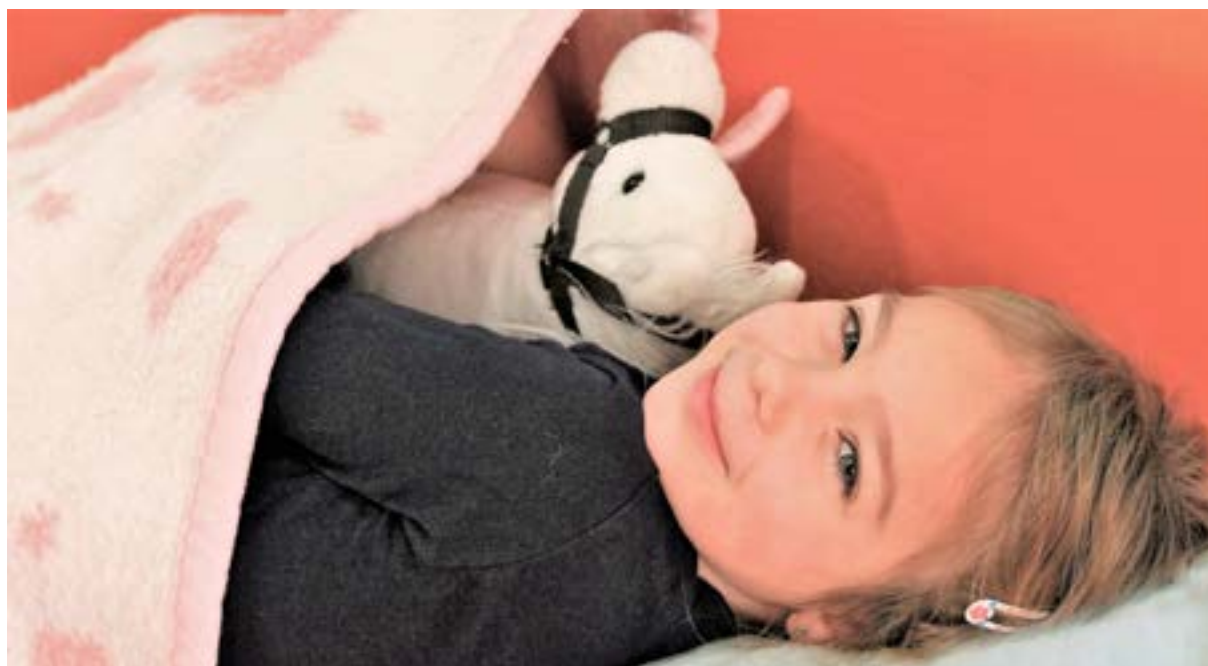




TRANSITIONS IN THE EARLY YEARS

Tools Used in the START Project – Inspiration for Professionals



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1. Introduction

The project *A good start for all: Sustaining Transitions across the Early Years* aims at promoting transnational experimentation and exchange of good practices related to the educational continuity between early childhood and school settings in four countries (Slovenia, Italy, Belgium and the United Kingdom).

As indicated in the 'Study on the effective use of ECEC in preventing early school leaving', positive experiences of transition between educational levels can be a critical factor for children's future school success, while negative experiences can have lasting difficulties leading to poorer educational performance (Dumčius et al., 2014). Furthermore, it is well documented by a growing body of research that paying particular attention to individual and meaningful transitions has a significant effect on the child's ability to manage change. By adopting a more unified approach to transitions across educational settings in order to sustain continuity of children's experiences over time we can significantly improve children's educational achievement and socio-emotional development (Brooker, 2008; Woodhead & Moss, 2007). In these regards, promoting professional exchanges among ECEC practitioners, teachers and parents in the transition process are considered to be key factors in ensuring successful transitions (Dunlop & Fabian, 2007; Margetts & Kiening, 2013; Moss, 2013).

Starting in September 2016, four different pilots in the above stated countries were established to develop warm and inclusive transitional practices with specific attention to children and families who face complex family situations (e.g. socio-economic disadvantage) and are at 'risk of social exclusion' (e.g. Roma, children with migrant background, refugee children, children with special educational needs):

- Pilot in Aalst, Belgium: Collaboration between a childcare centre, a pre-and primary school and a poverty advocacy group to enable well-being and participation of poor children and families in transition.
- Pilot in Corby, England: Collaboration between an integrated ECEC centre and primary schools to ensure continuity based on a parent and professional partnership.
- Pilot in Tišina, Slovenia: Collaboration between pre- and primary school staff to develop transitional activities for Roma children and their families.
- Pilot in Vignola, Italy: Collaboration between pre- and primary school staff to re-think educational continuity for children and families.

Four inter-institutional professional learning communities (PLCs) were formed in the framework of the project – one in each pilot country. In a PLC, a group of staff from different institutions (childcare, preschool, ECEC centre and/or primary school), shares and critically questions their transitional practice in a continuous, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting way¹. Each professional learning community were involved in participatory action research, where practitioners worked together with researchers – in shared processes of critical reflection aimed at generating transformative change in educational institutions starting from situational analysis, data collection and interpretation and leading to joint planning, documentation and evaluation of experimental projects².

This documentation reflects the tools, methods, strategies and practices that were used by inter-

1 Stoll, L., Bolam, R., McMahon, A., Wallace, M., Thomas, S. (2006). Professional learning communities: a review of the literature. *Journal of Educational Change*. 7(4), 221-258.

Sharmahd N., Peeters J., Van Laere K., Vonta T., De Kimpe C., Brajković S., Contini L., Giovannini D.; Transforming European ECEC services and primary schools into professional learning communities: drivers, barriers and ways forward, NESET II report, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2017. doi: 10.2766/74332.

2 Asquini, G. (Ed.) (2018) *La ricerca-formazione: temi, esperienze, prospettive*. [Action-research-for-professional-development: themes, experiences, prospects] Milano: Franco Angeli.

institutional professional learning communities in four pilots over the two years of their implementation. With the help of the tools described, each pilot starting from their own context researched their unique path to develop soft and inclusive transitions.

Tools to inspire

This document is not read as a guide or manual, but as an inspiration to all coordinators and managers, school directors and leaders, as well as trainers and pedagogical advisors/counsellors, practitioners, researchers to increase engagement with families and children in order to collaboratively improve transition. In this way, ECEC professionals and managers rethink transition approaches with children and parents using a co-constructed framework.

Several of the tools described in this document are derived from two transnational trainings that were carried out within the framework of the project. Transnational training activities stood at the very core of the START project as they laid the foundation for the design of effective action-research and experimentation projects within ECEC/school settings and - at the same time - built a solid framework for the exchange and transferability of good practices. The first transnational training was conducted in December 2016 in Corby, UK. The focus of the first training was on participatory action research and partnership with the parents. The second training was conducted in December 2017 in Tišina, Slovenia. 32 practitioners and researchers participated at each transnational training.

These transnational events offered researchers and practitioners the opportunity to learn about new tools, which they later used, together with their own materials, in accordance with the needs in their environments. All these helped practitioners and researchers in national pilots to develop an individual approach that led to various new practices, which contributed to softer and more inclusive transitions.

This document represents the accompanying documentation of national case studies, comprising description of the tools, methods, strategies and practices, which are arranged by the individual pilots. We recommend a joint reading of this document and national case study reports.

2. Tools used in the Case Study Italy

In the Italian context, the issues of educational continuity and transition between Early Childhood Education (ECE) and Compulsory School Education (CSE) started to be discussed, both at the institutional and pedagogical levels, in the 60s. Such discussion followed the push for democratization of the Italian public school system, that characterized the social and political context of those years. It was only at the beginning of the 1990s – when two laws were enacted, Law 148/1990 and Ministerial Decree 16-11-1992 – that such pedagogic and institutional debate was translated, through various experimentations at the school level. These laws not only acknowledged the equal status of the educational activities carried out in each type of school (pre-primary, primary and junior high), but also outlined the pedagogical practices to be carried out at institutional and inter-institutional level for the implementation of educational continuity (Calidoni & Calidoni, 1995). Within this framework, ECE and CSE institutions preserve their own specific pedagogical identity but, at the same time, they are connected by mutual obligations which revolve around the promotion of children's full development as persons and citizens.

Collegial meetings among ECE and CSE teachers play a crucial role in smoothing children's transition between different levels of the education system. In the framework of inter-institutional collaboration, projects aimed at promoting educational continuity should be jointly planned and carried out by ECE and CSE teachers. Specifically, such projects should focus on the exchange of documentation regarding children's experiences in ECE institutions, the exchange of information with children's parents, and the realization of joint initiatives aimed at introducing children to new school environments. Over the years, such projects have contributed innovative practices to improve children's transitions. An example is the "*memory suitcase*" (Canevaro et al., 1996). By conceiving transition as a journey, the "*memory suitcase*" collects pictures, drawings and other artefacts that recall children's most significant experiences within *scuola dell'infanzia*. We consider this form of documentation to be particularly interesting because it values the richness of children's learning experiences as a whole, to encompass many symbolic means through which learning could be described or recalled by each child.

Discussing documentation within collegial meetings involving both ECE and CSE teachers is not only limited to the exchange of information about the personal history of each child, it also extends to confrontations on pedagogical approaches adopted within each setting. In this sense the discussion of documentation aims at promoting a common understanding of educational work between ECE and CSE teachers. It is on the basis of this common understanding that continuity initiatives should be jointly planned and carried out with the aim of facilitating children's transition.

These initiatives may comprise school visits in which newcomers are welcomed by older children, exchanging messages and other materials with primary school classes, working on common projects involving children in *scuola dell'infanzia* and *scuola primaria*. The involvement of children's parents is also considered to be essential in supporting the process of transition: for this reason, meetings with parents are specifically organized with the purpose of providing information on the new school environment but also to exchange information about each child. Finally, within these policy documents (Law 148/1990 and Ministerial Decree 16-11-1992), the elaboration of continuing professional development paths involving ECE and CSE teachers are also encouraged through collaboration with training and research agencies at local level.

Through the years, the experimentations that were consolidated in the 1990s progressively became routine practices adopted on an annual basis by most of the Italian schools. The practices that are most commonly implemented in transition projects carried out in Italian preschool and primary school are described in the sheets reported in [Appendix 4](#).

Such transformation from experimentation to routine practices has led however to the bureaucratization of educational continuity, where transition projects are carried out by pre- and primary school teachers every year in the same way. In this context, the aim of START research has been two-fold: first, we

intended to re-conceptualize the educational continuity practices, starting from those carried out in each school involved in the study; second, to transform and experiment new practices that would better address teachers', children's and families' needs. This toolkit is organized as follows: the first section presents an overview of the tools to activate teachers' reflexivity, and their impact on teacher re-conceptualization of educational continuity; the second section highlights the tools adopted to centre the voices of children in the process of transition, and how such tools have facilitated the emergence of crucial factors to re-think the practices of continuity. The third section explores the tools used to centre the voices of families, while experimenting innovative practices to facilitate continuity. Finally, the last section, containing appendices, illustrates some practical examples of such tools.

2.1. Tools to activate teachers' reflexivity

Facilitating teachers' reflection around educational continuity and transitions is essential to foster a pedagogical environment that responds to children's and families' needs, and to reframe consolidated practices that risk being implemented mechanically.

2.1.1. The questionnaire

The first tool that we have used to solicit teachers' thinking is a questionnaire that has been distributed to both ECE and CSE teachers in the schools of Vignola, where the Italian research team has carried out the case study. The questionnaire was given to each teacher individually, following their informed written consent, and contained open ended questions to be answered in written form. The question directed to ECE teachers is:

1. The transition from ECE to CSE is a time when children experience great changes, both on a relational level and in terms of learning. Based on your experience, what do you think are the competence acquired by children in the last year of kindergarten that could support them in facing this step in the best possible way?

The question directed to CSE teacher is:

2. In dealing with the transition from ECE to CSE, some children may have difficulty in settling in into the new educational context, to conform to the new rules and to new demands from teachers. Based on your experience, what do you think are the greatest difficulties that children encounter in this transition? And what do you think are the necessary pre-requisites so that children can face this step in the best possible way?

The questionnaire was administered to teachers of both levels of schools at the very beginning of the research and served to facilitate teachers' understanding of the general objectives of the study, and to prepare the ground for more in-depth considerations and thoughts on educational continuity. It is important to stress that – whereas the experimentation reported in the Italian case study was carried out as a pilot only in one preschool (Collodi) and primary school (Moro) of DD Vignola, the teachers' questionnaire was administered to all preschool and primary school belonging to the school district (n=11). This served the purpose to create a common ground on the basis of which a shared understanding could be created even beyond the group of teacher-experimenters who took part in the pilot. The fact that the design of the innovative transition practices implemented within the pilot adopted as a starting point (pre- and primary school) teachers' reflection upon reciprocal perspectives and points of view, facilitated the upscaling of the experimentation at district level and guaranteed its sustainability even beyond the duration of the START project.

2.1.2. Observations

After administering the questionnaire, the research team has conducted classroom observations in ECE and CSE schools in Vignola. The research team has used an observation schedule that would let emerge teachers' actions, children's initiatives, space and time, and would also give the possibility to

the researcher to note some reflection. A prototype of such observation schedule is reported below.

See: [Grid to be used as a tool for exchanging reflections on observed activities in preschool](#)

2.1.3. Focus groups

A further tool that we have deployed for teachers' reflexivity on existing continuity practices is represented by focus groups. The focus groups with school professionals were used to analyse the needs characterising the school context studied, which also represented the first stage of the research. Focus groups with teachers have been then enriched with information provided by parents and children, in relation to their perception of continuity and transition. The focus groups were based on semi-structured, open-ended questions, to facilitate the discussion and to highlight similarities and difference in the perception of continuity. The ultimate purpose of the focus group was to explore the meaning and the lived experiences around educational continuity.

The semi-structured questions were organized around three major themes: (1) critical issues, (2) good practices, (3) support offered by the project. Below we offer some example of the questions asked during the focus groups with teachers:

1. What do you think are the main difficulties that children face in their transition from childhood to primary education? (observations related to concrete experiences from primary school teachers, feedback from parents reported to ECEC professionals, if younger siblings are present);
2. How do you try to facilitate this transition to childhood and primary education? Are there any particular devices that are adopted in the case of children with special educational needs? What positive feedback did you have regarding the effectiveness of these strategies? (story of a concrete episode);
3. What are the major difficulties that you think a teacher has to face in moving from ECEC to CSE and which support could be useful? And at the same time, what kind of support would ECEC professionals receive, compared to their primary school colleagues?

The idea of the focus group is then to promote a dialogical exchange between the participants, generating a shared reflection grounded in the experiences of each teacher. Such shared reflection represents the foundation of a renewed process of educational continuity where all actors are involved in the transition from ECEC services to CSE, while prioritizing children's needs.

In one of the focus groups, Teacher 1 working in preschool elaborates an argument about some of the issues that parents reported to her in the transition of their children to primary school:

"I can tell you that some parents came back to speak to us ECEC educators precisely about this aspect: their children go willingly to school, but they miss an authentic relationship. They miss, for example, the possibility of hugging their teacher, and then going back to their tasks. You see this is natural for us. I think that for you in primary school to have such relationships is hard. I'm sure a lot depends on the academic requirements of primary school, because if children are not performing well the school loses all funding and cannot continue the projects [...]." (Preschool Teacher 1)

In the above passage, Preschool Teacher 1 describe a crucial issue in transition from ECEC to CSE: the different ways in which teachers build their relationships with children. Passing from a nurturing environment, whereby relationships are more intimate and so it is the display of emotions, to a more detached type of relationship can cause distress in children. Importantly, she recognizes a systemic factor influencing CSE teachers' attitudes towards children: neoliberal reforms in education, emphasizing predetermined academic outcomes, standardised testing (i.e.: national INVALSI tests) and compliance. Such factors play a pervasive influence on teachers, who seem to not prioritize relationships over predetermined academic outcomes.

Primary School Teacher 6 reflects on two important aspects of the educational continuity: children's autonomy and the structuring of the day:

"I think that in ECEC services children are more free, and in primary school they have to get to the point where they are sitting down, quietly; then your methodology has to include an alternation of time, moments, and so on, this is clear; but the question is <<do you want the child to be autonomous while at ECEC services or at the beginning of the primary school?>> And here the management of time and space is important. Kids need to learn how to manage themselves at a time of non-structured activities and this is becoming more and more difficult because nowadays children are more curious [...]" (Primary School Teacher 6)

Teacher 6 highlights the substantial difference between ECEC and CSE as the latter being more organized in terms of spaces and time, and where learning happens more as through listening to an adult instead of through a free inquiry process. She also believes that is important that ECEC and CSE teachers agree on a shared objective around children's autonomy and when and in which context they should be expected to achieve it.

The following section presents the tools used to centre the voices of children and their families in their experience of transition from ECEC to CSE.

2.2. Tools used to centre the voice to children

2.2.1. Drawings

In order to research how children themselves experience the transition from ECEC services to CSE, we have used tools that valued their nuanced perspectives, as well as those of their parents. Drawing was one of such tools. The drawing process was facilitated in a context in which children would have not felt judged by the primary school teachers, nor the researchers. Additionally, it followed a specific strategy to ensure children's spontaneity during the process. During an agreed visit to children who recently transitioned to primary schools, ECEC educators have asked them to prepare a gift consisting of a drawing about their experience in the new school settings and how it differs from the preschool. In this section we present some of the drawings we deemed as more significant.



Left: boy in ECEC classroom setting while colouring.

Right: same boy in primary setting, sitting on his desk, studying the different seasons



Left: child in ECEC setting, playing in the garden.

Right: same child in primary setting, sitting on his desk listening to the teacher

The analysis of the graphic representations produced by the children in first grade highlights that the elements of discontinuity with ECEC settings are predominant compared to those of continuity (which are highlighted only in rare cases). In particular, as can be seen from the images above, the main elements of discontinuity that characterize the transition between the two educational contexts refer to:

- learning environment: multiplicity of environments represented at the kindergarten (classroom, garden,) versus class as the core of the teaching activities (the gym and the external environment are rarely illustrated in primary school settings);
- activities: while activities mainly represented by children in kindergarten refer to free play with classmates, to creative activities and routines such as lunch and afternoon rest, the activities represented by children in primary school refer to situations such as listening to the teacher and copying what is written on the board (only rarely are moments of play during the recreation or the time of the table);
- body and agency: if the body is designed in its infancy, referring to a full involvement of children in the learning situations represented (also through the body), at primary school the body tends to be represented mostly in partial way and with a predominantly passive role (children sitting behind a desk, only the teacher is represented in full);
- relationships between children: although in both cases the children are mostly represented together with their peers, peer interactions seem to be the focus of the situations illustrated in the childhood school while in the situations represented at primary school this aspect rarely appears (in most part of the cases the children are drawn frontally seated in separate counters).

2.2.2. Children's individual interviews

From the analysis of the data collected through the conversations with the children of the last year of preschool ([Appendix 1](#)) it was found that their expectations regarding primary school contained both elements recalling their experience in preschool (the possibility of becoming of friends, to play in moments of pause between one activity and another, to learn new things) and elements that anticipate change (Corsaro and Molinari, 2005), such as a different structuring of spaces (presence of benches and blackboards) and a greater formalization of learning (learning to read and write, numbers, doing homework).

'I think that [in primary school] there are so many desks, the blackboard, the IWB and I think I can learn to read and write in italics' (Giorgia, age 5)

'I think that [in primary school] I'll be doing well, I think I go out and play, I expect to learn how to do gymnastics and write' (Abraham, age 5)

'[In primary school] I think I find so many friends to tell secrets, I expect to learn a lot of words, numbers, and study and I want to study leaves to know how they become leaves'(Halit, age 5)

'[In primary school I think I find] many friends with whom I can play, and then also a nice park, and then also some nice things, and I think I learn to read and write' (Thomas, age 5)

At the same time, children were interviewed individually by preschool teachers about their achievements. Children's perceptions about what they have learned in preschool offered rich insights about their capabilities and coping strategies, feeding into the reflective process that involved both preschool and primary school teachers in the design of the pilot. In this sense, the image of children as competent and confident learners was put at the core of the experimentation. Discussing children's excerpts with teachers also gave them the opportunity to reflect upon the diversity of children's interests, attitudes and learning strategies. This provided a very important starting point for experimentation, acknowledging that no 'one size fits all':

'[In preschool I have learnt to] play and also to draw which is beautiful. [My favourite activity is] to tell [made-up] stories and those that the teachers tell us. [The thing I am best at is] drawing. [When I do not cope with something] I feel like crying but then I try again' (Yassmin, age 5)

'[In preschool I have learnt] not to hurt the others [children], to listen and understand what my friends are saying. I learned to colour and drawing. I learned that when someone calls me I have to go, and also when the teachers call me I have to go. [My favourite activity is] gymnastic. [The thing I am best at is] doing gymnastic. [When I do not cope with something] I ask my friends how to do it.' (Francesco, age 5)

'[In preschool I have learnt to] to share toys and colours and to play with the others [children]. [My favourite activity is] writing and drawing. [The thing I am best at is] drawing. [When I do not cope with something] sometimes I get angry and then I try again.' (Gabriella, age 5)

'[In preschool I have learnt to] play with my friends, to go on the swing, I have learned to eat by myself and to colour. [My favourite activity is] building with blocks. [The thing I am best at is] carrying out the morning roll call and numbers. [When I do not cope with something] I try again.' (Godswill, age 5)

'[In preschool I have learnt] how to play with the castle, to draw and to look at books. [My favourite activity is] drawing. [The thing I am best at is] reading books. [When I do not cope with something] I try again.' (Marwa, age 5)

'[In preschool I have learnt to] to behave well, to work, to draw and to make effort. [My favourite activity is] colouring. [The thing I am best at is] drawing castles. [When I do not cope with something] I think I look for other things to draw and I draw those which I am better at' (Alessio, age 5)

2.3. Tools used to centre the voice to parents

2.3.1. Questionnaire for parents

One of the tools that has been used to engage parents and families in the discussion about transition of their children has been an open-ended questionnaire ([Appendix 2](#)). Whereas children's drawings and individual interviews were carried out only in the preschool involved in the pilot, the questionnaire was administered to all parents of preschool children moving to primary school within the DD Vignola, having in mind the more long-term goal of scaling up the experimented transition practice beyond the duration of the project. The questionnaire was aimed at understanding parents' hopes and

expectations – as well as perceived challenges – in their children transitions from pre-school to primary schools and how these could be potentially overcome. The semi-structured questions included the following questions:

- In September your child will move on to primary school. What are your hopes and expectations for your child's education in the new school? And what are your worries, if any?
- What do you think it would be important to support your child in facing this transition?

The data collected through the questionnaires revealed that discontinuity assumptions – related to the different ways in which children's learning and socialization experiences are fostered and/or regulated across the two environments – are often at the origin of fears and concerns:

"[it worries me] Negative initial impact. A very rigid method of learning could lead to the "closure" of my son who already has a character who is shy in the group. "

"I expect a school where the children are always sitting at the desk and this worries me a lot because my son has problems with a condition of hyperactivity and oppositional disorder. [...] All schools of every grade and level should have at least some characteristics of kindergarten. The ability to play even if with different frequencies and times, to move, not to receive summary evaluations but only for competence".

"The biggest concern is to know that it does not resist so much sitting saw its liveliness"

"The greatest concern is that you need reassurance even emotional at school and that there is not much room for this in primary school."

"The emotional aspect of the transition to primary is what worries me most. To have new rules, to change the comrades, the environment, the teachers, I think the conditions are for those who are more sensitive and introverted. I fear my son gets scared and loses his enthusiasm for going to school."

If on the one hand the analysed data show that the aspects of discontinuity linked to the different educational approaches and teaching methods used within the two contexts (preschool and primary school) are those that most affect the representations of children and their families during the transition, from the other they show that - in the expectations of the latter - the presence of a certain continuity in the relationship between adults (parents-teachers), between teachers and children, and within the class group (peer socialization) is seen as a potential resource to cope with these changes.

'I expect teachers to be attentive in teaching the expected subjects but also in showing to the children how to live together in a community such as the school, how to face difficult times, how to help one another among peers [...]. I hope my daughter will find a positive, collaborative and stimulating environment to grow as a student and as a person.'

'We would like that new teachers – beside transferring knowledge to the children – would induce interest in knowledge as a value for children's individual and community growth.'

'[I expect] Teachers to be aware of how important is school in the life path of a child. Respect for every child in their abilities, emotions. Not just an instructional teaching but more related to the person, something that now is not happening much.'

'[To support my daughter in the passage I think it would be important] So much communication and attention between teachers and parents.'

'I think it's important for all of us adults (teachers and parents) to understand, flexibility (in times, ways and strategies of teaching) enthusiasm, listening [...] The relationship between teachers and parents is very important for the transition because it's a big change from preschool to

primary school.'

'I think our attitude as parents is important [...] Being present as parents ready to listen and support our children. Communication and mutual respect with teachers is essential.'

2.3.2. Parents presenting their children

Conceived as a strength-based approach to facilitate children's transitions to CSE, parents were asked to present their children to primary school teachers. Such presentations happened before ECEC professionals would present the children to their colleagues in CSE. More importantly, the researcher presented this strategy to families as a multimodal tool: parents were given a variety of suggestions to introduce their children: video, letter of presentation or digital story presentation. In the [Appendix 3](#) we present some examples of the artefacts elaborated by parents. Such creative way of introducing the children has been considered a powerful tool to facilitate children's transition to primary school settings by the teachers and parents themselves. Evidence of such positive reception of the strategy can be found in some of the parents' account, reported below:

"A very useful thing in my opinion was the presentation that we were asked to do for the teachers... Personally I preferred to make a video by giving to my son the 'responsibility' to show himself to the new teacher ... and it was amazing ... he surprised me too! I would have talked probably as a mom and that's it, but he also said the things that, let's say, are a bit more difficult to say regarding his personality ... So this thing, to bring a story, a video of the child to the new teachers in my opinion was fundamental: both for teachers and for the child himself. Because he had to take time, to think 'who I am', 'what I do' and above all 'what do I want to tell them about me?'. This in my opinion was fundamental for my son." (Mother)

"For the first time the teachers asked us 'how is your daughter?' 'what can we know more than her beyond the fact that she is a 6 year-old girl who starts primary school?' My husband and I sat down one evening and actually for the first time we looked at each other and asked ourselves 'how is our daughter?' what are the right words to describe her?' And it was very nice because, yes, we talk so much about her but we never sat down to tell the positive and negative sides of her personality ... So we wrote a kind of a letter in which we also spoke, for example, of her sensitivity, that if you do not know her deeply you might not notice it ... Thanks to this interview I think we have been able to give useful and important information to teachers." (Mother)

The above quotes speak to importance of the presentation strategy as an inclusive tool that allow teachers to understand the various aspects of a child's personality, avoiding one singular perspective of the child's attitude and behavior, which may be influenced by teacher's bias. Such tool help teacher to have a holistic perception of the child, offered by those who know her/his better: the parents. Simultaneously, it has demonstrated to be a powerful reflective tool for parents who had the opportunity of gather 'evidence' of their children's personality.

List of appendices, which present tools used in the project:

- Appendix 1: [Open-ended questions asked to children prior to the transition to CSE](#)
- Appendix 2: [Questionnaire for the Families](#)
- Appendix 3: [Examples of Parents Presenting Children](#)
- Appendix 4: [Activities implemented in educational continuity project – descriptive sheet](#)



3. Tools used in the Case Study Belgium

A couple of pioneers in the field of childcare, preschool education and combatting poverty in the city of Aalst in Flanders started to collaborate on the question how to ensure warm and inclusive transitions for a diversity of children and families, including children living in poverty. For this purpose we started a START critical learning community with preschool teachers, childcare workers, directors and poverty advocates. Monthly in the period September 2016 – June 2018, we have been discussing what the problems are in transition and which actions can be undertaken and how to follow-up and evaluate these actions. We conducted an action research with employees of childcare centre Mezenestje -in collaboration with the associated partner, advocacy poverty organisation Mensen voor Mensen NGO and pre- and primary school Sint-Maartensinstituut (Moorsebaan). This action research is facilitated and guided by VBJK, a Centre for Innovation in the Early Years.

This action research is focussed on the co-construction, experimentation and documentation of a change process to enhance overall ECEC quality for children - between 2 and 4 years old - living in poverty and their families by making transitions warm and inclusive across home, childcare and preschool. In a first phase of the action-research we have gained more insight on the experiences of children and parents in Aalst on transitions. In order to research how parents themselves experience the transition from home or childcare to preschool education, we organised 4 focus groups and 10 individual interviews in the period January –March 2017. The focus groups were organised by the poverty advocacy group and VBJK, the facilitators of the START learning community. These data were analysed and discussed in the START learning network. Based on the discussion of the analysis, the participants enriched their current actions and developed new actions.

The first meetings of the START critical learning community were focused on childcare workers, preschool teachers, poverty experts and directors getting to know each other and how their settings work. During an international training week in Corby (December 2016), the members of the group learned more on methodologies of action research. Inspired by the field visits to the ECEC centres and primary schools, the group started debating a common vision and developed 7 common principles.

1. We respect each child in his/her identity and give them all possible changes in the transition.
2. We approach children and parents positively and personalized: strengths and forces of children and parents are at the core
3. We want to ensure a gradual and comfortable transition for children and parents.
4. By encounter and dialogue we actively involve parents in the transition process and build a trust relationship with them
5. By an open and warm reception, children and parents can feel welcome
6. We support and strengthen each other to take actions in transition
7. We unite our forces to establish continuity in the upbringing process of children

These principles continuously served as a reflection instrument throughout the project. Together with the results of the analysis of local needs, these principles gave us a common ground to develop actions that actually can make a difference for children, parents and professionals in the transition across home, childcare and preschool. Although there was an initial specific focus on ensuring that children and families in poverty experience a smooth transition, the developed transitional practices are inclusively focused on all children and families.

In what follows we summarise professional learning tools that can be inspirational for any inter-institutional professional learning network to work on warm and inclusive transitions.

3.1. Listening to parent's voices

See [Appendix 1](#) for more details.

In order to research how parents themselves experience the transition from home or childcare to preschool education, then you organize some focus groups with parents. If you want to achieve diversity within the group of parents, then you need a well-considered planning. Each partner organizes a number of focus groups, with the aim to reach a mix of parents. (SES; gender; ethnic-cultural diversity; with young/older children). The ideal number of participants for a focus group would be between 6 and 12 people. Each organization invites all parents of children of 2-4 years old to participate.

If you want to achieve diversity within the group of parents, you will have to plan a focus group at multiple and various moments. One parent can make himself available in a morning, another one in the evening, or in the weekend. The location where you organise the focus group is also important. Parents take part in a focus group of their own choice; this could be in their familiar environment, at the place where parents already come. These options lower the barrier for parents to participate.

Flyer: do you want to reach all parents? Do all parents speak or understand the language sufficiently? Do you need to provide an interpreter? A multilingual invitation indicates that everyone is welcome to participate in these conversations.

Each focus group should support the sharing and co-construction of meanings amongst participants. The discussion will start from individual points of view, but it should evolve through confrontation with the perspective of others.

Key points:

1. At the beginning of the focus group, the facilitator welcomes everybody and reminds the aims of the focus group. Remind that everything will stay anonymous and that just the research team will see the information of the families. Remind also that the focus group will be recorded.
2. As a facilitator, make sure there is a focus on how diversity/inclusion is perceived through all the areas you will explore with the focus groups. You do not need to make this explicit with participants, but pay attention to the examples they bring and try to deepen concepts connected to this theme when they arise.
3. As a facilitator make sure everybody has a say, pay attention also to the ones that talk less and value what is said, without judging or giving an answer yourself. Be careful, for example, when a participant asks you 'what do you mean?' Sometimes by answering this question, you actually give a direction to the conversation (unless of course the question refers to a term that it is not understood or so). In these cases, it is better to mirror the question by repeating 'what do you mean?'
4. When exploring each theme, always ask concrete examples. Through concrete examples, we get to know what parents 'really' think, and we don't get 'standardized answers'. E.g. after asking 'Do you think it's important to stimulate autonomy during the 'saying goodbye'. Make it concrete by asking 'do you think children say goodbye by themselves?'

3.2 Observing and reflecting together

See [Appendix 2](#) for more details.

Due to the rather dominant idea that children need to be made(pre-)school ready, it is more common that new children are framed from a deficit perspective in terms of what they are actually lacking to be in preschool (e.g. they are not potty trained, they do not speak Dutch well enough,...). When professionals from different backgrounds (childcares, teachers) observe together and discuss how children act and



learn, the necessity of a holistic viewpoint in which caring and learning are inseparable is automatically brought to the foreground. Gradually different groups of professionals from both childcare and (pre) school will start to discover that children already are very capable once they arrive in childcare or in preschool. With the exercises 'observing and reflecting', we will strengthen the competences of teachers and childcare workers to become more sensitive and responsive to the needs of each child and parent.

The pedagogical coach has an important role in guiding the observations made by teachers and childcare workers. Observing and reflecting requires mutual trust. 'Learning from each other' is an important objective of the learning network. Besides observing in your own setting/context, it is also interesting to visit a colleague in 'his/her' own setting/context. This observation method covers three steps

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

3.2.1. Observing without interpretation

During the day you constantly look at 'what is happening' at that moment. You receive signals, you watch, you listen and react to this. You do this spontaneously, it is important that you are aware of this subjective view. Besides, it is good to observe and to understand the different actions objectively. Observing and reflecting give you a different view on a situation. Within a learning network you will alternately observe and reflect together to make multiple interpretations, provided that you are open to a 'different' view on the actions.

3.2.2. Trust, curiosity and respect

A caring learning environment, in your own organisation and within the learning network is essential to invite a colleague or to visit another colleague. Observing and giving feedback as well as being observed might cause stress to teachers and childcare workers. You are curious about the other person's story, communicating respectfully about your observations. Giving and receiving feedback asks for mutual trust. What do you want to reach with your feedback? How to make sure you open up for feedback?

3.2.3. An observation exercise in three steps

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

3.3. Working on inclusion in ECEC settings

See [Appendix 3](#) for more details.

Basic ECEC services are at the heart of society: a society that constantly moves and changes. Therefore, it is only natural that services need to change in this evolving context. High quality services are working on inclusion of children with special needs, on respecting diversity and on accessibility for vulnerable

or disadvantaged groups within society. This is all 'part of their job'. The 'mini-society' that is shaped within ECEC services, fights against exclusion of disadvantaged groups and fully engages itself for social cohesion and participation in society. In order to create accessible services, attention especially needs to go to transitional moments.

How do we make our schools/ECEC services meaningful for all children and families? How do we make our schools/ECEC services more inclusive to create a sense of belonging for everyone? How can you work together to make transitions more inclusive?

Every transition, every start in a new day care centre, preschool or primary school is an important step for the child and his family. As a team, you should always be aware that your ECEC centre has unintentional barriers. The book *'Four small corners of nothing'* by Jérôme Ruillier, is an eye-opener to break down the barriers in your ECEC service. This book can be used as a reflection tool in the professional learning network to explore metaphorically, what accessibility and inclusion really are. It supports you to develop a mission and vision on accessibility in relation to transitional moments across home, childcare, preschool and primary school.

You will find this story on Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7o2gk0bS2Pw>. The book is in French, English translation can be found in the [appendix 3](#) of the toolbox.

3.3.1. A nice story, but it is so much more!

Based on the discussion of the first impressions of this book, you can ask some questions and formulate statements to help the professionals in the network to critically reflect on their accessibility. It starts from analysing your neighbourhood. If you know which families live in your neighbourhood, you can actively work on increasing accessibility of your ECEC services

3.3.2. The community: who, which, why

- Who is in your community?
- Which is the largest group?
- Which group are least represented in your setting?
- Why do you think this is the case?

3.3.3. Statements

"Some families are hard to reach. Some services are hard to access." Which of these statements do you find yourself saying more frequently?

- look at the barriers in the schools/ECEC for groups?
- What is your professional task? How do you act as a professional?
- Initiative lays with schools and centres.
- Outreach? How do you contact the others? Are you connected to the community?

"If parents don't send their children to preschool on a regular basis, children will have less chance to succeed in later school and life." Do you agree with this assumption or not?

- Individualisation of social problems/blame
- If you promote enrolment, you need to look at your quality

“Some families do not want to use the ECEC services or schools because in their culture children stay in the family.”

- Culturalised approaches versus services not being able to be inclusive: ‘othering the other’. ‘It is the same story again and again with them’.

“Do we see people of a certain community or minority group as agents of change or are we the advocates for minority families?”

“Is it a matter of building trust with families or combatting your own fears of going into dialogue?”

3.3.4. Questions

- How do we make our schools/ECEC services meaningful for all children and families?
- How to make our schools/ECEC services more inclusive to create a sense of belonging for everyone?
- How can you work together to make transitions more inclusive?

3.4. Working on warm welcome in pre(school)

See [Appendix 4](#) for more details.

Across the line, a film on transition follows three children in different locations of preschool education in the city of Ghent (Belgium). Together with their parents, they are spending all the time they need to explore their new classroom and school environment. This documentary supports the reflection on a warm and smooth transition for children, parents and professionals. Although this documentary takes place in a split system in which childcare and preschool are organised under different ministries, this can also be an inspiring movie for professionals who work on the transition to primary schools and for ECEC professionals who work in integrated ECEC systems.

Documentary **Across the line**

Guust, Noë and Anna-Lisa: first day at school

Free movie to watch with English subtitles

<https://vbjk.be/en/publication/across-the-line>

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Commissioned by the Centre of Education,
(Onderwijscentrum Gent)



Guust, Noë and Anna-Lisa are going to school for the first time. ‘It can be so overwhelming that it feels as though you’ve landed on another planet’, says teacher Bart.

Inside and outside the school grounds, various staff members collaborate in this: parents and staff pull each other across the line, so that every child gets off to a good start. This happens literally and figuratively. Parents are engaged to step “across the line” into the classroom. And various professionals, from the teacher in the classroom to the professional in out-of-school care, together elaborate maximum opportunities for young children to get a good start in preschool education.

First impressions: watch the movie, take some notes and discuss this in the learning network. In the appendix you will find a more elaborated version to guide the discussion (with quotes etc.)

- What is remarkable?
- What touched you?
- Do you see similarities with your preschool / childcare?
- Do you see differences with your preschool / childcare?
- How could care and education services work together to facilitate a better transition to school?
- How can both concepts be more integrated? What is the place of parents in all of this?
- What about the need for additional attention for children from disadvantaged, vulnerable groups?
- How do young children experience starting at school? What does it mean for a 2 ½ years old to go to school? How do they experience their first days? How do the parents feel and react? In addition, what about the teachers?
- Where do you encounter barriers in ensuring inclusive transition processes for new children and their parents?
- What is your vision / goal for the future regarding this theme?

3.5. Documenting change

See [Appendix 5](#) for more details.

Notes, observations, video, photographs and stories are part of the memory of a change process. You collect documentation for yourself, your colleagues and the inter institutional learning network. Where are we now? What is going well and what could be improved? It is useful to design a 'grid' for the report. Every member of the inter institutional learning network writes down his or her plans and observations, analyses and new plans in an almost similar way. Such a grid is a handy tool to exchange experiences. The items show the action step by step. You discuss the material with your team or within the learning network. These schemes are arranged in an orderly manner and make an action visible and understandable for a colleague. They support the reflections on the actions you take. Next to that, the schemes are the memory of your change process. You look back easily at the many actions you have taken to work out one objective. In the Belgian professional learning network we have connected this grid with the shared common vision:

1. We respect each child in his/her identity and give them all possible changes in the transition.
2. We approach children and parents positively and personalized: strengths and forces of children and parents are at the core.
3. We want to ensure a gradual and comfortable transition for children and parents.
4. Through encounter and dialogue, we actively involve parents in the transition process and build a trust relationship with them.
5. By means of an open and warm reception, children and parents can feel welcome.
6. We support and strengthen each other to take actions in transition.
7. We unite our forces to establish continuity in the upbringing process of children.

These principles continuously help you to reflect. They help you to set goals and plan actions. Together with the results of the analysis of local needs, these principles give a common ground to develop actions that actually can make a difference for children, parents and professionals in the transition across home, childcare and preschool and primary school. Although there was an initial specific focus



on ensuring that children and families in poverty experience a smooth transition, the developed transitional practices are inclusively focused on all children and families.

In order to document the different actions in relation to the common vision, a template is available in appendix of this toolbox.

List of appendices, which present tools used in the project:

- Appendix 1: [Focus groups with parents on transitions](#)
- Appendix 2: [Observations and reflections in a critical learning community](#)
- Appendix 3: [Four small corners of nothing](#)
- Appendix 4: [Guidelines to discuss the documentary on transitions: 'Across the line'](#)
- Appendix 5: [Action plans and analysis](#)

4. Tools used in the Case Study Slovenia

Within the project, Educational Research Institute- Centre for pedagogical initiatives Step by Step, worked side by side with partner school Tišina, which under one structure combines two institutions: Primary School Tišina and Kindergarten Plavček.

Centre's activities in the pilot were focused on developing joint professional learning community (PLC) of ECEC and primary school teachers. Within it, ECEC and primary school professionals had opportunity to start the process of developing shared understanding of the needs of the children and parents, shared vision of the child, shared understanding of the supportive learning environment and interactions in kindergarten and primary school and through this to ensure pedagogical and professional continuity, as two out of four crucial processes providing smooth transition between different learning environments. (Van Laere et al., 2019)

We used the strategy of developing PLC as developed within International Step by Step association (ISSA), which we also use in the Network of kindergartens and primary schools Step by Step in Slovenia. The following text is based on the publication Roads to Quality - Strengthening Professionalism in Early Childhood Education and Care Systems (Tankersley, 2015).

4.1. About the PLC

The PLC provides a safe environment for reflection of the practice of a professional worker as well as for creating a common understanding of the pedagogical concepts of all professional staff in kindergarten/ primary school. That is important both for raising the quality of the practice of each individual expert as well as the kindergarten/primary school as a whole. PLC is an important strategy for professional development, as it offers support in introducing changes to practice. In order to learn about novelties from the profession, participation in training, reading literature etc is certainly important, but the support of colleagues in kindergarten / primary school is crucial to the introduction of innovations and the changing of one's own practice.

A professional learning community is more than a group of professionals that regularly meet. Eaker (2002) states that for a community of educators to become a learning community, the group of educators needs to have: cooperation; a joint vision/mission; common values and goals; orientation towards learning; leadership; a focus on a plan for enhancing performance; determination; and a celebration of achievements.

Newmann et al. (1996, in Vescio et. al, 2008) add other basic pre-conditions for the development of learning communities and included: shared values and norms (on issues as the group's collective 'views' about children and children's ability to learn, the school's priorities and the role of the educators and educational professionals); a constant focus on children' learning, reflective dialogue between community members, deprivatizing practice to make teaching public; and a focus on collaboration.

4.1.1. Elements for development of PLC

Three elements that are necessary for the development of professional learning communities, and which we incorporate in the structure of the work of the communities are: cooperation, shared vision and reflection.

4.1.1.1. Cooperation

Cooperation does not solely refer to educators working in a pleasant atmosphere, but also to mutual appreciation and sharing experiences, knowledge, skills, doubts, etc. According to McMillan (1976, in McMillan & Chavis 1986: 9) the "sense of community is a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs

will be met through their commitment to be together”

Knowing ourselves and each other

The process of developing cooperation in a community starts with knowing ourselves and each other, as what we do in our classrooms is impacted by our beliefs about education and learning. For example, learning can be seen as the transmission of knowledge or a social process whereby knowledge is constructed together with others. Imagine, for example, how hard it would be to cooperate with colleagues who have a completely different set of beliefs than yours on the ways how children learn best. Therefore, it helps to share one’s personal teaching philosophy with one’s colleagues.

Developing trust

Developing cooperation in a community means creating an atmosphere of trust, or in other words, a belief that their colleagues do not wish to threaten them professionally (i.e. to ridicule or humiliate). Mutual trust is the basis for success of a community. Les Hart (2002, in Caine & Caine, 2010) describes, what happens when people feel threatened or helpless. In such situations, the brain switches to automatic, often a fast and reflexive reaction which serves the purpose of “survival” and which he calls downshift. In such moments, higher-order thinking is blocked. To be explicit, when educators feel frightened about the reactions of their colleagues, their brain is in downshift, and they are not capable of thinking and solving professional challenges they encounter in their daily work.

Sense of interdependence

In time, the sense of interdependence should develop between community members, the feeling that they can succeed together, combine talents and capacities and create something new (Covey, 1989, in Wald & Castleberry, 2000). Creating a sense of interdependence in the group is a complex process which is alleviated if each member of the group understands one’s self (Who am I? What do I believe in? How do I wish to contribute?). This self-awareness is then combined with knowing others and their strengths, by valuing differences in the group, different experiences and opinions.

4.1.1.2. Shared vision

A shared vision of quality teaching allows all educators to implement their work differently. Part of having a shared vision is having a common understanding of the theory of teaching. Studies show that the better educators know the theory of teaching and learning, the better they can cope with problems in the classroom, but also they can teach different content easier and with better quality (Caine & Caine, 2010). Therefore, educators are required to combine knowledge of theory and practice with an understanding of professional terminology, and reflect on their own experiences.

In our PLC we build shared vision on quality teaching and learning upon the ISSA Definition of Quality Pedagogy. The purpose of using such a document has been to accelerate the process of creating a shared vision and thus assist educators to introduce changes and enhance the quality of their work more quickly. This document- Competent Educators of the 21stCentury – ISSA Definition of Quality Pedagogy (ISSA, 2010), describes quality child-centred teaching practice based on the findings of research of children’s development, the theory of learning and neuroscience. The ISSA Principles of Quality Pedagogy are not a recipe, a formula or a checklist. Educators are encouraged not only to accept this document as a shared vision of the school, but also as a starting point for discussing and reflecting about the current quality of education in their kindergarten /primary school and of the goals they wish to achieve, so as a point for opening dialogue about practice and seeking improvement.

Document describes the principles of quality pedagogy and indicators of quality practices on seven in research and the analysis of good practices identified key areas in ensuring a quality process: Interactions; Family and Community; Inclusion, Diversity and Values of Democracy; Planning and

Assessment; Teaching Strategies; Learning Environment.

Each professional community may select the area of the educators' practice they wish to enhance. In addition, each community independently determines which segment of work they wish to tackle within this area and the time they will dedicate to it. The goal is to guide the learning community towards the development of quality child-centred practice, and at the same time allow the freedom for each professional learning community to plan their own vision. During all meetings, the community members discuss some of the aspects of quality (Indicator belonging to Principles in ISSA definition), discuss how to meet the Indicators of quality in their work, and how ultimately to develop a "professional development plan" describing what they plan to achieve or change in their practice by the next meeting, what actions they will take, what resources they will need, and who can help them. Instead of the transmission perspective over the practice in which the educators are usually told what to do, the constructivist view of the teaching profession is nurtured within and through the learning communities. Educators are no longer perceived only as doers, but also as people who know and who reflect.

4.1.1.3. Reflection

The goal of reflection is to seek new understanding and new ways for improving the quality of practice, instead of the usual revision of daily practice. Therefore, while working in professional learning communities, it is necessary that educators avoid dealing only with "nice ideas" they can apply in their work on a one-time basis. Instead, it is necessary to ensure reflective thinking about the education practice.

Reflection is a process of revising professional experiences in order to describe them, analyse them and evaluate them (Reid, 1993). It responds to the questions "Where are we now?" and "How good we are, compared to what we want to be?", "What activity had an impact on the children, and what had none?", "Based on what can I say this?", "What out of the attempted had most impact?", "What kind of children's behaviours indicated that we are going the wright way?" (Caine & Caine, 2010). When educators respond to these questions (or in other words, reflect upon their practice) they are engaging in metacognition (thinking about personal cognitive processes and beliefs) and examining their emotions (thinking about personal emotional status) and behaviours (analysing personal behaviour and its consequences) (Vizek-Vidović, 2011).

Reflection can be done individually or as a group activity of educators. Through discussing a problem together, theories, or current issues and documenting their own experiences, educators can become the driving force of change. Reflective practice which starts at the individual level (the educator as an individual who reflects causes and consequences of his/her work) may influence the practice of colleagues and groups which s/he belongs to (the professional learning community); and group reflexive practice expands and is accepted on the school level (Čudina-Obradović, 2008).

Reflection is incorporated in the structure of the learning communities meetings on three levels, as described by Cowan (1998, in Vizek-Vidović, 2011).

During meetings, the educators (based on previous experiences and understanding of certain elements of quality teaching) plan activities to be carried out their practice. This is called reflection before action. During the execution of planned activities, educators observe the reactions of children. This is called reflection inaction, reflection during action, or reflection of the first level. An educator's journal may help them while reflecting in action as they record their observations. Immediately after teaching, educators reflect if they carried out activities as they planned, were there any discrepancies and finally, why and what would they do differently next time. This is reflection on action, reflection about the implemented activities or second-level reflection. Once again, the educator's journal is a tool for recording and analysing reflections on action. While meeting with colleagues, at the learning community meeting, educators present their thoughts after the plan has been carried out (reflection on reflection or third-level reflection).

Experiences from leaders of professional learning communities have shown that in different communities, certain elements were emphasized more than others: cooperation, vision or reflection. For example, in schools with no established habit of educator conversations or dialogue, leaders needed to invest a lot of effort in establishing trust between community members, making them feel accepted enough to be able to speak both of their successes and challenges. In schools where educators did not feel intimidated by their colleagues, communities focused more on the vision, using more articles, video materials and other resources in order to clarify certain terms and to reach common definitions of the quality of teaching. In schools where educators have already worked together on their professional development, have attended seminars on child-centred approaches, and have already developed a shared vision of the quality of educator's work, the reflection component was emphasized. They used fewer prepared resources (video, lessons plans, etc.). Instead they created new activities used for reaching the goals described in the ISSA Definition of Quality Pedagogy. At their meetings, educators spent most of their time discussing the effectiveness of the activities they created.

Experience from our pilot

In interinstitutional pilot PLC kindergarten and primary school teachers were included. Researchers from ERI initiated the first meetings, where work of PLC and ISSA principles were introduced and "rules of acting" were agreed upon. Kindergarten and primary school teachers agreed on working on developing deeper understanding of stimulative learning environment in kindergarten and primary school, as well as developing pedagogical and developmental continuity in this field. We were also discussing peer observations as powerful tool of mutual support and peer learning (see more in next chapter).

In the process it was established, that although kindergarten and primary school teachers share the same organization, there is present strong institutional split amongst them, reflected in weak common trust and cooperation. As written above, in different PLC's, certain elements of work- cooperation, vision or reflection can be emphasized more than others. In our case, due to lack of mutual cooperation between teachers on both levels, a lot of effort needed to be put in establishing trust between community members. Only in the last phases of implementation of the project, level of trust increased to the point, where teachers were prepared to engage in peer observations and reflect upon them.

4.1.2. Leading the PLC

The leaders of PLCs are very often the leaders of professional development at the level of the kindergarten/primary school. In some cases, these can be educators who are enthusiastic about their own personal development, but also care about the professional development of their colleagues and the enhancement of the quality of performance on the kindergarten/primary school. If possible, it is beneficial if a PLC has two leaders, because it makes the preparation of the meeting easier, and it contributes to the sense of security of the leaders, as well as to the dynamics of the meeting.

In our case, the leaders of interinstitutional PLC were researchers from our Centre. The idea was to model the leading of the PLC and during the implementation of the project, transfer the leadership to two other leaders- one from kindergarten and other to primary school. Unfortunately this did not happen during the project. Even more, the school Tišina stepped out of the Network for changing Quality Step by Step. This means less external content support for both- the kindergarten and also primary school.

4.1.3. Structure of the PLC

Ideally, the PLC meets every month, as the continuous meetings and reflective discussions of practitioners about their practice contributes to changing the understanding of the pedagogical process and introducing changes to the practice. In our case, the inter-institutional PLC met every month (?). Additionally researchers met with a narrower project group every month and a half to two

months. At the monitoring we performed a reflection of the work done in the PLC as well as other project activities and planned the work until the next meeting.

Clear structure of the PLC's meeting helps following three elements that are necessary for the development of professional learning communities: cooperation, shared vision and reflection.

In the chart structure of the PLC meeting is introduced. Presented timeframe is adapted to the hour and a half meeting.

Elements of the structure of the community meeting	Activity	Duration
1. Warming-up	Warming-up exercise, creating a sense of unity and strengthening cooperation among members.	5–10 min
2. Reflecting on performed Activities	<p>1. All PLC members briefly present how they carried out activities in their groups, how children reacted, what would they have done differently, etc. After that, one educator presents in detail his/her reflections of the implemented activities and her/his reflection. The educator who reports speaks briefly of the activities, impressions, dilemmas and ideas for improvement, etc. (10 min.) – see Appendix 1</p> <p>2. Other educators ask questions and seek clarification, offer their ideas for improvement, solutions, etc. This is the part where practitioners connect theory with practice, link goals and tasks, beliefs and behaviours and assess different aspects of their practice. (15 min.)- see Appendix 2</p> <p>3. The speaker gets an opportunity to say which proposals she/he found useful. (5 min.)</p> <p>4. Everybody gets a chance to give their opinion (5 min.)</p>	30–45 min.
3. Developing a common understanding of quality	Discussion on one quality indicator initiated by an article, text, video, on basis of peer observation etc. _	20–25 min.
4. Planning next steps	Each educator writes his/her own individual professional action plan – see Appendix 3	5–10 min
5. Closing the meeting	Closing remarks, conclusions, evaluation.	5 min

4.2. Peer observation with reflective discussion

Peer observations (observing the colleague's practice followed by a reflective conversation) are one of the most important activities for ensuring soft transition and the continuity of pedagogical practice among various institutions. Furthermore, observation is one of the most efficient methods of mutual learning and support of colleagues, which enables creating a common understanding of concrete pedagogical concepts among professionals and consequently leads to raised quality of pedagogical

practice (Tomić, 2002). Through observation, professional workers acquire authentic “study material”, based on which they can reflect their practice and form an action plan that serves to change their own work.

SbS CQE uses observations tools, which were developed by ISSA. Their goal is to promote inclusive, quality care and education experiences, which create conditions for all children to become active members of democratic societies. Based on research and cooperation with practice, ISSA defines quality pedagogy around seven Focus Areas of early childhood professional practice: Interactions, Family and Community, Inclusion, Diversity, and the Values of Democracy, Assessment and Planning Teaching Strategies, Professional Development.

A prerequisite for the implementation of colleagues’ observations is trust, which should be established at the level of the collective, and the understanding of communication as a tool for professional development (Tomić, 2002). This was also the case in our project, where the implementation of observations was adapted according to the trust among colleagues and the degree of willingness of each individual to change their own practice.

Another important aspect, which needs to be considered when planning such action, is to have a clear goal and supporting materials for observation, which help us develop common understanding, support professional development of preschool and school teachers and help them improve their everyday performance through principles of learner-centred, interactive pedagogy, development of lifelong learning skills, self-reflection and cooperation with colleagues/peers, families and communities. The use of suitable supportive materials enables us to follow and ensure the process quality not just the structural aspect of practice.

4.2.1. The process of observation

When observing, we focus on one (or two) focus areas and collect evidence around a specific indicator. This provides a basis for professional discussion and at the same time gives observers a feeling that they are successful in recording information, which is crucial for the adult learning process. As they master the recording of evidence and sharing those experiences with other observers, they will be able to improve their focus during observations and pay more attention to important evidence they might miss in the classroom. It is recommended that observers begin by focusing on one principle and slowly add others. As observers gain skills, they get able to observe more complex situations over time. In a reflective conversation that follows observation, professionals develop a common understanding of each principle.

As mentioned above, the use of tools requires training on how to observe and collect evidence during observations as well as how to analyse it. Opportunities also need to be provided to discuss the evidence and how to assess it using the scales provided in the document. It is important that everyone (including the teachers) using the tool are trained in observation, data collecting and analysis procedures in order to put teachers in a more active position in the process of professional development and building professional communities. Data collected through the use of the tools will identify needs for training, knowledge, resources, and support as well as areas of excellence, providing information about individual or cohorts of teachers.

Effective observation requires collection of neutral and specific information, which reflects the real image of the observed child/practitioner. Observers note only facts and accurate descriptions of what they see. Notes comprise specific descriptions of actions, words and reactions of the observed ones. There are certain words, which could be interpreted in various ways and should not be noted (messy playroom, unresponsive child/teacher/practitioner, inappropriate, nice, rough...). Furthermore, observers should avoid words, which define certain characteristics that cannot be objectively observed, such as: words describing emotions (happy, sad, mean, angry, bored, interested...), intelligence (smart, dumb, lame, average...), explanations for certain actions (irritated, forced, decisive, without control, motivated...), and self-esteem (capable, beautiful/ugly, athletic, uncertain). Personal judgements and

interpretations, which are based on experience, values, mental filters, own reactions or questions should not be noted.

4.2.2. Tools for observation

The Sbs CQE uses for observation the Professional Development Tool- tool for gathering examples on ISSA quality principles ([appendix 4](#)), grounded in the ISSA's Competent Educators for the 21st Century, a policy document that proposes ISSA's Definition of Quality Pedagogy and was adjusted in the SbS CQE.

This tool can be used in professional learning communities or in the mentoring process. It outlines 20 Principles and 85 Indicators of quality, structured around the above stated seven Focus Areas of early childhood professional practice. Additionally, it defines quality teaching practices in working with children aged 3–10 and their families to better support the child's development, learning and well-being.

During observations, observers use this tool to check indicators for a specific focus area, which is agreed to be monitored and discussed later.

Experience from our pilot

One of the activities, which were planned for preschool and school staff in our pilot, was also peer observation. Representatives of the Sbs CQE conducted training for both teams at the same time, where we presented the tool for observation, benefits of such professional development and the impact of observation and reflective discussion on professional's practice. This joint training was intended to grow further in developing a professional learning community, which would be formed from professionals from two collaborative institutions in order to give them a new opportunity to work together, build common understanding of quality practice and strengthening their cooperation. This mutual professional development would later lead to observation of their practice. However, during this training we experienced how important is trust among colleagues. Due to lack of trust, observations could not be carried out in the first phase of the project. The shift was made after the training week in Tišina (December 2017), when a significant part of the training was dedicated to the importance of observation of the early childhood practice. Participants were introduced with the Professional Development Tool – tool for gathering examples on ISSA quality principles (described above) and got the opportunity to experience how to use the tool for observation of the practice at preschool as well as school. Very positive feedback from international colleagues who observed their practice during the training encouraged professionals from our pilot school and preschool to start with observations themselves. This cooperation first started on the level of professionals from the core project team, who connected more during the project and built trust among themselves. Preschool teachers went to observe practice of their colleagues from school and vice versa and discussed what they saw during this process.

4.3. Reflective discussion

Reflective discussion, which follows each observation, is the most valuable part of this process, as all involved get the chance to exchange their views on the observed practice and share their notes and knowledge. Yet, in order to achieve this, it is of great importance to have a clear structure of this conversation, which is based on the tool and our notes on its indicators of quality. In this way, the observed colleague gets feedback on his/her practice, while the others learn and create common understanding of quality practice.

Immediately after the observation, observers and the observed professional sit down together and exchange their views on the past process. It is important that this meeting is structured and led by one of the observers (management, external professional...). Conversation is based on the practice, which



was observed with the help of the Professional Development Tool. See [Appendix 5](#) to find concrete guidelines on how to lead the process of peer observation and reflective discussion.

List of appendices, which present tools used in the project:

- Appendix 1: [Preparation for the meeting of PLC \(reflection on the implementation of the Action Plan\)](#)
- Appendix 2: [Clarification and probing questions](#)
- Appendix 3: [Professional action plan](#)
- Appendix 4: [Professional Development Tool – tool for gathering examples on ISSA quality principles](#)
- Appendix 5: [Peer observation and reflective conversation](#)



5. Tools used in the Case Study England

A parent and professional partnership to ensure continuity from Early Care & Education Centres to Primary School in England - Pen Green Centre for Children and their Families, Our Lady of Walsingham Catholic Primary School and Rockingham Primary School.

5.1. Toolkit Introduction

The resources included within this toolkit are designed to provide staff groups, early years settings or individuals with a range of tools to engage fully with both the child and parent whilst in their early years setting and during their transition to Reception Year in school.

The aim of the practices within the toolkit are to provide an ethos of shared understanding based on the principle that parents as the child's primary educator are best placed to know their child's individual needs and how best these are responded to. Parental engagement is integral to successful partnership working and the various tools illustrated are used in our daily practice to build positive relationships with children and their families. The toolkit provides strategies for work with professionals, parents, carers and children and includes templates where relevant, these templates can be located within the Appendices.

5.2. Project Information

Within the Project, Pen Green Centre worked with the two partner schools in our community that are the main feeder schools for our nursery, Our Lady of Walsingham Catholic Primary School and Rockingham Primary School. We have long established relationships with both schools and utilised the work of the Project to further enhance and embed that relationship and also to develop and initiate innovative practice in supporting children's transition to school. The transition included both Nursery to Reception Class, and the on-going transitions throughout both schools following on from Reception through to Year 6.

It cannot be stressed enough the importance of the processes involved to enhance and improve transition for all children. We have invested hugely in this work and the many benefits from this investment can be seen within the case study including:

- the implementation of a Parent Hub created within one of the schools where parents were previously expected to wait in the playground.
- Increased engagement between practitioner and teacher and teachers and parents. Much higher profile on transition.
- A shift from a transition day to a transition week for the whole school
- The breaking down barriers between professional heritage and hierarchy
- Working with children and their families on the edge of social exclusion to address the barriers to access and learning and to improve their experiences of transition
- Being an advocate for children and families to shift social and cultural capital for all
- Inclusive practice, to include an individual and meaningful transition for all children regardless of circumstances. Financial implications must not be the only driver for offering poorer transition processes.

The work of the Project is underpinned by the use of firmly embedded practice within the Pen Green Centre which includes a range of frameworks and assessment tools, including:



- Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2017)
- Well-being Scales (Laevers, 1997, 2005)
- Involvement Scales (Laevers, 1997, 2005)
- Te Whariki (1996) Early Childhood Education Curriculum, New Zealand
- Schema Theory (Athey, 1990, 2013; Bruce, 1997; Arnold, 2010)
- Adult Pedagogic Strategies. (Whalley & Arnold 1997; Lawrence, Gallagher & the Pen Green Team, 2015)
- Frameworks for thinking and sharing knowledge about children's learning and development at Pen Green (unpublished).

Within the overall Project toolkit the Pen Green Centre has made the following contributions based on the work of the day to day practice at the Centre and the work contained within the Case Study.

5.3. Tools for Observation

The Pen Green Centre use a number of tools and frameworks to support the observations of children across all of its pedagogical spaces which include a maintained Nursery school, a community nursery off-site and two settings for children aged 0-3 yrs. These settings work with children aged 9 months to 5 years. In addition workers are supported in this area of practice through individual 1:1 supervision and the use of Peer Observations to identify and inform the learning styles of children and how best to support them.

Observations of children are undertaken on a daily basis across the setting by all staff within the space and not just limited to the child's Family Worker, this provides 'multiple perspectives' (Jordan & Henderson, 1995) on the child and their learning. All observations undertaken are used to inform the possible 'next steps' for the child which will include individualised planning linked to the child's interests and current curiosities at home and in the setting which in turn can extend the child's learning in an exciting, challenging and meaningful way.

Observations of children are recorded and kept within the child's individual Celebration of Achievement File and this can be accessed at all times by children and their parents/carers.

Well-being & Involvement Dipstick/Lens The Well-being & Involvement Dipstick (based on the Leuven Scale 1994a) forms an integral part of all observations that are undertaken. This enables Family Workers to consider the child's personal, social and emotional world which in turn will influence how receptive they are to the learning in the environment and building relationships with staff and peers. When using the involvement tool, staff will consider this as a quality control measure of the environment and whether they have planned meaningful learning opportunities.

Schemas are described as patterns of repeated behaviour which allow children to explore and express developing ideas and thoughts through their play and exploration. The repetitive actions of schematic play allow children to construct meaning in what they are doing (Athey, C., 1990)

The nature of the observations is shown as below:

Snapshot observations	Captures 'In the moment' engagement and is recorded appropriately. See Appendix 1 The observation also captures the child's schematic interest.
Narrative observations	Telling the story of the child... <i>'I could see you were interested in....'</i> it provides a longer/more detailed description of what the child is engaged in and some analysis of what learning has taken place. See Appendix 2 . The observation also captures the child's schematic interest.
Longer term observation	Observations of children's schematic learning over a period of time helping to build a picture of how children learn and to support workers to interpret this learning. This exercise is normally incorporated into a small individual booklet which is created using photographic and written material specific to the child.
Observation Based Area Planning Sheets	Family workers will take the intended learning from the previous observation and what happened, how learning was supported and by whom. Please See Appendix 3 . This is linked directly to the EYFS* (2017) children's schema and PLOD (possible lines of direction) See Appendix 4 . This helps to extend learning and inform future plans based on children's interests and motivations. Longer term planning sheets are also completed in relation to key events that are directly linked to child focussed activities across the Nurseries. See Appendix 5
Video Vignettes	Used to provide a retrospective in-depth analysis and can be used by individual Family Worker or to inform the peer observation exercise. This footage can be viewed multiple times to look closely at the child's actions and language.

*The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) sets standards for the learning, development and care of children from birth to 5 years old in the United Kingdom. All Early Years Ofsted registered providers must follow the EYFS including childminders, pre-schools, nurseries and school reception classes.

The Pen Green Centre also utilises a secure online learning journal which enables the immediate sharing of children's observations and information with parents/carers. Conversely parents/carers are also able to share home observations with Family Workers. This enables continuity of play and learning experiences in the home learning environment and in nursery. This two way communication and ability to share experiences enables children to be make connections and be held in mind between home and nursery. [See Appendix 6](#) - The Pen Green Loop.

Pen Green Adult Pedagogic Strategies are a shared methodology and understanding of how adults support the learning and development of children (Pen Green Pedagogic Strategies, 2005) which

further inform and support the ongoing work with children and their parents to further their learning.

Peer Observation sessions - this exercise is a constructive method to enable practitioners to reflect and evaluate their adult pedagogic strategies in relation to providing appropriate learning and development experiences for children. The use of a video vignette enables the workers to analyse and identify where the workers may be 'stuck' and suggest areas for improvements as well as acknowledging the aspects of their practice that they are particularly good or particularly skilful at. Peer observations form part of the overall staff reflections which also include 1:1 supervisions and group supervision sessions.

5.4. The Image of the Child

The Pen Green Centre utilise a range of strategies in order to build upon the image of a child. These strategies are based on the staff team having a negotiated and collective image (not individual) of the child and how the observations of young children in the settings inform these images. The use of a wider perspective enables a collective way of working to identify and provide the ideal to support each child individually.

The exercise is incorporated into the Pen Green Centre Parents Involvement in their Children's Learning (Whalley et al 2007 ed.) training materials. This enables both parents and practitioners to gain a shared image of the child. This involves identifying the concept of different characteristics which builds up a picture to help support the child within the setting.

5.5. The Image of the Parent

The Pen Green Centre approach to creating the image of the parent is by undertaking a range of ideals which ensure that parental engagement is not tokenistic. This includes working to develop a trusting and reciprocal relationship with parents which value them as the primary educators of children. Staff learns from and with parents. A real partnership with parents involves power-sharing, recognition of parent's equally valuable knowledge and expertise and an understanding of the real pressures that young families face (Whalley et al, 2011). This enables a strength based approach to working together with a shared language and common goal of putting the child at the centre.

The Centre actively supports and enables parents to be fully participative in their child's, and their own education, and openly challenges perceptions to prevent reverting to the deficit model approach. By listening to parents needs there is the opportunity to share key concepts for learning with a shared language in order to support children to be all that they can be and to help shape services both within the Centre and the wider community.

5.6. How to collect parent's stories/strategies for gaining information.

The Pen Green Centre incorporates a range of methods to engage parents and build trusting relationships in order to support a reciprocal approach and to provide the opportunity to get to know all the parents/carers well. The main focus for the Centre is to adopt where possible in a face to face personal engagement, such as the '*daily dialogue*' as this provides the opportunity to reduce barriers to communication and for parents to share their stories which enables a broader perspective which is central to the understanding of the child. This may also enable support for parents from a wider range of partner agencies to further benefit the family's individual circumstances.

The provision of a regular and consistent relationship with their Family Worker enables the value of each party's overall contribution in the process of gaining information. By using face to face interactions this enables the building of a sensitive and empathetic approach in the day to day communications and provides a '*daily dialogue*' opportunity.

The development of a trusting relationship between parents and Family Workers ensures where needed that the role of advocate on behalf of the child and its family can be undertaken and again to

ensure how the needs of the family are best met. There is not a 'one size fits all approach', there needs to be persistence and flexibility, the focus is on building trust and this can take time and effort.

The Pen Green Centre practice of home-visiting and the 'settling in' period are central in the initial building of this 3 way relationship. The purpose of the home visit is to be able to observe the child in their own environment, where the child is most confident; this helps to establish a relationship based on equality and parity.

Parents and carers of children can complete the Family Voice ([see Appendix 7](#)) in order to ask or share relevant information with Family Workers on a regular basis. Families can share key events, family hobbies or their particular perspective on events or activities as and when they wish to.

5.7. Home Context Matters

The overall purpose of the Home-Visit is to commence the building of relationships with children their parents/carers and other family members. The Centre works on the principle that parents as the child's primary educator are best placed to know their child's individual needs and how best these are responded to. The home-visit enables workers to begin to understand the children's home context including all that is important to the child in relation to family members, their routines and rituals and the child's preferences for their play and learning style. The visit takes the form of a 'Getting to Know You' and allows for opportunities

Whilst there are universal home-visits throughout the child's time in the setting, the more vulnerable children in Nursery are offered a wider range and frequency of home-visits in order to support their horizontal and vertical transitions (O'Connor, 2018). The importance of a dialogue between nursery, school and families is integral to a smooth transition, especially for the more vulnerable children and their families. Practice has been extended to incorporate joint home visits between nursery and school reception teacher as well as joint visits to school including child, parent and Family Worker.

The Family Worker, on their initial home-visit, will complete the Home-Visiting pack alongside the child and parents. [Please see Appendix 8](#) - Home Visiting pack.

On some occasions due to various factors it may be quite challenging to complete paperwork other than the main health and safety topics, including medication, allergies etc. Where this may occur the Family Worker will utilise the settling in period at Nursery to gain further insight into the child's and family's interests in order to help plan appropriate and meaningful activities while their child is in Nursery. This time also allows for further opportunities to build relationships with parents and carers.

5.8. Examples of letters for parents

The Centre employs a range of medium to engage parents and carers including video, social media, written and face to face dialogue. By engaging and understanding parents and carers individual circumstances Family Workers can respond sensitively when communicating with parents.

The opportunities for engaging meaningfully with parents include social events, attending group activities for both universal and targeted families, celebrations and newsletters. There are several parents open evenings during the academic year which focus on key concept learning sessions and celebrations.

The Pen Green Centre offers different methods of communication to include those that incorporate a subtly of engagement which does not necessarily require parents to read and include using visuals i.e. pictures and a daily dialogue with Family Worker.

The use of social media is helpful in prompting discussions between parents and Family Workers regarding checking out further details or clarifying queries. The use of the online learning journal (Tapestry) encourages parents to enter into dialogue about their child's interests and achievements on

a daily basis both at home and whilst they are in Nursery.

Children's Celebration of Achievement files - these files are created and added to constantly in order to share the children's time in Nursery with all key adults in their lives. Parents are encouraged and supported to contribute to their child's file at any time.

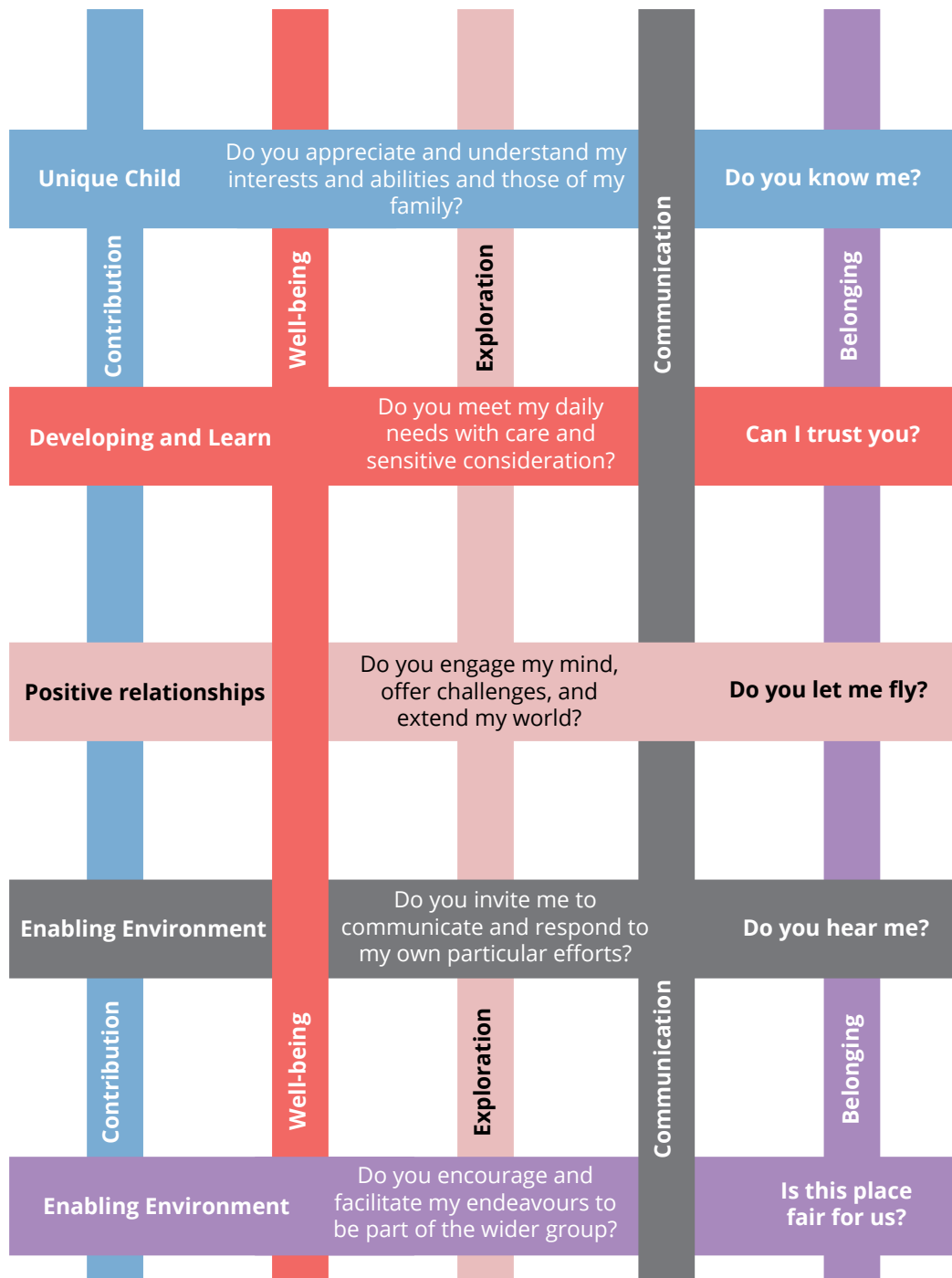
5.9. The Five Statements - Margaret Carr (1996)

The Pen Green Centre has adopted Margaret Carr's five questions within the document *Getting To Know You* which forms part of the Home-Visiting pack - [See Appendix 8](#). The questions come from the five strands of the Te Whariki New Zealand education curriculum.

They are used to enable workers to reflect on how they know, understand and relate to the children they are working with. We use these questions to help us document how we are responding to each child in their Celebration of Achievement file and share this with key adults in their lives.

The questions are:

- Do you know me?
- Do you hear me?
- Can I trust you?
- Is this place fair for me?
- Do you let me fly?



Assessment Pathways - possible complementary approaches to demonstrating progress in the Early Years (adapted from Te Whariki and EYFS)

List of appendices, which present tools used in the project:

- Appendix 1: [Snap shot observation and analysis](#)
- Appendix 2: [Narrative Observation – Telling the story](#)
- Appendix 3: [Planning for children’s learning and development](#)
- Appendix 4: [Possible Lines of Direction](#)
- Appendix 5: [Long Term Planning – 2019](#)
- Appendix 6: [The Pen Green Loop](#)
- Appendix 7: [Family Voice](#)
- Appendix 8: [Initial Home Visit](#)

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