

START

A good start for all: Sustaining
Transitions across the Early Years

Enabling Well-being and Participation of Children and Families Living in Poverty during Transition Periods across Home, Childcare and Kindergarten



Case study
BELGIUM

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1. Contextualisation

1.1. A long history of an institutional split between childcare and preschool education

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is the term most commonly used in international policy documents and research to designate all provision of care and education for children before compulsory school age. Many countries, including Belgium¹ and the Flemish community, are historically characterised by an ECEC split system, where child care services for children up to three years of age (kinderopvang) are under the auspices of the Minister for Welfare and preschool institutions (kleuterschool) for children from two and a half to compulsory school age are under the auspices of the Minister for Education (Hulpia, Peeters, & Van Landeghem, 2014; Peeters & Pirard, 2017). These two types of institutions have distinct curricula, professional profiles and child-staff ratio: see annex 1

One of the biggest differences between childcare and preschool institutions, however, is the accessibility of these types of institutions towards children and families living in disadvantaged societal conditions. Statistics demonstrated how childcare is fairly inaccessible for families living in poverty, families from ethnic cultural minorities and single parents (Van Lancker, 2013; Van Lancker & Ghysels, 2012; Vande Gaer, Gijssels, & Hedeboew, 2013; Vandenbroeck, Geens, & Berten, 2014). Only 23% of children living in poverty attend childcare in comparison to 68% of the more affluent children (Schepers & Nicaise, 2014). Therefore the Minister of Welfare wants to ensure the right for every child

¹ As education became a competence of the Flemish Community in 1988, we will focus in this case study on the context of the Flemish Community of Belgium.

to attend childcare in the near future. On the contrary the accessibility of preschool education is fairly good. Every child is entitled to free preschool from two and a half years onwards. Of the five-year-old children within Belgium 99% are enrolled in preschool, and of the two-and-a-half-year-old children 82.2% are enrolled in preschool (Departement Onderwijs, 2015); this is one of the highest enrolment rates in the EU (European Commission, 2011).

The institutional split between childcare and preschool education unintentionally perpetuates the ingrained idea that care and learning of young children are two completely different aspects of human life: care of young children is a matter that belongs to the private domain of family education and/or to childcare institutions. Learning of young children belongs to the formal (pre-)school settings. Because of this institutional and conceptual split between caring and learning, both childcare - and preschool institutions are historically dealing with a lack of respectively learning and care. One of the main issues that have occasionally been addressed by different stakeholders since the 1970s is the fact that preschool education is not well adapted to the caring and learning needs of the youngest children (De Munter, Roelands, Snoeck, & Vandemeulebroecke, 2001; Dehaes, Lambrechts, & Pauwels, 1999; Van Laere, 2017).

Especially in those countries where ECEC systems are split, transitions between home environment, childcare and preschool settings mark a significant change in the life of children and families. Recent research shows that the Belgian preschool education system unintentionally sees to work under the assumption that every child has attended childcare before entering preschool (Amerijckx & Humblet, 2015; Peleman, Vandenbroeck, & Van Avermaet, 2019; Van Laere & Vandenbroeck, 2017). Considering the inaccessibility of childcare services, consequently disadvantaged children who have to cope with their first socialisation outside the family environment will likely face more problems to start in preschool. Not only does it define their first school experience; more importantly, it contributes to shape their entire experience of preschool, with potential long-term harmful effects. As indicated in the 'Study on the effective use of ECEC in preventing early school leaving (ESL)' - concluded under the commission of the DG EAC - positive experiences of transition between educational levels can be a critical factor for children's future success and development, while negative experiences can have lasting difficulties leading to poorer educational performance (Dumcius et al., 2014).

1.2. Combatting social inequalities by investing in the equalising potential of preschool

Since the 1960s, the relationship between social inequality and school has been of considerable interest to Belgian policy-makers. As they were concerned with the low educational attainment of working class children in primary school, they started being interested in preschool education because of its allegedly equalising potential. In the 1960s, the major concern of policy makers, in this regard, was the educational attainment of working class children. Later the attention also turned to children with migrant backgrounds (Van Laere & Vandenbroeck, 2014). Policy makers argued that if working class children were exposed to learning at an earlier age, this would potentially raise their educational attainment and stimulate their social and cultural mobility (Brackeva, 1986). Due to the economic crises in the second half of the 1970's, however, the social-political objective of enabling social and cultural emancipation of working class children was increasingly accompanied by a more economic approach in which the future employability of children and the prevention of school failure and later unemployment were considered key elements to increase the nation's economic growth (Brackeva, 1986; De Ceulaer, 1990). Reinforced by the poor results of the Flemish community in Belgium in the PISA studies, the political attention for educational inequalities increased in the new millennium (Stanat & Chistensen, 2006). The 'equal opportunities decree' (GOK) was set in place giving additional funding to (pre)schools when they enrolled more children with low SES, migrant backgrounds or from low educated mothers. In addition, measures were taken to enhance the social and cultural diversity in schools and to prevent social segregation (Agirdag, 2016).

Despite the aim over the years to invest in the equalising potential of the early years and having one of the highest attendance rates of toddlers in preschool in Europe, the educational gap between children with high socioeconomic status and low socioeconomic status (SES) and between children with and without migrant backgrounds, remains persistent in Belgium. According to the latest PISA studies, the Flemish community of Belgium is one of the regions with the most pronounced educational gap, related to the home situation of the children (OECD, 2016). Children with migrant backgrounds

and children living in poverty have lower scores on standardised tests; they need to repeat school years more; they are overrepresented in vocational secondary studies; they have a higher chance to leave secondary school without a qualification; and they are significantly underrepresented in higher education in comparison to their peers (Agirdag, 2016). Children living in poverty have four times more chance to be redirected towards special needs education in the Belgian educational system than compared to their peers (Unicef, 2012).

Although the policy focus in the Flemish community of Belgium on combatting social inequalities through preschool education is something to be applauded, questions do arise on how we can clarify the paradox explained above? By emphasizing the equalising potential, two side effects seem to take place that unintentionally can widen the educational gap even more.

1.2.1. Side effect 1: responsabilisation of parents

In order to combat social inequalities and close the educational gap, different pathways are possible (Vandenbroeck, Coussee, & Bradt, 2010). In Belgium a popular recurrent idea has been that disadvantaged parents need to be activated to send their children regularly to preschool. The earlier and the more frequent these children will attend preschool, the better they would be prepared for their school career and eventually participation in the labour market and society. This was the underlying idea in the political debates on lowering the compulsory school age and on installing other coercive measurements to convince parents to send their children to preschool. Since lowering the compulsory school age is only possible by federal law, the Flemish government started developing their own policy in order to stimulate so-called 'toddler participation' (*kleuterparticipatie*) (Vandenbroucke, 2007). This stimulus plan includes denying the school allowance and refusing children from entering primary school when they do not sufficiently manage the Dutch language and did not attend preschool regularly enough (220 half days). These measurements have been accompanied by measures to raise awareness amongst parents living in poverty and parents with migrant backgrounds on the importance of preschool (e.g. home visits, local outreach). The current Minister of Education, Hilde Crevits (CD&V) continued the "toddler participation policy" of her predecessors (Crevits, 2015) As new statistics showed how the probability of children not attending preschool frequently enough, increases when children are non Belgian nationals, have a lower educated mother, receive a school allowance and/or speak a language other than Dutch at home, she increased the minimal attendance from 220 to 250 half days for five-year-old children. She argued that this would prevent a scholastic delay and would prepare children better for the primary school. As the same report on the new statistics also suggested that a later start in preschool is associated with grate retention in primary school (Crevits, 2016). This idea also permeated the legislation on child allowances (*Groeipakket op maat voor elk kind en gezin*) that was approved by the Flemish government in May 2016 (Vlaamse regering, 31/05/2016). From January 2019 on, child allowances are less for parents if they do not enrol their child in preschool within two months after their third birthday and if they do not send their child to preschool regularly. Because of the allegedly overwhelming consensus across political parties that school failure of disadvantaged groups can and will be solved by having higher preschool attendances, parental responsibility tends to be further increased without exploring other possible problem constructions and ways to address social phenomena as social inequality in Belgian society.

In these same debates, several stakeholders have over the years questioned the sole focus on convincing parents to send their children to preschool. The trade unions, the Flemish education council and the Office of the Children's Rights Commissioner raised for example concerns that the responsabilisation of parents is no guarantee for the prevention of learning delays of disadvantaged children. Alternatively, the government could better invest in ensuring quality education by professionalising staff and extending the 'equal opportunities decree' (GOK) to preschool (Commissie voor Onderwijs Vorming en Wetenschapsbeleid, 18/5/2004; Kinderrechtencommissariaat, 2016; Vlaamse Onderwijsraad, 2004, 2017). Moreover several local poverty organisations and the federal poverty organisation underlined the importance of investing in quality education for children living in poverty, better partnerships with parents and the establishment of a welcoming atmosphere in preschool with respect for diversity and awareness of social inequalities (Dautrebande, 2008; Steunpunt tot bestrijding van armoede bestaansonzekerheid en sociale uitsluiting, 2006). In the 'toddler participation' policies and practices, a shift over the last years can be identified towards focussing more on how to support preschool staff in educating a diversity of children and communicating with a diversity of parents. Based on a qualitative study, the Minister of Education underlined the importance of investing in parental

involvement in preschools in her action plan, titled 'Preschool counts every day' plan (Crevits, 2016). The inspection is currently performing an inspection round in which 'attendance of toddlers, educare approach in schools and the ability of preschool staff to build reciprocal relationships with parents' is interconnected. This focus on also investing in the quality of ECEC provision is very much needed as international studies indeed show that preschool can have an equalising effect if the preschool education is of good quality. In studies like EPPSE this means having low adult-child ratio in class, having an educare approach in which learning and care of young children is the same and being able to dialogue with families in a context of super diversity (Sammons, 2010; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2004).

1.2.2. Side effect 2: making children preschool ready

Another side effect of stressing the equalising potential of preschool education is that this strengthens a schoolification top-down pressure in which children foremost need to be made preschool ready for the next educational level without taking into account the educational and social value of the preschool community in the here and now. In ECEC split systems like Belgium there is an extra institutional split between childcare/home environment and the preschools. Popular views of preschool teachers in countries like France and Belgium is that young children between two and a half and four years old are often not yet able to really learn in preschool because of their physical and emotional caring needs (e.g. eating, sleeping, going to the toilet, emotional comfort,...) and the fact that some do not master the dominant Dutch language sufficiently. Therefore, sometimes schools and teachers would advise parents to still keep their children at home a bit longer. Despite the concern for the well-being of the child, the question is whether keeping children home doesn't jeopardise their learning and socialising opportunities? Another popular idea is that children need to be made preschool ready beforehand in the childcare centre or by their parents (Peleman & Van Laere, 2018; Van Laere & Vandenbroeck, 2017). A crucial question we need to ask is what do we mean by making children 'preschool ready' in a standardised way? Bloch and Kim (2015) problematised for example the introduction of a formal notion of 'readiness' in the Head Start programs in the US in which, for example, children's needs for emotional stability and security were increasingly reframed as competences or skills within a developmental hierarchy that children need to possess and demonstrate. If the child cannot sufficiently self-regulate and demonstrate the required skills it becomes the problem of the child instead of the problem of the teacher, the preschool or the curriculum (Bloch and Kim 2015). Especially knowing that childcare is not enough accessible for poor children and children from migrant backgrounds, this raises questions. In addition another dominant belief is that children and families need to adapt as soon as possible in preschool by 'learning it the hard way'. By listening to the rules and systems in place, some teachers state that children will eventually stop crying. In turn, it is believed that parents need to learn to let go of their child by for example stimulating daily short goodbyes. The problem in above logics is that irrespective of the fact that children have attended childcare or not or irrespective of the material and financial possibilities and social networks of families, they all need to adapt in an unidirectional way. Especially as international studies of Bloch and Kim (2015) and Lehrer, Bigras, and Laurin (2017) pointed out how implicit ideas and practices of readying children for American and Canadian preschools has paradoxically contributed to marginalizing and stigmatizing children considered disadvantaged. An alternative perspective is how to ensure that preschools feel supported and 'are ready' for a diversity of children, irrespective of the fact that they attended childcare or not.

1.3. Ensuring smooth and inclusive transitions to preschool

Being aware of these issues, the Departments of Education, Welfare and Integration in the Flemish Community of Belgium recently started to collaborate to smoothen the transition between childcare/home environment and preschool environment. They developed an action plan in order to ensure pedagogical, professional, structural continuity and continuity with the family / neighbourhood². The starting point of this plan is the acknowledgement that transitions mark a very significant phase in the lives of young children and their families. Transition is understood as a process of continuity and change in which children and families feel prepared on one hand and after the transition to preschool feel good and involved. Reciprocity between families and ECEC centres are central key concepts.

² <https://www.expo.be/transitie-tussen-thuis-buurt-kinderopvang-en-kleuterschool>
https://www.expo.be/sites/default/files/atoms/files/REFLECTIE-instrument%20transitie_oktober%202018.pdf

ACTION PLAN TRANSITIONS – CORE IDEAS

- Structural continuity: a close collaboration between administrations and the different types of basis institutions that are involved in the lives of young children and their families (childcare, preschool and preventive family support)
 - Stimulate Flemish and local collaborations and mainstreaming
 - Promote inspiring practices that make the difference for socially disadvantaged children and families
 - Support people or organisations who want to organise integrated work by tackling the hindering policy condition/measurements coming from different policy domains
- Professional continuity: a shared responsibility from all professionals from different fields for a warm transition
 - By investing in professional exchanges (seminars, conferences, intervision trajectories)
 - By developing learning networks for current and future ECEC professionals
- Pedagogical continuity: an aligned pedagogical framework with attention to transitions where caring and learning is seen as equally important in terms of pedagogical quality
 - Addressing the theme of transition in curricula of children and ECEC staff
 - Exchange between different organisations and policy fields on social pedagogical theme's related to transition
 - By aligning governmental communication materials for parents on the transition to preschool
- Continuity with the home environment, neighbourhood and local community
 - Developing a reciprocal dialogue between professionals, parents, local community members
 - By expanding and investing in local networks that stimulate reciprocal parent participation.
 - By expanding on existing relations with relevant parents with attention to the transition to preschool

1.4. Beyond the split and 'ready children' ideas: pioneers in the city of Aalst

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 (Moorselbaan). This action research is facilitated and guided by VBJK, a Centre for Innovation in the Early Years.

In Aalst 9,4 % of the children are born in a poor family. 14% of the families is not able to pay all the bills for basic necessities (Agentschap binnenlands bestuur, 2018). This number is increasing every year. A lot of the poverty is due to generational poverty. The participating organisations of this action-research are all located in one of the poorest areas of Aalst:

- The **Childcare centre Mezenestje** organises warm and safe care for baby's and toddler until three years old and out-of-school care for children until 12 years old. The centre with his flexible long opening hours has 100 fulltime available places for children in the region of Aalst. The staff consists out of 1 director, 3 social-pedagogical coaches, 21 childcare workers, 2 logistics employees and 4 volunteers. Since the centre is organised by the hospital OLV-ziekenhuis Aalst, 60% of the children are children of staff members of the hospital (logistic staff, doctors, nurses,...). The childcare centre has since 2011 specifically focused on making the centre accessible for children and families who live in poverty by having a proactive admission policy. 30% of the places are now reserved for families who live in poverty. 10% of the places goes to families living in the neighbourhood. Specific attention is also given by reserving places for children with special needs.

- KOLVA vzw is the legal representative and board of different catholic schools in Aalst. The school involved in this project is the **Sint-Maarten Institute**. This a pre-primary and primary school located at the Moorselbaan in Aalst. This school consists out of 1 director, 2 care coordinators, 11 kindergarden teachers, 16 primary school teachers, 2 teachers in gymnastics, 1 administrative staff member and 1 ICT staff member. The preschool has 122 toddlers and the primary school has 210 children. Most of these children live in Aalst and approximately 80 % of the children do not speak Dutch as a home language. 56 % of the children have a mother who is lower-educated. This number is increasing every year. The school invested in cost policies for parents living in poverty and a policy on the use of languages. The school developed many cooperative teaching methods in order to co-construct expertise and knowledge on working with children who do not speak the dominant language of the school, Dutch. The mission and vision is built upon the vision of the catholic umbrella organisation in which the child is seen and positively approached as a unique personality and as part of a close, caring community.
- In order to make ECEC more accessible for families living in poverty, **'Mensen voor mensen' [people for people], a poverty advocacy group** have been working closely with childcare centres and preschools. In this organisation people who have experienced poverty and social exclusion and people who are still living in poverty, come together and speak up about their participation in society which often results in implications for policies in the fields of welfare, employment, education, 'Mensen voor mensen' endorses a human rights perspective, in which the dignity and power of people living in poverty are central. People in poverty do not only ask for help, but they want to be recognized, valued and heard in the society and public debates. What are causes of poverty and social inclusion and what can structurally be done in policies?

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. 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.

2. Analysis of local needs

Before and while developing an action plan we started to gain insight on how the different stakeholders experienced the transition across home, childcare and preschool (in the period September 2016 – March 2017).

2.1. Perspective of the preschool Sint-Maarten Institute

The population of the preschool drastically changed the last 10 years with an increase of children with migration backgrounds and only a few remaining children without migration background. Although there was a huge concern on how to deal with the increasing diversity of the student population, parents had no central place in the preschool practice and policy before the project. The school adhered to a rather traditional approach of parental involvement in which parents were expected to come to individual parental conferences while at the same time had to wait in the street to bring and pick-up their children. Consequently not many opportunities existed for the teachers and the parents to talk and exchange. The teachers generally stated

'We can see the parents, but we really do not know them.' (Preschool Director)

On the side of the teachers of the youngest children, referring to own experiences of being a mother, there was a willingness to rethink the welcoming policy:

'When my own son started preschool, we had to opportunity to already visit the class room. That was really nice and gave a good feeling to me as a parent.' (Preschool Teacher)

Because of these reasons the school wanted to understand more what and why they were doing certain things with children, families and communities. The director and the teachers of the youngest toddlers saw this project as an opportunity to jointly work on developing a new vision and new actions that will make a positive difference for everybody.

2.2. Perspective of the childcare centre Mezenestje

Before this project, the childcare centre had started a working group in order to make the transition to preschool for children and families living in poverty more smooth. This group consisted out of childcare workers, parents of the centre and the poverty advocacy group 'mensen voor mensen'. The urge to work on this specific theme came from the parents and childcare workers themselves. As many parents had the habit in the childcare centre to enter the centre and talk regularly to the childcare workers to discuss caring and educational matters of the children, they often problematised the sudden lack of contact and trust between them and the preschool staff of their older children.

'We cannot reach the teacher of our daughter while in childcare we daily shared so much information with the childcare workers.' (Parent)

'I'm used to our familiarisation and welcoming policy for children and parents. When I wanted to go to preschool with my son, the school was not open for these kind of practices.' (Childcare Worker)

'We have the feeling that we were abandoning our parents once their child went to preschool. The trust relationship between parents and professionals out of sudden has stopped.' (Director Childcare Centre)

In sum, the centre realised that children and parents in poverty needed some support in the transition towards preschool: on the one hand support in ensuring the subscription in preschool and on the other hand in how they experience the actual start in preschool.

2.3. Perspective of children and parents living in poverty

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. In total, we reached 31 parents who went to different schools in Aalst. (2 fathers, 29 mothers, dominantly low SES, mix of parents with and without migration background). Some of the children of these parents had attended childcare before preschool.

Based on these conversations, it soon became clear that we need to understand 'transition' as a broad concept. It cannot simply be reduced to the general transition from home or childcare to preschool education. It concerns any important change in a child's life that will have influence the provided educare in the ECEC services: e.g. a move, a children and families who have fled their country and start preschool, It requires a constant awareness and focus on how to ensure that children and families are coping well with these major changes. Another important aspect that came out of the conversations with parents, is that a school day and a day in a childcare centre exist out of many different types of transitions (in space, time, with different professionals).

Although parents considered preschool an important educational (e.g. language learning) and socialising environment (e.g. dealing with diversity) for their child, they had many questions on the perceived lack of care in preschool education. They were concerned about sleeping, eating and toileting, as well as about emotional care and belonging. *Will my child find friends? Is my child happy? What if my child is rather introvert, will it be seen by the teacher?* The majority of parents underlined the importance of care and attention also during the moments children are not in the preschool class (outdoor playtime, lunch, ...).

'There is need for more supervision for the youngest children on the outdoor playground. My daughter tells me that my youngest son is often crying in a corner of the playground. He tries to grab a hand of one of the teacher because he is scared. The school is doing what they can but it is not enough.' (Parent)

'I have the impression they look out for him, that they care. When he hurt himself, there is a patch on his wounds.' (Parent)

'From the moment she has a bruise or a scratch. I ask them to contact me. Of course a child can fall, but I would like to know what happened.' (Parent)

As it is challenging or sometimes even not possible for parents to go in dialogue with the preschool staff, they are worried about this and some expressed that they would rather keep their children home.

Many parents expressed a fear that they cannot make their child ready for preschool as schools and society would like this. One of the most controversial issues in making children 'preschool ready' is the potty learning of young children. Children and parents seemed to feel a pressure that children need to be 'potty trained' before coming to preschool. They however found that this is not in accordance with a positive and natural pedagogical approach of children. This pressure puts consequently a lot of unnecessary stress on the child.

'When children are three years old, they mostly start using the potty in a spontaneous way. As my child has to start to go to preschool, I feel the pressure that I have to make him potty trained before the age of 2,5 year old. But I do not think my child is ready for this. I experience some fears when he has to go to preschool. I have the impression that children need to grow up out of a sudden.' (Parent)

'When my son was at home, he was at ease with the potty training and it was a quite natural growth process. Since he started preschool, going to the potty creates a lot of stress for him. He is making an effort to not burden the teacher I have the impression, but that does not always works out well.' (Parent)

With regard to the relationship between parents and preschool, the focus groups and interviews revealed an eagerness of parents to know what was happening to their child in preschool. Some parents expressed that they would like to be more in the class to smoothen the transition time for their child and so they could have a possibility to talk to the teacher.

'My child cried every day from September until Easter holidays in April. When I had to say goodbye at the school gate, he really kept holding on to me. The teachers try to pull him out of my arms but he would not let go. As a parent there is not much you can do. Saying goodbye at the school gate is really hard. It breaks my heart each time and I'm afraid this could be traumatic for my child. After a while he stopped crying. I think it would be better if I can enter the classroom with my son. Being able to say goodbye in the classroom would help the situation.' (Parent)

'When I can be present in class with my child in the mornings, he is doing better. He has more confidence because he knows I'm present. He knows his space in the class. He wants me to help him, but now and then he tells me he can do it himself. He gives me a kiss and then goes playing. When I couldn't enter the class, he was scared of everybody else.' (Parent)

Despite parents' attempts, the request to be more connected with the staff and to be able to communicate and share in the care of their children remains somewhat unanswered in the stories of parents.

3. Development of the action plan

3.1. Vision and action go hand in hand

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.

3.2. Actions before the start in preschool

Amplify the familiarization policy/practices of the childcare centre for new children and parents

Due to the collaboration with the preschool to develop and install a reciprocal familiarisation practice for children and parents, the team of the childcare centre was confronted with the fact that their own familiarization policy needed some discussions and amplifications. Although the childcare centre has had a long tradition in having a familiarisation policy/practice for a diversity of children and families, some childcare workers did not always consider parents as partners. They believed that short daily goodbyes are the best for the child without involving parents as parents are more considered a burden and a threat for their professional practices. These assumptions have been deconstructed and reconstructed again in several group discussions. In one of the discussions the preschool teachers of the project were present as well to examine together what the value could be for children and families.

Create a community - based network for children and families who did not attend childcare

The childcare centre Mezennestje started to organise monthly moments for families in the neighbourhood to support them in the education of their children and more specifically the transition to preschool (*boekenhuisje*). Staff of the preschool are occasionally present to discuss this big step with parents in order to reduce the stress and uncertainty this might cause. These moments are open for all families, even if they do not have children in the childcare centre. *Mensen voor mensen*, the poverty advocacy group started to pay more attention to the questions and concerns parents had in the transition to preschool. Every week parents living in poverty and coming from different cultural backgrounds would meet each other with a coffee while their children make use of the toy library (*spelothek*). These small initiatives grew into a larger project idea to create and stimulate meeting places for parents of young children who do not have large social networks. Often these families do not or cannot send their children to childcare settings due to the unaffordability. Part of this larger Koala project (with support of the King Baudouin foundation) that started in 2018, concerns the transition from home to preschool. More specifically they will see how to support children and parents better in the search process of a good preschool, the subscription process and the intake in the preschool

Organise activities in which children are getting acquainted with preschool and out of school care

In order to make the transition more smooth for children, the childcare centre started organising *Toddler Tuesdays* (peuterdinsdagen). During these sessions the older toddlers go out of the centre and play in the spaces of the out of school care centre or in the playground of the nearby preschool. In this way children get already a bit familiar with the bigger setting of a school and out of school care centre and how certain school concepts operate in a school (e.g. playing in the playground). During these sessions a story book has been developed with photos of the preschool and the out of school care centre that toddlers can look into and discuss with other children, their educators or their parents.

3.3. Actions while and after transitioning to preschool

Welcome parents daily into the classrooms and dialogue with parents

The preschool Sint-Maartensinstituut started with welcoming parents in the class of the youngest children. Before the project, parents had to wait outside the school and rarely had opportunities to talk to the teachers of their children. This practice gradually evolved into ensuring parents can enter all the preschool classes. Although this sound like a small step, it is a huge milestone in the preschool in order to create opportunities for parents and teachers to meet each other, get to know each other and to start building a trusting relationship that will ultimately benefit the children.



Develop the familiarization policy/practices of the childcare centre for new children and parents

The preschool started with implementing a familiarisation practice in which children and parents have time to spend in the class room together with the teacher and the other children. This gives the opportunity for the teacher to ask the parents who their child is, how they like to be comforted,... Staff of the childcare centre Mezenestje supported the teachers how to organise these moments for children and their parents in the school in a flexible way. Before the familiarisation moments, every preschool and primary school class organised open class moments in which children and parents can go and see the class, play together with other children and the teachers can talk to the parents about the experience of coming to preschool.

Rethink care - and 'in-between' moments.

'Many transitions occur during a school day. Think of the outdoor play times. Children have to leave the warm environment of the class room to be left alone in a loud environment full with children. Yes, of course the teacher has the right to have a cup of coffee during a well-deserved break. But isn't it strange that toddlers are panicking, start to cry and are upset? The same applies to the wellbeing of children in the lunchbreaks. As an organisation it is logic that we need to reorganise the in between moments and breaks.' (*Preschool Director*)

Due to the institutional and conceptual split between learning and care, the Flemish preschool education system is characterized by many 'in between moments' in which children are on the playground, eat lunch, go to the toilet,...without necessarily having the full support of the teaching staff. Often non-educated or low-educated care staff are responsible for these moments. Yet this is a hard job, as these people are responsible for many children. Due to the discussions in the START critical learning community and the international field visits in the UK and Slovenia, these in-between moments became subject of intervention in the preschool. Although this is still work in progress, many changes have been made.

- Inspired by the field visits in other countries, the teachers of the start project introduced the idea in the school team to rethink the organisation of the playtime outside and make it a more caring environment. Younger and older children are in different spaces of the playground. They have developed a buddy system in which older children are supported to take care of the younger children. As some children claimed that the outdoor playground is too busy for them, the school installed a little wooden house in which children can read books to each other. One of the older students called this 'mini-utopia'.
- Since the project started, it became clear that the lunch time can be an overwhelming and tiring time for young children. Inspired by discussions and field visits, the teachers of the youngest children decided to eat in the classroom with the children.
- The director and staff members currently are organising sleeping moments for children who need it. They are however still figuring out how to do this in accordance with the legal framework of deploying teachers.
- The toilet moments for the young children were organised in a collective way as one preschool teacher had to take care of many children of 2,5 until 3 years old. As the awareness grew that young children need more individualised care and support, the toilet moments became of point of intervention. In the future this classroom will have two teachers so a better pedagogical individualised approach of care and learning can be developed.

This important thinking exercise to reorganize the different 'in between moments' of a school day also resulted in the idea that maybe in future the school could organise the class groups in a different way. Instead of holding on to age-segregated classes, mixed age groups could be a better way in which children learn to live together and also learn to take care of each other.

4. What was implemented

4.1. Changing point of views and mind shifts

Towards a more positive and competent view of children

By exchanging ideas on pedagogical practices from different ECEC settings and making observations in the different settings, professionals from both childcare and preschool started realising that children already are very capable once they arrive in childcare or in preschool. 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. In the childcare centre they discovered that they do not have sufficient educational activities for children, whereas in the preschool they discovered that children can develop better when their caring and learning needs are jointly met. When professionals are able to observe, listen to children and respond to their signals, a different way of working is steadily growing both in the childcare and in the preschool setting. One of the major discussions that occurred in this project is how this transition project touches upon the essence of education and care of young children. For example one of the questions that appeared were: in what way is the preschool becoming a childcare centre and the childcare centre a preschool? This demonstrates that we need to discuss an educare approach of children in dialogue with parents even more, irrespective of the institution in a split system like Flanders.

Towards a more positive and competent view of parents

A prevalent idea for some professionals before the project was that parents are more a hindrance to the educational work of a teacher or a childcare worker. In the childcare centre for example some professionals would complain that parents stay too long inside the group in the morning. In the preschool for example it was generally believed that for the safety of children, it is better to keep the parents outside the school. Many reasons in both settings existed why parents were seen as a threat and even a burden. By trying to understand better what parents are experiencing (cfr. Analysis of local needs) and setting up opportunities to have dialogues between professionals and parents, it became more and more clear that also parents have positive dreams and aspirations for their children. They were very much willing to share and discuss the education of their children with the teachers and childcare workers. Throughout the project, a mind shift occurred in which parents are seen as indispensable partners to smoothen the transition of children. Every parent knows his child the best and the professional knows the child in a collective educational setting. Together they can figure out the best way to increase the well-being and learning opportunities of children during the transition across home, childcare and preschool.

'We probably all recognise this: the 'parent line' or the school gate that separates the children from their parents. How did this popular idea develop? Probably from being concerned and wanting to do our job right. How could we maintain the safety of children when all parents are present? Why didn't we dare to put ourselves in the shoes of the parents? Didn't we understand why gradually less parents felt welcomed and consequently did not attend parental events like conference and school parties? Was it a matter of cultural difference, a fear we had to combat,...?' (*Preschool Director*)

Aha-erlebnis: we are working with the same children and families, irrespective of our institutional different histories and set-up!

By understanding and discussing the different standpoints in transition, the practitioners in this case study gradually worked towards a pedagogy in which caring and learning of children, irrespective of age, is inseparable also taking into account that parents and families are crucial partners in the transition story. By stimulating collaborative learning of professionals from different settings (childcare and preschool) and from different countries, we experienced that all practitioners gradually moved beyond thinking from a solely institutional, historically ingrained perspective. They started thinking from what children and parents expressed as what they need in these transitions. Why are we looking and acting so different towards the same children and parents? Instead, the belief in a more

individualised, 'tailor-made' approach of how to support the transition of each child and family started to develop. In order to do this, ECEC settings need to be available and learn to listen what children and parents are trying to tell us or not tell us. How can we recognise signals of children and parents and answer them in responsive, flexible way?

'One of our parents asked us if she could see how the teacher interacted with the children in the classroom. She had no idea what happened in the preschool class of the youngest children and had many concerns about this. The childcare centre made an appointment with the preschool teacher. Together with the mother, grandmother and the child, we spend a morning in the classroom with the teacher. We could experience circle time and the reading of a story. The mother and grandmother were reassured and the child could experience the classroom for the first time in the safe presence of his mom, grand mom and childcare worker.' (*Director Childcare Centre*)

4.2. What made the difference in order to change?

Getting to know driven professional partners with various expertise in working with a diversity of children and parents

When starting this project, we deliberately choose to start a learning community with partners that each in their own way were driven and engaged in trying to create equal opportunities for all children. The different involved partners were willing to sit together and fundamentally question their own work and the impact of their work. This is not an easy endeavour. This thinking exercise worked well as the START learning community was composed out of different types of organisations (childcare, preschool and poverty advocacy group) with different expertise in working with a diversity of children and families.

The first phase of the project, in which the different partners learn to get to know each other better, was already an enlightening experience for many of the participants. This demonstrates that innovation can occur when as an organisation you step out of your comfort zone and talk to other organisations in the neighbourhood that are also concerned with the lives of young children, families and the local communities. The collaboration with the poverty advocacy group was very essential in this process. This organisation constantly kept the participants being focused on the voices of families living in poverty. It is tempting to quickly start thinking from institutional logic again without considering the experiences of children and families, especially the most disadvantaged ones.

Reflecting together on the pedagogy of transitional practices in Aalst and other countries

In the START critical learning community, the participants regularly would meet each other to exchange and discuss new actions, practices and their underpinning pedagogical ideas. In the first phase, after being confronted with transitional practices in the UK in the international training week, all the participants developed common principles to start from. These common principles (see 3.1) were essential as the professionals themselves have developed them. This bottom-up approach turned out to be crucial in order to have enough ownership in the innovative process.

'After coming back from the UK, I needed some time to rest and think. On the other hand we had the feeling that we couldn't lose time. Me and my colleague were constantly debating what we could do in order to smoothen the transition. And most importantly how will we convince and how we will convince and inspire our team to join in this new way of working.' (*Director Childcare Centre*)

The training week in Tišina, Slovenia was an important moment for the practitioners to learn how to observe, give words to what they see and eventually share reflections. In the following meetings of the learning network they continued with the observations in different stages. First they continued working with the movie materials given in the TOT. In a second step they made observations in the class rooms or playgroups of their colleagues in their own institution (moment in which child and parent are in class & moment with child alone) They shared their observations and reflections, supported by the pedagogical coach in the centre. In a third phase they visited the other one's centre the observe similar moments. The observations were critically discussed and there was a point in which the meanings of educating and caring for young children was discussed, irrespective of the institutional logic or history.

Reflecting together on how to install change in an organisation and local community.

Although this dynamic only recently really took place, the exchange of practices does not only concern the content level but also the level of how you install change in organisations. Both the childcare centre as the preschool worked in a similar way. A core team of the director, pedagogical coach and preschool teachers/ childcare workers took part in the START critical learning community and in the international training weeks in the UK and in Slovenia. In order to install change in an organisation both directors experienced that you need to have a good balance between stimulating bottom-up initiative of teachers or childcare workers and making top-down decisions as a director. This is a continuous search in which coming together as a team is very important. In the beginning of the project some childcare workers did not feel that this project was any of their concern. This started changing when the director decided to visualize their theory of change together as a team. So that all the staff members understand why they are doing certain things or why they should consider to change them.

'We cannot say that we have arrived where we want to be. Innovation remains a continuous process of trying, evaluating, adjusting, banning and keeping certain things. We need to be creative and together search ways in order to break the status quo. This is something we do in the START learning network, but also within our own organization.' (*Preschool Director*)

A pilot project as a safe space to 'experiment'

The fact that this was a pilot project limited in time and that it was explained as an opportunity to overcome the historical split system, challenged people to feel comfortable enough to think out of the box. People felt that they were in a kind of safe space in which the directors and colleagues would not judge them as it concerns a trial and error process.

4.3. Challenges in the process

Importance of continuous leadership that combines pedagogical and administrative coordination

In order to create sustainable change, ECEC centres should be part of competent systems in which individual professionals are supported and foremost enabled to create innovations. In both centres they worked on ensuring that there is a continuous professional learning structure. For instance in the childcare centre, the director is a driven actor of change. The pedagogical coaches at one point seemed to be less engaged in the problem of transitions in order to support the childcare workers to work on the actions. In the preschool, directors have changed 3 times throughout the first period of this project. Yet, from a systemic viewpoint it is important in this case study that work can be done on the level of the class practice of the teachers and childcare workers, but also on the level of directors who can ensure good working conditions in order to organize a warmer and more inclusive transition. The pedagogical coach of the school in this project has been an important support for the preschool teachers, also in order to create the conditions within the school for successful actions. The importance of her role should also be acknowledged and valued in the school system. In the second half both of the institutions found a better balance in order to change the way of working in regards to transitions. Both on the level of organisation (directors) and the level of actual practice (pedagogical coaches, childcare workers and teachers) people turned out to be extremely driven and engaged in transition issues. Because of this combination, change could actually take place in both institutions.

Sustainability of the project idea within the organisations: top-down versus bottom-up approach

Both institutions concurred that you need to have a balance between a bottom-up approach and a top-down approach in order to create change for children and parents. At one point we organised staff meetings with all the involved partners to inform and make other colleagues aware of the problems that occur for children and families in transitional periods. This was an important step to make sure the innovations will be sustainable in all the organisations. Despite these efforts, it wasn't sufficient at times. Working intensely with a small delegation of staff members of the teams (e.g. learning network, international training weeks) in this project, risks to create two groups in an institution: the ones who want to go forward and the others who do not see the immediate urge yet. So it is imperative that organisations create a learning community within the school and childcare centres in which other teachers and childcare workers can think, try out actions and evaluate them together.

Feeling sure enough to critically reflect

Although the professionals were involved in intense exercises on observing, learning to give words and interpreting together in a constructive way, it remains a challenge for the professionals within one institution and in between both institutions to discuss practice together and give feedback to each other. Often professionals feel not sure to critically reflect. With good process guidance in the critical learning community and being aware that this was a pilot project, this worked out well. It remains a challenge how to stimulate this continuous critical reflection and experimentation before, while and after simply doing all kinds of activities

Ensure a reciprocal learning process between childcare and preschool staff

In projects and collaborations that work on transitions it is very important to facilitate a reciprocal learning atmosphere between professionals of different institutions. Often because of the downwards schoolification pressure, professionals of young children have a lower professional and societal status compared to the professionals that work with the older children. It is very important to take this into account in the used methodologies of the critical learning community and constantly try to connect them from a shared vision.

'Who am I to say something to the teachers. They have their expertise. I'm a childcare worker and know more about caring issues.' (Childcare Worker)

Deontological code: Respect for privacy of children and parents

In the project the discussions were mostly about making transition accessible to all children and families. When individual cases were discussed and actions were developed on an individual level, this always started from the need of the parent. It was very important to make sure that parents are and remain the owner of the process when a childcare centre and preschool start working together for a specific child or family. From this viewpoint, it is imperative to develop a kind of deontological professional code when working on transitional practices. Trust of the parents is very important and this trust can easily be broken when you talk *about* parents and not *with* parents.

5. What works?

By investing in a warmer and more inclusive transition across home, childcare and preschool, different stakeholders noticed how the atmosphere in general became more comfortable, friendly and approachable. They identified less stress for children, parents and ECEC professionals before and after the transition. Because the trust increased between everybody, a feeling of belonging to an educational community ("*we are in this together*") in the neighbourhood gradually increased.

5.1. Impact on children

Because of the different transitional activities, the ECEC professionals and parents observed that children are more at ease. They have a better well-being and in comparison to the early days, they would not cry for long periods of time. Children are welcomed and invited to be part of a community in which they matter as a person. Although this remains a work in progress, the caring needs of children are better addressed in the transition to preschool which has a positive effect on their health, well-being and learning.

'We clearly saw the difference for children who had difficulties to eat as the school canteen was a stressful environment. One child last year didn't eat or drink throughout a whole day. Since he can eat in smaller classrooms with his friends and his teacher, he started eating daily and feels much more at ease in school.' (Pedagogical Coach Preschool)

5.2. Impact on families

Both parents and professionals claimed that parents feel much more at ease, supported and mentally prepared to experience this transition period. The childcare centre and poverty advocacy group supported parents to dare to ask questions to the preschool staff. Consequently parents felt more empowered to go into dialogue with the school staff.



'When I talk to parents now, it is remarkable how much they have a certain kind of ownership in this transition process. For people living in poverty the relation with the school is in general quite difficult: the school asks money and they perceive the school as the institution that controls and disciplines them. Now parents talk about the preschool like it is really also their school.' (*Professional poverty advocacy group*)

In both the childcare centre and preschool the dialogue with parents increased from being physical present, be welcomed, actual talk to each other and share dreams and concerns about the education and care of the children in school.

'We opened up the school and the relationship between teachers and parents developed in a safe and trustworthy partnership. Parents see what their child is doing in class and they learn to get to know other parents of the classroom.' (*Preschool Director*)

'I really appreciate the changes that are made in the school. Previously I could not bring my older son to the classrooms. But now I can bring my younger daughter daily into the classroom. In contrast to my daughter, my son used to cry constantly. The first two school days she cried a little bit but that soon passed. I'm so happy that I can enter to classroom with her and take time to take of her coat. This is a little bit our moment of the day. You can see how it makes her really happy. After a while she waves at me and says 'bye daddy'! That gives me a good feeling. Just now I talked to her teacher about personal things. She makes time for us.' (*Parent*).

In the preschool they noticed that significantly more parents attended the yearly performance of children for parents. Whereas 6 years ago 25 parents attended the performance, this year already 70 parents of 122 toddlers attended the yearly festivity to the amazement of the teachers.

5.3. Impact on teachers / childcare workers

Since the population of the preschool drastically changed over the years (from a white middleclass high SES population to a diversity of children with different SES and cultural backgrounds), this process was hard for some of the teachers in the school as they perceived it as a kind of 'fall back'. How can we teach children who do not speak Dutch at home? Consequently a more negative and deficit view on children and divers parents existed. By investing in this project, the image of the school staff towards the children, parents and local communities is gradually transforming into a more positive, competent one.

'The population of this school actually represents our societal future with all it richness and diversities. We are working with this mini-society. And it is a challenge we love to take on.' (*Preschool Director*)

More concretely teachers stated that they have developed better relationships with children and parents. The previous focus on written communication is losing ground as talking and interacting became a main activity of teachers.

'I can see that I have a better connection with the youngest toddlers. Since parents come into the classroom, they are also facilitating this connection between us. When children are transitioning to a next class, some of them come to say good morning to me every day. They talk to me and come and tell me something. That is a novelty for me.' (*Preschool Teacher*)

Also in the childcare centre the vision and practice of building relationships was refreshed so instead of a couple most of the team members started developing a positive, competent image of all the parents.

5.4. Impact on organisations

It should be noted that the research on voices of children and parents, as part of the first phase of the action research, slowly became a continuous focus of the professionals in the different settings. The positive and critical feedback from parents on the new transition practices (e.g. parents can come every day in the classroom as this was not allowed previously, more pedagogical attention towards the importance of sleeping, play ground,...) gave a boost to the pre- and even the primary school team:



'I used to say to parents that 'my door was always open' and I really believed this was the case. Since parents are able to take time to say goodbye to their child and talk to the teachers in the classroom, I can really say that we have more and better contact with parents. Parents often come to me and talk and I also easily start talking to them. I often go outside to be able to talk to parents, even about small things' (*Director Preschool*)

By doing this project, it was interesting to see how the mutual respect and understanding was growing between the professionals from the different settings. Although broader society often gives different praise and acknowledgement (e.g. difference between childcare worker and preschool teacher), the various groups of professionals felt more connected in their mission to develop educational practice that is suitable and meaningful for a diversity of children and parents in this specific disadvantaged neighbourhood of Aalst.

6. Reflection and critical evaluation

The Flemish community of Belgium is a region with one of the highest enrolment rates in ECEC in Europe. Yet, it is also one of the regions with the highest educational gap related to the home situation of the children (OECD, 2016). Especially negative transitional experiences can have lasting difficulties leading to poorer educational performance for children living in disadvantaged circumstances (Dumcius et al., 2014). Therefore we aimed to challenge the historical institutional split system and make transitions warm and inclusive for children and families living in poverty. Whereas in the beginning of the project we solely perceived the institutional splits as a huge problemacy, we gradually understood that these institutional splits are actually an opportunity to think out of the institutional and cultural box: by collaborative learning and confrontation of childcare workers, preschool teachers, and primary school teachers coming from four different countries, traditional child- and family images were deconstructed and based on this pedagogical practices were recontextualised and reinvented. Although we admit that we definitely have still a long way to go, it is also remarkable how the initial focus of professionals on making children (pre)school ready gradually disappeared. In our experience systematic change, even in an increasing international context of schoolification, is possible by taking small steps in which relationship, care, trust and community are considered key levers.

6.1. Implications for policies

In general

Deal proactively with the artificial institutional split to avoid having detrimental effects on the social inclusion of children and families living in poverty.

Because Belgium (the Flemish community) has a long preschool tradition, the institution still stems from an older societal model in which more mothers were home to take care of the children. In the context of an ECEC split system, the idea that care belongs in the private household or in other childcare services does not yet accommodate the needs of children and families in the 21st century. There is a fundamental need to rethink transitional practices and an EDUCARE pedagogical view from the perspective of a diverse group of young children and families instead of continuing the institutional, historically ingrained thinking that separates care from learning.

- By aligning further the work of different ECEC policy domains, pre-service training institutions, in-service training institutions and foremost the work of childcare centres and preschools > *conceptual integration of caring and learning into EDUCARE in both childcare and preschool, and/or*
- By enabling childcare centres and preschools to collaborate and work in a more integrated way > *structural and conceptual integration of caring and learning into EDUCARE*

Prioritise the investment in warm welcome policies for families in schools and professionalisation of ECEC staff over the development of coercive policies for families living in poverty to send their children to preschool

Value childcare and preschool also for what it can be in the here and now, not solely for preparing children in what comes next in the educational system

Discuss and contest preschool readiness ideas (e.g. being able to go to the potty, being able to stay awake, ...) **that are artificially constructed due to the split system as this puts a lot of unneeded pressure on the children, families and ECEC staff.** Inspiration can be found in other European member states who either work on warm transitions within an ECEC split system or have an ECEC integrated system.

Rethink a school day of a child in preschool

- **Develop better staff deployment policies so preschool teachers and childcare workers can work together more flexibly and constructively to ensure educare throughout a schoolday of a child**

In the Flemish community of Belgium, all children aged two-and-a-half to six are legally entitled to a free place in preschool. In contrast to many other countries, this policy choice deserves full praise. Nevertheless, our analysis of local needs showed that many parents have identified caring needs of their children that remain unaddressed during teachers' coffee and lunch breaks, when children are expected to play outside (*speeltijd*) with little supervision. Considering that teachers are officially expected to stay 15 minutes after the lesson and that many lunch time breaks last a lot longer, this raises many questions on how this 'remaining time' is organised and whether this actually is in tune with the caring needs of children (Kint, 2016). It should be further researched how the ECEC professional system can evolve towards more co-teaching and working in shifts so the pedagogical continuity throughout the day for young children can be assured and parents are more able to meet the educators who know their children personally.

- **Invest in age-appropriate preschool infrastructure and rearrange space to increase the well-being**

Since many parents and staff members in this project action research the traditional care facilities of schools, policies should address this need by providing the necessary resources for preschool institutions that have a more classical lay-out. This would help them rebuild their preschool infrastructure into age-appropriate and peaceful eating, toileting, outdoor playing and sleeping facilities for young children. Preschool institutions could rethink and rearrange their infrastructure and lay-out spaces in order to improve the well-being of children and parents. Preschool, for example, can become much more welcoming to parents when there are meeting spaces with couches in or close to the classes. Creating a welcoming environment for parents will automatically evoke more opportunities to share the educational responsibilities of children. As preschools collaborate with out-of-school care centres, it could be interesting to explore possibilities for sharing space and caring facilities in order to develop continuous educare practices for children and parents. Finally, it should be noted that by investing in age-appropriate infrastructure and rearranging space, an increased sense of well-being for preschool staff themselves will result, as it will be more peaceful and enjoyable to work in the classes.

- **Invest in lower adult-child ratio's in order to have better educare for a diversity of children in preschool, especially the youngest ones and other newcomers** (e.g. refugees, recently migrated children,...)

Preschool institutions need sufficient personnel to achieve adequate child-staff ratios throughout every moment of the day (including lunch breaks). Furthermore, preschool institutions need to assure that the number of children in classes is adequate so teachers and childcare workers can provide sufficient individual attention and give support to children regarding their caring and learning needs. Smaller groups can make it easier for the staff members to build good relationships with parents. Some preschool institutions work with mixed age groups, which may serve as an inspiration as these schools manage to construct a concept of educare in which children also care for each other as an important part of growing up. The transition into these class groups is smoother both for children and preschool staff than, for example, the case of 20 children who all start school at the same time and in the same class.

Support for families

Invest in accessible meeting places in local communities for children and parents who did not attend childcare.

Support parents living in poverty in the search for a good preschool and in the subscription procedures.

- Enable more flexibility in the entry days (*instapdagen*) so childcare and preschool staff can dialogue with parents on what a good time is to start in preschool.

Support for ECEC professionals

- **Integrate the theme of transition** (warm welcome, familiarisation, educate, relationship with parents) **into the pre-service curricula of future preschool teachers and childcare workers.**
- **Integrate the theme of transition** (warm welcome, familiarisation, educate, relationship with parents) **into the continuous professional development (CPD) pathways for preschool teachers and childcare workers**
- **Invest in inter-institutional professional learning communities**
 - between preschool teachers, childcare workers and directors to work on transitional practices (warm welcome, familiarisation, educate, relationship with parents) and use institutional splits as opportunities to think out of the box and create new pedagogical practices
 - between preschool/childcare and other welfare organisations who have expertise in dealing with diverse children, parents and communities - *do not forget the children who did not attend childcare!*
 - facilitated by pedagogical coaches / researchers / other stakeholders who can connect different types of institutions by contextualising the differences and commonalities of ECEC services from a historical and systemic perspective.
- **Invest in good working conditions for preschool teachers and childcare workers: child-free hours to sit together and reflect, child-free hours to research voices of children and parents as a starting point for the transitional practices**

6.2. Key Success Factors

Innovation requires COMPETENCE and CONFRONTATION !

According to the CoRe study ECEC quality is strongly linked to a professionally competent workforce (Urban, Vandebroek, Peeters, Lazzari, & Van Laere, 2011; Urban, Vandebroek, Van Laere, Lazzari, & Peeters, 2012) Yet, a 'competent system' is required for a competent workforce; such a system must include collaboration between individuals, teams and institutions, and have competent governance at policy level. A competent system needs to invest in initial training and continuous professional development for all staff.

From the point of view of in-service training and support, we experienced the power of interdisciplinary and international learning! Without these confrontational learning dynamics our group is convinced that these major mind shifts and changing transitional practices (that are challenging the historical split system and the idea that parents need to be responsible to make their children school ready), could not take place so quickly.

7. References

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8. Annexes

8.1. Differences between childcare – and preschool institutions in Belgium (Fl)³

Curricula:

For childcare centres for children below the age of 2½ years, a pedagogical framework was issued in 2014 by the Flemish Ministry for Health and Families. It describes in detail what is understood by pedagogical quality and how it can be achieved. Until now, there has been no obligation to publish how this programme is used, but it is expected that each setting can demonstrate how certain aspects of the pedagogical framework are implemented. In the general core curriculum for preschool institutions (*Ontwikkelingsdoelen*), developmental goals to achieve are formulated, covering five areas of learning: (1) physical education, (2) artistic education, (3) Dutch language, (4) world studies – nature, technology, humankind, society, (5) introduction to mathematics. During inspection visits checks are made to see whether these developmental goals are being followed. Each setting develops its own educational programme according to the different ages of the children which has to be approved by the government.

Child-Staff ratio:

In childcare centres there are usually at least nine and at most 18 children in a group at any one time. A staff member is responsible for a maximum of eight children. If several staff members are present, each one may also be in charge of nine children. During rest/nap times, a staff-child ratio of 1:14 is also permissible. There are ongoing attempts to reduce the staff-child ratio to 1:7. Preschools enjoy a high degree of autonomy, which allows each school to develop its own educational policies, as well as to appoint its own staff and decide the child-staff ratio. In many preschools, entry classes (*instapklassen*) or reception classes (*onthaalklassen*) are organised for children who are between two and a half and three years of age. In other preschools, the youngest children attend the first grade class of preschool, which comprises children from two and a half to four years of age. A preschool class typically consists of 20–25 children with one preschool teacher.

Professional Profiles

The split system has for a long time been reflected in the qualifications required for work in these two different sectors. Core practitioners in preschool education predominantly have a bachelor's degree and core practitioners in childcare settings have a vocational degree or no degree. This is starting to change as the Flemish community invested in a new bachelor degree in childcare, who will not necessarily work in a management position. In preschool education more childcare workers started working to assist the teachers. The bachelor initial trainings take place at higher education institutions – university colleges – specialising in teacher education or pedagogy of the young child. The upper-secondary, vocational qualification route especially for childcare workers is situated within the secondary schools or adult education.

3 Hulpia, H., Peeters, J., & Van Landeghem, G. (2014). *Study on the effective use of early childhood education and care in preventing early school leaving. Case study report: Flanders*. Brussels: European Commission DG E&C.

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