EDUCAS

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| Report Case Study Belgium (FL)

Re-thinking ECEC spaces/materials by reflecting on practice

Belgian Case Study

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1 Situating the pilot in the Belgian (Fl) context

Educare is a holistic way of working with children, in which well-being, learning and playing are seen as inseparable and equally important (Broström, 2006; Jensen, 2018; Hayes, 2008; Noddings, 2005; Van der Mespel et al., 2020). It is more than the 'simple assurance that children feel emotionally and physically well within the ECEC setting. It also represents belonging and creating an inclusive environment for a diversity of children' (Van der Mespel et al., 2020, 14). *Educare* concerns addressing the needs of children as well as their rights in a holistic way (Van Laere, Vandenbroeck, 2016).

In the last years, the concept of *educare* gained more and more attention in the international debate about ECEC (Early Childhood Education and Care). Also the Council Recommendation for High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care systems and its European Quality Framework (Council of the European Union, 2019) underline its importance, by focusing on how ECEC quality should be linked to a holistic approach in which education and care are intertwined. However, at the European level, there is a general trend to treat children as 'academic learners' at younger ages. This means that, very often, a hierarchy between care and education exists, in line with the concept of 'schoolification' (Moss, 2013). As shown in a recent NESET report realized for the European Commission (Peeters et al., 2016), in several EU countries, 'short-term' qualified assistants take care of the physical needs of children, while core practitioners are thought to 'educate' (meaning that they should focus on so called cognitive activities). This might implicitly indicate that care is valued less than cognitive development, in line with a traditional approach that doesn't fully recognize the crucial role of 'care' in the upbringing of children.

This is the case also for Belgium (this document focuses on the Flemish Community of Belgium)[1].

The ECEC system in the Flemish Community is a split one, which means that different ministerial authorities are responsible for provisions for children under 2 ½ years old (childcare sector, under the Flemish Minister for Welfare, Public Health, Family and Poverty Reduction – and managed by the Flemish government agency Upbringing – *Opgroeien,* former *Kind & Gezin*), and for children from 2 ½ years up to compulsory school, which starts at 6 years old (education sector, under the Flemish Ministry of Education and Training). Within the split system, professionals working with 0-2,5 and 2,5-6 years old children have different qualifications (core practitioners in pre-primary education have a bachelor level; practitioners in childcare sector are mostly infant care workers with secondary vocational level) and different opportunities for professional development. The two sectors have different finances and regulations. This 'split' encourages the hierarchic division between 'education' and 'care' in ECEC services[2]. In line with this trend, normally childcare workers are employed to work alongside the teacher and are most of the times responsible for caring tasks and for looking after the children outside the 'classroom moments' (during meals at midday, in

[1] Belgium is a federal and multilingual country comprising three autonomous Regions (Flemish Region, Walloon Region, Brussels Capital Region), three language Communities (Flemish, French, German-speaking), and four language areas (Dutch, French, German, and French-Dutch in the Brussels Capital Region). Each Region and language Community has its own ECEC system. Here we will focus on the Flemish Community, where the 'Belgian part' of the EDUCAS project took place.

2 This case study and the implications for policy and practice don't mean to state that transforming a 'split system' (in which childcare and (pre)school fall under different governmental responsibilities) into an integrated one is necessarily the model to be followed. This document rather suggests that when a 'split' is present, strong collaboration between the different institutions is needed and crucial at all levels, in order to develop coherent vision and practice that orient *all* professionals in working (together) for the wellbeing and learning of children and their families, within an *educare* perspective.

the play-ground, during sleeping moments, and before and after school time). This service in which childcare workers are employed is called *opvang* (out-of-school care), while preschool is called *kleuterschool* (in this document we will use these two terms to refer to the two services). The different professionals normally lack possibilities to reflect together on practice and build a coherent vision[3]. While meant to support the teacher, this situation is in effect resulting in a split between caring and teaching roles, which unintentionally perpetuates the ingrained idea that care and learning of young children are two completely different aspects of human life (Case study Belgium, START project[4]): care is a matter that belongs to the private domain of family education and/or to childcare institutions. Learning belongs to the formal (pre)school settings.

Because of this institutional and conceptual split between caring and learning, bot childcare and preschool institutions are historically dealing with a lack of respectively learning and care (Van Laere, Boudry, 2019), whereas what is needed is a holistic approach in which education and care are inter-twinned (Van Laere, 2017; Peeters, Sharmahd, Budginaitè, 2016).

Within this discourse, the way spaces/infrastructures/materials are organized plays a crucial role. Following the definition of Loris Malaguzzi, we know that ECEC spaces can be considered 'third educators' and their organization can support or hinder the implementation of an *educare* practice. Malaguzzi assumed that, besides adults and children, features and organization of spaces could convey educational meanings and affect children's growth in the early years (Edwards & Gandini, 2018; Malaguzzi, 1987). Similarly, the Italian architect Mario Botta has defined the construction of a school building as 'the first pedagogical act' (Botta, Crepet, & Zois, 2007, p.73), highlighting the need to consider the physical spaces in which education takes place, even before constructing them (Literature Review Educas, 2019[5]). This is underlined also in the research of Ine van Liempd (2005), which finds out that when the pedagogial vision is coherent with the way the building is made, both parents and professionals give a high score to the pedagogical quality, while when the match vision-building is not there, the scores are much lower. The Project *Pic2Learn* coordinated by the Flemish 'Kind and Samenleving NGO' gives voice to this need, by investing in creating a 'participative instrument' to guide the (re)building of school-infrastructures in line with the pedagogical vision of the teams[6]. The way the space responds to the different needs of children and families, influences indeed the cognitive, social and emotional development of children, their self-esteem and motivation to learn (Galardini, 2003). It is therefore necessary to organize the spaces coherently with the educational vision of the ECEC centre, by giving also to children and families an active role in this organization (Clark, 2010; Melhuus, 2012; Vuorisalo, 2015).

Within the Belgian (Fl) split system, all this shows how crucial it is to work with the whole team (teachers/childcare workers) on developing a coherent vision, in order to then organize the spaces/materials accordingly. The VALUE project, corodinated by VBJK, focused on this theme, by exploring how can continuous professional development (CPD) strengthen professional identity, holistic approaches to

[3] Concerning the roles of the different professionals and the possibility of integrated working, please check the outputs of the VALUE project: https://vbjk.be/en/project/value

[4] https://vbjk.be/en/project/start-a-good-start-for-all/contact

[5] https://www.issa.nl/content/meanings-spaces-ecec-centres-literature-review

[6] https://k-s.be/medialibrary/purl/nl/3230079/Pic2school%20Handleiding%20&%20iconenboekje.pdf

educational work (*educare*) and cooperation between core and assisting practitioners working within in ECEC[7].

In the last years, in the Flemish Community of Belgium efforts have been made on the level of policy and practice in order to promote an *educare* approach, with attention to both the organization of ECEC spaces and the collaboration between *opvang* and *kleuterschool*. Recently, for example, the Flemish Ministry of Education published a practical guide[8] (Flemish Ministry of Education, 2020) for preschool staff (ECEC services 2,5-6 years old) on how to promote quality 'toddlers participation' (with the aim of increasing children's attendance to preschool). Part of the guide is dedicated to how to create ECEC spaces based on an *educare* approach. Besides, in 2014 the Flemish government agency Upbringing (*Opgroeien*) published a Pedagogical Framework (MeMoQ Pedagogisch Raamwerk) to support high quality pedagogy in childcare centres, and a self-evaluation instrument (*MeMoQ zelf-evaluatie instrument*) which contains 6 dimensions to be explored. One of the dimensions (n. 5) is dedicated to the 'environment', meaning the ECEC spaces/infrastructures/materials[9]. The whole Pedagogical Framework and self-evaluation instrument is based on an *educare* approach, in which ECEC centres support the holistic development of children, collaborate with families and create networks with the community. In line with this approach, it is notable that on a local level, the City of Ghent (Department of Education and Welfare) is in the process of developing an 'infrastructure note', aimed at creating a framework that orients the organization of ECEC and school spaces/infrastructures on the basis of 7 negotiated principles that embrace the *educare* perspective, namely: accessibility, diversity, warm and safe environment, participation, sustainability, broad developmental opportunities, innovation and creativity. Each principle is then 'translated' in in the organization of the spaces/infrastructures, with specific attention to the different ages (0-3, 2,5-6, 6+ and high school). This 'holistic' perspective on education and care has been developed by negotiating the visions of the responsibles of all levels (childcare, preschool, out of school care, primary school, high school).

Concerning specifically the integrated working *opvang/kleuterschool*, it needs to be noted that in 2011, the Flemish Education Council (VLOR) published the 'Advice on childcare and education for young children', which makes a plea to install a stronger connection between the two sectors. Both childcare and preschool education should work towards a common vision in which 'care' and 'learning' are considered to be of equal value (VLOR, 2011)[10]. On a local level, several initiatives took place. For example the City of Ghent initiated a project called K2O specifically oriented to the collaboration between these two institutions[11]. When the two sectors share the same infrastructures, negotiation of visions is needed to organize the spaces in a coherent way. Also the regulations of the two institutions need to find a common framework. On this matter, it is notable that the Flemish administrations of welfare and education together instituted in 2017 a Multifunctional Infrastructure Forum (*Forum Multifunctionele Infrastructuur Zorg-Onderwijs - Forum MFI*

[7] https://vbjk.be/en/project/value

[8] https://www.vlaanderen.be/publicaties/samen-werken-aan-een-kwaliteitsvolle-kleuterparticipatie-een-inspiratiegids-voor-kleuteronderwijzers

[9] https://www.kindengezin.be/kinderopvang/sector-babys-en-peuters/pedagogische-aanpak/memoq-pedagogische-raamwerk/

[10] https://assets.vlor.be/www.vlor.be/import/rbo-rbo-adv-001_0.pdf. The Departments of Education, Welfare and Integration in the Flemish Community of Belgium started to collaborate in 2015 to smoothen the transition between the childcare/home environment and the preschool environment by establishing a interdepartmental working group of administrators (*ambtelijke werkgroep transitie*).

[11] One of the ECEC centres partner in EDUCAS (Hippo's Hof) is part of K2O.

Zorg-Onderwijs[12]) to support (via informing about regulations, procedures and their possible adaptations) building projects that connect education and welfare, including (pre)school and childcare (*onderwijs* en *welzijn*).

Taking into account that the Flemish Government recently announced the intention to invest 21,5 milion Euro in projects that aim at renovating/building schools, it seems now urgent to outline certain guidelines to orient this process, also by underlying the importance of a shared project school-childcare-out of school care.[13]

This report and its implicatios for policy and practice aim at giving a contribution in this direction.

2 The EDUCAS path: aims and method

It is within this framework that the international EDUCAS project (*Space and Educare: Creating child and family friendly learning spaces in ECEC centres* – Erasmus+ KA2) took shape, with the aim of creating ECEC environments that support children's development in a holistic way, taking into account the diverse needs of children and families, with special attention to the ones at risk of social exclusion. The project was developed in three countries (Belgium, Italy, Lithuania) through the collaboration between research centres and ECEC services. In each country one research centre and two ECEC centres were involved. Three International Training activities were planned within the project, in order to learn from each other experiences.

Between 2018 and 2021 the partners developed several actions towards this objective, by mainly investing in:

1. Elaborating a literature review and research concerning the connection between ECEC environments and ECEC curricula within an *educare* approach[14].
2. Elaborating and experimenting innovative pedagogical approaches, methods and tools to support professionals in improving ECEC environments within an *educare* approach, by involving children and families.
3. Disseminating the project's findings, educational resources and related policy recommendations, both in national and international debates[15].

2.1 The Belgian (Fl) pilot: who was involved?

Amongst the initiatives that in the Flemish Community of Belgium try to promote an *educare* approach and an integrated working, we can certainly mention the Jenaplan (pre)school and out-of-school centre Hippo's Hof, managed by the City of Ghent, and the Freinet Child Centre De Tandem (0-12 years old children)

[12] https://www.departementwvg.be/nieuws/commissie-multifunctionele-infrastructuur-van-start#multifunctionele-zorg--en-onderwijsinfrastructuur

[13] https://www.knack.be/nieuws/belgie/vlaamse-regering-investeert-21-5-miljoen-in-scholenbouw/article-belga-1608323.html?cookie_check=1619884401

[14] https://www.issa.nl/content/meanings-spaces-ecec-centres-literature-review

[15] https://www.issa.nl/content/educas-policy-recommendations-strengthening-importance-space-and-educare-approach

managed by GO! (Education of the Flemish Community) in the city of Bruges.

Hippo's Hof is a Jenaplan ECEC centre/school, which builds its vision on the philosophy of Peter Peterson, who theorizes a democratic way of learning strongly connected with *educare* principles. Peterson experiments with mixed age groups, which is also the way in which the Hippo's Hof works, having mixed age groups of children (2,5 to 6 years old) in the same space. Teachers and childcare workers work together, sharing spaces and vision. This has specific consequences concerning *educare* and spaces. The spaces of the Hippo's Hof have been recently renovated and, although already conscious of the importance of an *educare* approach, the staff had specific questions concerning how to concretely put it in practice.

De Tandem works with children from 0 to 4 years old, within a flexible approach. The groups of children are mixed in age (two groups with 0 to 3 years old children; one group with children from 3 to 4 years old). The daily practice is flexible and with open doors, which means that children can for example go from one group to the other in specific moments, according to their needs. Besides, children don't necessarily 'change group' the first of September (as it normally happens), but when they are 'ready' for it, on the basis of common agreements between staff, parents and the child him/herself. This is interesting and not common in the Belgian context, and it has consequences concerning *educare* and infrastructures, since spaces need to be organized in a flexible way, in order to allow this practice. The staff had specific questions concerning how their vision could be better linked with their practice when it comes to *educare* and spaces/materials. The vision of de Tandem is based on the pedagogy and philosophy of Emmi Pikler (1979), Loris Malaguzzi (1972) and Célestin Freinet (1956), all advocating in different ways for an *educare* approach. It needs to be noted that De Tandem is in the process of re-building its spaces, but, exactly because of the Belgian (Fl) institutional split, this process is encountering some difficulties, since the budget for rebuilding comes from the Education Department, but when re-organizing the spaces, the ECEC centre needs to meet both regulations for school and for out of school/childcare.

Considering the experiences, vision and questions of these two ECEC centres, VBJK (Centre for Innovation in the Early Years)[16] contacted them when looking for local partners in Belgium (Fl) to collaborate in the EDUCAS project.

The Belgian pilot has been coordinated by VBJK and developed together with the staff of the Hippo's Hof and De Tandem[17]. Within 16 months, an action research path took place, starting with a need analysis followed by a CPD path with the ECEC staff involved.

In the development of the pilot, an important role has been played by the local Stakeholder Group, which was composed by key-representatives (on the level of policy and practice) of the ECEC sector in the Flemish Community of Belgium and of the two municipalities involved (Bruges and Ghent)[18]. The key representatives have been 'critical friends' throughout the project with the intention of creating a stronger

[16] https://vbjk.be/en

[17] In Italy, the University of Parma, Department of Humanities, Social Sciences and Cultural Industries coordinated the pilot, and two ECEC centres managed by the PROGES Social Cooperative took part (Maria Vittoria and Gelsomino). In Lithuania the UIC, Center for Innovative Education, coordinated the pilot, and the ECEC centres Aukštelkė and Vaikystes Sodas took part. Besides these partners, ISSA (International Step by Step Association) has been also partner in this project, with a main responsibility concerning communication/dissemination activities.

[18] In Belgium the following institutions were involved in the Stakeholder Group: Flemish Department of Education, Agency Upbringing (*Opgroeien*, former *Kind & Gezin*), Flemish Support Network for ECEC 'Mentes', GO! Impact, Education of the Flemish Community, Department of Education, Welfare and Youth of the City of Ghent, VCOK Training Centre.

and sustainable impact on the local level, by giving valuable feedback on the development of the pilot, on the training toolbox, the policy recommendations and the dissemination activities.

2.2 Needs analysis

One of the key points of this project have been the awareness of the importance of taking into account the voices and needs of all actors involved (meaning here children, families, professionals), when wanting to (re)design ECEC spaces.

On this basis, the partners of EDUCAS decided to start the action research path in all the three countries with focus groups involving staff and families (in separate groups). The focus groups took place between March and May 2019, with the aim of gaining insight about families' and staff's ideas/beliefs/feelings/needs in relation to the ECEC spaces and their connection with education and care[19]. Focus groups can indeed respond at the same time to a research need and to a professional development/support need, linking research to self-reflection and thus to transformation, which is the main goal of action research (Bove, 2009; Sharmahd, 2011).

The CPD path with the staff has been then planned on the basis of the focus groups' analysis.
In Belgium (Fl) 4 focus groups were realized: 2 with parents and 2 with professionals. More specifically, one with parents and one with staff in the Hippo's Hof, and one with parents and one with staff in De Tandem. In total 17 professionals and 7 parents took part to the focus groups.

The sample is not representative, but it gives an interesting basis for reflection. However, in order to catch the meanings/thoughts of parents in a broader way, the ECEC staff has put in place different kinds of strategies, like for example hanging a poster with some specific questions concerning *educare*/spaces at the entrance, and asking parents to give their opinion when they brought or picked up the children. Besides, a Ph.D. student from the University of Parma who was involved in the project, elaborated a questionnaire for parents and professionals, aimed at exploring the ideas/views of families concerning spaces/educare, within a broader sample (tot n= 1490 respondents; n for Belgium-Fl: 174 respondents) then the one involved in the ECEC centres participating to the project[20].

The analysis of the data shows a focus of both professionals and parents on some recurrent concepts. Namely, a space for children should be calm, cozy, home-ish, and safe. Also taking care of hygiene seems quite important, especially for parents.

These concepts are directly linked with the '*educare*' approach, in the sense that in order to learn and play with pleasure, caring spaces are needed, places where we feel at home, familiar; places in which our holistic wellbeing is taken into account.

It is also interesting to notice that parents want their children to learn, but they express at the same time worries mainly connected to their care: for example they are worried that their children get wet in the

[19] In this case study we don't aim at reporting the analysis of the results of the focus groups. For the full analysis of the results of the focus groups, see doc. *The points of view of families, professionals, children: Summary of the analysis of the focus groups with staff and parents, and of the drawings and interviews with the children in Belgium, Lithuania, Italy.* https://www.issa.nl/content/points-view-families-professionals-children. Besides, a specific article has been published on this experience (Boudry, Sharmahd, 2021).

[20] The analysis of the data of the questionnaires is included in the Ph.D study of Sara Berti:

toilets or outside; that they reach the toilet on time; they like that they play outside, but they are worried that they have the right clothes (and professionals too); they want them to eat with pleasure; they want their emotional needs to be taken into account. This is in line with what comes out from a recent research (Van Laere, 2017), in which it is underlined how caring aspects are always implicitly and explicitly present in the words of parents, when considering children wellbeing in ECEC settings.

The results of the VALUE project underline the same aspects, when stating that 'by taking into account better the caring needs (e.g., including a physical care table to change diapers), professionals noticed how parents are more reassured and relieved that the school takes time for this' (Hulpia et al., 2020, 50).

Through the EDUCAS focus groups we see the importance of intertwining 'education' and 'care', giving them the same value, within a holistic approach. Within this framework, questions arise about the place of children in their own growing path: how can we take their individual needs into account in a collective place? What does this mean concerning the 'routines' moments (hygiene, sleeping, eating)? E.g., do children that wake up earlier have to stay in the sleeping room anyway until everybody is awake? Why? To whom needs are we responding by doing what we do? Or, is it important for us that children participate in the preparation of the table when we eat? Why? If yes, how can we organize it? And how can we involve the whole staff (e.g. including the professional that serves the food) in co-reflecting about the organization of the eating moment? Or, since many children like to be outside, how can we work on this moment? How can we improve the offer of activities, and at the same time make sure that children don't get cold or wet? How can we make the learning processes of children visible?

The teams expressed the need to better explore their vision and priorities concerning *educare*, in order to then look for organizational strategies that translate this vision into practice in the spaces and materials.

In this path, a strong partnership with families is needed. From the focus groups, it comes out that there is sometimes a lack of information from the ECEC centre to the parents: parents often don't know what happens in the school/service, and most of them would like to know more. Parents also say that they appreciate very much the possibility of entering the class, of having a place in the hall (sofas, benches, coffee) where they can stay with their children, but also with other parents, underlying how important it is today to offer families meeting places where they can also share their parenthood with other families, and feel less lonely.

On this matter, all professionals involved say that the collaboration with parents is crucial, and that they are very welcome in the ECEC centre. However, at the same time, a physical place for families in the centre or in the class is not always present, and parents are not always informed about many aspects of the daily routines in the school/service. Since informing parents is the first step to create participation, this has been an important aspect to be further explored with the teams. Starting from informing, a deeper collaboration can be created, in which professionals and families exchange their ideas and co-construct meanings and practice.

After analyzing the data, feedback/reflection meetings have been organized with the ECEC staff of the two centres, in order to discuss the analysis and co-decide what kind of CPD path to implement. The staff of both ECEC centres were willing to work on the challenges presented. They confirmed and re-discovered the importance of an *educare* approach.

Putting at the centre of this action-research children and their families meant for the research group and for

the ECEC staff to try to find strategies and tools to let their voice come out and be heard.

2.3 Implementation

2.3.1 Which actions

After discussing with the ECEC centres, VBJK and the ECEC staff developed an action plan to work within EDUCAS. It has been very important to have the ECEC directors 'on board', meaning that their engagement in the project and in the reflection process has been crucial not only for the development of the project, but also for the sustainability that we aim to achieve.

Together we elaborated an action plan, which can be summarized as follows:

1. First exploration with the staff of the ECEC centres involved aimed at defining which possible actions could take place after the analysis of the focus groups. The following concepts have been identified as aspects to be taken into account for the CPD path:
    - ✓ *Informing, making visible and sharing vision and approaches with parents*
    - ✓ *Creating a cozy, safe, homish (and clean) place*
    - ✓ *Creating possibilities for children to 'do', but also to be 'calm'*
    - ✓ *Joining learning, playing and caring*
    - ✓ *Clarifying what the teams think and want (vision), in order to organize the space in a coherent way*

2. Planning of a CPD path in which more or less every 5-6 weeks VBJK would facilitate reflection moments with the staff and support the implementation of an *educare* approach by working on the ECEC spaces/materials. The 'tools' and methods[21] used in the CPD path have been mainly:

[21] All the tools can be found in the Training Toolbox of EDUCAS, which can be downloaded here.

- ✓ Peer observations (between the two services and within the two services): professionals would observe each other on the basis of an observation grid, and then common reflection moments on what was observed would be planned. When observing each other in the

same team, teachers would observe childcare workers and vice-versa, in order to stimulate reflection on their vision and practice.

- ✓ Reflecting on pedagogical documentation to connect vision and practice: professionals reflected on their practice by analyzing photo's of their spaces in daily life and by

connecting their pedagogical vision to what the pictures represented. On the basis of this reflection, professionals created pedagogical documentation panels (to be hanged on the wall) that would make their vision visible through pictures and words. A specific article has been published on this experience (Boudry, 2021).

- ✓ Creating a moodboard & a mindmap to analyze and transform the spaces: professionals worked on the connection between needs of children, needs of families, ECEC vision, and how these needs find a 'place' in the ECEC spaces. On the basis of the analysis, professionals could 'see' what exactly needs to be transformed in the spaces to answer to the needs. This exercise was inspired by a guidebook developed by Jo Tondeur and colleagues, to work on

spaces for older children (Tondeur et al., 2019)[22]

- ✓ Reflecting on videos: professionals would film short daily moments with children and then reflect together on the videos. This helped in bringing different perspectives on the same situation and exchange ideas/views, in order to become more aware of the meanings standing behind daily practice, and of what eventually can be transformed in order to better respond to an educare approach when taking spaces/materials into account.

3. The voices of children have been taken into account too. Besides observing them, a specific path with drawings and individual interviews took place. The analysis of children's drawings/interviews underlines different aspects and needs, amongst which the importance of interactions and friendships for children in ECEC, the need to have spaces to play and discover, but also places to be calm and withdraw, the pleasure of being outdoor[23]. The analysis has been implemented with the support of the Ph.D student from the University of Parma who was involved in the project.

4. In one of the ECEC centres (Hippo's Hof) we especially worked on the collaboration between teachers and childcare workers. The need of common professional development paths is underlined also by the European Quality Framework (Council of the European Union, 2019, 10), where it is stated that 'professional development has a huge impact on the quality of staff pedagogy and children outcomes. Developing common education and training programs for all staff working in an ECEC context (e.g. preschool teachers, assistants, educators, family day carers etc.), helps to create a shared agenda and understanding of quality'. Having a common path responds to the need of giving to the whole team the possibility of reflecting together on their practice, from their different perspectives, in order to reach a common framework that orients their daily work with children and families. As mentioned above, Belgium (FL) is a context in which

[22] This tool has connections to the one of the *Pic2Learn* project. The instrument makes use of icons to think together (in the team) about the organization of the spaces.

[23] For the full analysis of the results of the drawings/interviews with children, see doc. *The points of view of families, professionals, children: Summary of the analysis of the focus groups with staff and parents, and of the drawings and interviews with the children in Belgium, Lithuania, Italy.* https://www.issa.nl/content/points-view-families-professionals-children

advocating for an *educare* approach still presents some challenges, since traditionally education and care have been seen as split in practice. All this makes a concrete collaboration towards *educare* quite complex. Nevertheless, it needs to be underlined that, as mentioned above, time is changing, and recently more initiatives are taken also on a policy level in order to address this issue. The COVID-19 situation also pointed out even more this gap between the two institutions and the need to have coherent regulations. Certain contexts are already working in this direction, including the two Belgian ECEC centers partners in EDUCAS. In the Hippo's Hof, teachers and childcare workers sharing the same spaces observed each other. Through EDUCAS they worked on how to organize the spaces of the *kleuterklas* (preschool) and of the *opvang* (out-of-school care) in a coherent way. They decided to offer different kinds of materials/toys in the two spaces (which are next to each other), so that children can go from one room to the other during the day and find different materials to play with. In this way there are also less children in one room during the day, because they spontaneously divide themselves. This also supports their autonomy, thanks to a flexible use of the spaces and an 'open door' practice, which also accompany smooth transitions out-of-school/school and vice-versa during the day.

5. Three Transnational Trainings, each of 3 days throughout the project. The first transnational training took place in Italy in June 2019 and has been focused on the role of pedagogical documentation in reflecting with ECEC staff about spaces/materials, and on the 'less can be more' pedagogy. The second training took place in Belgium (Fl) in February 2020, and focused on how observation and video-coaching can help reflecting on practice, with specific attention to *educare* and spaces. The third Transnational Training was supposed to take place in Lithuania in September 2020, but due to COVID-19 it has been transformed in an online-offline training which took place in May 2021, and has been focused on how to organize the outdoor spaces within an *educare* perspective. The three trainings have been crucial for the development of the project, since they offered 'eye-opener' moments to see one's own practice from a different perspective.

6. One local training moment has been organized for the Belgian ECEC centres, who visited the ABC-huis (Art Basic for Children)[24] in Brussels, which is 'a **laboratory for aesthetic experiences, creative development and artistic awareness'. ABC actively works with ECEC centres, schools, children and families. Its** vision has been inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach, and aims at offering well thought, mainly non structured materials which can support imagination and creativity, within a 'less can be more' perspective.

[24] http://www.abc-web.be/art-basics-for-children-abcvzw/?lang=en

7. Evaluation of the project with the ECEC staff involved. Through the evaluation, staff especially underline the mind shift that they could experience through this project. As one of the professionals puts it: 'we learned that collaboration between teacher and childcare worker is crucial. So we are looking how to change schedule and timing to foresee more collaboration on this level. There is no opvang and kleuterschool. There is a community. Educas helped us in looking for the common vision'. And another one adds: 'it has been so inspiring to see the centres in Italy. We learned a lot from the less can be more approach'.

It is also important to underline that, especially in one of the ECEC centres, we decided to involve also the cooking staff in part of the CPD path. Very often in ECEC centres there are different professionals working in various ways with children/parents, but not all of them are recognized and 'visible' in the team, nor common reflection moments are organized. In the case of EDUCAS we found it important to bring together not only teachers/childcare workers, but also for example the cooking staff, when possible. Organizing the eating room is indeed an important aspect when working on spaces/educare, and by involving the cooking/cleaning staff we aimed at increasing the awareness of the whole staff about this moment and its meaning, besides valuing the work of the cooking staff within an educare perspective.

The COVID-19 situation brought a change in the planning of our activities, since the way practice could be organized in ECEC centres had to be quickly transformed. The safety and hygiene rules to which ECEC centres had to adapt effected also how the spaces were organized, with several consequences which brought at the same time limitations and opportunities. The crisis obliged the ECEC staff to re-think about their 'taken for granted' concepts, which in some cases has led to new discoveries (see chapter 4 for details).

2.3.2 Impact on children, families and professionals

CHILDREN

Because of the different changes in the spaces, ECEC professionals observed that children seem to be more 'at ease' in the space, which results to be less chaotic and 'full'. Children can orient themselves better and be active participants in their choices when it comes to where and how to play. Besides, although it is a work in progress, professionals underline that they are now more aware of the importance of an *educare* approach

with children, they value the 'caring' moments and spaces. All this has a positive impact on the general wellbeing of children.

Professionals say:

> *"Children now like very much the fact that they don't need me that much, they are more free now. Parents like it very much as well."*
>
> *"I have changed the spaces twice! Now we can use the space in a more multifunctional way, which helps me very much because in my class I have 24 children aged 2,5 to 6 years old. This new layout allows me to work better with an open plan because I don't have a specific area to do something anymore. Before, when some children wanted to do a puzzle, they would go to a table, always the same one, where we used to play with puzzles. Now, they take it with them and choose where in the classroom they want to do it. It might seem a minor change but thanks to this, I am able to see how each child performs, to take better care of them, and they have more freedom to explore and play."*
>
> *"Children seem calmer. There are less things around. The space lets them 'breath'."*

FAMILIES

Based on the results of the focus groups, one of the areas that the teams wanted to work on was the relationship with families. In one of the ECEC centres there was already a welcoming space at the entrance in which families could stop, have a coffee and a chat. In the other ECEC centre, the staff decided to create space for parents. Foreseeing physical space for families implicitly means allowing them to have a 'place', to be present, to share. The staff also created documentation panels hanged at the walls, to explain the ECEC centre vision with pictures and words. Parents appreciated this initiative, which makes the ECEC actions and the philosophy behind the actions more visible and understandable for families.

Professionals say:

> *"Through the trainings we were able to reflect on how our space is organized and how we could improve it. For instance, we didn't have a room for parents to chat with each other and this is a suggestion we will implement at the school."*
>
> *"We also became more aware of the importance of connecting with parents, always. In crisis times and not. We can meet parents also outdoor."*

ECEC STAFF

Through the project, ECEC staff increased its reflective competences, becoming more able to connect their vision and actions, within an *educare* approach.

Also the collaboration and mutual understanding between professionals with different profiles (childcare workers / teachers) grew by sharing reflection moments together and being together in the same path. Kitchen staff has been involved too, when possible, because of the need of developing a shared vision around the importance of creating *educare* spaces (so also during hygiene, sleeping, eating moments).

Professionals say:

"The project has taught us about the importance of caring for our children, not only teaching them, and distributing the space of the classroom in a better way."

"We now look more into the details. We have also learnt that taking care of the little ones, in daily routines such as changing their diaper, can also turn into an educational moment. At lunch time, we now get the older children involved- we ask them to give the fruit to the babies, for instance. It is very nice to see how they try to help. In general, the CPD path has shown us how to combine care and learning in our daily activities."

"Because the children can decide for themselves, I get to know them better and can pay more attention to their caring needs. Traditionally the teacher would teach the children and they would follow. Through this new approach it is the other way around - we give the children their independence, see how it goes and then we help them if needed. […] As teachers we are not that used to incorporating the "caring side" of children's development in our educational duty. And it is very important."

"The importance of the collaboration teacher-childcare worker is much more clear now to me. I value our roles more then before, and I know that we both share similar tasks and that all these tasks are equally important."

3 Evaluation and sustainability

3.1 What changed?

By looking back at the whole process, the following changes can be identified in the ECEC centres involved:

- Staff's increased awareness of the importance of an *educare* approach and of what this exactly means in practice: ECEC staff is now more conscious about the crucial interconnection between education and care and about how to pay attention to it in daily practice when working with young children. Within this perspective, professionals for example better realized that children need spaces to 'explore' but also places to 'rest' and be calm, or that the eating, sleeping, hygiene spaces should be taken care of like the other spaces of the ECEC centre. Professionals also realize that infrastructures and materials should support autonomy and involvement.
- Following this raise of awareness, specific changes took place in the ECEC spaces: for example the re-organization of the eating moment in smaller and better organized groups. Now 'real' plates/forks/glasses are used (not plastic); or one of the ECEC centres increased the number of trolleys present in the centre, so that each group could have its own, and children didn't have to wait anymore for the trolley to arrive. This apparently 'small' change also helped professionals in being able to relax more during eating moments, which consequently helped children in relaxing too; toilets have been reorganized in a more 'pleasant' way; spaces for families are foreseen in the ECEC centres.
- The latter is related to the increased awareness of the importance of having a good relationship with families. In order to do so, welcoming spaces for parents are needed. In one of the ECEC

centre, a space for families was already present; the other one, throughout the project, created a space were parents can stay and meet (with professionals and with other parents, since ECEC centres are meeting places). Staff realizes how important it is to inform families about what happens in the ECEC centre, by 'making explicit the implicit', without taking for granted that the meaning of what they are doing is known. Besides informing, ECEC staff increased also their awareness on the importance of sharing with families, of involving them, by creating space and time for them. Pedagogical documentation can be of a great help here.

- Staff's increased awareness in how to pay attention to *educare* within a mixed age group of children, in which professionals need to take into account the needs of younger and older children at the same time.
- 'Discovery' of the fact that a rich space doesn't necessary mean a space full of stimuli. Within a 'less can be more' approach, a few well chosen and thought materials/furniture can be more 'enriching' than a full space.
- A more shared vision between childcare workers and teachers on how to use the spaces/materials in a rich pedagogical way. By taking part together to this project, childcare workers and teachers who were already working together, had the opportunity to reflect on their practice and to transform the spaces following a common goal. This also supported the respect towards each other function and the willingness to collaborate. As one of the two coordinators of the centre says: 'Creating a collaborative team means investing in communication and respect. Formal and informal moments make the connection possible. We work, talk, play, celebrate together. It's about building a 'we', instead of having two groups that are by accident working in the same place'.
- Increased awareness of the importance of involving the voices of families and children when (re)organizing the spaces/materials of the ECEC centres.

3.2 How did the changes happen? Challenges and success factors

CHALLENGES

The main challenges foreseen in this process have been:

1) **Time**: in order to reflect as a team and as individuals, time is needed. In the ECEC centres involved in the project, time has been 'creatively' found, but it has been challenging since childfree hours to meet together for teachers/child workers are not foreseen on a structural way.
2) **Offering high quality pedagogy within a high adult-child** ratio. The motivation of the ECEC professionals involved allowed the project to have an impact of the wellbeing of children. However, on a structural level, the high adult-child ratio remains a challenge.
3) **Keeping the whole team on the same track** is crucial when working on the connection vision-practice. In international projects, it is normally not possible to carry on all activities with the whole team, meaning that for example not all teachers/practitioners can be present in the international exchanges, meetings, trainings. This makes it very important to always foresee ways to involve everybody. The support of directors/pedagogical coaches is crucial. It is their role to help the participating staff making the 'bridge' to the rest of the team and making sure that everybody feels

on the same boat. Otherwise the risk is that two teams would be created in the same team, with possible tensions and misunderstandings. In EDUCAS we tried to address this challenge by foreseeing 'bridging' moments in which the whole team could be informed about the EDUCAS process[25].

4) **Bringing together professionals** with different profiles and from different organizations (teachers and childcare workers) in the same path can be challenging because of 1) the different visions of education and care, and the different professional identities that normally characterize the two institutions; 2) the different regulations that guide the two sectors, since working on an integrated way in Belgium (Fl) is not yet structurally supported with working conditions that makes this integration possible. The two ECEC centres that took part in EDUCAS are consciously investing in this and are on a path to concretely realize the integration.

5) **Mind shift**: initially it has been challenging to find ways to support professionals in their transformation process. Letting go and transforming requires engagement and energy, which is not always easy to find. At the same time, creating this engagement and energy is crucial. What makes people 'change their story'? What makes them say 'AHA'? In EDUCAS we experienced that this process took place especially through the international and local exchanges/reflection moments, as will be explained in the next paragraph.

6) **Having an old building** (together with a limited budget) can be challenging when wanting to invest in spaces/infrastructures/materials, because professionals need to find ways to 'fit' their vision in a given space. The experience of the moodboard & mindmap is interesting on this matter, because it supports staff in connecting the needs of children, families and staff/ECEC with the spaces they have. It needs to be noted that, beyond the 'limitations' of a lack of budget and/or an old building, working on staff's vision and mind-shift represents a very powerful way to create change in the given conditions.

Professionals say:

"What has been striking for me is to realize that it is not easy to get everyone involved. It is challenging to let people think that we all have to incorporate the "care side" to our educational approach, because this is something which in Belgium is done separately by different people within the school."

"I think the main challenge is a daily one, to which we are always confronted - how to deliver quality education and care in a large group of mixed aged children. In my group we are two people taking care of 18 children, but in Belgium it is common to have groups of 24 children for one teacher [when working with children aged two and a half to six years of age]. That is a big challenge."

SUCCESS FACTORS

Transformation in this project has been created especially thanks to the following elements:

1. **Aha-moments – reflecting on practice:** one of the strategies that allowed change has been creating time to reflect together in one's own team. Having the possibility to reflect together on practice (using videos, pictures, observations…), accompanied by an external facilitator (from VBJK

[25] About strategies to involve the whole team, please see the EDUCAS Toolbox here.

in this case) has been one of the elements that allowed professionals to ask themselves 'why are we doing what we are doing', and to eventually start a transformation process involving spaces and *educare*.

2. **Aha-moments – exchanging in the local professional learning community:** another important element that allowed change was the possibility to exchange within the local professional learning community (PLC) (Brajković, 2014; Sharmahd t al., 2017) of the 2 ECEC centres involved. Through common local trainings/meetings, and by organizing exchanges of observations (professionals of one centre observing the professionals of the other and vice-versa) and common reflection moments on what was observed, the ECEC staff of both services had the opportunity to 1) 'see' how things could be done in a different way in another place; 2) re-think their own practice with different eyes. The exchange of observations show the 'power' of the external eye to reflect on ECEC practice. It is often difficult for a team on itself to find a way to transform its practice, even when explicitly asking for a change. An external eye that asks what looks like 'simple' questions (for example 'why are you organizing this moment in this way?') can be a great support to the reflection of the team, and to the increase of self-awareness concerning the vision/beliefs that stand behind their choices. This stimulates staff in 'seeing' where their vision is or is not coherent with what they do, and thus in strengthening or transforming their practice when necessary. In the case of the exchange of observations, professionals experienced the double position of 1) having an external 'eye' that helps them 'seeing' their daily practice; 2) being that 'external 'eye', which also helps in seeing your daily practice with different eyes. The same observation method has been then used also within the same team, by letting teachers observing childcare workers and viceversa.
3. **Aha-moments – Transnational Trainings:** international trainings have been fundamental in supporting the 'mind-shift' of the professionals involved. Sharing field visits, trainings, reflection moments are indeed crucial steps that help 'opening up' and questioning taken for granted practices. EDUCAS foresaw 3 face-to-face International Trainings, one in Italy, one in Belgium, one had to be in Lithuania, but it happened online/offline due to the COVID-19 situation. A selected number of professionals from the involved ECEC centres could take part to these trainings, together with the representatives of the Research Centres. The trainings were carried out by privileging professionals' direct involvement in observation of educational settings in other countries (*inspiration and motivation*) and peer-exchange among professionals coming from different contexts (*confrontation and learning*). This organization supported the involvement of professionals and their active participation in their own learning process.

Professionals say:

"After visiting the school in Italy […] we reduced the amount of toys in the classroom, they are made with natural materials and less bright colors."

"When we went to Italy, we were very surprised to see how clean and well organized their school is compared to ours. On the other hand, they liked very much the open space we have here, with animals such as ponies, and the close contact we maintain with the parents. For me, personally, meeting colleagues from Italy showed me that, structures or layout might differ, but us, practitioners, we are all the same. We share the same objectives and want to achieve the same results in our daily work."

"After coming back from the international exchange, we've put mirrors at the wall and a low play-table in front of them, so that children could look at themselves while playing. We also eliminated a lot of plastic and took for example wooden blocks instead, paper rolls, tree branches etc. I started introducing much more natural materials."

In order to make these changes sustainable on a local level, the engagement of the directors has been crucial. Besides, the involvement of the Stakeholder group has been also important in order to create awareness around the value of these themes and in order to advocate for structural change able to facilitate the investment in spaces/*educare*.

4 Implications for policy and practice at local and regional level

"Working on high-quality spaces in childcare and school is like having three people pulling on the same blanket. The financial person wants to keep everything within budget, the time person wants to get it within a reasonable period of time, and then you have the person who monitors the quality. Whoever pulls hardest gets things done his way. But you can also try to make the blanket bigger together, by focusing on things that really matter and by giving a voice to the involved people."

Geert Leemans, Flemish Department of Education and Training (Bulckaert, 2021, 34).

Start from the vision of the people that work in those spaces. Sit together with the team, explore how they experience the spaces, what are their needs. Make sure that the architect takes this vision into account. (…) Flexibility is important. The space should suggest, but not impose what you can do there. And don't forget the parents. Make sure that they feel welcome at the entrance, that there is a chair or a sofa where they can chat with other parents (…).

Veerle de Vliegher, Flemish Agency Upbringing (Opgroeien) (Bulckaert, 2021, 34).

Drawing on the process and results of EDUCAS, in combination with the results of other projects/research concerning *educare*/spaces[26], the following implications (for the Belgian-Fl context) for policy and practice on a local and regional have been elaborated[27].

Here below some key points that need to be taken into account, concerning the **existing Flemish regulations for ECEC spaces/infrastructures:**

- The Flemish Agency for Infrastructure in Education (*Agentschap voor Infrastructuur in het onderwijs*) sets guidelines related to building (pre)school spaces. In Belgium (Fl), there are no strictly legal requirements for

[26] See for example the policy recommendations elaborated through the VALUE project (focused on promoting integrated working in ECEC) and the START project (focused on promoting warm and smooth transitions in ECEC). For VALUE see: Hulpia, H., Rosiers, M., Van de Weghe, J., Van der Mespel, S., Van Houte, S., Verhaeghe, K. & Van Laere, K., (2020). Supporting the collaboration between ECEC core and assisting practitioners. Experiences of two Belgian pilot schools. Ghent: VBJK. https://vbjk.be/files/attachments/.1248/report_Country_Report_Supporting_the_collaboration_between_ECEC_core_and_assisting_practitioners.pdf. For START see: Van Laere, K., Boudry, C. (2019). Enabling Well-being and Participation of Children and Families Living in Poverty during Transition Periods across Home, Childcare and Kindergarten.Case Study Belgium. Ghent: VBJK, https://vbjk.be/files/attachments/.1097/04_START_Case_Study_Belgium.pdf

[27] For the international Policy Recommendations of the EDUCAS project: https://www.issa.nl/content/educas-policy-recommendations-strengthening-importance-space-and-educare-approach

dimensions, height or minimum usable areas for classrooms or infrastructure. School spaces have to be safe, hygienic and 'liveble'.
https://www.agion.be/richtwaarden

- The Agency Upbringing (Opgroeien) provides advice related to building childcare and out of school spaces. Minimum standards have been drawn up for the infrastructure (square meters and group size are determined)
https://www.kindengezin.be/kinderopvang/sector-babys-en-peuters/infrastructuur/
https://www.kindengezin.be/kinderopvang/sector-babys-en-peuters/vergunningsvoorwaarden/referentiekader/default.jsp
https://www.kindengezin.be/kinderopvang/sector-schoolkinderen/regelinggeving

Both organizations argue that spaces are responsive to the daily activities of children, parents, and professionals. Both underline that the spaces must support caring, playing and learning and that the buildings should be coherent with the educational project of the ECEC centre.

As stated in the introduction, the Flemish administrations of welfare and education together, instituted in 2017 a Multifunctional Infrastructure Forum (Forum Multifunctionele Infrastructuur Zorg-Onderwijs - Forum MFI Zorg-Onderwijs[28]) to support (via informing about regulations, procedures and their possible adaptations) building projects that connect education and welfare, including (pre)school and childcare (onderwijs en welzijn).

- **Create a multidisciplinary team when working on (re)building ECEC spaces/infrastructures:** pedagogues, families, ECEC staff (and the voices of children), architects and policy makers (when needed) should think/work together in a participatory way when wanting to re-structure existing ECEC spaces or building new ones. The collaboration should exist from the beginning and in all phases of the project. It is important that a clear shared socio-pedagogical vision gives identity to the ECEC spaces/infrastructure. The values and advantages of creating participative projects lay in many elements. For example:
  - ✓ When ECEC professionals participate to the (re)building process, they also become more aware of the possibilities to use the spaces and infrastructures. The project becomes also 'their' project, which means that the engagement might grow, with positive effects on their practice with children and families. In the same way, when children and families are involved, they are supported in creating a special 'bond' with the ECEC spaces that they are contributing to realize.
  - ✓ Participatory common approaches help in better address the needs of all the ones involved (with specific attention to children, families, professionals), which is also important not to make major 'mistakes' in the building process (which are then difficult to correct afterwards). Participation can also speed the (re)building process, because of the more efficient way of tackling concrete needs, and thus again of avoiding possible 'mistakes' in the organization of ECEC infrastructures.

[28] https://www.departementwvg.be/nieuws/commissie-multifunctionele-infrastructuur-van-start#multifunctionele-zorg--en-onderwijsinfrastructuur

- ✓ Without a clear shared vision, it's very likely that the precious available budget for renovation goes (at least partly) wasted.

- Invest in **common *educare* (re)building projects that aim at connecting childcare/out of school care with (pre)school education**. When sharing ECEC infrastructures, negotiation is needed on the level of 1) visions, in order to organize the spaces in a coherent way. That is why for example common CPD (continuous professional development) paths that involve different categories of professionals are crucial. By this we mean teachers and childcare workers, but also other staff, for example cooking or cleaning staff, when possible. This is important to share a common *educare* pedagogical vision in which also the routines moments are considered important; 2) regulations of the two institutions; 3) working conditions of the two institutions. Pedagogical support structures and policy makers should invest in this direction. The Multifunctional Infrastructure Forum (*Forum Multifunctionele Infrastructuur Zorg-Onderwijs - Forum MFI Zorg-Onderwijs*[29]) can help on this matter (see introduction).
- Invest in **common financial (re)building planning between childcare/out of school care and preschool**, in order to support coherent projects and avoid situations in which ECEC organizers receive budget just from one Department but need to meet the regulations of both Departments when (re) building. In this regard, investing in a mind-shift on the policy level is crucial, aiming at overcoming the split between the two sectors.
- **Invest in continuity between the ECEC spaces and the community spaces:** the COVID-19 crisis showed us how community-based approaches are important in times of crisis (and non). Children and families need to be supported by a network of services that should collaborate, since for one service alone it is difficult to answer to families' and children's needs[30]. Because outdoor activities were advised during the sanitary crisis, one of the ECEC centres involved in EDUCAS (Hippo's Hof), which has a rather small outdoor space, got the permission from the City (of Ghent) to use the common public space outside the centre as 'school/out-of-school space' (car-free during school and out of school time). A small example of a community based approach that can be supportive in crisis times and beyond. Local policy makers should invest in this direction. More in general, ECEC centers should purposefully use the resources available in the community (library, bakery, post office, etc.), which significantly enrich children's educational environments.

[29] https://onderwijs.vlaanderen.be/nl/een-school-multifunctioneel-verbouwen-leg-je-project-voor en https://onderwijs.vlaanderen.be/nl/van-kinderopvang-naar-kleuterschool-een-warme-overgang

[30] This is in line with what the European Commission calls 'Whole School Approach' (European Commission, 2015), which is a holistic way of viewing a service/school as a multidimensional system. According to this vision, in order to ensure wellbeing and learning of all children/students and families, services/schools cannot work in isolation. They need the involvement of the whole community and a collaboration amongst different services and levels of the system

- **Invest on an *educare* approach when (re)building ECEC spaces:** the classrooms, entrance, common places, outdoor, eating places, sleeping rooms, toilets are all equally important and should be built keeping in mind the interconnection education-care. Spaces should allow at the same time playing, learning, caring and should be aesthetically pleasant. Working on educare doesn't necessarily mean having to rebuild the whole space. Many re-adaptations can be realized with small budget, when ideas and intentions are clear. Specific aspects to be kept in mind:
    - ✓ Wellbeing is a *conditio sine qua non* for learning. This means that every curriculum for children needs caring professionals and caring spaces in order to be implemented and to allow children to build on their learning.
    - ✓ Within this perspective, for example eating, sleeping, hygiene, free play etc. should be part of the curriculum for children in ECEC, underlying how they influence the learning and wellbeing of children, meaning their holistic development.
    - ✓ Within this *educare* perspective, spaces for families should be planned too. Creating a welcoming environment for parents will help evoking more opportunities to share the educational responsibilities of children. Besides this will also support networks amongst families themselves.
    - ✓ As preschools collaborate with out-of-school care centres, it is interesting to explore possibilities for sharing space and caring facilities in order to develop continuous *educare* practices for children and parents. Flexibility in organizing the spaces is crucial in this case (open doors between classrooms, flexible use of the thematic corners…), also in order to guarantee smooth transitions from out-of-school to school and vice-versa during the day.
    - ✓ By investing in age-appropriate infrastructure and rearranging space, an increased sense of well-being for ECEC staff themselves will result, as it will be more peaceful and enjoyable to work in the ECEC spaces.

Besides investing in pre and in-service training programs that allow (future) professionals to develop reflective competences in order to organize spaces/materials within an *educare* perspective, it is crucial that policies address the above mentioned points by providing the necessary resources for ECEC institutions, especially when they have a more classical lay-out. When wanting to create common (re)building projects for childcare/out of school and preschool, it is also important that these resources are allocated within a shared vision and with a common financial planning between the different departments/institutions managing childcare/out of school and preschool (see recommendation number 2).

- **Investing in spaces/infrastructures within an *educare* approach means also investing in having time to value the daily moments**: if sleeping, eating, hygiene moments are considered as important as the other moments of the day, enough time should be foreseen for them and children should not feel that they need to hurry in these moments in order to go back to the so called 'learning'. This also means that time needs to be given to many other caring/learning/playing moments that often are not valued: e.g. helping a child with closing his/her jacket, putting the shoes on, setting the table, valuing children's dialogues and (small) interactions, preparing an activity together with the children etc. Learning, playing, caring happen at the same time and they are always valuable. ECEC directors and coaches should be aware of this and support staff in orienting the organization of the day following this approach.
- **Concretely,** when wanting to (re)design ECEC spaces within the above mentioned framework, the following points should be taken into account by policy and practice:

Concerning toilets and hygiene spaces

➢ ***Location***

- *When building new spaces* → in ECEC centres (0-3 and 2,5-6), toilets should be directly accessible from the classrooms/children's rooms (in a separate part of the classroom, ideally partly visible by the professionals, through glass windows), or at least near the classrooms, so that children (especially the young ones) can reach them easily. Young children starting preschool (in Belgium 2,5 years old) are in the process of learning how to use the toilet. Together with a 'warm and welcoming' approach from the professionals, spaces and infrastructures should take care of this moment, by facilitating it through supporting children's autonomy and wellbeing, instead of making it more complicated by creating obstacles (e.g. a too far toilet). Also washing hands cannot happen regularly when toilets are not built in an efficient way, as many ECEC centres could experience during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- *When working in a given old building, where the toilets are not next to the classroom* → professionals need to be aware of the importance of these spaces/moments, and an effort has to be done in order to facilitate the transition classroom/toilet for children, especially for the younger ones. When classes are divided by age, attention should be placed on the fact that the youngest children should be in the classes that are

more nearby the toilet facilities. The hygiene/toilet spaces need to be clean and ventilated.

- ***Privacy***

  - Toilets should allow children to have at the same time privacy and possibility to be together, according to their needs.
  - Concretely this means for example that doors (or similar) should be foreseen between one WC and the other.
  - When toilets are not near the class, often professionals foresee a potty in the class for the young ones. In this case professionals should be aware of the fact that: a) not all children are at ease in using the potty in the class with the other children; b) air circulation is needed, otherwise the class environment becomes unpleasant. A dedicated space, with possibility to be alone (privacy) and with air circulation should be foreseen.

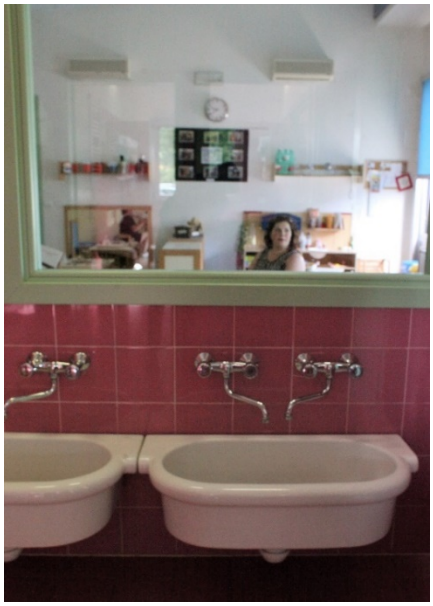
- ***Size***

  - WCs and sinks should be at 'child-size', so that it becomes comfortable for children to use them autonomously. Ultimately we want to support their wellbeing, autonomy, competences.
  - Toilets need to be also enough in terms of number, so that children can use them with ease.

- ***Learning and wellbeing***

  - Toilet facilities should be 'cozy' and clean. Children should have the opportunity to experiment the pleasure of going to the toilet, the pleasure of this learning discovery.
  - That is why, when renovating, attention should be put also on the smell of the toilets. Air circulation is important in order to create a welcoming space, which influences children's (and staff's) wellbeing and learning.
  - Children should be allowed to go to the toilet every time they need it, instead of going in fixed common moments. In this way professionals can support their holistic development by helping them in being aware of the signals of their own body and of taking care of them.
  - Toilets, also in preschool services (2,5-6), should foresee a changing table, preferably positioned in a non-visible corner, so that younger children that are not yet autonomous in using the toilet, can be changed in a comfortable way and with privacy.
  - If the toilets are far from the class, sometimes professionals foresee a changing table in the class. Also in this case professionals should be aware of the importance of creating privacy for this space, and air circulation should be provided.

- The access (for example by foreseeing access for a wheelchair) and wellbeing of children with special needs should also be taken into account in the hygiene and toilet facilities.



Concerning eating places[31]

➢ ***Location***

- Children should eat in small groups.

[31] Concerning the value of the eating moment in ECEC centres, please check also the VBJK video: https://vbjk.be/nl/publicaties/dat-lust-ik-heel-graag

- Big shared areas are normally noisy and crowded, while eating requires calmness and the possibility to interact in a soft way amongst children and amongst children and adults.
- For this purpose, children can eat in their own class, or in spaces that give the possibility to divide them in groups. The spaces where children eat should have a good air circulation (especially if they eat in the class).
- A good acoustic needs to be taken into account too in the eating spaces, otherwise it might be that children cannot talk to each other, or they feel not at ease.

➢ ***Materials***

- 'Real' plates (in ceramic), forks, glasses should be used (instead of plastic).
- These materials help children in finding 'pleasure' in eating and in learning how to take care of different materials, since in an educare approach children are seen as competent.

➢ ***Learning and wellbeing***

- Eating spaces should be 'cozy', familiar and clean, in order to support children's pleasure in eating. Pictures, paintings, plants can help in creating a familiar place.
- Children should also be given the possibility to help in setting the tables and to actively participate in the preparation of the eating moment. This is a concrete way to put *educare* in practice, since children learn to take care of the group, of the materials and space; they learn to count how many places there should be, to position the materials at the right distance; they collaborate with friends and adults; they talk, negotiate who does what etc.
- Trolleys or such (on which plates and food is placed before giving it to the children) should be foreseen for all groups and be placed next to the professionals who sit with the children.
- Adults should sit, and eventually eat, with the children. Eating is not a service, it is a pedagogical moment. This means that it has also a relational value. Within this framework, professionals should support the dialogue amongst children and with them. If the adults can sit down and 'be comfortable and calm', this helps children in feeling and doing the same.
- All this also means re-thinking about which staff (and how many) should be present during the eating moment. When in preschool the eating moment of children is considered the break moment of the teachers, this poses questions about the real value that is given to the eating moment in an educare perspective. Policy makers, coaches, ECEC staff should reflect on this and eventually adjust their practice if necessary.
- The access and wellbeing of children with special needs should also be taken into account in the eating places.

Concerning sleeping places

➢ ***Location***

- Sleeping and resting are a crucial need for young children.
- Also children in preschool institutions (2,5-6) need to sleep, especially in the first year, but sometimes also later on. Spaces and infrastructures should accompany this need, without forcing children in their growing path. That's why ECEC centres should foresee a sleeping place.
- *When building new spaces* → it's important to foresee sleeping rooms for small groups of children. Not a big shared room, but smaller spaces in which groups of children can be divided. The spaces should have the possibility to become almost completely dark, and at the same time air circulation should be possible. Ideally sleeping places are next to the classrooms, so that the transition moments sleeping-playing are facilitated. In this way it is easier for professionals to let sleep the children that need to sleep more, and to allow playing for the ones that don't need to sleep.
- *When working in a given old building*, without sleeping rooms next to the classrooms: it is important to be aware that sleeping is not something that children (especially

the young ones) can give up just to quickly adapt to institutional needs. That's why all ways have to be explored in order to find spaces where sleeping can happen. If no dedicated spaces are available, it is anyhow important to foresee 'polyvalent' multifunctional spaces in which multiple activities can take place, including sleeping in certain moments of the day. These spaces should also foresee the possibility of becoming almost completely dark, creating a calm atmosphere, and having a good air circulation.

- Besides sleeping, resting is also important. ECEC spaces (inside and outside the classrooms) should foresee both places where children can explore/play and places in which children can rest and be alone when needed.

➢ ***Learning and wellbeing***

- Sleeping is a delicate moment for children. The space should be organized in a way that makes them feel in a 'familiar' place. Personal beds, recognizable with the picture of the child, together with a personal blanket and the possibility to sleep with a transitional object, are important elements to let children feel at ease, and thus to support their wellbeing.
- Children should be actively involved in the preparation to the sleeping moment (taking out clothes etc.), so that they learn about time ('it is time to prepare ourselves…'), they experiment their autonomy, they can interact and imitate the other children etc.
- The sleeping places need to allow a certain level of silence, colors shouldn't be too bright (for example on the walls – colors close to white are a good option), and not too many stimuli should be present. The whole space should allow children to relax.
- The sleeping room should foresee a comfortable place (a chair, sofa…) also for the professionals. Adults that are given the possibility to relax, allow children to do the same.

Concerning classrooms/children's rooms

- ***Location***

  - When possible, classrooms/children's rooms should be positioned in places with enough natural light and with direct access to the outdoor spaces, in order to facilitate the continuity in-out.
  - The location and building should also take care of a good acoustic to allow children to interact in a pleasant way.
  - The class/children's room should be seen as 'broader' then just the physical class, meaning that children can make use of other spaces during the day to play, have activities etc. A playing corner at the entrance, or a polyvalent room can be seen as a 'broader piece of the class'. Also the outdoor spaces should be considered in continuity with the indoor ones, as playing, learning, caring spaces.

- ***Materials and toys***

  - In general, well chosen and diverse selected materials and toys (mainly non-structured, meaning for example wooden blocks in different sizes, branches, sand or other natural materials) can support children creativity and knowledge more than very structured toys.
  - Following a less can be more approach, classrooms should be organized with a selected choice of materials (especially not structured) that give 'mental space' to children to discover and learn. Spaces with too many stimuli normally tend to hinder concentration and to agitate children, while environments with selected non structured materials facilitate children in being active participants of their learning/playing processes, within their rhythms and modalities.

- It is also important to provide diverse materials, in order to address the different needs of children and support the building of their identity: different kinds of materials, but also dolls with different skin colors and gender, or books in different languages. In the same way, it is important to provide materials/toys in which children with special needs can recognize themselves.
- In order to facilitate children's recognition of the ECEC place as a familiar space, pictures of children and their families can be hanged on the walls and used to talk with children about their home. Children can also be invited to bring materials/toys from home, to create daily 'bridges' ECEC centre/home.
- Toys/materials are shared by opvang and kleuterschool (childcare and preschool), since they work with the same children and families.
- Storage places should be foreseen for materials/toys. These storage spaces are meant for all professionals (opvang and kleuterschool), who share materials/toys, since they work with the same children and families.

➢ ***Learning and wellbeing***

- A classroom/children's room should be a familiar place in which each child and adult can recognize him/herself, feel at ease, learn.
- Spaces should offer both places to play with friends, explore and discover, and places to withdraw, rest and be 'calm' if needed.
- Thematic areas (corners) can help in organizing such space in a 'readable' (meaning understandable) way for children, besides helping children in spontaneously dividing themselves in small groups.
- Too bright mixed colors normally hinder concentration, so it is recommended to use soft, natural and sober colors for the walls/doors, which create a 'calmer atmosphere'. White/warm white/beige are good examples. Colors should not be too strong and not many. Small nuances are recommended to create a calmer pleasant space.
- Professionals should also feel at ease in the classrooms. This means foreseeing for example (also) chairs for adults in the class, or a sofa, and places where staff can feel at ease.
- The space should support the autonomous play of children, so that professionals don't need to constantly 'direct' activities, but they can also listen and observe what children do.
- This means for example that materials/toys should be available for children in a 'readable' space, in which children can recognize 'what is where'. Open closets at the height of children help this process to autonomy.

Concerning outdoor spaces

- ***Location***

- When possible, outdoor spaces should be directly accessible from the classes.
- When a choice has to be made, the youngest children should be the ones that can have direct access to the outdoor spaces, because it becomes easier for the professionals to use both spaces in a comfortable way.

➢ ***Materials***

- Outdoor spaces should be organized with the care foreseen for the indoor ones.
- Diverse offers should be planned, like for the indoor areas: e.g. places to hide and withdraw, places to explore, run, play.
- Plastic toys normally become soon dirty and not pleasant to see and use. Natural or re-cycled materials can be used to create attractive 'playing structures' for children: car wheels can become an adventurous parkour; pieces of wood or trunks of trees can become stairs to get to a slide etc.

➢ ***Learning and wellbeing***

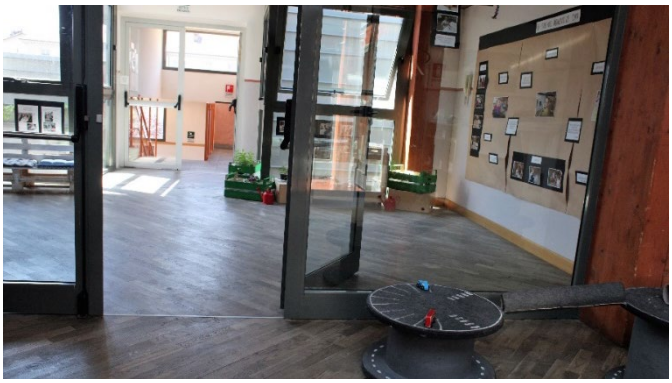
- Often outdoor spaces are seen as 'non-learning' ones, in which children run around, in order to get calmer later for the 'real' learning moment (in the class).
- In an *educare* approach indoor and outdoor spaces are in continuity with each other, and they both foster caring, learning, playing.
- Outdoor spaces give the possibility to get to know nature. If possible a vegetable garden can be taken care of with the children, and small natural events can be observed daily.
- Outdoor spaces are also places that can support children in learning to take 'risks'.

- It is also recommended to support professionals in 'creating' possibilities to go out with all kinds of weather. For example a specific space of the ECEC centre can be used to store boots and rain jackets for all children.

Concerning the entrance

- The entrance of an ECEC centre is a very important place to welcome children and families, but also (if big enough) to host common activities, parties and so on.
- The entrance should be organized with welcoming elements: e.g. pictures of children, plants, paintings.
- Panels that show the identity of the ECEC centre should be present too, meaning for example a panel with the pictures of all the staff members, a panel with the vision of the ECEC centre explained in an accessible way etc.
- Panels of pedagogical documentation (e.g. with pictures and short explicative text) are welcome because they help in making explicit and sharing ideas and practice with families and children.

- At the entrance, personalized (e.g. with pictures of the children) hangers (and/or small personal closets) for children should be present, with benches and/or sofas on which children and parents can sit comfortably when getting dressed/undressed (shoes, jacket…).
- A hanger for parents' jackets should be present too, to concretely show that parents are welcome as well.
- If the size of the place allows it, the entrance can also have a sofa (or similar) on which adults are welcome to sit and interact, eventually with a coffee/tea machine next to it, inviting parents to sit and have a chat.
- Next to the sofa, books for children and parents can be available, and eventually families and children would be invited to bring them home and then back (this stimulates the home/ECEC centre sharing and continuity).
- The entrance can have 'playing corners' to be used during the day with small groups of children.



Concerning spaces for families

- An *educare* approach is a democratic one, in which co-education with families is crucial.
- That is why an ECEC centre should be designed not only for children, but also to welcome their families.
- Concretely, this means foreseeing furniture/spaces in which families can feel welcome, where they can 'stay' and have a place (physical and metaphorically) at the entrance, in the classes (parents are welcome to come in), in the outdoor spaces.
- *When building new spaces* → it is recommended to foresee a parents' room, in which parents can sit when bringing and picking up their children, in which they can chat and create relationships with other parents, or meet the professionals. These spaces can be partly multifunctional, meaning that they can be used for individual meetings with parents, as meeting places for families (to have a chat/coffee), but they can also be used individually (or in small groups) with children for specific activities during the day.
- *When working in a given old building without extra room* → it is important to be aware of the importance of creating space for parents too. It can be just a corner with two chairs or a small sofa. The important point is creating a space that takes the presence of families into account.

Concerning spaces for professionals

- Professionals should feel comfortable in the ECEC spaces.
- The classrooms should be organized in a way that allows professionals to sit in a comfortable way with the children, or have the possibility to observe them.
- A dedicated room should also be foreseen for staff, so that all professionals can meet, discuss, reflect together.

- In this room *all* professionals should be able to meet. When teachers and childcare workers work together, this space will be the place where they can meet and reflect on their practice.
- It would also benefit professional's wellbeing to have a room where staff can meet for work-related activities, and another space where they can relax. The pleasure of being in the space supports professionals in their motivation and way of working.

Concerning transitions from one space to the other

- In the daily life of an ECEC centre there are several transition moments, not only during arrival and goodbye moments, but throughout the whole day (when going from school to out-of-school time, from the indoor to the outdoor space; from one activity to the another; from classrooms to sleeping rooms, or eating and hygiene/toilet ones etc.).
- The organization of time and spaces should take this into account, by organizing transitional moments (and spaces) in a soft and pleasant way for all children (for example professionals should not be put in a condition in which they feel they should shout to be listened to or in which they need to rush).
- Children should also not be put in the condition of having to wait too long in spaces that don't offer opportunities to play/learn/care.
- Often the entrance is also a place in which children have to 'wait' before going to another activity. In this case, the spaces should take this aspect into account and be organized accordingly. Sometimes small elements can be enough, for example a corner to play or read, a place with plants to take care of etc.

- **Invest in themes related to educare and ECEC spaces in the initial and in-service trainings of all ECEC professionals.** Policy makers and training institutions should invest in initial and in-service trainings that support (future) professionals in becoming aware of the fact that children's learning and wellbeing are connected to each other (there is no learning without wellbeing). Within this framework, reading a book or drawing are moments of learning, caring, playing at the same time, just like hygiene, sleeping, eating moments are. Giving value to all these moments means valuing also the spaces in which they take place, the materials and infrastructures. Professionals need to be for example aware of the fact that offering a clean a pleasant toilet is a pedagogical act, and not just a 'technical' one. This also means developing a different 'language' (which hides more or less implicit ideas about education): at this moment there is a clear distinction between the 'lesson time' (professionals often refer to it as 'working time') and the 'free time' (professionals refer to it as 'playing time') of children. Initial and in-service training institutions should promote an *educare* language that makes visible how learning, playing, caring are intertwined.

  Specifically, in order to be able to organize the spaces and materials taking *educare* into account, professionals have to develop certain competences:

  1) being aware of children's needs and perspectives and taking them as starting point when organizing their practice and the spaces/infrastructures/materials (need and right to play, learn, care);
  2) being able to observe children in the spaces and to listen to them, paying attention to how and where they play, with which materials, with who, for how long etc. (this is important to then organize the spaces and materials according to children's needs and interests);
  3) being able to create a circular process of observation, documentation (based on the observations), (shared) reflection, (re)planning, in order to constantly connect vision and practice in the organization of spaces/materials;
  4) being capable of having a co-educative relationship with families, listening to them and taking their meanings into account when (re)-structuring ECEC spaces. Educare is a democratic approach in which having a partnership with families is crucial;
  5) being able to work within a community-based approach, in which the ECEC spaces are in continuity and in relationship with the community spaces;
  6) being able to develop a pedagogical vision, which needs to be open to transformation and negotiation (with colleagues, families, children). It is through this vision that professionals understand how to use spaces and materials. In other words, having good and beautiful spaces and materials is not enough. Professionals need to be able to recognize the value of this space and materials, and to know how to use them with children and families, within their pedagogical vision (to make it concrete, if an ECEC centre has a beautiful garden, but the garden is never used because professionals don't know how, then the beautiful space is wasted).

     In order to invest in these themes within in-service training trajectories, good working conditions are needed, meaning for example that child-free hours for all staff (teachers and childcare workers) are essential in order to be able to reflect together on practice and (re)organize spaces accordingly. Besides, a good guidance and leadership is needed to create a

safe and challenging environment in which professionals feel free to share doubts and questions, in order to reflect on spaces and *educare*. Reflecting on practice is needed to create mind-shifts towards an *educare* approach.

- **Invest in lower adult-child ratio's in order to have better educare for a diversity of children in ECEC centres:** ECEC institutions need sufficient personnel to achieve adequate child-staff ratios throughout every moment of the day (including lunch breaks). In this way sufficient individual attention and support can be given to children regarding their caring, playing and learning needs. The COVID-19 crisis pointed out the advantages of working in smaller groups, since in many settings a smaller adult-child ratio was required, at least for a certain period.
- **Introduce specific quality indicators referring to *educare* in the existing official Frameworks for the Quality Assessment and Assurance of ECEC centers**. The concept of *educare* has to be explained and integrated into national quality assessment frameworks and any quality monitoring and assessment tool used to assess quality. Shared understanding has to be established on different levels of the ECEC system. Giving equal value to learning, caring, playing also means valuing the spaces in which they occur, the materials, and the infrastructures.
- **Invest in coherency between regulations and pedagogical goals.** Sometimes regulations (especially health and safety ones) can hinder the full expression of certain educational values within the organization of ECEC spaces. A classical example is how to allow a 'risky pedagogy' (meaning for example allowing children to climb trees, experimenting, cutting with knives…) within the safety regulations. Policy makers, pedagogical coaches, inspection staff, ECEC professionals should create moments to dialogue, in order to find a balance between safety and pedagogical vision. The COVID-19 situation gave us many examples in this sense (see final part of these implications).

"Children push their boundaries while playing. And this should be possible. In Kind en Gezin (Opgroeien) we evolved from 'as safe as possible' to 'as safe as needed' (Veerle de Vliegher, Upbringing Agency – in Bulckaert, 2021, 37)."

LESSONS LEARNED ON 'EDUCARE AND SPACES' IN TIMES OF CRISIS

Crisis situations are challenging, but they can also give an opportunity to re-think our taken for granted practice, and discover new possible actions. The COVID-19 situation brought a sudden change in the way practice could be organized in ECEC centres. The safety and hygiene rules to which suddenly all ECEC centres had to adapt effected also how the spaces were organized. On many levels these effects have been and are perceived as 'negative' for obvious reasons (lack of contacts with families, less 'cozy' atmosphere due to hygiene rules, fear feelings, etc.). However, positive opportunities can also be found in what this crisis obliged us to face concerning spaces/materials. For example:

1) ECEC staff had to find new ways to keep the connection with families, who were in most of the cases not allowed in the services anymore. Many contacts took place online (during and after the lockdown), with activities for children, storytelling, but also with individual phone calls, or door-to-door visits, especially to outreach towards families and children with vulnerable background. A new 'space' had to be created, an emotional and relational space capable of connecting also from a distance. Although challenging, this new practice gave to many professionals the opportunity

to get closer to the family situation of the children attending the ECEC center, to 'see' how they live, to value what they do at home, but also the challenges they might face. The pandemic also underlined how important face-to-face interactions are in ECEC, with children and with adults. ECEC spaces are meeting places for children and for their families. Parents can support each other, meet, create friendships thanks to the access to the ECEC spaces. That is why it is crucial to find ways to invest in this direction in times of crisis and beyond.

2) The COVID-19 crisis helped rediscovering the outdoor space. Since it was advised to be outside in order to contrast the spread of the virus, many ECEC centres re-arranged the outdoor space and they actually started to use it more than before. Also meetings with families would happen outdoor in some cases, as well as some familiarization moments for new inscribed children. This can be an interesting starting point to invest more in outdoor infrastructures, for children and for adults.

3) The advice to work with smaller groups of children supported the organization of a 'calmer' and 'warmer' space in many cases. Also the eating moment now happens in some cases in the children groups (instead of in big common spaces), which turns out to be an appreciated practice for both children and adults.

4) From a research carried out in Belgium (FL) (Lambert, Van Laere, 2021) for a European report for the NESET network about the effects of COVID-19 on ECEC (Van Laere et al., 2021), it comes out that some staff and children appreciate the fact that the preschool toilets now have to be cleaned more often. Children say that they like more to go to the toilet in school now, because toilets are cleaner. This is a small but important element when thinking about *educare* and spaces: taking care of the spaces in which the 'routine' moments happen is crucial for the wellbeing of children and adults.

These elements should be valued beyond the crisis and orient policy and practice in always valuing '*educare* spaces'.

All the above mentioned aspects take shape within a system. As policy makers, ECEC leaders, coaches, trainers and professionals, it is important to be aware of the fact that a systemic work is needed on different levels, in order to create quality in ECEC centres. Investing just in one aspect of quality, without having in mind the whole picture, cannot create strong and good ECEC quality on a long term. This means that, in order to work in a coherent quality way on ECEC spaces/infrastructures/materials, competent systems (capable of investing on the individual, team, inter-institutional and governance level) are needed (Urban et al., 2011; Vandenbroeck et al., 2016).

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