Transforming European ECEC services and Primary schools into professional learning communities: drivers, barriers and ways forward

Analytical Report

NESET II

Erasmus+

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AUTHORS:

> **Dr Nima Sharmahd,** VBJK (Center for Innovation in the Early Years, Ghent, Belgium)

> **Dr Jan Peeters,** VBJK (Center for Innovation in the Early Years, Ghent, Belgium), University of Ghent

> **Dr Katrien Van Laere,** VBJK (Center for Innovation in the Early Years, Ghent, Belgium)

> **Dr Tajana Vonta**, Educational Research Institute, Slovenia

> **Chris De Kimpe**, VBJK (Center for Innovation in the Early Years, Ghent, Belgium)

> **Sanja Brajković**, Open Academy Step by Step, Croatia

> **Laura Contini**, Municipality of Pistoia, Italy

> **Donatella Giovannini**, Municipality of Pistoia, Italy

PEER REVIEWERS:

> **Prof. Emeritus Linda Miller**, The Open University, The United Kingdom

> **Dr Roger Hancock**, The Open University, The United Kingdom

> **Jana Huttova,** NESET II scientific coordinator, External consultant and advisor to Open Society Foundation (OSF)

LANGUAGE EDITOR:

> **Jonathan Boyd,** Freelance Copy-Editor/Proof-reader

CONTRACTOR:

PPMI

PPMI Group
Gedimino ave. 50, LT - 01110 Vilnius, Lithuania
Phone: +370 5 2620338 Fax: +370 5 2625410
www.ppmi.lt

Director Rimantas Dumčius

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Researchers and international organizations broadly agree that the quality of early childhood education and care (ECEC), and of schools, depends on well-educated and competent staff (OECD, 2006; UNICEF, 2008; Milotay, 2016). The contemporary educating/teaching profession has become incredibly complex (European Commission, 2011a) prompting calls for stronger support of ECEC and school staff, which could be included in both initial education and continuous professional development (CPD). The complex multi-diverse societies in which we live, make it indeed impossible today to find standardized solutions for all families/children. Negotiation and reflection are then essential competences to be achieved by practitioners/teachers in ECEC services and schools in order to contextualize pedagogical practice and adapt it to the diversity of children and families. However, these competences are not prioritised by traditional forms of CPD (for example, seminars or top-down approaches). Therefore the latter need to be integrated with additional forms of CPD that focus on the active and democratic participation of staff.

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are a valuable answer in this direction (see 28). PLCs can be described as 'a group of people sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an on-going, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting way' (Stoll et al., 2006, p. 223). The goal is not 'being a professional learning community', but improving wellbeing and learning for children and families (*Ibidem*).

Competent systems are necessary to create and maintain PLCs. The latter require a multilevel network of competences, structural conditions, engagement, and awareness.

Many definitions have been offered of what a professional learning community is or ought to be, with the risk of losing its true meaning (DuFour, 2004). This report seeks to correct this gap, by: 1) providing a framework to explain the need for PLCs today (see 20); 2) offering a clear definition of the essential criteria that define a PLC, with concrete examples from several European countries (see 28); and 3) providing four in-depth case studies—from Belgium (Flanders), Croatia, Italy and Slovenia—which illustrate different ways of establishing and sustaining PLCs (see 38).

The study ends with specific conclusions and recommendations for policy makers in Member States.

It should be noted that the report focuses on services and schools for 0 to 12 years old children. However, the key concepts and conclusions could also be readapted for secondary school.

Key concepts

The purpose of PLCs is to support ECEC and school staff[1], both emotionally and professionally, by allowing them to critically reflect on their own teaching and to share concrete ideas on how to improve the wellbeing and the learning experience of children and families.

Building up on the literature review, this study suggests that the following five criteria be used to define a PLC (Vanblaere, 2016) (see chapter 2.2. What defines a PLC in this study?):

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[1] In this report we refer to ECEC and school staff, meaning practitioners that work in the 0-3 years old sector, teachers in the 3 (or 2,5)-6 years old sector and primary school, and assistants that support practitioners/teachers during specific periods of the day. Throughout the study we will refer to them as 'ECEC and school staff', or simply 'staff'.

1. **Teachers frequently engage in 'reflective and in-depth dialogues'** with colleagues about educational matters based on their daily practice (Wahlstrom and Louis, 2008).

2. **Teachers move from the classroom doors in a 'deprivatisation of practices'**, by observing each other's practices, giving feedback, planning jointly, building relationships with the neighbourhood, and engaging in dialogue with parents (Lomos et al., 2011; Wahlstromand Louis, 2008).

3. **There is investment in 'collective responsibility'**, as school improvement is no longer considered to be the sole responsibility of a principal or a single teacher, but rather a collective one (Stoll et al., 2006).

4. **There is a focus on reaching a shared vision and set of values**, based on children's rights and respect for diversity. This forms the basis for shared, collective, and ethical decision-making (Wahlstrom and Louis, 2008).

5. These four characteristics need a fifth condition to be realized: **the presence of 'leadership'** is a powerful factor in transforming a school's culture (Vanblaere, 2016). Leadership is a crucial, yet complex, element to be taken into account in PLCs (see 2.2. What defines a PLC in this study?).

The examples given in chapter 2.3. Overview of PLCs in European ECEC and primary school system) and the four case studies represent different ways of putting these criteria into practice, and they point out common and specific strengths and challenges.

More specifically, the Belgian (Flanders) case study focuses on childcare services and pre- and primary school, and it points to the importance of investing in democratic leadership, shared values and reflection on practice. The Croatian case study focuses on pre- and primary schools involved in the Step by Step program, and it illustrates the importance of organizing meaningful team meetings, through which staff motivation can grow thanks to the active involvement of all participants. The Italian (Pistoia) case study focuses on ECEC services (0-3 and 3-6 years old) and on the crucial role of pedagogical coordinators in supporting reflection, common planning, and peer-learning activities. To facilitate this, child-free hours are needed, which also requires collaboration among different levels: economic/political, administrative, and socio-pedagogical. The Slovenian case study also focuses on ECEC services (0-6 years old), and it illustrates the importance of de-privatising the practice (through shared observations, co-reflection, and exchange), the complex role of leaders, who need training and support, the focus on connecting research with practice, and the need for official financial investment in PLCs to make them sustainable.

Key policy implications and recommendations

Based on the literature review and case studies, we highlight conclusions and recommendations associated with the 5 criteria that define a PLC. In general, all of the recommendations influence each of the five criteria, but for clarity we differentiate between them.

Our conclusions and recommendations concern both ECEC and school systems (see CHAPTER 4), and they are the following ones:

1. **Need for staff members to frequently engage in 'reflective and in-depth dialogues' with colleagues about educational matters based on daily practice.**

> All of our case studies indicate how **co-reflecting on practice** is important for a team and amongst different teams.
> **PLCs need to provide all team members with a possibility to grow and learn**, including directors, pedagogical coaches, practitioners, teachers, assistants, etc. This requires: 1)

different kinds of CPD activities for different levels; and 2) a variety of learning methods, accommodating the different needs of the participants. Reflection can be organised on an individual, group, or inter-institutional level, and can be supported in several ways (observations, supervision moments, team meetings, seminars, pedagogical documentation, job shadowing, etc.).

> PLCs benefit from the **connection of research and practice.** Participative research, in particular, is important for the growth of both professionals and researchers.

Recommendations

Policy makers in Member States should invest in:

- **Child-free hours** for all staff: contracts should guarantee a specific number of paid hours without children, during which staff can reflect on their practice.
- **Team meetings** and other activities to reflect on pedagogical practice: planning, observations and documentation. These activities should include all members of the team (including, for example, low-qualified assistants).
- **Pedagogical support by pedagogical coaches** in order to initiate and accompany the reflection.
- **Developing reflective tools** for teams and individuals (e.g. specific group reflection methods2).
- **Connecting PLC's practice to research,** through the relationship between services/schools and universities or research centers.

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2. **Need for staff members to move from the classroom doors in a 'de-privatization of practices', by observing each other's practice, giving feedback, planning jointly, building relationships with the neighbourhood and community, and engaging in dialogue with parents.**

> The case studies show how **observing one another's practice, giving feedback, planning together as a team, and engaging in dialogue with families and neighbourhoods**, each support professionals in co-constructing meanings and practice, and lowers the risk of isolation.

> **European exchanges or job shadowing** are also noteworthy experiences because they encourage staff to experience daily practice in other contexts, which broadens their perspectives and supports change in their own practices.

Recommendations

Policy makers in Member States should invest in:

- **Shared observations/job shadowing**, which allows practitioners to learn from each other and reflect together on each other practice.
- **Exchange with other services** (on local, national and European level), which encourages the

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2For example, group reflection methods such as Analyse de Pratiques, developed in France, or Wanda, developed in Flanders (BE) and adapted to other countries (cfr. 2.3. for details on these 2 methods). The Italian pedagogical documentation is another example of how to implement group reflection.

de-privatization of the pedagogical practice. European projects, such as Erasmus Plus represent a significant opportunity in this direction.

3. **Need to invest in 'collective responsibility': school improvement is no longer considered to be the sole responsibility of a principal or single teacher, but rather a collective one.**

> Evident in the case studies is a **bottom-up approach,** in which each actor goes beyond attributing responsibility to one teacher or director, instead pooling responsibility and investing in a common project.

> Giving staff an opportunity to constantly reflect on their practice and to learn from each other encourages staff to become **'active participants' in their own learning process**, which in turn increases their **motivation**. The latter is a key benefit of PLCs, not least because instilling a strong sense of motivation helps to decrease staff turnover rates.

Recommendations

- Policy makers should create **structural conditions that facilitate peer learning through exchanges between and among different levels and actors in the system** in a horizontal and vertical way.

4. **Need to focus on reaching a shared vision and set of values based on children's rights and respect for diversity.**

> **PLCs require an open common framework of a shared vision and set of values, based on children's rights and respect for diversity.** The approach should be **democratic and communitarian**, in which the voices of families, professionals, children, and the neighbourhood, are all listened to. In this vision, vertical and horizontal collaboration and exchange is intended to take place among the different services, schools and organizations that are within the same territory (ECEC services and schools, ECEC services and schools, and other services in the neighbourhood).

> In order to better respond to the diversity of children and families in PLCs, it is important to invest in the reflecting and negotiating competences of staff. This is supported by **diversity among staff members**, as outlined in a previous NESET II report concerning the professionalization of childcare assistants (Peeters, Sharmahd, Budginaitè, 2016). A diverse team helps participants learn from each other in an enriching way.

Recommendations

- Policy towards PLCs should stress the importance of a shared vision and set of values based on democracy and respect for diversity.

- Member States should invest in hiring a **diverse workforce** in ECEC and schools, in terms of language, gender, and socio-cultural background.

5. **Need to invest in 'leadership' as a powerful factor in transforming a school's culture.**

> Leaders (school directors, pedagogical coordinators, etc.) can be drivers of change. PLCs in competent systems need **democratic leadership that is capable of combining top-down with bottom-up approaches.** Leaders in PLCs need to be able to orient the group, but at the same time they need to invest in shared responsibilities.

> To keep this balance, leaders require specific competences, and they cannot work in isolation. Besides particular training, **leaders need to be supported** by a strong network that enables them to learn from one another, also taking into account that PLCs are still rather new. Investing in training and support would also help in creating knowledge building on PLCs.

Recommendations

- Member States should **support the competences of PLC leaders** through the creation of specific training paths for leaders.

- Member States should support the establishment of a professional **network** that guarantees supervision moments and peer-learning exchanges for PLC leaders.

FR. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Les chercheurs et les organisations internationales conviennent largement que la qualité des services d'éducation et d'accueil du jeune enfant (EAJE) et des écoles repose sur du personnel compétent et correctement formé (OCDE, 2006 ; UNICEF, 2008 ; Milotay, 2016). La profession d'enseignant/éducateur est devenue aujourd'hui incroyablement complexe (Commission européenne, 2011a), ce qui suscite une demande de soutien renforcé pour le personnel EAJE et scolaire, lequel pourrait être inclus tant dans la formation initiale que dans le développement professionnel continu (DPC). La complexité et la très grande diversité des sociétés dans lesquelles nous vivons, empêchent en effet aujourd'hui de trouver des solutions standardisées applicables à toutes les familles/tous les enfants. La négociation et la réflexion sont des compétences essentielles à acquérir par les professionnels/enseignants des services EAJE et des écoles afin d'être en mesure de contextualiser une pratique pédagogique et de l'adapter à la diversité des enfants et des familles. Toutefois, ces compétences ne sont pas mises en avant par les formes traditionnelles de DPC (séminaires, approches descendantes, etc.). Par conséquent, elles doivent être intégrées dans des formes de DPC supplémentaires qui favorisent une participation active et démocratique du personnel.

Les communautés d'apprentissage professionnelles (CAP) constituent une réponse intéressante en ce sens (voir chapitre 2). Les CAP peuvent être décrites comme « un groupe de personnes qui échangent sur leur pratique et la questionnent de façon critique, dans une démarche continue, réfléchie, collaborative, inclusive, orientée sur l'apprentissage et promouvant la croissance » (Stoll et al., 2006, p. 223). L'objectif n'est pas « d'être une communauté d'apprentissage professionnelle », mais d'améliorer le bien-être et l'apprentissage pour les enfants et les familles (*Ibidem*).

Des systèmes compétents sont nécessaires pour créer et maintenir les CAP. Celles-ci requièrent un réseau de compétences multi-niveaux, des conditions structurelles, de l'engagement et une prise de conscience.

De nombreuses définitions de ce que sont ou devraient être les communautés d'apprentissage professionnelles ont été proposées, avec le risque d'en perdre la véritable signification (DuFour, 2004). Ce rapport cherche à combler cette lacune : 1) en fournissant un cadre pour expliquer le besoin de CAP aujourd'hui (voir chapitre 1) ; 2) en proposant une définition claire des critères essentiels définissant une CAP, avec des exemples concrets issus de plusieurs pays européens (voir chapitre 2) ; et 3) en soumettant quatre études de cas approfondies, menées en Belgique (Flandre), Croatie, Italie et Slovénie, illustrant différentes façons d'établir et de maintenir des CAP (voir chapitre 3).

L'étude se termine par des conclusions spécifiques et des recommandations à l'adresse des décideurs politiques des États Membres.

Il convient de noter que le rapport se concentre sur les services et les écoles destinés aux enfants de 0 à 12 ans. Toutefois, les concepts clés et les conclusions pourraient tout aussi bien être adaptés pour l'enseignement secondaire.

Concepts clés

L'objectif des CAP est de soutenir les membres du personnel EAJE et scolaire[3], tant sur le plan émotionnel que professionnel, en leur permettant de réfléchir de façon critique sur leur propre façon

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[3]Dans ce rapport, le personnel EAJE et scolaire fait référence aux professionnels travaillant dans le secteur 0-3 ans, aux enseignants du secteur 3 (ou 2$^{1/2}$)-6 ans et de l'école primaire, ainsi qu'aux assistants qui secondent les

d'enseigner et de partager des idées concrètes quant à l'amélioration du bien-être et de l'expérience d'apprentissage des enfants et des familles.

Sur base de l'analyse de la documentation existante, cette étude suggère d'utiliser les cinq critères suivants pour définir une CAP (Vanblaere, 2016) (voir chapitre *Qu'est-ce qui définit une CAP ?* dans cette étude) :

6. **Les enseignants s'engagent fréquemment dans des « discussions réfléchies et approfondies »** avec leurs collègues concernant les problématiques éducationnelles rencontrées dans leur pratique quotidienne (Wahlstrom and Louis, 2008).

7. **Les enseignants sortent de la salle de classe dans une démarche de « dé-privatisation des pratiques »**, en observant les méthodes des uns et des autres, en donnant leur avis, en travaillant à une planification conjointe, en construisant des relations avec l'entourage et en engageant le dialogue avec les parents (Lomos et al., 2011 ; Wahlstrom and Louis, 2008).

8. **Il existe un investissement dans la « responsabilité collective »**, car l'amélioration de l'école n'est plus considérée comme relevant de la seule responsabilité d'un principal ou d'un enseignant, mais plutôt d'une responsabilité collective (Stoll et al., 2006).

9. **L'accent est mis sur l'atteinte d'une vision partagée et d'un ensemble de valeurs**, basées sur les droits de l'enfant et le respect de la diversité. Ceci constitue la base d'une prise de décision partagée, collective et éthique (Wahlstrom and Louis, 2008).

10. Ces quatre caractéristiques nécessitent une cinquième condition pour être réalisées : **l'existence d'un « leadership »** est un facteur puissant dans la transformation d'une culture scolaire (Vanblaere, 2016). Le leadership est un élément crucial, bien que complexe, à prendre en compte dans les CAP (voir chapitre 2.2.1.).

Les exemples donnés au chapitre *Vue d'ensemble des CAP dans les systèmes EAJE et les écoles primaires en Europe* et les quatre études de cas illustrent différentes façons de mettre ces critères en pratique, et pointent les forces et les enjeux communs et spécifiques à chacun.

Plus concrètement, l'étude de cas belge (Flandre) s'intéresse aux services de garde d'enfants et à l'école maternelle et primaire, et souligne l'importance d'investir dans un leadership démocratique, des valeurs partagées et une réflexion sur la pratique. L'étude de cas croate se concentre, elle, sur les écoles maternelles et primaires impliquées dans le programme Step by Step, et illustre l'importance d'organiser des réunions d'équipe constructives qui permettent d'accroître la motivation du personnel grâce à une implication active de tous les participants. L'étude de cas italienne (Pistoia) cible les services EAJE (0-3 et 3-6 ans) et le rôle crucial des coordinateurs pédagogiques dans l'accompagnement de la réflexion, de la planification conjointe et des activités d'apprentissage mutuel. Pour faciliter ceci, il est nécessaire de disposer d'heures sans enfants, ce qui implique une collaboration à différents niveaux : économique / politique, administratif et socio-pédagogique. L'étude de cas slovène, enfin, s'intéresse elle aussi aux services EAJE (0-6 ans) et révèle l'importance de dé-privatiser la pratique (par le biais d'observations partagées, de co-réflexions et d'échanges), du rôle complexe des leaders, qui ont besoin de formation et d'assistance, de l'objectif de connecter recherche et pratique et de la nécessité d'un investissement financier officiel dans les CAP pour qu'elles fonctionnent dans la durée.

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professionnels / enseignants à des moments spécifiques de la journée. Tout au long de l'étude, nous emploierons l'expression « personnel EAJE et scolaire » ou simplement le terme « personnel ».

Implications politiques clés et recommandations

À partir de l'analyse de la documentation et des études de cas, nous avons mis en évidence des conclusions et recommandations associées aux cinq critères qui définissent une CAP. De manière générale, toutes les recommandations influent sur chacun des cinq critères, mais pour plus de clarté, nous faisons la distinction.

Nos conclusions et recommandations concernent à la fois les systèmes EAJE et scolaires (voir chapitre 4), et sont les suivantes :

6. **Nécessité pour les membres du personnel de s'engager fréquemment dans des « discussions réfléchies et approfondies » avec leurs collègues concernant les problématiques éducationnelles rencontrées dans leur pratique quotidienne.**

> Toutes nos études de cas indiquent combien le fait de **réfléchir ensemble sur la pratique** est important au sein d'une équipe et entre différentes équipes.

> **Les CAP doivent offrir à tous les membres de l'équipe la possibilité d'évoluer et d'apprendre**, y compris aux directeurs, coaches pédagogiques, professionnels, enseignants, assistants, etc. Ceci requiert : 1) différents types d'activités DPC pour les différents niveaux ; et 2) une diversité de méthodes d'apprentissage qui réponde aux différents besoins des participants. La réflexion peut être organisée au niveau de l'individu, du groupe ou entre institutions, et peut être menée de diverses manières (observations, moments de supervision, réunions d'équipe, séminaires, documentation pédagogique, observation en situation de travail, etc.).

> Les CAP bénéficient de la **connexion entre recherche et pratique.** La recherche participative, notamment, est importante pour la progression tant des professionnels que des chercheurs.

Recommandations

Les décideurs politiques des États Membres doivent investir dans :

- **des heures sans contact avec les enfants** pour tout le personnel : les contrats doivent garantir un certain nombre d'heures payées sans enfants au cours desquelles le personnel peut réfléchir sur sa pratique ;

- **des réunions d'équipe** et autres activités permettant de réfléchir sur la pratique pédagogique : planification, observations et documentation. Ces activités doivent inclure tous les membres de l'équipe (y compris, par exemple, les assistants moins qualifiés) ;

- **un soutien pédagogique par des coaches pédagogiques** afin d'initier et d'accompagner la réflexion ;

- **le développement d'outils de réflexion** pour les équipes et les individus (par ex. des méthodes de réflexion de groupe spécifiques[4]) ;

- **la connexion entre la pratique des CAP et la recherche,** par la mise en relation des services/écoles avec les universités et centres de recherche.

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[4] Méthodes telles que l'Analyse de Pratiques, développée en France, ou Wanda, développée en Flandre (BE) et adaptée à d'autres pays (cf. 2.3. pour plus de détails sur ces 2 méthodes). La documentation pédagogique italienne constitue un autre exemple de la façon d'implémenter une réflexion de groupe.

7. Nécessité pour les membres du personnel de sortir de la salle de classe dans une démarche de « dé-privatisation des pratiques », en observant les méthodes des uns et des autres, en donnant leur avis, en travaillant à une planification conjointe, en construisant des relations avec l'entourage et la communauté, et en engageant le dialogue avec les parents.

> Les études de cas montrent comment **l'observation des méthodes des uns et des autres, le fait de donner son avis, la planification conjointe en équipe et l'engagement du dialogue avec les familles et l'entourage** contribuent à soutenir les professionnels dans une pratique co-constructive et réduisent le risque d'isolement.

> **Les échanges européens ou l'observation en situation de travail** sont également des expériences intéressantes, car elles encouragent le personnel à expérimenter la pratique quotidienne dans d'autres contextes, ce qui élargit ses perspectives et favorise le changement dans ses propres méthodes de travail.

Recommandations

Les décideurs politiques des États Membres doivent investir dans :

- **les observations partagées/ l'observation en situation de travail**, qui permettent aux professionnels d'apprendre les uns des autres et de réfléchir ensemble sur leurs pratiques respectives ;
- **l'échange avec d'autres services** (au niveau local, national et européen), qui encourage la dé-privatisation de la pratique pédagogique. Les projets européens comme Erasmus + représentent une opportunité significative en ce sens.

8. Nécessité d'investir dans la « responsabilité collective » : l'amélioration de l'école n'est plus considérée comme relevant de la seule responsabilité d'un principal ou d'un enseignant, mais plutôt d'une responsabilité collective.

> Les études de cas mettent en évidence une **approche ascendante**, selon laquelle chaque acteur dépasse le fait d'attribuer la responsabilité à un seul enseignant ou directeur pour mutualiser la responsabilité et s'investir dans un projet commun.

> L'opportunité donnée aux membres du personnel de réfléchir constamment sur leur pratique et d'apprendre les uns des autres les encourage à devenir des **« participants actifs »** de leur **propre processus d'apprentissage**, ce qui a pour conséquence d'augmenter leur **motivation**. Ce dernier point constitue un bénéfice clé des CAP, notamment parce que l'instillation d'un fort sentiment de motivation associée à d'autres aspects relatifs à la reconnaissance socio-économique d'une carrière dans l'éducation contribue à réduire la rotation des effectifs.

Recommandations

- Les décideurs politiques doivent créer des **conditions structurelles qui facilitent l'apprentissage mutuel par des échanges au sein de et entre différents niveaux et acteurs du système**, de façon horizontale et verticale.

9. Nécessité de mettre l'accent sur l'atteinte d'une vision partagée et d'un ensemble de valeurs basées sur les droits de l'enfant et le respect de la diversité.

> **Les CAP requièrent un cadre commun ouvert d'une vision partagée et d'un ensemble de valeurs, basées sur les droits de l'enfant et le respect de la diversité.** L'approche doit être **démocratique et communautaire**, et l'ensemble des voix des familles, des professionnels, des enfants et de l'entourage doit être écouté. Dans le cadre de cette vision, une collaboration et un échange doivent prendre place sur le plan vertical et horizontal parmi les différents services, écoles et organisations situés dans un même territoire (services EAJE, écoles et autres services dans les environs).

> Afin de mieux répondre à la diversité des enfants et des familles dans les CAP, il est important d'investir dans des compétences de réflexion et de négociation pour le personnel. La **diversité parmi les membres du personnel** favorise ceci, comme souligné dans un précédent rapport NESET II concernant la professionnalisation du personnel assistant des structures d'éducation et d'accueil de la petite enfance (Peeters, Sharmahd, Budginaitè, 2016). Une équipe diversifiée aide les participants à apprendre les uns des autres de façon enrichissante.

Recommandations

- La politique en matière de CAP doit souligner l'importance d'une vision partagée et d'un ensemble de valeurs basées sur la démocratie et le respect de la diversité.

- Les États Membres doivent investir dans l'embauche d'une **diversité de personnel** dans les services EAJE et les écoles, en termes de langue, de sexe et de profil socio-culturel.

10. Nécessité d'investir dans un « leadership » qui joue un rôle de facteur puissant dans la transformation d'une culture scolaire.

> Les leaders (directeurs d'école, coordinateurs pédagogiques, etc.) peuvent être les moteurs du changement. Dans le cadre de systèmes compétents, les CAP ont besoin d'un **leadership démocratique capable de combiner les approches descendantes et ascendantes**. Les leaders des CAP doivent être en mesure d'orienter le groupe, tout en investissant dans des responsabilités partagées.

> Pour conserver cet équilibre, les leaders doivent disposer de compétences spécifiques et ne peuvent pas travailler de manière isolée. En plus de suivre une formation particulière, les **leaders doivent être soutenus** par un réseau solide qui leur permette d'apprendre les uns des autres, ceci en tenant compte du fait que les CAP sont encore relativement nouvelles. L'investissement dans la formation et le soutien peut également contribuer à développer les connaissances en matière de CAP.

Recommandations

- Les États Membres doivent **soutenir les compétences des leaders de CAP** par la création de formations spécifiques qui leur sont dédiées.

- Les États Membres doivent soutenir la création d'un **réseau** professionnel qui garantisse des moments de supervision et des activités d'apprentissage mutuel pour les leaders des CAP.

DE. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Forscher und internationale Organisationen stimmen weitgehend darin überein, dass die Qualität der frühkindlichen Betreuung, Bildung und Erziehung (FBBE) und der Schulen von gut ausgebildeten und kompetenten Mitarbeitern abhängt (OECD, 2006; UNICEF, 2008; Milotay, 2016). Der zeitgenössische Beruf des Erziehers bzw. Lehrers ist sehr komplex geworden (Europäische Kommission, 2011a); aus diesem Grund benötigt das Personal in FBBE und Schulen mehr Unterstützung, die sowohl in die Erstausbildung als auch in die berufliche Weiterbildung integriert werden könnte. Die komplexen vielfältigen Gesellschaften, in denen wir leben, machen es heute unmöglich, standardisierte Lösungen für alle Familien bzw. Kinder zu finden. Deshalb sind Verhandlung und Reflexion wesentliche Kompetenzen, die von Praktikern bzw. Lehrern in FBBE-Diensten und Schulen genutzt werden müssen, um die pädagogische Praxis zu kontextualisieren und an die Vielfalt von Kindern und Familien anzupassen. Diese Kompetenzen haben jedoch in traditionellen Formen der Weiterbildung (z. B. Seminare oder Top-Down-Ansätze) keine hohe Priorität. Deswegen sollten sie in ergänzende Ansätze der beruflichen Weiterbildung integriert werden, die sich auf die aktive und demokratische Beteiligung der Mitarbeiter konzentrieren.

Professionelle Lerngemeinschaften (Professional Learning Communities, PLC) sind ein wichtiger Schritt in diese Richtung (siehe Kapitel 2). PLCs können beschrieben werden als „eine Gruppe von Menschen, die ihre Praxis auf eine laufende, reflektierende, kollaborative, inklusive, lernorientierte und wachstumsfördernde Weise teilen und kritisch hinterfragen" (Stoll et al., 2006, S. 223). Das Ziel ist nicht, „eine professionelle Lerngemeinschaft zu sein", sondern das Wohlbefinden und das Lernen für Kinder und Familien zu verbessern (*Ibidem*).

Für die Ausbildung und Beibehaltung von PLC sind kompetente Systeme notwendig. Diese erfordern ein mehrstufiges Netzwerk von Kompetenzen, strukturellen Bedingungen, Engagement und Bewusstsein.

Es gibt so viele Definitionen, was eine professionelle Lerngemeinschaft ist oder sein sollte, dass der Begriff in Gefahr ist, jede Bedeutung zu verlieren (DuFour, 2004). In diesem Bericht wird versucht, diese Lücke zu füllen, indem: 1) ein theoretischer Rahmen geschaffen wird, der erklärt, warum PLCs heute notwendig sind (siehe Kapitel 1); 2) eine klare Definition der wesentlichen Kriterien angeboten wird, die eine PLC definieren, mit konkreten Beispielen aus mehreren europäischen Ländern (siehe Kapitel 2); und 3) vier vertiefende Fallstudien vorgestellt werden - aus Belgien (Flandern), Kroatien, Italien und Slowenien -, die verschiedene Möglichkeiten zur Etablierung und Erhaltung von PLCs veranschaulichen (siehe Kapitel 3).

Die Studie endet mit spezifischen Schlussfolgerungen und Empfehlungen für politische Entscheidungsträger in den Mitgliedstaaten.

Es sei darauf hingewiesen, dass der Bericht sich auf Betreuungsangebote und Schulen für Kinder im Alter von 0 bis 12 Jahren konzentriert. Die Schlüsselkonzepte und Schlussfolgerungen könnten jedoch auch für die Sekundarstufe angepasst werden.

Schlüsselkonzepte

Der Zweck von PLCs besteht darin, FBBE- und Schulpersonal[5] sowohl emotional als auch beruflich zu unterstützen. Professionelle Lerngemeinschaften ermöglichen es den eigenen Unterricht kritisch zu reflektieren und konkrete Ideen darüber auszutauschen, wie das Wohlbefinden und die Lernerfahrungen von Kindern und Familien verbessert werden können.

Auf Grundlage der Literaturübersicht schlägt diese Studie vor, die folgenden fünf Kriterien zur Definition von PLC zu verwenden (Vanblaere, 2016) (siehe Kapitel 2.2. Was definiert eine PLC in dieser Studie?):

11. **Lehrkräfte führen häufig „reflektierende und eingehende Dialoge"** mit Kollegen über pädagogische Fragen, die auf ihrer täglichen Praxis basieren (Wahlstrom und Louis, 2008).

12. **Lehrer öffnen die Türen ihrer Klassenzimmer und streben eine „Entprivatisierung von Praktiken" an,** indem sie die Praktiken von Kollegen begutachten, Feedback geben, gemeinsam planen, Beziehungen zur Nachbarschaft aufbauen und mit Eltern in Dialog treten (Lomos et al., 2011; Wahlstromand Louis, 2008).

13. **Es wird in „kollektive Verantwortung" investiert,** sodass die Verbesserung der Schule nicht länger als alleinige Verantwortung eines Schulleiters oder eines einzelnen Lehrers gilt, sondern als kollektive Verantwortung (Stoll et al., 2006).

14. **Der Schwerpunkt liegt auf dem Erreichen einer gemeinsamen Vision und Werteskala,** basierend auf den Rechten der Kinder und dem Respekt für Vielfalt. Dies ist die Grundlage für gemeinsame, kollektive und ethische Entscheidungen (Wahlstrom und Louis, 2008).

15. Diese vier Merkmale hängen von einer fünften Bedingung ab: **die Präsenz von „Leadership"** ist ein starker Faktor bei der Transformation der Schulkultur (Vanblaere, 2016). Leadership ist ein entscheidendes, aber komplexes Element, das in PLCs berücksichtigt werden muss (siehe Kapitel 2.2.1.).

Die Beispiele in Kapitel 2.3. (Übersicht über PLCs in der europäischen FBBE und im Grundschulsystem) und die vier Fallstudien stellen verschiedene Wege dar, um diese Kriterien in die Praxis umzusetzen, und zeigen gemeinsame und spezifische Stärken und Herausforderungen auf.

Genauer gesagt, konzentriert sich die belgische Fallstudie (Flandern) auf Kinderbetreuungsdienste sowie auf die Vor- und Grundschule und weist auf die Bedeutung von Investitionen in eine demokratische Führung, gemeinsame Werte und die theoretische Reflexion der eigenen Praxis hin. Die kroatische Fallstudie konzentriert sich auf Vor- und Grundschulen, die an dem Step by Step-Programm beteiligt sind, und zeigt, wie wichtig es ist, sinnvolle Teamsitzungen zu organisieren, durch die die Motivation der Mitarbeiter dank der aktiven Beteiligung aller Teilnehmer wachsen kann. Die italienische (Pistoia) Fallstudie konzentriert sich auf Angebote der FBBE (0-3 und 3-6 Jahre) und auf die entscheidende Rolle der pädagogischen Koordinatoren bei der Unterstützung von Reflexion, gemeinsamer Planung und Peer-Learning-Aktivitäten. Um dies zu ermöglichen, sind kinderfreie

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[5]In diesem Bericht beziehen wir uns auf FBBE- und Schulpersonal, d. h. Praktiker, die im Sektor für 0-3 Jahre arbeiten, Lehrer im Sektor für 3 (oder 2,5) -6 Jahre, Grundschule und Assistenten, die Praktiker / Lehrer während bestimmter Tageszeiten unterstützen. In der Studie werden wir sie als "FBBE- und Schulpersonal" oder einfach "Personal" bezeichnen.

Stunden erforderlich, die ebenfalls die Zusammenarbeit verschiedener Ebenen erfordern: Wirtschaft / Politik, Verwaltung und Sozialpädagogik. Auch die slowenische Fallstudie konzentriert sich auf FBBE-Angebote (0-6 Jahre) und zeigt die Bedeutung der Entprivatisierung der Praxis (durch gemeinsame Beobachtungen, gemeinsame Reflexion und Austausch), die komplexe Rolle von Führungskräften, die geschult und unterstützt werden müssen, den Schwerpunkt auf der Verbindung von Forschung und Praxis und die Notwendigkeit offizieller finanzieller Investitionen in PLCs, um diese nachhaltig zu machen.

Wichtige politische Auswirkungen und Empfehlungen

Auf der Grundlage der Literaturrecherche und der Fallstudien haben wir Schlussfolgerungen und Empfehlungen entwickelt, die mit den fünf Kriterien für professionelle Lerngemeinschaften verknüpft sind. Im Allgemeinen wirken sich alle Empfehlungen auf jedes der fünf Kriterien aus, doch unterscheiden wir sie zur besseren Übersicht.

Unsere Schlussfolgerungen und Empfehlungen betreffen sowohl FBBE- als auch Schulsysteme (siehe Kapitel 4). Diese Schlussfolgerungen sind:

11. **Die Mitarbeiter müssen die Möglichkeit haben, sich auf der Basis ihrer täglichen Praxis häufig in „reflektierenden und eingehenden Dialogen" mit Kollegen über pädagogische Fragen auszutauschen.**

> Alle unsere Fallstudien zeigen, dass **Co-Reflecting in der Praxis** für ein Team und zwischen verschiedenen Teams wichtig ist.

> **PLC muss allen Teammitgliedern die Möglichkeit bieten, zu wachsen und zu lernen,** einschließlich Direktoren, pädagogischen Beratern, Praktiker, Lehrern, Assistenten usw. Dies erfordert: 1) verschiedene Arten von Weiterbildung für verschiedene Ebenen; und 2) eine Vielzahl von Lernmethoden, die den unterschiedlichen Bedürfnissen der Teilnehmer gerecht werden. Reflexion kann auf individueller, gruppen- oder interinstitutioneller Ebene organisiert und auf verschiedene Arten unterstützt werden (Beobachtungen, Supervisionsmomente, Teamsitzungen, Seminare, pädagogische Dokumentation, Job-Shadowing usw.).

> PLC- Teilnehmern profitieren von der **Verbindung von Forschung und Praxis**. Insbesondere die partizipative Forschung ist wichtig für die Entwicklung von Fachkräften wie Forschern.

Empfehlungen

Politische Entscheidungsträger in den Mitgliedstaaten sollten investieren in:

- **Kinderfreie Stunden** für alle Mitarbeiter: Verträge sollten eine bestimmte Anzahl von bezahlten Stunden ohne Kinder garantieren, während denen die Mitarbeiter ihre Praxis reflektieren können.

- **Teamtreffen** und andere Aktivitäten, um die pädagogische Praxis zu analysieren: Planung, Beobachtungen und Dokumentation. Diese Aktivitäten sollten alle Teammitglieder (einschließlich zum Beispiel niedrig qualifizierte Assistenten) umfassen.

- **Pädagogische Unterstützung durch pädagogische Berater,** die die Reflexion initiieren und begleiten.

- **Entwicklung von analytischen Tools** für Teams und Einzelpersonen (z. B. spezifische Gruppenreflexionsmethoden).

- **Verbindung der Praxis von PLC mit der Forschung,** durch Kooperationen zwischen Betreuungsangeboten bzw. Schulen und Universitäten oder Forschungszentren.

12. **Die Mitarbeiter müssen die Möglichkeit erhalten, in einer „Entprivatisierung von Praktiken" die Türen der Klassenzimmer zu öffnen, sich gegenseitig zu bewerten, Feedback zu geben, gemeinsam zu planen, Beziehungen zur Nachbarschaft und Gemeinschaft aufzubauen und mit den Eltern in Dialog zu treten.**

> Die Fallstudien zeigen, dass es Fachkräfte bei der gemeinsamen Konstruktion von Bedeutungen und Praktiken unterstützt und so das Risiko der Isolation minimiert, wenn man **die Praxis des jeweils anderen beobachtet, Feedback gibt, gemeinsam als Team plant und mit Familien und Nachbarschaften in Dialog tritt**.

> **Europäischer Austausch oder Job Shadowing** sind in diesem Zusammenhang ebenfalls erwähnenswert, da sie Mitarbeiter ermutigen, die tägliche Praxis in anderen Kontexten zu erleben. Dies erweitert ihre Perspektiven und unterstützt Veränderungen in ihren eigenen Praktiken.

Empfehlungen

Die politischen Entscheidungsträger in den Mitgliedstaaten sollten in folgendes investieren:

- **Gemeinsame Beobachtungen / Job-Shadowing,** die es den Praktizierenden ermöglichen, voneinander zu lernen und gemeinsam über die Praxis nachzudenken.
- **Austausch mit anderen Bildungsanbietern** (auf lokaler, nationaler und europäischer Ebene), um die Entprivatisierung der pädagogischen Praxis zu fördern. Europäische Projekte wie Erasmus Plus sind in dieser Hinsicht eine bedeutende Chance.

13. **Es muss in „kollektive Verantwortung" investiert werden: Die Verbesserung der Schule wird nicht länger als die alleinige Verantwortung eines Schulleiters oder eines einzelnen Lehrers gesehen, sondern eher als kollektive Verantwortung.**

> Allen Fallstudien ist ein **Bottom-up-Ansatz** gemeinsam, bei dem die Akteure die Verantwortung nicht an einen Lehrer oder Direktor delegieren, sondern selbst Verantwortung übernehmen und in ein gemeinsames Projekt investieren.

> Wenn die Mitarbeiter die Möglichkeit erhalten, ihre Praxis laufend zu reflektieren und voneinander zu lernen, werden die Mitarbeiter ermutigt, **„aktive Teilnehmer" in ihrem eigenen Lernprozess zu werden**, was wiederum ihre Motivation steigert. Letzteres ist ein wichtiger Vorteil von PLCs, nicht zuletzt, weil ein starkes Gefühl der Motivation hilft, die Fluktuationsrate zu reduzieren.

Empfehlungen

- Die politischen Entscheidungsträger **sollten strukturelle Bedingungen schaffen, die das Lernen von Kollegen durch den Austausch zwischen verschiedenen Ebenen und Akteuren des Systems** auf horizontaler und vertikaler Ebene erleichtern.

14. Pädagogen müssen sich darauf konzentrieren, eine gemeinsame Vision und einen Wertekanon zu schaffen, die auf den Rechten der Kinder und der Achtung von Vielfalt basieren.

> **Professionelle Lerngemeinschaften brauchen einen offenen gemeinsamen Rahmen für eine gemeinsame Vision und Werte, die auf den Rechten der Kinder und dem Respekt für Vielfalt basieren.** Dieser Ansatz sollte **demokratisch und auf die Gemeinschaft ausgerichtet sein,** sodass die Stimmen von Familien, Fachleuten, Kindern und der Nachbarschaft gehört werden können. In dieser Vision sollten zwischen den verschiedenen Diensten, Schulen und Organisationen innerhalb eines Gebiets (FBBE-Dienste und Schulen, sowie andere soziale Dienste in der Nachbarschaft) eine vertikale und horizontale Zusammenarbeit und Austausch stattfinden.

> Um in PLCs besser auf die Vielfalt von Kindern und Familien einzugehen, ist es wichtig, in die Reflexions- und Verhandlungskompetenzen der Mitarbeiter zu investieren. Dies wird durch **Vielfalt der Mitarbeiter** erleichtert, wie in einem früheren NESET-II-Bericht über die Professionalisierung von Kinderbetreuungsassistenten dargelegt wurde (Peeters, Sharmahd, Budginaitè, 2016). Ein diverses Team hilft den Teilnehmern, voneinander zu lernen.

Empfehlungen

- Die politischen Leitlinien für PLCs sollten die Bedeutung einer gemeinsamen Vision und eines Wertekanons betonen, der auf Demokratie und der Achtung von Vielfalt basiert.

- Die Mitgliedstaaten sollten in die Einstellung eines **vielfältigen Lehrkörpers** in FBBE und Schulen investieren, und zwar in Bezug auf Sprache, Geschlecht und soziokulturellen Hintergrund.

15. Es ist notwendig, in „Leadership" " zu investieren, weil dieser Faktor die Transformation der Schulkultur entscheidend prägt.

> Führungskräfte (Schuldirektoren, pädagogische Koordinatoren usw.) können ein Motor der Veränderung sein. PLCs in kompetenten Systemen brauchen eine **demokratische Führung, die Top-down- und Bottom-up-Ansätze kombinieren kann**. Führungskräfte in PLCs müssen in der Lage sein, die Gruppe zu orientieren, aber auch in gemeinsame Verantwortung zu investieren.

> Um dieses Gleichgewicht zu wahren, benötigen Führungskräfte spezifische Kompetenzen und können nicht isoliert arbeiten. Neben einer besonderen Ausbildung müssen die **Führungskräfte von einem starken Netzwerk unterstützt werden**, das es ihnen ermöglicht, voneinander zu lernen, wobei auch berücksichtigt wird, dass PLCs noch relativ neu sind. Die Investition in Schulung und Förderung würde auch dazu beitragen, Wissen über professionelle Lerngemeinschaften zu sammeln.

Empfehlungen

- Die Mitgliedstaaten sollten spezifische Ausbildungspfade für Führungskräfte schaffen und so deren **Kompetenzen im Bereich der PLC verbessern.**

- Die Mitgliedstaaten sollten den Aufbau eines professionellen Netzwerks unterstützen, das Supervisionsmomente und den Austausch von Peer-Learning für PLC-Leiter garantiert.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Improving ECEC and school quality: the crucial role of the workforce

European policies

The European Commission has recently recommended that Member States 'revise and strengthen the professional profile of all teaching professions and prepare teachers for social diversity' (European Commission, 2013a). This reflects the broad consensus among researchers and international organizations (OECD, 2006; UNICEF, 2008) that the quality of early childhood education and care (ECEC) and of schools depends on well-educated and competent staff (Milotay, 2016).

Increased political attention to this issue prompted a thorough review of the existing policy and practice of Member States' ECEC service provision (Urban et al., 2011; European Commission, 2013b; European Commission, 2014a; 2014b; Akgündüz et al., 2015; Vandenbroeck et al., 2016). Within this framework, the development of a proposal for a quality framework in early childhood education and care (EC Thematic Group on ECEC, 2014) took place, creating a consensus in Europe about what constitutes quality in ECEC. In the quality framework, a competent workforce is considered particularly important when it comes to defining the quality of ECEC. At the same time, it is recognized that initial training and continuous professional development can have a large impact on both the 'quality of staff pedagogy and children's outcomes' (*Ibid*, p. 9).

The importance of a qualified workforce is also acknowledged in the revised priorities for strategic cooperation in the field of education and training (European Commission, 2015a), which identifies the professionalization of staff as one of the key issues for further work in ECEC and schools.

The need to provide strong support for practitioners and teachers is also emphasized in the ET2020 Joint Report (European Commission, 2015a): 'Many Member States report measures for enhancing teacher training and emphasize that initial education and the continuing professional development of teachers and trainers should be fit for purpose, combining subject matter, pedagogy and practice. Educators should be trained to deal with the growing diversity of learners, prevent ESL and use innovative pedagogies and ICT tools in an optimal manner, while enjoying induction support early in their careers' (European Commission, 2015a, p. 5).

The revised priorities for strategic cooperation in the field of education and training identified the professionalization of staff as a key issue for ECEC and school quality (European Commission, 2015a). This is also underlined by the most recent Communication of the Commission (European Commission, 2017). The complexity of the profession today (European Commission, 2011a; European Commission, 2017), calls for strong support of practitioners/teachers and assistants, and emphasizes the need to enhance their training by ensuring that both initial education and continuous professional development (CPD) are well established. Support through CPD primarily entails giving staff the possibility to reflect on what they think and do (Schön, 1983), in order to contextualize their thoughts and actions, to negotiate meanings, and ultimately to improve pedagogical practice (Peeters et al., 2015b). Investing in reflexivity is recognized as a fundamental part of this approach, especially when it includes co-reflecting (reflecting together) in groups with the support of pedagogical guidance (Lazzari et al., 2013; Peeters et al., 2015b). Co-reflection is so critical in ECEC services and schools because it empowers educational staff in dealing with the growing diversity of children and families, and it increases accessibility (European Commission, 2015b). Diversity makes it virtually impossible to have standard or one-size-fits-all solutions. Contemporary education instead needs negotiation, contextualization, and attention paid to the specific needs of each child, family and local community. Building democratic educational practices from a holistic viewpoint navigates human relationships in a diverse context. Relationships are often complex and working with them is unpredictable in nature; it is simply inadequate for professional workers to employ universally applicable practices and knowledge. For instance, inflexibly applying prescribed learning goals or following hygiene and health

guidelines are insufficient to deal with complex social realities. Professionals do much more than merely execute technical practices; they must work with ethics and values to enact a social practice. The ability to listen actively and engage in dialogue with children, families, colleagues are defining features of their professionalism.

That is why, besides theoretical and practical knowledge, critical reflection has an important role to play in encouraging professionals to research and create new practices that respond to the needs of their particular contexts (Children in Europe, 2016).

This democratic approach is threatened, however, by the increasingly marketed and privatized system of ECEC (Fielding and Moss, 2012) at European level because it creates a competitive environment in which collaboration is not seen as a core task, and therefore the voices of the actors involved are not fully taken into account.

Quality needs competent systems

These issues are also the focus of the CoRe study (Urban et al., 2011; Vandenbroeck, 2016), commissioned by the DG for Education and Culture and carried out in 15 European Member States by the University of Gent and the University of East London. And while the CoRe study focuses on ECEC services, its conclusions are applicable to the whole school system, and in general to all formal and non-formal educational settings.

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

More specifically, a competent system requires investment in and collaboration among several different levels (Vandenbroeck et al., 2016), namely at:

- **an individual and team level**: there is a need for open-minded and proactive ECEC and school staff, able to co-reflect on practice and to discuss and share common pedagogical values.
- **an institutional level**: the institutional level (for example, a municipality) is required to take on official responsibilities for the educational sector. In this way it becomes possible to officially value CPD, to support collaboration between professionals of different status, and to stimulate the continuous exchange between professionals and parents from different backgrounds. This exchange helps in reaching 'a common culture and a shared understanding of what is desirable for children' (Vandenbroeck et al., 2016, p. 133).
- **the level of the interagency collaboration and local government**: this level should invest in fair working conditions and recruitment, in order to advocate for quality and motivate staff in their jobs.
- **the level of governance**: this is the policy level, which must take into account all of the structural elements required to promote and ensure quality (good adult/child ratio; child-free hours to reflect, meet, plan; etc.).
- **a next level, arising from the CoRe study, is the international one**: ECEC and school practice can benefit from international exchanges between staff(visits to schools and services in other countries, participation in international projects and research, etc.).

Concentrating efforts on only one aspect of the system is futile and unsustainable (Eisenstadt, 2012; 2017). In order to improve the process and outcomes for children and families, all elements must be addressed simultaneously by investing in the relationship between them. This point is also underlined in the communication from the European Commission (2011c) on Early Childhood Education and Care, which states that systemic approaches to professionalization are needed. This may not, however, be easy because it necessitates a broad approach for changing a number of dimensions.

In the same way, the European Quality Framework (EC Thematic Group on ECEC, 2014) proposes key principles to create ECEC services of high quality by involving different actors as individual practitioners, teams, training centres, local administrative institutions, and non-governmental bodies. By identifying good examples from EU Member States that have created effective initiatives by establishing coherent pedagogical frameworks, the Thematic group (2014) introduced possible forms of ECEC staff professionalization such as: exchange of good practices among centres; participatory action-research and peer learning opportunities; pedagogic guidance provided by specialised staff; and training provision for ECEC centre coordinators/managers/directors. Although these forms are strongly promoted at the European level, the practical implementation of long-term professionalization initiatives in Member States still needs to be investigated.

The link with the 'Whole School Approach'

All of this is in line with what the European Commission calls a 'Whole School Approach' (European Commission, 2015c), which is a holistic way of viewing a service/school as a multidimensional and interactive system. According to this vision, to ensure the wellbeing and success of all children/students and families, services/schools cannot work in isolation. The whole community must be involved: school leaders, practitioners/teachers, assistants, learners, parents and families should engage in 'a cohesive, collective and collaborative action, with strong cooperation with external stakeholders and the community at large. […] Effective leadership and governance is essential. It is needed to promote a positive school culture, teamwork and collaborative practices within the school community (European Commission, 2015c, p. 5)'.

This kind of approach stimulates both horizontal and vertical continuity, which means that it creates 1) a network among ECEC services, among schools, between services/schools and families, and between services/schools and the community (horizontal continuity); and 2) a coherent path between different school levels, developing a link between childcare centers and kindergartens, and between kindergartens and primary schools (vertical continuity).

Both vertical and horizontal continuity can be realized through common meetings between staff of the different services/schools, common CPD paths, exchange through observation moments, visits of the children (e.g. children of the childcare center that visit the kindergarten), participation in common projects, family meetings (for example, a party for both the parents of the kindergarten and the parents of the primary school; or an open meeting for families and the neighbourhood) and so on. This relationship should promote a more coherent approach to learning and wellbeing for children and families and should support the development of a shared vision and set of values (Catarsi, 2011a).

An 'integrated continuity' (both vertical and horizontal) helps create a sense of belonging to a 'community' (which is one of the bases of PLCs) and the knowledge about each other's practices and beliefs. This approach, however, can be hindered by the 'schoolification' approach that is increasingly present in the ECEC sector (Kaga, 2014; Van Laere et al., 2012). Schoolification places its focus on children's cognitive and language development, while their social and emotional development areaccorded a lower priority. This is especially true in pre-schools (for 3–6-year-olds); their proper role

is increasingly perceived to be to prepare students for compulsory school. In the 'whole school approach', however, this hierarchy doesn't exist, ECEC services and schools learn from each other, and coherence and continuity are core principles.

This kind of framework requires that children be viewed holistically and ecologically, 'as a whole' person: the child that goes to a childcare center is the same person that will soon go to kindergarten, the same that will play sport in the neighbourhood and will borrow books in the local library. Accordingly it is important that these services/schools/organizations have a relationship with each other in order to create a 'coherent' and integrated context in which children can grow. Of course, growing also has to do with change. Indeed, continuity does not imply that differences and change are not possible. On the contrary, accommodating discontinuity and change plays an important role in promoting children's growth. However, it is crucial that change takes place in a coherent process that does not create too large a gap or chasm between the different contexts that represent the child's community (Catarsi, 2011a).

This approach benefits all children and families, but is also particularly important when thinking about including those with disadvantaged backgrounds. The Transatlantic Forum for Inclusive Early Years (TFIEY) points out that forum discussions often emphasize how important it is for migrant and low-income families that different services are integrated. When they are not, these vulnerable groups have trouble reaching all of the needed support systems, or there are too many different types of barriers to cross. TFIEY meetings also stress the importance of smooth transitions between home and ECEC services, and between childcare and school, especially for children and families with a disadvantaged background, since every transition could represent an additional challenge and barrier.

More specifically:

- In regard to the ECEC system, a clear example of the advantages of a coherent framework for different services can be found in so called 'integrated centers', which represent a way of creating a strong network among different sectors, professions, age groups, and at governance level. Integrated centers promote the integration of 1) services from different sectors (care, education, health, social services, employment etc.); and 2) different age-related services: transition between services for pregnant mothers, childcare centers, and kindergarten and primary schools. Integrated centers can bring different services together in the same location, or create a network among services/schools that already exist but do not yet have a relationship with each other. The goal is to increase inclusion and wellbeing by creating a more accessible system for children and families, capable of offering different answers to different needs. Examples primarily come from the Nordic countries—Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden—where integrated centers have a strong tradition (see chapter 2.3. Overview of PLCs in European ECEC and primary school system) (Kekkonen, Montonen, Viitala, 2012). There are some additional examples, for example in the *Huizen van het kind* (Houses of the child) of the Flemish Community of Belgium (Hulpia and Lambert, 2017), where the current focus is on horizontal continuity (see chapter 2.3. Overview of PLCs in European ECEC and primary school system). The Sure Start program in England is another example, and it underlines the difficulties that maybe encountered in the realization and sustainability of these kind of projects. The program is aimed at giving children (all children, but with special attention to tackling poverty) the best possible start in life through improving ECEC services, health and family support, with an emphasis on community development. Bringing all of these actors together has been complex, and while funding was available at the onset, its allocation was not well organized throughout the project, which affected the sustainability of the program (Eisenstadt, 2012; 2017).

- In regard to school systems, a 'whole school approach' can increase learning and wellbeing for children and families, especially in a diverse society. In this respect, early school leaving can also be addressed. As stated by the European Commission (2015c), early school leaving is often the result of a combination of personal, social, economic, educational and family-related factors, strongly interlinked and leading to cumulative disadvantage. Alongside this, certain features of our education and training systems may create additional barriers that exacerbate disadvantage. Research shows that school practices, teachers' attitudes and teaching styles affect children and young people's motivation towards education: 'an unfavourable school climate, a lack of learner centeredness, inadequate awareness of educational disadvantage, violence and bullying, poor teachers-pupils relationships, and teaching methods and curricula which are perceived as irrelevant are some of the factors that can contribute to the decision to leave education prematurely' (European Commission, 2015c, p. 7). The *Study on the effective use of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in preventing early school leaving* (Dumčius et al., 2014) concludes that good-quality ECEC plays a crucial role in strengthening foundations for lifelong learning and ensuring children's successful completion of compulsory education. However, the study notes that accomplishing these requires: a) pedagogical continuity (curriculum and teacher training), and b) flexible educational pathways.

Working within a holistic/ecological approach would be an answer to this deficit, by focusing on the network among different services in the same local community.

1.2. Towards Professional Learning Communities

Within this framework, the engagement and active role of staff is crucial. That is why a competent system should offer both initial qualification and continuous professional development (CPD) opportunities for all staff.

ECEC and school staff have a great influence on the advancement and wellbeing of children (Jolly, 2008; Hanushek, 2010; Sahlberg, 2012; Brajković, 2014). Regarding schools, the teaching method and a teacher's approach both appear to have a large impact on children's achievement (Hattie, 2010; Coe et al., 2014). This suggests that they also have an important influence on creating equal opportunities for everybody, taking into account children's and families' different backgrounds and potential.

That is why investment in professional development for staff is so necessary. However, many questions arise concerning the kind of CPD that is most effective, and the conditions that are needed to make it successful.

From the Belgian, Italian and Slovenian CoRe case studies (Peeters, De Kimpe, Brandt, 2016; Musatti, Picchio, Mayer, 2016; Vonta, 2016; Vonta et al., 2007) we learned that when pedagogical guidance is provided, when child-free hours are scheduled, and when reflection paths are supported, the quality of the services increase with a direct effect on children and families (Vandenbroeck et al., 2016). A recent systematic review on effective professional development published by Eurofound (Peeters et al., 2015) underlined that these activities seem to be most effective when they are continuous and of a certain length (Peeters et al., 2015). It also lists several critical success factors that enable quality CPD initiatives:

- a coherent pedagogical framework or learning curriculum that builds upon research and addresses local needs;
- the active involvement of ECEC and school staff in the process of improving educational practice, enacted within their settings;

- a focus on practice-based learning, taking place in constant dialogue with colleagues, parents and local communities;
- the provision of enabling working conditions, such as the availability of paid hours for non-contact time, and the presence of a competent pedagogical coach who facilitates practitioners' reflection in reference groups.

For example, in countries such as Croatia, Denmark, Italy, and a few cases in England, child-free hours are provided to plan, meet with colleagues and with parents, work on pedagogical documentation, observe each other's practice, and co-reflect (Brajković, 2014; Jensen, 2016; Musatti, Picchio and Mayer, 2016). In Slovenia, child-free hours are provided both for practitioners/teachers and for assistants (Peeters, Sharmahd, Budginaitè, 2016; Vonta, 2016). Pedagogical coaches that facilitate the co-reflection path and active participation of the team, and who support the development of a common vision and set of values, are established in, for instance, the Center-North of Italy (Catarsi, 2011b).

Traditional forms of professional development (attending conferences, workshops, courses) are no longer sufficient (Brajković, 2014). Bottom-up approaches based on co-reflecting on practice are needed to affect the daily work of practitioners/teachers. Good general stock responses to specific situations simply do not exist, and contextualizing practice is increasingly crucial, especially considering the fact that practitioners/teachers must respond to the different needs of children/families with diverse backgrounds. Encouraging all children to grow and build self-confidence means respecting them in their multiple identities. To do so, the involvement of families and local communities is indispensable (Children in Europe, 2016). Moreover, ECEC services and schools are places where children, parents, practitioners and local communities can participate in democratic practice. This enables the members of these groups to contribute to the construction of a common project that, ideally, is responsive to the needs of everyone. We should be mindful that this is a challenging task, given the existing diversity and societal power differences between and amongst these groups. Democratic practice is not merely fixed; it is a constant striving to create conditions which ensure everyone has the right to be heard, and in which all are accorded respect, recognition, solidarity, care and a sense of belonging, in order to encourage the principle that every child be fitted for life (DECET and ISSA, 2011; Fielding and Moss, 2012).

That is why ECEC services and schools need support to develop democratic practices. In regard to staff and their professional development, this requires an acknowledgement that professionals in this sector are much more than technicians. They deal with ethics and values in a complex relational reality. In this context, bottom-up approaches based on co-reflection on practice provide staff with an opportunity to contextualize and analyse daily situations. Along with enabling professionals to deal with diversity, this also allows them to realise that they are active participants in their own learning process, which has a positive effect on their motivation. Active participation generates 'positive emotions' towards the job, which further encourages the learning process of staff (Caine and Caine, 2010). This has the potential to create a positive 'well-being and learning cycle', since the wellbeing and motivation of practitioners/teachers inspire the same in children and families. Co-reflecting together supports staff in learning from each other, in deconstructing assumptions, and in negotiating meanings.

In much the same way, observing each other's practice, working on pedagogical documentation, collaborating in participatory research with research institutes/universities, job shadowing experiences, exchange with other services/schools/organizations, with families and the broader community, are now crucial forms of professional development.

Alongside this, we need to take into account that today's schools must provide young citizens with the competences they need to live in globalized, complex environments, where creativity, innovation, negotiation, reflection and engagement are just as important as 'cognitive knowledge'. This is stressed by the European Commission (European Commission, 2011a, 2011b; OECD, UNICEF, 2016; Koolsand Stoll, 2016): 'Traditional models of schooling whose organisational patterns deeply structure schools (the single teacher, the classroom segmented from other classrooms each with their own teacher, and traditional approaches to teaching and classroom organization etc.) are inadequate for [...] the 21st learning agendas, especially for the most disadvantaged students in society' (Kools and Stoll, 2016, p. 12).

In this context, practitioners/teachers need to invest in a more 'complex' way of educating/teaching, by promoting transversal competences and by teaching 'how to learn' and how to critically reflect. In order to do so, collaboration with other colleagues, with parents and with the community, are essential.

A literature review prepared for the European Commission (European Commission, 2011b) identifies six conditions to create successful CPD experiences:

- For services/school to improve, there ought to be numerous staff development opportunities for practitioners/teachers to learn together.
- Successful schools/services find ways of working that encourage feelings of involvement from all actors involved.
- Leadership is seen as a function which many staff contribute to, rather than as a set of responsibilities entrusted to a single individual.
- The coordination of activities is important to keep people involved, and communication is essential to coordination.
- Enquiry and reflection should be recognised for their important role in school improvement, as they support the establishment of shared meanings about education.
- The processes of collaborative planning for development enable schools/services to link educational aims to identifiable priorities.

Progress has been made: over the last decades there has been a slow shift away from the traditional concept of CPD towards a broader vision (European Commission, 2011b; Vanblaere, 2016; Cherrington and Thornton, 2013), which understands learning to be a social and interactive matter (Senge, 2006, 1990).

The concept of 'professional learning communities'(PLCs) emerged from this new vision (see CHAPTER 2). In essence, it refers to 'a group of people sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an on-going, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting way' (Stoll et al., 2006, p. 223). This implies that school staff must focus on learning rather than on teaching in order to initiate and sustain a PLC (DuFour, 2004; OECD, UNICEF, 2016). Moreover, competent systems are needed to create and maintain PLCs. They further require a multilevel network of competences, structural conditions, engagement, and awareness.

Despite general agreement on what a professional learning community roughly is and what it requires, many definitions have been proposed as to what a PLC is ultimately supposed to be; so many, in fact, that we are running the risk of losing its genuine meaning (DuFour, 2004). In chapter 2 we seek to redress this by offering clear criteria to define PLCs.

1.3. Aims and research questions

At the European level, there is a lack of comprehensive comparative research that reviews existing PLC initiatives in ECEC services and schools.

This report aims to address this deficit by creating a set of detailed recommendations for European education and school policies. Specifically, the review will focus on how ECEC services and schools, for children aged 0 to 12 years, can become professional learning communities. The first part of the study reviews the literature about the various meanings and possibilities of professional learning communities. The second part focuses on relevant case studies from four European countries (Belgium, Croatia, Italy and Slovenia) that have had successful experiences with PLCs. The report will conclude by offering specific recommendations for policy makers on how to transform ECEC services and schools into professional learning communities.

Our main research questions are:

- What are the characteristics of PLCs in competent systems?
- What are the key drivers of, barriers to, and possible routes of, developing ECEC services and schools as PLCs?
- What are the values and key impacts of ECEC services and schools as learning communities, as they relate to children, families, communities, and professionals/teams?
- What roles do children, families, communities, and professionals/teams, assume in PLCs?
- Which European cases can be taken as exemplars, and re-adapted to other contexts?

Professional learning committees stand to make a positive impact on the following challenges faced by many European member states:

- PLCs create a culture of collaboration and negotiation, not only by letting staff learn from one another, but also by improving their relational and reflective competences. The latter are critical, given the increasing diversity among children and families (European Commission, 2015b; Peeters, Sharmahd, Budginaitè, 2016). Being able to accommodate and value these differences is a key competence in allowing all children to reach their potential. This also implies the creation of a 'fairer' system, with specific attention given to children/families with a disadvantaged background.
- This research can make an important contribution to the European policy process of Life Long Learning (LLL) towards the development of an advanced knowledge society in accordance with the objectives of the Lisbon strategy (1720/2006/EC). The LLL programme ended in 2013, but has been continued in the Erasmus+ programme.
- Creating competent systems based on collaboration (in line with the 'whole school approach') is a challenge at European level. It means working not only on individual competences, but also on creating systems capable of developing competences at different levels (individual, team, governance, and institution) (Urban et al., 2011; Vandenbroeck et al., 2016).This holistic/ecological approach would benefit all children/families, especially those with disadvantaged backgrounds.

1.4. Method

The report is based on a literature review of PLCs. Following an overview, the study focuses on four case studies carried out by experts in four countries. The countries have been selected because of their

interesting experiences with PLCs, and because their PLCs include ECEC services (0 to 6 years old) and primary schools (6 to 12 years old).

The selected countries include:

- Belgium (Flanders) – case study in ECEC services (0 to 3 years old) and in pre- and primary schools (2.5 to 12);
- Croatia – case study in pre- and primary schools (0-6 and 6-12 years old);
- Italy (Pistoia) – case study in ECEC services (0 to 6 years old); and
- Slovenia – case study in ECEC services (0-6 years old)

According to the criteria we adopt to define a PLC (see CHAPTER 2), each case study is examined to address the following questions:

- How was the PLC set up (history, reasons, key actors, etc.)?
- How does it ensure sustainability?
- How is the PLC accompanied and monitored?
- What have been and are the strengths and the challenges of this experience?
- How is, and why was, the PLC linked to a competent system?
- What is the place of, and impact on, families, children, and the community in the PLC?
- What are the crucial elements of this experience that can be generalized and adapted to other contexts across Europe?

Each case study was carried out with the support of qualitative research instruments (e.g. focus groups, interviews, observations, etc.), involving one or more of the following groups of actors: practitioners/teachers, assistants, pedagogical coordinators, parents, children, or other key stakeholders.

CHAPTER 2. PLCS IN COMPETENT SYSTEMS

2.1. Definition and characteristics of PLCs

The concept of a professional learning community originated in the business sector in the 1980s, when Judith Little (1981) introduced the hypothesis that if workers of organizations learned and developed professionally within their organizations, the latter could develop as well (Fullan, 2006; Brajković, 2014). This hypothesis was subsequently adapted to the educational sector; Susan Rosenholtz (1989) found that educators with a higher sense of self-efficacy had better chances of introducing changes in their practice. She argued that educators who felt supported in their career and cooperated with colleagues were more committed and efficient than those who were not.

Indeed, the purpose of PLCs is precisely this, to support ECEC and school staff, both emotionally and professionally, by allowing them to critically reflect on their own teaching and to share concrete ideas on how to improve the wellbeing and the learning experience of children and families.

Many definitions of PLCs have been offered; so many, in fact, that the term is at risk of becoming ambiguous (Vanblaere, 2016). Although several definitions have merit, we have chosen to adopt the definition of Stoll et al. (2006, p. 223), who define a PLC as 'a group of people sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an on-going, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting way'.

PLCs create an ECEC/school culture that promotes children's wellbeing and learning through the establishment of values, norms and shared expectations among ECEC and school staff, which are influenced by the presence of trust (OECD, 2013).

This is in line with the concept of 'school as learning organization'(SLO). A helpful description of an SLO is made in the OECD study *What makes a school a learning organization?* (Koolsand Stoll, 2016): 'a school as learning organization has the capacity to change and adapt routinely to new environments and circumstances as its members, individually and together, learn their way to realizing their vision' (OECD, 2016, p. 1). The study suggests using the seven dimensions developed by Marsick and Watkins (2003) as a notional basis for developing schools as SLOs:

1. Developing and sharing a vision centred on the wellbeing/learning of all students, with a specific focus on including children/families from disadvantaged backgrounds.
2. Creating and supporting continuous learning opportunities for all staff, also by creating favourable structural conditions, for example, by providing child-free hours to meet, plan, and co-reflect.
3. Promoting team learning and collaboration among all staff. This requires trust and mutual respect, which are once again favoured by staff being available to meet, to observe each others practice, and to engage in network learning.
4. Establishing a culture of inquiry, innovation and exploration, which requires professionals to tolerate 'uncertainty' (Urban, 2008), to give time to their questions, to suspend judgments, and to consider different perspectives.
5. Embedding systems for collecting and exchanging knowledge and learning, which means that services/schools need to create the structures for regular dialogue and knowledge sharing among staff, parents and the community. Staff also need to be able to able to use information attained from multiple sources, including ICT.
6. Learning with and from the external environment and larger learning system, which means creating a partnership with parents, other schools/organizations, and the larger community, in a holistic 'whole school' approach.
7. Modelling and growing learning leadership, taking into account that school leaders, pedagogical coaches, etc., have a crucial role in creating safe and trusting environments that make learning possible. In services/schools that are learning organizations, staff are encouraged to participate in decision making such that distributed leadership develops.

Although the SLO and PLC models overlap in many ways, the concept of 'community' is more central to the latter, emphasizing mutually supportive relationships. As Mitchel and Sackney (2000, p. 6) write, 'the learning community is concerned with the human experience, and […] this concern is not necessarily evident in a learning organization'. The ethic of interpersonal caring is central in the notion of PLC, with a focus on the 'community' which emphasizes mutually supportive relationships.

2.2. What defines a PLC in this study?

Considering these general premises, this report seeks to develop a clear perspective on this theme based on an in-depth literature review (Vanblaere, 2016).

Two studies (Sleegers et al., 2013; Verbiest, 2008) suggest that effective PLCs develop capacity for professional learning on three levels:

1. a personal level (an individual's ability to actively reflect);
2. an interpersonal level (the ability of practitioners/teachers to work together from shared conceptions of learning and education); and
3. an organizational level (the structural and cultural conditions that facilitate and support the development of personal and interpersonal capacities).

These three levels influence each other. The interpersonal dimension recurs in the vast majority of studies covering PLCs, and is something of a common denominator across most definitions (Sleegers et al., 2013).

Considering this 'interpersonal level', the following characteristics define a PLC, and these are the criteria we adopt in our study:

1. **Teachers frequently engage in 'reflective and in-depth dialogues'** with colleagues about educational matters based on their daily practice (Wahlstrom and Louis, 2008). The goal is to clarify explicit and implicit assumptions and beliefs, to deconstruct and co-reflect on them, in order to transform practice (Verbiest, 2008).
2. **Teachers move from the classroom doors in a 'de-privatization of practices'**, by observing each other's practices, giving feedback, planning jointly, building relationships with the neighbourhood, and engaging in dialogue with parents (Lomos et al., 2011; Wahlstrom and Louis, 2008).
3. **There is investment in 'collective responsibility'**, as school improvement is no longer considered to be the sole responsibility of a principal or a single teacher, but rather as a collective one (Stoll et al., 2006). This collective responsibility orients the focus of teachers on the learning of all students (Vanblaere, 2016).
4. **There is a focus on reaching a shared vision and set of values** (Wahlstrom and Louis, 2008), which form the basis for shared, collective, and ethical decision making (*Ibid*.). PLCs work on the basis of an 'inclusive belief' according to which each child, despite whatever unique obstacles they may face, is able to learn and is supported in doing so (Verbiest, 2008). This is interlinked with what we define here as collective responsibility, since a foundation of shared child-centered values focused on respect for diversity can build a sense of collective responsibility.
5. These four characteristics need a fifth condition to be realized: **the presence of 'leadership'** is a powerful factor in transforming schools' culture (Vanblaere, 2016). As Fullan (2016, p. 20) notes: 'transforming the *culture* of schools and the systems within which they operate is the main point. It is not an innovation to be implemented, but rather a new culture to be developed'. Leaders appear to have the capacity to create professional learning communities through different leadership behaviours (Vanblaere, 2016).

What kind of leadership?

Leadership is the essential influence that is able to connect all of a PLC's separate parts, such that 'the whole' becomes more than the sum of its parts, and which makes the process sustainable (Kools and Stoll, 2016). School directors, pedagogical coordinators, etc. provide direction for learning and wellbeing, and ensure that a PLC's actions are consistent with its vision, goals and values.

The concept of leadership in the context of PLCs is nevertheless complex and multi-layered. In the field of education, two models are prevalent: 'instructional' and 'transformational' leadership (Halinger, 2003). 'Instructional' leadership is characterized by the direction of a leader's influence (Bush, 2014). Instructional leaders focus their interactions and work on teaching, learning, classroom pedagogy,

coordinating, monitoring and evaluating curriculum, and also promote a positive school learning climate by providing time, professional development opportunities, etc. (Hallinger, 2003; Gumus et al., 2014; Vanblaere, 2016). It can be categorised as a directive form of leadership. 'Transformational leadership', on the other hand, is an empowering strategy that focuses on how leaders influence their staff (Vanblaere, 2016). Transformational leaders link individual and collective action, not by exercising power over people, but rather through a bottom-up empowering approach.

While the two leadership models may have different focuses, they are not incompatible (Vanblaere, 2016). PLCs require that both of these two forms of leadership are combined, and that both 'orientation' and 'participation' play an important role.

A third form, 'distributed/democratic leadership', must also be included. While instructional leadership considers a school principal to be the unique person to coordinate and control multifaceted tasks, in PLCs it would not be plausible or even possible to give such a broad role to a single person. It would also violate the spirit of PLCs; the active participation of everyone is crucial (Gumus et al., 2014). This is ultimately why 'distributed/democratic leadership' is also needed in PLCs. This type of leadership implies collaboration, team work, and participation; in practice, while a school director or pedagogical coordinator will keep the goals in mind, and will support the development of a common vision and set of values, all team members will be encouraged to take an active part in decision making and to assume specific responsibilities. Because practitioners/teachers take on a more active role, distributed/democratic leadership typically fosters their development of a greater sense of self-efficacy and increases their job satisfaction (Kools and Stoll, 2016). This form of leadership also supports the growth of collective responsibility. Broadly speaking, a democratic/distributed leadership style is so useful for PLCs because it includes all of the partners needed to build a PLC in the decision-making process. This is linked to what can be defined as 'learning leadership' (Kools and Stoll, 2016), meaning that learning by individuals, groups and collective should be kept at the very heart of daily practice. In order to keep this focus, leaders should understand the importance of interconnections and of creating a safe, trusting environment for exploration, inquiry and creativity. Leaders ought to concern themselves with all of those who are part of the learning community.

Leaders also create networks with other services/schools, families, and the community, and accordingly become 'system players' (Fullan, 2014). The support of policy makers and administrators is crucial here, in order to provide concrete conditions to realize the collaboration. Research shows that leaders of schools that are able to challenge circumstances are usually highly engaged with other services/schools, with families, and with the community (Harris et al., 2006). Also, the outcomes and wellbeing of socio-economically disadvantaged children appears to improve when school leaders involve other partners beyond their own school/service (OECD, 2010; Kools and Stoll, 2016).

PLCs, in short, require multi-layered leadership that combines a top-down with a bottom-up approach, all within a democratic framework. These are not easy competences to achieve, which is why leaders will need specific training on relational, reflective, methodological and organizational competences. For much the same reasons, leaders will also need in-service support—for example, supervision moments, networks, and peer-learning activities.

Figure 1. PLC circle
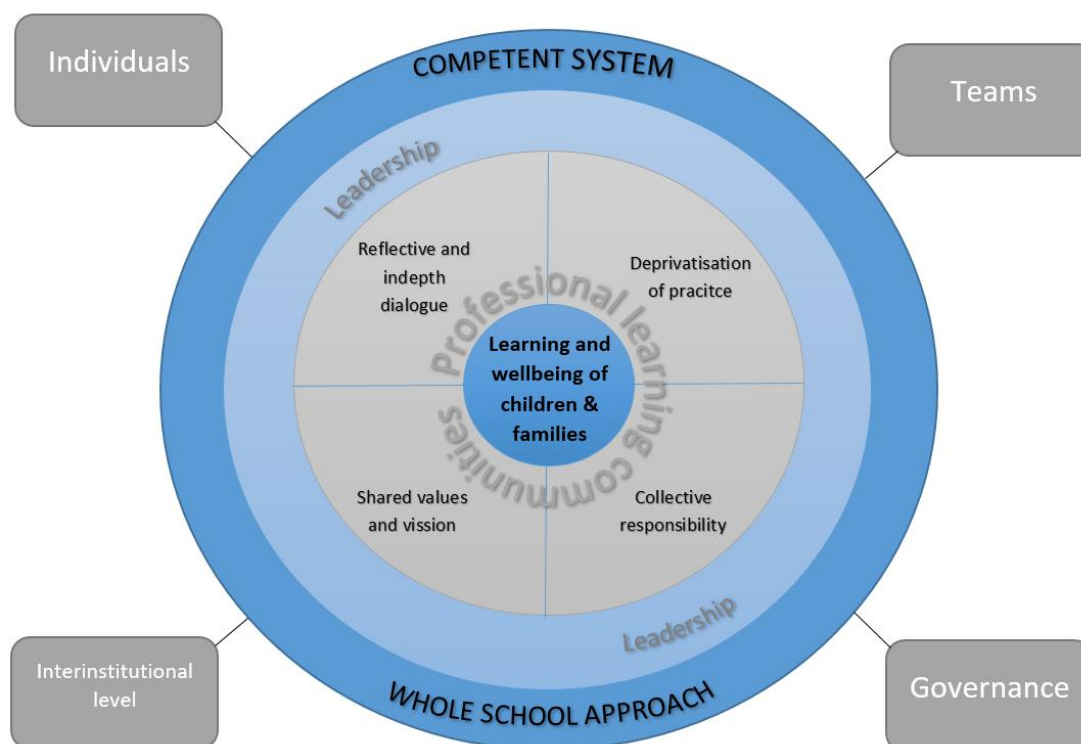
Source: prepared by the authors.

2.3. Overview of PLCs in European ECEC and primary school system

It has proven difficult to provide a comprehensive overview of which European countries do or do not have a PLC system for ECEC services or primary schools. Specific studies do exist, but they tend to focus on the micro-level (witnessing local experiences) rather than the macro-level (taking into account the whole system). Broader studies (such as SEEPRO and TALIS) are focused more generally on the ECEC system (SEEPRO – Oberhuemer, 2010), and on the teaching profession in primary schools (TALIS – Vieluf et al., 2012) rather than on PLCs specifically. While Stoll et al. (2006) provide a literature review on PLCs, underlying their characteristics, strengths and challenges, and Lomos et al. (2011) also give an overview, focusing on the connection between PLCs and student' achievement, we believe it is now a beneficial time to focus on concrete examples from different contexts, which will clarify some aspects of what a PLC is in practice and what they perhaps ought to be, and inspire changes to policy and practice.

Some descriptions of PLCs refer to the OECD Education Working Papers (Kools and Stoll, 2016) on schools as learning organizations, which show some interesting projects that have affinities with PLCs. In addition, we will cite some examples of local studies on PLCs.

Several countries have been taking concrete actions to establish PLCs. Some of these actions constitute just a part of what we mean by a PLC, but they are nevertheless interesting examples of the effort towards the establishment of PLCs and competent systems.

1. Examples of PLCs

A systemic, participatory and multi-layered approach in Germany – Berliner Bildungsprogramm: The Berlin Early Years Sector now covers 2,356 early years' centres for children between 0 and 6 years old and their families. Law prescribes that these centres need to develop their practices based on the Berliner Bildungsprogramm 'Bridging Diversity', which starts from a holistic understanding of education embedded in the children's rights framework and respect for diversity. The curriculum, first published in 2004 and revised in 2014, serves as a tool for self-reflection and reflection in the teams of all the centres. The curriculum is oriented towards providing a strong framework, but at the same time is open to critical reflection and adaptation to each context. This is one of the core characteristics of a PLC: reflecting on practice, de-privatisation, and a shared vision and set of values. A whole system is built around supporting this: each team reflects on the curriculum and co-constructs its meanings, different teams are brought together to discuss it, and this reflection process is used to evaluate all of its services. All centres had to develop an in-house educational concept paper based on 'Bridging Diversity' by December 2006, and in 2008 all centres started their in-house self-evaluations in teams. Based on these evaluations, they all develop an annual plan for in-service training and critical reflection for the team. The quality development is owned by the professionals themselves. One of the consequences is that only once in five years was an external evaluation performed by an agency accredited by the Ministry. In general, the Regional Ministry of Education in Berlin strives to have an on-going dialogue with main stakeholders about the implementation process of the curriculum and related professional development pathways (Preissing, Heimgaertner, 2016); this is crucial when thinking about the active involvement and motivation of staff in PLCs.

Multiple and meaningful team meetings in Croatian PLCs: The Open Academy Step by Step (OA SbS) in Croatia has developed PLCs of educational workers in primary schools and kindergartens. OA SbS has trained over seventy leaders who organized fifty PLCs in their schools and kindergartens, involving more than 300 educators (Brajković, 2014). Existing forms of cooperation among educators in the schools in Croatia have been used in order to facilitate the development of PLCs. Within the framework given by the International Step by Step Association (ISSA) principles (ISSA, 2015), and by focusing on cooperation, a shared vision and reflection, OA SbS has coordinated the realization of PLCs through the organization of several kinds of meetings, observations and exchanges among educators/teachers. Challenges are being faced regarding the need for a supporting network for facilitators and the need for a continuous supply of official financial support to make the PLCs sustainable (see chapter 3 – 3.2. CROATIA: Making team meetings meaningful in PLCs).

A multi-layered approach to PLCs in Slovenia: The Step by Step Network in Slovenia has created a PLC in ECEC that has grown and evolved over time, and which has an increasingly bottom-up approach that invests in the responsibility of staff and in the de-privatization of practice through common reflection moments, observations, and exchanges. The PLC is built on a clear common framework based on ISSA principles, which gives it its overall orientation, but the PLC is also designed to simultaneously remain open to deconstruction and critical reflection (ISSA, 2015). The approach is a holistic one, involving different levels of the system, namely individuals, teams, services, and the policy level (Vonta, 2016). The role of leaders in the PLC has traditionally been and remains a challenging issue here; this crucial

function requires regular and additional training and support (see chapter 3 – 3.4. SLOVENIA: A multilevel approach to PLC).

Community, coordination and pedagogical documentation in the Center-North of Italy: Some Italian Regions (e.g. Emilia Romagna and Tuscany; both regions have a tradition of social-democracy) have since the 70s developed specific 'community approaches' (Galardini, 2003; Catarsi, Fortunati, 2005) based on the concept of co-education (Catarsi, Fortunati, 2005; Jésu, 2010; Rayna, Rubio, 2010). In their early years, *democrazia scolastica* (Catarsi, Fortunati, 2005) took shape: ECEC services and schools began to be organized through specific committees made up of representatives for staff, parents and municipalities. The initiative was spearheaded by Loris Malaguzzi and Bruno Ciari, who were both proponents of a socio-democratic pedagogy aimed at involving practitioners/teachers, but also families and communities, in the education process. The internationally renowned 'Reggio Emilia approach' grew out of this (Reggio Children, 2009). In it, pedagogical documentation (videos, photos, observations etc.) is central because it allows two orientations: 1) towards the outside – because it supports the network with other services/schools, with families, and with the community; and 2) towards the inside – because it supports teams in co-reflecting on their practice and in negotiating meanings. The role of pedagogical coordinators are fundamental here: they are 'guiding facilitators' supporting practitioners/teachers in their reflection, which is crucial for PLCs (Peeters, Sharmahd, 2014). This is also one of the key points of the more recent 'Tuscany approach' (Catarsi, Fortunati, 2012), which again focuses on the concept of community and more specifically on creating an 'integrated system', in which the different providers and levels of services/schools (public, private, mixed/childcare centers, preschool, and other services) are networked and operate within a coherent framework by sharing specific CPD paths. Actualising this network and exchange is not an easy task, since the different providers are subject to diverse labour regulations (staff working time, number of child-free hours, pedagogical projects, etc.). Working in collaboration with the local policy level has been and is essential under this framework (see chapter 3 – 3.3. ITALY (Pistoia): Collegiality as basis for PLC).

Freinet approach in kindergartens and schools in Belgium, France and the Netherlands: The pedagogy of Celestine Freinet is an example of a community approach, seeking to form strong learning relationships among all of the actors involved in school life (parents, teachers, children, and the local community). An alternative to 'traditional schools', the Freinet approach is based on an ecological perspective that emphasises the contexts in which a child grows and lives. It represents, then, a bottom-up and democratic approach to learning, in which each child is listened to and respected. To realise this vision, it is vital that strong partnerships among all actors involved in the education of children are formed, and adults must be given the possibility to learn from each other in a coherent, democratic way (Department Onderwijs en Opvoeding Stad Gent – Department of Education City of Ghent, 2010). Originally developed in France, it became popular in Belgium and in the Netherlands in the 80s. Around this time, the approach gained ground in Ghent (Flemish Community of Belgium) when local government decided to invest in new 'good' schools in disadvantaged areas. The number of Freinet schools in Ghent has since grown considerably and been gradually transformed to adapt to the region's diversity (Department Onderwijs en Opvoeding Stad Gent – Department of Education City of Ghent, 2010) (see chapter 3 – 3.1. BELGIUM (Flanders): Examining a PLC school and a childcare center with democratic leadership).

International Step by Step Association (ISSA) in Europe and Central Asia: ISSA is an international

membership association that serves as a learning community to share experiences and knowledge for the sake of quality in education and for equity among all children and their families. The ISSA network includes over 70 members from across Europe and Central Asia, and is a dynamic mix of NGO's, schools and ECEC centres, along with higher education and academic institutions. The ISSA's specific goals are to: 1) advocate for competent ECEC and school systems for all children, especially the most vulnerable; 2) increase awareness of the importance of early childhood development and of a qualified workforce; and 3) be a leading early childhood network and learning community that promotes quality, equitable and integrated services for children, families and practitioners/teachers (ISSA, 2015).

2. Examples of projects and methods useful to create a PLC[6]

Action-training/research to improve the professional quality of ECEC organizations through critical reflection in the Netherlands: The model for 'Sustainable learning in a professional learning community' is a practical approach that early childhood professionals and their coaches have adopted in the Netherlands to develop a 'critically' reflective attitude to their knowledge and practice. The model was developed as part of a two-year action research project conducted by Bureau MUTANT (2007-2008), a small independent Dutch agency that supports professionals and institutions in early childhood, welfare and health care through innovative training and consulting. The project places an emphasis on educators' critically reflective processes, shifting the focus from individual to collective learning, and urges the need to involve all staff within each ECEC services. They have co-constructed and developed eight learning methods: 1) naming qualities: valuing, reflecting on and naming core qualities of professionals and parents; 2) asking critical questions; 3) maintaining a learning process diary to document the personal and team professional learning process; 4) reflection on thinking, feeling and willingness; 5) supporting contextual thinking/reflection/knowledge about the context of each childcare centre and its families; 6) formulating challenges for the ECEC service; 7) co-operation with a colleague as a critical professional partner; and 8) drawing up a contract for each learning community: developing concrete principles which describe how the team members want to communicate with each other. This co-construction of learning methods in the training and in practice has contributed to strengthening the learning process and motivation in the teams, and the critical reflective competence has improved at different levels in the involved ECEC services (DECET and ISSA, 2011).

Foundation LeerKRACHT in the Netherlands: *Leerkracht* has 3 meanings in Dutch: teaching force, learning force and teacher. The Foundation, established in 2012 in the Netherlands, aims to implement a bottom-up capacity-building programme for primary and secondary schools, and reshape national education policy to create a culture of continuous improvement. Three improvement processes are central to the programme: classroom observation and feedback observation, joint lesson planning, and board sessions to jointly define objectives and share improvement ideas. While these improvement processes may seem rather simple to organise, they need to be conducted continuously, not just by a core group of enthusiasts but rather freely chosen widely, and that is often challenging. To create this culture in schools, the teacher teams that work with these three processes are supported by their

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[6] In order to be-come effective PLCs, these projects and methods should be integrated with other aspects and should involve different levels.

school (through time and resources) and a school coach from within the organization. The approach is underpinned by forum meetings with Foundation leerKRACHT schools, and by visits to companies that have a continuous improvement culture. This private initiative now involves hundreds of primary schools in the Netherlands (Kools and Stoll, 2016).

eTwinning Europe: eTwinning is an online community of schools in Europe (200.000 registered teachers, head teachers, librarians, IT co-ordinators, etc.). More than 100.000 schools from 33 European countries have signed up to use its free online environment, utilising IT tools and its secure internet spaces for virtual meetings, ideas and practice exchanges, and to engage in cross-border projects and continuous professional development. eTwinning also provides additional services to teachers including a search function to find partners for Comenius school partnerships, opportunities for taking part in communities of practice (e.g. eTwinning Groups and Teachers Rooms), and for participating in Professional Development Workshops and Learning Events (online or on site) at regional, national and European levels. It is a cross-border initiative that utilises social networking mechanisms for enhancing collaboration, communication and intercultural awareness among school communities in Europe (Kampylis, 2013).

'Multiprofessionalism' in Finland: The Finnish ECEC system is integrated under the Ministry of Education and Culture, and has a universal core curriculum governing pre-primary education (0 to 7 years old). Student progression from early childhood education and care to pre-primary education, and then on to primary education, is intended to be a seamless process. This is largely attributable to the fact that the Finnish model of ECEC is designed to be in line with 'Educare', which proposes that quality in ECEC should encompass a broad, holistic view of learning, caring, upbringing and social support for children, since 'care' and 'education' are inseparable (Karila, 2005). This concept informs the pedagogical approach of other North-European countries as well; Denmark, for instance. Within this framework, several Finnish policy documents (e.g. Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2002; National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health, 2003) have emphasized the concept of 'multiprofessionalism'. This refers both to 1) the co-operation of ECEC professionals with professionals of other sectors; and 2) the co-working within ECEC centres between teachers and assistants. It is not always easy for professionals to recognize the value of each other's work and to be willing to exchange and collaborate, and so Finland has invested in making common CPD paths that focus on co-reflection on practice.

Collaborative learning and working through networks in Austria: The Austrian New Secondary School Reform started in 2008 (to be completed in 2018). It has sought to create a new leadership position at school level: a teacher-leader who, together with the school principal and other teacher-leaders, serves as a change agent. A specially designed two-year national accredited qualification programme for teacher-leaders has been created, together with an online platform for building a network to share ideas and practices. This is an interesting example of investing in leadership roles, which is instrumental to the functioning of PLCs. Democratic leaders are assigned the complex task of combining a top-down with a bottom-up approach, and need to be trained and supported in order to realize this. Although this specific project focuses on secondary school, it could be a helpful model for primary schools (Kools and Stoll, 2016).

Analyse de pratiques (analysis of practices) in France: This method originated in the 1960s from an initiative by Michael Balint, a Hungarian psychoanalyst who analysed the benefits of having doctors work in groups; he believed that initially proposed treatments made in isolation may not always be the

best choice for treating disease, but that several doctors engaged in group reflection could identify complicating factors and better treatment options. The approach later found its way into the broader social sector and came to be applied in a more systemic manner. In France, many professionals – groups of colleagues, student groups, etc. – in childcare and other domains work with *analyse de pratiques* (Favre, 2004), organizing specific meetings to co-reflect on practice. For many, it has proven to be a tremendous asset in the workplace: workplace atmosphere improves, and people feel supported and valued in their jobs (Thollon Behar and Mony, 2016).

Wanda (appreciative analysis of practice) in Albania, Belgium, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovenia: Wanda also has its roots in the French *Analyse de Pratiques*. It is a co-reflective method aimed at improving the quality of experiences for children, families and staff through a group reflection process based on practice. It is organized either within a team or a group of practitioners/teachers that come together every 4-6 weeks to have a 'Wanda session' coordinated by a facilitator. During each session, the group moves through 5 phases to reflect on a specific situation, to analyse it, deconstruct it, and find possible ways to re-construct it (Sharmahd et al., 2015). Creating a Wanda path is one component of a broader PLC project. The method, with varying nuances, is currently used in 6 countries: Albania, Belgium (Fl.), Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovenia. In 2010, Artevelde University College and VBJK (Centre for Innovation in the Early Years), through an European Social Fund (ESF) project, developed a co-reflective method, which they explicitly called Wanda, for the childcare sector in the Flemish Community of Belgium. In collaboration with the ISSA, the method has also been adapted for Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovenia (in services and schools for children from 0 to 10 years old). Through a UNICEF project, Wanda paths have also been set up in preschools in Albania. Variations of the method have always taken a bottom-up approach and been made in close collaboration with colleagues in each country. This avoided the risk of simply 'exporting' a method from one context to another without taking into account local history, structure and needs.

Research Learning Communities project – UCL Institute of Education, England: Fifty-eight primary schools in England have been working with the UCL Institute of Education at University College London in a two-year pilot project, funded by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), and focused on increasing the application of research in schools. The project has been designed to address interdependent learning factors: developing approaches to building teacher capacity to engage in and with research and data; exploring how schools can promote the use of research as part of an effective learning environment; and examining the necessary structures, systems and resources to facilitate research use and the sharing of best practice. Two leaders – a senior leader and an informal opinion leader – represent each school that is engaged in the Research Learning Communities (RLC) project. In the first year, teams came together in ten groups of five or six schools for four one-day workshops, where they examined research and evidence relating to a commonly agreed upon area and developed strategies based on their discussions. These strategies were tested out in school between the sessions. The sessions were also designed to make the approach sustainable, to ensure that schools could continue to run RLCs and use research effectively after the end of the project. In the second year, participating schools are leading the sessions, with external facilitators to support the exchange (Research Learning Communities, 2017).

Family Centres in Nordic countries: 'A family centre is a service model which brings together the services that promote the wellbeing and health of children and families on the basis of a promotive

and preventive approach (Kekkonen, Montonen, Viitala, 2012, p. 9-10)'. Sweden has been a pioneer in the development of family centres since the 1970s (Bing, 2005). In Finland and Norway, the development process for family centres began in the early 2000s, and Denmark, Iceland and the other Nordic countries began to show an interest around that time. These centres focus on the idea that the well-being of children is strongly connected to that of their parents, and that parents are connected to the resources necessary to respond to their children's needs. Supporting parents (by creating a network, organizing meeting moments, or reinforcing their community) is seen as directly related to the improvement of child wellbeing. Alongside this, family centres facilitate the accessibility of services to all families (especially vulnerable ones) by bringing together more services in the same place and relating them to each other. All this is possible if professionals from the different services know each other, communicate, value each other's work and learn one from one another; to that end, common meetings and CPD activities among different professionals are organized.

Integrated Centres in Belgium (Fl.): In the Flemish Community of Belgium over the past few years, 'integrated centers' have emerged. In 2014, a new law was implemented in Flanders that sought to stimulate the integration and coordination of a broad range of family support services. The Commission of the Flemish Community in Brussels has taken the lead by setting up a research and innovation project to develop a model for the realization of integrated services for families in the Brussels region. The project seeks to discover how to create family support networks which can respond to the diverse needs of children and families through integrated, inclusive and participative work (Hulpia and Lambert, 2017). The project is creating networks of services (health, education, etc.) that work together (horizontal continuity). Professionals from different settings meet in order to be introduced and learn from each other. This is not always easy, considering the different history, organization, and framework of the services. The role of leadership, specifically democratic leadership, has emerged as a key factor, since the network consists of several independent organizations. The leader must strike a balance between diversity (autonomy of the professionals and organizations) and coherence (need of a shared goal/vision and interdependency). Accordingly, training for leaders needs to be established, together with a 'network system' through which leaders can support each other and prevent isolation (see 58).

CHAPTER 3. GOOD PRACTICES: CASE STUDIES IN 4 COUNTRIES

Some countries in Europe have invested in creating and maintaining PLCs. In some cases, this has happened on a local level, in some others on a broader scale.

This chapter describes four case studies from four European countries that have noteworthy examples of PLCs: Belgium, Croatia, Italy and Slovenia. We asked key experts in each country to realize a case study exploring how the 5 criteria that define a PLC (see 2.2. What defines a PLC in this study?), are present in their PLC experiences. More specifically, we asked each expert to respond to the following research questions:

- How was the PLC set up (history, reasons, key actors, etc.)?
- How does it ensure sustainability?
- How is the PLC accompanied and monitored?

- What have been and are the strengths and the challenges of this experience?
- How is, and why was, the PLC linked to a competent system?
- What is the place of, and impact on, families, children, and the community in the PLC?
- What are the crucial elements of this experience that can be generalized and adapted to other contexts across Europe?

3.1. BELGIUM (Flanders): Examining a PLC school and a childcare center with democratic leadership

By Jan Peeters[7] and Chris de Kimpe[8]

Introduction

Belgium is a federal state with three communities and three regions next to the federal level. During the last few decades, policy domains and competences have been divided over the different levels of authority. Policy areas such as family services, childcare services, education, youth work and welfare are regulated at the community level. Basically, the same kind of services are offered to families in all three communities, but with different emphases or nuances. This case study focuses specifically on the Flemish Community.

Since the eighties, the Flemish Community of Belgium introduced important innovations in childcare centres and in primary schools. These innovations stimulated the development of the professional learning community concept. It should be noted that the Flemish Community of Belgium is characterised by a split system in which childcare facilities for 0 to 3 years old are under the responsibility of the Department of Welfare, and pre-primary education (*kleuterscholen*) from 2½ to 6 years old is under the responsibility of the Department of Education (UNESCO, 2010). This case study examines both a primary school and a childcare centre that have developed a sustainable PLC tradition:

- **'De Vlieger'**, primary Freinet school in Ghent: historically, Flemish primary schools have been influenced by the Experiential Education of Ferre Laevers (University of Leuven), focused on the well-being and the involvement of children. In the city of Ghent a group of teachers and pedagogues wanted to expand upon these concepts. They came together once a month and reflected together about the 'ideal school'. During these open discussions and workshops, an idea arose to create new schools based on the pedagogy of the French pedagogue Célestin Freinet. Freinet proposed a child-centered approach that was built on reflective and in-depth dialogues with colleagues about daily practice, openness towards each other and towards negotiation with parents, openness towards the local community, a collective responsibility to improve the quality of education starting from a shared vision and set of values, and a focus on democratic leadership (Department Onderwijs en Opvoeding Stad Gent – Department of Education City of Ghent, 2010). The first Freinet school opened in 1985, and currently the city of Ghent has 10 primary and 2 secondary Freinet schools. For

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[7] Jan Peeters is the Director of VBJK (Center for Innovation in the Early Years, Ghent, Belgium)

[8] Chris de Kimpe is collaborator of VBJK (Center for Innovation in the Early Years, Ghent, Belgium)

this case study, we selected one primary Freinet school, called 'De Vlieger', which is situated in a poor neighbourhood with a high percentage of children with migrant backgrounds. This school is an informative example of how to realize a PLC within a multi-diverse context.

- **Elmer**, ECEC centers: Elmer is the name of a group of childcare centers that operate in disadvantaged areas in Brussels. Elmer invested in creating exchange amongst colleagues, shared observation, co-reflection meeting moments, within a shared framework and with democratic leadership. VBJK (Centre for Innovation in the Early Years), in collaboration with training centres, played an important role in the evolution of PLCs by emphasizing the importance of reflection on practice within the whole team.

The case study will examine these two settings as PLCs, taking into account how they've been set up and the experience and evaluation of the PLCs.

Set-up of the PLC

De Vlieger Freinet school: In 1964 the city of Ghent started a mixed school for boys and girls in a disadvantaged area (Dampoort): de Biekorf. The sixties was a period of immigration of Turkish people that came to work in the textile industry. Gradually more and more Turkish children came to the school, but there was no policy towards diversity and this was one of the reasons why white working-class families left the Biekorf. During the nineties, all the children in the primary school were of Turkish origin, and the Biekorf became a so called 'segregated' school. In the second half of the eighties, the first three Freinet schools were set up by the Pedagogical Guidance Centre in empty school buildings in areas of Ghent where the number of children in schools was decreasing. These new schools attracted mainly high-qualified parents from other parts of the town that strongly believed in the Freinet pedagogy. In this way, the three schools unexpectedly became mainly white middle-class schools. This was not in alignment with the original vision of Célestin Freinet, who was a socially engaged pedagogue working mainly in disadvantaged areas. Therefore, the Pedagogical Guidance Centre changed its policy in the nineties, and started to set up Freinet schools in areas of Ghent where many immigrants were living. 'De Vlieger' (2.5 -12 years old) opened its doors in September 1995, and aimed to reserve 30% of school places for children who spoke another language at home. The pupils of the old Biekorf school were integrated after two years in the Vlieger. This approach, of integrating after a couple of years into a segregated school with only migrant children into a new Freinet school, was also successfully used in other parts of the city. The pedagogical project of De Vlieger was based on adapting to diversity, experience-based learning, second language learning, parental participation and democratic team working within a PLC (Department Onderwijs en Opvoeding Stad Gent – Department of Education City of Ghent, 2010).

Elmer Childcare Centres in Brussels: Elmer started in 1997 as an innovative project that sought to combine childcare for disadvantaged groups with a strong collaboration with the neighbourhood, and with an adapted pathway to qualification to work in ECEC for low qualified people from the neighbourhood. The four Elmer childcare centres in Brussels have 161 places for children between 0 and 3 years of age. Elmer has a team of 80 employees of which 14 are following an adapted training course for ECEC. During its 20 years of operating, Elmer has continued to further elaborate on the quality of care and education for young children and the participation of families. The four childcare centres were also very successful in the adapted training they provided. They trained many people (all women) from ethnic minority backgrounds with low qualifications, who became qualified childcare workers at secondary level, and some of them have recently graduated at bachelor level.

Experience and evaluation

For this case study, we conducted in-depth interviews with the directors of both institutions, a teacher, a childcare worker, a pedagogical coach, and a coordinator of one of the Elmer locations.

Some common themes connected to PLCs come out from the analysis of the interviews:

***Reflecting on daily practice*:** Both institutions are characterized by a well-thought construction of how to stimulate reflection and learning. It is the responsibility of the institutions to create the conditions to allow practitioners to reflect and co-construct practice. The city of Ghent provides child-free hours for teachers. At de Vlieger, the director and the team is strongly investing in reflection and dialogue to improve the pedagogical practice. During child-free hours, many activities take place that give teachers and the director the opportunity to develop their school as a learning community:

- Every year, at the end of summer holidays, a two day meeting of Freinet teachers takes place. During the meeting, colleagues give workshops for their peers. According to the teacher, this two day exchange of interesting practice are a very motivating way to start the new school year.

- The De Vlieger team comes together every week to discuss issues that are of interest for all teachers: e.g. exchange experiences on new tools that can be used with children in the classroom, or how to make reports about children that can be motivating for them and simultaneously give clear information to parents. Experts from the Pedagogical Guidance centre can sometimes fill the role of supervisor of these team meetings. Sometimes, even experts in Freinet pedagogy from France come to attend the team meetings.

- Six times a year there is also an exchange with teachers and directors of all Freinet schools. Teachers are free to attend. According to the teacher, the meetings are focused on the pedagogical practice and the themes that are discussed are very diverse and useful.

- There are also peer groups for Freinet teachers that are limited to a few schools that work year-round on a common theme and can share ideas and practice about it.

- There are pedagogical study days (three half days a year) with an external speaker/expert.

- Every two years, teachers are invited to attend a Freinet Conference with colleagues from Belgium, France and the Netherlands on universal themes that can be used in the different countries.

At Elmer, the director and the team are strongly convinced of the importance of reflection and dialogue among colleagues as a tool to develop a quality service. The organization invests in team meetings and makes use of specific methods to enhance reflection and dialogue: video feedback, the Italian approach of pedagogical documentation, and the Wanda co-reflection method. The lack of sufficient child-free hours is sometimes a problem. Elmer would like to invest more in reflection and dialogue around inclusion, but there are not enough child-free hours for this. The following activities take place in the Elmer PLC:

- Elmer organises a monthly meeting in each group, with childcare workers, the coordinator of

> the childcare centre and the pedagogical coach. They discuss concrete pedagogical practice and try to find answers to problems the childcare workers are facing (e.g. familiarizing of parents and children). Tools like the group reflection method Wanda, or pedagogical documentation, are used to reflect on and develop concrete themes.
>
> - Every year there is a team day for each centre with a focus on teambuilding and training (e.g. communication with parents, child poverty).
>
> - Every three months there is also a supervision moment with the staff and the coordinators of the four centres. During this meeting, middle management works with the Wanda tool (co-reflecting method – see 35) around concrete cases of leadership and coaching of childcare workers.

Exchange and constructing practice with others: At De Vlieger, both the teacher and the director declare that inside the team there is an openness, a willingness and a motivation to go to other schools and observe other practice, and to welcome in external teachers and visitors. The director believes strongly in this 'de-privatization' of practice. Also inside the school team, teachers observe and reflect on each other's practice. Young teachers ask more experienced teachers to join their class and give feedback on their approach. The teacher formulates it as follows: 'you learn a lot from your colleagues when the relation between the teachers is safe, and when there is an open and not judging attitude towards each other'. The director gives an example of a teacher who asked for video feedback on her behaviour towards the children, and this improved her practice. Daily contact with parents is also particularly important for the director. Children and parents come each morning to the classroom and are warmly welcomed by the teacher. The parents can stay a while in the class and have a chat with the teacher, which is a very important way to create a climate of trust amongst families, children and teachers. At Elmer, there is a long tradition of 'open doors and open minds'. Since Elmer is also a training organisation on the work floor, giving feedback to each other in daily practice became a natural attitude. The childcare worker formulates it as follows: 'We learn constantly from each other and to each other, from the parents, our colleagues and from the children'. Elmer is also an open house for visitors, or for childcare workers from other centres who want to work there for a couple of days. Elmer was last year involved in the European Erasmus project EQUAP, that used job shadowing (working in a centre in another European country for one week). The experiences of the childcare workers from Elmer with job shadowing in Latvia, Portugal, Slovenia, Italy and Sweden were very positive. This exchange has inspired parental participation at Elmer: the childcare workers discovered new ways of involving parents and families very much appreciated those new initiatives. Dialogue with parents is an important topic at Elmer too. The childcare workers have an important task towards parents: making family participation in the society possible. Elmer takes into account the feedback of parents on the daily practice, and there are many activities organized for them, where they can share their opinions and needs: satisfaction talks, focus groups, parental cafés, and representation of parents in the board. Some parents get the opportunity to follow training to become childcare worker, and after they graduate they can become a childcare worker at Elmer. This makes sure that the voice of parents is very present inside the Elmer team. Elmer aims to be an active partner in the neighbourhood and also a meeting place for democratic cohabitation. The list of Elmer's partners in the neighbourhood is very long, including services for the elderly, cultural organisations, neighbourhood committee, and libraries. The pedagogical coach formulates it as follows: 'Collaboration with the neighbourhood is an important added value, it reinforces the social cohesion and enlarges the social network of parents and children'.

Operating as a collective: At De Vlieger, the director refers to an important principle of the Freinet pedagogy: cooperation. This means that the teachers are heard, questioned and actively involved in the decision-making process. The interviewed teacher talks about a 'self-guided' team. The weekly team meetings are the engine for this collective responsibility: giving feedback, deploying the expertise of each member of the team, and supporting each other if necessary. Moreover, the Department of Education of the City of Ghent is operating as a competent system to improve the competences of teachers (Peeters, De Kimpe, Brandt, 2016). Many actions are taken at different levels (local government, department of education, school team, teachers) to increase the competences of the directors, teams and teachers. At Elmer, staff members feel engaged in a collective project with a clear framework focused on respect towards diversity. The non-judgmental atmosphere supports the share of responsibilities and the collaboration with families and the neighbourhood.

Drive to create a shared vision and set of values: At De Vlieger, the director emphasises the added value of the common vision of all the Freinet schools, which are a source of inspiration and guidance for the daily pedagogical practice. It inspires the yearly evaluation and planning, it can offer solutions to problematic situations, and it helps to make decisions on which projects and actions have to be taken. Experienced teachers are encouraged to follow a four-year training course for Freinet teachers. At De Vlieger, each year one teacher undergoes this training. Teachers who have followed this training together with the director play an important role in further developing the shared vision. They provide interesting texts about the Freinet pedagogy and they participate in meetings in countries that are inspiring for the school team. Next year, the Freinet schools from Ghent will create a new list of shared values and vision that will be discussed by every team. For the interviewed teacher, the most important shared values are emotional security and respect towards each other (parents, children, colleagues). At Elmer, the four centers have a common vision and shared values that is a source of inspiration for the daily work with families and children. The vision text is a kind of guideline that is used to write policy papers, to set up planning, and that helps to define CPD needs. It is used when important decisions have to be taken or when problematic situations need to be solved. The childcare practitioner formulates it this way: 'I am proud of our pedagogical vision, pleasure and experimentation of children is central and it gives opportunities to disadvantaged children. It helps them to enlarge their experience and this can help them later in life. Parents find in this way here a second family, just like me'.

The importance of leaders as agents of change: At De Vlieger, the director is supported by a core team consisting of the care teacher and a teacher. This core team prepares together content-related aspects (e.g. the common vision text) and organisational aspects (e.g. the composition of the classes at the beginning of the school year). The director opposes the purely technical management approach, which is becoming dominant in the education sector. She describes her role as 'creating an ethos of warm professionals, who know what they are doing, why they do what they do and who believe in what they are doing'. She sees her role as stimulating and coaching her collaborators towards change that improves quality. Stimulating exchange of experiences, collaboration and cooperation are for her important points of attention. In her role, she always tries to recognize and employ the talents of each collaborator. She emphasises the role of individual talks, both formal (like performance talks) but especially informal. Coaching is crucial for breaking out of fixed habits and introducing new pedagogical practice. It is also important to optimise the quality of teaching and to follow-up on what has been decided in the team. The director aims to make De Vlieger a place where children, parents and teachers 'make together a school' where all participants are satisfied. The fact that there is low to no turn over in the workforce enforces her belief in the realisation of this aim. For her the important roles of a director are: being an excellent organiser, being able to recognize the needs of parents and children,

being able to listen, consultation, coaching of teachers who are not performing well, and being able to take decisions when there is no consensus in the team. At Elmer, the director is supported in her policy by a team of coordinators, and the pedagogical team supports the childcare workers. The PLC inside Elmer is sustainable, and the director succeeded in creating democratic spaces where not only the pedagogical coordinators but also the teachers are 'agents of change'. The director formulates her task as implementing the values of Elmer: providing security and well-being for all practitioners, giving opportunities for every practitioner to constantly evolve, knowing that every practitioner is unique and acknowledging that diversity is an asset, that every practitioner is equally valued and reciprocity is important, and that everyone has talents and is able to take on responsibility. The childcare worker formulates it as follows: '*Our director is for us a role model. I am proud of my work at Elmer. We have much trust here and responsibility, and the director is communicating very well with us*'.

Conclusions: strengths and challenges

- PLCs need to invest in reflection on daily practice in several different ways. Reflection can happen at an individual level, at a group level, through in-service training, through seminars, through observations, exchanges, etc. Job shadowing also helps, at national and international level.

- A shared vision and set of values are needed. This can also be supported by common training, common projects and shared reflection moments.

- In PLCs, the diversity of staff also plays an important role, since a diverse team, accompanied by pedagogical guidance, gives opportunities to improve in negotiation, which helps in better answering the needs of diverse children and families. Investing in adapted qualification paths for low qualified people is thus important.

- Collaboration with families and the neighbourhood is key in PLCs and it should be supported through a variety of meetings, activities, and opportunities to express each other's point of view.

- PLCs need democratic leadership able to make the team become an active agent of change. Recognizing the talents of each professional is therefore key, together with the capability of building reciprocal trust. These elements increase the motivation of the team, which helps in reducing staff turnover, which in turn provides more continuity to the group.

- Enough child-free hours are necessary in PCLs.

3.2. CROATIA: Making team meetings meaningful in PLCs

Sanja Brajković[9]

Introduction

At the core of PLCs is the principle that professionals need to reflect in teams. Although this need is widely acknowledged, team meetings do not always include critical reflection. In the Republic of Croatia, for example, every practitioner/teacher, irrespective of whether he or she is an employee of a public or a private institution, is obliged to participate in professional meetings of the preschool or school.[10] Consequently, all preschool and school staff members have ample child-free hours in comparison to other European countries (Brajković, 2014). However, despite this golden opportunity, in these so-called 'active meetings' (*aktiv*), practitioners/teachers mainly speak about organizational issues, exchange ideas, plans, and materials, related more to organizational and structural matters than to the quality of the educational process. After meetings, staff are not expected to implement practice in the classrooms and, most importantly, there is no follow-up on the implementation of new ideas or planning.

One teacher says: *'In our activities, topics are imposed, often repeated, we do not participate individually, do not become closer to each other, we just do what we have to do.'*

However, this situation is changing; instead of working in a culture of 'isolation', one that is often present in preschools and schools, new initiatives that provide practitioners/teachers with opportunities for daily mutual cooperation and support within their organisations are underway. The National Curriculum for Early and Preschool Education (2014) underlines the importance of creating professional learning communities (PLCs) in order to encourage practitioners/teachers in exchanging knowledge and experiences. At the initiative of Open Academy Step by Step, PLCs of practitioners/teachers have been created in preschools and schools for nearly six years. The main idea of the initiative is to use existing forms of cooperation among practitioners/teachers in preschools and schools in Croatia, to facilitate the development of PLCs as platforms for enhancing the quality of performance of both practitioners/teachers and educational institutions (and, as a result, the learning experience of each child and their family) (Komandina, Brajković, 2016).

This case study explains the work of OA SbS in setting up and maintaining PLCs in schools and preschools in Croatia.

[9] Sanja Brajković is program director of Open Academy Step by Step in Croatia.

[10] Practitioners/teachers have the right and the obligation to pursue continual professional development through programs approved by the Ministry (Article 115, Paragraph 1, Croatian Parliament, 2008). They are required to take part in professional development at the national level at least once every two years, and at the county level at least three times per year. Therefore practitioners/teachers can be enrolled in professional development programs provided by the Education and Practitioner/Teacher Training Agency (ETTA) provided at the national and, more often, county level. Civil society organizations are also important provider of professional development opportunities through the non-formal practitioner/teacher training programs approved by the Ministry.

Set up of PLC

The development of a PLC requires that the team meetings of practitioners/teachers are meaningful, which largely depends on the skills and competences of PLC facilitators and their understanding of the objectives of the work. Accordingly, the OA SbS approach to the development of PLCs is grounded on organizing educational and additional support for the facilitators. Facilitators of PLCs are primarily practitioners/teachers themselves (preschool and school) who have undergone specific training. Since the intention was to have facilitators with the same authority as members, the facilitators are very rarely external pedagogical coaches or psychologists.

PLC facilitators need to follow a 28-hour training course focused on the following themes: *Common understanding of process quality in addition to the content and structure of the ISSA Principles; How to ensure the reflective practice in professional learning communities?; Establishing professional learning communities; The structure of the professional learning community meeting; How do adults and practitioners/teachers learn?; Different needs of practitioners/teachers; The phases of professional development; Reactions to change.* After this training, facilitators, usually working in pairs, gather practitioners/teachers at the level of their institution (preschool/school), and initiate developing PLCs together with other practitioners/teachers. Each PLC has one two-hour meeting per month.

Since 2012, approximately 150 PLC leaders have been educated in Croatia by OA SbS. These leaders have organized PLC meetings for roughly 750 practitioners/teachers (for example, preschool, elementary school, subject teachers, psychologists, and pedagogical coaches). About half of those who participated in the pilot year of this model almost six years ago, continue to work today.

In order to encourage practitioners/teachers to develop cooperation from the very beginning, one of the goals of an initial PLC meeting concerns co-creating conditions for a safe and challenging learning environment. In addition, for all succeeding meetings, facilitators create activities that allow practitioners/teachers to get to know each other better and to understand each other's values and attitudes, in order to recognize and develop a shared vision and set of values. As a framework for discussing a common vision, PLC members use the document 'Competent teachers of the 21st Century - ISSA Definition of Quality Pedagogy'[11] (hereafter referred to as ISSA's Definition of Quality) (ISSA, 2015).

The child-centred practices in ISSA's Definition of Quality are described in seven areas of practitioners/teachers' work: interactions; family and community; inclusion; diversity and values of democracy; assessment and planning; teaching strategies, learning environment and professional development. Each year, each PLC selects one of the seven areas they wish to enhance. In addition, each PLC independently determines which segment of work they wish to tackle within this area and the time they will dedicate to it. The goal is to guide the PLC towards the development of quality child-centred practice, and at the same time give greater leeway to each PLC to plan their own vision. At the end of each meeting, PLC members develop their 'professional development plan' based on their chosen focus area. The plan describes what they plan to achieve or change in their practice by the next meeting, what actions they will take, what resources they will need, and who can assist them.

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[11]This document (each member of PLC receives a free copy) describes quality child-centered teaching-practice based. A free copy in Croatian is available at http://www.korakpokorak.hr/upload/vrtici/praksa-kvaliteta-izvrsnost/issa-standardi-brosura-za-web.pdf for preschool practitioners/teachers and at http://www.korakpokorak.hr/upload/Sadrzaj/issa_definicija.pdf for elementary school teachers).

Two or three months after the training, one supervision meeting is organized for 'new' PLC facilitators. After the meeting, each facilitator is asked (they are not obligated) to send reports of the meetings with the teams and practitioners/teachers' evaluation of that meeting. They also have an opportunity to receive online mentoring support.

Each team meeting aims to:

- Work on creating a sense of unity and strengthening cooperation between practitioners/teachers.

- Present performed activities and reflections of at least one PLC member.

- Create a common understanding of quality that benefits children and families.

- Think about activities that could be used to improve quality in the selected focus area.

- Revise practitioners/teachers individual professional development plans.

Experience and evaluation

During the monitoring of the PLC, OA SbS developed an online anonymous questionnaire for PLC participants (facilitators and other practitioners/teachers). The questionnaire is organized in two parts, with closed and open questions concerning what it means to take part to the PLC and what kinds of effects this participation has on their way of working. Altogether, 71 PLC participants gave responses to the questionnaire. Most respondents were preschool staff (62% of the respondents) and primary school staff (22%). The other respondents were principals (3%) and school/preschools counsellors (pedagogies, psychologist, speech therapist, etc.) (13%). Most PLC members who responded to the questionnaire have up to two years of experience of professional development in PLCs (82%).

Some noteworthy findings from this study are as follows:

> ***Positive impact on children and families***: The majority of participants think that PLCs have a positive influence on children's development and learning, and on building partnerships with parents and families. For example, one practitioner says: '*Thinking about children and what is really necessary for them, and not what is important for the practitioner/teacher*'.

> ***Strengthening and empowering each other:*** Half of the respondents claimed that for them, exchanges of ideas and reflections are particularly valuable. Practitioners/teachers value analysis of their own practice, self-assessment of their own work, discussions of video examples from their own practice of that of other colleagues. In comparison to previous '*aktiv* meetings', half of the respondents note a clear difference in the 'atmosphere' or 'climate' of the group. They say that members are more open to speak, feel more at ease with each other, and are more relaxed, even when talking about their 'failures'. For example, one practitioner says: '*In the learning community we have the opportunity to talk, discuss, and think together, while in other forms of cooperation we are more passive listeners*'. Another example: '*We have a different goal: not to criticize and evaluate but to assist each other in the improvement of school and individual professional development'.* During the focus group with PLC members in primary school (Vonta, 2016), teachers stressed that their self-confidence as it related to providing quality education is much higher. One of the teachers says: '*I feel more competent and more sure in what and how I am doing my job, and I have somebody behind my back'*.

Another teacher says: '*I am much more capable to define professional issues with words*'. They also started to accept observations of other professionals in their classrooms as something positive, something that could help them in improving their own practice and understanding that they are good teachers. This is important, especially if we consider that until the introduction of the PLC initiative, the practice observation was generally perceived to be an exercise in top-down control by educational authorities.

> ❯ ***Experiencing ownership and increased motivation:*** The questionnaire demonstrated that PLCs have the ability to 'give back' autonomy to practitioners/teachers, so that they experience ownership over their own learning process. Consequently, PLCs positively influence practitioners' and teachers' motivation and their perception of self-efficacy. One practitioner, for example, says: '*PLCs help practitioners/teachers to manage their own professional development both by deciding on the area of their practice they want to improve and by deciding dynamic of change. In this way, they change the system in a bottom-up way*'. And: '*We are more ready to challenge and change ourselves and the environment'.*

> ❯ ***Developing a collective story***: In comparison to the start of the PLC, many participants now believe that it is crucial to build a sense of community, which allows them to appreciate and be appreciated by colleagues, to experience trust, to be open, and to work in a group without stress. In regard to the influence PLCs have had on an institutional level, respondents primarily pointed to positive changes in the institutional atmosphere, and in the capacity to build a shared vision of quality and unity.

Conclusions: strengths and challenges

- PLCs have a positive influence on children's wellbeing and learning by improving practitioners' and teachers' competences. This occurs by building common understanding of quality practice, exchange of ideas, reflection and improvement of everyday practice.

- PLCs positively influence practitioners'/teachers' motivation by granting them autonomy to plan their own professional development, which gives them the ability to introduce changes to their own practice and improves their perception of their self-efficacy.

- Time is needed in order to develop PLCs and to actually experience change in practice. A positive influence is visible and sustainable after several years of PLC implementation. At least two to three years are needed to ensure quality improvement.

- PLCs have a positive influence on an institutional (preschool/school) level by improving the institutional atmosphere, and by building a shared vision of quality and unity.

- PLCs have a 'bottom-up' positive influence on the whole educational system. To sustain their influence on the system, PLCs should be expanded in pre-schools and schools.

- The structure and content of team meetings, as well as the presence of competent facilitators, play a crucial role in the success of PLCs.

- PLC facilitators should have continuous support through networking and other initiatives.

- Preschool and school leaders require more knowledge about PLCs and support to introduce them in their institutions.

3.3. ITALY (Pistoia): Collegiality as basis for PLC

By Donatella Giovannini[12] and Laura Contini[13]

Introduction

The ECEC system in Italy is currently transitioning to adapt to recent regulations that established an integrated system from 0 to 6 years old. In reality, there is still a long way to go in order to realize this; the system remains split, with different management structures and responsibilities for the 0-3 years old and the 3-6 years old sectors. Practitioners in childcare centers and teachers in kindergartens have different qualifications and different salaries, which at the time of writing makes it one of the difficulties to create 0 to 6 pathways.

The 0 to 3 years old sector has undergone many additional changes during the past few years. For one, there are a variety of different providers which now manage the services. It is no longer solely the municipality that runs settings, but there is an increasing number of private entities. The latter have formed different relationships with the municipality, which retains the role of 'controlling and supporting'. A second change is that, alongside traditional childcare centres, there has been an introduction of several different new types of services (*centro bambini genitori, spaziogioco,* and so on). The new services are meant to offer variety and flexibility for the different needs of families.

The shift has moved the focus from each childcare centre, to the quality of the entire public/private system (although many differences still exist in different regions). Each municipality is in charge of the quality of its services (public and private) and it must provide opportunities for continuous professional development (CPD). On a structural level this means also providing child-free hours to staff.

In order to realize this, specific structures of pedagogical coordination have been established in each municipality. These structures are responsible for organizing in-service training, reflection moments, planning, observations, and pedagogical documentation. Pedagogical coordinators, in this context, are leaders/facilitators that support teams in co-reflecting on everyday practice.

Within this framework, specific regions have worked towards quality during the last 50 years, with recognition from the national and the international field. This is especially true for Emilia Romagna (the Reggio Emilia approach), but also Tuscany. These regions have, over decades, developed specific 'community approaches' (Galardini, 2003; Catarsi and Fortunati, 2005) based on the concept of co-education (working in collaboration with families and community) (Catarsi and Fortunati, 2005; Jésu, 2010; Rayna, Rubio, 2010). In the 70s, the first experiences of *democrazia scolastica* (school democracy) (Catarsi and Fortunati, 2005) took shape: ECEC services and schools started being organized through specific committees made up of representatives of staff, parents and municipalities. The heads of this change were Loris Malaguzzi and Bruno Ciari, both proponents of a social-democratic pedagogy.

Within this framework, the Region of Tuscany has invested in an 'integrated system', designed to build a coherent pathway for different services/schools in each municipality. The 'integration' concerns both

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[12] Donatella GIovannini is head of the ECEC system 0-3 of the Municipality of Pistoia.

[13] Laura Contini is head of the ECEC system 3-6 of the Municipality of Pistoia.

vertical and horizontal continuity (see chapter 1.1. Improving ECEC and school quality: the crucial role of the workforce): the private and public sector, the connection between childcare centers/schools and other services in the neighbourhood, and the continuity between different educational levels (e.g. between childcare and preschool, and between the latter and primary school). The relationship with families and the community is crucial here. The coherence of the approach is guaranteed through investment in a specific system of pedagogical coordination that provides a framework. This framework is, at the same time, subject to critical deconstruction through co-reflection in teams.

This case study focuses on Pistoia, a small municipality in Tuscany, which is a recognized example since the 60s. In 1964, the first municipal kindergarten was opened, and in 1972, the first childcare centre. From 1987, new types of services have been created, for example the *Aree bambini* for children between 18 and 36 months and their parents. Despite the national policy, in Pistoia, 0-3 and 3-6 services belong to the same socio-pedagogical project and are built within a common framework. This means that there has been investment on an institutional level in the following aspects:

1. Practitioners (0-3) and teachers (3-6) have the same qualification and nearly the same wages, which has allowed for creating exchanges and continuity between the two sectors.

2. 0-3 and 3-6 services have the same calendar.

3. Specific common CPD paths are provided for practitioners and teachers together (alongside other distinct paths).

4. There has been a possibility to experiment with the spaces and the organization in both settings.

Pedagogical coordinators have worked in this direction by creating coherence and continuity. A specific kind of PLC has been created, with a focus on what we can call 'collegiality'. Collaboration exists on many levels (professionals, teams, institutions, city, families and communities), in order to offer children and families coherent contexts in which to grow.

Set up of the PLC

Within this framework, a coherent CPD plan is drawn up, involving practitioners/teachers and assistants of 0-6 services/schools. The focus is to invest in 1) each professional, in order to support his/her professional growth; 2) the team, through peer-learning activities, with attention to the richness of a diverse team; and 3) the community, in order to create a coherent context that is capable of keeping the ECEC services and schools, the city, and other services, invested in the integrated public/private system.

The starting point is an acknowledgment that learning happens through relationships. CPD is an investment if it supports the capability of listening, of exchanging, and of negotiating different points of view. This capability supports the creation of a coherent context, which is at the same time capable of changing in order to increase the wellbeing of children and families.

Over the years, this vision has taken shape through various kinds of methods and actions:

> **common projects *(progetti corali)***, where services and schools work together (expositions, events in the city, congresses, etc.);
> **common meetings *(intercollettivi)***, where teachers/practitioners from different settings meet order to co-reflect on specific projects or themes related to ECEC;

> **pedagogical exchanges** *(scambi pedagogici)*, through common in-service training;
> **pedagogical partnerships** *(partnerships pedagogiche),* through which different services/schools co-reflect on their pedagogical documentation (videos pictures, observations and so on); and
> **international exchanges**, through experiences of job-shadowing, participation in international projects, and study visits in other countries. Study visits involve practitioners/teachers, coordinators, policy members, and researchers, with the aim of connecting all parts of the system.

All of this creates a specific PLC, focused on 'working together', with attention to the individuals, the groups, and the community. This is what is referred to by 'collegiality', which is the basis of the identity of PLCs in Pistoia. Collegiality creates coherence, with the indirect (but primary) aim of increasing the wellbeing of children and families.

Within this approach, specific 'social learning paths' have been realized, with the aim of supporting staff to better understand some processes (e.g. how to communicate with families, how to support children's interests, their social interactions, their ways of exploring the world, etc.). Within a bottom-up approach, staff in ECEC settings have been asked to identify their specific focus area, considering the identity of each service/school and its strengths and critical points. Each team then chose specific documentation materials related to the chosen area. Practitioners/teachers had to analyse these materials and to create a presentation of their conclusions to be shared with colleagues of other services/schools. These colleagues could then critically reflect on what was presented and exchange points of view on it. The aim was to create co-reflection moments on common themes. This experience has put professionals in a central position, giving them direct responsibility for their growing process, which is an integral aspect of PLCs.

The role of pedagogical documentation is also crucial here. Working with pedagogical documentation (pictures, observations, videos, and anything that 'tells' the stories of the actors involved in the life of a service/school)' has a long and strong tradition in Pistoia. By facilitating communication among actors, as well as with colleagues from other services, 'pedagogical documentation favours the development of a real intersubjectivity (an exchange of perspectives amongst the actors involved). This exchange gives voice to the diversity within the group and becomes the basis to co-construct meanings' (Peeters, Sharmahd, 2014, 416). Observing and documenting are not just 'tools'. They are 'a *habitus*' (Giovannini, Gandini, 2003), a way to listen and give voice, and are thus a way to express and build democracy (Tognetti, 2003; Malavasi and Zoccatelli, 2012), which is an essential attribute of a PLC. Reflecting together on a picture or a video is an important way to deconstruct, reconstruct and negotiate implicit and explicit ideas, and to transform practice on that basis.

In Pistoia, specific effort has been placed on the development of documentation, including 'weekly diaries'. These are written by practitioners/teachers at the end of each week, and they contain the main points of the process of the week for children, families and staff. Besides being an important instrument for common reflection, diaries are also a way to communicate to families and the community about what is happening in the service/school. This experience and investment in working with diaries has been implemented throughout a long project that connects research and training. The project has been carried out in collaboration with the National Research Council (Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche - Istituto di Scienze e Tecnologie della Cognizione) (Picchio et al., 2012).

PLC experience and evaluation

In order to evaluate the PLC experience in Pistoia, we used a mixed method, relying on: 1) secondary data obtained by previous questionnaires and interviews of key actors (parents, staff and coordinators); and 2) focus groups with practitioners/teachers.

From the responses, we can conclude that staff motivation is crucial when creating a PLC and building collective responsibility. Supporting staff and recognizing the value of their jobs is a very important element in building and maintaining PLCs. Pedagogical coordinators therefore have a significant role to play. One practitioner notes that, '*The recognition that we get from the city, from families, from the municipality, give us motivation. And motivation is contagious*'. Another says, '*motivation comes from being in a growing process that supports the team in researching together with colleagues*'. Another, '*knowing that our job is important, that we are important for families, this gives us motivation. We know that we have a big responsibility*'. One teacher states that, '*when your voice is not listened to, then you feel de-motivated. Here we feel that we have a voice*'. Clearly, investing in a 'collegial approach' in which practitioners' and teachers' work is recognized and valued, creates a 'constructive circle' in which staff motivation can grow.

Sharing and reflecting together are fundamental aspects here. One practitioner says: '*We are lucky because we have many occasions to reflect [...]. Reflection needs a context that supports it also practically. Here we have a good coordination system that orients us*'. Another professional notes, '*Reflexivity here is present thanks to a coordination system that accompanies us and gives us an external eye that allows us to reflect on our practice with a certain distance*'.

The crucial role of a pedagogical coordination structure is evident here, provided it gives orientation, motivation, and the possibility to co-reflect, to plan, and to share observations; it implies learning from each other in an active and democratic way.

Pedagogical coordinators must strike a balance between orienting professionals, and allowing them to empower themselves. Pedagogical coordinators are important leaders as they provide a framework to the groups, yet they are also 'democratic leaders' that must facilitate communication within the team and devolve responsibility to the teams themselves. Coaches can stimulate ECEC practitioners in 'discovering what is possible' (Dalli, 2008, p. 17) by trying to look at concrete situations from different perspectives (Musatti and Mayer, 2003; Catarsi, 2011; Peeters, Sharmahd, 2014).

Working in this way takes all aspects of what we call a PLC into account: there is investment in reflection on practice and in de-privatisation of practice, collective responsibility grows, and a common vision and set of values.

Conclusions: strengths and challenges

- PLCs should invest in a common vision and framework that orients pedagogical practice for the whole 0-6 system, in both the public and private sectors.

- Creating an integrated system is not easy when different providers and different working conditions exist in different settings. It is important to invest both in a common framework (common meetings, exchanges) and in fair and sustainable working conditions.

- The key principle of this vision is 'collegiality', which means creating a strong network amongst services/schools, the community, the municipalities, other services, and families.

- PLCs invest in a strong system of pedagogical coordination that orients ideas and practice. This increases staff's motivation, which is crucial to transform practice.

- A competent system is needed, with collaboration among the different levels: the economic/political one, the administrative one, and the socio-pedagogical one.

- There is investment in structural conditions that permit participation in a PLC; for example, providing staff with child-free hours to reflect, plan, observe, document, and peer-learn.

- PLCs need to connect research with practice in order to support change; for example, in Pistoia this has been achieved through a collaboration with the National Research Council.

3.4. SLOVENIA: A multilevel approach to PLC

By Tatjana Vonta[14]

Introduction

This case study describes the vision and activities of the Step by Step Network Slovenia (SbS Network); specifically, it focuses on the setting up and management of a professional learning community (PLC) which includes ECEC services by connecting different levels of the system.

ECEC in Slovenia is organized as a unitary system for children aged eleven months up to six years old, and falls under the auspices of the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport. The government sets the relevant legislation and the ECEC curriculum. Municipalities are responsible for providing enough ECEC places, and for implementing the national curricular framework.

The national curriculum was introduced in 1999. It sets out broad goals and principles for early childhood education, and represented a shift away from the traditional emphasis on content towards emphasizing the process and enabling practitioners' autonomy and responsibility (Vonta, 2007; Bahovec et al., 2007).

The programmes are implemented by teachers and teacher assistants. In some ECEC settings that have children from the Romani minority, Roma assistants also work directly with children. Early childhood teachers have higher education degrees, teacher assistants have a vocational qualification (upper secondary), and Roma assistants have a vocational qualification for Roma assistants.

According to government regulations (Collective Agreement for the Education Sector in the Republic of Slovenia – Kolektivna pogodba za dejavnost vzgoje in izobraževanja v Republiki Sloveniji, Article 53, 2016), practitioners with at least an intermediate education are obliged to attend five days (during working hours) of in-service training per year or fifteen days every three years; other workers are obliged to attend at least two days per year or six days every three years. ECEC centre directors are obliged to organize training and other continuous professional development (CPD) activities for

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[14] Tatiana Vonta is an associate professor at the University of Lijubliana, senior research associate, international consultant. She is also former head of Center for Quality in Education Step by Step at Educational Research Institute, Slovenia.

practitioners within the yearly work plan and to enable them to participate. On a structural level, this also means that child-free hours must be provided in order to join the training activities, and to reflect, plan, and observe. At the same time, it is the obligation of practitioners to participate in those activities, although some tend not to be very involved. CPD is thus both an obligation and an engagement. However, a problem with attendance exists because many ECEC settings do not have replacement staff available. Many CPD activities take place in the late afternoon or on Saturdays. The costs for CPD activities are incorporated into the programme's or institution's budget. CPD activities are required activities and count towards promotion.

Set up of the PLC

Within this context, the SbS Network plays a significant role in organizing CPD activities.

The SbS Network was instituted in 2002 to manage the CPD activities of those practitioners who successfully started to implement the holistic and complex Step-by-Step (SBS) Program. The SBS Program was initiated by the Open Society Institute in 1995 and was later transferred in 1997 to the ERI Institute, the *Public Research Institution* in the field of education in Slovenia, where the *Development Research Centre for pedagogical initiatives SBS* was established and renamed one year ago to the *Centre for Quality in Education.*

The interest in being involved in the SBS program was high, and it has been acknowledged that this program had a major impact on the introduction and implementation of the national curriculum. The Centre provided training to everyone interested and helped in organizing visits, observations and presentations in the ECEC settings.

By 2000, activities in this innovative project were broadly implemented throughout Slovenia in 231 classrooms in 38 ECEC settings (Vonta, 2015). In order to sustain the CPD activities, in 2002 the SbS Network Slovenia was established and it is still successfully operating. In Slovenia, ECEC institutions are not permitted to pay fees to associations or networks, however, they can choose providers for CPD and pay for those services. Therefore, the SbS Network has charged fees for professional development to its members' institutions depending on the number of classrooms that were involved in the activities.

The SbS Network started with practitioners/teachers and assistants from 100 classrooms. In 2005, it involved 250 classrooms more or less, and in 2010 around 370 classrooms and 703 teachers and assistants. Today, around 800 classrooms are involved and 1800 practitioners/teachers and assistants. The number of ECEC institutions has remained around 34-40 (Vonta, 2011). The increased number of staff from a relatively constant number of ECEC settings shows that the SbS Network activities have been mostly spreading on the level of the institutions already involved, while teachers from new settings ae slowly joining. One of the reasons for this situation is the fact that the Centre has never had enough core staff to support a very large network.

In 2010, the Centre provided a qualitative evaluation of its activities within the institutions involved. In 2011, a quantitative study followed (Vonta, 2011). The results of this evaluation led the SbS Network to shift toward a more bottom-up approach by giving space to actions initiated by practitioners. At that time, the concept and role of professional learning communities (PLCs) had been introduced to the Network's members. More responsibility had been put on the practitioners/teachers themselves through peer mentoring and sharing experiences with each other. The SbS Network's goals expanded to strengthening and developing the proactive abilities of practitioners to be more independent, more participatory and autonomous in decision making around the quality of educational processes; to be

more proactive in searching for solutions in areas where there are doubts or questions, to be able to advocate for their profession and influence development of the ECD field with active participation in sharing their points of view and their experiences even on the international level.

More specifically, every team goes through a self-evaluation process, defining their strengths and critical points, finding out what their specific needs are, and deciding about the Focus Area they want to work on. After they have chosen the Focus Area (7 areas exist), they deconstruct the meaning of the *ISSA Principles of Quality Pedagogy* and indicators in that area (ISSA, 2009). In the next step, the innovation phase, they prepare a framework plan for changes they will implement and research in their practice together with indicators of success. The plans are shared among all members in the SbS Network.

Tankersley (2016, p. 11-14) described the processes in teams in the following steps:

- Introduction to theory and seeing the theory in practice.

- Engaging in individual self-evaluation of their practice as well as group reflection on the practices within the kindergarten using the Principles of Quality Pedagogy.

- Choosing a Focus Area to concentrate on and deepen understanding.

- Teaching how to do observations.

- Engaging in peer observations focusing on collecting evidences and examples of good practice.

- Videotaping practice to reflect on it.

- Engaging in professional discussions around the peer observations and videos referring back to the resources in the Quality Re-source Pack.

- Planning next steps and reflecting on changes.

Currently, the Centre offers various packages with different services and prices from which members can choose. The services in packages are differentiated in a way that they serve members' different needs (for beginners, or for more advanced members). They include coordinators' reflection meetings, director meetings, exchanges, joint observations and reflective meetings on every day practice, regional meetings, and a 'school for coordinators'.

In this way, the PLC created by the SbS Network operates on different levels: on the level of each ECEC service, on the inter-institutional level among ECEC institutions, and on the individual level among all members of the SbS Network. Participation in the PLC at the institution level is in the majority of cases voluntary. Teams at the institution level include early years teachers and teacher assistants, in many cases preschool counsellors, sometimes the institution's leaders (director, vice director, heads of departments), and in some cases Roma assistants.

PLC experience and evaluation

The PLC experience has been analysed through the results of qualitative and quantitative studies carried out at the Educational Research Institute (ERI) about the operation and impact of the SbS Network, the documentation at ERI, and the results of the case study on implementing the Quality

Resource Pack (ISSA, 2009) in Slovenia produced by Dawn Tankersley (2016) for the International Step by Step Association (ISSA). Tankersley used diverse sources for data collection (interviews with the core team, the former and current director, advisory board members, trainers, the core team in the centre, parents, teachers, assistants, and administrators). For additional data, we conducted focus groups with ECEC institutions' directors/directors and PLC leaders/coordinators in three institutions involved in the SbS Network.

Through the analysis of our data, we can identify the impact of PLC activities from different perspectives:

> *Children:* All information collected has been from parents or professional staff in ECEC services. In the interviews for this case study, directors mentioned that in classrooms with teachers involved in the SbS Network everything seems to run more 'smoothly' and in a 'peaceful' atmosphere with attention to the individual rhythms and interests of children. One director states that children are much more connected with the surrounding community, and that the community started to be more responsive to cooperation with the institution. Staff implement activities where children from different classrooms cooperate, so their possibilities for different interactions are richer.

> *Parents and community:* The PLC supports ECEC professionals in being more open to parents. Indeed, teachers recognize that they have changed their communication style with parents (Tankersley, 2016, p. 19). At the same time, parents say that teachers are interested in their approaches towards their children and are searching for better solutions with them in approaching each child. Parents also know that their children's teachers are collaborating with other classrooms and that it is important that teachers are engaged in CPD, since directors and coordinators inform parents about it. Families know that the community is also involved, professionals are more aware of all other services that exist in their area, and they call for collaboration. Teachers are also more capable to express their professional opinion when they communicate with other services. At the same time, the community itself is more aware of the work of the service and open to take part to its activities.

> *Professionals/teams:* A study conducted by Vonta (2011) found that staff had changed their practice in interactions that support learning, activities that require taking into account individual differences, self-evaluation, reflection, autonomy, partnership with parents, awareness, and sharing knowledge and experiences. According to directors, staff are constantly looking for answers to the questions from their work in the classrooms. One of them says: '*they (teachers) are researching their practice, they see their progress, they are satisfied with themselves and are happy with their job. They don't need the director to lead them. But I have to show the respect for their efforts in my reports, with visiting their classrooms, observing their work from time to time*'. At the same time, one of them stresses that '*these kinds of processes need time, especially at the beginning*'. Another director points out that all staff are more sensitive to the diversity among children, parents and community members.

Another important aspect is that team working includes teacher assistants and that they appreciate being part of the PLC (Tankersley, 2016, p. 17). Involvement of assistants is crucial in order to improve quality, as stated in a previous NESET II report (Peeters, Sharmahd, Budginaité, 2016).

Interviewed trainers pointed out that the strength of the PLC is in the teamwork, which needs to be constantly developed, as it is not a closed-end process. From interviews with ECEC and school staff, Tankersley (2016) found out that working in learning communities supported staff to take more

risks individually and as a group. This was confirmed by one of the directors who mentioned that the environments in learning communities are much more supportive, professionals listen to each other, share, and open classroom doors to other practitioners, which means working towards a de-privatisation of practice.

This is also proved by the fact that half of the practitioners from the Network expressed their readiness to open their doors to other teachers to observe their practice, and expressed their wish to observe other's practice (Vonta, 2011).

We can conclude that the SbS Network's activities had a positive and rather high impact on staff. Nevertheless, there is still a lot of work to do in order to find processes that will help professionals in being more open, confident, reflective and independent.

›   *Leadership and institutional level:* The SbS Network trains coordinators on how to facilitate meetings. The training reinforces the concept that the coordinators' role is to facilitate the teachers' co-construction of knowledge, instead of being seen as 'the expert'. The coordinators also have regular meetings together with other coordinators and the Centre's Core Team staff at least once or twice a year. The interviewed coordinators point out that they learned how to be open to different opinions; how to formulate a specific opinion professionally; how to prepare themselves for activities with adults; how to have greater self-confidence; how to understand better what is the child-centered approach; how to connect ideas and conclusions; how to care for other team members; and how to be responsible for their participation. They also stressed that it is very important for them to have meetings with other institutions' representatives.

The role of leaders is also very important. However, many questions still exist on how to improve their competences and on how to guarantee a certain continuity of leadership, since turnover is quite common not only among practitioners/teachers, but also among leaders themselves. The complexity of a job that is rarely supported could probably be one of the reasons for this turnover.

PLC experience and evaluation

- PLCs should share a common vision and set of values. A framework is needed. At the same time this framework needs to be open to be critically deconstructed and reconstructed. Thus, PLCs need a combination between top-down and bottom-up approaches.

- De-privatisation of practice (shared observations, meetings, etc.) and reflective and in-depth dialogues are needed.

- In order to realize all of this, child-free hours for all staff are needed. In Slovenia, they are foreseen for teachers/practitioners and also for assistants (although in a different amount). This supports giving value to a diverse team.

- Child-free hours are not sufficient. There needs to also be a plan on 'what to do' with the child-free hours in a meaningful way.

- There is investment in collective responsibility because of a bottom-up approach. This means involving everyone in the decision-making process and in co-constructing meanings and actions.

- The PLC is a network that works on many levels interacting with each other, which means working in the framework of a competent system.

- PLCs need a connection between research and practice: in Slovenia, the Centre is part of the

Research Institute and researching quality is one of its main focuses. This is a very important aspect that allows practice to connect with research and to enrich both. Being involved in research is for professionals a way to grow in their job, to reflect on it and to value it. At the same time, this is for researchers an opportunity to be involved in practice and to look for improvement together with the staff.

- The role of leadership is crucial, so more attention should be placed on leaders' competences. Providing continuity is also important. Changing leaders can raise a lot of challenges for a PLC. At the same time, considering the PLCs' coordinators, questions about what kind of processes and support would help them in their role are constantly present.

- Documentation: a PLC's processes should be made visible to families, communities, and other colleagues (Tankersley, 2016, p. 21).

- Official financial support for PLCs is needed in order to make them sustainable on long-term.

CHAPTER 4. KEY POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Improving learning and wellbeing for children and families, through an inclusive and holistic approach, is the ultimate aim of education. Contemporary European policy and research recognizes that this aim can be reached through high-quality ECEC services and schools accessible for all. In the same way, it is recognized that quality is connected to a professional and competent workforce, working within a 'competent system', which includes collaborations between individuals, teams and institutions, as well as competent governance at policy level (Urban et al., 2011; Vandenbroeck et al., 2016). As stated by several research and policy documents (Moss, 2009; Peeters, 2008; Pourtois and Desmet, 2004; European Commission, 2015), our societies require a workforce capable of dealing with differences and commonalities by valorising them. In order to achieve higher quality in the educational system, we need professionals that are able to negotiate, to reflect on the meanings of what they think and do (Schön, 1983), and to question themselves. Competent systems are needed, and collaboration among different stakeholders and services/schools is crucial, as indicated by the 'whole school approach' (European Commission, 2015c). Investing in this direction would mean creating a 'communitarian vision' in which each child and family can grow, be valued and be recognized. This should decrease early school leaving as well (ibid.).

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are one of the compelling answers to this call. By investing in the relationships among professionals, families, communities, and services/schools, and by supporting their capability of respecting and learning from each other, PLCs give voice to competent systems focused on inclusion and respect for diversity.

Considering the confusion about the identity of PLCs today, and taking into account the importance of a clear investment in this direction, our report analysed the meaning of PLCs, their place in competent systems, and the strengths and critical points of their possible realization. This has been done through a general overview, followed by four case studies in four European countries (Belgium (Flanders), Croatia, Italy, and Slovenia).

Based on the literature review and the case studies, we highlighted five criteria as crucial elements characterizing a PLC's identity. These elements are important both for the ECEC and the school

systems. Our conclusions and recommendations focus on these criteria and thus concern both ECEC and school sectors.

In general, all of the recommendations influence each of the five criteria, but for clarity we differentiate between them.

More specifically:

1. **Need for staff members to frequently engage in 'reflective and in-depth dialogues' with colleagues about educational matters based on daily practice.**

> All our case studies indicate how **co-reflecting on practice** is important for a team and amongst different teams. Group reflection and dialogue are keys to transforming practice in order to improve quality for children and families.
> **PLCs need to provide all team members with a possibility to grow and learn**, including directors, pedagogical coaches, practitioners, teachers, assistants, etc. This requires: 1) different kinds of CPD activities for different levels; and 2) a variety of learning methods, accommodating the different needs of the participants. Reflection can be organised on an individual, group, or inter-institutional level, and can be supported in several ways (observations, supervision moments, team meetings, seminars, pedagogical documentation, job shadowing, etc.).
> PLCs benefit from the **connection of research and practice**. Participative research, in particular, is important in this field because 1) it allows to professionals to grow in their job through reflection; and 2) it represents a way to value staff's work, which has an influence on motivation. At the same time, research benefits from being involved in practice and the whole process creates a constructive circular path that supports quality improvement in PLCs.

Recommendations

Policy makers in Member States should invest in:

- **Child-free hours** for all staff: contracts should guarantee a specific amount of paid hours without children during which ECEC and school staff can reflect on their practice.
- **Team meetings** and other activities to reflect on pedagogical practice: planning, observations and documentation. These activities should include all members of the team (including, for example, low-qualified assistants).
- **Pedagogical support by pedagogical coaches** in order to initiate and accompany the reflection.
- **Developing reflective tools** for teams and individuals (e.g. specific group reflection methods[15]).
- **Connecting PLC's practice to research,** through the relationship between services/schools, universities or research centers.

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[15] For example, group reflection methods such as Analyse de Pratiques, developed in France, or Wanda, developed in Flanders (BE) and adapted to the contexts of other countries.

2. **Need for staff members to move from the classroom doors in a 'de-privatization of practices', by observing each other's practice, giving feedback, planning jointly, building relationships with the neighbourhood and community, and engaging in dialogue with parents.**

> The case studies show how **observing one another's practice, giving feedback, planning together as a team, and engaging in dialogue with families and neighbourhoods**, each support professionals in co-constructing meanings and practice, and lowers the risk of isolation.

> **European exchanges or job shadowing** are also noteworthy experiences because they encourage staff to experience daily practice in other contexts, which broadens their perspectives and supports change in their own practices.

Recommendations

Policy makers in Member States should invest in:

- **Shared observations/job shadowing**, which allows practitioners to learn from each other and reflect together on each other practice.

- **Exchange with other services** (on local, national and European level), which encourages the de-privatization of the pedagogical practice. European projects, such as Erasmus+ represent a significant opportunity in this direction.

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3. **Need to invest in 'collective responsibility': school improvement is no longer considered to be the sole responsibility of a principal or single teacher, but rather a collective one.**

> Evident in the case studies is a **bottom-up approach**, in which each actor goes beyond attributing responsibility to one teacher or director, instead pooling responsibility and investing in a common project.

> Giving staff an opportunity to constantly reflect on their practice and to learn from each other encourages staff to become **'active participants' in their own learning process**, which in turn increases their **motivation**. The latter is a key benefit of PLCs, not least because instilling a strong sense of motivation helps to decrease staff turnover rates. Staff turnover is indeed a challenge many PLCs face, since the continuity of ECEC and school staff and directors/pedagogical coaches helps in building a strong PLC system based on a shared vision and set of values.

Recommendations

- Policy makers should create **structural conditions that facilitate peer learning through**

exchanges between and among different levels and actors in the system in a horizontal and vertical way.

4. Need to focus on reaching a shared vision and set of values, based on children's rights and respect for diversity.

❯ **PLCs require an open common framework of a shared vision and set of values, based on children's rights and respect for diversity.** The approach should be **democratic and communitarian**, in which the voices of families, professionals, children, and the neighbourhood, are all listened to. In this vision, vertical and horizontal collaboration and exchange is intended to take place among the different services, schools and organizations that are within the same territory (ECEC services and schools, and other services in the neighbourhood).PLCs promote a peer-collaborative culture in which ECEC services and schools learn from each other. There is no superiority of the latter; instead, there is an awareness that in some fields (for example, 'relationships' or 'emotional development') schools are the ones that can learn from ECEC services.

In order to better respond to the diversity of children and families in PLCs, it is important to invest in the reflecting and negotiating competences of staff. This is supported by **diversity among staff members**, as outlined in a previous NESET II report concerning the professionalization of childcare assistants (Peeters, Sharmahd, Budginaitè, 2016).

Recommendations

- Policy towards PLCs should stress the importance of a shared vision and set of values based on democracy and respect for diversity.
- Member States should invest in hiring a **diverse workforce** in ECEC and school services, in terms of language, gender, and socio-cultural background.

5. Need to invest in 'leadership' as a powerful factor in transforming a school's culture.

❯ Leaders (school directors, pedagogical coordinators etc.) can be drivers of change. PLCs in competent systems need **democratic leadership that is capable of combining a top-down with a bottom-up approach**. Leaders in PLCs need to be able to orient the group, but at the same time they need to listen to and value each member of the staff, and create shared responsibilities. This means creating a *safe* place (in which people feel free to express themselves) that is at the same time *challenging* (meaning that people feel motivated in improving and transforming their practice) for the people involved.

❯ To keep this balance, leaders require specific competences, and they cannot work in isolation. Besides particular training, **leaders need to be supported** by a strong network that enables them to learn from one another, also taking into account that PLCs are still rather new. Investing in training and support would also help in creating knowledge building on PLCs.

Recommendations

- Member States should **support the competences of PLC leaders** through the creation of specific training paths for leaders.

- Member States should support the establishment of a professional **network** that guarantees supervision moments and peer-learning exchanges for leaders.

To summarise, the above-mentioned five criteria that characterize PLCs represent key elements to be taken into account, in order to make contemporary ECEC services/schools capable of tackling the challenges practitioners/teachers are confronted with in a multi-diverse society. Through PLCs based on these elements, a collaborative-democratic culture can be developed in services/schools that can contribute to improve learning and wellbeing for children and families.

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