

**GROUP REFLECTION
AS A MOTOR FOR
HIGH-QUALITY
EDUCATIONAL
PRACTICE**



**An inspirational
travel guide for practitioners
and leaders in ECEC
and primary schools**

May, 2023



PROJECT CONSORTIUM:



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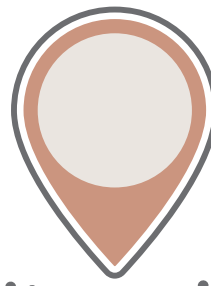


ABOUT THIS GUIDE



This Guide will help you get familiar with the collaborative reflective practices of educators* working in Early Childhood Education Centres (ECEC) and primary schools. It is intended for both ECEC professionals and leaders interested in finding out more about [professional learning communities](#), how they operate, how different reflective methods help educators and how to set one up in your educational setting.

The Guide is developed within the [Reflection, Cooperation, Group Support](#) (REC) international project funded by the European Union with the aim of introducing collaborative reflective methods for educators and other professionals working with children aged 0-10 in a total of ten child-care and educational centres in Belgium (Flemish Community), Croatia, Hungary and Slovenia. It is grounded on national experiences of the consortium partners, their collaborative reflective practices in different educational systems (e.g. split and integrated ECEC systems), as well as on international research findings. Through our joint experience, we share the voices of numerous educators who, based on their experiences, advocate for the opportunity to be a part of the reflective group within their comprehensive, supportive and continuous professional development.



The Guide has been prepared so that institutions not participating in the program can find their way to the reflective methods that best suit them in order to set up sustainable reflection groups. In the chapters that follow, we will outline the route of professional learning communities as an approach to the professional development of educators.

The Guide outlines the basic information on specific methods of reflection, providing links to further resources for those who want to know more. Some of the methods require trained facilitators. For more support in a particular reflective method, please refer to REC partnership resources:

[Partners Hungary Foundation, Hungary](#)

[Open Academy Step by Step, Croatia](#)

[Centre for Innovation in the Early Years \(VBJK\), Belgium](#)

[Artevelde University of Applied Sciences, Belgium](#)

[Pedagogical institute, Slovenia.](#)

* Due to variety of terms used in different European countries for professionals who work with children in ECEC and primary schools, the consortium decided to use 'educator' as the common term. This term refers to a person who promotes children's development, wellbeing and learning by creating environment in which children can cultivate their unique learning and development capacities both in ECEC and primary school settings, and includes different types of child-care and educational practitioners and leaders.

Here are some of the questions we tackle:

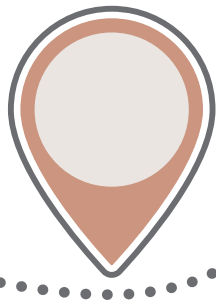
- What are the goals and benefits of professional learning communities?
- What elements of collaborative reflective practices should be ensured?
- What are the necessary conditions for starting a reflective journey in your own team?
- How to ensure adequate support during the work of the professional learning community?
- How do methods of group reflection look like in practice?

WHY EMBARK ON A REFLECTIVE JOURNEY WITH US?



The professional development of educators should be continuous and exciting just like a journey. It should be reflective and explorative like we explore new places we visit: we observe, we question, we laugh, we try something new and we connect to new experiences with people or communities we meet. All of these things and more are also done during the professional development in learning communities. This is why we invite you to join us on this journey.





With the development of education sciences, we become more and more aware of different **children's needs** related to their development and learning as well as of different ways how to meet them. At the same time, **educators' work** becomes increasingly more complex and diverse than ever before, both in early childhood and primary education setting. Educators' work is dynamic, changing over and with time, and developed within multidiverse societies. Every day educational professionals are faced with numerous decisions they have to make. Those decisions have consequences on the experiences, development and learning of each child in our group and care. Educators often lack support in making fully informed decisions in their work, and this is particularly the case for those working in more challenging context such as in centres for societally vulnerable, marginalized or at risk children. Educators come into contact with not just children but families, communities and other adults and professionals who are connected to children in different ways. Additionally, child-care and education across Europe records concerning shortages of educators, a profession that is often underappreciated. In the ECEC practice of today there

are no standard answers applicable to all families and children. As educators and education experts, we advocate for providing opportunities to reflect and to grow in our profession so that we can support children in our care better. While working, **educators do not just teach; they sympathize, think and react.** Although educators' work is founded on knowledge about the cognitive, emotional and social development of children/learners, it is at the same time a deeply social and emotional activity. Working with children is closely related to the values and representation we promote, including those of children's rights and social justice – in that sense, educators' is an activist profession.

Furthermore, ECEC quality is strongly related to a professionally competent workforce. In this, individual competences are not enough. They need to take shape in a competent system which includes collaboration between professionals, teams and institutions, as well as competent governance on policy level. A competent system has to link staff's initial good training to the opportunities for continuous reflection on the present, on new ideas and practices, as underlined by the [European Quality Framework for ECEC](#).

.....
*While working,
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think and react.*
.....

That is why team reflection is recognized as a fundamental aspect of quality in the ECEC sector (Peeters et al. 2015). It is one of the key elements for creating Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) (Brajković 2014). These networks of different profiles of staff in different settings work together in a variety of ways with the same goal, that of increasing the quality of supporting the wellbeing of children and their families (Sharmahd et al. 2017).

Educators who are not supported to reflect about the meaning and consequences of their actions, behaviours and the context in which they work cannot meet the needs of the contemporary educational profession. They are mechanically inclined to routine and work as technicians (Schön 1983). Rigidly following prescribed curriculums, norms, policies, handbooks and ready served 'practical examples' results in practice primarily driven by tradition and authorities (Dewey 1933). This means that educators try to solve problems or try to teach based on the 'collective code' ('this is how WE do it'), and not following the needs of children. It is still commonly considered that a 'good educator' should always and immediately know the 'right' answers for all the issues and challenges which occur, instead of feeling encouraged to pause, challenge, reflect on old and create new pathways when needed – while, in fact, **successful educators are the ones who are competent to educate reflectively.**

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Contemporary education sciences support this idea that reflective practitioners have to constantly question their daily practice as well as themselves to embark on new interpretations on how they relate to children (Peeters 2008).
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A founder of reflective practice theory, John Dewey, emphasized that for learning or professional development to happen, a professional needs to be able to connect their new experience to what they already know. To learn, a professional needs to be actively interacting with others, continuously testing out and modifying what was learned. To meet complex requirements of their work and raise the quality of education and child-care, **educators need to be free to create new transformative practices by exploring their own practices, knowledge, values and beliefs.** Therefore, we strongly believe reflection is a right and not an obligation, but as such should be supported and cherished.


Contemporary education sciences support this idea that reflective practitioners have to constantly question their daily practice as

well as themselves to embark on new interpretations on how they relate to children (Peeters 2008). Reflective thinking implies conscious and purposeful effort to understand one's own activity or one's own experience in a certain situation in order to create new learning or new action and to improve outcomes (Vizek-Vidović 2011).

In reflective teaching, the educator actively, persistently and mindfully reflects upon each professional belief, all the good and bad sides with all its consequences. This very often means thinking about what you are doing, while you are doing it, making on-the-spot adjustments to what you are doing. This kind of reflection may become automatic, habitual and intuitive and it is called '**reflection in action**' or 'thinking on your feet'.

Analysing our own practice after the fact is called 'reflection-on-practice' or 'reflection-on-action'. It involves looking back and going over things again. It is an opportunity to see an event with 'different pair of glasses' and try to understand the deeper meaning of what happened. Reflection-on-action helps educators to plan new professional decisions and actions upon their insights which will transform their practice. This kind of reflection is called '**reflection-for-action**' (Schön 1983).

Educators who have regular opportunities to analyse their own practice **in cooperation with**



Postcard from a traveller

I recognise change on a personal and professional level as a result of being a part of a professional learning community. Before participating in meetings, I used to take on all the challenges that I came across in my classroom, perceiving them as my 'problem', something that I had to solve on my own, successfully and as quickly as possible.


After almost half a year of PLC meetings in my school, I noticed that teachers started to collaborate and help each other more often. They are now willing to listen to each other about the challenges they face. I think that the members of the community have become closer, they communicate more, sharing both professional and personal topics important to them.

Primary school teacher from Croatia

others tend to reflect more easily and mindfully on their teaching activities, introducing on-the-spot changes that will make teaching more effective and supporting each other in this endeavour. This is what we call **group reflection**.

It is important to note that educators work in diverse settings within diverse communities, which often means they have very different professional and learning needs. Because of this, new and different forms of continuous professional development other than traditional and standardized training programmes are necessary. **Professional development should be strongly connected to the daily practice of each individual educator** and allow both peer and expert support during

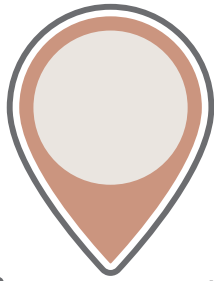
the process of introducing changes into practice. Additionally, it is particularly important for professional development practices to respect the principles of adult learning, providing learning opportunities such as peer learning that better fit the nature of adult learning. We need to harvest benefits from the fact that **educators work with other educators** who also have similar experiences. Sharing of these experiences, if facilitated and geared towards children's wellbeing, will inevitably lead to the enhancement of the quality of their work. This is why group reflection is such a powerful vehicle for travel.



PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES (PLC) AS A JOURNEY TOWARDS REFLECTIVE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

How it started...

The concept of PLC is not new. Judith Little and Susan Rosenholtz first articulated it in the 1980s arguing that if the workers learned and developed professionally within organisations, these organisations will develop as well (Vescio et al. 2008; Fullan, 2006). Rosenholtz (1989) applied the theory in education, finding that educators with a higher sense of self-efficacy had better chances of introducing changes in their practice. She found that educators who felt support throughout their professional career and development and cooperated with other colleagues were more committed and efficient.



While traveling, we encounter different and new people, see new views and horizons but this often motivates us to rethink our own experiences and beliefs. Traveling helps us to get to know ourselves better, both our strengths and weaknesses, providing us with some new ideas in the process. Similarly, PLCs enable educators to reflect on their talents and weak points so that they can improve them. Still, it is always hard to start. Many might ask how to distinguish a learning community from a group of experts or a support group. What makes a group reflective?

Let's start the journey and find out more.

A Professional learning community (PLC) is a type of continuous professional development opportunity that enables a group of educators to regularly **exercise reflective thinking by looking back on different professional experiences**. This is our vehicle on a journey towards reflective educational practice.

Educators today are often professionally isolated. Their experiences are rarely used as a resource in their professional development. Through professional learning communities and reflective thinking, their own learning process and that of their peers' is placed

Checklist for your reflective trip:

For a conversation within a PLC to be reflective, it must have the following characteristics (Ghaye 2011, Sharmahd et al. 2017.):

- it looks back on what has been,
- it looks forward to what will be,
- it is happening in a certain time and space,
- it makes sense for teaching and learning,
- it examines educators' experiences,
- it has the potential to enlighten and empower,
- it keeps the focus on educational values,
- it moves from individual learning to group understanding.

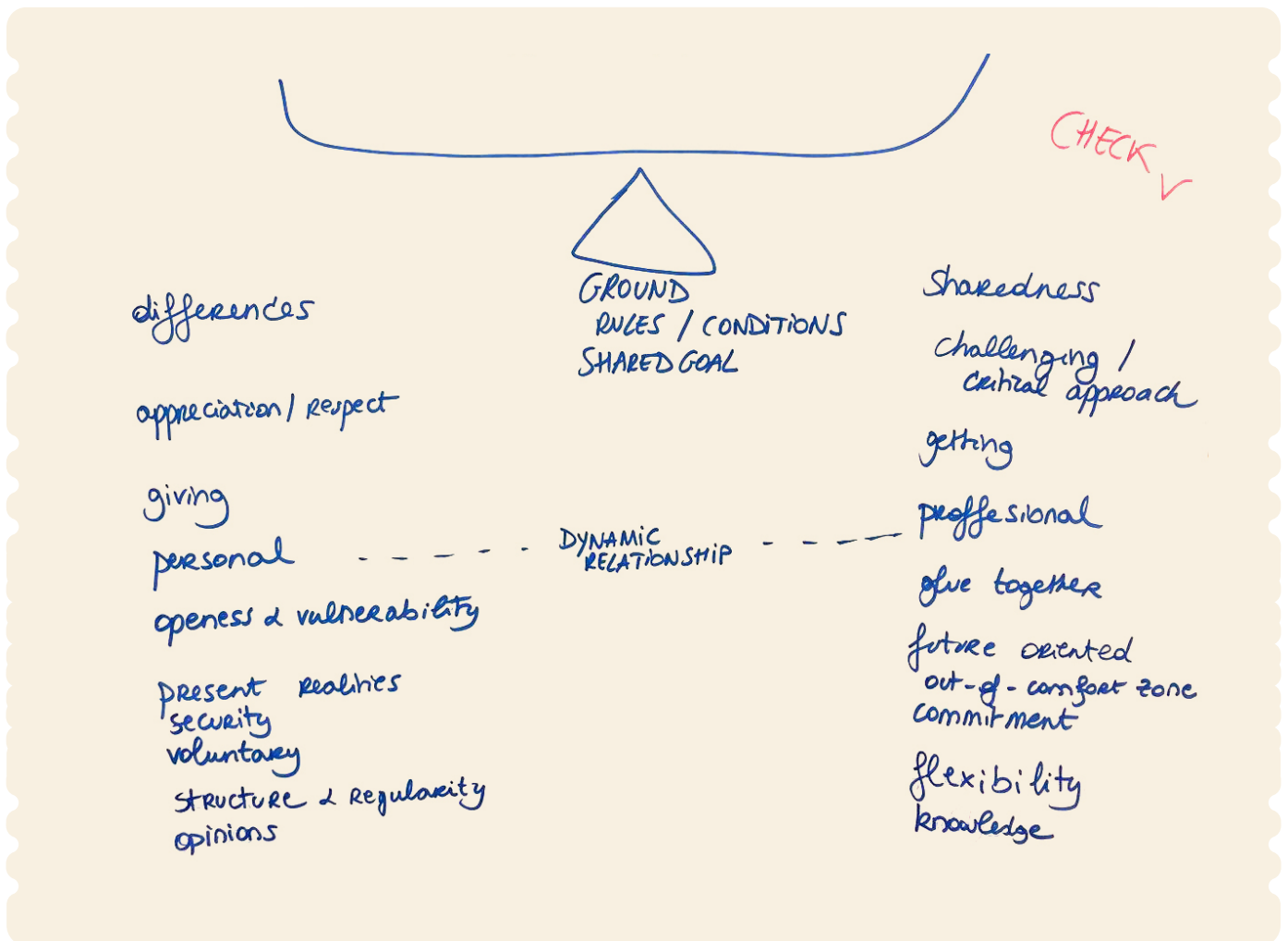
at the centre of their professional enhancement.

As groups of professionals who meet regularly in order to learn with and from each other, PLCs are sometimes also called: critical teams for development, peer coaching, team learning, collective learning. Regardless of what we call the group or the process, PLCs are usually defined by the following characteristic:

- the group is composed of regular members
- the meetings usually last two hours
- members share their experiences, opinions, attitudes
- there is a common willingness for finding the best solutions for professional issues.

By sharing and listening to others,

educators get a critical overview of their own work which helps them in reflection-in-action and making on-the-spot adjustments when they go back to the classroom. Both new and experienced educators build on their own ideas and the experiences of their peers, reconsidering their own previous knowledge and beliefs, with the aim of improving the quality of educational practice and enhancing children's development and learning (Cochran-Smith & Lyle 2011). PLC is an **educational organization with a deep-rooted culture of collaboration, support and exchange with a goal to learn sustainably, individually and collectively in order to improve ECEC and school system and strengthen the development of children** (Stoll et al. 2006).



The work of the PLCs is aimed at supporting educators, both emotionally and professionally, throughout the course of their professional development by allowing them to (Sharmahd et al. 2017; De Neve&Devos 2016; Vanblaere&Devos 2016):

- frequently engage in reflective and in-depth dialogues with colleagues,
- move from a deprivatisation of practices, by observing each other's practices, giving feedback, planning jointly, building relationships with the neighbourhood,
- engaging in dialogue with parents,
- share with other educators' specific ideas on how to improve the learning experience of all children,
- motivate other educators to enhance the quality of their work and help them enjoy their work.



TRAVEL DESTINATION: GOALS AND BENEFITS OF PLCS



Razglednica s putovanja

Dijeljenje informacija jednih s drugima u našoj zajednici učenja omogućuje nam da budemo bolji u svom poslu, da budemo vođeni potrebama djece i njihovom dobrobiti. Mislim da je to jako važno. I ja se osjećam bolje sama sa sobom kao praktičarkom, sada kada imam dobar odnos sa kolegama.

Odgajateljica iz Belgije

There are numerous short-term and long-term benefits of starting a PLC:

- **Improving the quality of practice** - The ultimate goal of any professional development of educators is to improve the quality of practice in order to ensure the wellbeing of all children and families. If group meetings do not result in new and improved ways of supporting the learning and development of children, they should not be considered PLCs.
- **Co-constructing new meanings** - Observing each other's practice, giving feedback, group reflection and planning, engaging in dialogue inevitably results in co-constructing of meanings and practice and lower the risk of isolation. This means that a group grows to understand in new and different ways what it means to engage in quality practice, to provide support to learning and development and what the role of the educator is in it, and these new constructs result in new and improved practices.

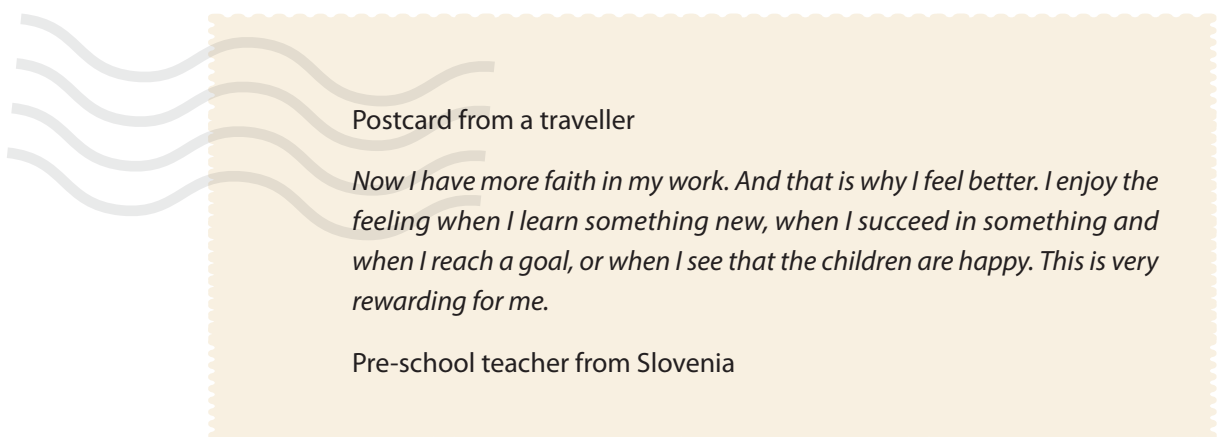


- **Professional self-awareness** – Every reflective process includes three components: metacognitive (thinking or rethinking what we know, believe, uphold), emotional (thinking about our personal emotional status) and behavioural (analysis our behaviour and its consequences). Unlike practitioners who base their practice on routines, reflective educators are putting effort in discovering their knowledge, skills, emotions and beliefs, finding out its limits, asking how they affect others, feel empowered by their strengths and introduce change where needed.
- **Sense of belonging** – When isolated, professionals can become less effective, perceived as out-of-touch or with obsolete skills, and unmotivated. A sense of belonging refers to a feeling that members matter to one another in a group that shares faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to each other (McMillan & Chavis 1986). PLCs are a community.
- **Sense of value** - Reflective group thinking contributes to the professionalisation of educators' practice, since educators will start to perceive themselves more intensively as professionals who make impact on all levels, from classroom to community and society and finally on the level of decision-making in education.
- **Coping with stress** - Educators face high work-related stress on daily bases, which puts them in an increased risk of experiencing burnout. Sharing experiences, getting the support and the development of togetherness prevents stress and burn-out syndrome and contributes to coping with stress. Educators who successfully cope with professional issues on a daily basis, which is the main task of a professional community, report lower level of work-related stress and a higher job satisfaction. Well-established PLCs at the school level have the potential to mitigate burnout among educators.

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By reflecting on their past, educators in PLCs share their experiences so that they can move forward enriched. The reflective travel never ends, but its destination is always the benefit of the children.

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- **Responsible decision-making on-the-spot** - Reflective practices help us understand the links between what we do and how we might improve it. With a sense of who they are and a vision of the professional they want to become, educators identify opportunities for development and growth that are best suited to them during their work with children. Educators who have an opportunity to cooperate with others on analysing their own practice become more competent but also more committed to their job (Rosenholtz 1989, McLaughlin & Tablert 1993, Darling-Hammond 1996).
- **ECEC/school culture of collective responsibility that promotes children's wellbeing and learning** – By establishing common values of respecting diversity and child-centeredness, sharing norms and expectations of quality teaching, the institution as a whole grows in strength and quality. PLCs are a powerful tool for developing an inclusive school culture that promotes wellbeing and child-centred learning because quality improvement is no longer considered to be the sole responsibility of leadership or a single teacher, but rather a collective one (Stoll et al. 2006).
- **Power to be a part of the transformative process** - Giving educators the opportunity to regularly reflect on their practice and learn from each other encourages them to become active participants in their own learning process, which, in return, increases their motivation. A

reflective practice which starts on the individual level may influence the practice of colleagues and will result in the creation of groups that reflect together (PLC), which further expands and gets accepted at the school or kindergarten level. Educators who reflect can introduce a new dimension in the research of education as well. When discussing practice, theories or current issues together, and documenting this experience, educators can become the driving force of transformation of the education itself. Any person can be a starter of or a contributor to the change.



Postcard from a traveller

As a result of the work of the learning community, the cooperation between the school and other services improved. I recognise that among my colleagues there are those who listen, provide emotional and other kind of support. I believe that reciprocity and equality is crucial in the communication between colleagues, with parents and others, if they are to tell each other their visions.

Teacher from Croatia



HOW TO ORGANISE THE JOURNEY?



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Like a journey, the success of the reflective process is highly influenced by time and space and therefore should be organised very carefully. The main responsibility lies in providing all the needed prerequisites for a successful PLC to be established. Let's start packing!

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Postcard from a traveller

I believe that participation in the learning community enables me to discover the complexity of the various educational situations. Previously, in solving various challenges, I would start from the premise that 'everything can be solved in my own way'. Now I've realised that everything can be solved in another way as well. During the learning community processes I found myself in situations where I recognised that my opinion does not have to be true. It gave me the opportunity to recognise that there is more than one possible solution to a problem and that, truth be told, not all of us want the same thing.

Teacher from Croatia

Institutional support

For PLCs to be fully successful, school/ECEC leadership needs to embrace and cherish it.

By leadership we mean directors, pedagogical coordinators and all professionals who provide direction and ensure environment for the learning and wellbeing of children in the institution. They are to ensure that the institution benefits from the work of the PLC and that it is consistent with its vision, goals and values.

Being informed

Ensure that educators are informed about the professional learning community.

It is important that educators receive all relevant information and answers to all of their questions and dilemmas in advance. Information given to potential community members should include:

- what are PLCs,
- how does the functioning of PLCs differ from other types of professional development,
- what will the obligations of members be,
- what were the experiences of other communities, etc.

We recommend that facilitators present a video example of the work of a PLC or examples of educators' testimonies regarding the benefits of being a part of the professional learning community. Such recordings of practice usually generate relevant discussion and questions among educators, helping them to determine if they wish to become members of a PLC.

Being engaged

Ensure that the group is composed of members who are willing to learn through reflection.

In order for each member to be responsible for the process of their own professional development, as well as to take part in the development of other colleagues, normally their participation in a PLC needs to be voluntary. In some cases, when the whole ECEC team participates, it might be that some members feel at the beginning less 'convinced' than others. This can be a starting point, which often brings to increased engagement through time, thanks to taking part to the reflective process. It is important to regularly ask for feedback to the group, in order to monitor their feeling, participation and suggestions in relation to the whole path. Further on, giving educators enough information in advance can stimulate and motivate them to become members. The composition and size of the group can also be a motivating factor for members to join. Some researchers think that groups with diversity of members in terms of their roles, backgrounds or types of profession, i.e. those that include both educators and professional support, or those that bring together preschool and school practitioners, bring different experiences that increase learning. This can be an appealing start. Studies suggest that the ideal number of members is from 5 to 10 (in some cases 8 to 12).

Note that the ideal number of members depends also on the method used to reflect within the community. Generally speaking, the process of reflecting is less effective if the community is too large. This discourages active participation and limits time for speaking to what is available instead of what is needed. On the other hand, if there are too few members, the group's energy drops and can result in an insufficient amount of new ideas (Brajković 2014). Make sure that everyone's voice is heard: encourage members to raise topics within their own professional interest and dedicate sessions to these topics.

Scheduling

Ensure that the time and place for meetings are appropriate and agreed upon in advance. The recommended time frame for meetings are detailed within the reflection method descriptions.

It is recommended to have the meetings scheduled during child-free paid working hours to avoid educators leaving and returning to the school/kindergarten before the meeting ends. A good workaround might be for example to organize PLC's in kindergartens during nap time – this is what worked well for some of the partners of this project. For others, other timing worked, especially in those contexts in which interprofessional reflection was stimulated, meaning that for example teachers and childcare workers (who normally take care of nap time) were both engaged in the reflection process. In certain contexts, reflection time can be planned when the ECEC center is closed for children and families.

In order for educators to detach mentally and physically from their working routine, the PLCs should not meet in the usual venues of educators' work such as the staffroom or the classrooms. If it is possible to find a place that is rarely used in the school/kindergarten, we recommend arranging it and holding the meeting there. For example, some schools/kindergartens fix up unused spaces such as attics which are now used for PLC meetings, workshops or other similar events, expanding the space of the institution symbolically as well. Others meet in libraries, offices, sport halls, etc.

Equality and respect

Ensure safe and conformable space for reflection.

We recommend that participants sit in a circle during PLC meetings. The circle sends a message that there is no hierarchy in the group. Also, this way everyone can see everyone else. Sitting in a circle contributes to the feeling of unity and respect. It also encourages those less prone to speaking to take their part in the group discussions. You will need tables for the meetings because notes will be taken and plans for professional development will be created. Not less important, make sure that educators are comfortable during meetings. Besides feeling safe and respected, members also need to feel comfortable. So avoid sitting on children-size chairs and get rid of other disturbing factors.



Trip Checklist: Things to Do Before You Travel

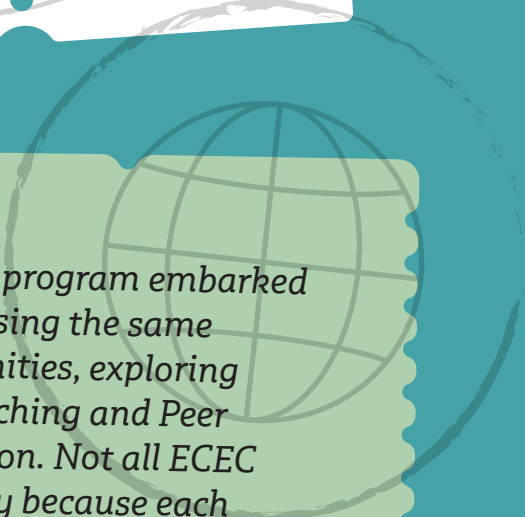
- Give educators the needed info regarding professional learning communities:
- what are PLCs
- how does PLC differ from other types of professional development
- what will the obligations of members be
- what were the experiences of members of other PLC's
- info about different available methods of group reflection within PLC's.

When you form a group for reflection, make sure that:

- there is diversity between group members (regarding experience, training profile, etc.);
- the number of group members is suitable for group reflection and the method which will be implemented.
- allow members of PLC to participate in the organisation of the meetings,
- the agreement on the meeting time is suitable for all members;
- that agreement on the meeting venue enables educators to feel comfortable;
- the selection of the method for group reflection is suitable to this group



MEANS OF TRAVEL



The 10 institutions participating in the REC program embarked on different journeys in the four countries, using the same framework of professional learning communities, exploring the reflective methods of WANDA, Videocoaching and Peer Observation Followed by Reflective Discussion. Not all ECEC centres used all the methods in the same way because each community needs different support. What was common in all reflective journeys besides the framework of PLC is that all institutions got to decide which method(s) suit them best for their goals. Some had internal facilitators who were trained to conduct sessions, some had external facilitators, and members slowly grew into the role of conducting sessions. This guide captures the essential conclusions of the different journeys without describing in detail the schools' choices. You can read more about the details and the journeys in the REC Impact Report.

In order to support the process of reflection and for the group to achieve its goals, professional learning communities often practice certain reflexive method. The method introduced is like a vehicle, a means of transport that will lead us more easily to where we want to be, achieving the benefits of the PLC.

Depending on the group and its needs, the method can be a simple technique such as situation-based role-play or journaling, exploring a topic together by a group discussion or inviting an expert on the field (e.g. a special education teacher talking about supporting neuro divergent children in the classroom), or it can be a more complex and comprehensive reflection method, such as those which we describe in more detail in this chapter. Just as choosing our means of transportation, every PLC group should choose their own method most suited to their experiences, best fitting their ways of learning and the one they feel most comfortable with.

There are some criteria that a reflective method should meet in order to be appropriate for a PLC, as we see them. The approach to solving problems or tackling situations in the group should be democratic and communitarian, meaning that the voices of professionals, children and families are taken into account and respected. Vertical and horizontal collaboration, exchange and participation of actors are to take place and be represented. Respect for diversity and inclusion should be among the guiding principles and **quality education for all children** the main goal.

In the REC programme, the following reflective methods were used within the PLC's, which all fulfil the above criteria and the project partners have experience with:

- WANDA
- Videocoaching
- Peer Observation with Reflective Discussion

In this chapter, we will present these methods for reflection in detail. In order to make the reflective methods we used comparable to each other and to decide which is the most helpful for your goals, we share the key information using the same aspects:

- What is the basis of reflection?
- Who can be the participants and how big is the optimal group size?
- What is the aim of the process?
- What does the process look like?
- How are the participants expected to participate in the sessions?
- How often should the group meet and for how long?
- What is the facilitator's role?

Note on the choice of reflection method, a. k. a. your vehicle of transport on your journey

Most of these methods work well if not used as one time occasions but as part of a process, as you could read in the summary tables. However, it does not mean that you have to carry through a school year with one single method. Feel free to e.g. introduce Video Coaching or Peer Observation sessions in your WANDA process or any other way round. The basis of flexibility is a commonly agreed, transparent framework where the educators' team discuss explicitly the professional needs and matches the reflective methods accordingly.

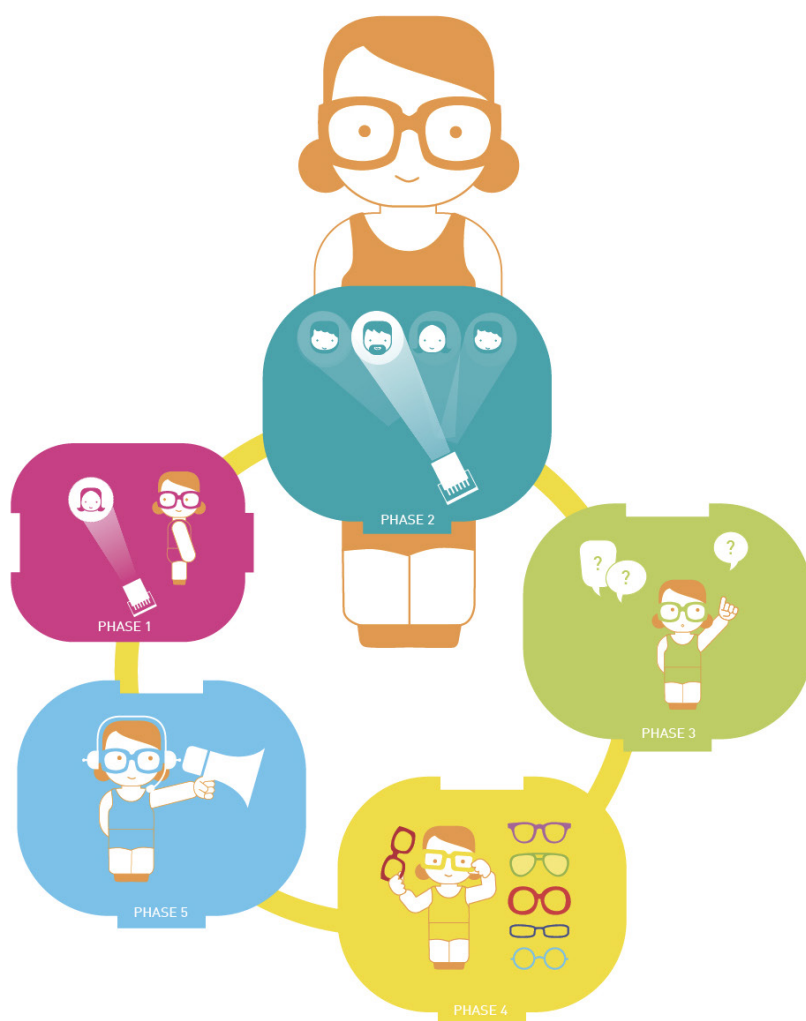


Wanda

(Dutch for
Appreciate [Waarderen],
Analyse [ANalyseren] and
Do [DAden])



If you have ever felt stuck with a situation as an educator, curious about something that happened, caught yourself thinking about what you should do on your way to the ECEC centre or going home, noticed you talk about it a lot with colleagues over coffee, WANDA can help you to move forward. Here we give a short overview of the 5-step WANDA reflective method tried out in all the four countries in the REC programme, as part of the PLCs. For more information and professional resources, visit www.wanda.community.



WANDA is a group reflection method developed by VBJK and Artevelde University of Applied Sciences in Belgium (FI), on the basis of the methods Analyse de Pratique (France) and Appreciative Inquiry (US). It strives to encourage educators to first take a ‘step back’ in order to better understand the problem or the situation (De Schepper et al. 2016.). The key to applying the WANDA method lies in ‘seeing’ the situation. To understand the situation, it is crucial to try out different perspectives than your own, creating new insights and bringing you to fascinating, different, new possible solutions. By holding our interpretations, questioning the case and by thinking about the situation from the perspectives of those involved, participants have the opportunity to understand their own practice in new ways, develop a sense of empathy for others and construct new knowledge (ideas) that they can apply.

In practice, a WANDA group meets every 4 to 6 weeks and follows the steps below:

1. Looking back on the previous WANDA session.

This phase only applies from the second meeting onwards: participants look back on the previous case – the educator whose case was discussed (the contributor) tells the team about what happened since last time regarding the case discussed. Afterwards, the rest of the group does the same. This phase helps the team to check back on how the contributor and the other colleagues feel, if any change occurred – in many cases the contributor reports about more ideas, or about a change of perspective on the same situation.

2. Selecting a case.

Each participant that feels like can bring a case, a situation that touched or surprised him/her in a positive or negative way, something that left open questions inside him/her. The situation is described in a concrete way by the participant, without interpretations.

The person who brings the case is the “owner of the case”, he/she has to be involved in it, he/she cannot bring a case heard from someone else. After listening to all the cases, the group decides which one will be the subject of this specific Wanda session. In this way we underline that the group is responsible of the session and of its own learning path. The person who brings the case that is selected is the “contributor”. WANDA is also not appropriate to deal with conflictual situations within staff. At the end of this phase, the contributor is asked to formulate a so-called learning question that helps to focus their attention on what they want to get out of the sessions. The learning question focuses on the contributor’s possibilities and not on changing the people involved in the case. For example, instead of asking “How can I convince the parents that the child needs extra professional support?”, an appropriate learning question could be: “How can I build more trust with the parents to discuss possible and viable options?”

3. Asking questions.

After the case is selected, participants are encouraged to ask open-ended non interpretative questions to get to know better about the case itself. The more contextualized a situation becomes, the more the group can search for possible meanings and, ultimately, develop possible actions. Questions are not oriented towards a possible interpretation or solution at this point, the goal is to explore as many aspects of the case as possible. We make sure that we do not only explore the problematic aspects but also the resources that are available. Sometimes, by asking questions and contextualize the situation, the point of view of the contributor on the case already changes. That is why, at the end of phase 3, we ask to the contributor to formulate again his or her learning question, which might be transformed.

4. Collecting Perspectives.

In this phase, participants “walk in the shoes” of the people involved in the case. In most cases. They take the perspective of the child, their parents, the rest of the group, possibly the professionals involved, or also the theory of the vision of the ECEC centre, and talk about what each person in the case might feel, think and want. This helps to take a step back from judgement and quick solutions and give room for more empathy and connection. Feel free to use creative tools to represent the possible feelings, thoughts and needs of the people involved, such as image cards.

5. Giving Advice.

It is only in this final phase where participants are encouraged to give ideas and advice to the contributor. After the Perspectives phase, participants can relate to the people affected in the case with more understanding and empathy, thus giving ideas that suit the case better. The contributor is not mandated to try out the ideas, however, experience shows that both the contributor and the rest of the group find useful ideas for their own practice.

Summary of WANDA

Basis of reflection

- A specific case with families and children, chosen from everyday practice, told verbally
- A specific positive learning question
- A group or team of ECEC professionals

Participants

- 5-15 educators from the same or different institutions, with the same or different training backgrounds and roles, working within the same type of settings.
- For a better process, the group should be stable through the whole process.
- ECEC directors/leaders need to share the aims of WANDA. They don't necessarily need to join the WANDA groups, but they do need to engage in the goals of the process.

Process

Before the process:

- Info about the method

Before the session:

- Agreements on how to feel 'safe' within this process
- Cases of educators (not obligatory in advance)

During the session:

- Going through the 5 WANDA phases:
 - Looking back
 - Selecting a case
 - Asking questions
 - Collecting Perspectives
 - Giving Advice

Through the sessions

- Wanda is a process, it is not just one session after the other. It is important to keep the connection between the sessions and underline the learning process of the group

Learning process for the participants

- Transformation from a 'problematic' to a positive learning approach
- Learning appreciation towards families, children, colleagues, yourself
- Opening to the perspectives of the different stakeholders
- Improvement of the capability of suspending one's own interpretations, to open up to questions and perspectives
- Improvement of the capability of 'taking care' of each other within the professional group

Regularity and duration of meetings

2 hours every 4-6 weeks for at least one year

Facilitator

Trained WANDA facilitator, external or internal to the ECEC center

Postcard from a WANDA traveller

I could discuss the problems but couldn't get my and the parents' viewpoint closer. It was about certain issues with a boy in the group. We had a meeting with the parents. We told them what we experienced but we couldn't cooperate with the parents.

During this time, we heard about the WANDA method and applied it in our PLC. When we discussed a case together, we got to see different viewpoints. This helped us to look beyond the problem and see the other sides better. In the end, we could help them and, at the same time, solve 'our' problem, because the problem is actually common.

At the next meeting with the parents, we tried to ask different questions so they could start talking about themselves. We started from a wider aspect and went closer and closer to the issue. I can't say we achieved full cooperation right away but we got a better insight into the problem. It seems that a lot of things came to light. Since then, we have a different relationship with all the parents. We know in what areas help is needed so we can help them and ourselves at the same time. It is easier to work with the child as well, as we now know more about his home background.

Now it is much easier for me to grasp someone else's viewpoint, I am able to approach a problem or a situation from a different perspective. It is easier to connect with the child. Everyday work is still hard. But as far as communication is concerned, it has become more fluent for us.

I chose to tell this story because WANDA has left a deep impression on me. We heard brilliant ideas at the sessions. For me the best was when the others take the parents' position and give fresh ideas from that point of view.

Pre-school teacher from Croatia

WANDA is your vehicle if:

- You want to improve your interaction with families and children, starting from a specific concrete situation that raises questions or doubts in your mind.. It can be something you experience as positive. (e.g. a parent complimented you all of a sudden) or as challenging (e.g. a child doesn't want to eat in school)
- You have a professional dilemma that manifests in your everyday work (e.g. how can I support the children learning to become more autonomous? How can I (or we) give a good socio-emotional support to all children in my class). However, when discussing such a dilemma with the WANDA group, the case should be made specific and concrete (for example: there is a child in my group that cries for a long time when it's sleeping time. I struggle in supporting him because in the meantime, there is also the rest of the group to take care of. Last week, this happened:..').
- You want to build relationships with parents but unsure how (e.g. you see that some parents didn't know about an event that the ECEC centre organised and you wonder how your communication to the families could improve and be more coherent within the team; a parent didn't come to the parental meeting, and you would like to get in touch but not sure how)
- Wanda is not meant for individual reflection. It is a group reflection method. It is also specifically meant for professional development, which means it cannot be done with parents of children, but just with professionals.

WANDA is a process. It goes beyond the WANDA sessions:

'Before, we would react very quickly from our own point of view, we would not look much at the other people involved, for example what a parent can think, want or feel. And it also goes beyond the WANDA sessions. If we meet now in the professionals' room and we are discussing a situation related to a child, I see that we wait before giving an opinion. Before we would step more easily into 'negative judgements', now we try to look from different perspectives. I have the impression that now I look at things more from a distance, meaning that I can look broadly at the situation, I can look for the different points of view of the people involved. I also see that the way we (school staff) and the out of school colleagues communicate with each other changed'

(preschool teacher, Belgium)



WANDA helps interprofessional reflection

'As a result of having the sessions together, the approach to children and parents is now more shared by the staff of the school and the staff of the out of school. The reflection doesn't stay just in the sessions, the advice is transferred into practice, and they are transferred by everybody, so I feel that we have a more common approach now as team'

(childcare worker, Belgium)



VIDEOCOACHING



Have you ever wanted to slow time down to see what options you have in a certain pedagogical situation? Have you ever sensed that the child is communicating something with their behaviour but you were unsure what the message is exactly and how you should attune your reactions to match their deepest needs? If yes, video coaching is your vehicle. Here we give a short overview of the video coaching reflective method.

For more information visit:

<https://www.arteveldehogeschool.be/en/research/video coaching>



Watch this short videoclip about videocoaching:

<https://www.sciencefiguredout.be/video-coaching-offers-child-care-workers-new-pair-eyes>



Imagine ... you work in a pre-school or daycare. The children play together, you hardly have time to see what they are doing.

Wouldn't it be great to have a pause button to see what each child is doing and how they react to you and each other.

Unfortunately, we don't have a pause button... Or do we?

Videocoaching gives childcare workers a new pair of eyes.

Louise is two. She watches the other children, without immediately playing along. But after a while, she takes the step herself.

Or the five-year-old Joppe. He often challenges you as a teacher. But now he's comforting another child who has just fallen.

The interactions that children have at a young age are very decisive for their development.

But with many children around you, it is not easy as an educator or teacher to observe and think about interactions with the children in your class or group.

Together with the "imagination" team, I have found a solution for this.

Videocoaching: that's the answer!

Videocoaching appears to be the way to visualize interactions with children and to discuss them. A professional boost for quality interactions!

To this end, we developed a new viewing framework that starts from the signals of children in the interaction instead of the interaction skills of supervisors.

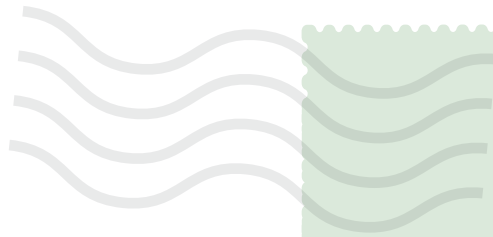
How does it work exactly? Well, together with a video coach you take four steps.

1. You let yourself be filmed together with the children. Ten minutes, that's enough.
2. You look at the images together. You can freeze and rewind. So, press the pause button.
3. You focus on the children first. What are their needs in the interaction? Louise, whom we see here, seeks the proximity of the educator on her lap and asks for confirmation through eye contact for exploring together.
4. Then you look at what you do as a supervisor in the interaction. What do you do well and what could you possibly do differently? Like how you can confirm Joppe, here, who indicates that he wants to build himself but also looks at what happens here.



Videocoaching

Peer to Peer Online Workshop



Postcard from a Videocoaching traveller

Videocoaching offers me a new pair of eyes.

An ECEC professional from Belgium

A new pair of eyes

Videocoaching is a method of engaging with practitioners in reflective processes by raising their awareness and exploring different aspects of daily practices that can contribute to enhancing children's development. The method is developed by Artevelde University of Applied Sciences in Belgium (Bracke, Hostyn, Steverlynck, & Verschaeve, 2018; Bracke, Hostyn, Steverlynck & Verschaeve, 2020). During videocoaching sessions, practitioners become able to see new insights that could gradually improve their educational interaction with children. Videocoaching stimulates the **in-depth observation of the total development and experiences of children, analyses the adult-child interaction from the children's perspective** and provides **coaching of professionals by professionals** with attention to strengths and growth opportunities in those interaction. It is a reflective observation tool that maps the total development of the child and visualizes the total experience of the child: the child as a unique person in interaction with the world, the educators and the other children.

The method challenges the staff - by looking small at the children's experiences, development and talents of the children - to think about their own role in the rich and high-quality interaction. This is input for individual as well as team reflection. Videocoaching accompanies practitioners in the process of re-thinking their way of acting with children and promotes the inclusion of every child in our child-care and education practice (Verschaeve et al. 2020).

In principle, it consists of watching a video recording of short interactive sequences for several times and discussing them -individually with the coach or collectively within a PLC. This helps educators to become aware of their own implicit personal theories about children and to deconstruct them. An important condition for the success of videocoaching is a good and substantiated framework to focus and to look at video fragments in a targeted manner.

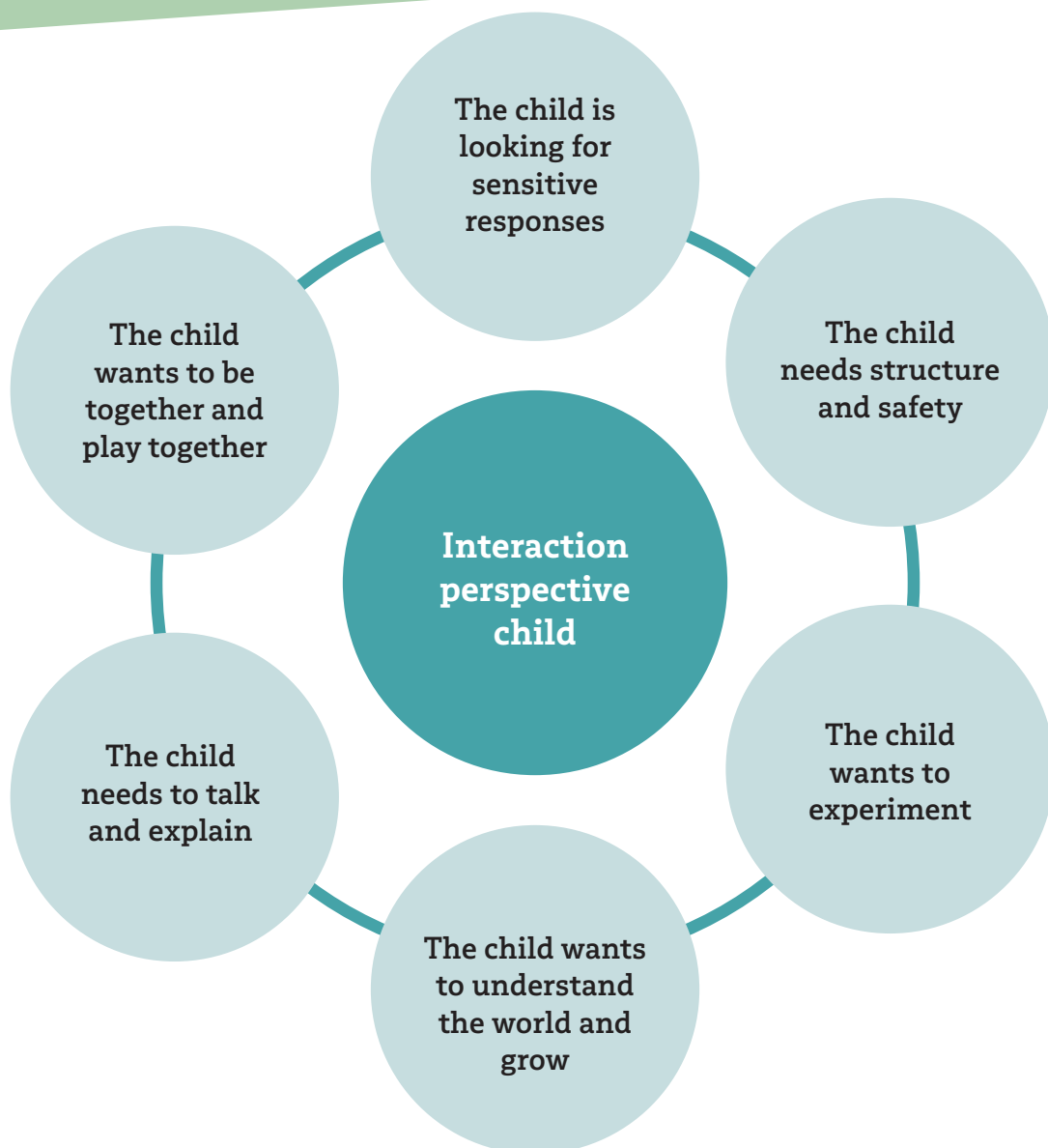


*'A new pair of eyes',
is how an educator
describes the effect of
videocoaching in our
research.*

*Thanks to videocoaching,
you can see things
you've never seen before
with the children. And
you get ideas to improve
your interactions.
Highly recommended
for anyone who works
in a kindergarten or
childcare!*



FRAMEWORK HIGH-QUALITY INTERACTION - PERSPECTIVE CHILD



Based on NCKO-Kwaliteitsmonitor (Gevers Deynoot-Schaub, Fukkink, RiksenWalraven, Kruif, Helmerhorst, & Tavecchio, 2009) and reframed towards the perspective of children by the verBEELDing research team from Artevelde University of Applied Sciences (Bracke, Hostyn, Steverlynck, & Verschaeve, 2018).

There are four central questions during the video coaching sessions (that help analyse the recording sequence) that the professional watching the sequence recording is encouraged to ask themselves:

- Child-perspective
What behaviours, initiatives, signals do you see in a child/children in this interaction? How would you give them meaning? Always keep the focus on the children! Look for children that seem to be on the margins but need support.
- The professional
How did you receive these initiatives, signals? What behaviour did you exhibit? How would you give them meaning? What is the effect on the child?
- Empowering focus
Which initiatives, signals from the child tell us the professional did an excellent job? What were positive elements in this interaction (what was going well)? What talents were discovered and what is important to cherish and strengthen in this professional?
- Growth-oriented focus
Which initiatives, signals, interactions require more support? Where are the challenges and growth opportunities in this interaction? What could you use/do differently to achieve this? What would be the effect on the children?

.....

By placing the focus on children's viewpoint, professionals are able to see children's needs, hidden initiatives, their potential, thus change the everyday pedagogical practice through changing the interaction with children.

.....



I was very curious to see the video recording.

How nice to see their wonder, their open mouths and radiant eyes. Long live Tiktak (a typical Dutch game)! But I'm also very surprised. A little boy who spoke little Dutch and speaks a foreign language, pointed to an orange T-shirt while I asked 'What color is this?' holding an orange fish in the air.

Yes, now I see that he knows what colour it is! Super. He may not know the Dutch word yet, but he does know the concept. I feel that in my head I am adjusting my assessment of the toddler boy. A little further in the recording I see him also making swimming movements with the big fish. It moves me. The boy is a lively child and sometimes it is not easy to always look from the positive aspect but now I see so much potential.

Pre-school teacher from Belgium

Sažetak video coaching metode

- Basis of reflection**
- A short recording (a ten-minute video) of an interaction between child(ren) and a practitioner
 - The starting point of the discussion is the perspective of the child

- Participants**
- One-on-one session (practitioner and video coach) that can evolve into a team reflection.
 - A team reflection (possibly preceded by one-on-one session), when the team atmosphere feels safe.
 - 1-12 practitioners of the same or different teams of the same type of setting.

Process *Before the process:*

- Information about the method: how! (and particularly about the confidentiality and ownership of the recordings)
- *Important to stress: video coaching is not an evaluation, but a peer reflection or inter-professional relationship driven by curiosity to learn together.
- Planning the process together: when & what! (always more than one session!)

Before the session:

- 10 minutes recording of a child-educator interaction chosen by the educator

During the session:

- Observation of and reflection on the interaction in the video
- Deeper insight into the child (finding the child's perspective)
- Deeper insight into the actions of the educator

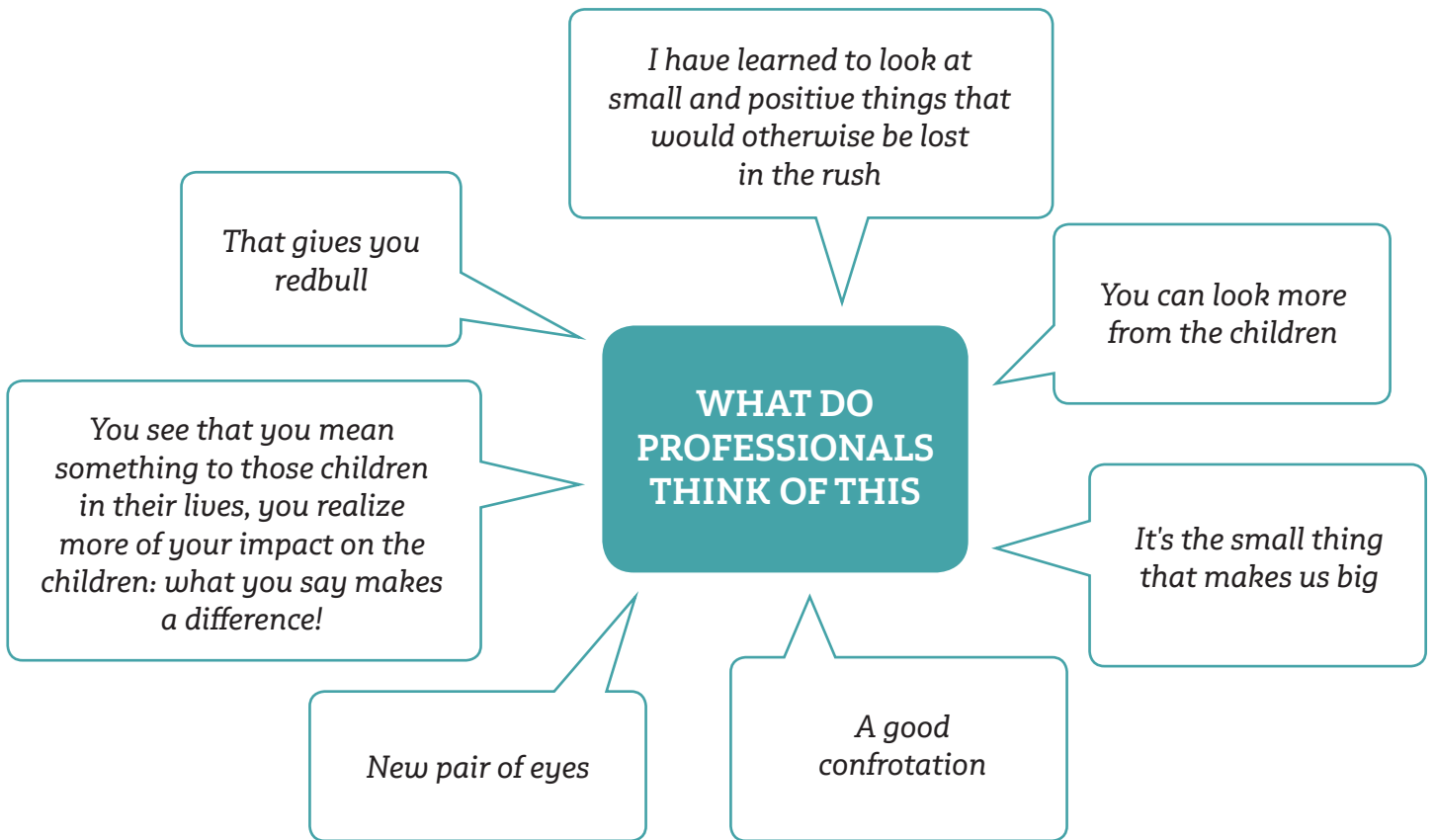
In-between sessions:

- Reflection

- Learning process of the participants during the process**
- Transformation from a problem to a positive learning approach
 - Competence for observing, especially the needs of and the perspectives of children
 - Improved (understanding of the) interaction with the child, more awareness about the strengths and areas for growth, new approaches, tools and ideas

- Regularity and duration of meetings with the practitioners**
- Repeat the process of making videos and discussing/reflecting (ideally 3 times, with breaks in between).
 - One-on-one coaching: at least twice with each professional, one hour, with breaks of 2-4 weeks between.
 - Group discussion: once a month, one-hour discussions.

- Facilitator** Trained video coaching facilitator, a person from the organisation or outside the organisation with coaching skills.



Postcard from a Videocoaching traveller

In the conversations and when discussing the videos, the practitioners recognized the 'same' children and that reinforced the insight that we are confronted with the same problems and situations at school and in childcare.

Now that the contacts have been built up and strengthened, there is a growing awareness that we can give each other inspiration about how to deal with certain children. For the children, further development of the cooperation will have a great effect because they will notice that there is a similar approach, and that the teachers and the child caretakers pull together, e.g., around difficult behaviour or potty training. This is also important to the parents, the communication is then more attuned to each other, communication can be done from a shared point of view.

Preschool teacher from Belgium

KAKO DIJETE VIDI VIDEOCOACHING?



A child in out-of-school care, as if she would talk about video coaching

I go to the out-of-school care every day. I get a snack after school and play with other children. I often hear the supervisors tell my mom in the evening that I was having a difficult day.

One day I play outside 'skipper I can sail over'. Very nice, the educator sings and comes up with playful games. I'm having fun. Someone also makes a video record of our game.

The game is nice, I have fun and do the activities as well as possible. At the end we give a group hug with the educator. But then Lukas starts crying because he is being crushed among the big children. I see that the educator gives him a hug. I'm going to give him a feather from the playground and he's happy.

A little later I hear the supervisor say to my mother that she has watched the video of the game with a video coach. She has seen how I gave Lukas a feather when he started crying, but she also re-

wound the video to understand me. For example, she saw that I had noticed during the game that Lukas wanted that feather all the time. A feather that another child had found in the corner of the playground.

I had seen that and the moment Lukas needed comfort (because I had noticed that comfort too) I gave him that feather – which had now ended up back in the corner of the playground.

This time the educator does not

tell that I had a difficult day ... Instead, she tells my mom that she's impressed with how much I care about the other kids in the group. Even though the supervisor sometimes finds me challenging, she has now really seen my talent and expressed it based on concrete examples from the video record: I am very caring for the other children in the group.

I'm beaming and so is my mom. We proudly walk outside the building towards home.



A Videocoaching Travelogue:

'Whipped cream? Never again!...
Whipped cream? Yes please!'

Part 1: BEFORE FILMING

Today, the video coach will make a video recording of our activities for the fourth time. I've been thinking carefully in advance about what I would like to have recorded. In the previous recording, I had noticed that the children were attracted by the large mirrors on our walls. This time, I wanted to give the children the possibility to play a lot, so they can 'shine' in their enthusiasm. That is why I will let them experiment with whipped cream on the mirrors. This is to be *the* activity of the year.

I prepare well: I put plastic on the floor, give all children aprons and make sure they are covered from head to toe. They look like colourful little dwarfs! I take all the material needed to clean up afterwards... I leave nothing to chance as I want the children to have a really nice time.

Part 2: WHILE RECORDING

I take the can of whipped cream and I spray some on the mirror. All the children remain quietly seated. None of them dare to go to the mirror. I put some children in front of the mirror and show them how they can use their fingers to wipe the whipped cream on the mirror. I still hardly get any response, and one child even starts



to cry. I try everything: spraying the whipped cream on the carpet instead of the mirror, signalling they can taste it, using the cream to draw pictures and tell a story with it... But the 'great whipped cream party' I had hoped for just doesn't happen. I start to feel irritated. I ask my colleague to bring in two more children; maybe they will like it and then the rest will follow. But unfortunately, they too stay quietly seated and look around. After about ten minutes, I decide to end it... on a sad note, as far as I am concerned.

I could not hide my disappointment, so the coach asked if I would like an extra recording to conclude my track with a positive feeling. By now, I knew the coach pretty well, so I was honest and said that I was not happy. At exactly that moment, two children in the recording crawled over to the bucket of water I had prepared for cleaning up. They were interested in the water and began to discover it. It was a nice moment, the three of us around the bucket, using the sponge, filling the cap of the spray-can like a cup... The children are very interested in the water... Great! This

way, I can end this recording with a positive feeling.

Part 3: AFTER RECORDING

About three weeks later, I had an appointment for an interview with the video coach. Due to renovations, we had this interview in the supervisor's office. When we entered the room, she asked if she should order some more whipped cream. 'No, the activity wasn't successful at all', I answered. 'I wanted to organise the best activity of the year, but it was a failure.'

The video coach asked me which sequences I want to watch. I told her I would like to start again with the whipped cream recordings and then end on a positive note with the water activity.

While we were watching, the video coach stopped the tape almost immediately (method: freezing). I see how a child immediately looked at the spray-can when I sprayed it on the mirror. He was fascinated by the sound. The video coach asks me what I see happening with the children (method: looking from children's perspective). I stop looking at myself and I notice one child looking very interested at the mirror and

follows me with her eyes while I make a long line on the mirror with the whipped cream. A bit later, I see how another child, usually not very good at crawling, makes a huge effort behind my back to crawl towards the spray-can to feel the edge of the nozzle. He seems fascinated by it. It's too bad I didn't notice it at the time, but now I enjoy seeing how interested the children were. The activity was more of a success than I thought back then. I hear myself in the recording asking disappointedly 'Isn't this fun?', but now I can see: 'Yes, it actually was fun!' I hadn't expected this at all, but the recording made me experience this activity completely differently. I noticed how interested the children were, and got to relive the experience, which was very pleasant. The recording cheered me up and made me want to try it again. Next time, I will offer the whipped cream without too many expectations, but I will be very attentive towards children's signals and

their interests. The video coach asks me if I'm able to end the track with a positive feeling now: 'Yes, definitely! I really learned a lot from this.' The video coach tells me our interesting conversation is very rewarding for her as well, and that she learned a lot from it too (method: learning together in dialogue). She explained how new experiences can be overwhelming for children, even for us adults. So we may seem less enthusiastic at first as well. She told me about a trip she made to Chartres Cathedral. At first, she was overwhelmed and very silent, but on the way home, she became very enthusiastic and couldn't stop talking about her experience. I recognised the same feeling in children on that recording.

We concluded that my expectations concerning the activity were different than those of the children. I'd expected a mess and lots of experimenting, but for the children the activity was much more about discovering

all the facets of a can of whipped cream (What's inside? How does this work? Where does the sound come from?).

The video coach asked me if I wanted to have some photos from this part of the recording. Yes, I would like to show these to the parents. I hadn't told the parents anything about the activity because I didn't think it was a success, but now I would like to show them how much interest their children showed in the spray-can (the sound, the nozzle...) and how they explored it because it was new to them. I am proud of the part we selected from the recording and we don't even watch the rest of the recording anymore... and when I leave, I say to the supervisor: 'I changed my mind! Go ahead and order another can of whipped cream!'

Liesbeth, Kindervilla Waregem

A childcare practitioner for children between 0-3 years

Videocoaching is your collegial reflection vehicle if:

- You would like to see yourself and your interaction with children from outside, in a safe learning environment
- You would like to understand children's behaviour and interactions more and adjust your responses to their needs
- If you want to see both the strengths of the child-educator interactions and the chances for improvement.

More information can be found on our website

<https://www.arteveldhogeschool.be/en/research/videocoaching>





PEER OBSERVATION FOLLOWED BY REFLECTIVE DISCUSSIONS



*By observing each other's practice, educators gain a basis for reflection from everyday professional life. In peer observations that we describe here as a more comprehensive reflective method, the educator uses **observation tools** which are developed by the International Step by Step Association (ISSA) and which describe the qualitative educational process through seven areas: Interactions, Family and Community, Inclusion, Democracy and the Values of Democracy, Assessment and Planning, Teaching Strategies, and Professional Development.*




PRINCIPLES OF QUALITY PEDAGOGY: FOCUS AREAS

- Interactions
- Family and Community
- Inclusion. Diversity and Values of Democracy
- Assessment and Planning
- Teaching Strategies
- Learning Environment
- Professional Development

Each area consists of several indicators that describe and guide educators' work in that area in greater detail. When practiced in a PLC, members decide themselves which area is going to be studied in detail in a particular session.



Developed by: 

.....
When educators observe their colleague's practice, they focus on finding and explaining evidence for different indicators which describe quality in that area.
.....

1 INTERACTIONS		
Focus area:		
Interactions between adults and children, as well as peer interactions, are of key importance to supporting and influencing children's social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development. They are also crucial in promoting children's learning on an ongoing basis by encouraging them to develop and exchange knowledge, experiences, feelings, and opinions. It is through interactions that children develop a sense of self, a sense of being a member of a community, and knowledge of the world.		
The role of the teacher is to provide opportunities for children to engage in interactions, to participate in processes to co-construct knowledge and meaning, to support their learning and development in a caring way, and to model respectful and supportive interactions among all adults and children involved in the children's lives.		
Interactions that demonstrate and foster meaningful and respectful exchanges among all participants in the process, where everyone's voices are heard, promote children's development as self-confident learners and as contributing and caring members of society.		
PRINCIPLE	Indicators of quality	What have you observed?
1.1 The teacher interacts with children in a friendly	1.1.1 The teacher's interactions are warm and caring, expressing appreciation and enjoyment of children.	

Reflection tool is developed based on the Professional Development Tool for Improving Quality of Practices in Kindergarten, developed by the International Step by Step Association (Tankersley, D., et al.). An excerpt of the ISSA Professional Development Tool is available at: <https://www.issa.nl/node/366>.

Since members of a PLC talk about different ways in which some indicators (concepts) can be applied in practice, the **professional conversation** often turns into a very fruitful study that connects theory and practice.

Peer observation has numerous benefits for the overall growth of the practitioners as the areas and indicators are truly comprehensive. It also has benefits for improving the quality of the institutions as a whole and ensuring quality transition, continuity of pedagogical practice among various institutions of child-care and education and cooperation between sectors. Therefore, mixed groups of practitioners in a PLC of this type is recommended.

In practice, participants of the PLC agree on whose practice is going to be observed by whom

(not more than 2-4 colleagues at a time), and for what reason (e.g. to learn a new good practice or to look at a challenging situation?). Participants agree on one focus area out of the seven and make notes during the observation. An information sheet guiding the note taker is available in the appendix of this guide. Observers make sure that their notes are observations and not interpretations – they keep in mind to write about what they see. After the observation, the group agrees on the date of the discussion. During the discussion, participants make sure that the observed educator gets to speak first and share how the observation felt for them. Then the observers make sure to share observations first and not interpretations – interpretations are always made together with the observed educator, keeping

in mind that they are the first and foremost experts for their class. At the end of the discussion, the observed educator can draft a professional development plan (sample available in the Appendix) regarding the following aspects:

- What is my aim in improving my practice?
- What steps do I need to take to reach my goal?
- What resources and support do I need?
- How will I know I reached my goal?

Summary of Peer Observation with Reflective Discussion

Basis of reflection ● 60-minute observation practice

Participants ● 3-4 practitioners in the same team or from different teams for 0-3 year-old children up to 6 for 3-6 year-old children
● External and internal observers plus management members

Process *Before the process:*
Information about the method
Before the session
● Introduction to the observed focus area, getting familiar with the observation tools
During the session:
● Observing and taking notes of the facts which confirm the presence of a certain indicator
After the session:
● reflective discussion and action plan for improvements

Learning process of the participants during the process ● Competence for observing
● Common understanding of quality teaching practices

Regularity and duration of meetings with the practitioners ● It is recommended that practitioners observe and be observed once a year (and not more often)
● Observation: 1 hour, discussion: 1.5 hours

Facilitator Trained Step by Step facilitator from within or outside the collective

Peer Observation with Reflective Discussion in your vehicle if:

- You need a fresh eye from your colleague on the spot
- You want to increase your awareness of your practice and its different aspects
- You want to gain insight into your own strengths and needs and translate them into actions



OUR TRAVEL GUIDE: THE FACILITATOR



If you have ever been on a trip with a travel guide, you know that the experience of your trip largely depends on him/her. It is similar when you are a member of a PLC or practicing reflective methods as the experience and the success of these professional development opportunities too largely depends on facilitator skills, attitudes, knowledge. This is why it is important that potential facilitators get basic training and support in this.

Who are they?

The facilitation of PLCs can be done both by professionals employed or external to the ECEC/school where the PLC is organised. In both cases, the facilitator needs to have competences for team coaching and training in using at least one method of supporting professional development. Also, it is preferable for facilitators to have supervision support in the case when they have doubts about the process of facilitation.



What do facilitators do?

- The PLC facilitator:
- plans and conducts the sessions by implementing at least one method,
- ensures safe and comfortable environment for all members,
- supports reflection and learning of all members during the sessions,
- cooperates with other professionals outside the PLC,
- contributes to monitoring, evaluation and improvement the quality of work of the PLC,
- puts him/herself in a learning position him/herself,
- is a bridge towards the ECEC organisation.

Who can become one?

If the ECEC/school decides to have a facilitator who is employed in the institution, we recommend that at least two persons should be trained for leading a PLC. Leading in pairs has proven to be much easier and takes pressure off the individual who facilitates but also takes part as equal member. Training two facilitators ensures the continuity of work in case one of them must discontinue their involvement in the PLC.

- The ECECs and schools often ask what educator should be trained for facilitation within the professional learning community. There are several desirable characteristics of a potential facilitator:
- understanding the importance

of quality in teaching for children's development,

- knowing the principles and being able to recognise the quality of the child-centred practice,
- propensity to questioning their own practice,
- focus on learning and a growth mindset in general,
- well-developed communication skills,
- propensity to question educational practice at institutional and public level,
- not entraining a hierarchic relationship with the participants of the reflection group (participants don't have to feel evaluated during the reflection process).

Misunderstandings

The PLC facilitator is not the 'boss' of the PLC. It is a person who, after being trained for facilitating, simply knows a bit more about the process and how to provide support to members moving towards their goals most efficiently. The facilitator has the same goals and interests as other members do and is equal member and a peer in the group. In time, once a routine is established, it is assumed that other educators will be able to take over the leadership.

We do not have such a facilitator in our institutions, what shall we do?

- You can start building an atmosphere of trust, cooperation and reflection with the help of

the icebreakers and worksheets in the Appendix. You can use them at the beginning or at the end of a staff meeting.

- You can organize Peer Observation sessions and discussions keeping in mind that the discussion is not an exam and that the observed educator is the first and foremost expert of their class.
- You can organize PLC discussions where you explore topics and issues that interests and motivates educators. Agree on what topic will be explored that are pedagogically relevant, agree on how members will gather information before the session (libraries, online resources, asking experts) and make sure that information in the session is shared in a well-paced manner. It is possible to invite experts in the given topic and the PLC can become a Q&A session as well, not just a circle of sharing of experience and examples and reflecting on them.
- Whenever stuck with a specific case, you can ask for support: an informal discussion in the format of exploring the perspectives of the people affected by the case in the WANDA way (What feelings, thoughts, needs might they have individually – the child, the parents, the rest of the class, the professionals involved?)



A PLEASANT TRAVEL



How can we make sure that the journey of professional development through group reflection makes a positive experience sustainably in the long run?

Much like when we go on a trip, many potential members of the PLC feel travel-fever. They feel-uncertainty and wonder if their professional development journey will be a positive one and if it will last. PLCs, like journeys, are oriented towards positive experiences, even in the moments of unplanned uncertainties.

Therefore, in the course of developing and sustaining PLCs, make sure you **create a stress-free learning environment for professional inquiry and learning**. Stress blocks the flow of information. If we are anxious, we are incapable of learning and the information we acquire during


interactions with other professionals will not reach the long-term memory. On the other hand, when we feel good, the release of neurotransmitter dopamine (blocked when we feel anxious or stressed) will work for us, supporting our memory and problem solving. This is why it is important to assure safe, relaxed and pleasant environment. PLCs can use some of the recommended relaxation techniques if stress is accumulating in the group for whatever reason.

At the same time, unpleasant experiences and professional doubts are not neglected. Instead of leading deficit-based conversations, we focus on professional needs and goals - **what can be, rather than what isn't or can't be there**. Deficit-based approach and focusing the conversation

on the problems, may become perceived as the total of our professional reality. For this reason, PLS conversations are focused on **appreciative inquiry** approach (Cooperrider 1986). This means that conversations start with exploring the capacities and already built strengths which can be utilised for the transformation of practice in a desirable direction.

Regarding the communication between professional community members in general, we must make sure that **interactions are positive**, in a way that the questions which we pose to one other are non-judgmental but rather about what was seen and heard (**descriptive questions**), and **oriented to the desired objectives**.

ECECs and schools in which there is already an informal culture of professional cooperation are



Postcard from a traveller

By bringing together school and out of school staff around a table, and by guiding them in this reflection process, I have the impression that the staff members became 'softer' towards each other, meaning that their communication takes now more each other into account, they listen to each other. Before, it was easier to stick to one's own point of view. Now [...] there is more openness. I see it during the sessions. But I also see changes in their practice.


(Out of school coordinator, Belgium)

more successful in this. Leadership should cherish such appreciative culture if they wish to support quality education. Quality happens when teachers work together and exchange experiences to improve the learning process of children, create joint efforts on systematic challenges, sharing the goals of the PLCs on an institutional level. This is what makes work in PLCs and on the quality of the institution sustainable.

More on appreciative inquiry

Appreciative inquiry based reflective practices focus on professional needs and goals and enable positive interactions, regardless of what method members of the community choose. This approach draws upon the power of positive questions leading the conversation. Here are some of the examples:

Why is this a problem? / What beliefs do we have that make it a problem? / Where are we now? / Who are we, compared to who we want to be? / Which of the implemented actions and practices had an impact on the children, and which did not? / Based on what do/can I say this? / Out of the things I tried out, which had the most impact? / Which behaviours of the children indicated that we are going the right way? / What are the strengths and limitations of your current practice? / What do you need to keep doing well? / What are the things you need to change? / What is the best way for you to move forward? / How can you learn from success, no matter how small? / What does the evidence of positive development look like, and to what extent is this evidence trustworthy?



Postcard from a professional learning community member

In the past, I had difficulties with sharing my dilemmas, but as a member of the professional learning group, which brings together a smaller number of colleagues, I find it easier to open up to others in such a relaxed atmosphere.

I feel very comfortable in this group of colleagues. This is why it was easier for me after a while to expose myself and share some difficult situations which burdened me. I realise now that I just needed some time to open up about certain things. When it came to the point that I was ready to speak about my dilemmas with others, I felt good.

Pre-school teacher from Slovenia



A SUSTAINABLE TRAVEL



The goal of any educational institution as well as policymakers should be to strive towards the sustainability of professional learning and development. To ensure that, we strongly believe it is important that institutions and systems include cooperation and mutual support in everyday functioning. Here are some of the point for reflection on how to ensure continuity for both leaders in charge of providing conditions and professionals involved.



Ensure continuity. In order to be effective and achieve results, PLCs should be held regularly over the course of at least one year. When the members of the PLC meet continuously for a longer period of time, they will develop mutual trust and conversations on sensitive issues and topics regarding teaching will result in new ideas. We recommend that you hold two 90-120 minutes' meetings per month. If it is not possible, at least one meeting a month will do. Ideally contracts should guarantee paid hours without children during which ECEC and school staff can reflect on their practice. When working with multiprofessional staff, it is important to think about working conditions that allow to all categories to have time to reflect together (e.g. teachers and assistants).

Ensure strong leadership, engaged in the reflection process. Leaders are key in the success of the reflection path of the staff. They need to be involved, share the aims, and support the professionals in bringing reflection into practice. To do this, leaders need to be supported themselves.

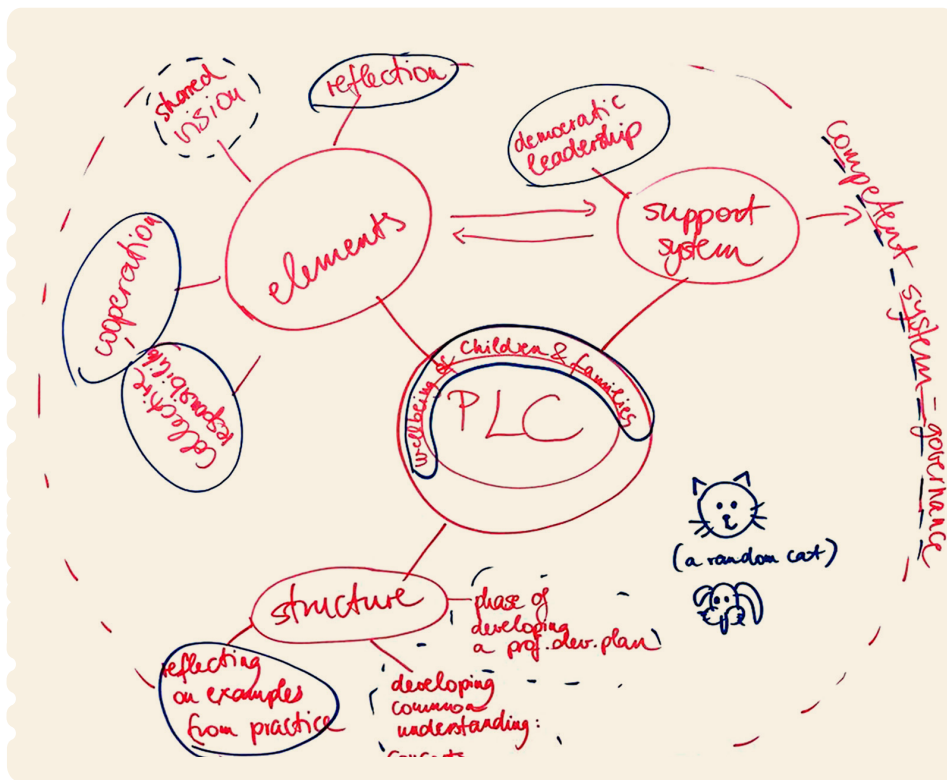
Ensure that professional goals of those involved in a PLC are aligned within the group and with institution-wide goals – It is important that the goals of the PLC and its members and goals of the institution as a whole align. In fact, the stronger the goals of the group are aligned among members individually and with institution-wide goals as a whole, the more effective the learning pro-

cess becomes. Learning from collaboration is reinforced if the child is central to the objective of the collaboration and this is common to both individuals, the group and the institution.

Ensure collective responsibility for the professional development of all educators. Simply told, school/ECEC culture is 'the way you do things around', it is the 'school mindset' (Stooll, et al.2006). It covers beliefs that are shared by members of the organisation unconsciously, and is exposed through artefacts (from the documents to the environment), rituals, customs, etc. In order to ensure that the ECEC/school's culture appreciates professional development of all educators, it should **invest in collective responsibility** (Sharmahd N., at al. 2017.). ECEC/school improvement is no longer considered to be the sole responsibility of a principal or a single leader, but rather a collective one. Educators should have the opportunity to move from the isolation of their classroom to the collective ('deprivatisation of practices'), by supporting **each other's practices, observing, giving feedback, planning jointly, building relationships** with the neighbourhood and engaging in dialogue with parents. Reflection on pedagogical practice (planning, observations and documentation) should be an essential part of all team meetings and professional development strategies, not just of professional learning communities.

Enable professional learning communities to be sustainable through participation. PLCs thrive in ECEC/schools which have abandoned the traditional pattern in which children learn, educators teach and principals lead. PLCs, like competent institutions, need democratic leadership that is capable of supporting the work of the PLC by combining top-down with bottom-up approaches, instigating participation in decision making at all levels. PLC facilitators and members need **sufficient support from leadership** in order for the PLC to work in an atmosphere in which transformative practice is desirable. But institutions need engaged professionals taking responsibility collectively and individually as well if they are to be truly successful. To maintain such balance, specific competencies are required from leaders.

Ensure exchange of learning and pedagogical support by other professionals within and outside institution. The goal of a PLC is to reach a shared vision and set of values that can transform educational practice according to children's needs, respect for their rights and diversity. In approaching this goal PLC can build on not just the strengths of the members, but on the positive forces outside it as well. Members of the PLC can decide to invite experts, from their or other institutions to the PLC meetings to help them clarify dilemmas they have encountered. External educational



Trip Checklist: Things to Keep in Mind During the Travel:

- Institutional goals are complementary to the PLC philosophy and the goals of professional learning of each member
- ECEC/school improvement is no longer considered to be the sole responsibility
- School culture supports teachers' collaborative learning
- Team meetings in ECEC/school cherish reflection
- There is a shared vision and set of values
- Educators, children, and parents are included in decision making
- Leadership enables the sustainability of professional learning communities
- Leadership is oriented on children's development and different professional development opportunities of educators
- Leadership promotes the values of equity, justice, participation, and democracy
- There is exchange of learning and pedagogical support by other professionals within and outside the institution
- PLC members share their learning within and outside ECEC/school.

professionals often bring in expertise that is complementary to the expertise that is already present in school teams.

Ensure visibility and celebrate success -The purpose of the PLC is to have a broader impact on its members and on the institution as a whole. In order to influence the quality of work of all educators in the ECEC/school., some PLCs have displayed posters with meeting conclusions, notes, lists of reference, described practices. Some present their work in teacher rooms and meetings to other educators, celebrating successful activities they tested. These displays have a purpose to draw attention not only to improved practices but so that other teachers can join or rethink their own practices even if they are not PLC's members (Brajković, 2014).

Ensure monitoring of the learn-

ing process within the community. The facilitator of the group reflection should ensure that community members have the opportunity to give feedback on the process and facilitation after each session. Also, it is a good idea to ensure at least twice a year educators give feedback on the whole path of learning and professional development. This feedback can be organised in various ways, from giving written feedback to group conversation with attached notes. The feedback should be used only for the improvement of the educators' process of group reflection and professional development. Monitoring, as any other content shared within the PLCs, should never be shared with outside individuals, such as institution leadership or administrators, without the consent of everyone.

APPENDIX: ICEBREAKERS IN COLLEGIAL REFLECTIVE ATMOSPHERE



1. Short reflective icebreakers

- **Word of the week**
 What word have you used a lot in your professional context in the last week? Explain.
- **Favorite moments**
 Everyone answers the following questions:
 - What was your favorite moment between the previous holiday and today?
 - And what is the moment you are looking forward to after the next holiday? Tell.
 Each participant tells about the two chosen moment. After each sharing moment, the group discusses the following questions: What does this say about this person as a professional? What does this person find important in his or her work?
- **Movie or song**
 Describe your past week at work by the title of a movie or a song. Why did you choose this title? Let's share...



2. Talking about Strengths

What strength did you use last week in your work?
 Can you often use this strength in your personal and professional life?
 Do others recognize this strength in you? Give examples.

Executing	Influencing	Relationship Building	Strategic Thinking
Achiever	Activator	Adaptability	Analytical
Arranger	Command	Developer	Context
Belief	Communication	Connectedness	Futuristic
Consistency	Competition	Empathy	Ideation
Deliberative	Maximizer	Harmony	Input
Discipline	Self-Assurance	Includer	Intellection
Focus	Significance	Individualization	Learner
Responsibility	Woo	Positivity	Strategic
Restorative		Relator	

3. Reflection exercise: timeline

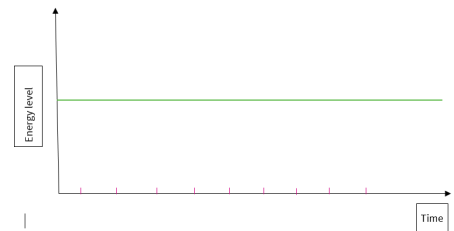
Make a graph of a "regular" working day in which you have contacts with children and families.

- The horizontal axis shows the passage of **time** . So on the far left is the beginning of the day, on the far right is the end of the day.
- The vertical axis tells something about your **energy level**. The higher on the axis, the more energy and flow, the lower on the shaft, the less energy.

More information: Gallup, The Clifton Strengths (<https://www.gallup.com/cliftonstrengths/en/253715/34-clifton-strengths-themes.aspx>)

Method:

- Think about at least **five** moments in a day when you are working with children and/or families that stand out for you as meaningful moments (e.g. positive, less obvious, challenging, important, ... moments).
- Turn off those five moments in time: around what **time** does the moment occur?
- For each of those moments, think about how your **energy level** is: medium (green line), rather high (above the line), rather low (below the line).
- Put a dot in the right place (combination of time and energy) and make a **small drawing** to visualize the moment.



Discussion: everyone talks about the created timeline. What stands out? What differences do we see? What similarities? What desires and learning questions emerge?

4. Check-in with the mood meter

The mood meter is a useful tool to check with yourself what you feel, and to give language to it.

The meter categorizes different feelings according to two axes:

- An axis that indicates how much energy you experience
- An axis that indicates whether you are more likely to experience positive (pleasant) or negative (difficult) feelings

With the help of the mood meter you can communicate more nuanced about your feelings and you get more insight into what exactly you feel and why. The more insight you have into your feelings, the more aware you are about the influence of certain circumstances on your mood. And the better you are able to deal with your emotions.

You can do this exercise individually. There are also apps that allow you to “gauge” your mood several times a day to gain better insight into the ups and downs in your feelings, and the circumstances that cause these fluctuations.

You can also use the mood meter to gauge the feelings in a group. For example, at the beginning of a meeting: how do we sit down? How do we start? Or at the end of a meeting: how do we leave the meeting? And why is that?

You can also use the mood meter to gauge the feelings following a situation or a decision made, and thus start the group conversation (and group reflection).

MOOD METER



The mood meter is designed by Marc Brackett. For more information, visit <https://www.marcbrackett.com/about/mood-meter-app/>.

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