Summary of the analysis of the local focus groups in Belgium (FL)

Contents:

1. Introduction: some data

In Belgium (FL) we carried on 4 focus groups: 2 with parents and 2 with professionals, in the 2 ECEC centers involved in the project. The ECEC centers are:
   1. De Tandem (in Bruges), which is a Center that joins childcare, preschool, school, out of school care. More specifically the group of professionals working with 0 to 4 years old children is involved in Educas. The school and preschool follow the Freinet approach.
   2. Hippo's Hof (in Ghent), which is a kindergarten and out of school care for children from 2,5 to 6 years old, following the Jenaplaan approach.

In total, we could involve in the focus groups 17 professionals and 7 parents.
The professionals were a mix between practitioners, professionals and teacher assistants. In both focus groups with the professionals, the directors asked to join the focus group and we decided to approve their participation after discussing it with the group. All professionals were Dutch native speakers; two of them speak also a second language at home. 15 professionals were woman, and 2 man.

The parents were all mothers, with children of different ages between 1 and 5 years old. Five of them had Belgian origins, two with migrant origins. During the focus group, we spoke Dutch, but when needed we translated something in English. For the mother from Poland there was a Russian translator present.

The aim of the focus groups is analyzing the in depth the needs of local target groups concerning ECEC spaces and get insight about their ideas in relation with the role of ECEC environments in supporting care and education. Attention will be put also to their ideas concerning the involvement of families in co-defining the meaning and use of ECEC environments.

The Belgium case study aims to realize an action-research involving 2 ECEC centers in Flanders, with the purpose of 1) gaining insight on how the organization of the ECEC space is perceived by parents and staff, and how it is or it is not connected to their vision on education and care; 2) planning and realizing a professional development path with the staff of the 2 ECEC centers involved, with the aim of improving the connection space/educare, also by involving the voice of children and families (coord **VBJK**).

2. **Summary of the points of view of parents and professionals:**

2.2. **Favorite place**

When asking to professionals, which **place you like the most** in the school they often point at their **own class**, explaining that they feel 'at home', they made it the way they wanted, they feel they belong to it. It is a calm place, 'homish', where each person can feel at ease and safe. **Safety and 'calmness'** are common repeated needed concepts. **Light** is another element that should be present inside. '*I feel good in my own class, because it's like a second house, it's calm, you can give your own touch to the room and make it cozy' (professional).*
Some also mention the professionals' room, where they can meet and exchange with colleagues. In one of the schools/services, where there is a **big hall with benches, sofas and coffee** available, professionals say they like to be there. Also the parents of this school say that they like this space very much, especially the benches, which are near to the children rooms.
'*My children were in another school before. And what I like here is that you come in and there is immediately a place to sit and meet, to have a coffee. I like to sit in the hall on the benches and talk to the other parents' (mother).*
In the same school, parents also say that they like to be in the class with the children in the morning. Not all schools/services in Belgium allow this, so it is especially appreciated, together with the fact that there is quite a flexible timing to enter the school and say goodbye in a personalized way (until 8:50).
In one of the schools/services many professionals say they don't like the **toilets** because they are old, smelly and not 'cozy', and the storage room, because too messy. In this school, a renovation of the whole building has been planned for the following years.

Considering the **children,** it is interesting to notice that both professionals and parents (and especially parents) mention that **they don't know** where children like or don't like to be in the school. '*I don't know where my child*

likes to be' (mother).
However, both mention that they think **being outside** is very much liked by the children, in the sand, or biking etc. At the same time, in one of the schools/services, it is exactly the outside space that receives most of the 'critics' from professionals and parents, because not big enough, with not enough different offers and materials.
Some professionals also mention the **toilets** as places the children like to go in small groups, hiding in one of the toilets, or washing their hands.
Some mention also the fact that children like the *polyvalente space* (Hippo's Hof) because here they are 'collected' all together to go from one space to the other. They like it, sometimes they have to wait a bit, but professionals and practitioners underline that they try to make it anyway a 'nice' moment.
'It is not really about waiting (wachten), but about expecting (verwachten)', because there are moments in which we create expectations with the children about what is going to happen' (professional).
In the other school/service, on the other hand, these '**waiting moments'** are perceived as not pleasant for the professionals and for the children (from the point of view of the professionals). The open question that came out during our focus group is: is it the hall that is not nice or the organization?

2.3.   Inside playing space and entrance

Considering the **entrance**, as we said, in one of the schools/ services parents think it's great to have a **big entrance where you can sit, chat, have a coffee**. The professionals of this school also say it's great to have this possibility. They also find parents **'naturally respectful'**, in the sense that they stay but they are also aware of when they should go. In the other school there is not much space in the entrance for parents. Professionals say it's already very good that parents can enter the children room and say goodbye in a calm way. They don't think there should be more space for adults there, because the school is anyway mainly for the children. In the same service parents find the entrance moment (of the children that arrive early) calm and cozy, because children can **bring their breakfast** and eat it with the professionals that drink their coffee. Sharing food together makes the entrance moment for these children very familiar.
It is interesting to notice that in the school that has a '**goodbye window'**, some professionals think it's very nice for the children, while parents think it makes the goodbye moment more difficult, especially for the young ones, who might cry when seeing the parents going away. *'I like very much the room with the goodbye window. Children can say goodbye to their parents' (professional). 'I think the 'goodbye window' is difficult for some children. They see the parents going away and they cry. Maybe it should be built higher' (mother).*
Probably more exchange between professionals and parents is needed about the meaning of this window and more in general about the meaning of familiarization.
All professionals say it's nice and **homish** to have **plants** at the entrance, but they need care. Maybe also a **digital framework** with pictures is seen as a homish element.

Considering the **continuity school/home**, some parents mention that they like the fact that children can **bring things from home to school**, because they can also contribute to the project themes the school is carrying on. On this matter, it interesting to notice that many parents say that they know which projects the class/school is carrying on, but they don't know the details, or how, or what exactly they are doing. The same lack of information is mentioned several other times; for example parents know that the day starts with a 'circle moment' in which children talk and decide what to do, but **they don't know what happens** afterwards. Some parents mention they would like to know it, or to see pictures of short movies about what happens in the school/service. One of the school uses **family pictures** with the children, to talk about their different/similar families and create a bridge home/school.
Some other parents mention that they don't want her child to bring things from home because the child doesn't want to share them and it becomes difficult. One of the schools/services has pictures of the families, which are used with the children to know each other and to create a bond school/home.

In one of the school there has been an interesting exchange about **learning and playing**: some parents say they like the fact that in the school children are let free to choose and play, that they see learning and playing as interconnected (children learn by playing), some others mention that they actually would like more stress on 'learning', also because in their country of origin children learn poetry and similar activities at this age.
'I think there should be more school preparation, learning poetry etc. In my home country, children learn poetry from a very young age' (mother).
'For me playing and learning are the same thing. I think that by playing, children learn about themselves, the world, the others. And also about motoric development, colors, etc. ' (mother).

Considering **materials** we notice that both, parents and professionals like wood and non structured materials, but not only. They also mention that sometimes some plastic toys are good, they are easily washable, and children like the colors.

Some professionals also mention the fact that it would be good to have a space that allows adults and children **not to 'clean up' too often**: f.e. if children are busy building something, then it would be good to have the possibility to leave their work the way it is for a while even when going to another activity (lunch etc.). This is mentioned also by some parents.

In one of the services, parents say that some materials/toys are **closed in closets** in the class, and they wonder how professionals use these closets with the children, because they noticed that their children don't always know what is inside the closets. Also in this case probably a more clear communication school-families-children is needed.

One parent specifically mentions that she likes that **books** are available for children.

In one of the services, which has **mixed-age groups**, **professionals** struggle with the organization: although the mixed age groups have many learning/caring potentials for all children, they have the feeling that more attention is given to the older children, and not enough to the young ones. A similar worry is present in the words of **parents**, who are happy their children can interact with different ages and learn from each other, but they also question the safety of the young ones.

'I have to admit that I am happy my child is not a baby anymore here [...]. But I like the fact that I can see that he is aware of another young child, that h knows he has to take care' (mother).

The need to interconnect **learning and caring** here becomes crucial, and it is one of the points that should be explored with the team.

2.4.   Routine moments

Hygiene and Toilet

Both parents and professionals think it's important to have **privacy** in the toilets (so doors or at least short walls are welcome), but they also think children like to go the toilet together **in small groups**. They like to go in **small groups** in one toilet, hide there and play. *'I think there should be both possibilities for children in toilets: to be together, but also to have privacy' (mother).*

Children, normally go to the toilet both? when they need it and in collective moments, and both parents and professionals think it's important that these moments are **individualized and flexible**. In some cases the toilets are **quite far** from the children room/classroom, though, which can make it difficult for some children (especially young ones) to reach the toilet on time (parents say). There are normally potty in the class, but the question is: do all children feel at ease in using them? This has been a point to reflect on during one of the focus groups.

In one of the schools/services professionals underline, they don't like the toilets, they are old and not cozy.

Some **parents express some worries** also about the fact that sometimes young children are accompanied to the toilet by **older ones** (of 4-5 years old). But the young ones don't want to go with them sometimes, or they are dirty at the end of the day because a child of 5 is not going to clean properly one of 2,5. They also think their children like to play with water, but some say they don't like that their children often go home with **wet sleeves.**

Some parents also mention that they actually **don't know much** about how the toilet moment is organized in the school.

Eating moment

Both, parents and professionals think it's important for an eating place to be **cozy, calm, 'homish'**. A tablecloth is also appreciated. The professionals underline that not too many children should be in one place while eating.

In one of the schools/services professionals reflected on the eating moment, and now they use a **cover for the table and 'real' plates**, forks, glasses. They let **children participate** in preparing the table, counting the children (one child is responsible for counting) etc. In this way, they want to stimulate autonomy, responsibility. *'The eating space should be familiar, cozy, calm. It's nice here. We worked on it, and now we use 'real' plates, a table cover... Children help in preparing, one child is responsible for counting how many children are present... [...]' (professional).*

The professionals of this school think that not all parents know how the eating moment is organized, and that they should maybe let them know, because it is not like this in all schools/services. In the other school/service children are not actively involved in the preparation of the table etc. There is a professional that prepares everything (not present in the focus group). They use 'real' plates, but they are afraid of using 'real' glasses (in

glass) or small glass bottles so that the children can serve themselves on their own. In the same way, children are 'served' by the practitioners. By talking about other possibilities, professionals underline that it would be difficult to let children serve themselves, because of safety reasons (warm pots etc.).

Parents often say they **don't know very well** how the eating moment is organized. They find it important that children eat in pleasant materials (plastic smells and it's not pleasant).

Sleeping moment

Parents and professionals agree that in general the sleeping moment should be **flexible** (individualized, in agreement with parents), the room should be **calm, cozy,** with the possibility of listening to soft music, dark enough. In both schools/services, not all children are obliged to sleep, which is not the case in all Belgian schools/services. Parents appreciate this. Some professionals and all parents say it's important for children to have a **personal bed**. Some parents underline that this is important not also in order to feel at ease, but also for hygienic reasons. In one of the schools/services, they have personal beds, in the other one not in a 'generalized way', but some children do go always spontaneously to the same bed. In general, parents **don't always know** how the sleeping moment is organized.

Not in all preschools/services in Belgium is possible for children to sleep, so these two schools/services are already investing in this moment. In one of the schools/services, children can **sleep as long as they want**, in the other one, there is a more structured 'timing', also because the sleeping room is upstairs, and all children need to get down together. That's also one of the reasons why children that get awake earlier in this school should anyway wait in their bed before getting up.

2.5.   Spaces for adults

In the school that has a big hall, **parents** like the fact that they can sit in the hall, take a coffee and talk to other parents. They also like the fact that they can stay a bit in the class of the kids in the morning. In the other school/service parents wish they could have a 'meeting space'. *'I think it would be nice to have a **'meeting place'** here, also for adults, to have a coffee together, to talk…' (mother).*

In both schools/services there are no specific places thought for parents in the class (besides in one class), but all professionals say that parents are welcome to stay when they bring and pick up the child. The question 'do we need specific spaces for parents in the class too' has been (and will be) one of the points to reflect on with the teams. It is at the same time interesting that in one of the services, one parent has been responsible to **close the school** after our focus group (no professionals were present), which is a sign of collaboration and trust between professionals and families.

In both schools/services, the **room for practitioners/professionals** is on another floor. Some professionals experience this as a 'distance' that makes a bit difficult to use the room daily in a very efficient way. A calm room for adults to share, reflect and discuss is something that professionals/practitioners value as a positive element.

2.6.   Outdoor spaces

All professionals think playing outside, with any kind of weather, **is important** for children. Both schools/services have boots for children to play when it rains. One of the schools/services has a very big and beautiful garden, with trees, plants, ponies and other animals. The other one is a city school with a rather small garden. In the latter, parents say that they like the fact that children go out also when is not good weather, but they think it's not always well organized considering the **right clothes** children need to wear.

'I like all kind of activities, but for me is important that my child is dry and warm while doing these activities' (mother).
In this school, there is also a tap for water outside. But some parents don't like that the children can just play with it and become all wet, also when it's cold.

Considering the **'freedom of choice'** of children about going or not going outside, in both schools/services there is partly freedom, and partly children need to be in groups for **safety** reason, because it is not possible for the professionals to see the whole outside space from inside.

It is interesting to notice that the outside space is often mentioned as the **favorite** one for the children, but in one of the schools/services, it seems at the same time **less well organized** then others, and with not many offers, as especially some parents say.

2.7. Ideal space

Professionals' voices:
- More space
- Calm place
- Homish feeling
- Corners to build
- Places to hide
- Calm places to eat
- Calm places to sleep
- Places to move
- Places to be alone
- Places with not too many stimuli

Parents' voices:
- Places that stimulate the pleasure of learning
- A 'meeting place' also for adults, with sofas and coffee
- Light and glass
- Light colours (f.e. one colour on the walls) as a basis
- Possibility to do but also to be calm and rest (places with stimuli and places with less stimuli)
- A breastfeeding room/corner
- Cozy places with plants, pictures, paintings
- A roof on part of the garden, to be outside dry also when it rains
- Having a parent committee, to participate in what the school does, and to meet other parents

3. First 'conclusions': which possible ideas/questions for the next steps of the project?

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

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

It is also interesting to notice that **parents want their children to 'learn', but they express at the same time worries mainly connected to their 'care'**: for example they are worried that their children get wet in the toilets or outside; that they reach the toilet 'on time'; they like that they play outside, but they are worried that they have the right clothes (and professionals too); they want them to eat with pleasure; they want their emotional needs to be taken into account. This is in line with what comes out from a recent research (Van Laere, 2017), in which it is underlined how caring aspects are always implicitly and explicitly present in the words of parents, when considering children wellbeing in school.

Through our focus groups we see the importance of **intertwining 'education' and 'care'**, giving them the same value, within a holistic approach.

Within this framework, questions arise about the place of children in their own growing path: how can we take their individual needs into account in a collective place? What does this mean concerning the 'routines' moments (hygiene, sleeping, eating)? F.e. do children that wake up earlier have to stay in the sleeping room anyway until everybody is awake? Why? To whom needs are we responding by doing what we do? Or, is it important for us that children participate in the preparation of the table when we eat? Why? If yes, how can we organize it? And how can we involve the whole staff (also the professional that serves the food in one of the services/schools) in co-reflecting about the organization of the eating moment? Or, since children like very much to be outside, how can we improve this moment? How can we improve the offer of activities, and at the same time make sure that they don't get cold or wet?

All these questions can be summarized by this sentence: **we need to explore our ideas as team (vision and priorities) concerning educare and spaces, what we think it's important considering children education and the relationship with families, in order to then look for organizational strategies that make our ideas possible**

in a coherent way.

Concerning more specifically the space, once our ideas and priorities are clear, we need to clarify which issues are related to the way the space **is build**, and which ones are related to the **organization** we created. On the latter we can intervene more directly.

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

On this matter, all professionals/practitioners say that the collaboration with parents is crucial, and that they are always very welcome in the school. But at the same time, not always there is a physical place for families in the school or in the class, and parents are not always informed about many aspects of the daily routines in the school/services. Since informing parents is the first step to create participation, this is an important aspect to be further explored with the teams. After informing, a deeper collaboration can be created, in which professionals and families exchange their ideas and co-construct meanings and practice: a concrete example is the one referring to the goodbye window: parents and professionals have different opinions about it, but they never had the chance to talk about it, make them explicit and listen to each other.

A transversal element to reflect on is the **participation of parents to this project**: how are we going to make sure we can involve them? How can we involve diverse families? How can we give them feedback about what we are doing? How can we make this project visible for them? This is something we need to take into account for the next steps of the project.

Concluding, from our focus groups, we can summarize the following concepts as some of the possible **aspects to be taken into account when building a CPD path in Belgium** (FL):

- *Informing, making visible and sharing with parents*
- *Creating a **cozy, safe, homish (and clean) place***
- *Creating possibilities **to 'do', but also to be 'calm'***
- *How to join **learning and caring***
- *Clarifying what the teams **think and want** (vision), in order to organize the space in a coherent way*

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