



WONDER AND BEAUTY



Connecting ECEC spaces and *educare*



EDUCAS TOOLBOX
For Early Childhood Education
and Care Professionals

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 UIC, Center for Innovative Education, Lithuania
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GLOSSARY

CPD path

Continuous Professional Development path – Ongoing process of developing, empowering, and documenting professional competences through reflective processes.

ECEC

Early Childhood Education and Care - All services for children from 0 to 6 years old and their families.¹

ECEC spaces

Physical environments in which children and adults live their daily experiences in the ECEC centres, including infrastructures, furniture and materials/toys.

Pedagogical Documentation

Photos, videos, observations etc. which document the daily life of ECEC centres allowing reflective processes and shared practices that involve staff, children, families.

Schoolification

In this approach, the primary function of ECEC centers is to prepare children for school. Therefore, some ECEC centers focus on academic achievements, hindering the richful interconnection between playing, learning and caring, which is the core of an '*educare*' approach.

Stakeholders groups

Groups of key representatives of the ECEC sector (local policy makers, representatives of pre and in-service training institutions, NGOs working in ECEC, etc.) that took the role of 'critical friends' in each country. Stakeholders groups helped contextualizing the process and results of the project, supporting its impact and sustainability.

The 'less can be more' approach

Especially developed in certain Italian Regions, this approach considers children as competent and active participants in their learning and wellbeing. Within this framework, spaces and materials should support the autonomous discovery of children, following their rhythms and interests. In order to do so, spaces should not be overstimulating, but offer instead a well thought choice of materials, colours, furniture, which allows children to concentrate and have time to develop their experiences in creative ways. Natural and non-structured materials (wood blocks, recycled elements, etc.) support this approach.

¹ ECEC systems can be integrated (centres with children 0-6 years old integrated under the auspices of the same Ministry) or split (0-3 and 3-6 centres governed separately under different Ministries). (split in Belgium-FI; integrated in Lithuania; split but 'in transition' to an integrated one in Italy). In this text we refer normally to ECEC centres in general. Only when necessary because of the context, we refer to childcare centres (0-3 years old children) and preschool (for 3 or 2,5-6 years old children) . Information about the ECEC systems in the three countries can be found [here](#).

INTRODUCTION

The EDUCAS project

The overall goal of the EDUCAS project has been creating ECEC (Early Childhood Education and Care) environments for children from birth to 6 years old that support their development in a holistic way. This means taking into account the diverse needs of children and families, with particular attention to the ones at risk of social exclusion.

The three-year project (2018-2021) was developed in three countries (Belgium, Italy, Lithuania) through collaboration between research and ECEC centres.

	RESEARCH CENTRES	ECEC CENTRES
Belgium (Flanders)	<u>VBJK, Center for Innovation in the Early Years</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ De Tandem (Bruges)→ Hippo's Hof (Ghent)
Italy	<u>The University of Parma, Department of Humanities, Social Sciences and Cultural Industries</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ PROGES – Maria Vittoria (Torino)→ PROGES – Gelsomino (Parma)
Lithuania	<u>UIC, Center for Innovative Education</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ Aukštelkė (Aukštelkė)→ Vaikystės Sodas (Vilnius)

[ISSA \(International Step by Step Association\)](#) was responsible for communication and dissemination of the project results.

Under the project, the partners developed several actions, by mainly investing in:

- Development of a [literature review](#) concerning the connection between ECEC environments and ECEC curricula within an *educare* approach.
- Developing and testing innovative pedagogical approaches, methods, and tools to support professionals in improving ECEC environments within an *educare* approach by involving children and families.
- Disseminating the project's findings ([EDUCAS web page](#) and social media), its educational resources, and its related [policy recommendations](#), both in national and international debates.
- Developing a Toolbox presenting the approaches, methods, and tools created and employed under the EDUCAS project to support professionals working on ECEC spaces/infrastructures/materials within an *educare* approach. The Toolbox provides inspirational guidelines for ECEC pedagogical coaches, coordinators, managers, trainers, and professionals on transforming spaces and improving their practice.



Think and reflect: *educare* perspective in practice



- A child sits on the lap of the professional who is reading a book to him. While reading, she is caressing the hair of the child. The child doesn't know the meaning of a word. The professional uses an example to explain it to him.
- A professional looks a child in the eyes and softly talks to her while changing her diaper.
- Children help to prepare the table for lunch. They count how many plates they need, position them at the same distance from one another, carry water bottles finding a good balance not to let them fall, they laugh and chitchat.
- A professional supports children in talking/ exchanging stories while eating together.
 - M.: 'My little sister has one tooth.'
 - Professional.: 'Does she? She has one tooth.'
 - P.: 'My brother has many teeth. He is big.'
 - Professional: 'Oh, he is older then. (To the others): Have you heard what P. says?'
 - B.: 'I will also grow up soon.'
- Two parents have a coffee together on a sofa at the entrance of the ECEC centre and exchange about their children.
- A child is sitting on a bench at the entrance. He is putting on his jacket, but he doesn't manage to close it. The professional sits next to him and patiently supports him until he manages to close the jacket.

Framework: Why spaces and *educare*?

To create child and family-friendly learning spaces in ECEC centers, EDUCAS has developed its work under the *educare* framework. *Educare* is a holistic way of working with young children, in which wellbeing, learning, and playing are seen as inseparable and equally vital (Broström, 2006; Jensen, 2018; Hayes, 2008; Noddings, 2005; Van der Mespel et al., 2020). It is more than the 'simple assurance that children feel emotionally and physically well within the ECEC setting. It also represents belonging and creating an inclusive environment for a diversity of children' (Van der Mespel et al., 2020, 14).

The context influences whether an integrated perspective on *educare* can be implemented. A tradition and culture where education and care are understood and addressed as separate tasks may hinder an *educare* approach (Van der Mespel et al., 2020).

Despite theoretically agreeing on the need for a holistic/ *educare* approach to early childhood, it often seems complicated for professionals to identify what this type of approach means in practice.

The examples in the box on the right column present specific situations in which a holistic approach to children's development is in place. Learning, playing and caring are happening



Caring moments, such as changing diapers or having lunch, are good moments to invest in the relationship and interaction with an individual child. These are moments of spontaneous learning. (Professional, Belgium).

simultaneously, without the possibility to distinguish or hierarchically divide them.

In recent years, the concept of *educare* gained significant attention in the international debate about ECEC.²

The Council Recommendation for High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems and its European Quality Framework (2019) emphasizes it by focusing on how ECEC quality should be linked to a holistic approach in which education and care are intertwined.

ECEC spaces are crucial for *educare*: that is why the tools in this publication focus on 'ECEC spaces': the physical environments (including infrastructure, furniture, and materials/toys) in which children and adults live their daily experiences in the ECEC centres.

However, at the European level, there is a general trend to treat children as 'academic learners' at younger ages (Bennett, 2013), resulting in a hierarchy between care and education and a further tendency towards 'schoolification' of ECEC. But we know from research and practice that caring tasks are educational and that care is intrinsic to quality education (Van Laere et al., 2012), as already the Hungarian pediatrician Emmi Pikler underlined (1979).

Within this perspective, the role of space is crucial. All the examples of *educare* mentioned above take place in specific spaces, which support professionals in 'acting' holistically. As underlined in the EDUCAS literature review (2020), the last few decades have seen a growing interest in the role of the physical environment in ECEC. Alongside staff and planning, the physical environment of the ECEC centre is recognized as a critical aspect through which ECEC quality could be implemented (Council of the European Union, 2019; Melhuish, 2016; OECD, 2012).

Attention to ECEC spaces has increased significantly since the founder of the Reggio Emilia approach, the Italian pedagogue and psychologist Loris Malaguzzi, defined the physical environment as the 'third educator': besides adults and children, features and organization of spaces could convey educational meanings and affect children's growth in the early years (Edwards & Gandini, 2018; Malaguzzi, 1987).

The Italian architect Mario Botta defined constructing a school building as 'the first pedagogical act' (Botta, Crepet, & Zois, 2007, p.73). He highlighted the need to consider the physical spaces in which education occurs, even before constructing them (EDUCAS Literature Review, 2020).

In the '*educare* approach' space as 'third educator' should speak to children's holistic wellbeing and learning. The way in which space responds to children and families' different needs influences their cognitive, social, and emotional development, self-esteem, and motivation to learn (Galardini, 2003). Therefore, it is necessary to organize the spaces coherently with the educational vision of the ECEC centre, by giving children and families an active role in this organization (Vuorisalo, 2015). Working in this direction means investing in inclusion, by considering the needs of diverse children and families and promoting family involvement, with particular attention to societally disadvantaged families. For 'Tips and recommendations on including all the the voices and valuing diversity' see page 25.

For working on these issues and rethinking spaces, infrastructure, or materials, ECEC staff needs support on many levels. Besides the organizational or financial support, a strong pedagogical vision is required to orient concrete choices. This means providing time for ECEC professionals to reflect on their practice through Continuous Professional Development (CPD) paths.

² Attention towards *educare* grew also at national level. For example, the Flemish (Belgium) Ministry of Education in 2020 published <https://www.vlaanderen.be/publicaties/samen-werken-aan-een-kwaliteitsvolle-kluterparticipatie-een-inspiratiegids-voor-kluteronderwijzers> for preschool staff on how to promote quality children participation, including a chapter on creating spaces based on *educare*. In Italy, Musatti, T., Picchio, M. Early Education in Italy: Research and Practice. IJEC 42, 141-153 (2010). https://www.researchgate.net/publication/225360539_Early_Education_in_Italy_Research_and_Practice; the Minister of Education is publishing specific guidelines which contain a focus on *educare* in an integrated system: <https://www.miur.gov.it/linee-pedagogiche-per-il-sistema-integrato-zerosei->

Method: Connecting research and practice by using action research to create change

By emphasizing the collaboration between research and ECEC centers in each country, the EDUCAS project has been developed following the action research methodology, which resulted in innovative practices related to spaces and *educare*.

The action research aimed at:

- Including all the voices and perspectives - gaining insights on how children, parents, and staff perceive the organization of the ECEC space and how it is or not connected to their vision of education and care;
- Planning and realizing ECEC staff's professional development paths around the meaning of 'education' and 'care' for children, families, and staff, aiming to improve the link between spaces and *educare*.

In this way, research and professional development have been integrated, combining research and (self)reflection, which resulted in transforming practice (Bove, 2009).

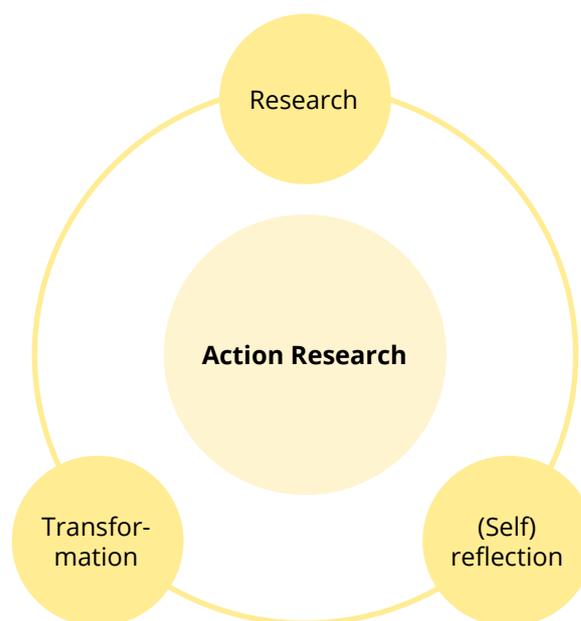
Although the project teams in the three countries worked on several common areas, each had a specific focus for their Continuous Professional Development Path (CPD):

Belgium: the Research Centre (VBJK) and the two ECEC centres involved mainly worked on 'how to better connect vision and practice when organizing spaces within an *educare* approach'

Italy: the Research Centre (UniPr) and the two ECEC centres involved mainly worked on 'how to value *educare* in daily practice by transforming ECEC spaces, with a specific attention to listening to children voices'.

Lithuania: the Research Centre (UIC) and the two ECEC centres mainly worked on 'how to give space to families and create a physical space that 'allows' a relational one, within an *educare*/democratic perspective'.

The approaches, methods and tools used while implementing the CPD paths are the core of this Toolbox. In addition, complete EDUCAS case study reports with examples from the practice from the three participating countries can be found here ([Belgium- FL](#), [Italy](#) and [Lithuania](#)).



Following the approach of connecting research and practice and enhancing joint learning, in each context, the research centres accompanied the staff of the two local ECEC centres in co-reflecting on spaces, infrastructure, materials. In this process, different strategies such as supervision, observation, video-observation, pedagogical documentation, etc. were used. Together in teams, professionals searched for the answers to questions such as:

- How can we include children's, parents' and professional's voices when (re)designing the ECEC spaces within an *educare* approach?
- Are we taking the *educare* approach into account when organizing our ECEC spaces and the materials we offer?
- How can we create warm and inclusive ECEC spaces?

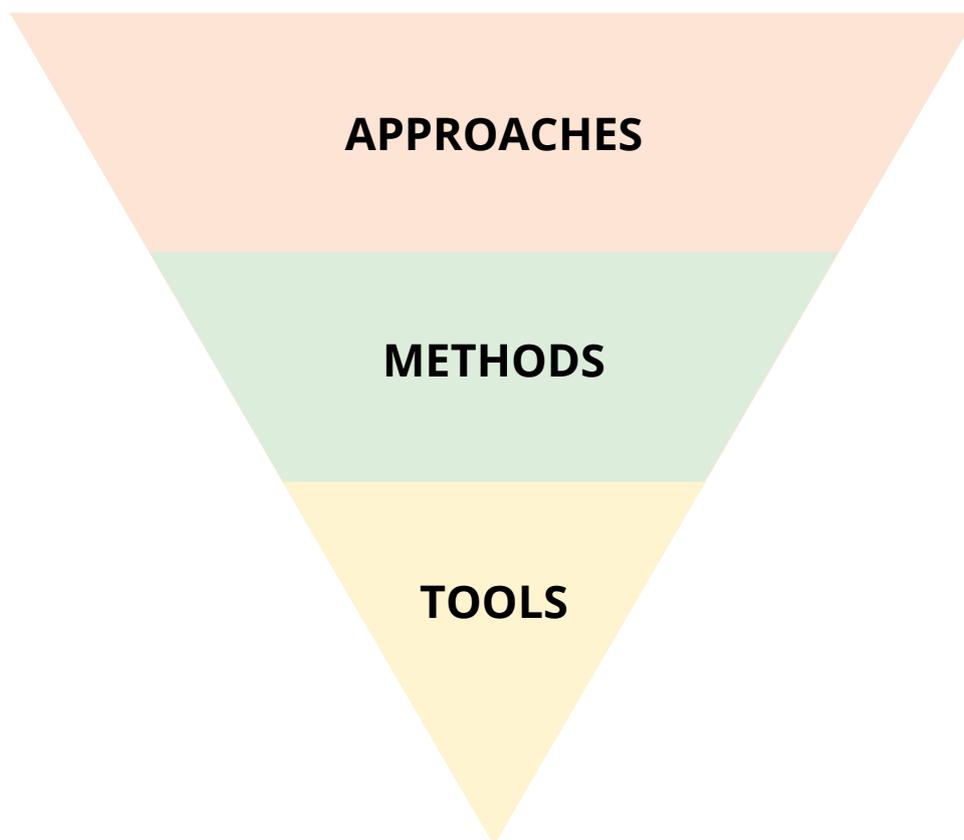
EDUCAS TOOLBOX: THE APPROACHES, METHODS AND TOOLS

This Toolbox contains the approaches, methods and tools developed under the EDUCAS project to support professionals working on ECEC spaces/infrastructures/materials within an *educare* approach.

It provides inspirational guidelines for ECEC pedagogical coaches, coordinators, managers, trainers, and professionals on transforming spaces and improving their practice.

The tools/methods can be adapted to each context according to the specific needs.

Overview of the Toolbox



APPROACH 1

Gathering and analyzing different perspectives and needs:
How to encompass children's, families', and professionals' voices and perspectives in (re)designing ECEC spaces?

METHOD 1

Gaining insights through focus groups with families and professionals

METHOD 2

Exploring children's perspectives

METHOD 3

Reflecting on spaces through observations

METHOD 4

Strategies to involve families in the (re)organization of ECEC spaces

TOOL 1

Guidelines for organizing focus groups

TOOL 2

Thematic grid for focus groups

TOOL 3

Indicators to transcribe focus groups

TOOL 4

Guidelines for introducing drawings to children

TOOL 5

Grid for interview on children's drawings

TOOL 6

Guidelines to create a three-dimensional model

TOOL 7

Guidelines for interviews with children on three-dimensional model

TOOL 8

Grid for analysing interviews with the three-dimensional model

TOOL 9

Observation grid

TOOL 10

Grid for exchange of observations between ECEC centres (and within the same centre)

TOOL 11

Questionnaire for parents

TOOL 12

Families and professionals' perceptions of the ECEC spaces

APPROACH 2

Connecting vision and practice:

How to connect pedagogical vision and practice when working on spaces within an *educare* approach?

METHOD 5

Reflecting on pedagogical documentation

METHOD 6

Exploring needs in the spaces through moodboard and mindmap

METHOD 7

Creating a shared vision by investing in integrated working in shared spaces

TOOL 13

Moodboard and Mindmap tools

TOOL 14

Grid for questions preschool – out of school care

APPROACH 3

Supporting professionals:

How to support professionals in valuing *educare* when (re)designing spaces/materials?

METHOD 8

Building local professional learning communities amongst ECEC professionals

METHOD 9

International exchanges

TOOL 15

Professionals' reflection grid - Focus Area Learning Environment Tool

TOOL 16

Concrete questions for ECEC staff when wanting to connect spaces and *educare*

Where relevant, within each approach and tool description, you will find:

- Experiences from the EDUCAS project
- How the Tool was implemented to practice
- Voices of the participants in the process
- Tips and recommendations
- EDUCAS main findings and results

APPROACH 1

Gathering and analyzing different perspectives and needs

When (re)designing ECEC spaces, it is essential to listen to 'all the voices,' including voices of children, families, and professionals.

Information on childrens' and adults' visions and meanings will put a reflection process in motion. This process will help you decide which spaces might be transformed to better respond to the needs of children and families.

METHOD 1 Gaining insights through focus groups with families and professionals

Working with focus groups is an exciting way to involve families and staff from the beginning, by exploring their ideas and needs. Focus groups have the double function of:

1. gathering data on the views and needs of participants, which can lead to a needs' analysis
2. creating opportunities for participants to exchange and co-construct ideas and beliefs.

Organizing focus groups requires good preparation and discussions among partners (Tool 1). The method and themes for the focus groups have to be decided and agreed upon in advance. Under the EDUCAS project, a thematic grid was developed with:

- **Themes** - Broader issues that all the focus groups need to explore;
- **Areas** - Specific subjects that all the focus groups need to explore, and
- **Sub-areas** - Suggestions and clarifications about how the areas can be introduced and explored with the participants. Each research team could adapt this part according to its context.

As long as all agreed themes are explored, the order in which themes, areas, and sub-areas are discussed could differ from one focus group to another. In addition, sub-areas could be different depending on the participants they address to. To learn more, look at Tool 2.

After the focus groups are finalized, Tool 3 can guide you through the focus groups' transcription process.

Experience from the project

In the project, partners decided to start the action research in all three countries with specific focus groups involving staff and families (in separate groups) in the 6 ECEC centers. The method and themes of the focus groups have been discussed and agreed upon in advance so that all partners could have 'similar readable data' at the end of the process.

The planning of the CPD path with the staff has been informed by the focus groups' analysis results. In this way, the focus groups supported the aim of the action research of linking research with reflection and transformation.



'Early childhood education and care settings can actively encourage participation by involving parents, families, and carers in decision-making processes.'

(Council of the European Union, 2019, 8)



Supporting tools for Method 1.

TOOL 1 Guidelines for organizing focus groups

TOOL 2 Thematic grid for focus groups

TOOL 3 Indicators to transcribe focus groups

The main themes agreed by the partners included:

- inside playing space and entrance
- routine moments (hygiene, eating, sleeping)
- spaces for adults
- outdoor spaces
- ideal space

The themes were the same for families and staff.

Overall, in the **three countries**, EDUCAS conducted **13 focus groups** (6 with parents and 7 with professionals), involving a total of **36 parents** and **47 professionals**. In EDUCAS, focus groups were facilitated by the research teams. However, they can also be facilitated by coaches, directors or other staff from the ECEC centres.

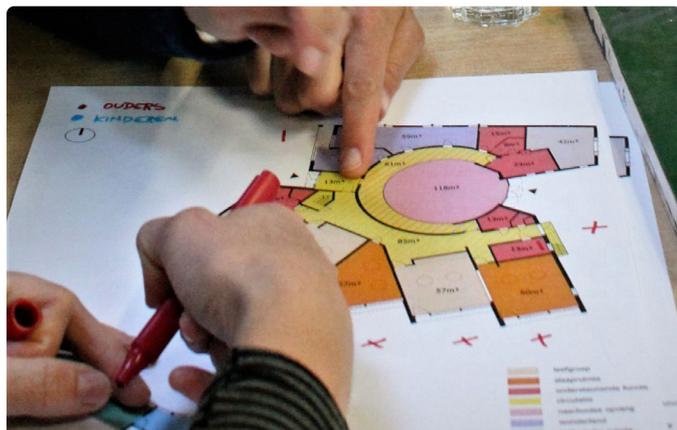
Process of the focus groups – how did it look in practice

At the beginning of each focus group, the facilitators showed the map of the ECEC centre and placed it in the middle of the table (see images below). He/she started by asking participants to mark the place(s) they like the most in the service and the places they think children like the most. Then, during the discussions, whenever participants mentioned a specific space in the center, the facilitator would tag that space. In this way, at the end of each focus group, we had a visualization of how parents and professionals perceive the ECEC centre space.

This exercise aims to provide a visual presentation of the most mentioned places of the ECEC centre, the most and least used spaces, the more and less discussed ones. Drawing might also help in the discussion itself: it can help clarifying concepts and thus visualizing the different perspectives of professionals and families.

To facilitate the participation of families with different languages and backgrounds, an interpreter was available when necessary.

Partners also foresaw the possibility of having individual interviews with some families, for example, the parent(s) who would feel more comfortable in a one-to-one interaction or those who had organizational problems in being present at the given day and time.





“Our children are continuously surrounded by ready-made and plastic things, so the kindergarten should be minimalistic, with essential materials.”
 (Professional, Italy)

“I like the entrance and welcoming space because it is really an agorà, there are parents who meet there ...” (Parent, Italy)

“Children don’t always like to sit at the tables when they draw or write. Then it is difficult to bring them together, and often we must individually invite everyone.” (Professional, Lithuania)

“I like that we have nice nature very close and children can enjoy visiting animals, going to feed goats. It is a privilege for children attending pre-school in the countryside. [...] Each family has a different policy when it comes to going out with “bad” weather.” (Parent, Lithuania)

“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...” (Professional, Belgium)

“I don’t know how the toilet moment and space is organized here.” (Parent, Belgium)





Tips and recommendations

- When conducting the focus groups, it is recommended to have two facilitators so that one person can facilitate the discussion, while the other one can play an 'assisting role' (e.g., taking care of the 'technical part' of the focus group, observing the climate and non-verbal communication of participants, etc.).
- When selecting parents and professionals who should participate in the focus group, it is recommended to search for a diverse, mixed group of participants. For example, for parents: mix in gender; ethnic-cultural diversity; the age of children. For professionals: from different age groups of children, from various groups (classes), with different roles and qualifications, different 'seniority' positions (when applicable).
- In advance, inform all participants about the aims of the focus groups, the anonymity of the data, and how they will be used.
- As facilitators, make sure everybody has a say, pay attention to the ones that talk less, and value what is said without judging or answering yourself. Be careful when answering participants' questions such as 'What do you mean?'. Sometimes by answering this question, you can unintentionally direct further the conversation. In these cases it is better to mirror the question by repeating, 'What do you mean?'
- Photos of different ECEC spaces can support participants exploring the themes. For example, a photo of a classroom, an entrance, the toilets, and the sleeping room. We suggest using photos from ECEC centres not involved in the focus group so that participants feel free to express their opinions. Show the photo to the group, and ask: 'What do you think about this photo?' or 'What do you see?'. Then you can ask, 'Is there anything you like in this photo? What? Why?' 'is there anything you don't like in this photo? What? Why?' etc. The aim is to use a visual to start talking about participants' ideas, perceptions, and feelings regarding *educare* and space.
- When exploring each theme, always ask for concrete examples. Through concrete examples, we get to know what professionals and parents 'really' think and we don't get 'uniformed answers.'
- When focus groups are facilitated by directors or other staff of ECEC centres, one needs to be aware that directors or staff might need to be supported in getting to know how to organize/conduct a focus group. Besides, more or less implicit power-relationships (for example, between the director and the staff or between staff and parents) might influence some of the answers, which is not necessarily something that hinders the data. Still, it is something to be aware of and to address if necessary.

Insights from the focus groups

The results of the analysis of the focus group findings indicate certain common tendencies in the three countries. Some examples of what families and professionals shared are provided in the next paragraph. In addition, a complete analysis is available: [The points of view of families, professionals, children: Summary of the analysis of the focus groups with staff and parents, and the drawings and interviews with the children in Belgium, Lithuania, Italy.](#)

Using focus groups findings for future planning

1. Extracting the central themes

In the project, after realizing the focus groups, each research center analyzed its results. Through the analysis, some central common themes emerged, such as:

→ *The importance of creating spaces that welcome families* (e.g., 'the entrance where parents can meet'), to support their participation and give them voice. Furthermore, it is important to inform parents about what happens in the ECEC centre, since many of them answered 'I don't know how the spaces are organized'.



→ *The importance of a 'less can be more' approach.* This approach is well developed in Italy (especially in certain regions), and partners learned to appreciate it during the project. According to this approach, ECEC spaces don't need to be overstimulating but rather to offer selected well-thought materials (mainly non-structured and natural – for example wooden blocks, recycled elements, and in general materials that don't indicate the scope of their use, but they leave it open to children) that can support children's discoveries and create a 'calm' environment where creativity and relationships can grow.



→ *The tension between education-care seems to be present in daily practice in some contexts, with a perceived difference between learning, playing and caring.* In the holistic *educare* approach that we wish to promote, these aspects are intertwined and not separable.



→ *The value of the outdoor spaces.* In certain contexts, outdoor spaces are less used than indoor ones due to a traditional reluctance to go outside with so-called 'bad weather'. At the same time, both families and professionals recognize the crucial role of outdoor spaces for the wellbeing and learning of children, which indicates the importance of working on how to value these spaces.

→ *The importance of the routine moments (eating, hygiene, sleeping).* These moments and spaces should not be less important than the playing moments or the more structured activities. Children develop caring, relational, cognitive, physical, and emotional aspects of their identity during daily routines, which means that specific attention should be reserved for these moments and the spaces where they happen.



2. From reflection to action

Each country contextualized the results of the analysis and put in place the following actions:

- Sharing the results with the teams of the involved ECEC centres, discussing, and reflecting;
- Sharing the results with families through different strategies (meetings; posters with main results hanged on the wall; feedback moments);
- Developing a specific action plan with two intertwined segments: 1) a contextualized CPD path, specific for each ECEC center; 2) a common CPD path, which brought together the two ECEC centres in each country to share specific actions, meet and exchange, and eventually become a small scale local 'professional learning community'.

DRAWINGS AND INTERVIEWS WITH CHILDREN

One of the Tools used in all three countries is analyzing children's drawings and interviews. Additionally, the Italian team used a three-dimensional model of the ECEC centre to interview children and explore how they 'see,' experience, and understand its spaces and materials. This exploration helped the teams get closer to children's points of view, understand their visions and needs better, and elaborate on possible actions to transform the spaces.

Specific guidelines on introducing the activity to the children and coordinating it, together with activity materials are provided in [Tool 4](#).

Experiences from the EDUCAS project

The process of collecting children's perspectives and opinions followed the following steps:

- The ECEC professionals asked children to draw their favorite space in the ECEC center.
- Through a brief individual interview, the researchers or professionals asked each child to talk about his/her drawing. The interview was guided by questions like: What did you draw? What do you like in this space that you drew? Is there anything you 'miss' in the ECEC spaces?

For the complete list of the interview questions, look at [Tool 5](#).

Utilizing findings from drawings and interviews with children for future planning

1. Extracting central themes

Several themes emerged from the analysis of the drawings and interviews, for example: children look for places for exploration and 'play,' but they also look for places where they can rest and 'be calm'. The later ones are more difficult to find in ECEC centres. Children also wish to experience the connection between families and the ECEC centre.

The complete analysis of the children's perspectives can be found [here](#).

2. From reflection to action

After analyzing drawing and interviews:

- The research team discussed the results with the ECEC teams.
- The results have been integrated with the ones coming out from the focus groups with families and professionals.
- The results helped defining the action plan that ECEC centres put in place to work on their spaces by taking families' and children's needs into account.

Supporting tools for Method 2.

TOOL 4 Guidelines for introducing drawings to children

TOOL 5 Grid for interview on children's drawings

TOOL 6 Guidelines to create a three-dimensional model

TOOL 7 Guidelines for interviews with children on three-dimensional model

TOOL 8 Grid for analysing interviews with the three-dimensional model

Tips and recommendations

- 1) The interpretation of young children's drawings and answers is complex and not always possible. Therefore, although the children in ECEC were 0 to 6 years old, the project partners decided to focus primarily on children aged 4-6.
- 2) When undertaking this kind of activity, researchers and professionals need to be aware that what we analyze is always an interpretation of what children express and serves only to support team reflection.



A THREE-DIMENSIONAL MODEL TO EXPLORE CHILDREN'S VISION AND NEEDS

The Italian pilots went further with exploring children's points of view, by working on a three-dimensional model. A Ph.D. student from the University of Parma, involved in the EDUCAS project, built a three-dimensional model of children's rooms and asked them individually to position Playmobil dolls representing themselves, two friends, and the two professionals telling a story about a day in the center.

Specific guidelines to create the three-dimensional model (Tool 6) and collecting the data with children (Tool 7) have been elaborated.

The analysis of the activity with the three-dimensional model was carried out by identifying the following main categories to be observed:

SPACE = Which space was represented?

PEOPLE = Which people were represented?

REASON = Why was that space chosen as the favorite one?

To learn more about the entire 'grid for the analysis interviews with the three-dimensional model,' consult Tool 8.



METHOD 3 Reflecting on spaces through observations

OBSERVATIONS AND VIDEO-OBSERVATIONS ON SPACES

Observation is a precious instrument for 'seeing' practice and reflect on it, individually or in group. It is an intentional 'look' at what is happening, allowing one to 'freeze or stop' the situation and reflect on it afterwards.

Observation is not about 'judgment' but about allowing different views on the same situation to open possible interpretations and negotiate meanings and practices (Bove, 2009; Sharmahd, 2011).

Observations have been one of the tools that EDUCAS has used to work on spaces within an *educare* approach. The following paragraphs illustrate two methods elaborated under the project: Valuing *educare* through observations and exchanging observations.

Valuing *educare* through observations

In the Italian pilot, the teams realized that the relational and emotional meaning of the 'caring' spaces is recognized and valued by the professionals, but that the 'learning' meaning of the same spaces is less clear and explicit. Therefore, the Italian EDUCAS team asked itself: *How can we make more visible the educare value of our ECEC spaces, by making explicit how caring spaces are educational too?*

This point has been widely discussed in the teams and has helped professionals make children's learning paths more noticeable in the different moments and spaces in the center. Researchers and professionals co-designed a circular and recursive path that allows the sharing of different points of view.

Experiences from the EDUCAS project

In-person observations and video observations have been employed as a method for reflection. The teams prepared an observation grid (Tool 9) to be used during the observations to ensure that all the participants in the process use the same 'observation lenses.' Finally, the following questions guided the reflection:

- What happens in this specific space?
- Which learnings take place?
- Which relational and emotional aspects take place?

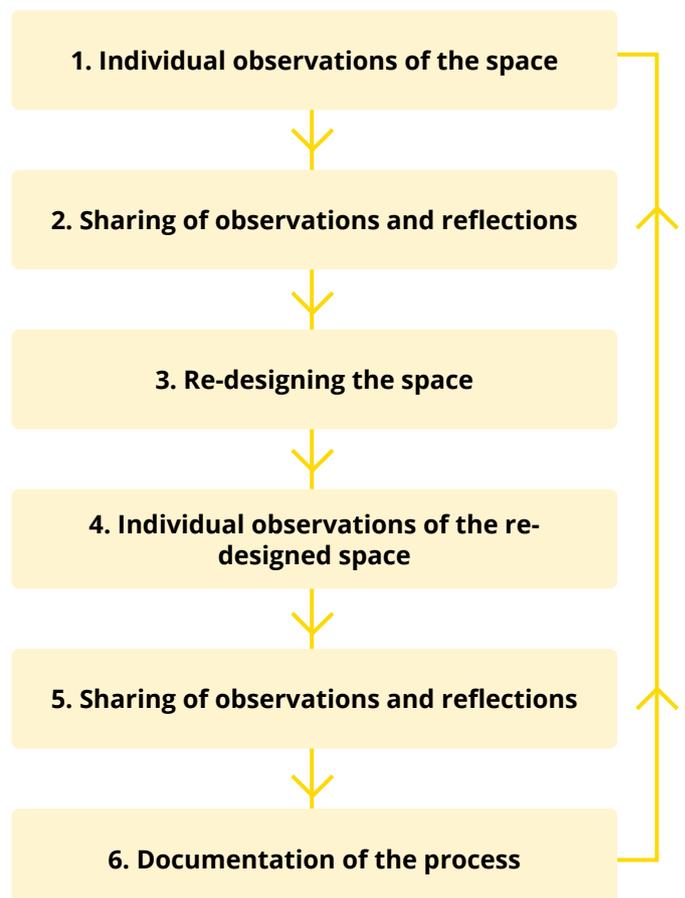
As a preparation, professionals and coordinators of each ECEC center defined a critical space to be observed and developed a brief document explaining which space was chosen, why they decided to work on it, and the guiding questions or doubts of the professionals about that specific space.

Six steps followed, as the graphic shows, and further developed on next page.

Supporting tools for Method 3.

TOOL 9 Observation grid

TOOL 10 Grid for exchange of observations between ECEC centres (and within the same centre)



1. Individual observations of the space: Each professional, the pedagogical coordinator, and each researcher individually observed (in different moments) the same critical space, following the observation grid and taking one or more short videos (with mobile phone).

2. Sharing of observations and reflections: Once all the observations were done, each observer read the perceptions of all the other observers. During the joint meetings of professionals, coordinators, and researchers, insights and reflections were shared.

3. Re-designing the space: Inspired by the shared reflections and discussions, space was redesigned.

4. Individual observations of the re-designed space: the same observation-procedure used at the beginning (step 1) was carried out after the redesigning (each professional observed the redesigned space).

5. Sharing of observations and reflections: the same reflection procedure used before redesigning the space (step 2) was carried out after the redesigning (sharing the observations and reflecting on them together).

6. Documentation of the process: the whole process has been documented with photos, videos, reports.

From reflection to action – an example from the project

A space considered as critical by the teams in Italy was the entrance, which had been modified to follow the COVID-19 protocol, according to which parents could not enter the children's room. Since the re-organization took place very quickly, professionals felt the need to reflect on this space to understand if it was functional and allowed a welcoming transition for children and families.

The circular process of observations/video observations was an opportunity for the team to change the organization of the spaces/furnishing and to understand how the welcoming moment could be an *educare* one for children and families.

As a first step, professionals defined specific *educare* elements of the welcoming moments such as:

- welcoming children upon arrival;
- caring for and giving attention to parents;
- caring for all children, especially the ones that find it more difficult to separate from their parents;
- self-organization of children in the group while they are waiting for the professional who is welcoming other children and parents;
- developing a sense of belonging to the group, by 'creating the group' every day.

Through the joint reflection based on the observations, specific changes were implemented in the welcoming space to stress and value learning, caring, and playing:

→ The area in front of the entrance has been enlarged. The lockers were moved, and a bench for children was placed. In that way, the area became more spacious and thus more welcoming for parents and arriving children.

→ The professionals initially moved the activity corners close to the door to better 'manage' the children in the class while welcoming other children and families. However, after the observations and



reflections, the activity corners were positioned near the entrance door and in other areas of the room. In that way, the entrance became less crowded.

→ Professionals initially perceived the stained glass windows between the classroom and the entrance as a 'disturbing' section for the children in the class, who constantly ran to the window to see the arrival of their friends. After the observations, the window was re-valuated and seen as an additional asset to 'give meanings' to welcoming, greetings, separation, and reunion moments between children and parents, since the transparency of the glass activated a more participatory welcoming and reunion modality. As the group began to experience it as a resource, the window was valued by moving the furniture that stood in front of it and favoring visibility for all children.



EXCHANGE OF OBSERVATIONS

Exchanging observations means that professionals from one ECEC center observe the ones of another ECEC center and vice-versa. After the observations they share reciprocal reflections. The same can happen also within the same team, when for example professionals from one children group observes colleagues of another group.

The exchange of observations shows the 'power' of the external eye to reflect on ECEC practice. It is often difficult for a team to find a way to transform its practice, even when explicitly asking for a change. An external eye that asks what looks like 'simple' questions (for example, 'why are you organizing this moment in this way?'; 'why the tables are in this position?') can be a great support to the reflection of the team, and thus its self-awareness concerning the vision and beliefs underlying their choices. In addition, this stimulates staff in 'seeing' where their vision is or is not coherent with what they do, thus strengthening or transforming their practice when necessary.

In the case of the exchange of observations, professionals experience the double position of being 'the external eye' and being observed by an 'external eye'.

Both positions support staff in 'seeing' their daily practice with different eyes.



Observations and video observations - Voices of professionals

"The team stressed the importance of the video-observation method because it allowed professionals to see themselves and the colleagues specifically during the welcoming moment. It also allowed them to reflect on both the emotional aspects and the children's learnings."

"Through written observations and video recordings, it has also been possible for pre-school professionals to observe colleagues in the childcare center and vice-versa, especially highlighting the competencies of younger children."

"By analyzing the video observations in the group, it was possible to grasp how the entrance spaces, although changed following the pandemic rules, could still allow a good welcome for families and children."

Tips and recommendations



- 1) Video observations are precious methods for joint reflections. This method allows us to 'stop' a situation to later reflect on it. A video gives a whole picture of the space. It represents an opportunity to observe oneself from an external perspective, helping in making visible non-verbal communication, simultaneous actions, and complex interactions (not only dyadic ones).
- 2) Video observation also allows professionals to re-observe themselves several times, allowing to grasp specific processes with greater depth.
- 3) Before starting with video observations, the educational team must agree on some essential aspects and opportunities of this instrument. It is crucial to agree that the aim of video observations **is not to judge the educational practices**, but to understand them better and reflect on how the spaces are organized and which meanings they carry.

From reflection to action - an example from the project

The two Belgian ECEC centers involved in the EDUCAS project organized 'exchanging observation moments' between one centre and the other.

Before doing the observations, the ECEC staff had been prepared by the research center team and the ECEC directors. It had to be clear that the focus was not judging but reflecting on practice.

The observations followed a grid prepared in advance, which focused on how the different spaces (entrance, children rooms, routines spaces – eating, sleeping, hygiene – outdoor spaces, places for adults) in the services are organized and used, and what kind of interactions are happening, taking into account an *educare* approach (Tool 10).

After the observations, a joint reflection moment has been organized. Both observed professionals and observers were present during the reflection moment, together with the ECEC directors and the researchers (here as facilitators). The reflection moment (feedback) was structured as follows:

1. The observers report what they saw in a descriptive way.
2. The observed professionals tell what they think about it and how they felt when observed (interpretation).
3. The observers add/discuss their interpretations and tell 'what they would bring home' from what they saw.
4. The facilitators summarize and eventually add if needed.



Exchange of observations - Voices of professionals

The practitioners of both ECEC centres reported that this was a very enriching experience for them because 1) they could see similar/different practices in another context and learn from them; 2) they could rethink their own practice and re-elaborate taken for granted concepts.

"It was very interesting to see; I could see that their spaces changed a lot. But I could also rethink my class, my spaces in our pre-school."

"They have a wall full of boots for children so that they can go out with all kinds of weather. This is something I want to bring home. They also flexibly use the outdoor spaces during the day, without fixed moments. I find it very inspiring."

"Children are very involved when they eat, and space is organized, calm, and pleasant. And children serve food themselves. It made me rethink how we organize our eating moment and space, which is less 'calm.' The colleagues observed in our service and reported a sense of 'chaos' when seeing our eating moment, so this is an eye-opener."

"Here I see that they work with a 'buddy' (older child) that accompanies a younger child to the toilet. I find it an interesting practice; we might use it also in our ECEC centre."

Tips and recommendations



- 1) During the 'reflection moments,' it is important not to start with interpretations of what has been observed, but to focus on the 'description'. Descriptive language helps the joint reflection because it opens up for different interpretations of the same situation.
- 2) Learning the difference between 'describing' and 'interpreting' is also an important exercise for ECEC professionals. It helps them become aware of the type of language they use with children and families, eventually consciously choosing which language they want to use in different situations.

METHOD 4 Strategies to involve families in the (re)organization of ECEC spaces

An *educare* approach is a democratic one, in which families are valued in their role and seen as partners in the upbringing of children, within a co-educative perspective (Rayna, Rubio, 2010). Involving and supporting all families in ECEC centres is thus crucial.

It is well known that parents who participate in decision-making in ECEC feel ownership and belonging to ECEC community. Therefore, besides being beneficial for families themselves, all this potentially improves children's wellbeing.

From reflection to action - an example from the project

The professionals from the Lithuanian ECEC centres, partners in the EDUCAS project, traditionally engage in various ways with families. Within the EDUCAS project they developed this aspect further, focusing on spaces and *educare*.

In addition to the focus groups, the Lithuanian ECEC professionals surveyed parents to capture their views on the ECEC environment (Tool 11).

The collected information were summarized at the group level, and then presented to the colleagues on the level of ECEC centre. Parental responses allowed professionals to decide what should be changed in the ECEC or classroom environment. A survey and further discussions with the ECEC community showed that many parents understand that wellbeing is the basis for harmonious child development. As one parent stated:



"Physically safe environment is important, but psychologically safe and stimulating environment, even more. It influences children's development."

Also the Italian teams prepared a questionnaire to explore families' and professionals' perceptions of the ECEC spaces where they are daily. This questionnaire has been distributed to several ECEC centres in Italy, Lithuania, Belgium (Tool 12).

SPACES FOR FAMILIES

Reflecting on the fact that, in the focus groups, parents expressed the need to have a 'space' in the ECEC centre, one of the Lithuanian centres decided to create a 'parent corner' – a pleasant space for parents which shows them that they are welcome and gives them a place to meet.

In response to the parents' wishes expressed in the questionnaires, a mini library for parents was established in the "parent corner." Professionals asked parents what literature they would be interested in, collected books, pedagogical and psychological magazines with valuable information for parents, and put it on the table and the shelf. Parents after work can sit for a bit to read while they wait for kids to dress up or borrow a book for the weekend.

The space is aesthetically pleasing, to make families feel at ease and welcome. Family pictures have been put on the wall to create a connection between home and ECEC centre: professionals

Supporting tools for Method 4.

TOOL 11 Questionnaire for parents

TOOL 12 Families and professionals' perceptions of the ECEC spaces



Voices of parents and professionals

"When you realize that parents and professionals all want the best for children, there must be some common ground to start quality communication. I never thought about it. It is evident that our reflection and feedback from parents can help to improve the overall quality of the pedagogical practice."
(professional, Lithuania)

"I feel informed about my child's progress and feel included in planning and decision-making. I feel happy that my opinion is valued." (parent, Lithuania)



asked parents to bring the photos they like, telling stories about their everyday lives, pleasant moments at home, or holidays. Parents hung up all pictures along with their children. Children and their families feel they 'belong' when they can recognize themselves in the ECEC environment.

 "I think it would be good to have a special shelf with books for parents: about parenting, psychology, etc." (Parent).

During the day, this same corner can be used as a quiet place to comfort a child or a place where children can see pictures from their homes and share about them. Parents appreciated this corner very much, and many of them use it now when picking up their children; they sit down, read a newspaper, have a chat.

The other Lithuanian ECEC centre also has a parent's corner. In this space, an EDUCAS stand is present, in which all information about the project activities are placed. In addition, a calendar created by the center is posted, with all the upcoming events and activities under the project. This helps informing families in advance about the planned activities, but it also allows them to plan in which activities they could or would like to participate and reserve their time for it.

CONTINUITY HOME-ECEC CENTRE

Collaboration between families and professionals is a key aspect of ECEC life.

Children, also through their drawings, express the wish to 'see' their parents, their homes in the ECEC centre. In Lithuania, the ECEC centres created specific moments when children could bring certain materials (for example, toys, books...) to the centre introducing them within their group of friends (by showing them, playing with them together, exchanging etc.). In the same way, children could take home books and toys from the ECEC centre.

Informing families about what happens in the ECEC centre is also important to create involvement. Each Friday, the ECEC center sends a letter about its activities to the parents. In addition, the team decided to add a new section about the EDUCAS project. In this way, families get information about the project, and they are welcome to give feedback.

 "It is important to inform the whole community about the changes we are making. In every letter, we share informations on how we renewed our classrooms after the start of the EDUCAS project, why we decided to renew them, and how it helps professionals and children. Parents are very interested in the changes in the environment, express their ideas and offer their help. That is the way we include our community in this project." (Professional, Lithuania)

Besides this, ECEC staff invited parents to initiate activities in the ECEC spaces, if they wished to, to share the spaces as a community. For example, one Italian father proposed to teach children Italian once a week, one mother proposed to teach art, etc. Children like it when their parents, grandparents, or family members come to the ECEC centre. The same thing has been done online during the lockdown due to the COVID-19 situation, when virtual *educare* spaces needed to be created.



Voices of parents and professionals

"I like that the classroom looks like home—no institutional feeling." (Parent)

"There is a 'toy day' on Fridays when children bring their toy from home and can introduce it to their friends. Children are waiting for Fridays very much." (Parent)

"Children take different things to the ECEC centre as the centre organizes thematic units. So children often say: "aha, I can show this to my class because it is related to the theme we are now focusing on." (Parent)

"Yes, children like to have a toy from home, especially during familiarization periods. This gives them a feeling of comfort. They bring books or different things when we are starting a new thematic unit. And... of course, they need their loved toy for sleeping moments." (Professional)



CO-DESIGNING SPACES WITH FAMILIES

The Lithuanian ECEC centers got inspired by the study visit to Italy under the EDUCAS project. In Italy (especially in certain regions), a 'less can be more' approach is present, which suggests focusing not on the volume of materials and toys but primarily on the quality of a well-thought offer.

Well-chosen materials in not over-crowded spaces favor children's creative experiences, besides allowing them to enjoy 'calm' moments.

😊 "I think there are too many toys in the classroom. When there are fewer toys, children start to communicate, share, play together."
(Professional, Lithuania)

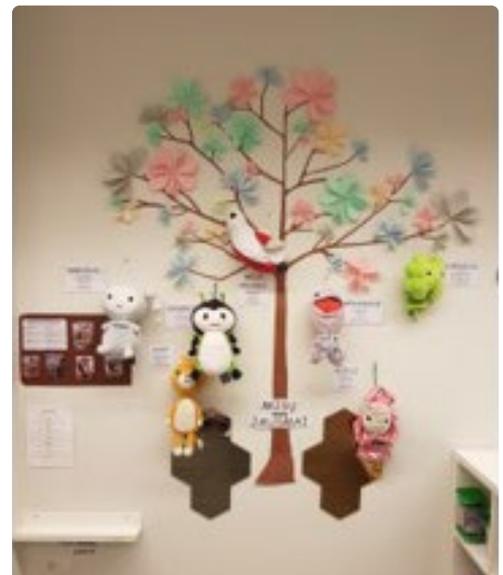
Experiences from the EDUCAS project

Based on the Italian example, the Lithuanian ECEC centres decided to re-visit their offer of materials and toys to children by involving families in this decision-making process. Steps:

- The topic has been discussed during specific meetings with parents. When asked for their opinion, parents stated the following: *'There is too much plastic in the pre-school' 'We say that the rooms are small, but I see massive objects – toys which take too much space – huge cars, cubes, three boxes of trains, etc. Some can be removed'*. ECEC teams and parents reflected that ECEC environments that are comfortable, well organized, and welcoming can better promote learning, playing, and caring.
- Based on this reflection, the spaces have been organized into logically defined interest areas. Professionals discussed with children and parents which materials to select for each activity area. Overloaded shelves have been cleaned up, and materials have been labeled so that children know where to find them. Clean, well-organized shelves and materials facilitate children's ability to use and explore them, making them feel more autonomous.
- The staff then created a specific 'pedagogical documentation' for each area in the children's room: posters with pictures and short descriptions of what children do in that area explaining which materials are used, what competencies are being developed in the center etc. Each month professionals are changing this information. Parents like to be informed in such a way and discuss this information with other parents and the professionals. It helps sharing the understanding that wellbeing, learning, and playing are equally crucial for child development.
- The changes introduced in the spaces have been appreciated through a celebration moment with children and families in the ECEC centre.



BEFORE



AFTER



WORKSHOPS TO CREATE 'FAMILY BOOKS'

One of the Belgian ECEC centers got inspired by the study visit to Italy and organized meeting moments with children and families to create 'family books' jointly. As a result, the big entrance of the ECEC centre has been arranged in a warm and welcoming way, coffee and tea have been prepared, and small groups of parents could take place around different tables. On these occasions, staff and families also had the opportunity to talk, exchange and get to know each other better.

Organizing 'workshop' moments with families has the double effect of:

- co-creation;
- reducing parent's feeling of loneliness on the 'parenthood path', by favouring relationships amongst families.

In this specific case, the family books have also been a way to 'make families visible' in the ECEC spaces. In addition, the meetings have been a way to connect home and ECEC centre by bringing family pictures into the service, looking at them with the children and sharing them.

A specific space in the children's room has been foreseen for the family books, and children can take the books when they want, when they miss their family or when they would like to share their 'home stories' with peers and ECEC staff. Professionals also support this process and use the books in specific moments to 'talk' with the children about their families and home.



Tips and recommendations on including all the voices and valuing diversity



Valuing and making diversity visible can be challenging. When thinking about involving the voices of everybody, it is essential to think about who are we reaching? Who are we excluding? How can we make sure that everybody has a say?

- For example, when having focus groups, we can find strategies to involve those who don't speak the main language or don't feel comfortable talking in a group, etc. (by having an interpreter, organizing individual interviews, etc.). It is also crucial that all families feel that we are 'interested' in their meanings. Invite thus the families individually (and not just with a general message), and let them know that their opinion and experience is important to you.
- In the same way, it is important to think about how to listen to everybody when involving children's voices. That's why a combination of strategies might help, for example, combining interviews, drawings, observations, so that both verbal and non-verbal behavior can have a place.
- This attention to valuing diversity needs to be taken into account also when organizing the ECEC spaces. So here are some questions we can ask ourselves:
 - Do we have enough materials for the different ages of children?
 - Do we answer to their different needs?
 - If children constantly climb furniture that they are not supposed to climb, they demonstrate the need to move, climb. Are we responding to this need by foreseeing places where they are allowed to climb?
 - In the same way, if they hide behind a garbage bin, this might make us reflect about how to respond to their need of hiding. Are there enough places to hide in our ECEC space?
 - Do we have places where children can experiment and places where they can be 'calm', hide, be alone and 'do nothing' if they want to?
 - Do we have materials and toys in which also children with special needs can recognize themselves (for example, dolls from both genders and with different skin colors, pencils with nuanced colors to draw all skin colors, books in other languages, etc.)?
 - Do we have spaces for children, but also adults?
 - Are the spaces accessible for children with special needs (e.g. using a wheelchair...)?

APPROACH 2

Connecting vision and practice

When working on transforming spaces within an *educare* perspective, it is essential that the team develops a clear pedagogical vision and explores together if this vision is reflected in the ECEC spaces and materials.

Different methods and tools can be used to put 'vision into practice'.

METHOD 5 Reflecting on pedagogical documentation

Especially developed in some Italian Regions, pedagogical documentation (Malavasi, Zoccatelli, 2012; Sharmahd, Peeters, 2019) is a way to document ECEC practice (through videos, photos, observations...) to:

- enrich children's experiences;
- support the dialogue with families;
- make ECEC more visible;
- support professionals' reflection on daily practice.

From reflection to action – an example from the project

In the framework of the EDUCAS project, using pedagogical documentation has supported reflection on daily practice. One of the Belgian EDUCAS teams decided to work primarily on photos: how photos are taken and framed implicitly says something about vision and pedagogical values.

Reflecting on photos with colleagues brings up different/similar visions/points of view, which sometimes remains unsaid and implicit until that moment.

The staff had specific questions on how to better connect their vision to their practice, within an *educare* approach that responds to the needs of all children. Thus, the team wondered how to organize the spaces accordingly. For example professionals asked themselves:

- Since the children groups are mixed in age, how to respond to the exploratory needs of the older children while, at the same time, keeping a calm and safe space for the younger ones?
- How to organize the eating time in a friendly and cozy manner for all children?
- How to organize a space that supports professionals in following each child's rhythm?

As one of the professionals said at the beginning of the process: *'Eating with friends and family is always cozy. But the eating moment in the children group was often more chaotic than cozy. Also, the colleagues used to say that this was the most chaotic moment of the day.'*

Comments like the above one, expressing concerns around the eating time and space, stimulated the team to start a reflection process to transform it. The steps followed have been:

- 1) **Documenting the day:** An external observer (researcher) took photos of different moments during the day in the ECEC spaces (chosen based on what came out from the focus groups with families and staff) by 'following' each professional for a few hours. In this case, the external observer was from the research center involved in the project. But this could also be a pedagogical coach or someone with a similar profile.
- 2) **Vision in photos:** Each observed professional chose a pedagogical principle related to the ECEC vision and selected the photos that made that principle 'visible,' with attention to

spaces and *educare* For example a professional could choose 'valuing diversity' as principle and then choose photos of practices and spaces that represented (or not) this principle, according to her/him.

- 3) **Guided individual reflection:** The external observer reflected individually with each professional about the chosen photos and the not chosen ones (Why did you choose this photo? What do you see here? Why didn't you choose the other? ...). The reflection on the 'not chosen' photographs has been particularly interesting, since it helped making explicit what is considered 'good practice' and what not, according to the professionals themselves.
- 4) **Translating images into concepts and words:** Each professional created a poster with the chosen photos related to that specific theme and 'gave words' to the photos themselves to explain the vision underlying the choice of the photos. 'Giving words' to the images has been particularly challenging for the staff. It has been an interesting exercise to make clear to oneself and others which ideas stand behind the ECEC actions.



Voices of professionals

Transforming the eating time and space in the ECEC has resulted in positive feedback from professionals :

"Now, each day, we organize the eating time in the same way. Children know what to expect. We prepare the space together with them. Cleaning up happens now in a calm way. Since not long ago, each group has its trolley with food, thanks to the results of the focus groups. In this way, we don't have to wait to eat anymore. The atmosphere is now much calmer [...]. We make sure that we sit next to the children and we communicate with them. [...] We use less plastic materials to play and during the meals, glasses, plates."



Free initiative
Children follow their interest
Children choose their game
Children play alone, play together



- 5) **Team reflection:** Reflection on the posters with the whole team (exchange of different points of view)
- 6) **From reflection to action:** Definition of possible 'actions' related to what came out from the exchange

Example of a concrete change

Before starting the reflection path, children in the different groups had to sit at the table and wait until the trolley would do the 'tour' of all groups and come to them. After reflecting on it, the staff decided to buy trolleys for each group. Now each group has its trolley, and nobody has to wait. This is an example of how, through reflection on the 'taken for granted practice,' a minimal practical change (based on a clear vision) can affect children's (and adults') wellbeing in ECEC.



METHOD 6

Exploring needs in the spaces through moodboard and mindmap

The moodboard and mindmap aim to support professionals in becoming aware of the needs to consider when organizing the spaces, and of how to connect them to the ECEC vision by using a given space/infrastructure.

Based on the guidebook developed by Jo Tondeur and colleagues for working on spaces for older children (Tondeur et al., 2019), this Tool has been developed by the Belgian team within the EDUCAS project.

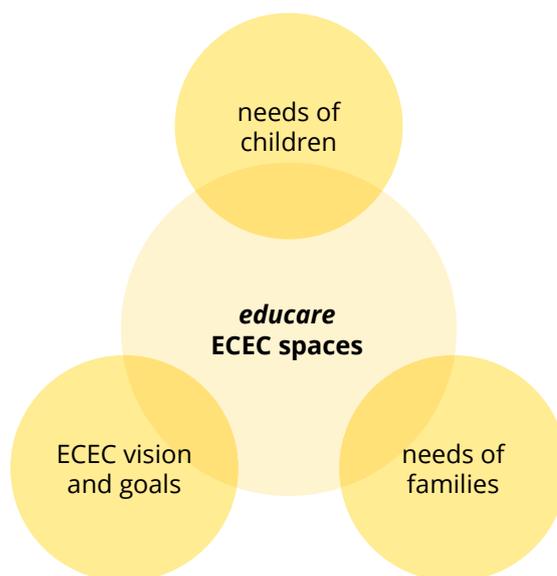
We defined the purpose of the Tool in the following way:

- The **moodboard**, a type of visual presentation or 'collage' consisting of images, text, colors, and samples of objects in the composition, helps to identify what ECEC staff needs and likes within their living space (thinking about their home), which elements make them feel at ease (for example, which light, colors, smells, etc.);
- The **mindmap**, a diagram for visual organization of information, helps identifying the needs of families and children in the ECEC spaces (according to the staff). In EDUCAS the results of the focus groups with professionals and parents and of the observations, drawings and interviews with children helped in this process. The goals of the curriculum and the ECEC vision is also taken into account.

The Moodboard and Mindmap tool can be used as follows:

- The moodboard can be used as first step to explore what professionals find pleasant in their living space and verify how these elements are (or are not) present in the ECEC centre where they work.
- Then, through the mindmap, staff can connect the reflection on the moodboard to the needs of children, families and the curriculum/ECEC vision, and work on how spaces/materials respond to these needs.
- At the end of the process an action plan will be developed to transform the spaces taking into account needs of children and adults.

For the complete 'Moodboard and Mindmap tools,' consult [Tool 13](#).



Supporting tools for Method 6.

TOOL 13 Moodboard and Mindmap tools

From reflection to action – an example from the project

In one of the Belgian ECEC centres this Tool was used by the team to analyze the ECEC spaces and find out how the latter are or are not answering to the needs of children and adults within the vision of the ECEC center, and thus how and where exactly staff needs to invest.



The steps of the staff in working with the moodboard and mindmap have been the following ones:

MOODBOARD:

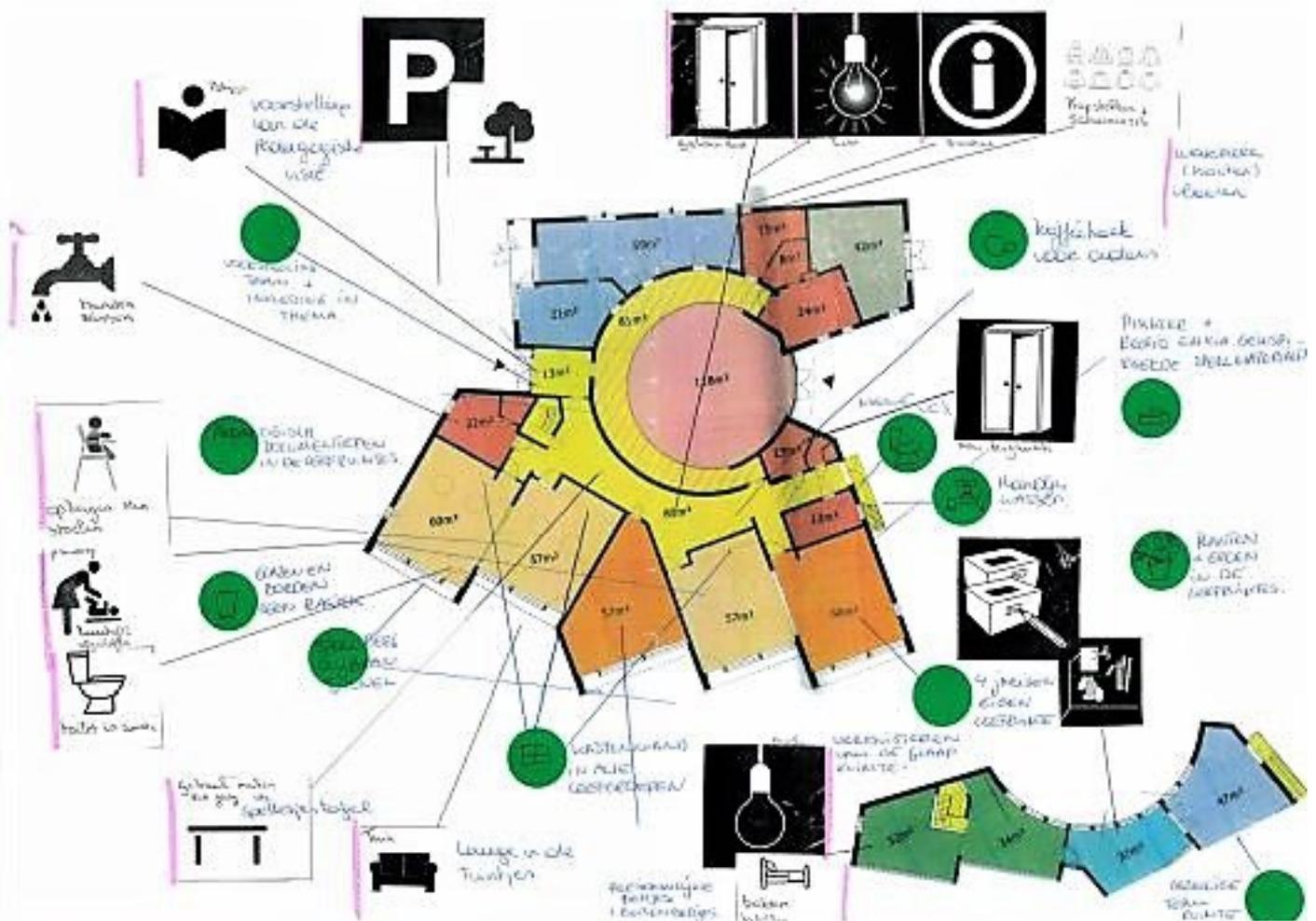
- STEP 1** Identifying professionals' needs: what do you like/need in our living space (at home)?
- STEP 2** Reality check: connecting the personal moodboards to the ECEC spaces (where do I 'feel good' in the ECEC centre where I work?)

MINDMAP:

- STEP 1** Identifying the needs of children and families within the ECEC center (for example need to discover, need to move, need to meet...)
- STEP 2** Identifying the needs linked to the curriculum and to practice, within an *educare* approach
- STEP 3** Finding symbols (images) to represent the materials/furniture/spaces that respond to each of the identified needs, in order to facilitate the visualization



STEP 4 Visualizing the map of the ECEC center and identifying in which spaces those symbols find a place.



STEP 5 The visualization gives an immediate image of how the space responds or doesn't respond to the needs of children and adults. The staff identifies the symbols that eventually didn't find a 'place' on the map, meaning that staff can then work further to create a space where these needs can be met. It can also happen that staff discovers that some needs are met in specific spaces, but maybe not in a 'proper' way. The team reflection in this case could lead to a transformation of those spaces.

STEP 6 The staff co-reflects on their findings and creates a new map with the 'possible changes' and actions to be taken.

Tips and recommendations



Working with moodboard and mindmap can also be done through digital tools. For example you can use [Jamboard](#), [Miro](#) or similar to collect the answers of professionals and to place the symbols on an uploaded map, model or picture of the space to be analyzed. In this way professionals can sit together, but they can also work online from different locations.

METHOD 7

Creating a shared vision by investing in integrated working in shared spaces

In many EU countries, the different professionals involved in ECEC (professionals, childcare workers, assistants...) lack opportunities to reflect on practice and build a coherent vision jointly.

The need for different staff categories to participate in action research with common reflection paths is highlighted in the European Quality Framework (Council of the European Union, 2019). Having a common path responds to the need to give the whole team the possibility of reflecting together on their practice, from their different perspectives, to reach a coherent framework that orients their daily work with children and families.

Experiences from the Belgium (FL) context

As you can see in the [ECEC systems fact sheet](#), in Belgium (FL) traditionally education and care are viewed as split in practice. In preschool, school staff (teachers) and out-of-school staff (childcare workers) normally have different tasks: 'educational tasks' are perceived as the responsibility of teachers, while 'caring tasks' are seen as the responsibility of childcare workers. The professionals of the two sectors lack time to reflect together on practice. This makes a concrete collaboration towards *educare* challenging.

From reflection to action - an example from the project

Under the EDUCAS project, the staff of one of the Belgian (FI) ECEC centre reflected on how professionals and childcare workers use the spaces. Professionals asked themselves how the spaces can be transformed to better respond to the needs of the preschool (*kleuterschool*) and of the out-of-school-care (*opvang*). Teachers and childcare workers observed each other by using the grid developed for the above-mentioned 'exchanges of observations' ([Tool 10](#)). Based on the results, they reflected together on how to organize their spaces in a coherent shared way:

- They decided to offer different kinds of materials/toys in the two spaces of *opvang* and *kleuterschool*, which are next to each other (for example, the puzzles are in one room, the building blocks in the other room), so that children can go from one room to the other during the day and find different materials to play with.
- This makes each room more attractive. Besides, in this way there are also fewer children in one room during the day because they spontaneously divide themselves in the two spaces.
- This also supports their autonomy, thanks to a flexible use of the spaces and an 'open door' practice, which also accompanies smooth transitions out-of-school/school and vice-versa during the day.

In [Tool 14](#), you can find a grid with questions for the different professionals working in the same ECEC setting (the grid has been developed for the Belgian-FI context). The questions explore the way they use the ECEC spaces. The answers can be a basis for further reflection on how to share and transform the environment.

Supporting tools for Method 7.



TOOL 10 Grid for exchange of observations'

TOOL 14 Grid for questions preschool – out of school care

Tips and recommendations



In identifying the needs of the space, inspiration can come from the [ABC basis box](#), which points out specific aspects to take into account in this analysis: shape, materials, colors, light, sound, smell, interior, circulation, climate, outdoor.³ ABC works within a 'less can be more' philosophy that focuses on essential quality elements (mainly non structured and natural) that support children's discoveries and creativity, avoiding overstimulation.

³ Within the EDUCAS project, the Belgian team visited the ABC house in Brussels (Art Basic for Children), which is 'a laboratory for aesthetic experiences, creative development and artistic awareness', aimed at using the artistic process as a step towards dialogue, and as a reflective tool for young and old to use as support in integrating art into everyday life. For more information: <http://www.abc-web.be/art-basics-for-children-abcvzw/?lang=en>



Tips and recommendations

- When bringing together professionals of different profiles (for example, professionals and childcare workers) in the same path, one needs to be aware of the possible tensions that this might create. Therefore, it is essential that the directors and coaches are engaged, knowledgeable, and willing to build this kind of path. At the same time, it is crucial to advocate for coherent regulations on a policy level since working in an integrated way should be supported with working conditions that make this integration possible.
- Having an old building (together with a limited budget) can be challenging when aiming to invest in spaces/infrastructures/materials because professionals need to find ways to 'fit' their vision in a given space. That's why several researches suggest the importance of connecting pedagogical vision and architectural planning from the start when thinking about creating ECEC spaces (Van Liempd, 2018). The experience of the moodboard and mindmap is interesting because it supports staff in connecting the needs of children/families/staff with the spaces they have. Of course, having a budget helps, but it's crucial to have a clear vision of using that budget and not wasting it. Besides, when the vision and goals are clear, sometimes small changes in the furniture and materials can already bring to a different practice.
- Regulations can be challenging when they don't seem to support the pedagogical vision of the ECEC center. For example, specific safety rules can sometimes hinder the full expression of certain educational values. A classic example is how to allow a 'risk pedagogy' (meaning, for instance, allowing children to climb trees, experimenting, cutting with knives...) within the safety regulations. On this matter, policy and practice should find a point of dialogue that is now not always present in certain contexts. The COVID-19 situation gave us interesting examples on this matter (see chapter on page 39.)



If you want to re-think ECEC spaces taking *educare* into account, you can ask yourself concrete questions concerning each space, by following the grid in **TOOL 16**.

APPROACH 3

Supporting professionals

Joint reflections on how *educare* can define ECEC spaces' identity requires support. Professionals need to be accompanied in this process. They need opportunities to exchange, reflect together, see other practices, create networks.

Different methods can support ECEC professionals in this process.

METHOD 8

Building local professional learning communities amongst ECEC professionals

International exchanges are exciting when working on reflecting/transforming practice. But local exchanges can also be vibrant and compelling, besides being more affordable in terms of budget and organization.

For example, meetings and shared observations between two or more ECEC centres in the same country (or even the same Municipality) can have a similar eye-opener effect for ECEC staff. When working daily with children and families, it is important not to feel 'lonely,' knowing that possible issues can be shared, that other contexts deal with similar situations and that inspiring examples can be found through the exchange. That's why being part of a professional learning community is helpful to not work on a monadic island and to feel supported.

The EDUCAS project supported the creation of professional learning communities (PLCs) (Brajković, 2014; Sharmahd et al., 2017) on the local level amongst the staff of the 2 ECEC centres involved in each country.

The EDUCAS project balanced the CPD path to respond simultaneously to the specific needs of each ECEC center, and to the common ones, by bringing the services together. Exchange of observations, joint trainings and reflection moments supported the teams in feeling connected and allowed them to discover each other's practices, which also stimulated them to reflect on their own practice.

The local learning community has also been supported through the involvement of a local Stakeholder Group that each country consulted throughout the project. The Stakeholder Group was composed of key representatives of the sector. Its involvement aimed to reflect on the project's process and results critically, in order to contextualize them better and create impact.

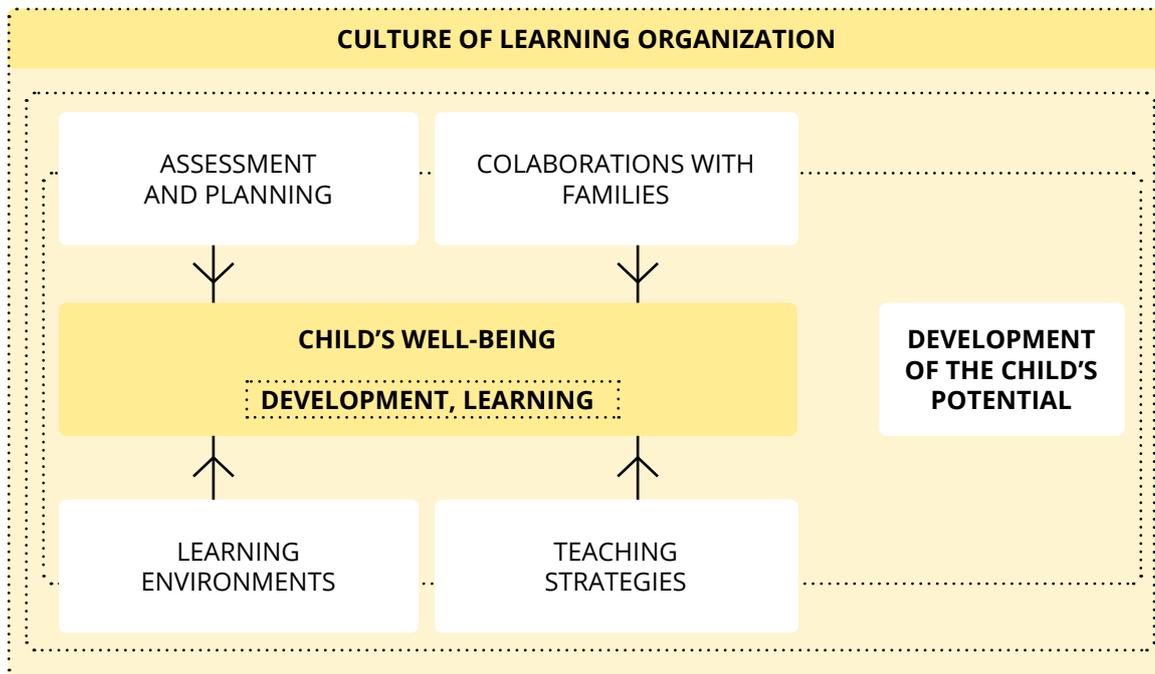
Experiences from the Lithuanian context

The Lithuanian team invested in developing ECEC centres as learning organizations. An ECEC centre becomes a learning organization when: 1) the whole community participates in the self-evaluation process; 2) the quality of activities is constantly inquired; 3) systematic cooperation at all possible levels takes place; 4) attention focuses on the most relevant (both strong and challenging) aspects of activities.

In such a way, the self-evaluation process becomes an integral part of the activities of the ECEC centre, ensuring the growth of its individual members and of the whole centre as an organization.

Starting a self-evaluation process and striving for ever-increasing quality is not easy. The ECEC community has to be determined to learn to accept different opinions, discuss, and find agreements, recognize the strengths of their work and failures, learn to provide and accept help. All of this requires courage and competences.

The two ECEC centres used the opportunity to reflect together on their practice using the same quality framework developed in 2020 under the guidance of UIC experts (see [Tool 15](#)). The quality framework counts seven areas of assessment, and the results of the evaluation are meant to be reflected upon at different levels, in order to address ECEC quality improvement.



The quality assessment model

The proposed quality assessment model consists of three levels.

On the first level: child's wellbeing, development, and learning, developing the child's potential.

Second level: learning environments, teaching strategies, assessment and planning, collaboration with families.

Third level: the culture of a learning organization (management, professional development, leadership for learning on school level).

The purpose of evaluating the quality of activities of ECEC centres is to support quality development processes by conducting a consistent analysis of their actions and, based on the acquired evidence, to suggest ways for further improvement. The results of the ECEC quality assessment are addressed to all stakeholders: the ECEC community (professionals, principals, children, and parents), school-ECEC operators, municipal, national authorities responsible for quality assurance and policymaking, and the broader society.

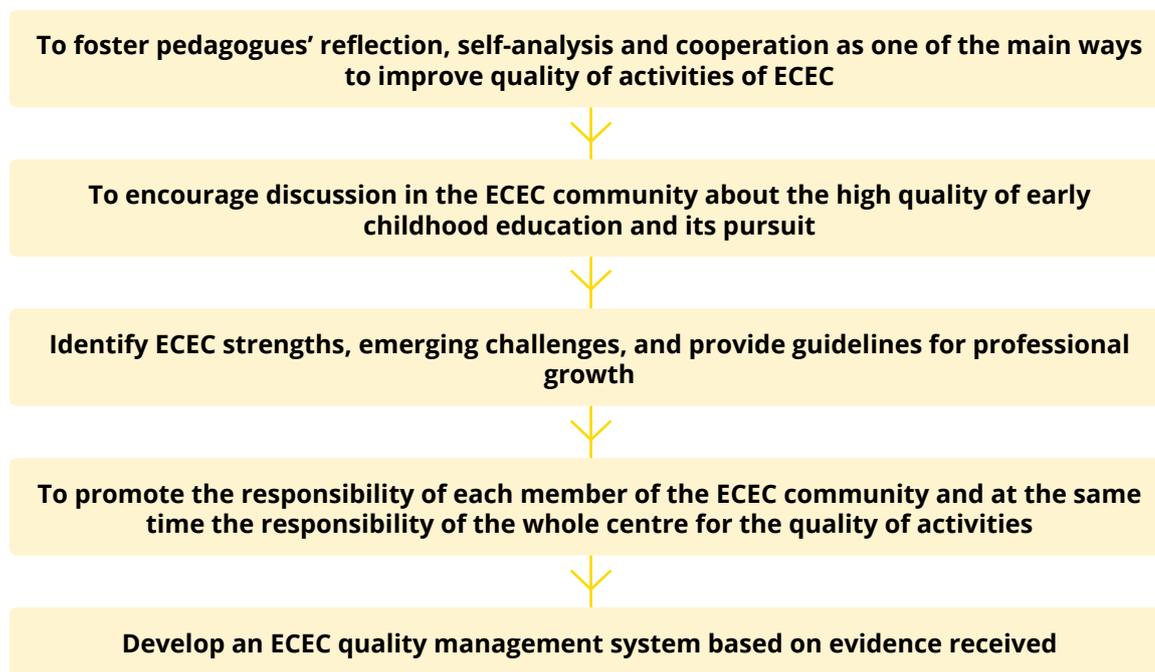
The system of quality assessment of the activities of ECEC institutions should be based on three main standpoints:

- the essential goal of evaluation – is to create a culture of quality pursuit, where the process of assessment is only a means to achieve the goal;
- at the center of education is the child's development, learning, and wellbeing;
- the evaluation system is dynamic, constantly developing, relying on scientific evidence and good practice.

ECEC evaluation can be of two types – internal and external. Together they form a dual system pursuing the same common goal, which is supporting staff in improving the quality of ECEC institutions.

Seven areas of assessment, 21 indicators, and 88 criteria are proposed to evaluate the quality of ECEC activities implementing ECEC programs. It should be noted that these areas are closely related to the quality areas recommended by the Council of the European Union (2019) and the Good School Concept, which was approved in Lithuania in 2015.

One of the ECEC centres involved in EDUCAS decided to use the quality framework to perform a self-assessment of their activities, deeply analyzing one area of assessment: learning environments. Another ECEC centre explored all seven areas of quality. The main tasks of ECEC centres' self-evaluation were as follows:



In **Tool 15**, we provide a grid used by professionals for reflection on the quality of the learning environment in their classrooms.

When all the professionals finished reflecting on one assessment area, they met together and shared the results. They discussed the examples of their quality practice and shared the doubts they had reflecting on some of the indicators. As a result, both strong and challenging aspects of the pedagogical practice were identified, and a common understanding of how quality practice should be achieved. This process helped at the same time to decide on professional development for individual professionals and the whole ECEC community. It was decided that more attention is needed for the outdoor spaces providing more choices for children to participate in meaningful activities; to enrich the environment through various social interactions (inviting parents, representatives of the local community); to provide children with practical opportunities to contribute to the care of the environment; etc.

“When reflecting, it is important to be open to your experiences and feelings, not to be afraid to name yourself both pleasant and unpleasant things. Furthermore, discussing personal reflection results and sharing your insights with another person or group is beneficial. This provides an opportunity to enrich new experiences and learn from each other” (professional).

Supporting tool for Method 8.



TOOL 15 Professionals' reflection grid - Focus Area Learning Environment

METHOD 9 Mind-shifts through international exchanges



The EDUCAS project promoted an international exchange, which resulted in being crucial in supporting the 'mind-shift' of the professionals involved. Field visits, trainings, and reflection moments are important steps that help 'open up' and questioning taken for granted practices. EDUCAS foresaw three face-to-face International Trainings in the three participating countries: Belgium, Italy, and Lithuania. Unfortunately, the latter had to be replaced with an online training due to the COVID-19 situation. The trainings aimed at sharing developed knowledge and competences concerning *educare* and spaces.

A selected number of professionals from the involved ECEC centres participated in the training, together with the representatives of the Research Centres.

Each training would include a combination of field visits to ECEC centres, joint reflection moments/feedback, and presentations of possible strategies/approaches/tools to be used to work on the connection *educare* and spaces. The training structure was based on the active involvement of the ECEC professionals, who would be engaged in their learning process and experience the ownership of the project path.



COUNTRY	FOCUS
Belgium	Observations and video coaching as instruments to reflect and connect vision and practice.
Italy	Creating esthetically rich spaces within a 'less can be more' approach, including pedagogical documentation to communicate/share with families and reflect as a team.
Lithuania	<i>Educare</i> in outdoor spaces.

THE CRUCIAL ROLE OF PEDAGOGICAL COACHES

Creating a CPD path focused on reflecting on practice, spaces, and materials requires the involvement of pedagogical coaches.

Professionals cannot be left alone in dealing with their questions. Facilitating guidance is needed, an 'external eye' that can help staff in putting reflection into practice. The primary role of the director and/or coach in this process is to facilitate the reflection path of the team. He/she puts the group 'in crisis' (constructive crisis) by inductively questioning ideas and practices (e.g. 'what do you see in this picture?'; 'what did you want to say when you wrote this?'; 'is what we are doing in this space coherent with what we think?' etc.), and by helping staff in always finding the connection between their vision and their actions.

In the EDUCAS project, pedagogical coaches and (or) directors and researchers worked together to support the ECEC staff in this process.

Tips and recommendations



- **Keeping the whole team on the same track** is crucial. It is usually impossible to carry on all activities with the entire team in international projects, meaning that not all professionals/practitioners can be present in the international exchanges, meetings, and training. It is thus important to foresee ways to involve everybody. Here below some concrete examples of how to do this:
 - Plan 'bridging moments' in which the participating staff 'reports' to the rest of the team what is going on with the project, and the team reflects and discuss it together.
 - Involve more staff in the project activities whenever possible.
 - Make the rest of the school staff feel part of the process by supporting them in experimenting and practicing what the project is about.
 - Support the participating staff to become an 'example' in changing one's practice. For example, changing the spaces in their classes and concretely showing the possible benefits of it might stimulate the colleagues to do the same.
- In this process, the **support of directors/pedagogical coaches** is crucial. It is their role to help the participating staff making the 'bridge' to the rest of the team and making sure that everybody feels on the same boat. Otherwise, the risk is that two teams would be created in the same team, with possible tensions and misunderstandings.
- **Mind shift:** it can be challenging to support participants in their transformation process. Often an initial natural defensive mechanism might occur. People could find it not easy to 'let go' of what they know, even when the new possibilities would benefit them and their practice. Letting go and transforming requires engagement and energy, which is not always easy to find. At the same time, creating this engagement and energy is crucial. What makes people 'change their story'? What makes them say 'AHA'? In EDUCAS project, this process took place mainly through the exchanges (internationally and locally) and the reflection on practice.
- **Time:** in order to reflect as a team and as individuals, time is needed. If we want professionals to work towards quality, we need to give them time to 'think' about this quality and about how to realize it. Childfree hours are thus needed.



Voices of EDUCAS participants

Participants report the enriching feeling they got from these exchanges and the motivation and new ideas they could 'bring home.'

"Getting to know other ECEC centres in Italy and Belgium allowed us to understand better how we are working with our children. [...] It also helped us reflect on how we relate with parents, and to improve this, we decided to build an EDUCAS tent outdoor where parents can share the places they like the most about the ECEC centre." (Lithuania).

"The EDUCAS trainings have shown us how to combine care and education in our daily activities. [...] We now look more into the details. We have also learned that taking care of the little ones, in daily routines such as changing their diaper, can also turn into an educational moment." (Belgium).

"Each country tells its own experience and its way of working with children. This allows reflecting and changing, choosing to take what is considered interesting or useful from the other contexts." (Italy).

EDUCARE AND SPACES IN TIMES OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Crises periods are challenging, but they can also create an opportunity for rethinking taken for granted practice, and discover new possibilities. Therefore, we would like to end this Toolbox with some indications of lessons learned during the second half of the project implementation marked by the COVID-19 pandemic impacts.

The COVID-19 situation brought a sudden and unpredicted change in how the practice could be organized in ECEC centres. In addition, the mandatory safety and hygiene rules also affected the organization of the spaces. On many levels, these effects have been perceived as 'negative' for obvious reasons (lack of contact with families, less 'cozy' atmosphere in the group, fear, etc.). However, some positive changes occurred regarding spaces and materials.

In the following bullet points, we present lessons learned by project partners as well as results of the most recent research on how the pandemic affected ECEC in relation with spaces and *educare*:

- **Keeping contact with families:** ECEC staff had to find new ways to connect with families, who were in most cases not allowed in the services anymore. Many contacts during and after the lockdown happened online (e.g., activities for children, storytelling, etc.) and through individual phone calls or door-to-door visits. The latter helped also in keeping contact with societally disadvantaged families and children (not used to digital media or not being able to be online or without internet access). Thus, a new 'space' had to be created - an emotional and relational space capable of connecting from a distance. Although challenging, this new practice gave many ECEC professionals the opportunity to get closer to the children's family situation, to see how they live, value what they do at home, and see the challenges they might face.
- **(Re)welcoming families and children:** With the re-opening of ECEC centres, professionals reflected on how to re-welcome families and children already attending (but absent for the long lockdown period), and how to welcome the new ones? The main point has been to maintain and support an *educare* approach within a new normality that focuses on safety and health. In Belgium (FI), at the beginning of the school year, when the Corona numbers were still low, both ECEC centres in the project have decided to let parents come inside, unlike many other services and schools.
- **Outdoor spaces:** In all three countries, the outdoor has been used more to meet families and have the first conversations and familiarization moments. This practice can be an interesting eye-opener on how the outdoor spaces can be used more with children and families beyond the COVID-19 situation. This implies rethinking the outdoor space organization, the furniture, etc. (for example, foreseeing benches or something similar for adults to sit). In general, the ECEC outdoor spaces have been rediscovered during the crisis, and they have been used more flexibly with children and families.
- **Community involvement:** Since one of the ECEC centers in Belgium has a relatively small outdoor space, the Municipality decided to let the staff use part of the public space in front of the center as an outdoor space for as long as the pandemic lasts (and probably beyond). A small but significant example of a community approach to education.



"Because during the lockdown the contacts were more individual (through home visits), we got to know families in another way. For example, we brought figures to color with the children at home, but some families told us that they don't have pencils at home. Never thought about it before."
(Professional from Belgium)

Source: <https://vbjk.be/nl/nieuws/2020/5/hoehoudjecontactmetmaatschappelijkkwetsbaregezinnenintijdenvancorona>

- **Smaller groups:** The advice to work with smaller groups of children supported the organization of a 'calmer' and 'warmer' space in many centers. Also, the eating moment happens in certain contexts within the children groups (instead of in big common spaces), which turns out to be an appreciated practice for both children and adults.

- **Clean and pleasant hygiene spaces:** According to the data collected in Belgium (FI) (Lambert, Van Laere, 2021) for a European report of the NESET network about the effects of COVID-19 on ECEC (Van Laere et al., 2021), some stakeholders from different organizations state that staff and children appreciate the fact that the spaces now have to be cleaned more often. Children say that they like more to go to the toilet in the ECEC centres now because toilets are cleaner. This is a small but important element when thinking about *educare* and spaces. Taking care of the spaces in which the 'routine' moments happen is crucial for the wellbeing and learning of children and adults. We may conclude that offering a clean toilet is a pedagogical act, not just a technical one.

- **Redesign of spaces to adapt to the new requirements:** In Italy, staff had to redesign the ECEC spaces – for example, the spaces where the moments of welcoming children and families at the beginning of the school day and rejoining at the end happen, the materials and the organization of groups. The path 'Space in Mind,' in the Italian EDUCAS pilot, turned out to be an important opportunity to reflect on spaces and daily moments and observe what happens in the newly-designed contexts. Staff asked itself how to make the 'border spaces' (doors) 'inclusive and welcoming spaces'. This question has been an opportunity for the staff to reflect on how to value the diverse ways in which families and children want to be welcomed: some parents explicitly said that they missed entering the center or the group, some others said that they felt at ease with this new organization, which made the staff reconsider their taken for granted concepts and reflect on how to value (beyond the pandemic situation) the diverse needs of children and families.



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TOOLS

TOOL 1

Guidelines for organizing focus groups

Aims of focus groups:

- gaining **insight about families' and staff's ideas/beliefs/feelings** in relation with the ECEC spaces where their children are and their connection with education and care;
- exploring **ideas concerning the 'ideal' ECEC centre for families and staff** (which core elements)

Our primary objective is **not comparing** the analysis of the 3 countries, **but contextualizing** the action-research path also on the basis of the answers of families and staff.

How many focus groups:

One focus group will be carried out with **teachers/practitioners/assistants**, and one focus group with **parents** in each of the 2 ECEC centres involved (to **4 focus groups in each country**). The ideal number of participants for a focus group would be between **6 and 12** people.

Selection of parents and teachers that will take part to the focus group:

- **Parents:** make sure there is a mix of parents (SES; gender; ethnic-cultural diversity; with young/older children).
- **Teachers:** if not all teachers are involved, make sure they are a mix from different classes; working with younger and older children; with different 'seniority' of work.

How to carry on the focus group – technical aspects:

- 1) **Discuss these guidelines and grid in advance with the directors** of the schools/centres (to have their feedback), but **not with the professionals themselves** (who will take part to the focus groups), otherwise we would influence their answers.
- 2) If the focus group is coordinated by 2 (or more) people (which is advised), then agree on your roles in advance: one person should be the main 'facilitator', the second one is an 'assistant'.
 - **Role of the facilitator:** main coordinator of the focus group, he/she gives the welcoming introduction, facilitates the exchange during the focus group, makes sure there is a 'good' climate in the group, tries to give the word to everybody, listens actively.
 - **Role of the assistant:** he/she makes sure all the technical things are working, he/she makes sure everybody filled in the document with anagrafic data (see below), observes the group (also the non-verbal behavior), asks eventually a couple of questions during the focus group, if he/she feels it's needed.
- 3) When having the **first contact with the participants** (before doing the focus group, when we ask them to take part to the focus group), explain them the aims of the focus group and of the project. Reassure about the fact that all information will stay anonymous. Tell them that the focus group will last more or less 2 hours and it will be recorded to make the transcription and analysis possible. Explain that the video will be seen just by the research team.
- 4) Prepare the **space for the focus groups** in advance. Normally we all sit in a circle.
- 5) When doing the focus group, make sure you have at least **1 recorder (for safety) and 1 camera** to video-record the focus group (without a camera is too difficult afterwards to understand who is talking, because it is a group).
- 6) Before starting the focus group, ask all participants to fill in the **document with anagrafic data**, assuring that anyway the information will stay anonymous, it is just to have an idea about the composition of the groups. No names will be reported in the transcription of the focus group.

How to carry on the focus group – contents:

Each focus group should support the **sharing and co-construction** of meanings amongst participants. The discussion will start from individual points of view, but it should evolve through confrontation with the perspective of others.

Key points:

- 1) At the beginning of the focus group, **the facilitator welcomes everybody and reminds the aims of the focus group**. Remind that everything will stay anonymous and that the anagraphic data will be seen just by the research team. Remind also that the focus group will be recorded.
- 2) Use the **grid** with thematic areas to explore all the **themes** with the participants. The questions are suggestions, what is important is that the theme is explored and that the facilitator listens actively and links the themes of the grid to what the participants are saying.
- 3) As facilitator, make sure there is a focus on how **diversity/inclusion** is perceived through all the areas you will explore with the focus groups. You don't need to make this explicit with participants, but pay attention to the examples they bring and try to deepen concepts connected to this theme when they arise.
- 4) As facilitator make sure **everybody has a say**, pay attention also to the ones that talk less and value what is said, without judging or giving an answer yourself. Careful for example when a participant asks you 'what do you mean?'. Sometimes by answering this question, you actually give a direction to the conversation (unless of course the question refers to a term that it's not understood). In these cases better to mirror the question by repeating 'what do **you** mean?'
- 5) To help participants in exploring the themes, use **pictures** (for example a picture of an outdoor ECEC space, of a toilet, of an eating room, of a symbolic corner to play etc.). Show the picture to the group (better if you project it), and ask 'what do you think about this picture?' or 'what do you see?'. Then you can ask 'is there anything you like in this picture? What? Why?', 'is there anything you don't like in this picture? What? Why?' etc. The aim is starting from the picture to talk about their ideas/perceptions/feelings concerning *educare* and space. Normally it is better to use pictures from ECEC centres different then the ones taking part to the focus groups. In this way participants feel more free to express their opinion. However this is not mandatory.
- 6) When exploring each theme, **ask always concrete examples**. Through concrete examples, we get to know what professionals and parents 'really' think, and we don't get 'standardized answers'. F.e. after asking 'Do you think it's important to stimulate autonomy during the eating moment?' make it concrete by asking 'do you think children should serve food in their plates by themselves?'. In the same way, if participants come up with 'general concepts', ask for concrete examples: for example, if a participant says 'I think the eating space should stimulate the autonomy of children', you can ask: 'Can you give me an example?'



TOOL 2

Thematic grid for focus groups

The grid is divided in themes, areas and sub-areas:

THEMES = broad issues that all the focus groups need to explore

AREAS = more specific subjects that all the focus groups need to explore

SUB-AREAS = suggestions and clarifications about how the areas can be introduced and explored with the participants. Each research team can adapt this part according to its context without obligations.

Themes and areas are the same for parents and teachers. Sub-areas might be different depending on the participants they refer to. The order in which themes/areas/sub-areas are discussed can be different in each focus group.

Visualizing the perceptions on the ECEC spaces:

At the beginning of each focus group, take the map of the ECEC centre and place it in the middle (on the floor or on the table). During the whole focus group, when talking about a specific space, mark with a pencil the place participants are talking about. At the end of each focus group we should have a visualization of how the ECEC space is perceived by parents and professionals.

The aim of this exercise is to have a visualization of the most quoted places of the centre, the spaces that are more and less used, the more and less discussed ones. Drawing might also help during the discussion itself: it can clarify concepts, and it helps visualizing the different perspectives of teachers and parents.

We will have two maps for each ECEC centre: one for the focus group with parents, and another for the focus group with professionals. Use different colors to represent the perception of staff/parents and the perception that staff/parents have on the points of view of children (for example red for 'what is the place you like the most in the ECEC centre?' and blue for 'and what is the place your child like the most?').

On next page you will find a the detailed thematic grid.

THEME	AREA	Sub-AREAS (suggestions)	Sub-AREAS (suggestions)
		PARENTS	ECEC PROFESSIONALS
A. INSIDE PLAYING SPACE and ENTRANCE	Area A1. Favorite place in the ECEC centre	1) What is the place that you like the most in this ECEC center? Why? 2) And your child (if you know it)?	1) What is the place that you like the most in this ECEC centre? Why? 2) Which place do you like less? Why? 3) Which places you think the majority of children like the most in the ECEC centre? Why according to you? 4) Which places do they like less? Why according to you?
	Area A2. Continuity home-ECEC centre	1) Do you think it's important for children to find things in ECEC centers that remind them of home and vice versa? Why? 2) How could this be achieved in ECEC centres? 3) Through the answers, try to explore also: <i>'What do you think about the possibility of bringing something from home to ECEC centre (a doll, a toy, a blanket...)? ; do you think there should be a space for these 'individual' things?</i>	1) Do you think it's important for children to find things in ECEC centers that remind them of home and vice versa? Why? 2) How could this be achieved in ECEC centres? 3) Through the answers, try to explore also: <i>'What do you think about the possibility of bringing something from home to ECEC centre (a doll, a toy, a blanket...)? ; do you think there should be a space for these 'individual' things?</i>
	Area A3. Different materials	1) Do you think it's important that a ECEC centre has different materials for children concerning their: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Age - Gender (f.e. dolls representing girls and boys) - Interest - Learning level - Ethnic-cultural background (f.e. skin colour of dolls, kitchen instruments also from other countries...) 2) What do you think about having natural / non structured materials in an ECEC centre	1) Do you think it's important that a ECEC centre has different materials for children concerning their: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Age - Gender (f.e. dolls representing girls and boys) - Interest - Learning level - Ethnic-cultural background (f.e. skin colour of dolls, kitchen instruments also from other countries...) 2) What do you think about having natural / non structured materials in an ECEC centre
	Area A4. Collective and individual spaces	Explore the perception of 'collective' spaces (places where children can be together and share) and 'individual' spaces (places where children can be on their own if they want) 1) Do you think a ECEC centre should have spaces in which children can play/be alone and spaces to play in group? Why? 2) How can a ECEC centre achieve this? 3) Do you think children should be allowed to choose to take part or not to an activity? Why? (ask for examples)	Explore the perception of 'collective' spaces (places where children can be together and share) and 'individual' spaces (places where children can be on their own if they want) 1) Do you think a ECEC centre should have spaces in which children can play/be alone and spaces to play in group? Why? 2) How can a ECEC centre achieve this? 3) Do you think children should be allowed to choose to take part or not to an activity? Why? (ask for examples)
	Area A5. Entrance and welcoming	1) Are there welcoming elements for you at the entrance of the ECEC centre? Which ones? f.e. pictures, panels with information, panels in different languages, sofas etc. – suggestion to use a picture	1) Are there welcoming elements for you at the entrance of the ECEC centre? Which ones? 2) And which elements you think welcome parents and children? – suggestion to use a picture f.e. pictures, panels, sofas...

THEME	AREA	Sub-AREAS (suggestions)	Sub-AREAS (suggestions)
B. ROUTINE MOMENTS (toilet, eating, sleeping)	Area B1. Hygiene and Toilet	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Suggestion to use a picture: what do you think about this picture? How do you think children experience going to the toilet according to this picture? 2) Through the discussion (and with the help of the pictures), try to explore the following elements: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Distance toilet/children room (in some cases the toilet is quite far from the children room, and this can create difficulties especially for young children); - Autonomy (is it important that children can go alone to the toilet, wash their hands?); - Flexibility (do children have to go to the toilet in fixed hours or there should be flexibility? Why?); - Privacy (is it important for example that there are doors between the WCs)? 3) Which elements are important in a toilet of a ECEC centre, according to you? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Suggestion to use a picture: what do you think about this picture? How do you think children experience going to the toilet according to this picture? 2) Through the discussion (and with the help of the pictures), try to explore the following elements: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Distance toilet/children room (in some cases the toilet is quite far from the children room, and this can create difficulties especially for young children); - Autonomy (is it important that children can go alone to the toilet, wash their hands?); - Flexibility (do children have to go to the toilet in fixed hours or there should be flexibility? Why?); - Privacy (is it important for example that there are doors between the WCs)? 3) Which elements are important in a toilet of a ECEC centre, according to you? 4) Would you change anything in the organization of the 'toilet moment/space' of this ECEC centre? What and why?
	Area B2. Eating Space	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Suggestion to use a picture: what do you think about this picture? How do you think children experience eating according to this picture? 2) Through the discussion (and with the help of the pictures), try to explore the following elements: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Location of the eating place (big/small room; big/small group...) - Autonomy (is it important that children serve themselves, eat by themselves...); - Interactions (is it important that the eating moment is also a 'relational' moment between children and adults and children) - How can you realize the above mentioned things in a ECEC centre? 3) Which elements are important for you in the eating space? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Suggestion to use a picture: what do you think about this picture? How do you think children experience eating according to this picture? 2) Through the discussion (and with the help of the pictures), try to explore the following elements: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Location of the eating place (big/small room; big/small group...) - Autonomy (is it important that children serve themselves, eat by themselves, what kind of 'equipment' do you need for this: which plates, glasses...); - Interactions (is it important that the eating moment is also a 'relational' moment between children and adults and children; is it important that teachers eat together with children? Why?) - How can you realize the above mentioned things in a ECEC centre? 3) Which elements are important in the eating space of a ECEC centre? 4) Would you change anything in the organization of the 'eating moment/space' in this ECEC centre? What and why?

THEME	AREA	Sub-AREAS (suggestions)	Sub-AREAS (suggestions)
B. ROUTINE MOMENTS (toilet, eating, sleeping)	Area B3. Sleeping Space	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Suggestion to use a picture: what do you think about this picture? How do you think children experience sleeping according to this picture? 2) Through the discussion (and with the help of the pictures), try to explore the following elements: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Location and organization of the sleeping place (big/small room; big/small group; is it important that there are chairs, sofas also for adults?); - Personalization (is it important that each child has his/her own fixed bed; is it important to allow children to bring personal 'objects' for the sleeping moment – a doll, blanket.; do you think children should be allowed to sleep as long as they want or they should be woken up? Why?) - How can you realize the above mentioned things in a ECEC centre? 3) Which elements are important for you in a sleeping space of a ECEC centre? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Suggestion to use a picture: what do you think about this picture? How do you think children experience sleeping according to this picture? 2) Through the discussion (and with the help of the pictures), try to explore the following elements: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Location and organization of the sleeping place (big/small room; big/small group; is it important to include chairs, sofas for adults?...); - Personalization (is it important that each child has his/her own fixed bed; is it important to allow children to bring personal 'objects' for the sleeping moment – a doll, blanket.; do you think children should be allowed to sleep as long as they want or they should be woken up? Why?) - How can you realize the above mentioned things in a ECEC centre? 3) Which elements are important for you in a sleeping space of a ECEC centre? 4) Would you change anything in the organization of the 'sleeping moment/ space' in this ECEC centre? What and why?
	C. SPACES for ADULTS	Area C1. Spaces for parents	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Is it important to have spaces dedicated to parents in the ECEC centre? (f.e. a room, a corner with books for adults etc.); Why? 2) Is it important to have 'furniture' or elements for parents in the playing rooms of the children? (f.e. chairs for adults, a sofa for adults in the playing room etc.) – Why? suggestion to use a picture 3) Do you think parents should be allowed to enter the class of their children during the drop in and pick up moments? Why? 4) Through the discussion, try to explore also: <i>What do parents do when they arrive in the ECEC centre in the morning and when they pick up the child? Where do they go? How do they say goodbye? What facilitate (or would facilitate) the goodbye moment for them and the children?</i>
		Area C2. Spaces for professionals	

THEME	AREA	Sub-AREAS (suggestions)	Sub-AREAS (suggestions)
D. OUTDOOR SPACES	Area D1. Perception about being outside	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do you think it's important to play outside? Why? 2) What kind of toys/equipment should characterize these spaces? 3) What do you think about going out with 'bad' weather? 4) Playing outside can also be adventurous and 'risky'. What do you think about this? (suggestion to use pictures) 5) Do you think going outside should happen in fixed moments, or children should be able to choose? Why? 6) What do you think about the relationship between ECEC centre and neighbourhood-community? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Do you think it's important to play outside? Why? 2) What kind of toys/equipment should characterize these spaces? 3) What do you think about going out with 'bad' weather? 4) Playing outside can also be adventurous and 'risky'. What do you think about this? (suggestion to use pictures) 5) Do you think going outside should happen in fixed moments, or children should be able to choose? Why? 6) What do you think about the relationship between ECEC centre and neighborhood-community?
E. IDEAL SPACE		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1) What is/are the most important thing/s of your ideal ECEC centre for children and families, in relation to space? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1) What is/are the most important thing/s of your ideal ECEC centre for children and families, in relation to space?



TOOL 3

Indicators to transcribe focus groups

Once the focus groups have been carried on, you can use this **template** to transcribe them before the analysis:

Date	
Duration	
Place	
Number of participants	
Presentation of the group (here use just initial letters for the names. They can also be invented, it is just to recognize them in the transcription)	<p>F.e. for parents: L. = mother of P., a 3 years old child P. = father of M., a 4 years old child </p> <p>F.e for teachers: M = teacher working since 20 years ago, in this school since 3 years ago </p>
Facilitator	
Assistant	
Notes (here you can write some notes that might be important for the analysis: general atmosphere in the group, observations of the assistant on the dynamics etc.)	
Transcription (example) 1. V. (facilitator): Good morning, as you know we are here today for a focus group on..... 2. O. :..... 3. P.:	

Analysis

For the analysis of the focus groups, Themes and the Areas of the Thematic Grid in **Tool 2** (used to carry on the focus groups) can be used as code-categories.

TOOL 4

Guidelines for introducing drawings to children

Here below you can find the guidelines to collect data using children's drawings and interviews.

- **Material:** a white A4 paper (without rows or squares) and markers of various colors.
- **Time:** both the drawing (in group) and the individual interview can take all the time needed.
- **Children's age:** from 3 to 6 years old.
- **Conductor:** drawings and interviews can be conducted by a researcher, but also by the pedagogical coaches or the ECEC staff themselves.

Informed consent form

First of all, parents should sign the informed consent form, which should contain:

- Child's first and last name
- Gender of the child
- Date of birth of the child
- Nationality of the child
- ECEC centre attended
- Year of attendance
- Title of study and profession of the mother
- Title of study and profession of the father
- Date of birth of any other siblings

Then, data collection should be conducted in two different parts, described below:



FIRST PART: DRAWING - IN GROUP

1) Introduce the concept of "place" to the group of children

"Your school is great, and it is made up of many places, spaces where you can go, places that are both inside and outside."

2) Ask children to draw (in group, but each child doing his/her own drawing)

"Now I ask you to think of a place where you like to stay when you are here at school. It can be inside the school or outside in the garden."

Okay, have you thought?

Now I ask you to draw yourself while you are in this favorite place. If you want you can draw some of your friends or teachers, or just you, as you prefer.

When you finish the drawing, you can bring it to me and I'll ask you to tell me about what you drew. All right?"
(children's consent)

3) When a child ends up he/she can deliver

Write the name of the children on the other side of a paper.

SECOND PART: INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

Meet each child for an individual interview – audio-record

The interview should be done after the realization of the drawing, in an isolated room, to promote concentration, to avoid conditioning among children in the answers and to improve the audio quality of the audio-recording.

Ask the child to indicate:

- 1) What was represented: All relevant elements of the drawing must be clear.
- 2) Who are the people represented and what happens, what they are doing.

✍ *Write the indicated elements on a paper*

Then ask to the child:

- 3) "So this is a place where you like to stay here at school... And why do you like being here?"
- 4) "What do you think is missing in this school to make it even more pleasant and beautiful for children?"
- 5) "Is there anything else you'd like to tell me/tell me about your school...?"

✍ *Write the answers on a paper/grid.*



TOOL 5

Grid for interview on children's drawings

First and last name of the child:

Write the main elements of the drawing	
What was represented in the drawings?	<i>Write them also on the drawing</i>
Who are the people represented and what happens, what they are doing?	
Write the answers of the child	
"So this is a place where you like to stay here at school... And why do you like being here?"	
"What do you think is missing in this school to make it even more pleasant and beautiful for children?"	
"Is there anything else you'd like to tell me/tell me about your school...?"	

TOOL 6

Guidelines to create a three-dimensional model

Visit the school and decide the space to be represented in the model

Visit the school, take a look at the spaces and decide what to represent in the model (The class? The garden? The hall?) depending on the aim of the research *[We decided to represent the class].*

1) Take measurements and take pictures of the space

Draw a map of the chosen space (or take a map of the school, if available), took measurements and took pictures of the space.

2) Build the model

Build a model of suitable size for playmobil dolls *[Our model was about 60x30 cm in size].* You should represent floors, walls, doors, windows and furnishings *[We used polystyren and glue for the walls and balsa wood for the furnishings].* Do not represent the ceiling or roof to allow the child to see inside and move the dolls. Also the walls should be high enough to accommodate the furniture but low enough for the child to comfortably move the playmobils inside the model.

3) Paint the model

Paint the model with the same color of the class (floors, walls, furnishings...) *[We used tempera for painting].*

4) Add details

Add details to make the class as recognizable as possible in its current appearance. *[We added pieces of paper and cloth to represent posters on the walls and curtains. We also add little objects as plates, bottles, books, etc...].*

TOOL 7

Guidelines for interviews with children on three- dimensional model



The activity should be done in an isolated room to promote concentration, and it should be audio and video recorded to help the analysis.

1) Show the model to the child and let him/her recognize what it represents

During the individual session the researcher shows the model to the child asking him/her if he/she recognizes what place it is. If the model is realistic, usually the child recognizes it. If the child doesn't recognize the class, the researcher should help him/her "Look at this... It reminds you to some place you know?" until the child says: "Oh yes! It's my class!" Then the researcher might ask some questions to understand if the child is really aware, as "When you arrive in the morning where are you?" or "What is this specific place?" (eg: the reading corner).

2) Let the child choose the playmobil dolls

Once the child recognizes his/her class, the researcher shows him/her some playmobil dolls asking him/her to choose one doll to represent him/herself, two dolls to represent his/her two teachers and three dolls to represent three of his/her school friends.

3) Ask the child to place the playmobil dolls in the model

The researcher asks the child to place all the dolls in the tridimensional model of the class. It is useful to take photos of the positions chosen by the child and for friends and teachers.

4) Ask the child to say why each doll is in that place and what is doing there

The researcher asks the child why each doll is in that place and what is doing there.

5) Ask the child to tell a story about what the dolls are going to do

The researcher asks the child to tell a story about what the dolls are going to do (e.g.: "And now what happens?")

6) Thank the child

After the session, thank the child and take him/her back to the class.



TOOL 8

Grid for analysing interviews with the three-dimensional model

Preferences on spaces for themselves	
Which space does the child choose for him/herself?	
Which activity is taking place?	
Preferences on spaces for friends	
Which space does the child choose for friends?	
Which activity is taking place?	
Preferences on spaces for teachers	
Which space does the child choose for ECEC professionals?	
Which activity is taking place?	
Representation of relationships	
Does the child place him/herself alone? Or with 1, 2 or 3 friends? Or with 1 or 2 teachers? Or with some friends and some ECEC professionals? Or with all friends and all ECEC professionals?	

Other categories, relevant for the specific context of each school, may be deduced by the activity in order to highlight the most relevant aspects through which children seem to give meanings to their ECEC spaces.



TOOL 9

Observation grid

Observer's name: Service: Section:

Space observed: Date: Time:

Focus of the observation	Description
Guide-Questions for the description	What are children doing? What are ECEC professionals doing? (also the observer him/herself) What are parents doing? (if applicable)

Reflections - Guide-Questions: CHILDREN

HOW ARE CHILDREN FEELING?
(emotional aspects/wellbeing...)

WHAT ARE CHILDREN LEARNING?
(which social, emotional, relational skills)

Reflections - Guide-Questions: THE SPACE

HOW IS THE SPACE AND THE GENERAL ORGANIZATION OF MATERIALS?

WHICH CHANGES SHOULD BE POSSIBLE?

Reflections - Guide-Questions: MYSELF

HOW DID I FEEL IN THAT CONTEXT?
(thoughts, emotions...)

TOOL 10

Grid for exchange of observations between ECEC centres (and within the same centre)

This grid can be used by ECEC staff to observe professionals of another ECEC centre or colleagues of the same ECEC centre. After observing, a shared reflection moment should take place between observers and observed staff.

Please divide your observation in 1) descriptive part; 2) interpretation (what do you think about it)
Each professional can choose (together with the professionals of the ECEC centre observed) 2-4 moments to be observed more specifically.

Focus of the observation	Description
Entrance	What are children doing? What are ECEC professionals doing? (also the observer him/herself) What are parents doing? (if applicable)
	Please choose 2 children/parents and describe what happens when they arrive (where do they go, to who they talk, which interactions with who? etc.)
	What do you think about what you described?

Focus of the observation	Description
Classes/Groups	<p>How are the spaces of the classes organized? (thematic corners, division of spaces) Do you see strategies concerning the continuity ECEC centre/home (bringing toys from home; bringing something home from ECEC centre; is the diversity of families visible? How? etc.)</p>
	<p>Please observe a specific moment in the class (free play and/or activity) and describe what happens (how many children are involved, where, how they use the space and materials, which interaction with the adult/s and amongst each other)</p>
	<p>What do you think about what you described? (how do the spaces/materials/organization facilitate (or not) interactions; how do they facilitate (or not) individual learning; how do they facilitate (or not) autonomy etc...)</p>

Focus of the observation	Description
Hygiene and Toilet	How are the toilets organized? (where are they, distance to the classes etc.)
	Please observe a specific moment in which a child/children go to the toilet and describe it (how many children, when, what do they do, with who...)
	What do you think about what you just described?

Focus of the observation	Description
Eating Space	<p>How is the eating place organized (where is it, big/small, which materials are used on the table etc)</p>
	<p>Please observe the eating moment and describe what happens (who prepares the table, how many children, how many adults, where do they sit, how (and who) do they serve the plates (can children serve themselves?), who, which interactions amongst children and amongst adults and children; can children decide what to eat; how long do children have to 'wait' and what happens during the waiting moment etc...)</p>
	<p>What do you think about what you just described?</p>

Focus of the observation	Description
Sleeping Space	How is the sleeping place organized (where is it, big/small, personalization of beds etc)
	Please observe the sleeping moment and describe what happens (how many children, how many adults, which preparation, which interactions, can children leave the room when they are awake? What happens if a child doesn't want to sleep? etc...)
	What do you think about what you just described?

Focus of the observation	Description
Outside Spaces	How is the outdoor space organized (materials, toys...)?
	Please observe a 'going outside moment' and describe what happens (how many children, how many adults, where do they play, with what, which interactions children/children and children/adults; can children choose to play in or out? etc...)
	What do you think about what you just described?

Focus of the observation	Description
Spaces for parents	Are there places for parents in the centre/service?
	How are they organized?
	If you see them used by parents, please describe how
	What do you think about it?

TOOL 11

Questionnaire for parents

The listed statements help to assess the environment in the school, in the group your child attends. Mark the answer that best suits you with an X.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree	Don't know
1. The physical environment of the group is safe and adapted to the needs of children						
2. The environment of the group is aesthetic, not crowded, reminiscent of the home environment						
3. The group environment is rich in visual information (posters, maps, books, photos, etc.)						
4. Children's works are exhibited in a group / school environment						
5. There are children's playgrounds in the school yard, which are tidy and safe						
6. School outdoor spaces are adapted for the holistic development of children						
7. My child trusts the teacher, knows he/she will help as soon as child will need help						
8. Continuity of children 's life at school and at home is ensured (children can bring their favorite toys from home, which help them to fall asleep or calm down, etc.)						
9. The school fosters traditions, organizes joint celebrations with parents (birthdays, state or calendar holidays, etc.)						
10. The school invites parents to choose themes/projects/field trips for the entire group and help organize and realize them.						
11. The school provides conditions for meeting my child's needs and developing talents						
12. The creation or modification of different spaces and educational materials is discussed with parents						

TOOL 12 (TO DOWNLOAD)

Families and professionals' perceptions of the ECEC spaces

Hi!

This questionnaire is addressed to families and professionals (coordinators, teachers, educators, assistants ...) of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) centres. In particular, we would like to collect some information on how the spaces of ECEC centres are experienced and perceived by those who live them daily, in order to make them always better and suitable for the needs of adults and children.

This is a short questionnaire, it will take less than 10 minutes to be filled in. You will find some questions about the spaces of your service. You should answer on the basis of your experience: we are interested in your personal opinion, therefore there are no right or wrong answers.

Participation is voluntary. The collected data will be stored and processed in an absolutely anonymous and aggregated form, in accordance with the European privacy legislation (EU) 2016/679 (so-called GDPR).

For any clarification, you can contact the scientific representatives of the project: ***insert names and contacts***

I declare that I have read and understood the above indicated information and agree to participation in the search and processing of the data provided (1)

1) I fill out the questionnaire as

- parent or other family member (1)
- educator or teacher (2)
- assistant (3)
- pedagogical coordinator (4)
- other (specify) (5) _____

2) Age _____

3) Gender

- male (1)
- female (2)
- other (3)

4) Nationality

- belgian / lithuanian (1)
- other (specify) (2) _____

Click [HERE](#) to download the full tool

TOOL 13

Moodboard and mindmap

Moodboard and Mindmap can be used by ECEC professionals to reflect on the organization of ECEC spaces and materials.

- The moodboard can be used as first step to explore what professionals find pleasant in their living space and verify how these elements are (or are not) present in the ECEC centre where they work.
- Then, through the mindmap, staff can connect the reflection on the moodboard to the needs of children, families and the curriculum/ECEC vision, and work on how spaces/materials respond to these needs.
- At the end of the process an action plan will be developed to transform the spaces taking into account needs of children and adults.

MOODBOARD

1) Memories from my childhood

Close your eyes and think about pleasant moments during your childhood.
What do you see? What do you smell, feel, hear...?

Memories: short overview (individually)	
I smell...	
I see...	
I feel...	
I hear...	
I taste...	

2) I feel good at home because...

Which elements make you feel at home in your house (use eventually the 5 senses for description)? Which elements could make you feel better (what would you change)?
Divide your description in 'inside' and 'outside' spaces, if applicable.

I feel good at home because...	
I smell...	
I see...	
I feel...	
I hear...	
I taste...	

3) What about your work place?

- a. Which elements that make you feel good at home and your childhood memories you find back in the ECEC centre where you work?

- b. Which ones do you miss?

4) Taking all the previous answers into account, make a collage with colors, images, fotos' that you find inspiring to orient the (re)organization of the ECEC space/materials.

MINDMAP

1) Identify needs of children and families (what do you think they need?)

Children	Families
Ex. Movement	Ex. Interactions with other families
Interactions with peers	...
Calmness	
...	

2) Think about the goals (needs) of the curriculum and of the vision of your ECEC centre

Ex. Children develop autonomy: children are able to go autonomously to the bathroom;
Children develop their language...
...

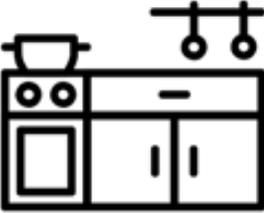
3) Think about how the materials/furniture/spaces can respond to the above mentioned needs

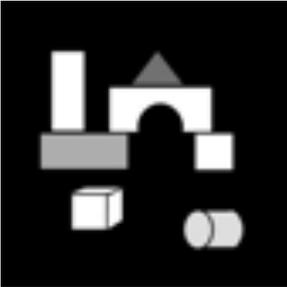
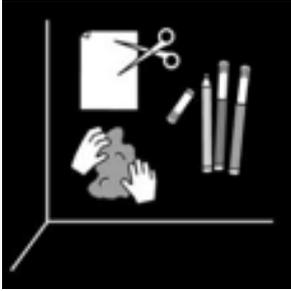
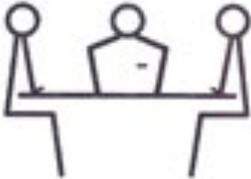
Children	Families	Curriculum and vision
<p>Ex. Concerning movement:</p> <p><i>Playing with a ball, climbing, running...</i></p>	<p>Ex. Concerning Interactions with other families</p> <p><i>Having a parent corner or room,...</i></p>	<p>Ex. Concerning development of autonomy</p> <p><i>Having open furniture so that children can take materials/toys on their own,...</i></p>
...

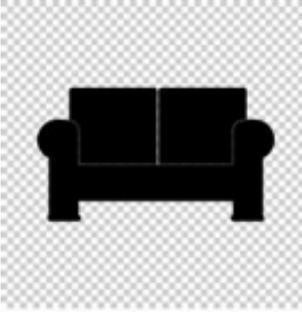
4. Find symbols to represent materials/furniture/spaces that respond to the identified needs

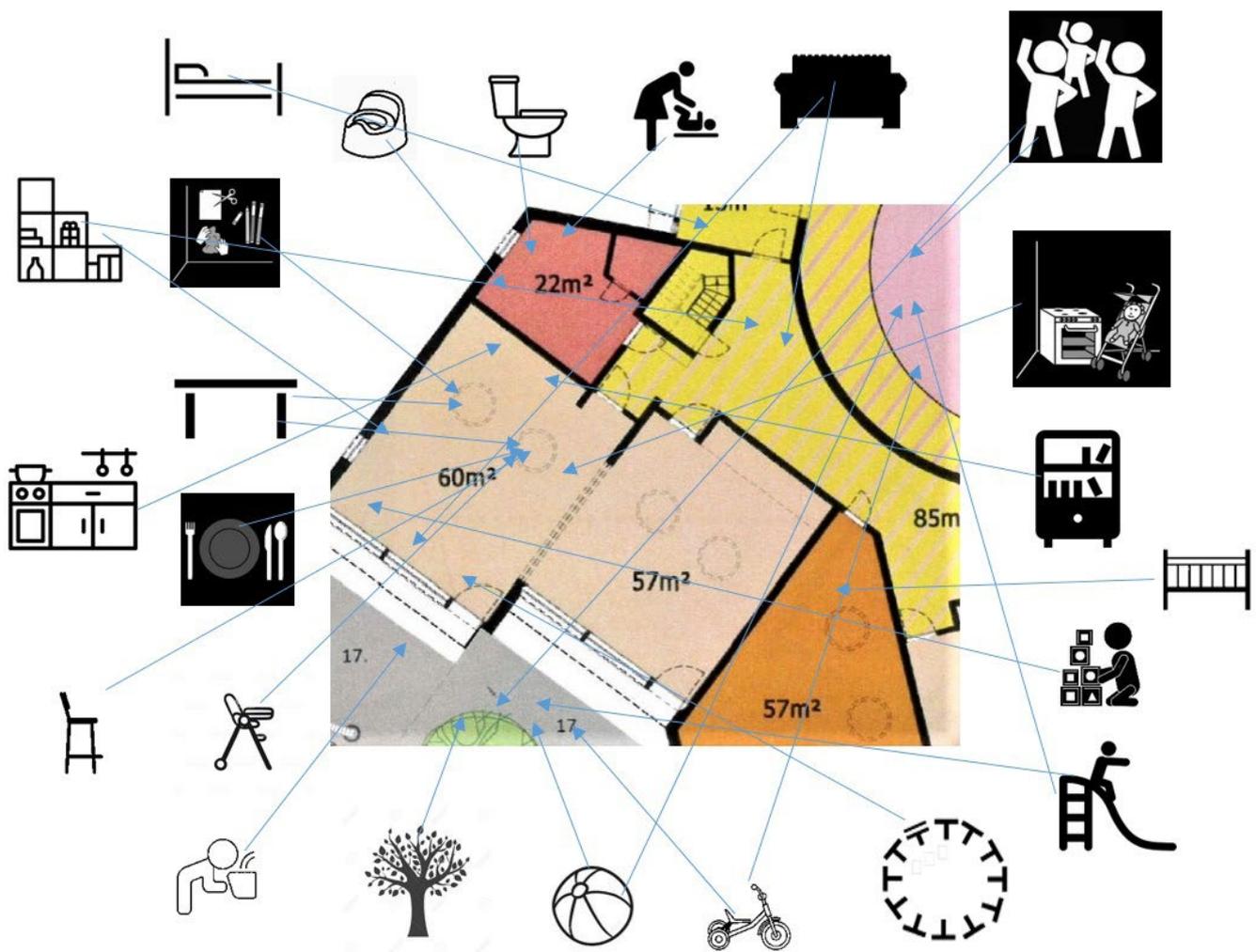
Think and find out symbols that represent the identified materials/furniture/spaces (responding to each of the above mentioned needs).

Here you find examples of symbols, but feel free to add your own.

	Playing with a ball		Materials/toys reachable by children
	Symbolic corner		Symbolic corner linked to the life context of children

	<p>Construction</p>		<p>Place where you can keep what children build</p>
	<p>Carpet to play</p>		<p>Atelier</p>
	<p>Bikes</p>		<p>Place to do movement games</p>
	<p>Library reachable by children</p>		<p>Calm place where children can read</p>
	<p>Calm place without too many stimuli</p>		<p>Room for professionals Parents' room</p>

	<p>Natural light</p>		<p>Chairs for adults</p>
	<p>Sofa for parents</p>		<p>A place where it is possible to sit in a circle for the circle moment with the children</p>
	<p>'Real' plates, forks... to eat</p>		<p>Table to...</p>
	<p>(Other examples)</p>		
			
			



5) Take a map of your ECEC centre and place the symbols where they belong

Where can children play with a ball? Where is the library? Etc.

6) Which symbols have a place? Which ones not?

- Do all symbols have a place?
- Which ones are not represented in the ECEC space?
- Mark with a pencil the missing elements and the ones you think are not enough represented

7) Reflect on what you discovered: action plan

- Reflect with your colleagues and find agreements for an action plan aimed at transforming the spaces. The aim will be that all identified symbols can find a place in the map.
- Create a new map of the ECEC centre where you indicate which spaces you are planning to change and how

You are now ready to take action!

TOOL 14

Grid for questions preschool – out of school care

This grid can be used to explore the way teachers and childcare workers use the ECEC spaces within the same building. The answers can be a basis for further reflection on how to share and transform the environment by answering to the needs of children and families within an *educare* perspective (learning, playing and caring intertwined).

These questions can also be used as basis to organize a small 'focus group' amongst the professionals of the two settings. In this way, the focus group itself becomes an opportunity of sharing opinions, perceptions, ideas.

- 1) **Are there differences in the way the classroom (preschool time) and the out of school space are organized?**
- 2) **Do you ever use the spaces of the other service (meaning do teachers use the spaces of the out of school care, and vice-versa)? If yes, when and how?**
- 3) **If you share the spaces, are there agreements concerning your roles as professionals (the teacher does.....; and the childcare worker does.....)? If yes, which ones?**
- 4) **Are the agreements with children different during school time and out of school time? How?**
- 5) **Can the preschool use the materials of the out of school, and vice-versa? Which agreements do you share on this?**
- 6) **How to you organize warm and smooth transitions for children from the preschool space to the out of school space?**

TOOL 15

Professionals' reflection grid - Focus Area Learning Environment

Teacher's reflection - Focus Area Learning Environment

The level of quality: 0 – Inadequate; 1 – Minimal; 2 – Good; 3 – Excellent

	0	1	2	3	Evidence, examples of the practice
1) The educational environment is safe, aesthetic, attractive to children					
2) The educational environment is comfortable and encouraging to try various activities, individually, in small groups or with all the children in the group					
3) The educational environment is divided into logically defined smaller spaces (according to the competencies to be developed, activity centers, corners, etc.) with appropriate measures for certain activities, encouraging research, play and education					
4) Educational materials are purposeful, adapted to the age and needs of children					
5) There are areas for relaxation and quietness where children can be alone and rest					
6) It is ensured that children spend the prescribed time outside every day					
7) School outdoor spaces are used for the holistic development of children					
8) The teacher develops an individual responsive relationship with each child, creates a secure attachment					
9) The environment is rich in various social interaction situations (with other children in the group, with parents, with other members of the community)					
10) Children learn to protect the environment and have practical opportunities to contribute to the care of the environment					
11) Children are involved in planning, creating and supervising the group and school environment					

12) Children use different materials, information and communication technologies appropriate to their age					
13) In order to enrich children's development and promote their socialization, the teacher uses community resources outside the school and invites community members to the group					
14) The educational environment encourages children to take appropriate risks for development and learning					

Total Score of the Focus Area Learning Environment: _____

What am I doing well? ? _____

What would I like to improve? _____

What do I plan to improve in the coming weeks? _____

What experiences can I share with colleagues? _____

What help would I need from colleagues? _____

TOOL 16

Concrete questions for ECEC staff when wanting to connect spaces and *educare*

Concerning toilets and hygiene spaces:

- Is the toilet enough near the children's room? Especially the children between 2 and 3,5 years old need to be supported in their process of learning to go to the toilet. This means that spaces/infrastructure should help professionals in supporting them (for example by not having toilets that are too far to reach).
- Can children autonomously decide when to go to the toilet (is their autonomy and decision making supported)?
- Are toilet and hygiene facilities clean?
- Are toilets and hygiene areas ventilated?
- Do toilets foresee small doors/walls to guarantee privacy for children?
- Are toilets and hygiene facilities accessible for children with special needs?
- Are toilets and hygiene facilities at 'child size' ?
- Can children wash their hands autonomously?
- Are there enough toilets and hygiene facilities, so that children don't have to wait too long?
- Is there a changing table for children that are not yet autonomous in using the toilets?

Concerning eating places:

- Can children eat in small groups?
- Does the eating area have a good acoustic, so that children can pleasantly talk to each other and with the professionals while eating?
- Is the eating space ventilated?
- Which materials are used to eat? 'Real' plates (in ceramic), forks, glasses (instead of plastic) are more pleasant to be used and help supporting the image of children's competent
- Eating spaces should be 'cozy', familiar and clean, in order to support children's pleasure in eating. Are there pictures, paintings, plants which help in creating a familiar place?
- Are children involved in setting the table and preparing the eating moment? This is a concrete way to put *educare* in practice, since children learn to take care of the group, of the materials and space; they learn to count how many places there should be, to position the materials at the right distance; they collaborate with friends and adults; they talk, negotiate who does what, etc.
- Are there enough trolleys or such (on which plates and food is placed before giving it to the children) for all groups so that children don't have to wait too long to start eating?
- Do adults sit, and eventually eat, with the children? Eating is not a service, it is a pedagogical moment. This means that it has also a relational value. If the adults can sit down and 'be comfortable and calm', this helps children in feeling and doing the same.
- Are the eating spaces accessible for children with special needs? Are their needs taken into account when organizing the eating moment?

Concerning sleeping places:

- Is there a sleeping space in the ECEC centre? Also in preschool this is crucial, since many children need to sleep?
- Can children sleep in small groups?
- Is the sleeping place a 'calm' silent one?
- Can the sleeping place become almost completely dark?
- Are the colors in the sleeping room soft, not 'aggressive' ? (for example colors near to white are soft ones, while red might be more aggressive)
- Is the sleeping place near the children's room? This helps the transition for children, and it supports professionals in organizing the sleeping moment in a flexible way (children that don't sleep or wake up earlier can easily join the children's room, and vice-versa)
- Has the sleeping room good air circulation?
- Are there personal beds - personal sheets, the possibility to use always the same bed for each child, objects (or transitional toys, pacifiers..) brought from home by each child etc.?

- Are children involved in the preparation to the sleeping moment?
- Is there a comfortable place (a chair, sofa...) also for the professionals in the sleeping room? Adults that are given the possibility to relax, allow children to do the same.

Concerning classrooms/children's rooms:

- Does the children's room have enough natural light?
- Is there direct access to the outdoor area? If not, is this access facilitated in some way?
- Are children's rooms easily accessible for children with special needs?
- Is there a good acoustic in the children's room?
- Which materials are present in the children's room? In general, well chosen and diverse selected materials and toys (mainly non-structured, meaning for example wooden blocks in different sizes, branches, sand or other natural materials) can support children creativity and knowledge more than very structured toys. Following a less can be more approach, classrooms should be organized with a selected choice of materials (especially not structured) that gives 'mental space' to children to discover and learn. Spaces with too many stimuli normally tend to hinder concentration and to agitate children, while environments with selected non structured materials facilitate children in being active participants of their learning/playing processes, within their rhythms and modalities.
- Is there diversity in the offer of the materials? E.g. different kind of materials, but also dolls with different skin colors and gender, or books in different languages. In the same way, it is important to provide materials/toys in which children with special needs can also recognize themselves.
- Are the pictures of the families in the children's rooms? In order to facilitate children's recognition of the ECEC place as a familiar space, pictures of children and their families can be hanged on the walls and used to talk with children about their home.
- Can children bring toys/materials from home, to create daily 'bridges' ECEC centre/home?
- Do children have personal boxes (or similar) to put their personal toys/objects?
- Are there places to discover/play in the classroom, but also places to withdraw, rest and be 'calm' if needed?
- Is the children's room organized in thematic areas (corners), which can help in organizing such space in a 'readable' (meaning understandable) way for children, besides helping children in spontaneously dividing themselves in small groups?
- Which colours are present in the children's room (walls, furniture...)? Too bright mixed colors normally hinder concentration, so it is recommended to use soft, natural and sober colors for the walls/doors, which create a 'calmer atmosphere'. White/warm white/beige are good examples. Colors should not be too strong and not many. Small nuances are recommended to create a calmer pleasant space.
- Are there chairs/sofas also for adults in the children's room? Professionals (and parents) should also feel at ease in the classrooms.
- Are materials/toys available to children? Can they take them autonomously? Open closets at the height of children help this process to autonomy.

Concerning outdoor spaces:

- Are outdoor spaces directly accessible from the classes? When a choice has to be made, the youngest children (when possible) should be the ones that can have direct access to the outdoor spaces, because it becomes easier for the professionals to use both spaces in a comfortable way.
- Is there a diverse offer of materials and play in the outdoor spaces? e.g. places to hide and withdraw, places to explore, run, play.
- Are the outdoor areas easily accessible for children with special needs?
- In which materials are built the outdoor facilities/toys? Plastic toys normally become soon dirty and not pleasant to see and use. Natural or re-cycled materials can be used to create attractive 'playing structures' for children: car wheels can become an adventurous parkour; pieces of wood or trunks of trees can become stairs to get to a slide etc.
- Outdoor spaces give the possibility to get to know nature. Is there a vegetable garden to be created and taken care of with children? Are 'small' natural events observed with children?
- Can children use the outdoor areas in a flexible way, or they always have to go out 'all together'. When outdoor and indoor spaces are near each other, this helps their autonomous use by children, according to their needs.
- Is it possible for professionals to see the children outdoor, without necessarily be with them outside?
- Is the continuity indoor-outdoor supported by bringing elements of the outdoor (wooden blocks etc.) space inside and vice-versa?
- What is the place of 'taking risks' for children in the outdoor space? Does the space allow a risky pedagogy?
- Can children go out with all weather conditions? For example a specific space of the ECEC centre can be used to store boots for all children.

Concerning the entrance:

- Does the entrance have welcoming elements: e.g. pictures of children, plants, paintings?
- Does the entrance have panels that show the identity of the ECEC centre: e.g. a panel with the pictures of all the staff members, a panel with the vision of the ECEC centre explained in an accessible way etc. ?
- Are there personalized hangers (e.g. with pictures of the children) for children at the entrance?
- Are there benches and/or sofas on which children and parents can sit comfortably when getting dressed/ undressed (shoes, jacket...)?
- Is there a hanger for parents' jackets, to concretely show that parents are welcome as well?
- Is there a sofa (or similar) on which adults are welcome to sit and interact, eventually with a coffee machine next to it, inviting parents to sit and have a chat?
- Are there 'playing corners' at the entrance, which can be used during the day with small groups of children and during arrival/goodbye moments?
- Is there a space for buggies?
- Is the entrance safe : a cross over? Kiss and ride zone? A space for bikes?

Concerning spaces for families:

- Does the ECEC center have furniture/spaces in which families can feel welcome, where they can 'stay' and have a place (physically and metaphorically) at the entrance, in the classes (parents are welcome to come in), in the outdoor spaces?
- Are there adult-sized chairs for meetings with small/big groups of parents, to sit in a comfortable way?
- Are there hangers for parents' jackets?
- Is there a parents' room (or at least a corner), in which parents can sit when bringing and picking up their children, in which they can chat and create relationships with other parents, or meet the professionals?

Concerning spaces for professionals:

- Is there furniture (sofa, chairs) for professionals in the children's rooms?
- Is there a dedicated room for staff, so that all professionals can meet, discuss, reflect together?
- Is there also space to rest for professionals? It would also benefit professional's wellbeing to have a room where staff can meet for work-related activities, and another space where they can relax. The pleasure of being in a space supports professionals in their way of working.

...A last note about transitions from a space to the other:

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