



SUPPORTING THE COLLABORATION BETWEEN ECEC CORE AND ASSISTING PRACTITIONERS

Experiences of professional learning
communities in two Slovenian
pilot kindergartens



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Value diversity
in care and education

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1. INTRODUCTION	08	2. SLOVENIAN CONTEXT AND PILOTS	12
		2.1 GENERAL INFORMATION ON ECEC SYSTEM IN THE COUNTRY	12
		2.2 INFORMATION ON THE PILOT KINDERGARTENS	13
		2.1.1 Vavta Vas: Kindergarten Krkine lučke at Primary School Vavta vas	13
		2.1.2 Grosuplje: Kindergarten Kekec	14



3. PILOTS' LEARNING PATH	20	4. PARTICIPANTS' VIEW ON THE VALUE LEARNING PATH	32
3.1 VAVTA VAS: KINDERGARTEN KRKINE LUČKE AT PRIMARY SCHOOL VAVTA VAS	20	4.1 VAVTA VAS: KINDERGARTEN KRKINE LUČKE AT PRIMARY SCHOOL VAVTA VAS	32
3.1.1 Goals for the VALUE learning path	20	4.1.1 Participants' view on the VALUE learning paths	32
3.1.2 Concrete description of how the VALUE learning path was set up	20	4.1.2 Changes in practice for children	35
3.1.3 Concrete information on the VALUE learning path	21	4.1.3 Changes in practice for parents	36
3.1.4 Observed evolutions	23	4.1.4 Crucial conditions that affect the successful functioning of professional learning communities	36
3.2 GROSUPLJE: KINDERGARTEN KEKEC GROSUPLJE	23	4.1.5 Key conditions that contribute to maintain professional learning communities in the future	37
3.2.1 Goals for the VALUE learning path	23	4.2 GROSUPLJE: KINDERGARTEN KEKEC	37
3.2.2 Concrete description of how the VALUE learning path was set up	23	4.2.1 Participants' view on the VALUE learning paths	37
3.2.3 Concrete information on the VALUE learning path	24	4.2.2 Changes in practice for children	42
3.2.4 Observed evolutions	26	4.2.3 Changes in practice for parents	43
3.3 TOPICS RELATED TO THE STAKEHOLDERS' GROUP	26	4.2.4 Crucial conditions that affect the successful functioning of professional learning communities	43
3.3.1 Aim of the stakeholder's groups	26	4.2.5 Key conditions that contribute to maintain professional learning communities in the future	44
3.3.2 General information on the stakeholders' group	26	5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMENDATIONS	48
3.3.3 Some important reflections on the stakeholders' group	29	5.1 CORE IDEAS FOR BOTH PILOT SCHOOLS	48
		5.2 CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS	49
		APPENDIX. DESIGN AND METHODS OF THE FOCUS-GROUP EVALUATION	52
		LITERATURE	55

1.

INTRODUCTION

1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this report is to demonstrate development and implementation of a common path of professional development for professionals: ECEC core and assisting practitioners in two Slovenian kindergartens involved in the Value project.

The aim of the VALUE project was to create a 'path of continuous professional development (CPD) for all kindergarten professionals, to improve collaboration between ECEC core and assisting practitioners, and at the same time to recognize the diversity according to their background and experience. In this respect, the VALUE project aims to improve collaborative practices in order to address the needs of all children, families and communities.

In both kindergartens involved in the project, we have formed professional learning communities (PLCs) as strong pillars for achieving a shared understanding of process quality and strengthening educators' own role. PLC is defined as 'a social grouping of new and experienced educators who, come together over time for the purpose of gaining new information, reconsidering previous knowledge and beliefs, and building on their own and others' ideas and experiences in order to work on a specific agenda, intended to improve practice and enhance student learning' (Cochran-Smith and Lyle, 2011). The work of the professional learning communities, accordingly, has an objective to support educators, both emotionally and professionally, throughout the course of their professional development. It offers them the opportunity of critically reflecting on their own teaching; giving feedback to other members of the community on the quality of their teaching and learning; sharing concrete ideas with other educators on how to improve the learning experience of children; motivating other educators to enhance the quality of their work and helping them enjoy their work.

The basic goal of the PLC is professional development of educators. In order for this development to proceed smoothly, educators should be able to analyse and research issues and materials of interest; have an opportunity to link the new with the familiar; introduce new activities in their work in order to understand them and integrate better; receive mentorship through guidance and explanation; observe how their colleagues hold a class competently; use different resources as the basis for actions they will carry out in their work Caine and Caine (2010). All of these activities are incorporated in the proposed structure of the PLC meetings: warming up, reflecting on performed activities or discussion about a specific challenge, developing a common understanding of quality, planning next steps, and conclusion of the meeting. Such meeting structure allows members to develop and acquire new knowledge and skills according to the principles of adult learning, while respecting the individual differences existing between teachers. The proposed meeting structure consists of three elements of PLC work: cooperation among members, shared vision, and reflection.

PLC in both kindergartens were implemented from September 2018 until October 2019, involving both core and assisting practitioners.

The content goals in both kindergartens involved were linked to deepening the selected content area. In Kindergarten Vavta vas, core and assisting practitioners were exploring one of the focus areas of ISSA's principles of quality pedagogy: inclusion, diversity and democratic values, while in Kindergarten Grosuplje, ECEC core and assisting practitioners were researching their practice in the field of creativity in conjunction with ISSA's principles of quality pedagogy. It is important that all educators work on improving the same focus areas simultaneously. As a result, common energy which is needed to realize their common goal is

created, as well as the benefit of the children is increased.

Educational Research Institute (ERI) researchers were facilitators in the process of establishing the VALUE learning path. Their main task in this process was to strengthen competences of leaders of PLCs, by supporting them in reflection of their leading practices. Facilitators also supported leaders with new or additional contents, methods and techniques for developing a common understanding of selected focus areas. In Grosuplje, a so-called “developmental group” was formed, consisting of eleven leaders of PLCs (leaders were both core and assisting practitioners), and their five mentors (management staff and kindergarten counsellors). In Vavta vas, three leaders of one PLC were supported by facilitators.

Throughout the process, facilitators put great emphasis on formative monitoring of the professional development of all included staff. All involved staff had a possibility to develop their own professional reflective diaries (portfolios), in which they documented and reflected their professional development. Two types of professional portfolios were developed: one for the leaders of PLCs and the other for staff (core and assisting practitioners). The emphasis of professional reflective portfolios for leaders was on their professional development as leaders, and the emphasis of professional reflective portfolios for staff was on the development of their understanding of the chosen pedagogical field and on the changes, which they have implemented into practice.

In this report, we present a description and reflection of the learning path in two pilots in Slovenia. The report firstly introduces the ECEC system in Slovenia and afterwards presents contexts of two pilot kindergartens: Kindergarten Krkine Lučke Vavta vas and Kindergarten Kekec Grosuplje. The overview of how the VALUE trajectory was set

up, is illustrated with the summary of viewpoints of facilitators, stakeholders’ group, kindergarten directors, leaders of PLCs and professional staff: core and assisting practitioners.

The summary highlights the main identified issues as well as reflections on what is important for sustainability of the achieved results.

2.

SLOVENIAN CONTEXT AND PILOTS

2. SLOVENIAN CONTEXT AND PILOTS

2.1 GENERAL INFORMATION ON ECEC SYSTEM IN THE COUNTRY

Slovenia has a unitary system of preschool education for children from the age of 11 months until the age of six. Participation of children in preschool education is not mandatory. Preschool education is an integral part of the education system. Since 1993, it has been in the domain of the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, which ensures continuity from preschool to elementary school education. The government is responsible for the national policy, the legislative framework and the general programme of preschool education. The most important acts are: The Organization and Financing of Education and Training Act, which regulates all levels of education, and the Kindergarten Act, which regulates preschool education in public in private kindergartens. Municipalities establish kindergartens and are responsible for the implementation of preschool education programmes. Participation rate of kindergarten children continues to improve. Over the last twelve years, the number of children increased by 50%, namely from 58.127 in the school year 2006/2007 to 87.708 in 2019/2020. There were 82.7% of all preschool children, who attended kindergarten or stayed with education and care families in 2019/20. 94.5% of five-year-olds attended preschool education in the school year 2018/19.¹

The national curriculum was introduced in 1999. It set out broad goals and principles for early childhood education and represented a shift away from the traditional emphasis on the content towards emphasizing the process and enabling practitioners' autonomy and responsibility (Vonta, 2007; Bahovec et al., 2007). According to the Kindergarten Act, the main goal of kindergartens is providing comprehensive care for children, improving the

quality of life of families and children and creating conditions for children's physical and mental abilities development. The ECEC system in Slovenia has not changed much for almost two decades. The Kindergarten Act was amended between 1996 and 2010. It established less favourable structural conditions (e.g. the number of children per group, the size of indoor space); furthermore, a new form of ECEC was introduced, the so-called home-based care (provided by a home-based child-minder of preschool children); it caters for a very small share of children (Krek in Metljak, 2011).

Qualifications for ECEC core and assisting practitioners are regulated at the national level.

Kindergarten programs are implemented by kindergarten teachers (core practitioners) and teacher assistants (assisting practitioners), who work in pairs. In the first age group, ECEC core and assisting practitioner work together for 6 hours, and in the second age group for four hours per day.

Kindergarten teacher holds a bachelor degree (ISCED 6 bachelor or first Bologna cycle); and teaches 30 hours per week. Teacher's assistant has an upper secondary education qualification (ISCED 4) and teaches 35 hours per week.

The work obligation of the assisting practitioner includes cooperation with the core practitioner in the planning, implementation and preparation of the educational work, as well as other tasks related to the kindergarten activity. The assisting practitioner helps with the implementation of the educational process and independently performs individual tasks in agreement with the core practitioner. They are responsible for the preparation of educational materials and toys, as well as for the functional and aesthetic arrangement of the space.

1. Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia (SURS).

They provide adequate scheduling and daily tasks such as nutrition, hygiene, rest and outdoor living. Furthermore, they participate in the joint tasks in accordance with the annual work plan and cooperate with their core practitioner in preparation of the final report on the accomplishment of tasks in the previous year (job description).

The document Rules on the Promotion of Employees in Education to Titles covers only teachers, ECEC core practitioners and other professionals. Assisting practitioners cannot get promoted according to this rule, but through a different system. Legislation allows promotion to assistant educator for ten salary grades (22–32), and can be promoted based on annual assessments of the principal.

The Collective Agreement determines the right of all the kindergarten staff to 5 days of in-service training a year or 15 days over three years (in-service education takes place within regular working hours and is paid by the institution – can be (co) financed by the Ministry of Education Science and Sport.

Structural regulations governing staff: child ratio (SCR) are state-regulated. In general, the SCR in groups with children under the age of 3 is 1:7, with 3-year olds 1:9 and with 4- and 5-year olds 1:22.

2.2 INFORMATION ON THE PILOT KINDERGARTENS

2.2.1 Vavta Vas: Kindergarten Krkine lučke at Primary School Vavta vas

DESCRIPTION OF FACTS AND FIGURES OF THE PILOT SCHOOL

Kindergarten Krkine lučke at Primary School Vavta vas operates in the municipality of Straža, which lies 70 kilometres south-east of the capital of Ljubljana. Vavta vas has approximately 300

inhabitants, the municipality of Straža around 3000.

Kindergarten operates at three locations, enrolls 171 children, and has 24 educational staff employed. 12 of them are core practitioners with education level from ISCED 4 to ISCED 6, and 11 of them are assisting practitioners with education level from ISCED 4 to ISCED 6. There is also 1 assistant of a physically disabled child employed, and 1 deputy director. The managerial, financial-administrative and technical staff is common with the elementary school.

In recent years, the kindergarten noted that there are more and more immigrant families from foreign countries living in the municipality. In addition, there are also more and more children with different special needs. Therefore, more expertise is needed to support their inclusion in the community, and to support them professionally.

THE KINDERGARTEN AS A PILOT FOR VALUE

In the last five years, kindergarten faced a large fluctuation of employees (retirement, maternity leaves, changes in leading structure), which resulted in weakened professional connections among professionals. Under new, strong and motivated leadership, they saw the project as an opportunity to create a safe space for professional debates, professional networking and teamwork, reflection of their own practice and consequently higher quality of work. These were all the reasons, why this school was chosen as a pilot school for the VALUE project.

The kindergarten saw an opportunity in the project to create a common and continuous professional path for all employees. As the kindergarten principal wrote: “We want our kindergarten to finally become connected with

2. SLOVENIAN CONTEXT AND PILOTS

our local community, to be recognized by its professionalism even in a wider environment as it used to be.”

DESCRIPTION OF THE CULTURE (VISION AND PRACTICE) OF THE PILOT SCHOOL – STARTING SITUATION

Professionals from the kindergarten are aware that a small step has already been made toward the above defined direction, but at the moment they are feeling some lack of teachers’ motivation for professional development. Besides, assisting practitioners’ opinion is that they could be more valued by core professionals, that they are overloaded with work and that they are underpaid.

What the kindergarten particularly liked about the VALUE project is that it is focused on professional development of all staff. Besides professional development, kindergarten also considers professional networking and teamwork as very important, and the management misses this awareness among younger staff. For several years, they have been encouraging staff to develop their own professional portfolios that would show the professional growth of individuals. However, there has been no response so far.

The kindergarten was one of the first kindergartens in Slovenia that started with the implementation of the child-centred approach (Step-by-step methodology). After many years of cooperation with ERI, who was promotor of the child-centred approach in Slovenian pre-school system, the change in the management of the institution resulted in the suspension of cooperation, which has been revived in recent years. The kindergarten is also a member of the Step by Step Network for changing quality in education (leded by ERI), which goal is contin-

uous care for developing reflective practices of professional staff.

Facilitators’ main task in this process was to strengthen competences of three leaders of the kindergarten PLC, in which all staff (ECEC core and assisting practitioners) were included. Monthly meetings were focused on the leaders’ reflection of the process in their PLC. Facilitators supported the leaders in their competences for leading PLC by providing them new or additional contents, methods and techniques for developing a common understanding of the selected focus area and by supporting them in reflection of their practice of leading. In their PLC, professionals researched their practice in one of the focus areas of ISSA’s principles of quality pedagogy: inclusion, diversity and democratic values. By this, they developed a shared understanding on quality ECEC, they reflected upon their own practice and built supportive environments for their work.

The VALUE project offered the kindergarten the opportunity to create a common and continuous professional path for all employees.

2.2.2 Grosuplje: Kindergarten Kekec

DESCRIPTION OF FACTS AND FIGURES OF THE PILOT SCHOOL

Kindergarten Kekec Grosuplje operates in the municipality of Grosuplje, which lies south-east of the capital of Ljubljana. The kindergarten was established in 1953 by the municipality of Grosuplje and is a public kindergarten. The municipality of Grosuplje occupies 134 km² and has the population of 20.000. The kindergarten operates in 9 units, with 722 children aged 1-6 enrolled in 38 classrooms. The management staff characterized the neighbourhood in which their kindergarten is located as middle-class regarding the socio-economic status.

Kindergarten has 89 education staff employed. More than a half of them (50) has qualification for a preschool teacher's assistant (post-secondary non-tertiary education, ISCED level 4). Most of them are older workers who need additional professional support in their work. The reason for employing more assisting practitioners than ECEC core practitioners lies in norms for the design of groups, which are defined in the Kindergarten Act and in the Rules on standards to conduct pre-school education activities. Other educational staff has obtained an educational level from ISCED 4 to ISCED 6.

A speech therapist, special pedagogues and assistant for a child with special needs are also employed, hence there are children with different special needs and with a deficit in the language-related field are enrolled in kindergarten as well. The kindergarten includes also children who need to follow a prescribed diet(s) from the paediatrician due to their health condition. The management staff of the kindergarten consists of the principal and two deputy principals.

There are also six Romani settlements in the area of kindergarten, from which pre-school children were traditionally not included in pre-school programs. Romani families live in poor conditions, majority of parents are unemployed and since ECEC is not obligatory, the majority of them do not enrol their children in the kindergarten. When children enter the elementary school, they are not fluent in the language of the majority. There exists a low level of trust among Romani parents towards kindergarten and teachers, but in recent years, the kindergarten intensified its efforts to establish a partnership with Romani parents and initiated outreach activities in the Romani settlement. In this context, the kindergarten regularly cooperates with the Roma assistant working in the neighbouring elementary school.

THE KINDERGARTEN AS A PILOT FOR VALUE

Kindergarten Kekec Grosuplje was selected for participation in the project because of their long tradition of strengthening and supporting professional development of staff and their desire to introduce new quality elements into the kindergarten.

The kindergarten is aware of the importance of collaboration of different staff profiles in a classroom as an important element of the quality of the educational process.

By participating in the VALUE project, the kindergarten wishes to provide staff – specially assistants – with new challenges for the implementation of professional practice and with new incentives for working in the group of children and beyond. They want to increase their (assistants') professional autonomy and competence.

The kindergarten management is also aware that they are a part of a learning society that is constantly changing. From this point of view, it is very important that they follow these changes and change also themselves.

DESCRIPTION OF THE CULTURE (VISION AND PRACTICE) OF THE PILOT SCHOOL – STARTING SITUATION

Professional development of all employees is one of the aspects of the kindergarten's vision and its central strategic goal. This includes training of staff in all fields of expertise, mentoring trainees and students, peer observations, participation in seminars and other forms of professional development. Since 2002, the kindergarten has been involved in the Step by Step Network for changing quality in education (led by Educational Research Institute), which goal is continuous care for developing reflective practices of professional staff.

2. SLOVENIAN CONTEXT AND PILOTS

The kindergarten's aim within the VALUE project is developing a supportive environment for all professionals.

Facilitators' main task in this process was to strengthen competences of leaders of PLCs, in which all kindergarten staff (ECEC core and assisting practitioners) were included. There are 11 PLC leaders and each leads her own PLC (5-10 members). In PLCs, professionals research their practice in the field of creativity and reflect their work with the support of International Step by Step Association's (ISSA) principles of quality pedagogy.

At monthly meetings, facilitators supported PLC's leaders in reflecting their leadership practice and by providing them new or additional contents, methods and techniques for developing a common understanding of selected focus area.





3.

**PILOTS'
LEARNING
PATH**

3. PILOTS' LEARNING PATH

3.1 VAVTA VAS: KINDERGARTEN KRKINE LUČKE AT PRIMARY SCHOOL VAVTA VAS

3.1.1 Goals for the VALUE learning path

A PLC was formed on the level of the kindergarten as a school-based strategy for professional development and as a mean for realization of the shared vision of the kindergarten.

Kindergarten's management estimated that the quality of practice in the kindergarten had decreased due to the lower investment in professional development of professionals over the years. Social inclusion was considered the most challenging pedagogical area.

After establishing the working path in accordance with the child-centred approach Step-by-Step, the kindergarten records a long-standing practice of close cooperation between core practitioners and assistants, but the management felt there is room for improvement (on the level of the whole kindergarten) in bringing the whole staff together. Based on this context, the following goals were set:

- ▶ Deepening the understanding of the ISSA pedagogical area Inclusion, diversity and values of democracy (educare);
- ▶ Changing the practice, based on the implementation of individual action plans (educare);
- ▶ Developing a single professional learning community with all kindergarten professionals involved (collaboration);
- ▶ Empowering Professional Learning Community Leaders (Development Team) (professional identity).

3.1.2 Concrete description of how the VALUE learning path was set up

One PLC was formed on the level of kindergarten, which consisted of both: core and assisting practitioners.

Professional discussions in the PLC were connected to the field, which was recognized as the most challenging - social inclusion. Members of the PLC used the ISSA Principles of Quality Pedagogy as the content support in reflecting the selected pedagogical area. The document connects theory with practice and enables educators to build on findings from the fields of learning, development of children, neurobiological sciences and other sciences in their daily practice. Educators used the selected ISSA Principle of Quality as a starting point for their discussion and reflection on the current quality of education in their kindergarten and on the goals, they wish to achieve.

The PLC regularly met once per month and was led by three leaders. The leaders followed the PLC's structure, which incorporates warming up, reflecting on performed activities or discussion about a specific challenge, developing a common understanding of quality, planning next steps, and conclusion of the meeting. Such structure allows teachers to develop and acquire new knowledge and skills according to the principles of adult learning, while respecting the individual differences existing between teachers. The proposed meeting structure consists of three previously mentioned elements of the work of the PLC: cooperation among members, shared vision, and reflection.

During all meetings, the PLC members discussed some aspects of quality as well as how to meet the indicators of quality in their work and at the end of the meeting, they developed

an “action plan”, describing what they plan to achieve or change in their practice by the next meeting, what actions will they take, what resources will they need, and who can help them. Instead of the transmission perspective of the educator’s practice, in which educators are usually told what to do, the constructivist view of the profession of education is nurtured in the professional learning communities. This means that educators base their practice on previous knowledge and experiences, and use them in new situations where new understanding emerges.

Leaders of the PLC were especially alert on giving voice to the assisting practitioners. They formed smaller groups in such way, that the teams (teams who otherwise work together) were not sitting together. The leaders found this important as the assisting practitioner could leave the leading role (speaking, representing the viewpoint etc.) to the core practitioner in case teams would sit together. Furthermore, it was significant to the leaders to assure active role of the assisting practitioners and support strengthening their professional identity also in such way.

3.1.3 Concrete information on the VALUE learning path

Facilitators worked directly with a developmental team that included three leaders of the PLC: two ECEC core practitioners and one representative of managerial staff. Developmental team led the PLC at the kindergarten level. Facilitators conducted one introductory meeting in September 2018, which was dedicated to the introduction of VALUE professional path, PLCs and joint setting of the rules of working. Facilitators and developmental team met 5 times between October 2018 and June 2019; besides, facilitators observed twice the implementation of the PLCs.

At these reflective meetings facilitators and the developmental team reflected the process in their PLCs and supported them with new/ additional methods for development of shared understanding and leadership skills as well as new strategies for encouraging dialogue between members of the PLC. Facilitators supported PLC leaders with techniques and materials for the implementation of PLCs.

The meeting time was adjusted to the working hours of PLC leaders. We usually met at 12.00 and the meetings lasted for 2 hours.

Apart from the reflection of the process in the PLC, the following topics were also covered: development of individual action plans, reflection of the implemented action plan, deepening the understanding of the chosen pedagogical field, asking questions to help practitioners reflect their own practice, different strategies/techniques of work with the text, developing safe environment in the PLC (communication, joint setting of the rules for group work). Facilitators also developed additional materials for working on these topics. The topics were selected according to the interest of the PLC’s leaders, according to the expressed needs of professionals, members of the PLC.

Since there was strong emphasis on formative assessment of professionals through self-reflection in both environments, facilitators implemented one training (4 hours) on documenting the changes (development of professional portfolio) for the whole kindergarten staff. All kindergarten professionals were encouraged to develop their professional reflective portfolio with the aim of documenting and reflecting their professional development in respective period. The portfolio shows the changing understanding of the practi-

3. PILOTS' LEARNING PATH

tioner in the chosen subject area and the understanding of the self in the context of the learning community. Central components of the portfolio are written reflections and action plans that have served as tools to implement changes in practice.

A portfolio consisting of basic parts (description of the initial situation, documentation of professional development activities, documentation on peer observations, written reflections reflections) was developed by all professionals (22). 2 professionals developed a more extensive form of the portfolio, additionally containing case studies and reflections on changed practices, for which they could gain points for professional promotion.

In terms of the content, the work of the PLC was based on the ISSA principles of quality, the field of Inclusion, diversity and the values of democracy. Professionals thoroughly researched their practice in this area, which means that at each PLC meeting, they developed an action plan, which they were implementing until the next PLC meeting and reflected upon it when they next meet. Reflecting on the implemented practices, due to the different levels of understanding, sometimes led to disagreements, but this was understood as an important moment in forming a common understanding. Because of that, one of the fundamental concerns of the PLC's leaders was to provide a safe environment, where professionals could express their differing views and understandings.

TABLE 1. CONCRETE INFORMATION ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF VALUE LEARNING PATH IN KINDERGARTEN KRKINE LUČKE AT PRIMARY SCHOOL VAVTA VAS

Activities	Who was involved on the level of kindergarten	Date
Introductory meeting	Kindergarten management	21 June 2018
Introductory meeting	Kindergarten staff (ECEC core and assisting practitioners)	26 September 2018
Reflective meetings	Developmental team (leaders of PLC)	12 October 2018 17 December 2018 13 February 2019 19 April 2019 12 June 2019
Observations of PLC	Developmental team, kindergarten staff	12 December 2018 3 April 2019
Training on professional portfolio	Kindergarten staff	17 December 2018
Evaluation meeting	Kindergarten management, kindergarten staff	1 October 2019

3.1.4 Observed evolutions

We explained the observed evaluation in the section “Concrete description of how the VALUE learning path was set up” and “Concrete information on the VALUE learning path”. However, a few specific observations include also:

- ▶ greater interconnectedness of professionals;
- ▶ increased awareness of the importance of continuing professional support at the kindergarten level;
- ▶ increased sensitivity to parents, children and their needs.

3.2 GROSUPLJE: KINDERGARTEN KEKEC GROSUPLJE

3.2.1 Goals for the VALUE learning path

Kekec Kindergarten is a kindergarten where they are aware of the importance of investing in the professional development of professional staff and are constantly thinking about how to optimize kindergarten processes in order to achieve the highest quality of practice. All professionals (core and assisting practitioners) are included in one of 11 expert-working groups). Those expert groups are led by core practitioners, but also assisting practitioners. These expert working groups meet regularly during the year, but the content of the meetings is usually of organizational matters. Together with the management we decided to re-organize these groups into PLCs and to support current leaders for leading their PLCs in a participatory way.

At the kindergarten level, the following goals were set:

- ▶ transformation of expert groups into PLC’s (collaboration);

- ▶ empowering leaders of PLCs (developmental team; professional identity);
- ▶ deepening the understanding of the chosen priority area (professional identity);
- ▶ changing practice based on the implementation of individual action plans (educare);
- ▶ deepening the understanding of ISSA pedagogical areas (educare).

3.2.2 Concrete description of how the VALUE learning path was set up

On the level of kindergarten, there already existed 11 expert groups, which met regularly during the year (3 times per year), but the content of the meetings were primarily organizational matters. The kindergarten management and leaders of expert groups made a common decision to transform these groups into PLCs and support leaders in this process.

In the “newly” established PLCs, ECEC core and assisting practitioners were researching their practice in the field of creativity, leaning on **ISSA’s principles of quality pedagogy**.

Each PLCs met regularly once a month and was led by a leader. Leaders, core and assisting practitioners, followed the structure of a PLC, which incorporates warming up, reflecting on performed activities or discussion about a specific challenge, developing a common understanding of quality, planning next steps, and conclusion of the meeting. Such a meeting structure allows teachers to develop and acquire new knowledge and skills according to the principles of adult learning, while respecting the individual differences existing between teachers. The proposed meeting structure consists of three previously mentioned elements

3. PILOTS' LEARNING PATH

of the PLC work: cooperation among members, shared vision, and reflection

At a PLC meeting, members normally discuss some of the aspects of quality, debate on how to meet the indicators of quality in their work and at the end they develop the "action plan", describing what they plan to achieve or change in their practice by the next meeting; what actions will they take; what resources they will need; and who can help them. Instead of the transmission perspective of the educator's practice, in which the educators are usually told what to do, the constructivist view of the education profession is nurtured in the professional learning communities. This means that the educators base their practice on previous knowledge and experiences and use them in new situations where new understanding emerges.

On the level of individual PLCs, the membership was homogeneous (exclusively core or assisting practitioners). This was necessary due to organizational reasons (number of staff and opening hours of the kindergarten). Although, due to assuring interprofessional learning between core and assisting practitioners also on the professional level (not only on the level of leaders of PLCs) particular attention was given to the exchange of information and reflection between the core and assisting practitioners about their individual action plans. With the tools developed for this purpose, we fostered their interprofessional learning and at the same time strengthened the professional identity of both.

In the middle of the school year, during the implementation of the PLCs, professionals expressed an interest for "mixed" PLCs (core and assisting practitioners working/reflecting together in a PLC). Following their initiative, two PLCs were implemented in this way. The organization of such a meeting was a considerable organizational

challenge, but because of the positive reactions from the staff, the management was planning to organize two such meetings also in the school year 2019/20. The management finds it important, that some of the PLC meetings are held in a homogeneous composition, because in this way the assisting practitioners will definitely come to the word and at the same time strengthen their professional identity. The management also recognizes the need of quality professional dialogue between the two professionals and is aware of its own role in providing conditions for it.

3.2.3 Concrete information on the VALUE learning path

The existing expert professional groups, which included all kindergarten's professionals, have been transformed into PLCs. Facilitators have been working with the developmental team, which included 11 professionals (core and assisting practitioners in the role of the leaders of PLCs) and preschool management (director, 2 deputy directors and preschool's counsellor), who had the role of inner consultants for PLC leaders. Facilitators and developmental team met 8 times between October 2018 and June 2019. Besides the introductory meeting with the managerial staff of the kindergarten (June 2018), facilitators also met twice with the kindergarten management (September 2018: concrete planning of the implementation; June 2019: meeting dedicated to further planning of the implementation of the Value learning path on the level of kindergarten). Meetings with the developmental group were held in a form of a PLC (facilitators modelled leading the PLC with the developmental team as members). Besides of the reflection of their leading practice, PLC leaders were also supported with new/additional methods, techniques for development of shared understanding, leadership skills and new strategies for encouraging dialogue be-

tween members of PLC. Additional topics were the following: development of individual action plans, reflection of the implemented action plan, deepening of understanding of the chosen pedagogical field, different strategies/techniques of work with the text, developing safe environment in the PLC (communication, joint setting of the rules for group work), how to implement peer observations and how to conduct reflective discussion after the observation, asking questions to help practitioners reflect their own practice, how the core and assisting practitioner should discuss their implemented individual action plans in order to develop shared understanding of the pedagogical concept and to ensure the coherence of the pedagogical process. These topics were selected according to the interest of the PLC leaders, the expressed needs of members of PLCs and according to the observations of the pre-school management, acting as inner consultants. Facilitators also developed additional materials on these topics that could assist PLC leaders.

The time of the meetings was adjusted to the organization of work in the kindergarten. Meetings started at 13.00, but later due to organizational reasons changed to 14.00. They lasted for 2 hours.

A training for all professionals was conducted also in this kindergarten on the topic of professional portfolio. Due to the number of the staff, the training was carried out in two groups. Similar as in the first kindergarten, all kindergarten professionals were encouraged to develop their professional reflective portfolios to document and reflect their professional development in respective period. A portfolio consisting basic parts (description of the initial situation, documentation of professional development activities, documentation on peer observation, written reflections) was developed by all professionals (85). 4 professionals developed a more extensive form of the portfolio, containing also case studies and reflections of examples of changed practices, for which they could obtain points for professional promotion.

TABLE 2. CONCRETE INFORMATION ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF VALUE LEARNING PATH IN KINDERGARTEN KEKEC GROSUPLJE

Activities	Who was involved	Date
Introductory meeting	Facilitators, kindergarten management	21 June 2019 19 September 2018
Reflective meetings	Facilitators, developmental group	23 October 2018 15 November 2018 11 December 2018 14 January 2019 6 February 2019 27 March 2019 24 April 2019 4 June 2019 12 June 2019
Training on professional portfolio	Whole kindergarten staff	19 November 2018 (training held in two groups)
Evaluation meeting	Facilitators, kindergarten management, core practitioners, assisting practitioners	4 October 2019

3. PILOTS' LEARNING PATH

In terms of the content, the work of the PLCs was based on the kindergarten's priority theme in 2018/19, which was "creativity". As in the same school year the whole kindergarten started implementing the child-centred approach Step by Step, and the kindergarten management found it important for the whole kindergarten to be familiar with ISSA principles of quality, they also decided to combine content area "creativity" with ISSA principles of quality.

On the level of practice, professionals researched their work in the content field of creativity. At each PLC meeting, they have developed an action plan, which they implemented until the next PLC meeting and reflected upon it when they next met.

3.2.4 Observed evolutions

We explained the observed evaluation in the section "Concrete description of how the VALUE learning path was set up" and "Concrete information on the VALUE learning path". However, a few specific observations include also:

- ▶ greater interconnectedness of professionals;
- ▶ increased awareness of the importance of continuing professional support at the kindergarten level;
- ▶ increased sensitivity to parents, children and their needs;
- ▶ broadening the understanding of the concept of creativity.

3.3 TOPICS RELATED TO THE STAKEHOLDERS' GROUP

3.3.1 Aim of the stakeholder's groups

The purpose of this group was to create the conditions for the sustainability of the initiative, to liaise with practitioners, policy makers and other stakeholders.

The aim of organizing a stakeholders' group was to connect different stakeholders and open a discussion and encourage reflection on the topic of importance of creating opportunities for professional development of both professionals, the importance of reflecting the role of both professionals in relation to the educational and caring component of the pedagogical process and influence change in those areas.

3.3.2 General information on the stakeholders' group

At the first meeting in 2019, there were 14 participants present: directors of Kindergarten Kekec Grosuplje and Vavta vas, all three members of the developmental group from Vavta vas Kindergarten, one member of the Kekec Grosuplje kindergarten developmental team, representative of another kindergarten, two representatives of Ministry of education, science and sport, two representatives of secondary schools educating future kindergarten staff (assisting practitioners), two representatives of the Faculty of Pedagogy and a representative of an organization engaged in the development of management in kindergartens and schools.

They attended the meeting for different reasons:

«I'm interested in gaining information about professional development programs.»

(Representative of Ministry for Education, Science and Sport)

«I want to make the training of future educators as efficient, quality and up-to-date. Furthermore, I want to consider practical needs as much as possible and wish to cooperate with the Educational Research Institute.»

(Representative of secondary schools educating the future educators)

«I would like to get to know and get in touch with different stakeholders involved in pre-school education, and I want to learn more specifically how can a joint training of practitioners affect the quality of the process.»

(Representative of secondary school educating future assisting practitioners)

«I find it important to cooperate with different institutions operating in the same field. I am also interested in this topic because my institution deals with management in educational institutions and from the point of view of managing institutions.»

(Representative of an organization engaged in the development of management in kindergartens and schools)

«We will be updating the pre-school program shortly and I find all the information that contributes to a broader understanding of the role of the educator very valuable.»

(Representative of the Faculty of Education)

«I find this topic - recognizing differences within the professional staff very important and because we are currently dealing with this topic at the kindergarten level.»

(Representative of another kindergarten)

At the meeting, we wanted to address and discuss various challenges that both profiles of kindergarten professionals face in their path of professional development; as well as managers,

3. PILOTS' LEARNING PATH

who aims to support the professional role of both professionals in the group and ensure a common understanding of the quality of the educational process among professionals with educational qualifications, obtained through various formal routes.

In particular, we discussed the roles of core and assisting practitioners, and existing differences between kindergartens in recognizing their role. In this context, representatives of kindergartens Kekec Grosuplje and Vavta vas presented activities carried out within the project.

Representative of Kindergarten Vavta vas has pointed out:

«The project has a really positive impact on the assisting practitioners. They are equally involved in the process. Both, the assisting practitioners and the core professionals have a word in the PLCs. Assisting practitioners also develop their action plan, reflect their practice, etc. The role of us leaders of the PLCs is to facilitate the discussion in order for everyone to have the opportunity to contribute their views.»

We talked about the importance of finding ways of building a common understanding of the quality between the two profiles of professionals and the responsibility of the management to provide conditions that allow them to connect. A representative from kindergarten Kekec Grosuplje added that it is important to internalize strategies that enable development of a shared understanding. She said:

«This strategy is a reflective conversation in a formed learning community. And that is exactly what should remain after the project.»

Representatives of Kindergarten Kekec Grosuplje described the experience of assisting practitioners in leading PLCs: “

«It was with this project that the assisting practitioners received additional recognition. They also expressed their satisfaction with the fact that they were also involved in activities that contribute to professional development. Initially, they were stressed out when they had to take the lead in their PLC, but increasing experience and confidence from meeting to another, I became easier for them, they are more competent, more courageous. It seems to me that the assisting practitioners have really gained a lot.»

After the initial kindergarten presentations, we continued to discuss how we can support professional and managerial staff in implementing the path of continuous professional development for all. The importance of creating a common understanding of quality and the responsibility of all staff for quality assurance was emphasized:

«I think the role of both professionals (core and assisting practitioners) in the group is to achieve quality, and it is important that this is understood and recognized both at the kindergarten level and beyond.»

(representative of Faculty of Pedagogy)

We talked about the issue of quality in kindergartens and the role of management in providing supportive environments for professionals to be able to pursue quality in the educational process.

We also touched the role of the kindergarten's director in the career development of core and assisting practitioners.

The main reoccurring idea of the whole meeting was recognizing the importance of receiving support from management structures:

«The key to implementing innovation, ensuring that the initiative remains sustainable, are managers.»

(representative of an organization engaged in the development of management in kindergartens and schools)

We agreed, and participants expressed great interest in, to organize another meeting, where we will present the results of the project evaluation.

3.3.3 Some important reflections on the stakeholders' group

Stakeholders have shown great interest in the subject of the meeting and also expressed an interest in another meeting, which was planned to be held in February 2020. At the meeting, possible future cooperation and dissemination were elaborated among the participants.

LESSONS LEARNED

The most important lesson of developing the continuous professional development path was raising awareness on importance of both core and assisting practitioners for quality assurance of pedagogical process. By giving the leading role to assisting practitioners in one kindergarten and giving more voice to them in another, they received additional recognition. The crucial factor for success was the supportive role of the kindergarten management and the participatory approach.

The background consists of several overlapping, semi-transparent orange shapes of varying shades, creating a layered, organic effect. The colors range from a light, pale orange to a deep, vibrant red-orange.

4.

PARTICIPANTS' VIEW ON THE VALUE LEARNING PATH

4. PARTICIPANTS' VIEW ON THE VALUE LEARNING PATH

4.1 VAVTA VAS: KINDERGARTEN KRKINE LUČKE AT PRIMARY SCHOOL VAVTA VAS

The following text represents the result of the analysis of implemented focus groups and interviews with managerial and professional staff of the kindergarten. We² conducted one interview with the principal, one focus group with the leaders of PLCs and another one with the members of PLCs. There were two leaders of PLCs involved in this focus group. There should be a third one, but due to long-term sick leave she did not participate in this focus group. One interviewee is a deputy principal, one interviewee is a core practitioner. There were three core practitioners (CP) and three assisting practitioners (AP) involved in this focus group. According to the function of interviews, this was a mixed focus group. All interviews and focus groups were conducted in the same day.

4.1.1 Participants' view on the VALUE learning paths

Within the VALUE project, the kindergarten saw an opportunity to create a common and continuous professional path for all professionals. The project was in their opinion a way to create a safe space for professional debates, professional networking and teamwork, reflection of their own practice and consequently higher quality of work. All the staff was involved in the PLC – the VALUE learning path – no matter the role (assisting or core practitioner). Based on the interviewees' answers we can conclude that this kindergarten seized the opportunity and gained a lot from the project.

«I hope that these things will be maintained not only in our kindergarten, but that you and us will be able to spread the experiences, ideas and knowledge to as many people as possible, and to move things not only in individual kindergartens, but to move things on other levels as well.»

(Kindergarten's principal)

«I'm so grateful for this experience of being a pilot kindergarten in this project. I would like to continue in this direction and to deepen this experience.»

(PLCL1)

IN GENERAL

During the VALUE project we observed general and specific changes in practice for staff. One of the general changes was also noticed in the interview with the principal, when she stated that she feels that communication among professionals is now more relaxed and that those who were more in the background stepped forward, exposed themselves professionally. She sees a major role in PLC settings, which provide safe space for expressing also doubts and concerns. PLC settings were also the opportunity to get to

2. Interviews and focus groups were conducted on 1st of October 2019 by Mateja Režek and Jerneja Jager. All names of attendees are stored in facilitators office.

know colleagues better and their role at kindergarten.

Many members of staff also stated that they grew professionally through the project and that they gained the confirmation for their work. They also feel more connected with colleagues and they started to think deeper, not just superficially about their pedagogical work. From participating in the VALUE learning path, they get some insights, such as

«There is no way to grow professionally, if you do not reflect on your work.»

(AP3)

PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

In VALUE, professional identity is defined as the core practitioners and assisting practitioners' personal views about themselves as a professional practitioner. It presents how ECEC practitioners with diverse roles and backgrounds collaborate in everyday practice on a regular and continuous bases, hereby valuing staff diversity.

The biggest change in practice in the field of professional identity can be observed among assisting practitioners, since PLC was a new experience for them. At PLC they were able to equally contribute to the conversation, reflect their own and colleagues' practice and also prepare their own action plan for their work for the upcoming month.³

«It means a lot to assisting practitioners that they are together with core practitioners and that they work together on an action plan.»

(PLCL 2)

PLC leaders expressed that already in the past they were not making difference between core and assisting practitioners, but the VALUE project strengthen equal role even more. The opinion is that they are all professionals, and that is how they should treat each other. This equality was improved also by changing some rules (e.g. both, assisting and core practitioners started sharing the duty of morning opening and/or afternoon closing of the kindergarten) and the way of communication with each other (e.g. inviting one professional from the classroom, and not explicitly saying, who - core or assisting practitioner).

No matter what, there are some key differences between core and assisting practitioners, such as preparing documentation and developing of action plans. Documentation is a core practitioner responsibility, but it is still important how much she is including assisting practitioner in decision making and planning.

All interviewees (core and assisting practitioners) feel competent for working with children and parents. They found education very important and they see the difference between level of education between assisting and core practitioners, but they agree that they are improving their competences from experiences and learning from each other.

3. Core participants are usually responsible for documentation and development of action plan in the group.

4. PARTICIPANTS' VIEW ON THE VALUE LEARNING PATH

«I work with a core practitioner, who is very open and I can ask her many things, including about her opinion in certain professional matters. It is good if she knows how things got right. Besides, I believe that core practitioners with higher education level also know more than we, assisting practitioners.»

(AP2)

THE EDUCARE APPROACH

The educare approach is as such defined by the degree to which education and care are treated and understood as integrated rather than separate aspects. Practitioners believe that care and education activities intertwine (e.g. when implementing routine activities, you can always include educational activity).

In terms of educare, PLC's leaders expressed to feel the change especially with core and assisting practitioners, working in 0-3 age groups.

«I think practitioners in 0-3 age groups realised how much they can do also in this groups, and that it is equally important to develop an action plan for work as for older groups of children.»

(PLCL2)

The division of roles according to educare is not determined. Core and assisting practitioners state that there is no difference in their work. They all do

what needs to be done. They also expressed the importance of complementing each other's work: from where the core practitioner ends her work, the assisting practitioner continues (and vice versa) and take the initiative. It is important to observe each other in order to continue and expand the work started. The interviewed core and assisting practitioners think that joint agreement and planning are the basis for a good work, regardless of what kind of activity we are implementing, care or education.

«Our kindergarten is implementing the Step by Step methodology for a long period of time; following this methodology, this division is not so obvious – the roles of core and assisting practitioners are already blurred for a long time.»

(AP2)

However, there exists division of tasks, especially if there is a big age difference between practitioners. Especially with older assisting practitioners, the belief is still present that assisting practitioners are responsible for certain tasks (table cleaning, diaper changing etc.). However, younger assisting practitioners already started to change this mentality.

COLLABORATION

Collaboration between professionals is really important for quality education. Professionals need to collaborate and work together for children's best interest. We asked interviewees to share with us, which are the key aspects of enabling good collaboration between core and assisting practitioner. They pointed out mutual respect, flexibility, talking openly about things that bother someone, honesty, readiness to collaborate, and mutual trust.

There is not only collaboration between practitioners, but also joint collaboration with parents. The core practitioners think that it is also important for assisting practitioners to know what was discussed with parents at the parents meeting. One core practitioner said that she invited her assisting practitioner to these meetings and gave her 3 points from the agenda to present to parents. As we stated before, the core practitioner has the main role to lead the process, but is really important how much and in what ways she is including assisting practitioner into planning, developing, and decision making.

We asked the interviewees about the contribution of the VALUE learning path (PLCs) towards a good collaboration between core and assisting practitioner. They expressed the importance of discussing and developing joint action plans, in order to implement them in the best possible way and in order to gain the best results for children. They also saw an added value of being together at the PLC meeting.

«I find it very important that both of us could participate at the same PLC meeting. We can then discuss together, what we have worked on in the PLC, and we can together identify the best solutions for our group of children. It is great that we are all involved, we can then share the views about the same topic, and can continue discussion at the point where we stopped it at the PLC meeting.»

(AP2)

Through this joint collaboration they also developed the feeling that they can lean on their

colleagues and the impression that they will complement each other's work as everyone has their strengths. The quality collaboration at the parents' or PLC meetings and every day in the group has an important impact also on children and parents.

4.1.2 Changes in practice for children

The interviewees reported that participating in the VALUE learning path actually brought changes in practice for children. The image of child changed and professionals are stating that they changed the attitude towards children, coming from different language and cultural background. They paid more attention to them.

The kindergarten's principal exposed changes in staff's practice for children, such as higher tolerance and looking at things from another perspective. Consequently, the change is visible in different/new activities with working with children.

New activities were implemented also because of developing action plans. These also promoted more goal-oriented planning, which also resulted the change was more visible. Practitioners said that the journey that they walked was good for children, which means that professional development is influencing also children's development.

4. PARTICIPANTS' VIEW ON THE VALUE LEARNING PATH

«Each time we developed an action plan, which we implemented by next PLC meeting. You approached differently, because you had a goal, you knew what you would like to achieve. And then, when you evaluated your work, you got an insight 'Oh, this is what I now do differently, and also children changed.»

(AP1)

«An action plan is a great thing!»

(CP1)

4.1.3 Changes in practice for parents

Kindergarten's principals and leaders of PLCs saw similar changes in staff's practice for children as for parents.

Interviewees (core and assisting practitioners) did not recognize any changes in practice for parents, since this was not so much their focus of interest.

4.1.4 Crucial conditions that affect the successful functioning of professional learning communities

Crucial conditions are referring to the way of cooperation, creating positive atmosphere and being an active cocreator of the meetings.

PLC leaders identify treating all colleagues equally as a success factor in their PLC, as well as giving voice to each and every PLC member.

The interviewees expressed that core conditions, which affect successful functioning of PLCs are collaboration of all, motivation of all involved and active participation. That can be seen in exchange of opinions, exchange of examples of practice, being active and having a wish to collaborate at the meeting.

"It is also important that you say what you mean. If this will not be present and ensured, then nothing will happen." (AP2)

The interviewees gave value also to other aspects, such as nice atmosphere, working environment, ice breakers, and being positive.

The PLC meeting can function if they are goal oriented and if the PLC is a strategy for achieving the set goals.

«Critical friend and the way how you accept that critique is also important. That you understand it as something what could help you increasing your professionalism. We are not ready yet to be critical friends.»

(CP1)

The interviewees exposed also the value of PLC leaders:

«They worked very hard, they were always very well prepared.» And also "If we got out of the way, they always knew how to steer us back to the right path. They did this really good.»

4.1.5 Key conditions that contribute to maintain professional learning communities in the future

The most important condition that contributes to maintaining the PLC in the future is the managerial staff role. They need to encourage, support and enable the process of the PLC. As leaders they also need to stress the importance of professional development.

«I have big aims for professional development of staff, since I am also very active in my own professional development. I wish that all staff get acquainted with the child-centred approach (Step by Step methodology). Besides, I wish that they work also on their personal development, that they gain knowledge about communication, conflicts resolution etc.»

(Kindergarten's principal)

It is not only the principal's role to express the interest in PLC, also professionals' motivation to participate in such meetings is crucial to maintain it. It is important that PLCs are presented as an added value to them and to their work.

The kindergarten's principal also stated that there needs to be sufficient amount of PLC leaders in order to continue with PLC meetings.

4.2 GROSUPLJE: KINDERGARTEN KEKEC

The result of the analysis of implemented focus groups and interviews with managerial and professional staff of the kindergarten is presented below. According to the purpose of interviews, this was a mixed focus group. All interviews and focus groups were conducted in the same day.

We conducted⁴ one interview with the kindergarten's principal and three focus groups with PLC leaders (PLCL),⁵ and separately⁶ with core practitioners⁷ and assisting⁸ practitioners.⁹

4.2.1 Participants' view on the VALUE learning paths

All staff were encouraged to actively participate in professional learning communities (PLC), and they all had responsibility for joint realization.

IN GENERAL

The principal evaluated that staff gained a lot, firstly they deepened their knowledge about ISSA principles of quality pedagogy, and creativity, which was kindergarten's main content direction in the 2018/2019 school year. The principal

4. All the activities were conducted on 4th October 2019 by Mateja Režek and Jerneja Jager. All names of attendees are stored in facilitators office.

5. There were five leaders of professional learning communities (PLC) involved in this focus group. Three interviewees were core practitioners, two were assisting practitioners.

6. The decision to organise PLC meetings separated for core and assisting practitioners derived from the fact that core and assisting practitioners have different time tables, and the management wished to ensure (and also to realize a wish of staff) that not all activities are organised in the afternoons.

7. There were four core practitioners involved in this focus group.

8. There were four assisting practitioners involved in this focus group.

9. This however had implications on staff, for example core practitioners expressed they missed joint staff meetings; meetings, at which both (core and assisting practitioner) from the classroom would be present.

4. PARTICIPANTS' VIEW ON THE VALUE LEARNING PATH

said that also a lot of mutual learning happened, especially when practitioners went to a classroom and observed a colleague's work.

«I wish that the staff talk about their practice openly. Also, about practice, which is not good. By this, we can grow professionally, and contribute to quality improvement. /.../ It is also important that we think about our practice, and that we always search for new ways of working.»

(Kindergarten's principal)

Also, PLCL reported that they gained a lot on different levels: professional and personal. To a question, what they as a PLCLs gained in this process, they expressed self-esteem, professionalism, self-affirmation, and confirmation. They also developed a deeper understanding of the topic they were working on. More specifically they expressed the following:

«For me, this was a great experience. I always keep myself more in the background, but this experience gave me another insight into myself, and also feedback of my colleagues, members on my PLC were positive.»

(PLCL2)

«I am also quieter, calmer, but it seems if you are 'thrown into the water' you swim. This experience meant a personal growth for me.»

(PLCL3)

«It was me who took the responsibility. Before, I always liked that someone was beside me. This time, I wanted to take the responsibility by myself – you have to prepare and believe in yourself.»

(PLCL5)

«I think this was a confirmation for myself and also for members of my PLC that I am able to professionally lead a group of people, which is also a responsibility.»

(PLCL5)

«I received a confirmation for my work done in the PLC from colleagues with whom I do not work so closely. This was a confirmation for my work, I really appreciated it.»

(PLCL2)

In general, all staff gained something along the VALUE learning path, such as new ideas, new insights. They gained a deeper and broader insight into their work, despite the fact that there were many practitioners with many years of experiences in the PLC. They also agreed that they learn all the time.

«In the PLC, you get another perspective about your work, and you get an insight into others work.»

(PLCL4)

They gained another aspect on the importance of reflection of their work. The VALUE learning path also influenced the staff to work more on themselves, and they believe this requires years of work in order to make quality changes. But for now, they were able to connect more with their colleagues and to get to know them in different way. That also enabled them to plan their work better.

«Me and my colleague have a long tradition of working together, but in this way, with very detailed and meaningful instruction how to reflect our work, we did not work yet. It was a very positive experience for us.»

(PLCL3)

PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

By participating in the VALUE project, the kindergarten wished to provide staff – specially assisting practitioners – with new challenges for the implementation of professional practice and

with new incentives for working in the group of children and beyond. They want to increase their (assistants') professional autonomy and competences. According to answers in interviews, changes in perceptions on the 3 VALUE core concepts can be also observed mainly on the level of assisting practitioners, specially about their professional identity. Some of core practitioners also recognised important growth of their assisting practitioners. They exposed also one example of how the PLC encouraged assisting practitioner to become more proactive and start working on an issue on which she usually would not work by herself.

Assisting practitioners reported that they received a confirmation from other colleagues about the work they have done, and this was a confirmation also for them as professionals. They also reported that colleagues in their PLC started to look at them differently, more positively.

No matter the role, assisting practitioners said that their vision is to work in order for children to feel good. Beside that they still think that is important to build on your role, get to know it better and discuss it with your colleagues. The main difference assisting practitioner see between their and the role of the core practitioner in a classroom is on the level of responsibility, which is greater for core practitioners. Other differences are that the assisting practitioner does not prepare any documentation related to work in a classroom, and the core practitioner must prepare a lot for meetings with parents. According to that they think that core practitioners are more under stress. Core practitioners added that they perceive their professional identity in terms of having a lead role in a classroom. They prepare a frame, on which assisting practitioners just 'glue' their own ideas. Sometimes they encourage assisting practitioners to take over some activities, such as the morning circle.

4. PARTICIPANTS' VIEW ON THE VALUE LEARNING PATH

We asked assisting and core practitioners how competent they feel for working with children, parents and co-workers. They all said they feel competent, and started to express how valued and appreciated they feel from the parents.

«In a letter that was not intended to me, a mother state her gratitude to me as well. I feel I am getting the same response from parents as from my co-worker.»

(AP2)

Professionals talked about appreciation from the management staff. They continued that the management know them very well, that they have wonderful relationship, that they communicate respectively and that the management values their work and leaves them open hands to work. However, one of the assisting practitioners expressed that sometimes they feel not to be appreciated enough for the work they do.

«The management also shows us that they care about us: if we cannot attend a certain training because the spots are already filled, they came to apologize personally.»

(AP4)

We were interested also in the level of decision making and how assisting practitioners feel involved (on the level of kindergarten and classroom). All of them said they feel they can contribute when decisions are being made and that they jointly make decisions about activities and plan activities for parents. On the level of

kindergarten, they said that the management organises meetings at which everyone is invited to propose his/her ideas, opinions, proposals. That shows that the management offers collaboration in decision making on the level of kindergarten.

THE EDUCARE APPROACH

Educare approach is not seen as an obstacle, professionals elaborate that they can turn every situation in an educational one. PLCLs' opinion is that care activities are not a hindrance for educational activities. They express that care is also a learning opportunity for children, and that together with learning activities they are always intertwined:

«During their nap time, children process what happened to them during the day, and at the afternoon snack we really talk about interesting things. This can also be part of an educational activity.»

(AP2)

However, there is a difference with younger and older age groups. In younger groups, more time has to be invested in activities of care.

Activities can intertwine if a pedagogical tandem of core and assisting practitioner is functioning well. The practitioners stated that is very important that core and assisting practitioner are not thinking *"Oh, this is your work, just do it by yourself."* Division of tasks among core and assisting practitioner depends on the way how the tandem is functions and how professionals understand their and their colleague role. The misunderstanding of division of role can be done by the core practitioner toward the assisting practition-

er and vice versa. There was an example when the assisting practitioner said to the core practitioner: *"You are a core practitioner, you have higher salary, do it."* But on the other hand, there was an example exposed of how an assisting practitioner felt professionally humiliated: *"I was working with a core practitioner who said to me: 'You change the diapers, you clean the tables, this is for what I have you.' My opinion was never considered."* No matter the role of the professional, practitioners concluded that mutual respect is very important, and that all core practitioners should have an experience of working as an assisting practitioner, and vice versa. In this way, a core practitioner would never humiliate an assisting practitioner, and an assisting practitioner would never underestimate the responsibility that core practitioners have.

«I worked as an assisting practitioner for some years at the beginning of my professional career, and I would suggest this to all core practitioners. This enriched me greatly with new experiences, and I got to know many different ways of working.»

(CP2)

The difference can be seen from the answer of one core practitioner, that in care activities both profiles are equally involved, which she thinks that was not a practice in the past.

COLLABORATION

For quality collaboration some criteria need to be fulfilled. PLCLs think that when working with another professional, empathy is very important. If you are not empathic, profession cannot

help you. Other important conditions that were pointed out by assisting practitioners were communication, respect towards each other, conversation among co-workers, also about unpleasant issues, honesty and mutual support. Core practitioners added also motivation and readiness to work and to collaborate, good compatibility with a co-worker, having the same viewpoint on education and care, having a sense of importance and mutual respect. That can be seen in a way that professional is giving suggestions and ideas (from both sides) and that they are realised, no matter who the author is (core or assisting practitioner). Key condition is also that they are all included in all of the processes, that no one feels excluded.

Regarding the third VALUE core concept, PLCLs expressed that collaboration between core and assisting practitioners also changed in terms of joint planning and professional collaboration regarding tasks division. It could be seen that professionals planned and implemented activities together. They are also making an agreement about manner of work. They are also reporting that they started to talk more with their colleagues. Furthermore, they highlighted the importance of developing action plans for future work, and reflecting the work that was done.

«Now, we know how to evaluate and reflect our work, where we are in our understanding and where we can add more.»

On the other hand, another PLCL said that on those who were already working in this way, the VALUE learning path did not have a strong influence.

4. PARTICIPANTS' VIEW ON THE VALUE LEARNING PATH

4.2.2 Changes in practice for children

The principal thinks that all what they worked on (researching creativity, ISSA's principles of quality pedagogy, conducting peer-learning observations, reflections, evaluations etc.) had an impact also on children. Also, PLC leaders (PLCL), assisting and core practitioners expressed that PLCs did bring changes for children.

PLCLs also expressed that a change of work also influences the work with children and consequently on children. They reported implementing changes in observation of children, the way how they document observations and the way how they conduct a discussion with a colleague after observation. They also recorded children and observed them in videos, and shared the videos with parents, too. They also expressed that in the past, there were no such systematic and regular observations, as well they did not put so much attention to reflection of this process, but this year they have thoroughly devoted their selves to this activity. They also worked on encouraging children's own activity in a way that they ensured material; besides, children were encouraged to use it in a way they liked, they did not direct them in certain activities. Children were also actively involved in creative designing of a learning environment.

«Children were the ones, who took decisions, and not me as an adult.»

(PLCL1)

One PLCL did not recognize any changes in practice for children:

«We are already giving children a lot of choices, and it is difficult to offer them much more.»

(PLCL4)

Assisting practitioners expressed that PLCs brought changes for children. They reported that because of PLC meetings and conversations they had there, they were able to find a successful solution, which had an influence also on children.

«We developed action plans at each professional learning community meeting, and then we implemented it. Of course, this implies changes also for children.»

(AP1)

Core practitioners were also able to find new solutions, since at PLCs they reflected current issues they were facing in their classrooms. At PLCs, staff were encouraged to reflect on their work and to actively search for new activities for children. This resulted in the fact that children received more incentives and they became more creative, as well as they were able to start to work with children in many different ways. Meeting with other colleagues and discussing with them enables them to better direct children, and at the same time to observe and monitor them more carefully. They expressed also that PLCs helped them to face the problem earlier.

«If there were no PLCs, I probably would not have started to solve the problem so quickly.»

(CP4)

4.2.3 Changes in practice for parents

Parents were informed about what teachers and children were doing in the classrooms. Parents collaborated in a way that they helped with collecting and bringing material to carry out the activities, and they gained an insight into how little is needed in order to ensure children's activity and learning.

Collaboration between parents and kindergarten's staff was positive already before the project.

Every year, the kindergarten staff prepare a survey for parents. This year, they included also few questions about their priority task. Parents recognised they did a step forward in this direction, and expressed they should build on that.

Core practitioners did not recognize any changes in practice for parents, since this was not their focus of interest.

Just assisting practitioners thought that parents were not actively involved in activities they were implementing in the classrooms. The interviewees reflected they should also ask parents about their opinion or make a short survey with them. We can speculate that the information about the survey for parents was not discussed also with assisting practitioners or they were not involved in working with parents so much as others.

4.2.4 Crucial conditions that affect the successful functioning of professional learning communities

Practitioners praised the leadership skills of PLC leaders, and also ISSA's principle of quality pedagogy as a guidance for quality improvement in their classrooms. In addition, all PLCLs identified the role of facilitators and management as crucial conditions for successful functioning of PLCs.

PLCLs were not confident at first about leading the group, but after receiving very good, concrete instructions from facilitators and taking great deal of time to prepare on the meeting, they felt better. They reported that meetings with facilitators were really helpful and crucial for quality implementation of PCLs. They also complimented the support from management, which had a role of a mentor. Good example of being successful as a leader of a PLC is also having a deputy leader, The deputy leader helped during the meeting with complementing the leadership of a leader. For example, the deputy leader helped writing down the rules they were developing with members of PLCs in order for the leader to have the opportunity of leading the conversation uninterruptedly.

Successful functioning of the PLC depends on good preparation, support from others and clear instructions. PLCLs added also that the way of structuring the invitation for a PLC meeting had an important impact on the quality of the PLC implementation.

4. PARTICIPANTS' VIEW ON THE VALUE LEARNING PATH

«It was important to invest time in this in order for every member of PLC to understand instructions in the same way, and that they came prepared for the meeting.»

(PLCL3)

Ensuring equal participation of all was also a condition that was exposed. It is important that all PLC members have the opportunity to participate equally, that everyone has the opportunity to contribute to the meeting, and that the ones who are more dominant are politely stopped in order to give the word to those who are shyer, more restrained.

Furthermore, assisting practitioners identified conditions in different areas. Among conditions that are connected with leading a PLC, they exposed relaxed atmosphere, ensured sense of belonging, and knowing that you are welcome to express your own opinion. Moreover, personal conditions that also bring to the success of a PLC, are positive attitude, listening to each other and searching for solutions jointly. On the other hand, also organisational conditions are important, e.g.

«A snack that is provided; it helps with better thinking.»

(AP1)

Likewise, core practitioners expressed there are two groups of conditions: personal and organizational. Among personal conditions, they expressed readiness to collaborate, awareness that we need to grow professionally, and awareness that we have different strong points.

«Professional learning community is like a treasure of diversities, from which we can all benefit.»

(CP1)

Among organisational conditions they exposed working on a joint theme, however every one of them wrote her own action plan. On one hand there was a joint red thread, and on the other we had free hands.

«This is an important condition for PLCs, because it leads you to deepen into an everyday activity, but without structured way of working you would not pay much attention to it.»

(CP4)

Another organisational condition is connected with the timing of the meetings of PLCs (for example, not right after the work since staff needs to pick up their children at school).

4.2.5 Key conditions that contribute to maintain professional learning communities in the future

The kindergarten's management acknowledge that leadership is the key. Leadership give encouragement, motivate staff, proposes structure and present it to staff. They also conclude that the leader has to have a vision, a direction in which he/she would like to lead his/her staff to. The principal also expressed the importance of staff feeling that the principal trusts them.

«It is important to give staff the autonomy. By this, they gain confirmation and start acting proactive, not just waiting for instructions.»

(Kindergarten's principal)

Also, PLCL members expressed that it is the management who give instructions and take the lead. It is on them how they will plan everything and what is their vision.

Conditions which contribute to the maintenance of the PLC are also interest of staff and their wish for growth.

It is also important to stress that PLC meetings were very closely connected with practitioners' practice, they reflected on and expanded the work they are doing in their classrooms, as well as gained new knowledge and developed a shared understanding about a topic they were working on. This was very highly valued.

«It was connected with our direct practice, this is what interests us.»

(PLCL1)

Through the project, they received a model, which they will use in the future. The facilitators presented the structure of meetings that was a novelty for the staff, a challenge. The principal reported that at first, they felt a bit insecure, but then they realized there were so many learning opportunities. The developmental team of PLC leaders will further act as a resource point and broaden the knowledge further on other staff members.

5.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMENDATIONS

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMENDATIONS

5.1 CORE IDEAS FOR BOTH PILOT SCHOOLS

We were able to observe general and specific **changes in practice for staff**. Based on answers of participants we can conclude that they gained strongly on professional and personal level.

The main changes at both pilot sites are:

- ▶ improvement in communication among professionals and consequently more mutual learning happened;
- ▶ colleagues feel more connected with each other (in Vavta vas they also reported developing the feeling that they can lean on their colleagues more);
- ▶ confirmation for professional's work from their colleagues and managerial staff;
- ▶ insight into importance of reflection of their work;
- ▶ improvement in the field of equality of all professional workers;
- ▶ improvement in collaboration between core and assisting practitioner (in Grosuplje it changed in terms of joint planning and professional collaboration regarding tasks division);
- ▶ insight that no matter the role of professional, practitioners concluded that mutual respect is very important, and that all core practitioners should have an experience of working as an assisting practitioner, and vice versa.

According to the three core concepts in the VALUE project the biggest change can be seen

in the field of professional identity, which can be observed mostly among assisting practitioners, but also among core practitioners.

If we compare pilot sites, we can conclude that:

- ▶ division of tasks among core and assisting practitioner depends on the way how their tandem functions;
- ▶ the role of the core practitioner is to lead the pedagogical process, to include the assisting practitioner in decision making, to lead the documentation and to have bigger responsibilities;
- ▶ all interviewees (core and assisting practitioners) feel competent for working with children and parents;
- ▶ practitioners believe that care and education activities are intertwined (in both age groups).

At both pilots we can observed **changes in practice for children**. Professionals expressed that a change of work has impact also on working with children and consequently on children. They reported implementing changes in observation of children, the way how they document observations and the way how they conduct a discussion with a colleague after observation. This was a results of PLC meetings and conversations they had there, which helped them finding successful, new solutions and new activities for working in the group. The PLC also had a preventive role: with professional debates, core and assisting practitioners could find solutions and strategies to cope with certain challenges in advance. Practitioners' practice changed due to implemented action plans. In Vavta vas, the interviewees also reported that the image of

child changed and professionals state that they changed the attitude towards children, coming from different language and cultural background.

On the other hand, **changes in practice for parents** were not recognized.

Professional learning communities (PLC) were recognized as positive and useful path toward changing the quality of practice. PLCs provide safe space for expressing doubts and concerns and the opportunity to get to know better their colleagues and their role at the kindergarten. The PLC setting enables professionals to equally contribute to the conversation, reflect their own and colleagues' practice and also prepare their own action plan for their work for the upcoming month.

The identified **crucial conditions** that affect the successful functioning of the PLC are:

- ▶ motivated and supportive management,
- ▶ support from external facilitators (clear instructions),
- ▶ prepared PLC leaders (good preparation and leading of discussion),
- ▶ motivated professionals in order to professionally grow (readiness to collaborate),
- ▶ clear and structured invitation to PLC,
- ▶ treating all colleagues equally and that all members have opportunity to participate equally,
- ▶ positive atmosphere at settings,
- ▶ timing of the meetings,

- ▶ meetings closely connected with practitioner's practice.

Identified crucial conditions that contribute to maintenance of professional learning communities in the future are:

- ▶ management who encourages, supports, has a vision and enables the process of PLCs,
- ▶ motivated professionals in order to continue the PLC meetings,
- ▶ sufficient amount of trained PLC leaders,
- ▶ continuing the model that they learned during the project.

5.2 CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

Related to the aims of the VALUE professional learning path, which are to strengthen the collaboration between all ECEC practitioners involved in the care and learning process of young children and valuing the diverse background and experiences of these various groups of ECEC practitioners, the general goals that we were following in both Slovenian pilot sites were:

- ▶ Developing a common understanding of quality in the chosen pedagogical field, deepening the understanding of the chosen pedagogical field and changing the pedagogical practice based on it.
- ▶ Developing a professional learning community (PLC) at the kindergarten level, as a professional development path, to promote and strengthen the professional identity of practitioners in contexts of diversity.
- ▶ Empowering the leaders of PLC on the level of kindergarten.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMENDATIONS

- ▶ Since preschool education in Slovenia is organized as a unitary system, the care and education are traditionally understood as a complex joint process, implemented on the level of kindergarten. Therefore, on this level we did not expect closer connection in the terms of practice, but we expected greater awareness of the interconnectedness of both, and in connection with the professional identity of the practitioners, greater insight and awareness of the involvement of each practitioner in a particular part. There is also tradition in strong collaboration (which is also underpinned by the systemic regulation of preschool education), between core practitioner and assistant, therefore, we did not expect any major shifts in the quality of the connections, but we expected even greater awareness of the importance of joint cooperation and an awareness of the contribution of both professionals to the quality of the educational process. The expected results that we aimed to reach at the end of the VALUE learning paths in both sites were strengthened professional identity of both practitioners.
- ▶ At the level of children and parents, due to the intensive work of professionals on deepening specific content areas (creativity and social inclusion), we expected more responsive practices that are tuned to the needs of children and families.
- ▶ In both environments, facilitators worked with the developmental teams, whom they supported in guiding the PLCs on the level of kindergarten. The facilitators supported developmental teams with knowledge, information, strategies for how to set up a PLC and how to interact with a large group to ensure that all achieved goals at the PLC level are maintained (connecting, reflecting, forming a common understanding, changing practice). Facilitators aimed at supporting PLCs leaders in development of competences (knowledge, practices, values) for successful work in this context.
- ▶ In both environments in PLCs core and assisting practitioners were included, which enabled interprofessional learning between them.
- ▶ Throughout the project in both environments, we worked on the sustainability of the project idea and worked to make the PLCs a part of the learning culture of kindergartens.
- ▶ To this end, we organized some meetings with the principal of the kindergarten in Vavta vas (which usually did not attend reflective meetings with the developmental group), where we presented her achievements, impressions, our observations and ideas on how to continue working at the kindergarten level. In Grosuplje, managerial staff was from the very beginning intensively included in the process of developing VALUE professional learning path. These two different experiences of involvement of managerial staff in the process confirmed the importance of support from management structures, as they are the key for implementation of innovations, and for ensuring that the initiative remains sustainable.
- ▶ While planning and implementing the activities, the facilitators considered the context of each kindergarten, so the activities were distinctly tailor-made. We have taken this into account on the level of the organization and implementation of activities (hours and duration of the meetings, size and composition of the groups etc.)

as well as in the content. In both sites the special attention was paid to creating a safe learning environment for professionals. We took care of this at one of our first meetings, when in one of the groups, the facilitators modelled a joint formation of the rules of operation of the group (PLC). The leaders of PLCs were further supported in creating understanding of the importance of creating a safe environment in PLC for professionals, while at the same time, facilitators modelled the creation of such an environment in conducting reflective meetings with developmental groups in both kindergartens. The importance of developing a safe learning environment in the institution was also brought to the attention of the management of both kindergartens - by raising awareness through discussions and through participating in a group, where safe learning environment was modelled.

- ▶ In both environments, it was crucial to engage all staff in the VALUE learning path, and make sure the ownership (of the whole staff) of the project idea was developed, which was achieved by working closely with the management, carefully presenting the project idea to staff, finding connections with professional development activities already existing in both kindergartens, incorporating ideas, and including topics expressed by staff. This was possible by implementing participatory and tailor-made approach.

APPENDIX. DESIGN AND METHODS OF THE FOCUS-GROUP EVALUATION

Methodology

GENERAL INFORMATION ABOUT THE FOCUS GROUPS IN SLOVENIA

With the focus group interviews we explore the effects of the VALUE continuous professional developmental path expressed by the participants.

FOCUS GROUP IN KINDERGARTEN KRKINE LUČKE AT ELEMENTARY SCHOOL VAVTA VAS

Name of the first pilot school	Kindergarten Krkine lučke at Elementary School Vavta vas
Date	1 October 2019
Duration	Focus group with members of PLCs (core and assisting practitioners): 83 minutes Focus group with leaders of PLCs: 55 minutes Interview with the principal: 12 minutes
Name of the interviewer(s)	Jerneja Jager, Mateja Režek

FOCUS GROUP IN KINDERGARTEN KEKEC GROSUPLJE

Name of the second pilot school	Kindergarten Kekec Grosuplje
Date	4 October 2019
Duration	Focus group with members of PLC: core practitioners: 90 minutes Focus group with members of PLC: assisting practitioners: 95 minutes Focus group with leaders of PLC: 80 minutes Interview with the principal: 12 minutes
Name of the interviewer(s)	Jerneja Jager, Mateja Režek

GENERAL INFORMATION ABOUT THE INTERVIEWEES IN SLOVENIA

In the text we use abbreviations AP (assisting practitioner), CP (core practitioner) and M (manager).

The focus group with members of PLC in Kindergarten Krkine lučke at Elementary School Vavta vas was heterogenous, consisting of 3 core and 3 assisting practitioners. According to the function of interviews, this was a mixed focus group. Decision for this kind of composition was based on the fact that also professional learning communities (PLCs) in this pilot school were composed of mixed group of staff (all staff was involved in the PLC – VALUE learning path).

The focus group with leaders of PLCs in Kindergarten Krkine lučke at Elementary School Vavta vas was also heterogenous. There were two leaders of professional learning communities (PLC) involved in this focus group.

There was a third PLC leader in Kindergarten Krkine lučke at Elementary school Vavta vas, but due to long-term illness leave she did not participate in this focus group. One interviewee is a deputy principal, one interviewee is a core practitioner.

We conducted two homogeneous focus groups with members of PLCs in Kindergarten Kekec Grosuplje. There were four core practitioners involved in the first focus group and four assisting practitioners involved in the second one. The decision for this kind of composition was based on the fact that also professional learning communities in this pilot school were separated according to the profession (core practitioners/assisting practitioners).

The focus group with leaders of PLCs in Kindergarten Kekec Grosuplje was heterogenous There

were five leaders of professional learning communities (PLC) involved in this focus group. Three interviewees were core practitioners, two were assisting practitioners. The decision for this kind of composition was based on the fact that also the group of PLC leaders was heterogeneous.

ETHICAL CONCERNS

The project is ethically sensitive as it explores professionals' reflections and descriptions of personal, professional and relational aspects of their work and everyday practice. While this can be considered the project's strength and contribution, it is important to treat the resulting ethical concerns with sensitivity and care.

We ensured such sensitivity by respecting the anonymity of participants and considering other potential ethical issues at all stages of the process – from planning of focus groups to the dissemination of the findings.

We also obtained consent from participants, informing them of their right to withdraw from the interview at any time and guaranteeing that all data and analyses would be anonymized.

CORE QUESTIONS

The focus groups were based on an interview guide exploring the VALUE core concepts, as well as more specific information about participants. The overall themes in the evaluation study formed the basis for the interview.

FOCUS GROUP WITH MEMBERS OF PLC

- ▶ Current perceptions of core practitioners about the 3 VALUE core concepts:
- ▶ professional identity

- ▶ educare approach (and collaboration)
- ▶ collaboration
- ▶ Contribution of the VALUE learning path on joint collaboration between core and assisting practitioners
 - ▶ Changes in practice for children
 - ▶ Changes in practice for parents
- ▶ Crucial conditions that affect the successful functioning of professional learning communities

FOCUS GROUP WITH LEADERS OF PLC

- ▶ Changes in perceptions on the 3 VALUE core concepts and influence of the VALUE learning path on this
 - ▶ Changes in practice for children
 - ▶ Changes in practice for parents
- ▶ Crucial conditions that affect the successful functioning of professional learning communities
- ▶ Conditions for maintaining professional learning communities in kindergarten
- ▶ What professional learning community leaders gained in VALUE learning path? (Changes for professional learning community leaders)

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