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## SUPPORTING THE COLLABORATION BETWEEN ECEC CORE AND ASSISTING PRACTITIONERS

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Experiences from Learning Labs at the three  
Danish pilot schools



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## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Background and aims

This report examines the question: How can professional development in learning laboratories enhance professional identity, a holistic perspective approach to education and care (educare) and collaboration among and between core and assisting practitioners within Danish ECEC settings?

Overall, VALUE aims to support diversity and democracy among children through coordination of pedagogical activities and exchange of experiences among and between those working with the children: both core and assisting practitioners. It is assumed that focusing on the conditions for ECEC professionals' work, such as their expertise and the resources available, will lead to better opportunities for successful collaboration between these groups.

More specifically, VALUE focuses on strengthening collaboration among and between all ECEC practitioners with regard to young children's care and learning, valuing the diversity of their professional backgrounds and experience. Special attention is paid to the role and position of assisting practitioners and to strengthening their professional contribution and identity within communities of practitioners, as well as involving them in professional development and planning. In other words, VALUE is about valuing diversity in care and education, as this aim in the collaboration between all ECEC practitioners will help better address the diverse learning and care needs of children, families and communities.

To fulfil VALUE's aims, continuous professional development (CPD) pathways were developed and piloted in the four participating countries: Belgium, Denmark, Portugal and Slovenia. These pathways sought to enhance professional identity, an educare approach and collaboration (the three core concepts).

CPD pathways with different approaches were developed and tested in the VALUE pilots in the four participating countries. These approaches included learning laboratories, co-creation, collaborative learning and communities of practice, co-teaching and coaching. However, at the core of all these approaches was the idea that CPD in ECEC should not only increase expertise at the individual level but also drive development at a system level.

The Danish ECEC context is characterised by broad agreement at both policy and practice level regarding the importance of integrating care and learning in an 'educare' approach to the pedagogical work in day care for children aged 0-6. This holistic approach to care and learning, which is a rather controversial topic in many other European countries, has been the overall objective for Danish ECEC since the introduction of a national curriculum for day care/pedagogical learning plans in 2004. In Denmark, a conceptual (hierarchical) division between learning and care is not an



issue in the same way as it has been in other countries. In continuation of this, no division can be identified in the workforce profiles of preschool teachers and assisting staff in the Danish context. In many other European countries, teachers have primary responsibility for children's learning, whereas assisting practitioners provide care. This division of labour is not seen in Denmark.

Based on the insights resulting from the VALUE literature review<sup>1</sup>, the Danish VALUE learning paths were developed at three pilot schools in the Randers municipality. These learning paths sought to enhance the educare approach with a focus on including a diverse range of children by enabling positive collaboration and stronger mutual recognition among and between core and assisting practitioners. It was decided to use learning labs as a model for learning and competence development in the Danish VALUE case.

The model included eight monthly cross-institutional workshops, supported by facilitators from the Danish School of Education at Aarhus University (DPU). The novelty of this approach in the context of the Danish ECEC system is that three groups of staff – one manager, one core and one assisting practitioner from each of the three pilot schools – took part in monthly workshops/learning laboratories on an equal footing. This group of nine participants was supported in a facilitated process which included: a. examining their own practice, b. analysing practice based on the concepts of educare and inclusion, c. individual and common reflection, d. developing and trying out ideas for new actions, e. common evaluations and agreeing on the next steps. The process was facilitated by a process consultant and a researcher within the field of ECEC.

## 1.2 Evaluation design

This country-based endline evaluation builds on the baseline study (Jensen et al, 2019)<sup>2</sup>, which identified existing practices in relation to professional identity, educare and collaboration, as well as examining the preconditions for the VALUE study in the four countries in terms of the contexts, cultures and traditions of ECEC. The baseline study was based on a survey distributed in the participating countries and built on quantitative data and statistical analyses. This endline country evaluation builds on a qualitative design, as described in the following.

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<sup>1</sup> Rutar, S., Jensen, B, Marques, A., Cardona, M.J., Van der Mespel S & Van Laere, K, (2019). *Supporting the collaboration between ECEC core and assisting practitioners. VALUE Literature Review in 4 countries (BE, DK, PT, SL)*. Ljubljana: ERI.

<sup>2</sup> Jensen, B, Jager, Hulpia, H. Marques, Cardona, M.J., Van der Mespel S & Van Laere, K, (2019). *Supporting the collaboration between ECEC core and assisting practitioners. Baseline study in four countries (BE, DK, PT, SL)*. Copenhagen: Denmark, DPU. <https://www.VALUE-ecec.eu/?p=3900#top>



## **Participants**

Three schools participated in the Danish VALUE pilot. In total, three managers and 62 staff participated. The three schools catered to, respectively, 57, 98 and 135 children – a total of 290 children. All three schools are located in the same municipality (Randers) – an area characterised as middle-class. One of the pilot schools divides children into age-specific groups; the other two have mixed-age groups of children.

This Danish endline evaluation report is based on data from the learning laboratory workshops (descriptions by the facilitator) and data from the focus group interviews with the staff and managers who participated in LLs regarding their experiences with the three core concepts (see Appendix).

## **Data and analyses**

Data from the focus group interviews were transcribed (25-31 pages per interview) verbatim from tape and analyses were conducted using multi-cycle coding. First-cycle coding processes ranged in magnitude from a single word to a full paragraph and an entire page. In the second-cycle coding processes, as in the first cycle, interviews could be split into longer passages of text, or even reconfigurations of the initial codes; this process linked data collection and analysis of meaning<sup>3</sup>.

To codify is to arrange in a systematic order, to make something part of a classification system, to categorise; the resulting categories are then divided into themes and patterns are identified, both within the single group and across groups of professionals. This analytical approach is based on grounded theory.

To supplement the interviews, logs (18 pages, assisting practitioners; 27 pages, core practitioners; 8 pages, managers) were compiled electronically during the project, providing data on the perceptions of all participants (N=63)<sup>4</sup>.

The analysis in this Danish endline evaluation report seeks to exemplify change processes and their manifestations in the Danish context, as well as emphasising crucial aspects associated with the implementation of VALUE in local contexts.

## **Ethical concerns**

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

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<sup>3</sup> Charmaz (2006). Coding in Grounded Theory Practice. In: *Constructing Grounded theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis*, Chapter, p. 32-72. London: Sage Publications.

<sup>4</sup> Data are stored by the author on safe drives.



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

### **1.3 The structure of the report**

This endline report focuses on the Danish part of the project, which was implemented in close cooperation with three day care institutions in the Randers municipality over an 8-month period 2019-2020.

The report starts with a presentation of the context in which the Danish VALUE CPD takes place: the historical and cultural background of Danish ECEC, the educational backgrounds of ECEC practitioners in Denmark and presentations of the three pilot schools (section 2). This is followed by an overall description of the learnings paths in the Danish context, the theoretical framework, and the process and progress in the LLs as observed by the facilitators. In addition, stakeholders' roles in the project are outlined (section 3). Next, we present the lessons learned from the Danish pilots based on an analysis of the focus group interviews, centred on the three core concepts (section 4). These lessons are important for both policy and practice as there is a need to systematically develop CPD for ECEC practitioners at all levels, and we therefore conclude the report with recommendations based on the Danish findings (section 5).



## 2 The Danish context and the pilots

### 2.1 Historical and socio-cultural development of Danish ECEC

In Denmark, the ECEC system is a unitary system including children from 0-8 years of age. The Ministry of Social Affairs (State) governs the ECEC system. The responsibility of implementation of the national curriculum is placed at the municipality level. The Danish policy and professional development systems (pre-service and in-service) are aimed at strengthening educational attainment and competence development among ECEC staff in order to create improved professional competences in meeting new demands and challenges. The most recent demand at a legal level is “The Strengthened Educational Curriculum” (“Den styrkede læreplan”) (2020)<sup>5</sup>, which also focuses on an educare approach.

There are more public than non-public ECEC providers for institutions, providing ECEC for both younger children (up to two years old) and older children (three to five years old). The total number of institutions for children up to two years old (284 settings) is significantly lower than for the older children (1578 settings) (data based on Statistics Denmark, 2015).

- In terms of the youngest children, under one year of age, less than one-fifth attend ECEC settings (19%).
- Regarding children between one and two years of age, the situation is significantly different, as over 90% of children are enrolled in the ECEC system.
- For three to five-year-olds, the attendance rate is slightly higher (97%).

In total, in 2013, almost all children between the age of one and five were enrolled in some type of ECEC setting (94%) (Data from 2015).

Denmark is characterised by a long-standing unitary system. This is not only in terms of a structural integration of care and learning, but also a conceptual integration of care and learning = educare. The educare approach is inherently typical of Denmark.

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<sup>5</sup> Ministry of Children and Education (2020). The strengthened pedagogical curriculum, Framework and content.





Learning through play is an essential feature of this approach. In general, Denmark and the other Nordic countries are characterised by low power distance, and low hierarchy in decision structures and organisations.

## **2.2 ECEC education requirements in Denmark**

The educational opportunities and requirements for professional staff in ECEC have developed over many years, following the same trends as the common development in the educational system, i.e. stronger academic competence requirements and more educational opportunities for uneducated staff.

The Danish educational system is organised as a parallel system:

- a. The ordinary educational system where students move directly from primary and lower secondary school, through general upper secondary or vocational school and training to different bachelor and master degrees.
- b. The Adult and Continuing Education System provides the opportunity for lifelong learning and further education, starting at all levels from preparatory adult education to master's degrees. In order to be accepted for further education, it is a requirement to have at least two years of relevant work experience.

The term pedagogue in Denmark refers to a specific profession. By taking a BA (EQF 6) in social education, students become pedagogues, a position that includes work with “development and care assignments within the following areas: children and young people (including working in day nurseries, day care centres, preschool classes, recreation centres/school-based leisure time facilities, after-school clubs, 24-hour service institutions); institutions for children, young people and adults with reduced psychological or physical capacities; adults with social problems (homelessness, substance abuse, psychological disorders); family institutions; and child and youth psychiatric hospitals. Additionally, the education leads to qualification for working in the field of crime prevention e.g. in neighbourhoods, as well as working within the Prison and Probation Service” (Ministry of Higher Education and Science, 2014).

2006 saw a political desire to reform the education of pedagogues. The background for the reform was an evaluation from 2003 that documented a need for strengthening both the professionalism of the educated ECEC staff and the learning and competence development of students. As a part of the reform, the new education became a BA in Social Education, EQF level 6, with higher academic and professional requirements than before. In 2011, a monitoring group under the Ministry of Education recommended more intensive (academic) professional content. It is possible to study the BA in Social Education both as an ordinary full-time degree or as a part-time or full-time degree in the Adult and Continuing Education System. It is possible to acquire validation of prior



learning and competences, which can shorten the study time. The pedagogical BA degrees are provided by the University Colleges.

The term preschool teacher here refers to educated staff working in ECEC day care.

The term pedagogical assistant refers to staff educated at level EQF 4. The legal framework in Denmark has no stipulations in terms of mandatory qualification requirements for those working in day care for children up to the age of six, whether centre-based or home-based. Municipalities are required to ensure that day care staff have the 'necessary' qualifications regarding ECEC provisions as part of the task of quality assurance and monitoring, but these requirements are not further stipulated and are the responsibility of each Danish municipality.

There are no qualification requirements for assistants, although those with specific vocational childcare qualifications as pedagogical assistants (Pædagogisk Assistentuddannelse – PAU) are placed at a higher pay scale.

With the new Legislation (2018), professional development courses are offered, financed by the Ministry of Social Affairs. Turning to home-based day care, there are no mandatory national qualification standards, although local authorities may require the completion of various courses. Educated pedagogues fulfil a supervisory and supporting role within home-based day care. Qualification as a pedagogue is mandatory for those working in school reception classes (six-year-olds). Similarly, the first three primary school years (children between the age of seven and nine) are taught by qualified teachers, but pedagogues may perform certain tasks and have a supporting role.

In the ordinary system, the degrees of child care worker and care assistant are offered both as full-time vocational upper secondary education for youths and as part-time adult vocational training/adult VET. As part of the reform of the education for assistants in 2008, the theoretical part of the education was extended from 52 to 54 weeks and the internship to 52 weeks. The changes were part of the political tripartite negotiations, which emphasised the importance of competence development of uneducated staff. It is possible to acquire validation of prior learning and competences, which can shorten the study time. This education is provided by Basic Health Care Colleges and University Colleges.

In the Danish political context, the concept of learning was first introduced to ECEC through legislation governing preschool curricula adopted in 2004 (and revised in 2018) in the form of New Learning Plans. The Strengthened Educational Curriculum (Ministry of Children and Education, 2018)<sup>6</sup> was implemented in August 2018. The new legislation requires a more integrated approach to learning and care, but also the integration of play, inclusion and formation (in Danish: dannelse. In German: Bildung). In this context, formation refers to the child's active participation in the deeper-rooted

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<sup>6</sup> Ministry of Children and Education (2018)



social processes of learning and development that influence the child's personality (Strengthened Educational Curriculum, Masterplan, 2016, p. 17).

In terms of diversity, the Danish ECEC research has emphasised children in socially disadvantaged positions, social heritage and inequality, and studied 1) how everyday life in ECEC influences children in socially disadvantaged positions; 2) how early childhood education and care interventions influence children in socially disadvantaged positions, or how the learning environment could strengthen the learning opportunities for all children as ways to work for equality and social inclusion. Even though this research has improved, it is still an open question whether ECEC can make a difference in relation to social inequality.

## **2.3 Presentation of the pilot schools**

There are three VALUE pilot schools in Denmark, all located in Randers, a small city in Jutland. These introductory snapshots are based on the questionnaire completed by managers, and data refer to survey among managers as reported in the baseline study.

### **2.3.1 History, organisation and diversity**

The preschools have existed for 20, 25 and 46 years respectively. The managers reported that they have experienced important changes in the preschool within the last 3 years, such as employing a new head and merging two preschools. In addition, at one of the preschools, a new nursery group had been established within the last three years. All three managers had experienced changes.

Regarding structural regulations, none of them has structural regulations on child-staff ratios. However, one institution has a very small group with better standards as it a special group. The managers were also asked, "Who establishes the regulations" and responded, 'the municipality' not 'the state' (all three institutions are located in the same municipality). The staff-child ratio at one preschool was around 1:6. At another, the figures were approximately 1:3 for the youngest children and 1:7 for the older children. In a third preschool, the composition of children is evaluated, and set the staff-child ratios are decided in relation to the current group of children.

Regarding diversity, the schools are very different. Children at risk can be defined as children in vulnerable positions, or socially disadvantaged children, as this group of children are often called. The three schools differ in terms of how many children are characterised as socially disadvantaged: one school reports 1%, another 10%, whereas the third school reports that 20% of the children can be characterised as socially disadvantaged. These children are, as shown, defined in different ways; however, in this study we define the issues of diversity as issues that these children meet due to social difficulties stemming from a disadvantaged background with socio-economic



and/or cultural challenges. At two of the preschools, 1% of the children do not speak the national language at home, while at the third preschool, this figure is 14%.

Due to the demographic differences, the pedagogical work with diversity at the three schools differs, but all three schools worked with inclusion during the VALUE pilot period. An overall principle is that regulations on staff-child ratios and other structural issues are regulated at the municipal rather than the national level, and these conditions are therefore the same for the three pilot schools as they are located in the same municipality.

The managers described the work with diversity as a matter of using pedagogical approaches based on a resource perspective and working with inclusion as the most important pedagogical principles. The individual child is seen as integrated in the entire group. The vision is to make sure that every child gets the opportunity to be an equal partner in the social and educational learning environments that are available at the preschool. A participatory approach to the pedagogical work with children is another important principle. A small group of eight children is called a special group in one of the schools, and the children in this group receive special support and are not included in the overall staff-child ratio.

The preschools are located in neighbourhoods characterised as middle socio-economic class. The children reflect the different degrees of diversity of the neighbourhood according to all the three Danish managers.

### **2.3.2 Information about the staff and the managers' reflections on their roles as managers**

The total number of staff is 18 at one school, 20 at the second school and 31 at the third school – a total of 69 staff.

The total number of core practitioners is 7, 11 and 15 respectively. At one preschool, one employee was absent due to maternity leave. In terms of job descriptions, there is no job description for core practitioners in Denmark, nor for assisting practitioners; additionally, there is no job description for the heads.

Two managers are female and one is male, born in 1964, 1968 and 1980. All three have Danish as their mother tongue and are born in Denmark. One manager has been in the position for one year, while the other two have been managers at their current preschools for 5 years – but have also served as heads at other preschools. All three heads were experienced professionals, with up to 13 years of experience in the ECEC, and all have a bachelor's degree as their highest level of formal education.

There is a strong desire to develop and support team collaboration and to use the resources of all employees in the best possible way. There is an understanding that this will create benefit for both the workplace and the children. There is a strong commitment to the institution among all employees. Everyone has a voice and



everyone has ideas and initiatives that are followed up in practice. Everyone wants the best for the children and focuses on the core tasks.

All employees have their own unique perspective in relation to the individual child and groups of children. For this reason, it is important that all employees are included in discussions and contribute to a more nuanced picture of the group of children. Not everyone can, or should be able to, do the same, but everyone contributes to the overall effort and understanding of the child.

Challenges that may be experienced by employees include understanding and interpreting guidelines and VALUEs, as well as, and perhaps especially, eager employees who, with great knowledge and insight, 'forget' to involve their closest colleagues. Some of the answers to open questions in the baseline give an impression of the participants' reflections on the challenges of collaboration and how to deal with them. They suggest, for instance, "workshops with agendas so as to make the best possible use of the time available", and "creating different small groups, where everyone has the opportunity to say something – you can't 'hide'" in a small group.

They also suggest "workshops, forums and discussions that can be facilitated so that everyone is heard" and "work assignments that are delegated to all employees and professional groups". Finally, they express their intention to "remind each other about the fact that the information from the workshops is distributed within the group, and minutes etc. are constantly being updated and express that these procedures can easily be improved".

There is a structural regulation for providing on-the-job support for all professionals at all the three pilot schools.

### 2.3.3 Pedagogical visions

All the three heads report that they have clearly formulated visions; as examples are mentioned:

- *"Every child has the right to be part of a committed community. The task is to make sure that all children get the best opportunities for development, formation, learning and well-being".*

The managers at two of the three pilot schools express that staff are to some extent involved in the development of the pedagogical visions. They participate in workshops and professional days.

The most important aspect of the role as head is to *"listen and help create meaning, to balance between supporting, being curious and challenging attitudes, VALUEs and preconceptions"*. But also, to *"support reflection rooms where everyone can participate and everyone has equal VALUE in a recognizable and resource-oriented approach"*.



In addition, all three heads report that they have a vision in relation to parental involvement: *“That parents are involved in creating an engaging environment for all children”*. The principals VALUE that

- *“The parents influence children’s positive learning, development and well-being and influence the community and inclusion in the preschool”*.

However, it can be challenging: *“Parents may find it difficult to prioritise – many want to [be involved], but it disappears in the everyday bustle”*. We try to cope with this *“by identifying where participation makes sense”*.

#### **2.3.4 Summing up – expectation of the VALUE**

The managers hope that, by participating in VALUE:

- *“We have the opportunity to immerse ourselves in the topic and to create added VALUE – both in relation to inclusive pedagogical work with the children and in using all the resources in a staff group in the best possible way”*.
- *“We will improve a practice that supports collaboration between the various professional groups”*.
- *“The inclusion initiatives launched in the project can show how collaboration is essential for the development and implementation of a changed practice”*.



### 3 The VALUE Pilots in Randers, Denmark

This section first presents the conceptual framework and then the VALUE CPD path implemented at the Danish pilot schools: process, content and progress are examined from the viewpoint of the facilitators.

#### 3.1 VALUE: changing practices in ECEC – conceptual framework for the Danish case

As part of the Danish VALUE case study, we first conducted a review of the state of the art regarding research on interprofessional practice and teamwork in day care, as well as studies of professional identities within interdisciplinary teams. Second, we explored studies focusing on the idea of laboratories for learning and change, and rethinking practices and organisational structures within welfare institutions, with particular emphasis on day care institutions. Finally, we explored the concept of co-creation. Overall, we found considerable overlap in the motives and conditions for working in interdisciplinary teams and in learning labs employing co-creative approaches. In this section, we present the conceptual framework for the Danish case.

##### 3.1.1 Three approaches to learning laboratories

The Danish VALUE model for learning laboratories is based on three theoretical approaches: (1) expansive learning, drawing on Engeström's theory of change laboratories<sup>7</sup> and more recent findings from the desk research on learning laboratories within ECEC; (2) co-creation, drawing on Bason's theory of Mindlabs and innovation<sup>8</sup>; and (3) translation, with the goal of understanding what happens when 'external' conditions and 'local' practices come together – a bottom-up approach where we are interested in this encounter between the two levels, the outer and the local, rather than how the outer is implemented as something initiated from the outside.

This theoretical foundation is further outlined below.

Expansive learning is when the learner breaks with or transcends, and thereby frees themselves from, the framework or conditions established by previous learning : *“Learning is driven by genuine developmental needs in human practices and institutions, manifested in disturbances, breakdowns, problems and episodes of questioning the existing practice”* (Engeström 1998)<sup>9</sup>. Engeström's ideas inspire our

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<sup>7</sup> Engeström Y. (2013). Collective Concept Formation as Creation at Work. In: A. Sannino & V. Ellis (2013). *Learning and Collective Creativity. Activity-Theoretical and sociocultural Studies*. (pp. 234-257) New York: Routledge

<sup>8</sup> Bason, C. (2010). *Leading Public Sector Innovation. Co-creation for a better society*. Bristol: Policy Press.

<sup>9</sup> Engeström, Y. (1998). Innovative learning in work teams: Analysing cycles of knowledge creation in practice. In, Engeström, R. Miettinen, & R.L. Punamäki (Eds.). *Perspectives on activity theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



understanding of what occurs when LLs are established with the objective of problematising existing practice.

By working together to question existing practices and critically reflect on practice, participants' attention is focused on drawing up goals for improvement (see Engeström's model for "Expansive learning actions in the Change Laboratory Process", Virkkunen & Newham, 2013, p. 75)<sup>10</sup>.

In change laboratories, there are seven phases: 1. Questioning existing practice/identifying problems; 2. Analysing practice; 3. Developing a model for causes/solutions; 4. Exploring this model using an experimental approach; 5. Implementation and reflection in order to reach a deeper understanding of inherent conflicts/the possibilities for overcoming them; 6. Producing knowledge, based on this deeper understanding, regarding the need for further change – what direction to take; and 7. A new model for action that can be consolidated and implemented in a broader context: new rules, professional standards, new communities, new divisions of labour/roles.

We are inspired by another approach to LLs developed by Hviid & Plotnikof (2014)<sup>11</sup>, who highlight that "dialogue and collaboration are discursive processes that have a meaning-constitutive and possibility-creating effect" (ibid., p. 380, our translation). This influences both form and content. At the same time, discourses and dialogue among people can both develop and phase out practices and relations between stakeholders in a community. Discourses should be understood as micro-social and linguistically meaning-making. Dialogue between stakeholders can potentially bring about organisational change. It is through dialogue that polyphony can emerge on a number of levels: personal, social and organisational (Hviid & Plotnikof, 2014)

With Hviid and Plotnikof, we can understand intersubjectivity within the social sciences at a basic level as "...the possibility of sharing the knowledge we live in with others" (ibid., p. 383, our translation). Intersubjectivity is relevant when focusing on diversity among stakeholders.

Trust is fundamental in this dialogue, both in terms of trusting the other's assertions and trusting the other to understand one's own assertions. "Trust conquers mistrust" (ibid., p. 384, our translation), albeit not in the sense that differences between stakeholders evaporate, but the that presence of trust in dialogues where stakeholders represent different perspectives allows mistrust to be overcome (Hviid & Plotnikof, 2014). When encountering new problems or tasks, as the VALUE participants do, the subject constantly looks to develop new understandings (Hviid & Plotnikof, 2012)<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Virkkunen, J. & Newham, D. S. (2013). The change laboratory. A tool for a collaborative development of work activities. University of Helsinki

<sup>11</sup> Hviid, P. & Plotnikof, M. (2014): "Styringslaboratoriet": eksplorativt samarbejde om meningsfulde organisatoriske forandringer - Erindringsværkstedet som eksempel. I: P. Melander (ed.): *Laboratorier til bæredygtig samfunds- og lederskabelse - Når lederkompetencer samskabes af mennesker*. København: Jurist- og økonomiforbundets forlag, s. 371-411

<sup>12</sup> Hviid, P. & Plotnikof, M. (2012). *Nye muligheder for Samarbejde i Styring og Organisering af Dagtilbud. En forskningsberetning om mangestemmige resultater fra laboratorier*. København: CBS og Københavns Universitet.





In summary, this way of thinking about learning laboratories as a method for change helps us combine intersubjective and subjective processes in order to understand the importance of:

- Discourses
- Dialogue
- Intersubjectivity and otherness
- Trust versus mistrust
- Ambivalence

The experimental approach that was also part of the laboratories inspired us to supplement the approach to interprofessionality with an administrative and practice-based approach that can strengthen local development, lifting it beyond the individual day care institution and embracing the complexity that recent research (Hviid & Plotnikof, 2014) has shown is prevalent in and affects the ECEC sector. Again inspired by Plotnikof (2016)<sup>13</sup>, we introduced new reflexive knowledge, critically interrogated existing conventions within governance<sup>14</sup> and tried out alternative forms of interaction and development across different levels and transcending compartmentalisation in our approach to interprofessional practice and its design, implementation and evaluation.

### 3.1.2 Co-creation

More recent approaches to learning labs/co-creation (e.g. Bason) were incorporated to expand the LL approach and include all employees in a form of employee-driven innovation in developing for the Danish VALUE CPD paths.

Based on his experiences working with MindLabs, Bason (2010, p. 175)<sup>15</sup> talks about “Co-creation for a better society”.

The process starts by “*thinking in a different way about the problem or by identifying a new opportunity*” and by “*challenging the status quo*”. Bason regards innovation as a result of “*casting away existing mental maps of what we are delivering and how we do it, and replacing them with new ones*” (p. 176). *A kick-off workshop where a broad, diverse group is involved in systematically discussing the problem definition can be very helpful*” (Ibid)

Bason used Mind Labs where he sometimes held two rounds of kick-off workshops: one where the core team tries to come to grips with how they feel the problem could be framed, and one where a larger group is invited to see the problem from other perspectives. In VALUE, we only held one kick-off workshop and then held a series of learning labs for the coordinating team.

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<sup>13</sup> Plotnikof, M. (2016): Letting go of managing? Struggles over managerial roles in collaborative governance, *Nordic Journal of Working Life Studies*, 6(SI): 109-128.

<sup>14</sup> Plotnikof, M. (2016). Negotiating Collaborative Governance Design: A Discursive Approach. *The Innovation Journal* 20(3), 1-22.

<sup>15</sup> Bason, C. (2010). *Leading Public Sector Innovation. Co-creating for a better society*. Bristol: Policy Press.



### 3.1.3 Translation

The third concept used in the Danish VALUE CPD path is the concept of translation. This concept can be relevant in analysing interaction and the realisation of LLs in local day care institutions, as well as when using the experimental approach to strengthen the way that inclusion is implemented in everyday practices as a part of learning processes.

Our goal and vision is to explore whether the project strengthens the communities where participants develop, transform and realise ideas of a better practice through the six joint LLs for the core team (see section 3.2). Inspired by Røvik (2007)<sup>16</sup>, among others, it is possible to examine what happens when the project is transferred from one context to another. Applying a social constructivist approach, multiple translations occur during the process from the original generation of ideas to practice being changed (or not changed).

A 'decontextualisation' occurs, which is a critical phase, seeing as there have been numerous examples where key contextual conditions for a given practice have been successfully established at the local level, only to be lost in the effort to implement changes. Contextualisation also involves certain challenges – what happens when an attempt is made to introduce ideas to a specific organisation? Are they rejected or transformed so as to better fit the local context? It is important to understand that it is not specific knowledge or ideas that are contextualised, but translated ideas/knowledge (Røvik, 2007, s. 23).

The translation of dialogue and communication thereby plays a key role. This question is also inspired by the desk research (Jensen, 2018)<sup>17</sup> conducted for the VALUE literature review.

### 3.1.4 Summing up

We have here provided a framework for developing the Danish VALUE model for learning labs. The study of these learning labs examines the processes (section 3.2 and 3.3), analyses focus group interviews (section 4) and explores how this approach to LLs and co-creation contributes to: 1) strengthening professional identity, 2) working with a new educare approach to inclusion and 3) strengthening collaboration between participants, whether early childhood care and assisting practitioners or managers.

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<sup>16</sup> Røvik, K.A. (2007). *Trender og translationer. Ideer som former det 21. århundredes organisation*. Oslo Universitetsforlaget AS.

<sup>14</sup> Jensen, B. *Aarhus University, DPU, September 2019. Desk Research for the Danish VALUE Case*.



## 3.2 The Danish VALUE CPD Learning labs – Facilitators’ description

### 3.2.1 Initial goals of the VALUE learning path

The Danish Learning Lab approach is, as described, theoretically and empirically inspired (section 3, 1). As it appears in the previous text (section 2), there is a tradition in Denmark (and other Nordic countries) for VALUEs such as democracy, low power distance, trust and, at least to some extent, equality between different professional groups in workplaces. There is also, especially in the tradition of *Folkbildung*, study associations, etc. a very long Nordic tradition for experience-based and dialogue-organised learning and competence development in study, learning and research circles. Currently, there is even an increasing interest for developing a model for cross-professional, practice-oriented learning in many companies. On this background, the idea of Learning Labs taps into a known democratic tradition with the purpose of creating sustainable solutions.

### 3.2.2 Process and content evaluation Denmark Oct.-Nov. 2019

#### The data used for evaluation of the Danish case

In the process and content evaluation the data used are:

- The conceptual framework (see section 3.1)
- Minutes from initial workshops with local partners, facilitator planning workshops, LLs and stakeholder workshops
- Written programs for all LLs
- Minutes from all LLs by Maria Marquard, Nina Tange
- Minutes from group work/participants
- Observations from two LLs by Nina Tange
- Tasks/homework between the LLs
- Described experiments by participants

#### Methods:

The key points from the conceptual framework are clarified

Plans are used to describe content

Concrete observations and participants’ comments from minutes and observations are chosen according to the three goals of VALUE

Quotes are anonymised and chosen as representative of more common perceptions

#### Specific work with the Learning Path

With a starting point in the aim of the VALUE path “high quality ECEC through continuing professional development” by

- a. Strengthening the professional identity,
- b. Strengthening an educate approach,



c. Strengthening collaboration that VALUEs diversity in staff<sup>18</sup>

The involved researcher and the facilitators discussed and decided some fundamental principles for the practical work in Denmark.

A participatory, bottom-up approach in the work was decided in order to strengthen participation, responsibility and relevance for the participants. The perceived goal was to enable the participants to develop sustainable solutions and further collaboration between different staff.

Working with open dialogue and common responsibility for the overall planning already in the initial phase was thought to ensure local responsibility for the continuous process and information.

An overall common topic for CPD, “Inclusion of diverse children in the day care institutions”, was suggested. The reason for suggesting the concrete topic was that “inclusion” is highly topical in the Danish discussion of ECEC, and it might be rewarding to relate to “inclusion” of diverse staff in the CPD

### **Principles for reaching the goals**

Clarifying pedagogical concepts and deciding pedagogical principles for the work was an important part of the planning and became the basis for the practical work. The theoretical framework<sup>19</sup> (see section 3.1) is fundamental for the concrete pedagogical choices made.

Here, we offer some key points based on the conceptual framework presented in section 3.1:

1. Inspired by Engeström’s concept of expansive learning and change laboratories, the practical work was decided to have a strong participatory approach. The participants decide what genuine challenges in their own practice they want to work with, how they want to work and how to evaluate their work. The model of Learning Laboratories inspired by Hviid and Plotnikof was used in the ECEC sector, and we used this approach in order to emphasise the aspect that many actors with different perspectives were brought together to collaborate despite various professional prerequisites.

2. A model for collaborative/co-created learning inspired by Bason was decided to be the way of working with the participants at workshops, defined as Learning Labs (LL). Framing and facilitating a learning process with dialogues between diverse perspectives of the participants, challenging each other and the status quo and identifying challenges and new opportunities became pivotal in planning the process.

3. Translation, inspired by i.e. Røvik, was the third concept chosen to increase the possibilities for implementing both new professional knowledge, insights, concrete ideas and the structured co-created learning process (LL) in the participants’ own

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<sup>18</sup> From Background Information on the final VALUE Evaluation. Baseline.

<sup>19</sup> Jensen, Bente, VALUE: Changing practices in ECEC through Learning laboratories – a Danish case, 12/12/18



practice. It was important to ensure the translation between the joint LL and local LL through a planned structure.

Planned homework became part of the project. Between each LL, the participants had different tasks to work with in their own institutions. An 'experimental' model developed in a former project in Randers framed the homework. The perceived goal was to enable the participants to develop their own work and collaboration through the acquisition of a method to observe, analyse and develop reflected actions. The participants decided topics and content.

### 3.2.3 Concrete descriptions of how the VALUE learning paths were set up

#### Initial stage

Who was involved in the initial stage?

##### From DPU/AU

A team of researchers and two DPU special consultants

##### From the municipality and the day care institutions

A representative for the municipality and 3 leaders from 3 day care institutions were involved in the preparation and planning of the VALUE project.

All employees participated in the kick-off meeting

Due to the determined concepts, involvement of all participants and a bottom-up approach were underlined from the beginning of the planning process, both at a structural political level (the municipality), the organisational level in each day care institution (the leaders) and the practical daily work level (pedagogues and pedagogical assistants).

In the initial phase, local actors were involved as follows:

- a. Three-day care institutions in a municipality participated in VALUE. In the preparation phase, representatives responsible for day care in the municipality and BJ decided the overall frameworks for the project.  
Three leaders for the chosen institutions were involved in the planning at the overall level. Mail correspondences and phone workshops led to a physical meeting in their hometown between the three leaders, BJ and MM. Mutual expectations and realistic opportunities were clarified, and the overall practical plan for the project was decided (e.g. time schedules, dates).
- b. The VALUE project, purpose, ideas and concept were presented and discussed at a *kick-off meeting* with all employees in the three-day care institutions. Expectations and possible ideas for content were discussed. At the kick-off meeting, all employees in the institutions received the same information and had the opportunity to raise question, discuss the project and confirm their participation.
- c. After the kick-off meeting, the three institution leaders and their employees chose three participants (trainees) from each institution to participate in the joint LL. To ensure the required diversity, each institution was to be represented by



different groups of professionals – a leader, an early childhood educator with a BA degree and a childcare assistant.

- d. In the preparation phase, the trainers met and discussed the overall plan and content with the leaders of the institutions twice; in addition there were telephone workshops. Agreements were made on concrete issues like time schedules, meeting places and choice of participants. The learning process and the roles of the leaders were discussed. It was decided that when the trainees at LL workshops worked in cross-institutional groups, the leaders would be a group of their own.

#### Considerations and pedagogical choices – an important foundation for VALUE paths

Involving the day care leaders was thought to strengthen the implementation of the VALUE work at the organisational level. The leader's role is pivotal in terms of allocating work time, ensuring local discussions and involvement and supporting initiatives.

At the kick-off meeting, a participatory and dialogue-based form provided both information and response through facilitated discussions. The following questions were raised to be discussed in groups: a. if they had former experiences with structured collaboration in this form (LL) and if they had concrete questions to the form. B. If the suggested topic "Inclusion" is relevant and present in their daily work, and in what way. C. to give concrete examples (1-3) on dilemmas and challenges related to inclusion in their daily work.

The second group work session raised questions on the implementation of common LL to local LL and on the experimental model organisation of the work.

#### The implication of the initial work for the final design of VALUE paths

The solid initial work turned out to be valuable for the continued process, especially at the structural and organisational level. As the leaders were involved in the planning, they committed to the project, and had permission and support from the municipality. Before the first LL, the leaders presented the VALUE project in their institutions. In each institution, the employees chose the pedagogue and pedagogical assistant who should participate. All employees received preliminary information about the project. Through the initial work, we clarified and created the overall frames and goals together with the responsible local stakeholders (municipality and leaders). We clarified the professional preconditions of the participants and their former experiences with different kinds of collegial collaboration. Participants agreed on "Inclusion of diverse children" as the overall topic for the work. "Inclusion" in relation to diverse groups of children, to the parents and to new colleagues was regarded highly relevant in the daily work, even seen as the foundation of the pedagogical work. The importance of implementation was emphasised. The experiment model was chosen and regarded as an opportunity for more structured and well-documented work. The model became the structure for the progression of the CPD path.



## **Concrete information on the VALUE Learning path – defined as Learning Labs**

### **Who was involved?**

From each of the three institutions participated:

1. 1 Leader
2. 1 Pedagogue/kindergarten teacher
3. 1 Pedagogical assistant

From DPU, BJ, MM and partly NT participated

### **Workshops and overall pedagogical approach**

As mentioned above, the Danish VALUE project had a clear theoretical learning approach, which was the foundation for planning both initial work, the kick-off meeting with all involved and 6 Learning labs, each lasting 4 hours, for the trainees (approx. 1 LL pr. month) and an 'wrap-up' meeting for all involved. Between the joint LLs, the trainees worked in their own institutions with concrete activities. They involved colleagues in a local LL or similar collaboration/co-creation on identifying, analysing challenges and developing new ways of handling challenges.

The overall didactical structure for all the activities (kick-off, LL, wrap-up) more or less followed the same structure:

1. Starting with the participants' experiences, knowledge, insights, thoughts and questions since last LL
2. Co-creation of new perspectives, new knowledge raising new questions and issues for further work in own institutions
3. How to implement and experiment with the new knowledge in own practice until next LL.

### **Collaborative work approach**

In each LL, the work alternated between plenary discussions, individual reflections, joint institutional group work and group work with colleagues from participants' own institution. Mostly planned like this:

- a. Plenary, facilitated dialogues –participants' thoughts, questions and experiences since last LL
- b. The first group work session – joint institutional groups for pedagogues and pedagogical assistants, and one joint institutional group for leaders  
The aim was to provide joint institutional inspiration at both a practical and organisational level
- c. Facilitated plenary presentations – ensuring that the voices of all participants were heard
- d. The second group work session – with colleagues from own institution (including the leader). The aim was to bring and transform common inspiration back to concrete activities in participants' own institution
- e. Facilitated plenary presentations and final discussions.

There was one or two theoretical presentations at each LL.



Between the LLs, the participants had 'homework' (concrete tasks) related to the process to be carried out. The work followed the progression in the experiment model.

### Facilitators' role

We were two facilitators at all LLs. One facilitator primarily facilitated the process and ensured that all voices were heard through e.g. taking rounds on the topics discussed in common, compiling results from the discussions, etc.

The other facilitator gave research-based common presentations on different relevant topics that supported the process. The research facilitator created and presented the homework tasks.

The facilitators never gave individual 'good advice' or guiding related to personal or concrete issues, and they did not participate in the group work. This was a very clear and important choice. By giving common presentations but not individual advice or comments, you ensure a common rather than individual perspective on the work and development. The overall qualifying presentations offered inspiration and new perspectives on different challenges, concepts or methods. In groups, the participants related the new knowledge to their own practice. In this way, the concrete choices and ideas, and the responsibility for the development work, remained a participant responsibility. If the participants had not brought anything to the LL, had not suggested and worked with development tasks, nothing would have happened.

This bottom-up approach caused some insecurity and confusion in the beginning. The participants expected us to give more concrete tasks and guiding. It required 1-2 LLs before the participants appreciated and really took responsibility for the work. At the last LL and at the end of the process, many participants expressed that they have grown with the tasks and were proud of their work and committed participation.

### **The concrete content of the 6 LLs**

#### **LL 1. 21.11.2018**

1. In joint institutional groups + a leader group: reflections on own practice related to inclusion – how can it be improved?  
Common understanding of the concept inclusion, and of how to work. With it.
2. Theoretical, research-based input related to and compiling participants' preunderstanding – a presentation by BJ: Research on inclusion and diversity in ECEC.
3. In own institutional group incl. leader: defining the concrete dilemmas and topics most important to work with in relation to inclusion and diversity.
4. Presentations of questions for analyses and methods.
5. How to define and choose concrete areas for analyses and development in own institutions; how to involve colleagues.

### **Homework for LL2**





Go back to your practice and look with 'different eyes' at the challenges/issues you find related to inclusion in your institution. Choose 1-2 issues you want to analyse.

### **LL2. 16.1.2019**

1. Plenum – what do you bring from 'home' (own institution) to this LL?
2. In joint institutional groups: reflection on concrete VALUE work done in own practice since LL1. What did you observe?
3. Common discussion and research perspective on what approaches to inclusion are visible in the observations.
4. In joint institutional groups: what kind of activities would be relevant related to the observations and analyses?
5. Presentation of the experiment model. From observation/analysis to action. Three perspectives on how to look at inclusion. Key question: what excites you? What strengthens your enthusiasm?
6. In own institutional group incl. leader: how to implement the experiment<sup>20</sup> model in own institution.

### **Homework for LL3**

Start working with the experiment model in own institution. 1. Issues/challenges. 2. Goals based on issues.

Start and carry out the first experiment.

### **LL 3. 20.2.2019**

1. Plenum – what do you bring from 'home' (own institution) to this LL?
2. In joint institutional groups: local work with the experiment model. Presentation and sharing of thoughts and reflections on concrete experiment work on the playground, with focus on inclusion and diversity. What did you do – and how?
3. In joint institutional groups: what problems and challenges became visible through the analysis? The idea of learning labs is that the participants work problem-oriented. Which problems and challenges in practice, in relation to inclusion and diversity, did you decide to work with; what is the goal of your work?
4. Presentation of what is a problem? Compiling the different problems, challenges and goals and relating them to theory.
5. In own institutional group incl. leader: concrete planning of the work. Who will do what and when?
6. Introduction of the homework, "Carry out, describe and begin the evaluation of the first experiment."

### **Homework for LL 4**

How do you accomplish, describe and start evaluating your first experiment.

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<sup>20</sup> See appendix.



#### **LL 4. 6.3.2019**

1. A round – what happened since last LL; questions, etc.?
2. A short introduction/presentation – the double aim of VALUE (working with diversity among professionals might improve the educational work with inclusion and diversity among children), related to specific parts of the experiment.
3. In own institutional group incl. leader: preparing the presentations of the experiments done in each institution.
4. Each institution presents their experiments.
5. In joint institutional groups: what inspiration did you get from the presentation and the BJ introduction?
6. Presentation: “From goal to Evaluation”.
7. In own institutional group incl. leader: which evaluation methods will you use, and how will you further develop them?
8. Homework: how will you include all colleagues in the evaluation?

The participants asked for information about the whole EU VALUE project – to see their own work in the bigger context.

#### **Homework for LL5**

Consider your evaluation methods. Discuss how everybody in your institution participates in the experiment – from goal to evaluation.

#### **LL.5. 24.4.2019**

1. A short round – what happened since last LL? Questions etc. Presentation of the programme for the day.
2. Presentation (BJ) of the EU VALUE project, the Danish case/characteristics related to the EU VALUE, questions and comments
3. Presentation on evaluation: ‘bridge-building’ to the goals and aims – educate, collaboration, professional identity, the concrete work, how to document, look for signs, etc.
4. Group work in own institutional group incl. leader: discuss the three evaluation goals; what did you look for, what did you see?
5. Presentations from the groups on evaluation of educate, collaboration, prof. identity
6. Introduction (BJ) to group work 2: Implementation – how to continue the work.

#### **Homework for LL6**

Create a model for how you will continue the work, and how to involve your colleagues in developing inclusive learning environments for children. Write about the evaluation. Fill in and send the experiment models for the experiment you have done.

Helping questions:

- How do you collaborate on the homework?



- Who was involved?
- What did you do?
- Who did what?
- When (in which workshops? In which activities?)
- What was eye-opening related to collaboration and inclusion?
- What were the challenges related to collaboration and to children and inclusion?

#### **LL 6. 21.5.2019**

1. Welcome. Round and purpose of the day.
2. Group work in own institutional group incl. leader: looking back – what was done, who did what? Describe the collaboration. Implementation/development of practice.
3. Presentations from groups – what has been eye-opening related to what has changed a. collaboration, b. inclusion of children,
4. Common discussions. What are the key takeaways? What are common key issues? What are different key issues?
5. Group work in own institutional group incl. leader: what did VALUE cause? Conclusions, future perspectives.

#### **Wrap-up meeting 20.6.2019**

For this meeting, both the VALUE participants and some of their colleagues were invited. (Due to i.e. economy, it was not possible for all employees to participate). The purpose was to sum up and discuss the VALUE project, from goal to results, in a future-oriented perspective.

1. Welcome. Presentation, the purpose and content off the meeting, etc.
2. A short look back – the goal and expectations from stakeholders, participants, etc. BJ.
3. The concrete content and way of working by two participants from each institution.
4. Group work on new insights and knowledge about the three topics: collaboration, educare, professional identity. Special focus: what did the children get out of it – how did the children benefit from VALUE?
5. Presentations from groups.
6. Summing up the group work in a future-oriented perspective including comments on the baseline study, sustainable innovation, dissemination of the way of working and experiences.
7. Thank you and goodbye.

### **3.3 Observed improvements – Summary**

#### **Strengthening professional identity**



We observed a remarkable shift in mind-set, especially among the pedagogical assistants. They started out quite reserved at the first LL, making few contributions to common discussions, keeping their heads down and letting the others talk, and were clearly quite uneasy when they were ‘forced’ to say something. But their attitudes already began to change by the time of the second LL. They had been very engaged in trying to observe situations and challenges in the playground. “To observe” and the question of “what is an observation”? turned out to be a challenge for many participants. Especially for the pedagogical assistants, but also for core practitioners and leaders, it was a real eye-opener how difficult it is to find the time to observe and analyse before taking action to solve a problem.

This was a key experience for the pedagogical assistants and pedagogues, and to some extent also the leaders. Later in the process, participants expressed that they experienced improvements during the process, e.g. expressed as:

*“... to observe makes things visible and measurable, lifting us from “synsninger” (non-reflected evaluations) to reflected observations and from there to reflected actions”.* They became aware of a (possibly) habitual professional characteristic for practitioners – acting immediately to address concrete situations.

One participant even raised the question:

*“Is “Handletvang” (the compulsion to take (immediate) action) the biggest obstacle [preventing us from] acting according to our intentions?”*

We regard this as a key insight with regard to CPD. When looking for sustainable and nuanced solutions to challenges encountered during everyday practice, it is important to learn how to observe and analyse perspectives from all involved parties before deciding on an appropriate course of action. It can be a challenge to articulate one’s actions, especially for assisting practitioners, and learning to do so is a crucial part of continuing professional development (CPD).

From LL2 onwards, everyday practice became an increasingly important part of the VALUE CPD. We saw the pedagogical assistants ‘holding their heads high’, playing an increasingly active part in group discussions, introducing concrete observations from their daily work and suggesting ideas for new actions. They felt that VALUE’s foundation in practice enabled everybody to make a valuable contribution and gained the courage to do so. In addition, we saw pedagogues and leaders pay more attention to the perspectives of assistants and provide the space for everyone to participate.

Throughout the LL process, participants expressed that they were inspired and engaged by the positive results of their new initiatives, by acknowledgement from colleagues, and by being given responsibility. The increased awareness and new practices stimulated new ideas, taking the initiative, etc. – a self-reinforcing positive development process.

This change was recognised both by the participants themselves and by their colleagues. We heard many comments on this subject. For instance:



*“X, a pedagogical assistant, had previously struggled with collaboration; she was regarded as a pedagogical assistant. Now, through VALUE, she has something concrete to bring to the table”.*

*“X. is a good illustration of how her identity has been enhanced. She now starts more activities on her own initiative. These actions are a sign of greater self-confidence and self-awareness”.*

This quite remarkable shift in mindset is probably caused by a number of factors. We noticed greater self-awareness, a more reflected approach to challenges and more active participation were supported by the structural framework, experimental model, etc. Participants stressed the importance of *being given* ownership and genuine responsibility. Being given genuine responsibility for tasks and projects, being listened to at staff workshops, and having colleagues reach out to them with questions all contributed to a sense of acknowledgement.

The changes affected all staff. The pedagogical assistants participated more actively in the various processes surrounding professional practice. The pedagogues and leaders became aware of the VALUE of input from assistants and the importance of making ‘room’ for them in discussions and work. They allowed more room for the assistants and they listened. Some used techniques like turn-taking during workshops and allocating tasks during presentations and in everyday practice.

In the final LLs, where the concrete experiments from each institution were presented, some of the pedagogical assistants were clearly not used to presenting for an audience or standing up talking in a group. Nevertheless, they gave well-prepared presentations with encouragement from their leaders and colleagues. Their nervousness was articulated and discussed as a challenge to overcome. All three participating pedagogical assistants expressed that it was new for them to make such presentations and that they would not have done so had it not been for VALUE.

### **Strengthening the educare approach**

There were many concrete observations from the playground describing qualitative improvements resulting from the educare approach, and useful reflections, for instance concerning the impact of adults’ behaviour on children: when the adults ‘just’ walk around, the children just walk around, but if the adults are occupied with practical matters, the children join in or start activities by themselves.

Realizing the importance of such shared observation processes and subsequent shared reflection motivated the participants to train techniques for observing colleagues without making normative judgements, visit each other’s classrooms, and find ways to introduce and discuss the work in order to strengthen the educare approach.



They were inspired by the effect and results of the development work in relation to inclusion, e.g. observing that children's curiosity and vocabulary grew, that there were fewer conflicts among children and that the children were more likely to play together. Especially the assisting practitioners experienced the importance of being more aware of the child. The effect of not being aware of the child became very clear to the participants. They changed the structure of practice in the playground in order to give staff more of an opportunity to be present during activities aimed at increasing the inclusion of all children.

Through the experimental work that was a key part of the CPD activities, participants at all three institutions began to focus more on the children's perspectives. They planned and adjusted activities according to the children's comments, leading to greater variation in practice. Some even planned to carry out interviews with children to further develop activities.

The leaders and, to a lesser extent, the pedagogues experienced and expressed that VALUE contributed to higher ECEC quality in terms of inclusive learning environments, benefitting both children and employees. A few quotes illustrate this:

*"It has increased the professional foundation for all".*

*"A lot of children have benefitted from this approach – because we have got another perspective on our collaboration. It's possible for the adults to be more present as we organised the playground activities in another way so that no individual child walks around alone".*

### **Strengthening collaboration that VALUES staff diversity"**

As facilitators, we noticed a quite remarkable change in the collaboration from the first LL to the last LL. During the process, activity levels became more equal among all participants. The more the experimental model focused on concrete tasks and activities within everyday practice, the more everybody had relevant contributions. Pedagogues, pedagogical assistants and leaders all participated in both discussions and presentations of the experiments. All worked with "The inclusive playground" at their own institution.

However, there was still a tendency when working in institution-specific groups for the leaders to control and sometimes dominate discussions.

The participants noticed changes in individual activity levels and the amount of collaboration – as expressed in the following quotes:

*"There are more activities and action among pedagogical assistants, and they are now contacted by other colleagues"; "There is more confidence in and awareness of our own competences".*

Collaboration between different classrooms and institutions also increased. This was considered professionally and personally rewarding and seen to qualify ECEC activities. The collaboration helped overcome challenges such as a lack of time,



sharing and delegating tasks and responsibility, and involving and using everybody's competences to improve the work with children.

Joint reflection processes including all employees were mentioned as particularly important in improving the quality of measures to promote the inclusion of all children.

*As one participant stated: "Collaboration is the means to create more time for educare."*

Communication between staff improved and a more diverse group of staff played an active role.

All participants mentioned remarkable changes in collaboration, while some were surprised that things could change so quickly.

They recognised the importance of developing a framework enabling new collaboration to emerge and develop. As one said:

*"It is important that we have a structure that ensures that everybody can have their say. Before, some people just sat at the workshops without sharing their knowledge. Now we have created a structure so everyone shares their professional reflections".*

### **3.4 Comments on future work and implementation**

The participants really appreciated the VALUE CPD work and results. In the final discussion, they expressed that they would like to maintain the new insights and practices. Several comments and suggestions came up, e.g. to have rotation between tasks and roles and have a system to ensure delegation.

#### About the way of working

We as facilitators also observed a change, from insecurity, doubt about what 'this' was about, questions (why don't you tell us what to do?) to active participation and more self-confident participants, especially pedagogical assistants and pedagogues, quite proudly sharing concrete experiences and work.

#### **Conditions**

Several conditions are described earlier in this text. Therefore, just brief comments on the concepts mentioned:

#### **Engagement**

- We observed high engagement through the whole process. This was especially observable in relation to the experience of acknowledgement through being seriously involved and heard, working with genuine challenges.
- The engagement increased because the participants chose and worked with genuine challenges from their daily work. They decided the content and focus of the work.



### **Leadership**

- It was of great importance that the leaders were engaged in the whole CPD work. They participated actively in all LLs and ensured the organisational framework for carrying out the CPD work in the institutions.
- The facilitation of the work, especially in LL and workshops, ensured the framework, a process allowing everybody to express themselves and be heard.
- Maybe you could say that the participants took ownership of their own part of the work.

### **Ownership**

- The bottom-up participatory approach gave both the individual and the common participant group the responsibility and ownership of the content and work. This was decisive for the engagement and quality of the work done in CPD.

### **Facilitation**

- Most important regarding facilitation was to ensure the framework for the process and to really give the responsibility to the participants –facilitate the process, be flexible and structured at and the same time as not taking over the responsibility.
- To have facilitators with both process and topic knowledge is crucial.

### **Safe context**

- To ensure the group process and most of all give acknowledgement by serious involvement in daily work. The experiment model was a common structure for all.

### **Time for planning and reflection**

- It was clear during the process that time for planning and reflection was a challenge in the daily work for the participants. It was important to create structures that made this possible.

### **Tailor-made.**

- We did not use tailor-made content in CPD but introduced a framework allowing the participants to create their own solutions fitting the situations and contexts. The guideline for the framework was inspired by Engeström (mentioned earlier in the concept paper).

### **What after the project?**

- There is not an evaluative follow-up on the project. We expect and hope that individual and common development will be sustainable.





### **Some important reflections on the VALUE path**

#### Make it work

- The theoretical foundation with a clear bottom-up and participatory approach giving the responsibility to participants was crucial.
- The experiment model strengthened the implementation, training and focus on factors important for a reflected way of working: observation, analysis, reflection, action and evaluation.
- Important that VALUE was supported by the municipality and leaders.

#### Obstacles

- Sickness among employees, change in child groups, and lack of time and work pressure hindered and extended some of the CPD work in institutions.

## **3.5 Topics related to the stakeholder group**

### **Aim of the stakeholder group**

The aim was to inform about and disseminate the VALUE CPD paths at a national level and among policymakers in order to help develop possible partnerships and further implementation of the project findings. The invited stakeholders therefore represented social partners (such as trade unions), municipalities, NGOs and other organisations with political influence, and educational institutions:

1. A representative from the National Board of Social Services
2. Chief advisor, FOA (trade union)
3. Head of department for children and schools, Local Government Denmark (KL), which is the association and interest organisation of the 98 Danish municipalities (municipal political level)
4. Representative from the Danish Evaluation Institute, EVA (research)
5. Training manager, University College Copenhagen
6. Consultant/advisor, BUPL (trade union)
7. Advisor, Børns Vilkår (NGO), association for children's welfare
8. Two leaders from the involved institutions participated via Skype.

### **Involvement and work with the stakeholder group**

Two workshops – a presentation meeting and a mid-term meeting

- At the first meeting, the intention was to inform about the VALUE project and process, discussing and acquiring alternative perspectives on the VALUE CPD paths.
- The content was discussed with the VALUE participants and BJ had preliminary telephone dialogues with the stakeholder group.
- The stakeholders were very engaged in the Danish VALUE CPD approach as a possible model for continuous competence development for ECEC staff.



- At the second meeting, possibilities for future cooperation and possible dissemination strategies were discussed.

### **Observed improvements**

- The stakeholders were excited by the participation of local leaders via Skype. They invited them to take part in a study trip with representatives from KL.
- The facilitators MM and BJ + the leaders were invited to make a presentation at a national conference for policymakers and practitioners.
- The second meeting was held in December 2019 to present, discuss and receive feedback on the first two published project reports: The Literature Review and the Baseline Report.

### **Some important reflections on the stakeholder group**

- The initial contact to stakeholders was crucial, as was the preparation and involvement of VALUE participants.
- The second contact and feedback meeting regarding the publications was as inspiring as the first meeting.
- A further way to involve stakeholders was planned in the form of a seminar for practitioners to be held just before the end of the project in November 2020. Due to the Coronavirus situation, it is not yet clear if or how or this seminar will take place.
- The plan is also to involve stakeholders and the participating ECEC managers in writing a Danish-language article to be published on NVL (Nordisk Forum for Voksenl ring) a Web-based Network for Adult Learning. An interview with the lead researcher (BJ) by a journalist will be published alongside this article. These two practice-based publications will be used to facilitate further contact with stakeholders and other practitioners. Finally, stakeholders will be invited to discuss and give feedback on this national evaluation report and the overall endline evaluation report<sup>21</sup>, with particular focus on the recommendations for policy and practice.

### **Some lessons learned**

- The most important lesson was the effect and impact of the bottom-up, participatory approach.
- Facilitation rooted in a democratic and participatory approach supported professional learning processes.
- It made a real difference that the content of CPD activities was closely linked to challenges that the participants encountered in their everyday work.

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<sup>21</sup> Bente Jensen, Hester Hulpia, Mateja Re ek and Joana Sousa. (2020). *Supporting the collaboration between ECEC core and assisting practitioners. Endline report of the VALUE project in 4 countries (BE, DK, PT, SL)*: <https://www.value-ecec.eu/>



- It was important to have a strong focus on implementation and on preparing the participants to continue the work after VALUE came to an end.
- Inclusion of, and collaboration between, a diverse range of staff strengthened activities supporting the inclusion of children with diverse needs and backgrounds.

## 4 Participants' perceptions on the VALUE learning paths

This section analyses and discusses participants' reflections on, and discussions of, how participating in the VALUE CPD path Learning Labs influenced the three core concepts: professional identity, educare approach to ECEC and collaboration within the pedagogical work. The concrete method and data are found in the appendix and analyses are described in section 1.2.

### 4.1 Professional identity

Professional identity is in VALUE defined as the core and assisting practitioners' experiences of 1) feeling competent, 2) their work being acknowledged by their managers and colleagues, and their 3) involvement in decision-making ( Baseline report, p. 6). These three elements of improvement of professional identity are explored below, based on analyses of the focus groups interviews.

Feeling competent. Participating in VALUE improves competence and self-confidence, particularly among assisting practitioners, by giving them a sense of being heard and by assigning them with completely different roles than before.

We saw this pattern in the responses during the focus group interview of an experienced assisting practitioner who participated in the initial kick-off workshop and all six Learning Labs, as well as the final workshop.

She told that she was given tasks during that period; for example, being given the responsibility for introducing the ideas and methods from the VALUE learning paths to colleagues at her ECEC institution. For her, it was new to be a part of a working team in LLs and to be responsible for introducing new and innovative ideas at the school. While her task was to inspire her colleagues to implement the new learning processes, she improved her competences. She was very excited by the new sense of being heard: *"I feel more and better prepared for the things that I work with on a daily basis ... and I got the voice that I sought"*.

A similar experience was expressed by another assisting practitioner: *"What I saw, from being part of the project, is that I can stand up and talk and see that I am actually*



*being heard,” she said: “it’s been good for my confidence”. She continued: “I have been one of those who sat at the back and did not really say anything during workshops and suchlike. Before participating in this project, I would become completely red in the face and sweat and get very nervous. I’m still a little nervous, but it has really helped me a lot ... to take part in VALUE”.*

Others, especially core practitioners, already felt competent before VALUE.

Some of them express that they have *always seen themselves as capable of engaging with colleagues*. One example is a core practitioner who mentioned that she was “*fully competent*” before VALUE, but she realised that especially assisting practitioners found a new professional foundation for participating in everyday practice via teamwork.

One expresses that she has gained insight into the importance of the learning labs for assisting practitioners: “*What I have seen is that some assisting practitioners may have acquired new competences by being a part of this project. I know of at least one person who I can see has grown. And I think that is because of VALUE*”.

In addition, as one says, it can also open others’ eyes to the view that it is not assisting practitioners’ level of education, but their concrete skills and interests that determine how they can contribute: “*...it’s not about education, but about the skills and interests one has*”. “*It also requires competence – like being able to take a step back and give space for the assisting practitioner*”.

As such, the key benefit of VALUE lies in the development of dynamics between assisting and core practitioners, with the latter becoming increasingly conscious of the need to leave space for the former, to develop and practice new competences and roles. VALUE has also given rise to reflection on the part of participating core practitioners on professional roles; e.g. that core practitioners tend to perform the more educational and learning-oriented tasks, whereas assisting practitioners tend to perform practical and care-related tasks, but this could easily be different, as they learned in VALUE:

*“Well, I kind of think you are shaken up in some way, because it might be a bit unclear what the role of the core practitioner is. What do we have to take care of, what are we responsible for? In addition, it does not necessarily have to be that way. It has been a thought-provoking experience”.*

A key finding in this regard is that strengthening all employees’ learning potentials is a shared responsibility that is improved through VALUES.

### **Acknowledgement**

In terms of acknowledgement, the analysis shows differences in participants’ feelings or experiences of acknowledgement before, during and after VALUE. Acknowledgement can be understood on three levels: a group level, an interactive level and a personal level. An open, group-based staff-learning environment, such as



that established in the learning labs, should be characterised by open dialogue and a culture where participants acknowledge each other's roles and competences. In VALUE, this was facilitated during all the learning labs (see section 3.2). Individual practitioners realise that colleagues find their ideas and opinions interesting, which can lead them to develop new sides of themselves – and suddenly they dare to speak up in a group (VALUE learning labs). This learning is connected to the work with reflection, knowledge-sharing at LLs at both common and local level. We identified this as acknowledgement at the group level.

Acknowledgement was also connected to working with new tasks on a daily basis and experiencing newfound respect from colleagues and managers in relation to the way these tasks were performed. This new feeling of courage to participate more actively was one of the main benefits of participating in VALUE. Being assigned to more tasks, such as coordinating an educational experiment and being responsible for implementing new ideas in practice, led to a greater sense of acknowledgement. We identified this as acknowledgement at the interactive level.

The participants reflect on what acknowledgement means to them:

*"I think that it is when you are told when you are doing something well and that you are good at your job and things like that". Another assisting practitioner supplements: "Sure, but definitely that ... acknowledgement ... I partly think it is when others point out that what you do is good. Therefore, you feel that you are appreciated. That you are seen and heard".*

VALUE gave a new sense of acknowledgement to those for whom it was new to have a feeling of being active and involved in the community of practice. However, we also saw examples where establishing a culture of mutual acknowledgement was a more difficult process. A core practitioner reflects on her role in relation to acknowledging her colleagues

*"You could say that I've been a facilitator, ensuring that they are just as committed to it and just as interested in it".*

The core practitioner continues: *"That they ask what we have been talking about here in the learning labs and are interested in knowing what we have been talking about and what we have discussed and how we can use it in our local learning labs. So, I think it is an acknowledgement on their part that they are interested in what I have been doing and what I bring to the table".*

Another core practitioner does not have the same feeling of acknowledgement: *"I just think it took a long time – and we are a small institution! There are only three of us! Moreover, you think that this close communication should really just be a given".*

*This is acknowledgement at a personal level*

Being acknowledged by others at the group level, interactive level and personal level differs a lot: one core practitioner experienced a high degree of acknowledgement from



her colleagues as she participated more actively in the Learning Labs and in implementing the ideas from the LLs into renewed practices in the playground. Another core practitioner had the role as facilitator/coordinator of the local VALUE learning paths at her institution.

The analysis showed that participating in LLs improved the participants' interest and professional learning and, in most cases, the feeling of being acknowledged. The feeling of being acknowledged changed through the process. For example, one core practitioner felt that their discussions changed during the project. *"I think it was exciting. And I think these discussions we had in the learning labs were exciting"*.

### **Involvement**

The final aspect of professional identity analysed here is the perception of involvement. The managers reflect on the fact that employees' competence is not necessarily tied to their educational level but more to the kind of professionals they are. One manager reflects on the tasks related to three types of assisting practitioner and how she can involve the different assisting practitioners in different ways. She talks about

1) Assisting practitioners with many years of experience, for whom the job as assisting practitioner is a career. 2 Assisting practitioners who remain in the job for a number of years before entering higher education: for example, gaining qualifications as a teacher or social worker. 3 Assisting practitioners taking a gap year, looking to make some money.

This manager is aware of her own role in relation to these three different types of assisting practitioner, who develop new roles and competences in different way and for different reasons. The manager reflects on how one impact of VALUE is to provide a challenge for assisting practitioners. *"This is one of the things we can see that this VALUE project does – it contributes to challenging the assisting practitioners. The fact that we have given some people, especially the assisting practitioners, some new tasks and that they have actually grown tremendously"*.

Moreover, she adds: *"There is no doubt that for both types of employees, both the core and assisting practitioners, more competences come into play. And in terms of VALUE, some new confidence emerged and some attitudes and positions within the staff group changed when we joined VALUE"*.

This manager also got something out of VALUE in her role as a less experienced manager: *"As a manager, you can benefit from that, especially because we have the collaborative culture. I have realised that I have to become much more aware as a leader in this process"*.

In terms of professional identity, the results of the VALUE evaluation show that the professionals and, especially, the assisting practitioners generally gained a stronger sense of professional identity.



Those individual perceptions of competence and role are improved in terms of increased courage to take initiative and action.

That VALUE started a process enhancing practitioners' sense of acknowledgement at three levels: group level, interactive level and personal level.

### **Summing up**

The assisting practitioners gained more and more confidence in the situation and a growing self-belief, feeling competent in a new way. This resulted in a change in behaviour among the LL community and in their daily practice. Assisting practitioners were enabled to see themselves in a new way, as playing a more active role, as demonstrated.

In the joint LL, the progression became clear from the fact that, initially, the assisting practitioners were often annoyed and did not say much during discussions, keeping their heads down and leaving the communication to the others. They were quite clearly nervous when encouraged or almost 'forced' to contribute to such discussions. However, by the second joint LL, the assisting practitioners' behaviour had already changed. Between these two LLs, they had shown strong commitment to working with practice development through the experiment model in their 'home' institution, and had gained experience in observing situations and challenges in the playground.

The trust these groups developed during the process of working in LLs was translated into a new mood, including, for example, expressing the ambivalence that they also experienced. The conceptual framework helped us to understand such patterns (see section 3.1).

## **4.2 Educare**

The educare approach is defined by the degree to which education and care are treated as separate or as integrated aspects – that is, the extent to which there is a holistic approach to ECEC, integrating child well-being, learning and development (Baseline report, p. 6).

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. In Denmark, this approach is well known in policy as well as practice, integrating child well-being, learning and development. Here, the analysis will focus on these three themes. As we will see, reflections have less to do with the participants' educational level than their ECEC experience.



#### 4.2.1 Education and care – an integrated approach in the Danish political context

Even though the integrated approach is common in Denmark, some practitioners look at learning and care as separate phenomena, believing that children learn better when it takes place surreptitiously: *“I think it is easier to teach the children something if they do not feel that it is a learning situation”*. The assisting practitioner explains that care is the most important aspect of children’s learning and development, but you have to meet the children’s need for care while you are trying to teach them something: *“If they feel you are there full-on for them, and maybe put an arm around their shoulder, have a dialogue with them. Then I think it is easier to learn than in an old-fashioned school set-up. Then we can sit and enjoy ourselves; my experience tells me that it is easier to have children learn something when you mix it all up”*.

The assisting practitioner expresses in a way that there is a difference between learning, teaching and care – but he also thinks that these different aspects must be integrated. The VALUE project contributed to greater awareness of the integrated ECEC approach and to articulating this approach: *“I think it is sometimes a good idea to put it into words and be aware of what you do and why you do it. Because, I think, we have been doing it for so many years ... It’s great, because then I get an increased awareness of why, who and how we are doing what we do in our everyday practice”*.

A manager, who meets the demands of society that ECEC should be more school-focused than another manager is e.g. afraid that the care part might be forgotten in a time and society where schooling and performance are strengthened, expresses such a view

*“We have talked a lot about learning. We also need to remember the second part: care. After all, it is not because it is gone; it is the foundation of learning”* (M), states one manager.

Another manager adds to this by reflecting on how the political dimension influences ECEC within a wider context: *“It is not only the strengthened curriculum; in fact, politically speaking, I think it started with the primary school reform a few years ago. Moreover, the strengthened curriculum supports that too. As such, it can help the schools to look at the day care facilities, where we work with learning as a broader concept also involving care. At least, I think so, politically”*.

#### **Education and care (EDUCARE) and inclusion – a priority**

In Denmark, a shift has occurred within ECEC. While the 2004 legislation introduced the concept of learning, adding a more educational approach alongside the traditional focus on care and socialisation, the most recent revisions with the new Legislation (2018) integrate these approaches in the form of the concept of educare.





An important part of the design of the VALUE CPD paths was to inspire participants to integrate inclusive environments in their renewed practices. In order to evaluate if or how the inclusion aspect was adopted and implemented, the interviewer asked during the focus groups, *“How did you integrate learning, play, care and inclusion?”*

The assisting practitioners underlined the importance of integrating education, care and inclusion in their work with the VALUE pedagogical approach to educate and considered how, working with VALUE, they acquired new opportunities to improve their knowledge about inclusion.

*“I think it is extremely important to integrate the inclusion element, so you make sure that no one falls through the net”.*

They also spent time observing what actually happened in the playground in terms of inclusion and exclusion:

*“You can ... Some of those children who need a little extra [help] can easily ... be forgotten a little. Especially if there is a child who is a little quiet ... Just stares at the ground and keeps to themselves”.*

And based on those observations in practice, they got the opportunity to reflect individually and collectively in LLS on the importance of inclusion as a part of the integrated approach to educate. As expressed by one professional: *“in such cases, I think inclusion is important, so you keep an eye on everyone. Then play and relationships with others. Relationships they can establish with the help of an adult.”*

Another assisting practitioner adds: *“This is what we tried in VALUE ... To create those inclusive environments where we form some small play groups – just to get the children who need a little extra ... just so they have some success experiences.”*

The examples of assisting practitioners’ statements in the focus group interview indicate that they try to work with an integrated approach. However, they approach the concepts of education and care not as totally integrated, but as aspects that interweave with one another. Almost all the professionals, whether assisting practitioners or core practitioners, struggled with the question of how to prioritise between care and learning, and then work with inclusion as well; for instance, if a child needs special care. One educator mentioned that: *“Well, if one of the children falls and hurts themselves and gets upset, then you might have to go and help that child, and then you just stop the activity (a learning activity or an activity related to inclusion) for the others.”*

VALUE helped the participants to solve practical issues by developing a coordinating team that worked together in the playground. For instance, there is always one adult who can provide care when needed while others have the task of conducting a learning activity within inclusive learning environments.

*“And that’s why we try to coordinate it a little, so there are some who have the care tasks, and then there is someone else who can start an activity. Nevertheless,*



*sometimes you have to be a little bit in both places. And that is when what you are doing can sometimes be interrupted”.*

For others, this way of working with educare is a challenge; as one core practitioner mentioned in relation to working alone with a large number of children: *“Sometimes it’s been hard.”*

### **Conditions for working with an integrated educare approach and inclusion**

Implementing an integrated approach to educare and inclusion seems to not only be a question of practitioners’ priorities or political frameworks, but also of the practical conditions at the specific preschool. In this part of the analysis, we explore the conditions for working with an integrated educare approach and inclusion. The conditions mentioned as important in the interviews are:

- Time
- Number of children
- Whether practitioners share responsibility for planning and conducting pedagogical tasks
- Size of institution
- Management.

Others highlight the influence of management:

*“It has a lot to do with one’s management, too. How much guidance do we receive and ... the importance... People can be sent on a course or given lectures, so we acquire knowledge about the importance” (A).* The assisting practitioner continues: *“I think our manager has been good at this ... At making it clearer to us what we need to do. So, I also think that there is a huge leadership role in getting everyone on the same page.”*

The system itself and the way of organising the pedagogical activities and inclusive environments are important conditions too; the way the team works with children is of great importance as to whether an integrated perspective on educare and inclusion can be implemented.

For example, the practitioners explain the importance of always having an adult present who is aware of which children may need which kind of support.

There may also be an adult assigned with special responsibility for the youngest children and another to pay attention to whether any children are left out. One core practitioner is talking about the relevance and importance of changing both the system and its structures: *“We took turns, half an hour a time, to lead an activity. We could then see that there were some kids who, to begin with, were only involved in the*



*activities led by an adult from their own classroom. However, that started to become a problem, so we changed the structure in order to support the children's participation in activities across classrooms and with different adults" (C).*

This growing awareness of the importance of organising the system and structures to the benefit of the children is an important and noteworthy consequence of the work with VALUE dialogue and collective critical reflection in LLs.

### **Summing up**

There seems to be a consensus that learning and care should preferably be integrated, but it remains necessary to prioritise in everyday practice. The analysis also indicates the need for clearer concepts of learning, care and teaching, and of formation (*dannelse*), play and inclusion, which are the central concepts in the recent Danish ECEC legislation.

The lesson to be learned from this part of the analysis is, firstly, that an integrated approach – educare – can be realised in practice, as tested using the Danish VALUE learning paths. Secondly, we gained insight into the impact of practical conditions, such as having enough staff to share the work in creative ways. Finally, the analysis showed that successful implementation of the educare approach also depends on the employees' awareness of how to overcome the obstacles of their working conditions.

In summary, the analysis suggests that the strength of the community established through VALUE learning labs is precisely to support collaboration in implementing a holistic learning concept, which the Danish legislation encourages, and adding an inclusive dimension. But it also shows that it is important that such changes are accompanied by structures that support new working methods, and that applying an experimental approach requires new approaches to the work of the participants.

The holistic educare approach benefits children by ensuring that there is always an adult 'available', and that the adults plan play and learning activities that support inclusion. In this way, the children can easily get involved – and there is more of a level playing field for those who might not previously have known how to use the outdoor space of the playground. The methodology of learning laboratories helps adults collaborate on changing activities in order to link play, learning and inclusion in more qualified and reflected ways. In this way, critical reflection and planning in communities resulted in new ways of working with inclusion. VALUE CPD can thereby contribute to strengthening an inclusive pedagogical approach addressing children's diversity within ECEC.

The general impression is that realising an integrated educare approach is both a political and a pedagogical endeavour, but also very much an organisational and structural matter.



### **4.3 Collaboration**

Collaboration is defined as based on three dimensions: collaboration on planning activities within everyday practice, collaboration to execute the planned activities and collaboration in terms of collective evaluation of the child and/or the processes and pedagogical activities (Baseline report, p. 6).

#### **Planning**

The participants in VALUE collaborated on: 1) identifying challenges in their current practices, 2) reflecting on practices, 3) entering into dialogue regarding possible changes to improve inclusion, 4) implementing the changes and 5) evaluation. The collaboration on these five aspects started at the learning labs and continued during the local LLs in institutions.

An assisting practitioner explained how they worked systematically with these processes:

“We are coordinating the task ... there is usually one or two children who can't keep their concentration for so long; then we have an agreement as to who takes care of these children so the rest of the children and practitioners can continue with the activities we have planned. .... ”

The collaboration changed during the VALUE project. Even though the participants sometimes still used traditional team workshops to distribute tasks among professionals, they also expanded their collaborative practices to make full use of all available resources and expand the learning environment for children, parents and professionals. As a manager puts it, VALUE contributed to more added quality within everyday practice: “participating in the VALUE labs has provided something extra, as has being part of these dialogic spaces with different institutions”.

These reflections on VALUE's influence on improved collaboration are shared by a manager, who also reflects on collaboration in ECEC in relation to the current political and societal context:

“Things are changing fast these years; it's almost escalating. If you want 'VALUE for money', then you have to get everyone involved. .... in all new initiatives... Individuals and the system have to be able to acquire new competences. This is best done by workplace-based collaboration. And that is what VALUE has put into play. Assisting practitioners in particular, but also the core practitioners, have become better at talking about it”.

Another manager continues with further reflections on how VALUE improved collaborative networks that made a difference. She further reflects on how this project differs from other projects, as VALUE is not based on a manual, but on learning labs where professionals' reflections and action competences were in focus: “In VALUE we don't get a manual. It's about trying to be the investigator and observer and really just



looking at what the problems are, what problems we need to solve, instead of just being given the answers”.

Manual-based projects seem, in the participants’ experience, to be easier to implement. However, some argue that a manual-based approach risks reducing practitioners to a kind of effective engineer, suspending professional judgment in favour of evidence-based formalisation. VALUE is designed to focus on the creative reflections of practitioners, in direct opposition to formalisation.

### **Implementation in practice**

A core practitioner describes the implementation process as systematic and relevant to all members of staff. She also describes a progression during the VALUE project period:

“I would say ... Our first experiment ... we had much focus on the youngest children. So, you can say that, in organizing that experiment, we planned what to do and how. However, in the next experiment .... in Experiment 2, we had more focus on how we can embrace the entire group of children, so that the execution of the experiment becomes more relevant to all staff, including the core practitioners”.

This way to improve practice seems to be viewed as something that can make a difference: “I think our representatives are good at passing on knowledge to us. They are committed and ‘keep our noses to the grindstone’ – in a good way. It is good to focus on concrete experiments so that we do not just do things the way we always have” (LOGS, assisting practitioners). The implementation of change is strengthened by all employees’ collaborative work with experiments.

“We all welcome good ideas; we support each other, help each other and switch tasks if a colleague needs it. I think it worked so well in this experiment. The experiment has really made a difference in the playground. Fewer conflicts. Less people getting upset” (LOGS, assisting practitioners).

The idea of collaborating on experiments and on the implementation of new practices with all participants as equal partners builds on theories of co-creation and dialogue that can contribute to develop diverse perspectives and options of organisational change.

### **Evaluation**

The third aspect of collaboration in relation to VALUE learning paths is evaluation. Evaluation is an integral part of the collaboration. When participants reflect, observe and communicate regarding the implementation of new ideas, they reflect on questions such as “Has *this experiment worked for us?*” Evaluation is thus seen as an important part of the implementation.



*“We communicate about what we observe in the playground and what challenges we see. We reflect together on which actions we should take in order to pre-empt problems – something that is especially important for children with special needs. I work with my colleagues in the nursery who are also part of the common LL. We talk about the issues we see in our respective groups of children and we inspire each other in terms of the initiatives we have taken” (LOGS, core practitioners).*

Experimental designs used in the VALUE learning paths were based on the rationale that practitioners’ reflections and judgement could be an important part of the process of strengthening professional identity and collaboration. This experimental approach came naturally to the core practitioners. However, the process was more difficult for some of the other participants, as they found it more natural to act first and evaluate afterwards. A manager explained: *“It has been difficult to remember the order: first identifying a problem and then taking action”.*

The manager continues: *“It was hard, but it has resulted in a lot of learning and it helped to go back and see what we had planned”*

The VALUE learning labs more or less forced reflection and professional judgement by working with the experiment model (see section 3.2) – and the interviews showed that participants found this demanding but also recognised that it was this process that enhanced learning, as argued by one manager: *... In addition, I think so too, because it's the space for reflection that does this. So, of course, we have to reflect on something and then go out and act on it ... Being allowed to reflect is vitally important if we are to acquire and apply new knowledge.”*

Proper evaluation takes time, so it must be taken into consideration in planning the project, as one core practitioner argues:

*“Yes, I think ... What I think was that a really exciting professional discussion at our team meeting concerned what inclusion really is and how it can be identified ... We've spent a lot of time talking about that. In addition, that, I think, is exciting... Therefore; we talk about it a lot. We have some kids who ... We just had a kid who has some magnets inside his head because he is deaf. Then he has one blue eye and one brown eye. ... Because the thing is that you always have to be moving in the playground, which also ... it was you who said: They must also be allowed to take a timeout” (C).*

The core practitioner who earlier described her initial struggles due to working in a very small environment continued with a more positive view: *“We have had a lot of fun with those discussions in the staff group. And it was VALUE that first brought it up. In addition, it also adds something to the collaboration. It gives such a ... The fact that you have professional discussions.... It does something to support teamwork”.*



## Summing up

In VALUE, collaboration is defined as “working together on planning, executing and evaluating activities” (Baseline, p. 51). This collaboration can be developed as a professional learning community, where the participants (from different professional groups) share experiences with the development of practice and critically analyse their practices in a reflective and inclusive manner. In this way, diversity is an intrinsic part of the collaboration on planning and implementing the project. In summary, the results of the evaluation highlight that there has been a shift in the cooperation with regard to assisting practitioners’ participation, from being mostly involved in carrying out tasks determined by others to becoming acknowledged participants in all three phases of the collaboration: planning, implementing and evaluating the process. This tripartite collaboration is central when the goal is to strengthen the level of equality between professional groups and appreciate diversity among employees.

The analysis of how collaborative practices changed through participation in VALUE LLs showed that the VALUE learning paths improved relations between assisting practitioners, core practitioners and managers. The dialogue within the learning labs was a pathway to overcome the potential initial disillusionment connected to VALUE.

Advantages are shown to be connected to the responsive and inclusive dialogue identified in the learning labs. The dynamics between trust, mistrust and ambivalence (see conceptual framework, section 3.1), which were established during the facilitated learning labs, also helped in understanding the strengthened collaboration.

## 4.4 Influences on children

In this section, we present practitioners’ reflections on the outcomes of working with changes in practice based on their work with experiments.

### Changes for children

In logs, we asked the practitioners about their thoughts on the benefits of collaboration. Some mentioned that the gratification they get from the project is passed on to the children: *“We decide who does what, based on our different skills and what each of us is good at. I also like to try new angles in the games. I know I have done my best. My gratification can then be passed on to the children; I know that and I see it every day”* (LOGS, assisting practitioners).

The core practitioners explain how they improved their pedagogical approach to child development through the project. The project helped them open up for more and better dialogue between the children: *“We had some children who, for one reason or another, did not participate in the play community in the playground. We tried to solve this by*



*forming some playgroups during lunch based on friendships. This opens the children's eyes to new playmates" (LOGS, core practitioners).*

The managers also report great improvements:

*"It is very much about the initiatives that were developed in the playground with us in XX Institution, and it has helped to create an overview for the children when they come to the playground.... To help children with an overview over activities, e.g. through an adult initiating an activity helped the children. Or you can also do it visually, as we did in one department in XX Institution" (M). The manager continues: "We have created a structure that shows the importance of the relationship, that there is always someone ... An adult who is accessible. If the adults are walking around comforting children... Someone is doing something, so you as a can child just be a part of a relationship with the adult who is organising the game".*

### **Children got a voice**

*A manager states: "And so that the children also have a voice. That they have been asked, yes, and come of their own accord and think it is exciting that 'we have to help decide where to build this cave.'... The importance of just being allowed to plan something or to help buy something to be used in a particular activity."*

*Another manager addresses the question of inclusion: "I also think we've seen some kids who may have needed ... the grey-zone kids who may not have been playing, but have not gone around and been bored, but may have been a little left to themselves ..."*

*An assisting practitioner explained: "After the project ... It was then that I had a child I didn't have a very close relationship with who came and showed that she wanted to do an activity without me. The child could do it herself; it was like ... Okay, and this project's really working!" VALUE thus helped the practitioners plan necessary actions based on the children's particular situations and, as the manager here expresses, this is done by better analysis and reflections than before:*

*"... we must take action on something that can actually be observed, instead of being dependent on what 'one' thinks ... Analyse it based on some parameters we set. ... We can also do this for individual children. If there is a child who has difficulty socializing, then we try ... Usually we shoot a little from the hip and talk to a psychologist and the parents about what we can do. However, in reality, we should go out and do a slightly larger analysis of the child's situation in the group before we start to take any action. Then we can also see what we have done. And that applies to this group and this VALUE project."*

In the Danish VALUE learning paths, the focus has been on developing new forms of collaboration among practitioners in order to strengthen children's learning environments and work constructively with diversity.





## 4.5 Conditions and concluding reflections

In this section, crucial conditions for stimulating *interprofessional collaboration* between core practitioners and assisting practitioners are summarised: process conditions, structural conditions and management are all crucial.

- *Process conditions*

Learning labs allowed representatives from the three groups (assisting practitioners, core practitioners and managers) to meet, develop a dialogue as well as a new way to think through dialogue, and develop experimental thinking, critical reflection and collaborative relationships.

In order to conduct the Learning labs, room, time, facilitation and organisation were needed, but also a room that made it possible to invite the entire group of practitioners, a total of 63 at the beginning at the project.

- *Structural conditions*

Resources in general, but more specifically time and scheduling, are core conditions for the successful implementation of VALUE. As mentioned by one manager, there is a risk that staff will spend too much time on the project, so they must weigh up and balance the time used for planning and talking with the time spent with the children:

*“The downside to it is that a lot of hours are spent on it... What is the balance of time with regard to children and time spent with children? Because there is plenty to talk about and there are enough opportunities to develop and everything else, but it is actually the time spent among the children that makes a difference.”*

This view is shared by an assisting practitioner, who said: *“I also think about the project schedule. For example, if it had been a year from 1 March to 1 March, it would have been easier, so it's probably also a lot about when the project takes place.”*

- *Management/leadership*

*Management: “Managerial will”.* Managers talk about priorities: *“And therein lies the question of priority. ... I wish I could do this process all the time, but that is just not realistic because we do not have that opportunity. We have the opportunity when you come and say, ‘now I want to do a project in Randers municipality’, and NN (Municipal head of ECEC) says, ‘we would like to join’, and then XX (another municipal head of ECEC), who is our leader, says ‘we would like to join’, and he tells us, ‘these are the conditions’. You can set aside some time for it at staff workshops, etc. Then it can be done. But soon there will be a new research project.”*

However, the manager also talks about the improvements: *“What I take with me is how I can create greater VALUE ... employees are flourishing and become more skilled and talented, whether they are core practitioners or assisting practitioners. It facilitates everything else and is beneficial to kids, which is why we are here.”*



- *Strengths and weaknesses*

**Strengths:** Engagement, trust, ownership. Participants showed engagement, curiosity and interest as well as a growing ownership.

*“Well, trust is crucial. Especially for ... Now I am one of those people who can have a little trouble getting started just expressing my own opinions; if you feel that there is trust and respect, it certainly makes it easier to just open up ... But if you feel that people just ... do not have time to listen to you, then it is not fun to have to express your opinion”.*

**Weaknesses**

Some participants mentioned that the process of selection for the central learning lab might be a weakness of the project, because those who were not selected might be more passive and disinterested. This may negatively impact the implementation of the project’s aims, even if the coordinator comes back with a lot of energy from the learning lab. Another related aspect is that if the practitioner with the coordinator function is redeployed to another part of the institution, it can greatly affect the project implementation.

*“.... In addition, that can be a weakness when there are a few people who are responsible for a larger part. But it was also very unfortunate, you might say.”*

- *To what extent were the process and structural conditions met, and how sustainable is the VALUE CPD path?*

Time and resources were set aside for the project. However, this may not be possible in the future in a normal ECEC context with a lot of other tasks and projects going on.

*“To think that we can do six learning labs over six months on one topic – I don’t believe it’s possible. But we can make our staff workshops and our team-based workshops more like learning labs.”*

The Learning Labs also developed ideas for sustainable improvements:

*“We actually divided into three groups. Core practitioner workshops, which are the most theory-based. And then there are what we call professional team workshops, which are less theory-based, and then classroom workshops, which are very practice-oriented.”*

It is an indicator of the project’s sustainability, especially in terms of management, that the management team decided to continue their collaboration across institutions in a manner they developed through VALUE; the learning lab idea will continue as a way of working and the principle of reflection before action will also be continued.



## 5 Conclusions and recommendations

This report has examined the question: How can professional development in learning laboratories, as developed in the Danish VALUE case, enhance professional identity, a holistic educare approach and cooperation between professionals, both core and assisting practitioners?

Overall, VALUE aims to support diversity and democracy among children through concrete coordination of pedagogical activities and the exchange of experiences among those working with the children: both core practitioners and assisting practitioners. It is assumed that focusing on the conditions for professionals' work, such as their knowledge and competences and the resources available to them, will lead to better opportunities for successful collaboration between these groups.

The primary aim of this country-based endline evaluation report was to explore the crucial lessons learned, based on the experiences of facilitators/researchers in the VALUE pilots, and to explore how the three VALUE core concepts (professional identity, educare approach and collaboration) are strengthened through participating in the Danish VALUE CPD paths. As part of the analyses, conditions and challenges related to the VALUE pilots were explored. Overall, the aims are to explore the impact of the VALUE learning paths on children and the conditions for successfully implementing the three VALUE core concepts in the future by asking the question: "Will VALUE continue in the future"?

### Conclusions are summarised below:

The Danish VALUE case was based on learning labs (LLs) – a social constructivist approach to learning and co-creation of knowledge within communities of practice and organisational learning. The VALUE CPD paths in the three Danish VALUE pilot schools build on three theoretical approaches (see section 3.1): learning laboratories and co-creation (Engeström, Bason, and Plotnikof), collaborative learning and communities of practices (Lave & Wenger) and theories of translation (Røvik).

Central to this approach is that employees, including management, participate on an equal footing, employing a democratic, experimental and participatory approach to practice-based professional learning. A team of facilitators and researchers worked with the local ECEC managers in organising a series of LLs. At all 8 workshops (spread across an 8-month period), 63 employees from three ECEC institutions participated, with nine of these employees selected to participate in the coordinating joint LL (representing the three groups of practitioners and the three institutions). The coordinating team in the joint LL was supposed to translate the LL method into local LLs.



## Lessons learned from the Danish VALUE pilots

Three crucial lessons should be mentioned:

- This model of collaborative/co-created learning labs was a way of working with the participants at workshops where teachers and assistants, as well as managers, were involved on an equal footing.
- Framing and facilitating these learning processes based on dialogues between participants' diverse perspectives, challenging each other and the status quo (inspired by Engeström, Plotnikof), was a way to include all participants collectively to search for new opportunities for inclusive pedagogy in practice (inspired by Bason).
- This way of working collectively became pivotal throughout the VALUE process. In terms of the concept of translation (inspired by Røvik), it was important to ensure translation processes between learning labs in the coordinating team (joint LLs) and the local learning labs (local LLs). The interaction between the work in practice and the dialogues at Learning Labs therefore became part of this translation process. Participants worked on the basis of an 'experimental model' (inspired by VIDA, see Jensen, 2013) to change their local practices.

The lesson learned from this part of the process was that it enabled participants in the joint LLs to share an innovative educare approach with colleagues at their 'home' institution. They translated the processes for observing, analysing and reflecting on actions in practice learned at the joint LLs with a specific focus on inclusion and diversity among children (section 3).

The professional learning communities were at the heart of the VALUE CPD paths. It was within these learning communities that participants continuously shared and critically analysed experiences from their daily practices in a reflective, collaborative and inclusive way. The assumption behind the study is that learning to VALUE diversity in day care work will strengthen learning communities among professionals and encourage ECEC practitioners to experiment with new approaches in the pedagogical work with inclusion and diversity.

Overall findings from analyses of the focus group interviews were that the learning laboratories developed for *the Danish case* strengthened the three core concepts (professional identity, integrated educare approach and collaboration) if the right conditions were present. A possible pitfall is that a group of employees was selected to join the coordinating team (joint LL). The translation process from the joint LL to the local LLs, which include all employees on an equal footing, requires leadership. It has not been possible, nor our intention, within the scope of this evaluation to fully explore this issue.



### Crucial conditions for working with LLs were:

- Resources in terms of space, time, facilitation and organisation, such as a place for holding a workshop with 63 participants (structural features).
- Motivation, willingness and engagement in joining the dialogue with an open and experimental mindset (personal and processual features).
- The role of the managers. As expressed by one Danish manager *“It takes managerial will”* and *“for me, the employees become more skilled and talented, whether they are core practitioners or assisting practitioners. The leader’s role is to support these processes, supporting all employees in an equal manner.”*

Taking part in learning labs enabled participants to tackle challenges by articulating, for example, what they identified as problems in everyday practices, as shown in the analyses of the focus group interviews.

In addition, the analyses hinted that children benefited from this approach to professional development – the changes to playground practices resulted in new, creative and more inclusive learning environments and opportunities for the children.

The VALUE project represents an important contribution to establishing sustainable change in the ECEC sector. It might be possible to further develop this strategy of organising and facilitating learning processes that impact collaboration between professionals and the provision of high quality ECEC.

### Summary

The VALUE project represents an important contribution to the creation of sustainable changes, much needed in ECEC, by exploring new avenues in relation to diversity and inclusion. The Danish VALUE case is an example of establishing changes in day care through new forms of competence development in learning labs, which, as has been seen here, weight three aspects equally: professional identity, collaboration and educare.

Learning and professional identity cannot be dissociated from the relational and intersubjective processes that learning laboratories allow. With this project, it is not possible to identify 'HOW TO DO' strategies. On the other hand, it would be beneficial to further develop the participatory approach to practice-based learning established and tested in VALUE CPD in learning laboratories. It would also be relevant to explore the approach more in-depth, for example by studying practice-based learning in an anthropological perspective. Finally, the approach can be examined in a long-term perspective by asking: How durable – sustainable – are the positive changes we have seen examples of in the Danish VALUE approach? Potential guidelines for this approach include the different steps that have been applied in the above-mentioned LLs and the VALUE process: the collaborative working method developed in the



Danish VALUE approach, focusing on processes and ideas for establishing workshops and experimental work.

The insights from this country-based endline evaluation lead us to recommend, at the local level, that all employees should be involved in shared processes of practice and competence development. In addition, the VALUE study leads us to recommend that structural features, such as space, time and other resources, should be made available, as well as processual features such as the facilitation of motivation, openness, involvement and management, in support of efforts to improve professional identity, educate and collaboration within ECEC.

As expressed by one Danish ECEC manager: *“It takes managerial will”* and *“for me, the employees become more skilled and talented, whether they are core practitioners or assisting practitioners”*. In addition, she rounds off by saying, *“It benefits the kids”*.

Potential guidelines based on this practice-based professional development approach should therefore include all steps of facilitating collaborative learning as developed in the Danish VALUE learning path, with a focus on processes and ideas for establishing facilitated workshops where ECEC professionals can work experimentally, rather than producing fixed manuals for good practice. In addition, there is a need for guidelines regarding the necessary resources and supporting new forms of management/leadership.



## Appendix. Design of the focus group evaluation

### Methodology

#### **General information about the focus groups**

The focus group interviews explore the benefits of the VALUE professional learning processes as perceived by the participants.

#### **Information about the focus groups in Denmark**

Names of the three pilot schools: Bækkestien, Harridslev, Grøftekanten

Date: 15 August 2019

Duration: Three focus groups, each lasting 90 minutes

Name of the interviewer(s): Bente Jensen, interviewer; Frederik Taulborg, recording/transcription

#### **General information about the interviewees in Denmark**

In the text we use the letter A (assisting practitioner), C (core practitioner) and M (manager) to denote the different groups

- Assisting practitioners (A): assisting practitioners spread across the three pilot schools
- Core practitioners (C): core practitioners spread across the three pilot schools
- Heads/managers (M): managers spread across the three pilot schools

We used homogeneous groups, with the assisting practitioners in one group, core practitioners in another and managers in the third group, so that each focus group contributes a particular perspective.

#### **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.

##### **Professional identity**

General points on professional identity

More specific information

##### **Educare approach**

General points on the educare approach

More specific information.

##### **Collaboration**

General points on collaboration



More specific information

**Process of the VALUE learning path as perceived by the participants**

General points on the process of the VALUE learning path

More specific information