



# OUTPUT INTÉLECTUEL 2

## LE PROJECT PLAYING



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# MÉTHODOLOGIE DE LA FORMATION

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- Elmer: Ann Lambrechts
- Escola Sant Josep: Angels Aguilera



# Le projet en bref



## ACRONYME

**PLAYING**

## TITRE

Améliorer la qualité des services préscolaires grâce à des méthodologies d'apprentissage innovantes basées sur le jeu

## PROGRAMME DE FINANCEMENT

ERASMUS+

## DUREE

2020-2023

## OBJECTIVE GENERAL

L'objectif général du projet est d'améliorer la qualité de l'éducation et de l'accueil de la petite enfance par le développement de nouvelles connaissances sur les approches pédagogiques basées sur le rôle du jeu.

## OBJECTIFS SPECIFIQUES

Les objectifs spécifiques sont les suivants :

1. Renforcer les compétences des enseignants du préscolaire grâce à une méthodologie innovante d'apprentissage par le jeu
2. Améliorer la qualité des services préscolaires en introduisant des processus transnationaux d'évaluation par les pairs en ce qui concerne les méthodes d'apprentissage.

## RESULTATS TANGIBLES

IO1 : CARTOGRAPHIE DE L'APPRENTISSAGE PAR LE JEU EN TANT QUE MÉTHODE D'ENSEIGNEMENT, une analyse cartographique, offrant une vue d'ensemble des besoins existants et des lacunes dans les méthodologies et les connaissances liées à l'apprentissage par le jeu.

IO2 : MÉTHODOLOGIE DE FORMATION, une méthode d'enseignement comprend les principes et les méthodes utilisés par les enseignants du préscolaire pour permettre aux enfants d'apprendre par le jeu symbolique.

IO3 : UNE BOÎTE À OUTILS D'ÉVALUATION PAR LES PAIRS, un document expliquant comment effectuer une évaluation par les pairs pour évaluer les services préscolaires et fournissant du matériel et des modèles prêts à l'emploi.

## PARTENAIRE PRINCIPAL AUTRES PARTENAIRES

Municipality of Linköping (SE)

University of Linköping (SE), Municipality of Parma (IT), Sweden Emilia Romagna Network – SERN (IT), Escola Sant Josep (ES), UCL (DK), Elmer School (BE), Børneinstitutionen Holluf Pile-Tingkaerl - Odense (DK)

## WEBSITE

<https://playing-project.eu>

## FACEBOOK

<https://www.facebook.com/playing-project>

ect



Linköping  
Where ideas come to life

**SERN**



University  
College



Comune di Parma



Børneinstitution  
Holluf Pile - Tingkaer

**li.u** LINKÖPING  
UNIVERSITY

# 1. Le Project Playing



## CONTEXT

Le projet Playing, cofinancé par le programme Erasmus+, (2020-2023) vise à accroître la qualité de l'éducation et de l'accueil de la petite enfance par le développement de nouvelles connaissances sur les approches pédagogiques basées sur le rôle du jeu et plus spécifiquement sur le jeu symbolique.

Les objectifs spécifiques sont les suivants :

- Renforcer les compétences des enseignants du préscolaire grâce à une méthodologie innovante d'apprentissage par le jeu.

- Améliorer la qualité des services d'éducation de la petite enfance en introduisant des processus transnationaux d'évaluation par les pairs en ce qui concerne les méthodes d'apprentissage.

Le projet implique huit partenaires de cinq pays européens : Municipalité de Linköping (SE), SERN - Sweden Emilia Romagna Network (IT), Municipalité de Parme (IT), Université de Linköping (SE), Escola Sant Josep (ES), UCL - University College Lillebaelt (DK), Elmer School (BE), Børneinstitutionen Holluf Pile-Tingkær - Odense (DK).

Au cours des trois années du projet, le partenariat a développé trois produits, appelés résultats intellectuels (IO) :

- Résultat intellectuel 1 (IO1) : une analyse cartographique, offrant une vue d'ensemble du sujet du projet, déterminant les besoins existants et les lacunes dans les méthodologies et les connaissances liées à l'apprentissage par le jeu.
- Résultat intellectuel 2 (IO2) : une méthodologie de formation, une méthode d'enseignement comprenant les principes et les méthodes utilisés par les praticiens de l'éducation de la petite enfance pour permettre aux enfants d'apprendre par le biais du jeu symbolique.

- Résultat intellectuel 3 (IO3) : une boîte à outils d'évaluation par les pairs, un outil permettant d'évaluer tous les services d'éducation de la petite enfance en Europe sur la mise en œuvre correcte des méthodologies d'apprentissage par le jeu dans les activités de jeu symbolique.

La méthodologie est basée sur des lignes directrices, un ensemble de principes qui encouragent la réflexion des enseignants sur la manière d'améliorer la compréhension et la production linguistique des enfants en utilisant le jeu dans les structures d'éducation de la petite enfance. La méthodologie se développe autour de l'expérience menée par les partenaires du projet, qui ont remis en question le rôle traditionnel de l'enseignant et ont expérimenté de nouveaux rôles et de nouvelles positions.

## L'ÉDUCATION DE LA PETITE ENFANCE EN EUROPE

Le projet de jeu s'inscrit dans un contexte européen d'éducation de la petite enfance (EPE). L'organisation de l'EPE varie d'un pays à l'autre, ce qu'il est important de garder à l'esprit lorsque l'on travaille sur le développement européen. Parmi les différences les plus importantes entre les pays, on peut citer le fait que dans certains pays, l'éducation de la petite enfance est guidée par des programmes scolaires et dans d'autres non, que dans certains pays, l'éducation et les soins sont intégrés alors que dans d'autres pays, les soins et l'éducation sont considérés comme plus distincts, et enfin que l'âge auquel les enfants prennent part à l'éducation de la petite enfance varie. Dans certains pays, l'éducation de la petite enfance fait partie de la formation des enseignants, tandis que dans d'autres, seule une formation professionnelle est requise.



Cela signifie que nous avons dû faire certains choix en termes de concepts. Dans les pays participants, des termes tels que préscolaire et jardin d'enfants sont utilisés, mais dans ce rapport, nous utilisons l'éducation de la petite enfance (EPE) (en anglais, early childhood education (ECE)). En ce qui concerne le personnel, nous utilisons le terme praticien de l'EPE (en anglais, ECE practitioner), qui inclut le personnel ayant reçu une formation d'enseignant, une formation professionnelle et le personnel sans instruction. En ce qui concerne les partenaires spécifiques, d'autres descriptions peuvent être utilisées, reflétant la terminologie de chaque contexte national.

## CONTEXTE DES ORGANISATIONS PARTENAIRES

Dans cette partie du rapport, nous donnerons une brève description des partenaires participants. Ceci pour deux raisons. Premièrement, dans le projet Playing, une partie importante du processus réflexif a été la coopération et l'échange européens. La comparaison entre les contextes a fait partie des réflexions. Deuxièmement, la compréhension du contexte spécifique du projet Playing est également importante pour comprendre les résultats du projet. Même si cette méthodologie de formation peut fournir des méthodes, des idées et des connaissances sur le développement du jeu symbolique, l'apprentissage par le jeu et le développement du langage à tous ceux qui souhaitent travailler sur ces questions, il est toujours important de la contextualiser.

Cela signifie que les méthodes de travail présentées dans le rapport doivent être considérées comme dépendantes du contexte, ce qui signifie que la mise en œuvre et les résultats doivent être liés à la pratique actuelle. Cela peut signifier, par exemple, que vous devrez peut-être adapter certaines parties de la mise en œuvre aux conditions et aux missions locales. C'est également le cas pour les partenaires participants. Leurs conditions locales et leurs missions varient et la compréhension de certains aspects de la méthodologie de formation nécessite également une connaissance du contexte des partenaires.

Au total, des partenaires de cinq pays ont participé au projet Playing : la Belgique, le Danemark, l'Italie, l'Espagne et la Suède.

## MUNICIPALITÉ DE LINKÖPING (SUÈDE)

La municipalité de Linköping compte 127 écoles maternelles municipales avec 6059 enfants inscrits et 47 écoles maternelles coopératives avec 1617 enfants inscrits. Les écoles maternelles sont situées à la fois en ville et dans les zones rurales. 527 enseignants travaillent dans les écoles maternelles municipales. Les autres employés sont des enfants mineurs, des employés à l'heure ou du personnel de projet. Au total, 1802 éducateurs sont employés dans la municipalité de Linköping. En ce qui concerne le projet Playing, les écoles maternelles Kvinnebyvägen 91 et Ljungsbro förskolor ont été les écoles maternelles participantes de la municipalité.





### **The participating preschools from Linköping municipality**

The Swedish preschool is an institution within the welfare system and is one of the community-services that is available for all families with children between 1 and 5 years old. Sweden has a school-law and a curriculum for our preschools. The curriculum is divided into 1) The preschools value-base and mission and 2) Goals and guidelines. The Convention of the Rights of the Child is a law in Sweden. To always have the child's interest in focus, analysis of consequences for the child are done in the preschools.

The department of education in Linköping has a 1-19 perspective which means that there is a system in place from when the child is 1 year old until it is 19 years old. The goal is to secure independence, education, and occupation #förvarjebarn. The department is also responsible for adult education.

### **BØRNEINSTITUTIONEN HOLLUF-PILE TINGKÆR (DENMARK)**

Holluf Pile Tingkær Preschool is in the southern part of Odense, the third largest city in Denmark. General Manager is Karen Sterling.

The Childcare institution Holluf-Pile Tingkær consists of eight different divisions or houses (Fraugde, Ællingen, Hjulet, Holluf Pile, Agerhønen, Svanen, Tornbjerg and Viben). These houses care for children between 0-6 years old. Each house cares for around 46 children and has 7-8 educated/ bachelor's degree pedagogical teachers and 4 non-educated pedagogical helpers. Each house has a manager.

The strengthened pedagogical curriculum took effect on the 1st of July 2018. It has the intention to:

- promote the children's well-being, learning, development, and education. Play is essential, and it is based on the perspective of the child.

- share involvement, responsibility, and an understanding of and with democracy.
- cooperate with the parents on issues like the child's well-being, learning, and development and ensuring a good transition between home and day-care centre.

The day-care centre is committed to creating and upholding an environment for the children, which promotes their mental, physical, and aesthetic development. Among other things, we have a strong focus on these areas through the development of language skills as well as technology and natural sciences.

### **ELMER SCHOOL (BELGIUM)**

Elmer is regulated by the Flemish Community and situated in four vulnerable neighbourhoods in Brussels, a metropole, characterised by its super-diversity. About 60% of preschool children in Brussels do not speak an official language (Flemish or French) at home. Elmer aims to reach a socio-cultural mix of families living in the neighbourhood and focuses especially on vulnerable families. As a centre for inclusion, Elmer gives particular attention to children with special needs and supports their families.

Elmer has a capacity of 188 subsidised places for children between 3 months and 3,5 years old and organises childcare for parents in need of part-time, full-time, occasional, short-term, or urgent care. Elmer enables the wellbeing of each child, offers rich opportunities to develop and stimulates connectedness. Parent participation is a keystone in the work of Elmer. The parents are the first educators, together we are co-educating the children. Elmer aims to work on social participation of parents and organises opportunities for young parents to meet and share experiences. In the neighbourhood, Elmer is an active partner in common activities. Elmer also initiates a family centre as an integrated service.





*One of Elmer's centres in central Brussels.*

Elmer combines early childhood education and care service with employment and training of childcare workers, often recruited out of the group of parents. The Elmer team is very diverse, with childcare workers mastering many different languages. This cultural and language diversity helps for bridging and bonding with the diversity of families.

The Flemish pedagogical framework MemoQ describes “educational support” as a dimension leading to high pedagogical quality.

### **MUNICIPALITY OF PARMA (ITALY)**

From the municipality of Parma and its educational system the following departments is taking part in the project:

- 8 infant Toddler Centres
- 12 preschools
- 2 experimental 0/6 educational services

Our Infant Toddler Centres and Preschools are characterised by mixed classrooms (in infant toddler centres classrooms with children from 4 months to 3 years, from 1 year to 3 years; in Preschools with children from 3 to 6 years): this pedagogical organisation allows the children to live a true relational context where different competences build new horizons of growth.

Cooperation learning through experiences of touching, moving, listening, hearing, seeing together, with different competences, made a unique personal educational path with older and younger, together.

Teachers observe the children and share observations with other teachers and their ideas and practices such as thoughts are in continuous evolution.

Our projects are focused on:

Acceptance (the first time that children and families enter services we have different strategies to include them with safeness and tranquillity)

- Enhancement of difference
- Environmental education
- New technologies education.



*Preschool outdoor setting, Municipality of Parma*

### **ESCOLA SANT JOSEP (SPAIN)**

Escola Sant Josep is a semi-private educational centre located in a neighbourhood of the city of Terrassa, 30 minutes from Barcelona.

The school has nursery, preschool, and primary education with only one line per educational course; always betting on the work in small groups for the improvement and personalization of the learning process of our students. The age of students is up to 12 years old.



Since we are a small school, we have a very familiar environment, we are in close contact with the families daily.



Children from Escola Sant Josep

Our centre is located in an area of few resources where most of the families cannot offer their children rich experiences of cultures from other countries; they do not have the training or the economic level.

Our school belongs to a multilingual project based on linguistic immersion in English and methodologies based on the use of ICT. Currently one third of the subjects are taught in English including subjects such as art, physical education and science and using new technologies such as computers, I-pads, and digital books.

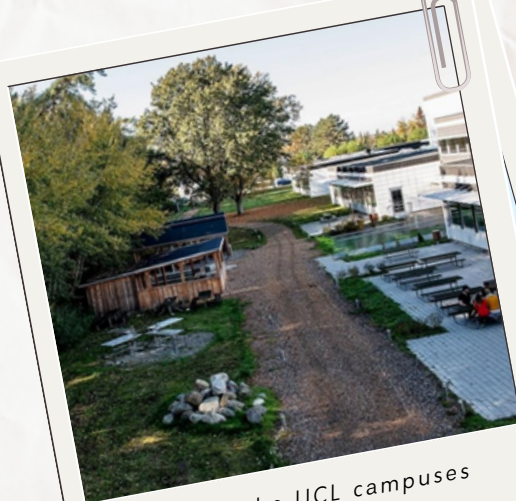
### UCL ERHVERVSAKADEMI OG PROFESSIONSHØJSKOLE (DENMARK)

UCL University College is a regional higher education institution with campuses in the cities of Odense, Svendborg, Vejle, Jelling and Fredericia. It has more than 10.000 students and about 1.000 employees. UCL University College is 1 out of 6 University Colleges in Denmark and is the 3rd largest.

UCL offers more than 40 academy and professional higher education programmes, within Business, Technology and Buildings, Education and Social Sciences and Health Sciences. All the programmes are characterised as first cycle studies within the European Quality Framework, level 5 and 6.

UCL University College offers Continuing Professional Development aimed at professionals in many fields, for example animation, technology, education, (theory and practice), health, and management in private and public organisations.

The institutions have a high degree of autonomy, but they are required to follow the national regulations for e.g. teacher qualifications, degree structures and examinations, including a system of external examiners.



One of the UCL campuses

### SWEDEN EMILIA ROMAGNA NETWORK (ITALY)

SERN is one of the main transnational networks in Europe fostering relations between Northern and Southern Europe and in particular between Sweden and Italy. Since its creation, the network has developed more than 130 projects at European level and is driving a continuous process of exchange and cooperation between Swedes and Italians members and other European



partners. In the PLAYING project, two members of the SERN network are involved (Municipality of Linköping and Municipality of Parma).

SERN has participated in numerous projects in the educational field and in particular in the preschool context as quality in education has been playing a very important role in the cooperation among the members of the network.



### LINKÖPING UNIVERSITY (SWEDEN)

Linköping University (LiU) is a research partner in the Playing project. LiU is one of Sweden's larger academic institutions, a research-based university known for excellence in education. LiU has four faculties: Arts and Sciences, Educational Sciences, Health Sciences, and Technology located on three different campuses with 14 multidisciplinary departments and 160 study programmes. The university has approximately 37,000 students and 4,300 employees. LiU provides a comprehensive teacher education and offers postgraduate training as well as opportunities for research within Educational Sciences. Research is linked to undergraduate education and deals with child, youth, and adult learning, as well as teaching at all levels from preschool to university.

A cross-subject, interdisciplinary thematic approach characterises the research at Linköping University. In this project researchers from the educational field have contributed with their competences in relation to early childhood education and play.



### TRAINING METHODOLOGY

This report contains a training methodology on play-based learning as a teaching method. The training methodology draws on the collected experiences from the playing project and outlines the principles and methods used by ECE practitioners to enable children learning through symbolic play.

The target group of the training methodology on play-based learning are ECE practitioners, preschool teachers, educators, pedagogical coordinators, and researchers. The objectives of the training methodology (Output 2, in the Playing project) are:

- to increase knowledge of the concept of play-based methodologies and symbolic play.
- to create new skills resulting from the comparison between practices adopted in different European countries.



- to enhance the ability of ECE practitioners by providing tools and principles for the correct adoption of play-based methodologies.

The methodology, as well as the project, focuses on the symbolic play, play-based learning, and development of language. A specific focus in the Playing project as well as in the training methodology is how the symbolic play can help developing language.

*Symbolic play* can have many definitions but within the Playing project, the term refers to play in which children use different kinds of symbol in their play. Lillard (1993) emphasises the pretend aspect of play. Symbolic play is defined as the ability of children to use objects, ideas, and actions to represent other objects, thus highlighting the abilities and agency of children. Important aspects of symbolic play are to make believe or pretend and can incorporate aspects of fantasy as well as everyday life. Symbolic play can thus be viewed as children's way of dealing with – both understand and explore further – their experiences (Lillemyr, 2009). This makes children's first-hand experience an important aspect of symbolic play but also borrowed, shared, and added experience.

*Play-based learning* is another important concept in the Playing project. A simple and straightforward explanation of what play-based learning is given by Danniels and Pyle (2018) who states that it can simply be understood as learning while playing. They go on to explain that play-based learning is usually used to illuminate and describe a part of the field of play where play is used in a conscious way to work with children's learning. In the Playing project we have come to emphasise the relation between children and adults in play, specifically the role of ECE practitioners.

For this reason, the concept of play-responsive teaching has become an important aspect of play-based learning. Pramling et al. (2019) point to the directed or intentional action that learning entails. They connect the play with didactic questions and argue that in the work with play as a tool for learning, the didactic questions about what is to be learned, how and why become central. It is thus about something more than that in play there is always, or at least often, a potential for learning. Rather, the concept seeks to delineate and make visible teachers' conscious attitudes and work with play as a means for children to learn about specific content.

This means that in the Playing project we are not working with changing all play. It is important to emphasise that we are only addressing a smaller part of what play is and can be as we are focusing on the part of play that contains or are actively used by ECE practitioners to facilitate learning (Figure 1). All play can lead to learning whether that is the aim of the play or not. In the Playing project we are focusing on playing activities where ECE practitioners use/take part/organise play with the specific aim to facilitate children's learning.

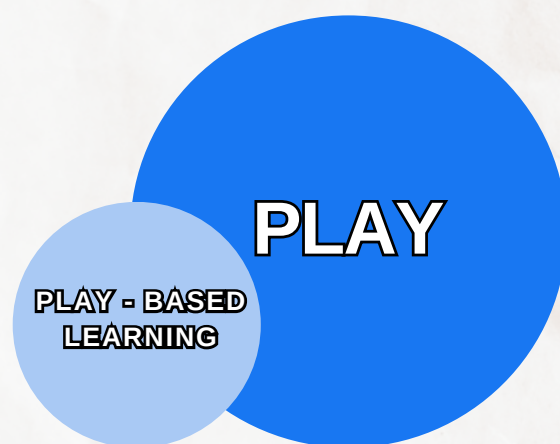


Figure 1 The relation between play and play-based learning

Language development is central in early education as young children are in the process of acquiring a language.



In the Playing project play based learning, symbolic play and language is connected. The primary focus is to support the development of language through symbolic play as children learn language through interactions with others. In symbolic play, learning can take place in a way that facilitates children's competencies and participation as literacy and symbols are closely connected. Symbolic play can be a space to support different communication skills based on the frame of imagination that symbolic play entails. Research has shown several benefits of literacy training through symbolic play. (Jalil & Abu Bakar, 2006; Pellegrini & Galda, 1990).

For a more detailed description and discussion of the concepts symbolic play and play-based learning, see the intellectual output 1 of the Playing project, Play-based learning as a teaching method. In this report the activities, working methods, and approaches carried out to increase knowledge of play-based methodologies and symbolic play; create new skills resulting from the comparison between practices adopted in different European countries; and to enhance the ability of ECE practitioners are presented. The structure of the report follows the work process that we have had in the Playing project, where we have worked with mapping, action, and evaluation. Since this process has been central to the outcome of the project, we will first say something about the reflexive process.

### ***A reflexive process***

Working with developing play-based learning as a teaching method is a complex process that is not easily translated to a specific conduct. When the project partners started to look back on what had been done in the project, we concluded that the core of our work had been the process itself.

For that reason, we have chosen to present this output in the form of a process. The activities that have been carried out have been important in being able to reflect and exchange experiences between countries, but we want to emphasise the importance that these activities need to be adapted and understood in relation to the local context.

In the Playing project we have worked according to the process illustrated below (Figure 1). Our process consists of three phases: Map – Act – Evaluate. In practice this means that we have started out with mapping the participating practices to identify issues, possibilities, and challenges. After the mapping we have conducted actions that are carried through changes in practice based on the issues, possibilities and challenges identified in the mapping. These actions have then been evaluated to identify their impact on the early educational settings. As shown by the continued arrows in the model (figure 1) this process then starts all over again. It is important to understand the phases Map – Act – Evaluate as integrated, that is a reflexive process is to be seen as an ongoing work without any clear beginning or end.

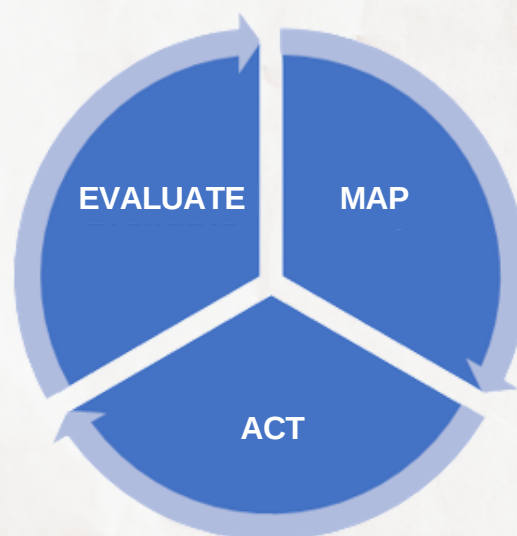


Figure 2. The reflexive process of the Playing project



So, why is the process so important? To work with and develop play-based learning and symbolic play has been shown to be largely a matter of the role and approach of the ECE practitioners. To support and develop children's play, you as an ECE practitioner therefore need to work with yourself and your colleagues in a reflexive process.

To work with children's learning within symbolic play requires that ECE practitioners take part in play using tools from the play responsive framework. This means that ECE practitioners bring intentions into the play, with this in mind they can respond and act within play to facilitate learning. This is to be done with sensitivity or responsiveness to children and to the process within the play and requires teachers to take part in the play, reflecting on their own roles, actions, and interactions (Pramling et al. 2019). To build sensitivity to children's perspectives in play also requires knowledge of the context around the children. Such knowledge can be required through listening to children's own voices, observing children's play or communicating with other ECE practitioners or parents.

To develop the work with play-based learning and symbolic play, it is therefore necessary to develop structures and routines for joint reflection. This is partly about finding forms for this work, and partly about structuring the content of the joint work. Research has shown that ECE practitioners need to be given both time and physical conditions to be able to work together (Lago & Elvstrand, 2020). It is, for instance, important that ECE practitioners are given time both to map and reflect on their own practice, that time and organisation are given to meetings between ECE practitioners in the schedule. To do so, it is important to plan so that the right people are given the opportunity for joint meetings, for example those who

work with the same group of children or are responsible for similar issues. It may also be important to think about the use of physical space, for example if ECE practitioners who work with children of the same age are close or far apart. Even if closeness can be seen as important it can also be positive on some occasions to talk and reflect with someone who doesn't work directly in the same group of children. That could give an "outsider" perspective of the everyday practice and contribute to further developments.

In addition to this it is also important to find a joint focus for reflection (Lago et al., 2022). If ECE practitioners are to develop their practice it is important to formulate and define the focus of the joint work. A common focus is important for the ECE practitioners to be able to discuss and develop the practice from a common basis. It could be about, for example, a common concept, the implementation of a similar mapping or a common text base. Part X of this report presents activities that may constitute such common foci for development of symbolic play, play-based learning, and language.

Research also emphasises the role of reflection for development and quality (Ritblatt et al, 2013). For example, Ercan and Perkins (2017) emphasise the importance of forming reflective practices where different professional groups. This has, they argue, a positive impact on the development of both the profession and activities. Reflection is important for understanding one's own actions, developing one's actions and being able to talk about and describe one's actions. Reflecting together is one of the foundations for being able to develop a common professional language (Colnerud & Granström, 2015), something that is needed so that the reflection is not only individual but also common.



A question to be asked regarding this is if reflection is enough. What is important in the development of early childhood education – in the Playing project specifically play-based methodologies and symbolic play – is that the reflection is professional. Cartmel, Macfarlane and Casley (2012) defines the difference between reflection and critical reflection. They define reflexivity as a core task for ECE practitioners as the ability to “examine the activities within daily work and to use this evaluation as a means of improving practice and knowledge” (p. 2) is important in early education practice. To do this, it requires reflexivity as ECE practitioners must be able to think about what happens in their practice and draw conclusions of proper conduct and change from this. This thinking is at the heart of reflexive processes or practices. For the reflection to become critical this, according to Cartmel, Macfarlane and Casley (2012, p. 3), requires that the reflection aims to “creating new ideas and new perspectives about quality practices, the thinking process draws on everyday experiences and understanding, and also contemporary early childhood theory and research to assist ECE practitioners to think otherwise about practice”. This means that apart from grounded knowledge of one's own practice, the reflection must also draw on sources such as research, theory, or international comparisons. To sum up, to create reflexive processes, 1) reflection needs to be shared between ECE practitioners; 2) this means that ECE practitioners need to be given time and possibilities to reflect and discuss the early education practice, 3) a well-defined and joint focus for reflection; 4) development of a professional language; and 5) an interaction between theory and practice.



Figure 3. A deepened reflective process of the Playing project.

### Tools for reflection

It is important to create both space and time for reflection. There is often limited time, which means that reflection time is instead used to solve acute problems such as personnel. For the reflection session to contribute to quality improvement and be perceived as relevant for those who participate, it is important to have both clear goals and working methods for how the reflection should take place.

- Discuss together how to create a positive climate of conversation that supports reflection. For example, how do we ensure that everyone becomes active and confident in talking? How do we listen to each other? Does anyone have the right to interpret over anyone else in the group? How do we handle situations where we have different opinions?
- Discuss and determine the different roles of the participants during the reflection session. It might be a good idea to have someone lead the meeting. This role can be on a rolling basis, meaning that everyone can take on that role. This can help to ensure a more even distribution of power in the group and allow everyone to practise taking on various roles in the discussion.



## Outline of training methodology

The training methodology is presented in three main parts following the work process of the project:

1. Mapping

2. Actions

3. Evaluation

Each part consists of a) shorter background of our theoretical and methodological starting points to give the methodology a framework, b) descriptions of what we have done in each phase, c) practical examples of how the change can look in practice in the different national contexts, d) conclusions and reflections.

## NATIONAL EXAMPLES

### A STORY OF BEING IN A REFLEXIVE PROCESS OF CHANGE FROM ELMER

While working on this dimension, we noticed in Elmer that children often spontaneously don't come to symbolic play. We felt the need to learn how to stimulate that kind of play, since we were convinced about its importance. Also, the process of language acquisition didn't always go smoothly, many children not having Flemish as their home language.

Under guidance of our pedagogical coach, we had already the experience of organising regular meetings of reflection with the teachers. We wanted to use this experience in the project of PLAYING, and it worked! Teachers, staff, and pedagogical coach started to experiment on symbolic play in the groups and shared ideas and activities during the meetings. Each meeting they became more enthusiastic. With the help of the peer-review, first we could show what we worked on. Secondly, we received very useful feedback, specifically on the need to focus more on the language acquisition of the children and of the interaction between the children.

We worked out a self-evaluation tool for language stimulation and a "play-circle" as an instrument to keep the things we learned in our organisation.



## 2. Mapping



### BACKGROUND

To be able to focus on and change children's play it was important to find a common ground to start from. To do this we started out by mapping our practices trying to identify what the conditions for symbolic play were and how we thought about it. What we noticed was that there were many ways to think about what symbolic play was and what the role of the ECE practitioners could be. As it is important to take an active part in children's play to facilitate play-based learning, we had to identify our assumptions of symbolic play, and play-based learning, and how the different partners worked with play.

To challenge the pre-assumptions, we started with a set of questions:

- If you want to change something, and make it sustainable it is important to start in your own practice.
- Work locally, in each ECE to discuss.
- What is play for me? For us?
- What kind of opportunities have the children to play in our ECE?
- What kind of play?

### ACTIVITIES

Based on these questions and the common discussion we had, we designed three activities to map how we worked with and thought of children's play.



#### Observations

What characterizes the play observed

Free play, teacher-led play, learning play, student play, play as teaching, etc



#### Interview

- What is play for you?
- Why is play important?
- Why should children play in ECE?
- What is the teachers' role in play?
- How can teachers support children's play?
- In your practice, what hinders children's play and how can you work to enable play?



#### Mapping activity

1. Policy documents, mapping policies regarding play in ECE.
2. Interview/reflection talk with colleagues about play in ECE.
3. Observation of play in ECE.



In relation to each activity, common reflections between ECE practitioners are an important part as it is important to discuss and analyse together with others.

In the Playing-project, the national partners also helped each other to reflect on what play-based learning could be in different national contexts.

## NATIONAL EXAMPLES

### A STORY OF MAPPING AND WORKING WITH TEACHER'S ROLES IN CHILDREN'S PLAY FROM UCL, DENMARK

In my work as a consultant and teacher in the preschool area, I have often made observations of educators and children's interactions in play. After my participation in the Playing project, I have become better at seeing that the teacher's role can be quite different from one moment to the next. My "aha" is especially how important it is that the role constantly changes, and how important it is that the teacher can make these role changes during the activity.

My new focus is to observe these role changes where, for example, the teacher is quite much the initiator of the play from the start and "controls the play", and then "backs off a little" as the children take over the play and, for example, express ideas and experiments. Here the teacher's role must become more "to guide" and to be "co-players".

Sometimes the primary role for the teacher then becomes to support the children who have a bit of difficulty with the play and who may be in a vulnerable position in the game itself and who need help to continue participating.

My experience as a consultant is that it can be difficult for some teachers to make these role changes during the activity. I think that such a role change can perhaps be quite difficult to carry out if you have been very precise in your didactics and, for example, described what role the teacher must have in order to achieve the goals of the activity. I think that the didactic task therefore must be precisely to describe the "flexibility of the role", so that we become aware of practising changing the role during the activity.

## CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

The mapping analysis showed both similarities and differences between the different national contexts.

In all national context, play is, to some extent, viewed as "belonging" to the children. As described earlier there is a debate where free play on the one hand and teacher-led activities on the other are seen as opposite each other. The idea of play-responsive learning challenges this as it stresses adult participation with children in play.

The results from the mapping show that there is a need to discuss and challenge the idea of play as something that children should be left alone in if a more play-responsive is to be developed. As play-responsive teaching emphasises that children and ECE practitioners should take part in play together making common experiences, ECE practitioners need to challenge their roles in play.



In the data the ECE practitioners are described as taking several positions in play, but, as shown in the figure below, many of these positions are rather outside or overlooking play than acting from within play focusing on instruction, observation or acting only at critical moments in the play such as starting up play or solving conflicts.

To some extent, roles that can be used or integrated in a play-based and play-responsive approach is described but to further develop such active, playing and with/within roles are a key aspect to develop the work with teaching in symbolic play to reach activities where play is not described in tension with teaching, but rather teaching is done in children's play together with sensitive and acting ECE practitioners. The tension between child directed and adult directed play that is described in many national contexts thus needs to be challenged and reflected on.

Another common theme is that the teachers mainly describe that their task is to support play that fails or children who struggle with play.

The play-responsive approach rather takes well-functioning play and competent players as the starting point. This means that ECE practitioners need to develop methods, roles, and approaches that relate to all play – good working or less good working play. The social view on children's play that is described in the outset for the project brings that a "together with" perspective in play needed. Drawing from the analysis of the national mapping this is an important part to reach the goals for the Playing project. An identified common idea that is an important basis to develop, challenge, and change ideas of play and the ECE practitioners' role in play is the described link between symbolic play and experience, in all national context children's own experiences are in some way emphasised as important to facilitate symbolic play.

Experience is recurring described as a central way for children to get knowledge of the world. To develop symbolic play and widen the possibilities for learning in play both the experiences that children bring to ECE settings and the experiences that are done in the ECE setting are described as important. In the national data it is highlighted that ECE practitioners need to be sensitive to children's views and experiences to be able to build on those in developing abilities and to facilitate learning. At the same time, it is emphasised that the ECE setting is a place where children can get new experiences. To work with and implement methods that build common experiences in the ECE setting is an important aspect to widen symbolic play. As the idea of experience is also highlighted in the play-responsive approach this is identified as a strong ground for building new methods and approaches to teaching in play.

A more detailed account of this phase of the project is presented in the IO1 report, Mapping of play-based learning as a teaching method.



### 3. Acting



#### The teacher's role and positioning in play

##### BACKGROUND

The teacher's role and positioning in play is of great importance for children's participation in play in day care. Play is an essential part of children's development and learning, and the educator plays a central role in supporting and facilitating this process. When the educator manages to take an active role and the facilities in play, it benefits the children's participation, immersion and learning in a broad sense – their language, imagination, social skills and ability to self-regulate. This facilitating approach requires special play skills – that the educator can read the play situation, play with and support children's learning through play, without taking over or breaking the children's play atmosphere. Finding the right balance is often difficult. The focus must be on how and how much the educator must get involved in the children's play to be able to support, guide and frame the play.

Although play is a fundamental part of children's lives, not all children find it easy to enter the play community. And here lies an important task for the educational staff. They can help a child into play through different play strategies and by teaching the children to master them themselves.

“Adults must become good at contributing to play on the terms of play. It requires analytical competence. They must be able to analyse the play to support it. And that requires that they have knowledge of the different types of play, moods and the unique composition of the children's group.”

(WINTHER-LINDQVIST, 2020)

#### “PLAYFUL LEARNING” AND “LEARNING THROUGH PLAY”

The educator's participation in play can contribute to the development of new qualities in play, which happens, for example, when the educator contributes to the emergence of play motivation, introduces relevant play props, suggests new play perspectives and contributes to the emergence of dramatic tension in the play process.

The teacher's participation in the play can also help to include the children in the play who are very often excluded from the games. Here it is crucial that the educator uses a strategy that is in line with the dynamics of play. But it usually requires the educator to act as a mediator, not least when it comes to including children with special needs (Franck & Glaser, 2014).

By getting involved in the play, the educator can contribute to the play coming to contain a professional substance that is in accordance with the dynamics of the play. Many different concepts and phrases are used in connection with linking learning to play and to make room for the educator to be on the sidelines or to be part of the play. For example, the phrases “Playful learning” and “Learning through play”, which indicate that play and learning are not identical dimensions and processes, but contain some common features and work together, and that the educator can influence and guide the play (Broström & Vejleskov, 1999).

In *playful learning*, the children's own play is central. The play comes first. The children create play sequences where the educator is not just a spectator but interacts with the children.



The pedagogues are responsive to the children's play, and in accordance with the premises of the play, they experiment with strengthening the informal learning in the play.

In learning through play, the learning is central, that the child gets to learn something specific, but at the same time the educator endeavours to make the activity playful. In playful learning, the educator experiments with the form of learning. The ambition is that the child's learning is enriched with some of the features of play (Broström & Vejleskov, 1999).

### THE ROLE OF EDUCATORS IN CHILDREN'S PLAY

The teacher has an important task in facilitating play and creating an environment that is stimulating, safe and supportive for children's play. This may involve setting up different play activities and materials, encouraging the children to play and actively participate in the play.

The educator's role in play is expressed both when the educator plays an active role and when the educator's role is more passive. It is important that the educator is aware of when they should be participating and when they should observe or stay completely outside the children's play. The children are also very aware of whether the educator understands the game, plays along and is present or absent, both mentally and physically (EVA, 2017)

The educator can support the children's play by adding new elements, asking challenging questions and encouraging creative thinking and problem-solving. The educator can also help expand the children's play by introducing new ideas, stories or materials that can inspire different play scenarios and exploration. Overall, the educator plays an important role in creating a playful and developing environment in daycare, where play is inclusive and meets the needs and

interests of different children, so that all children feel welcome and included in play, that they can participate actively, explore, learn and develop both individually and in interaction with others.

### GOOD SETTING FOR CHILDREN'S PLAY

A prerequisite for successful participation and to be able to pick up important play signals is that the educator is present and accessible. James Christie (2005) problematizes and challenges, based on his research, a long tradition that play takes place without educational involvement. He describes three elements that are essential for creating a good environment for children play:

1. ADEQUATE TIME FOR PLAY
2. BASED ON CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES
3. PEDAGOGICAL INVOLVEMENT IN CHILDREN'S PLAY

Time is important for whether children's play can develop. Complex forms of play such as symbolic play presupposes a considerable amount of time to plan, negotiate roles, find tools and play the roles that the play contains.

Christie (2005) further recommends that the pedagogues investigate and take as a basis in children's previous experiences, and that the pedagogues actively use this knowledge when they get involved in or frame the play. If the educator frames the play in a direction that the children have no experience with, the play will be unfocused, disconnected and concise. Therefore, it is important that the play is based on the children and their experiences.





## A CONTINUUM OF TEACHER ROLES IN PLAY

According to Christie (2005), the educator can relate to play in six different ways, from non-involved through various degrees of involvement to maximum participation. Christie uses the concept of involvement where the educator scaffolds children's play, but not necessarily within the framework of play. Involvement rather includes external support of children's play, where participation only occurs when the educator manages to be playful – to participate on the premises of play. The teacher's involvement in the play is important for whether the play is developed or completed (Jørgensen, 2019).

The teacher's involvement in the play is important for whether the play is developed or completed (Jørgensen, 2019).

The key to being able to get involved in an appropriate way in children's play is linked to knowledge of the facilitating roles: onlooker, stage manager, coplayer and play leader – as well as the ability to flexibly take on these roles. The pedagogue must be aware of what occurs in the play, and vary his facilitating role according to the play. The teacher must decide which of the six positions is most applicable in each situation, so that the play is not destroyed.

Minimal involvement	Facilitative roles				Maximum involvement
Uninvolved	Onlooker	Stage manager	Coplayer	Play leader	Director/Redirector

(Christie, 2005)



### Uninvolved

With this position, the children are free from interference, regardless of the educator's reasoning. Even if the adult does not participate, she influences the play, perhaps even negatively.



### Onlooker

The teacher encourages play, creates time and space for play. She does not participate in the play herself but observes the children's play and recognizes the importance of play for the children. She resolves any conflicts (Christie, 2005)



### Stage manager

From the sidelines, the educator has an active role by helping children with practical things such as designating playgrounds or getting materials to play with – when the child signals a need for help or when the children seek out the educator (Christie, 2005). In his facilitation, the educator can also come up with ideas for the content of the game. It is important to note that the educator in this role does not move within the framework of play but supports it with suggestions and assistance. An important point is also that the children can freely choose whether they want to accept the educator's help or whether they want to ignore it – both scenarios must be recognized by the educator.





### *Coplayers*

The pedagogue actively participates in play within the framework of play; as an equal play partner, she can take on roles and functions in play. She complies with the rules of the play and participates on the terms of the children and the play. Even with a minor role in the play, the educator will be able to enrich the form and content of the play, so that children can practise role-playing and role-changing in imaginative play. The educator can here create space for the children to interact and create participation opportunities for new possible play participants (Christie, 2005).



### *Play leader*

The pedagogue actively participates in the children's play and assumes a leading position from which she can enrich and expand the play's theme, its narrative, episodes and play cases. The role of play leader often occurs in short sequences where the player needs something new. When the game is running again, the educator steps back into the role of cosplayer. This form of participation contributes to children being able to play longer and more imaginatively.



### *Director/Redirector*

The pedagogue takes over management and control of the play. She plays a central role and function in the game. The children participate as co-players on the adult's terms.

(Jørgensen, 2019)

It is important to note that these roles are not fixed or linear. The educator can move along the continuum depending on the context, children's needs and learning goals. The continuum provides a framework for the educator to reflect on his practice, make conscious decisions and adapt his role to effectively support children's play and learning experiences.

As an educator, it is important to train your play skills so that you can approach and withdraw from play without destroying it. Very young children can greatly enjoy the adult's support and presence and play often breaks up when the adult leaves. Maybe because someone to play with is more important than something to play with, especially someone who can play.

#### **ACTIVITIES**

Working with your role in children's play activities is in many ways a question of breaking your habits and reflecting over how you tend to act in different situations.

As roles always need to be taken in relation to each specific situation this is not to find 'the best' role but to find ways to adjust your role to facilitate children's play in different situations.

To do this, we did the following task where the ECE practitioners were asked to change their roles and act in new ways that they would normally do.

#### **CHALLENGE ADULT ROLES/POSITIONS**

1. In 1 to 3 situations, "force" yourself to take on a different position than you normally would in a similar situation.
2. Reflect on how your position affects the play and/or learning possibilities.
3. Reflect on your role in the observation.

The idea with this task was to get out of one's comfort zone and reflect over what different adult roles bring to each situation and how different ways to act affect children's play.



### A STORY OF A CHANGED APPROACH TO SCIENCE TIME FROM ESCOLA SANT JOSEP

Once a week we have science time in preschool. Before the project - we used to do experiments in the classroom, not mixing the groups. Always in the same environment, same groups. The role of the teacher was - planner, organiser, guide.

During the project we learnt the importance of the environment and changing the roles both: of the teacher and the children. After peer visits, we have gathered with the teachers and talked about the changes we would like to introduce at our school. In the science class we decided to inform the families that we would conduct the activities outdoors, preferably in a park; we decided to use more natural materials and focus on symbolic and free play at some point of the activity. We have also decided to mix the groups, the teachers were excited about the idea so whenever possible, we do the activity together with two different age groups (3 years old and 4 years old). Thanks to mixing the groups, children learn from each other, they improve their language and communication skills, they observe and help each other.

Moreover, after brainstorming, the teachers have decided to focus on being more flexible about their roles, not only the ones they used before, so that they could be in different positions and give more space and autonomy to the children.

The materials have changed too - simple, natural, focusing on natural rhythm, for example in autumn the activities would be done using leaves, chestnuts, pumpkins, apples.

## CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

The role of ECE practitioners early on became central in the project. As play-based learning in some ways challenged certain taken-for-granted ideas about play, above all that play was the children's own. Working play-based rather presupposes that ECE practitioners take a more active role in children's play activities.

However, exactly what role ECE practitioners take is not a given, but it is a matter of being able to make assessments of the situation. It is also about making visible what goals you have for the children's play and acting based on these. Active work with roles is therefore not about acting in certain predetermined ways, but about being

able to change and adapt one's role based on the specific situation, starting from the goals of the activity. The fact that the adult role was identified as so central meant that in the project we came to work more with ECE practitioners' actions than with activities aimed at children. This builds on an understanding that sensitive ECE practitioners who actively participate in children's play in diverse ways for different purposes are a powerful tool for learning as well as to create joyful and stimulating play situations.





## Enriching symbolic play

### BACKGROUND

#### Symbolic play

Symbolic play is considered to be the most complicated form of play, as the child needs language to manage, negotiate, understand and further develop the play, while symbolic play requires the child to be able to abstract and play on several levels. Thereby, symbolic play linguistically constitutes an important but most difficult area to access if the child does not share a language with those who establish the play (Kibsgaard, 2015). Language forms an important bridge that binds the children together and enables play to develop.

Symbolic play, also known as pretend play or make-believe play, refers to a form of play in which children use objects, actions, or roles to represent something else, typically engaging in make-believe scenarios.

Symbolic plays have a crucial role in the development of children's language skills. It involves using objects, actions and language to represent something else, e.g. a child can use a toy car as a telephone and engage in a conversation, pretending to talk to someone.

Symbolic play allows children to practise and experiment with language in a meaningful and engaging way – using language to represent objects, actions and ideas. This use of symbols helps children understand that objects can have multiple meanings, improving their language representation skills.

#### Language development in symbolic play

The function of verbal language is central to the symbolic play. It is through language that the children create and maintain the imaginary world that keeps the play going and makes it possible to meet in a shared fantasy universe (Avnstrup & Hudecek, 2022). In play, children contribute to each other's communicative development. Dialogic conversation in shared fantasy play plays a key role in early learning of language and conceptual understanding. Three-year-olds, who talk a lot with their peers in pretend play, have e.g. two years later a significantly larger vocabulary than children who have not done this (Sommer, 2015)





In symbolic play, the children use language all the time. They negotiate and agree using language. But it is not simply used as a tool to convey content. Symbolic play requires the child to abstract and use language to develop, discuss, change, substantiate and further develop the game, at the same time that the game requires the child to abstract and play on several levels. The progress of the play assumes that the child negotiates and argues for his opinions. Symbolic play thus constitutes an important, but also difficult, field in terms of language, when the child may only partially share a language with the other children.

### **Imaginary play situation**

In the imaginary play situation, the children must have a common awareness and understanding of the situation they imagine. To build this shared understanding, the children must tell each other what and how they want to play. They communicate the content of the game, but at the same time they express (verbally and non-verbally) signals with a view to interpretations of the content. A child can, for example, say "and then there was a fire and the man burned inside" at the same time as he grabs his neck and shows with his body that he is about to suffocate. Such an expression helps to interpret the imagined play, and to define the playing circumstances, e.g. where the fire trucks are parked. In other words, to create a context. Through such communication, the children contribute to building a common understanding of the imaginary play situation (Elkonin, 1978).

To support the development of a joint imaginary play situation, it is important that the educators help the children to maintain and formulate their decisions. This happens partly through verbal formulations and perhaps drawings that can act as models (Broström, 1995).

When children agree on a play, they first define the theme of the play, e.g. "father-mother-children", after which they enter a negotiation about roles and rules. A girl says, for example "Then we said that I am the older sister, and you are the mother". This statement often serves as a starting point for a discussion: "No, why do I always have to be the older sister". Once the roles have been determined, the situation within which the realisation of the roles must take place is defined, e.g. one girl points to the windowsill and says: "Then we'll pretend the kitchen is there". After this, the children are ready to determine some play actions, which are often linked to a plot at this planning level. You can say that the children prepare a kind of playbook (Broström, 2002).

Where the younger kindergarten children unfold the entire act of play – they sleep, get up, wash themselves, set the table and eat – the older kindergarten children are able to shorten the actions. They do not carry out all the actions in detail, but let the single actions and scenes quickly replace each other, just as they replace actions with language: "and then we played, that we were at work, and now we sleep" (Broström, 2002).

### **Language stimulation through play**

In relation to language stimulation, play is important. The children develop abstract ways of thinking, and through play they do a whole lot of what we want them to do in the adult-directed activities (Kamp, 2028)

Although there is much evidence that play contributes to learning and development, this does not mean that children develop automatically when they play. It depends on how the child handles the play materials and unfolds the social interaction. The nature of this is, among other things, depending on the play opportunities offered, including physical conditions,



the existence of friendly relationships with peers and the adults' support for play. Linguistic development requires that language is combined with experience, and that the interlocutors have shared attention to objects and phenomena. The probability of catching children's attention is high when the child takes the initiative in an activity. Research indicates that when educators create a framework for play and qualify it, children's language development is strengthened (Sommer, 2015). Symbolic play and its complexity therefore constitute an important field for children's language development. Therefore, participation in the play is an important prerequisite for being able to understand and develop the play's theme in collaboration with others. Participation will give the child opportunities to use language to

negotiate, argue and position himself as a significant playmate. Children who do not master the language that appears in the play need help from the educators not only to get into the play, but also to develop it and be seen as a valuable participant in the play.

### Activities

Each organisation carried out an activity to change the play environment for the children. Exactly what they choose to change depended on which development opportunities that were identified in the mapping.

#### Change the conditions for symbolic play

1. In 1 to 3 situations, "force" yourself to take on a different position than you normally would in a similar situation.
2. Reflect on how your position affects the play and/or learning possibilities.
3. Reflect on your role in the observation.

### NATIONAL EXAMPLES

#### A STORY OF AN EXPANDED SYMBOLIC PLAY APPROACH FROM THE MUNICIPALITY OF PARMA

##### "PLAYING AT THE TRACK-TRAIN!"

6 children involved (2/3 years). During the morning in a part of the classroom with drawers containing different plays.

Four children: Carlotta, Olivia, Emilie, and Cristal are playing with some drawers they emptied. They begin to stack them trying to stand up.

Teachers that were observing them saw that they wanted to go all together on the tower made, but it was impossible for them...so they decide to interact with children asking: "what are you doing?" and Carlotta answer "a trip!" Teachers decide to support children in play asking them: "what do you need for a trip?" and Emilie say, "a train!". Teachers say: "for a train you need a track!". All the children enthusiastic say "a track!" and reinvent a building, putting drawers on a line creating a path. Other children, Ada and Flavio, attracted by the play observe and come to play they too.

"The track" repeats "Flavio" and Cristal plays the train sound.

After the play, before lunch, teachers read a story about a train to reinforce new words introduced in play. In the next few days, children repeat the play and the words "train" and "track".

Teachers reflect that their action of language in play promotes a change. The word "track" suggests children to create a path. A new mental organisation suggested with a word. The decision to read a book gives children more possibilities to reinforce language acquisition and to spread learning to other children as well.



## CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

In the Playing project the aspect of play in which children use different kinds of are in focus. One important outset in the project has been to give children more opportunities to participate in symbolic play as well as to give them opportunities to engage in different kinds of symbolic play to broaden their experiences and give them possibilities to learn through experience. The outset is to balance the aspect of fun with possibilities to learn. The idea is not to control play but rather make sure that children can access and be inspired to different kinds of symbolic play. In the mapping we noticed that there was a need to vary the play environments in different ways to allow the children to participate in different kinds of symbolic play. In the project, the national partners worked with their play environments in different ways depending on the needs in the local context. For some it was important to enrich the play environment by bringing in new objects, for others to give space for more varied play and, for some it has been important to bring the children's experiences from other contexts into the symbolic play. Children's symbolic play needs to be seen as codependent with the context in which it exists and for that reason the planning of the environment is an important part.

We see that the ECE practitioners can create opportunities for symbolic play

through the way they design the play environments, but also that the children themselves use the play environments in new and creative ways if they are given the opportunity. When planning play environments, it is important to think about aspects such as variety (e.g. that there is an opportunity for different types of play), change (e.g. that the children are allowed to discover new play opportunities through changes in the environment) and openness (e.g. that there are play materials that invite children to be imaginative and creative). Working with the play environment is thus about making concrete changes, but these do not always have to be 'big' or comprehensive. Sometimes you might want to change an entire play environment, but sometimes you might just add some new material to an existing play environment. What is important is that you think about and discuss the purpose of the change (e.g. what do we want to change and why?) and that you follow and evaluate the change. Furthermore, it is important not only to work with the environment as such, but we also see that the joint work and reflection is important so that the ECE practitioners have a common understanding of the children's play and use of the play environment. The interaction between concrete change and reflection is therefore central.

## Develop children's language

### BACKGROUND

#### Development of children's language through symbolic play

Linguistic interaction forms the foundation of social interaction between people.

During the first six years of life, the child undergoes significant development both linguistically, physically and socially. Language plays a major role in children's well-being as language is needed to express needs and to share experiences and thoughts,





i.e. that the language functions as an entry ticket not just to social communities but also to personal development. It is therefore through language that the child expresses his thoughts, feelings, opinions and needs. The child is born with an ability to learn language, and through linguistic interactions, cognitive processes are activated which contribute to developing linguistic structures. It is especially the stimulation of words through conversation that leads to linguistic and cognitive development (Olsen, 2015).

### Vocabulary

Vocabulary is activated in conversations when the children play with each other and the educators are involved, because it is precisely when the children are engaged in something they experience as meaningful and interesting that the receptivity to learning and development is greatest. The development of a vocabulary with great conceptual depth requires that concrete experiences in a social community are linked with linguistic structures and experienced through conversations with other language users. There must be a link between the word and the phenomenon/object. Without conversation, experiences remain just a sensory experience.

Through symbolic play, children get the opportunity to meet new words and concepts. When children engage in pretend play scenarios, children often use words they have heard in different contexts and expand their vocabulary. For example, while playing shop, they may use words like "cash register," "prices," or "sale" that are relevant to the scenario but may not come up in their everyday conversations. There is a correlation between the quality of the educators' vocabulary (number of different words) and the child's

acquisition of new words. It is of great importance how the educators describe objects and phenomena in the informal conversations with the children. The employees in the kindergartens should therefore reflect on how varied vocabulary the children are exposed to in different situations. Children must experience words in conversations that they themselves participate in or overhear conversations between others, to develop a vocabulary that enables them to formulate narratives and thus convey their own experiences (Olsen, 2015).

### Play and language development

You often try to support children's language in activities that are guided by adults, but children use significantly more words when they play. Justin Markussen-Brown (Kamp, 2018) points out in his field study that play holds great potential for language development if educators are involved in it.

“Children talk more when they are playing than when they are participating in structured activities, eating or the like. The point behind language-supported activities is to get the children to think more abstractly, but they already do that when they play. If we do not use play to support the children's language, we are missing a great opportunity. This does not mean that educators should not read with children or support them in other situations, but play is just important.”

(KAMP, 2018)

The field study showed that the kindergarten children used their language most when they played outside and second most when they played inside. They spoke least when eating and during adult-led activities. Language development requires not only that the children speak a lot,



but also that they communicate with adults with a more nuanced language (Kamp, 2018). Play has the potential to learn language, but the question is how to exploit this potential. Play is a good starting point for language stimulation, as it is based on the child's interests, curiosity and wonder. However, the potential for language development depends on the variation in the vocabulary and that elements, objects and processes are named during play. This means that it is important that the educators use a varied and specific vocabulary in spontaneous conversations with the children.

One approach could be symbolic play, where the children constantly use the language. They negotiate and agree using language, and it is not just used as a tool to convey content. The children must use the language in play at the same time as they learn language in play.

In the play, the children cultivate the form side of the language, they play with the words and often use a sentence melody and distort the voice in accordance with the role, which is assumed to develop a meta phonological competence (Vedeler, 1987).

When the child through play becomes familiar with producing, listening to and understanding different concrete sounds and sound expressions (phonological competence), the basis is created for this to be transferred to and used in other linguistic contexts, i.e. an overall linguistic hearing (meta phonological competence), which e.g. means that the child can hear and understand how the syllables sound in the words. Mathema phonological competence is seen as a necessary basis for developing writing and reading skills (Lundberg, 1984). Thus, it can be argued that play indirectly leads to reading (Broström, 2002).



*Playful activity to stimulate the acquisition of new words (Municipality of Parma)*

## COMMUNICATIVE SKILLS

Play is vital for children. It is a door opener for interaction with others. In children's communities, the child develops the ability to communicate. When a child expresses an idea, this can be interpreted in different ways. The child's play idea contains a certain content, which it expresses at the same time as it signals how the content should be interpreted. To understand the message, receivers must consider both aspects. Communication in play thus contains several levels. The children send some play signals, which the playmates must be able to interpret to participate in the game. Through play, the children thus become familiar with social interaction and communication (Bateson, 1972).

The communicative competence also includes knowledge of social rules such as e.g. wait for turn, to listen and to give space to others. Body language forms an important part of communication in children's shared fantasy play. Different roles in play require knowledge of certain forms of bodily behaviour and forms of bodily expression. A very large part of communication takes place through bodily expressions. The ability to use appropriate verbal and bodily expressions and appropriate actions,



which can be recognized by other children as meaningful and acceptable, is crucial to whether a play can work. The possibility of gaining access to play and the ability to function in joint play also largely depends on the child's communicative abilities. The communicative competencies play a decisive role in relation to whether the child's learning patterns are self-reinforcing in a positive or negative direction. Therefore, an important pedagogical focus area is how to support the children's communicative play competence, so that they can gain access to the games and engage in them. This is both about purely linguistic competences such as vocabulary and pronunciation and about the child's cultural competences in the form of knowledge of cultural stories and figures that children's play is inspired by. Children's knowledge of the cultural narratives that are at play in the children's group is of decisive importance for their opportunities to behave and develop linguistically (Avenstrup & Hudecek, 2022).

## ACTIVITIES

### Enhance the possibilities for language learning

- Reflect on the environment. What possibilities are there for children to acquire, develop and use language?
- Make a change (designing space; materials; time for play; groups; adult roles/participation)
- What have you changed and why?
- Describe the situation before the change.
- Reflect over the situation after the change.



*Embodied language learning in play (Elmer)*

## NATIONAL EXAMPLES

### A STORY OF DEVELOPING LANGUAGE SKILLS FROM BØRNEINSTITUTIONEN HOLLUF-PILE TINGKÆR

I work with children between 3-6 years old. I have learned from this project that developing the children's language skills means a lot to the children's social skills.

When I attend the children's play more, it helps their social and language skills and especially children who struggle in play situations could get access to meaningful play. This group often didn't have any playing partners/ friends to play with. I now repeat more often the words that the children are trying to say or develop the already existing vocabulary that the children have. That focus I have talked with my colleagues about, and we are in a process of changing our practices because of this project. Now these children have access to improve their skills and have meaningful games when I attend in different positions of the teacher's role in the games.

My biggest wow experience is that my participation in the children's play, and teachers' changing roles is the best way to develop children's language skills.



## CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

Language development draws everything together in the Playing project. To facilitate children's language development, the ECE practitioners need to be present in children's play. The development of language can benefit from different ECE practitioners' roles, but it is important to guide the children and provide them with experiences that expand their language and communicative abilities.

Central to benefiting the children's language development has also been to use different communicative resources in ECE practitioners' role to strengthen the language. Body language, images, experiences and materials are examples of such resources that ECE practitioners have used to enrich ECE settings and contribute to creating language-stimulating environments and contexts.

## Peer review process



### BACKGROUND

The playing project envisaged that an important part of the activities was focused on the peer review conducted in four different ECE settings (Belgium, Sweden, Italy and Spain) of the project partners.

Through this output the partners wanted to create a toolkit useful to possibly evaluate all ECE services in Europe on the correct implementation of play-based learning methodologies in symbolic play activities but also define a methodology to conduct an international peer review.

The aim of the peer review process was:

- **ENHANCING ONGOING PERSONAL PRACTICE**
- **ENGAGING IN REFLECTIVE, CONSTRUCTIVE AND ANALYTICAL DISCUSSION WITH A PEER ON THE USE OF PLAY-BASED LEARNING ACTIVITIES**
- **SHARING GOOD PRACTICE AND ALLOWING FOR ONGOING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT.**

The peer review developed explicit and defined criteria for peer reviewers that can guide the reviewers through the

whole peer review process, starting from how to get into peer reviewing, how to organise the peer visit, how to write the reports and provide constructive feedback.

The development of the peer review output has been complementary to the development of the training methodology, as it assesses how much of the play-based methodology offered has been successfully put into practice in the reviewed ECE setting. The toolkit for the peer review includes several materials, which have been tested during the different peer reviews conducted and modified, if necessary, to allow greater effectiveness:

1. **GUIDELINES FOR PEERS**
2. **SELF-REPORT FOR SELF-ASSESSMENT TEMPLATES**
3. **INTERVIEW TEMPLATE AND GUIDELINES FOR ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION**
4. **FINAL REPORT TEMPLATE**
5. **IMPROVEMENT STRATEGY FOR THE REVIEWED SCHOOL GUIDELINES**



The whole toolkit with the templates is available in English, Swedish, Italian, French, Flemish, Danish and Spanish on the Playing project website.

**CLICK HERE**



## QUALITY AREAS IN THE PEER-REVIEW PROCESS

During the peer-review process the following quality areas were highlighted both in the self-report, observation, and the interviews. The aspects were chosen because they are closely linked to how play-based learning can be conducted in an ECE setting.

- Role of the practitioner
- Environment
- Materials
- Organisation
- Children

### *Role of the practitioner*

In the quality area role of the practitioner, the following aspects were highlighted: type of role, flexibility in role changing, interaction, communication/language stimulation and group orientated versus individual orientated.

The observations show that the observed practitioners take (consciously or unconsciously) different roles in the situations. It was also common that the practitioner had a specific role when an activity started and then shifted several times during the activity. The model with different kinds of roles such as, for example introducer, helper, observer or co-player helped to identify and categorise different roles during play sessions. The model also helped to see if some roles were more common in one context than others. The reflection about different roles concluded that some roles can be more difficult to adopt than others and that it can be about what you feel comfortable with as a person. For example, traditionally you as a practitioner may often have had a controlling or supervisory role,

which means that the role of co-player may be more difficult to adopt. In such situations you need to actively try to change your role and action. In relation to roles the focus was also upon flexibility in role changing. This meant, for example, the extent to which practitioners were able to change their different roles in terms of how the activity proceeded. The observations show that changing roles is easier if practitioners have had the opportunity to reflect beforehand on which different roles would be most suitable during specific situations. Another important factor is also if you feel confident in the situation, it is easier to adapt and change roles in relation to what the situation requires.

The aspects of interaction and communication/language stimulation are closely connected. The observations show that the interaction differs. One reflection in the peer-review was that even here it is important to have a “communicative goal” with the activity. In practice, examples were shown when teachers have planned to help children gain knowledge about different fruits. Despite a formulated goal it can be difficult to remember to work actively with communication.

In relation to the youngest children, the observations show that on many occasions the interaction mainly was with the practitioner. This result emphasises the importance to develop interaction patterns that support interaction both between practitioner and children but also between children themselves.

### *Environment*

In the quality area environment, the following criteria were used during the observations: outside/inside, preparation of the space, recognizability of the space and inspiration.

<sup>1</sup> In the peer-review material we used the concept teacher. For the sake of consistency in this text, we use the term 'practitioner' here.



The observations show that the participating ECE settings had very different spatial conditions in relation to environmental aspects. In some of the settings the access to the outdoor environment was limited and therefore children don't have the ability to spend so much time outdoors. This may also be a cultural aspect in terms of how ECE education has traditionally been organised. In the Nordic countries the outdoor environment is highly valued in EC settings and often a huge part of the day takes place outdoors. These differences both in relation to condition but also to EC traditions were recognized during the observations.

In most cases the indoor environment was more elaborate than the outdoor environment with more considered spaces that could invite opportunities for play. An exception to that was the Danish and the Swedish settings where there was less of a distinction between indoor/outdoor environments. Observations also show that activities often took place in a "continuous flow". This meant that an activity could start indoors and then continue and then develop outdoors. These kinds of observations inspired "new thinking" on how the environment could be elaborated to contribute to enhancing and supporting children's play.

The time for preparation for ECE practitioners before an activity is often limited. Therefore a strength that was recognized during the observations was the use of so-called "multipurpose rooms". That means that a room can have many different functions during the day. This kind of flexibility can contribute to giving children a variety of repertoires of different play opportunities.

The observations also show that in some cases the children and their play should have benefited if the environment would have been more inspiring.

Here it is also of importance to look closer to gender aspects like is any space associated with a specific gender which means that, for example, only girls or only boys choose to play there. In Swedish preschools, traditional play corners for family play have been challenged by, for example, mixing different types of play with each other. In conclusion, this shows the importance of practitioners having a clear idea of the environment in which the children are living.

It is also important to continuously observe the environment and be flexible and able to change it based on the needs of the group of children.

### *Materials*

The third quality area was materials and to evaluate this the following criteria were used during the peer-review: presentation, introduction of the material, quantity, quality, type of material and accessibility. Materials are in many ways related to the environment and therefore many of the arguments above can also be transferred to the discussion of materials.

To enhance children's play it is important that children have access to materials that are stimulating and promote different forms of play. Materials could be either closed or open ended, that is, it could be, more or less, "given" how a material could be used. In the ECE setting it is important that children encounter different types of materials. Another issue to consider is how different materials are made accessible to children; are the materials placed on the children's level so that they can reach them? Do they need to ask permission before using the materials?; are materials presented in an inviting manner?; how is material added and removed to offer variety and curiosity?





*Examples of different kinds of materials (fixed, open ended, and natural) to facilitate different kinds of play in the ECE setting (Escola Sant Josep, Municipality of Parma, Linköping municipality).*

### *Organisation*

Organisation is not the main focus of the Playing project, but it is still important to recognize the importance of different organisational conditions because it can affect the possibilities in the work in general. Organisation can be about the size of the group, the number of ECE practitioners working with a group, which premises and outdoor environments are available or what the assignment various ECE settings have. In IO1, mapping of play-based learning as a teaching method you can read more about the national curriculums and play in the participating countries.

In IO1, mapping of play-based learning as a teaching method you can read more about the national curriculums and play in the participating countries.

### *Children*

Although ECE practices are in focus, it is also important to take into account the children's actions and opportunities in different situations. Pedagogical practice, play and teaching are interactive, which means that it is not as simple as practitioners being able to design activities and get a certain outcome. Rather, it is important in every situation to be sensitive to the children's actions and be prepared to change the activity based on their way of acting. In every situation, the ECE practitioner needs to be sensitive to the children but also recognize children as actors. Children's own thoughts and experiences are an important educational tool and the practitioner's ability to incorporate these into ongoing activities,



to change their own role based on what the children do or to let the children participate in how the play develops is an important part of play-responsive teaching. Practitioners' ability to do this was noted in the reviews. Another important aspect that emerged in the reviews was how the children reacted to the various activities, for example the extent to which they participated, showed commitment or communicated. Something that is important when observing children's actions is to be careful about what can be seen.

It is otherwise easily the case that as an adult you go to your own ideas about what children are and how children should behave. When children's participation is to be observed, it is therefore important to go to concrete descriptions of what is happening instead of attributing different feelings to children for what is happening. An example could be the following:

You observe a situation where an ECE practitioner and a group of children are playing in a post office environment that has been set up. When you write down your observation, you write that "the children are having fun" and that this means that it is a positive activity from the children's perspective. The question is what does "fun" stand for? What are the children doing that you interpret as "having fun"?

There are two problems with this description 1) that it is based on an interpretation of what the children feel, it may be that despite their behavior they are not having fun at all 2) there is an idea that children who are engaged in an activity must also think it is fun, which can also cause you to miss out on other engaged participation in the play, such as deep concentration. Instead, try to be concrete in your description. A description of the observed situation could be: All children participate in the play, no one appears to be outside. During the play, the children communicate, both with each other and with the practitioner. All children talk to another child during the activity, whether they have the role of working at the post office or being customers. The atmosphere is upbeat as small talk is heard all the time.

By being more concrete, you avoid including your pre-understanding in the interpretation. You also get a deeper description which is a better basis for discussion.

## NATIONAL EXAMPLES

In relation to the peer review process, we want to give two national examples, one overall reflection from Denmark of the general experience of being in this

process, and one example of working specifically with two of the qualitative areas (environment and materials) from Sweden.

### A STORY OF CHANGE UCL: FOCUS ON THE METHODOLOGY AND PEER REVIEW PROCESS

I am employed at UCL, University College Lillebælt, and work as a consultant and teacher in the preschool area. In my work, I am often out to observe both children and staff to subsequently support them in developments and changes in concrete everyday practice. Before joining Erasmus, I tried to find different tools that I could use when observing. It didn't quite work out, so I had the practice of writing down what I saw, and writing down the dialogue I heard between children/children and children/pedagogues.



After participating in Erasmus, I have discovered the possibility of working more systematically with my observations. It makes so much sense to use the five perspectives: role of the teacher, environment, materials, organisation, and between the children.

I have subsequently made it so that I still write down what I see and hear. The new thing is that in the subsequent reflection processes I use the five perspectives to analyse our observations. This brings about the change that, to a greater extent, we see many more factors we can change in the children's learning environment and in their learning processes. My new experience is that we have become more nuanced and more systematic in our reflections on practice.

## A STORY OF CHANGING A 'FORGOTTEN' SPACE FROM LINKÖPING MUNICIPALITY

Together educators and children developed a preschool learning environment using a systematic way of working. We want to design an inspiring limited learning environment that creates opportunities to play and interact, which can lead to learning together. We had observed a forgotten area beside some windows. There was a bench and materials there, but the children never seemed to use it.

We wanted to change this limited learning environment "the bench", by adding exploratory materials to attract the children to play and learn. We also moved the bench so that the children could work more together. By designing an inspiring learning environment in the department that attracts the children to play and learn and creates conditions for interaction. We also wanted to inspire the children to explore the material in the learning environment and make the children aware of the functions, and concepts of the material. We also wanted to make the children curious about interacting in the learning environment both with each other but also with the pedagogues.

What we saw was that this unused place started to attract the children, this was both related to the new materials and the new arrangement of the furniture. Changing an environment both spur the curiosity of the children, but it was also important that the materials were interesting to the children.



"The bench" after the changes



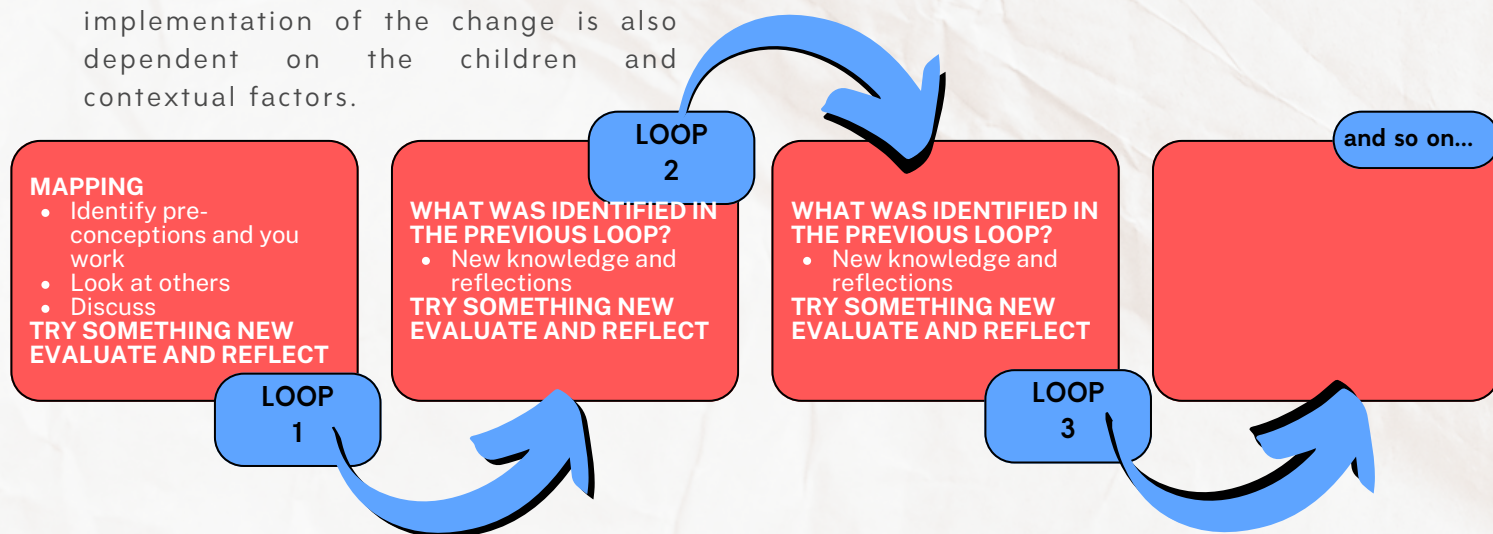
## 4. Evaluating



In every activity that has been carried out evaluation has been of highest importance. Changing practice must be seen as being in a process where every change implemented must be evaluated as changes you make might not get the results you expected. Educational practices are relational and even if the ECE practitioners plan for a specific change to get a certain result, the implementation of the change is also dependent on the children and contextual factors.

This also means that the same action might result in different changes in different settings or situations.

For this reason, the playing project has used a model for working with change inspired from action research. In such a model evaluation is done throughout the process.



## 4. Final reflection



In this concluding part we will first give examples from each national organisation of what the Playing

project has meant in their organisations and then summarise the common experiences and conclusions from the project.

### OVERALL OUTCOMES FOR THE NATIONAL PARTNERS

#### BELGIUM, ELMER

Under guidance of our pedagogical coach we had already the experience of organising regular meetings of reflection with the teachers. We wanted to use this experience in the project of PLAYING, and it worked! Teachers, staff and pedagogical coach started to experiment on symbolic play in the groups and shared ideas and activities during the meetings. Each meeting they became more enthusiastic. With the help of the peer-review, first we could show what we worked on. Secondly, we received very useful feedback, specifically on the need to focus more on the language acquisition of the children and of the interaction between the children. We worked out a self-evaluation tool for language stimulation and a “play-circle” as an instrument to keep the things we learned in our organisation.



## “ SPAIN, ESCOLA SANT JOSEP.....

The role of play and the impact of the project:

We always try learning through play and experiential learning. We use games on a daily basis to make children learn different concepts of our curriculum of preschool education. We also use some worksheets, but always after an activity and with a planned reason.

The role of games is very important: merely body-related playing (with feet and hands), unplanned handling of objects, targeted exploration and testing of objects, function-oriented playing (e.g. use of clothes pegs at a line), symbolic games, using toys to learn real situations from the child's everyday experience (shopping, going to a doctor/a hairdresser) towards playing and inventing fictive situations, using new technologies for interactive games.

The project made us realise we should think out of the box: use different spaces, not only the classroom for different activities (for example the corridor for free play); use natural, recyclable, simple materials for symbolic play; dedicate more time to do the observation and create charts for it; discuss the role of the teachers during the meetings and try different approaches; we have decided to create spaces for practising handwriting.

## “ SWEDEN, LINKÖPING MUNICIPALITY.....

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## “ DENMARK, BØRNEINSTITUTIONEN HOLLUF-PILE TINGKÆR

The role of play and the impact of the project:

The effects of this project have had a huge impact on our organization. To be able to focus on the topic of adult's roles in children's play have made the whole organization talk about this issue. Do we attend enough, and if not, why? How can we make all staff members aware of and work with their roles? How can we arrange reflection meetings, so we can discuss the quality of our work and thereby ensure playing quality for the children?

We have had many meetings to discuss this and to ensure equivalence within the organization. Each of our eight kindergartens and nurseries have scheduled reflection time.



We also try to arrange so that the staff can take on different roles and participate in the children's play in diverse ways. The managers in the eight houses help to organize this so that the staff can focus on reflection and how to be with the children.

## “ ——— ITALY, MUNICIPALITY OF PARMA ————— ”

What did the SERN Project mean for us?

- Sharing among different professionals on the topic of play had a big influence in our formation.
- The dialogue among different pedagogical approaches and cultural realities created a community of adults and children.
- The possibility to visit and know different ECE services managed in different ways, public and private, gave us a different perspective on pedagogical organisations and educational topics.
- We have understood more effectively the role of the teachers and educators in children's play. The importance of language and symbolic codes in communication among children and children and adults is another important acquisition.
- We have learnt about different ways of designing and organising educational spaces and materials in relation to the pedagogical project of the different services visited.
- We have developed a broader view of the pedagogical approach for 0 to 6 years.
- We have learned to construct an evaluation which is never definitive but which must always be seen in relation to the observed context. The provisional nature of the evaluation emphasises the importance of the gaze with which one looks.
- The physical journey: being physically in a different space is an extraordinary learning source.
- The peer review (learning by experience) was the exchange par excellence, the coordination group (learning by reflecting) represented the reflection and systematisation of ideas. However, these two moments were in constant constructive dialogue. The relaunch of the project was in this generativity of exchange.
- The number of groups travelling allowed constant exchange and comparison during the visit which increased knowledge and sharing of points of view.

### CONCLUDING DISCUSSIONS

We want to end this report by making an overall reflection on what the Playing project has meant for the participating partners and how European cooperation can contribute to developing play-responsive learning.

As the national descriptions show, the processes and lessons learned from the project have been different. Each partner has its own unique conditions and ECE is organised in different ways in different national contexts.

The goals of ECE also differ between countries. This means that the space for play and the view of the role of play in ECE varied when we started the project. To work with the exact same changes was therefore not realistic. Instead, the work process described in this report can be said to be based on two things: 1) the individual organisation's conditions and self-evaluation, and 2) exchange of experiences and common reflection between European partners.



This means that the training methodology can be applied in different types of organisations, regardless of whether play has a central or peripheral role from the beginning. In the project, it has been important to start from the needs of each partner. Developing play-responsive teaching has thus not been about everyone doing the same, but rather that each partner within the common frames has made changes appropriate for their practice. This has been done by valuing and reflecting on what happens in the own organisation and based on mapping of practices, participating in joint conversations and discussions about the project's focus areas. The joint discussions have been important to challenge the view and understanding of our own practice and what needs to be developed since an outside view can help us see what we take for granted. The peer-review process has also been central to transnational learning. By participating in each other's activities and being able to review what is happening in teaching in a structured way, we have been able to contribute with our perspectives on what is happening in the different national contexts, but also bring good examples back to our own organisations.

Working with one leg in the own organisation and one leg in the European collaboration has also meant that the different partners have reached different results since play, the roles of the adults and language development work have been based on local needs. However, this has taken place within a common framework where we, through various reflexive activities, have helped each other to challenge and change our organisations and the teaching of young children. Working in this way based on the needs of one's own organisations contributes to sustainable business development.



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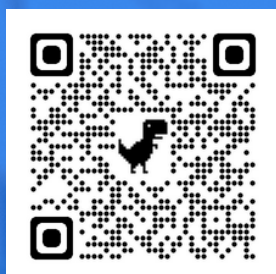








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