



| Report Case Study Lithuania



Building collaborative learning community

Lithuanian Case Study



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1 Contextualization

In Lithuania, the responsibility for **whole** Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is located within education (**integrated system**). The ministry of education perceives ECEC as a first educational stage. Children attend a **unitary setting** (for the whole age range) until the start of primary education (unitary settings exist in only a third of European countries).

ECEC provision is divided into two parts. The first part is non-obligatory pre-school education. The pre-school education curriculum is designed for children from birth until they begin attending the pre-primary education curriculum. Children must start pre-primary education in the calendar year that they turn 6. Pre-primary education lasts for one year.



In 2005 MoE essentially changed the approach to designing the curriculum of pre-school education as the national curriculum was replaced by a process of designing decentralised curricula at the level of pre-school institutions. Based on the Outline of Criteria for Preschool Education Curriculum and taking into consideration the needs, traditions and also material and pedagogic potential, every pre-school establishment must develop its own Curricula. Each ECEC setting (**teachers, parents, representatives of local community**) decides on its priorities, principles, goals, detailed content, teaching methods, educational materials, how to organize the environment, how to involve parents, how to assess children achievements and how to inform parents about it, how to evaluate the quality of the program.

Recommendation refers to way of **working in a team**, how to agree on goals and objectives, principles, what is most important for this particular community. Pre-primary education takes place in accordance with the **nationally approved** general curriculum for pre-primary education.

According to top level (national) regulations and recommendations equal status is given to 'care' and 'education' - a holistic/*educare* approach to early childhood. A holistic approach to children's development is put in place, giving space to learning/playing/caring at the same time, without the possibility to distinguish or hierarchically divide them. In Lithuanian language when speaking about ECEC we use word "ugdymas" which contains education and care as unity.

The institution implementing the rights and obligations of the owner supervises the ECEC setting. The owner can be a municipality, state, private actor. Each family has the right to choose which kind of institution – state, municipality or private – they wish their child to attend. However, in preschool education, the right to choose does not mean that a child is guaranteed a place in the desired ECEC setting. As pre-primary education is compulsory, every child is guaranteed a place in a state or municipal educational institution.

The importance of early childhood education and care (ECEC) is well recognized in Lithuania. The Lithuanian ECEC professional community shares a tradition of concern with the structural dimensions of ECEC quality – ensuring adequate space, group sizes, staffing, facilities and hygiene – and it has developed a widely shared understanding of the essential cognitive, emotional and social skills that children need to develop in their early years. Still there is not enough emphasis that education takes place not only in the

playroom or outside but also during the 'routines' moments (hygiene, sleeping, eating) and how the whole staff (also the professional that serves the food) can be involved in co-reflecting about the organization of the for example eating moment.

Lithuanian teachers are required to hold a bachelor's degree and are trained before beginning work in ECEC settings. They receive compensation under the same policies as other teachers in the education system. Teachers in Lithuania are considered a highly qualified workforce compared to many OECD countries. According to the teacher's working in ECEC job description, among others, teacher performs these functions: use appropriate pedagogical approaches; create stimulating learning environments; support children's development, ensure their health and well-being; make substantial room for learning through play; find the right balance between adult-initiated and child initiated activities; ensures a meaningful and safe presence of children outside: organizes various activities (research, games, observations, excursions), ensures the change of calm and active activities; ensures safe and peaceful sleep of children; involve parents in children's learning; organizing the educational process, teacher **combines** children's **education and care**.

According to the teacher's assistant working in ECEC job description, among others, "they are involved in educational activities and participate in them as much as possible". Still in the practice, as in many other EU countries, teacher's assistants are seen as the ones that mostly 'take care' and are not involved in 'education'.

Lithuanian study "The content of pre-school and pre-primary education and quality of its implementation" revealed what is most important for pre-school educators and other specialists working in ECEC settings: the child's well-being; meaningful, child-centered educational process in the group; a safe environment that promotes children's development; high achievement and continuous progress of the child. In the process of a child's education, the quality of interactions with the pre-school educator is very important.

"The entire daily life of children in the institution is recognized as an integral part of the curriculum. Child develops at any time of the day - by playing, participating in activities initiated or organized by the preschool teacher, performing household tasks (covering the table, handling toys, etc.). The emphasis is on integrity rather than separability - education takes place not only in a closed space - in a group, but also by using all other possibilities - the child is educated in the real and virtual world, both in the institution and outside it. ... It is important how preschool educators interact with children, how they communicate and collaborate with other staff, how children, staff and parents of children interact. In the institution it is ensured careful adult care of the child according to his or her age and abilities" (Pre-school Education Methodological Recommendations).

Currently great attention in Lithuania is paid for efforts to increase accessibility of preschool and pre-primary education in rural areas in order to reduce social exclusion. One of the forms of improving accessibility is establishment and development of universal multi-functional centres in rural areas. One of the mandatory conditions for the establishment of such centers is establishment of the group in which preschool or pre-primary educational program is implemented.

Participation rates in ECEC:

Age 1	Age 2	Age 3	Age 4	Age 5	Age 6
15,6	66,87	82,89	86,02	89,44	97,1

In 2015 MoE initiated project “Modernization of old ECEC buildings” and invited Vilnius Academy of Arts (Department of Interior Design) to provide the recommendations for modernization of educational spaces located in old ECEC buildings of typical architecture. The aim of the project was to improve the quality of children's education by evaluating and proposing projects for the modernization of educational spaces. New solutions for old spaces were recommended. In creative workshops, children their parents, preschool communities along with architects searched and offered ideas as they imagine what needs to be changed, what spaces would meet all expectations of children, teachers and parents. The recommendations for architectural solution will be used by those who will build new kindergartens or will renovate the old buildings.

2 The EDUCAS path

2.1 Who was involved?

The aim of the international Educas project (*Space and Educare: Creating child and family friendly learning spaces in ECEC centres – Erasmus+ KA2*) was to create ECEC environments that support children’s development in a holistic way, taking into account the diverse needs of children and families, with special attention to the ones at risk of social exclusion.

Two ECEC services were involved in the EDUCAS project in Lithuania, supported by UIC - Center for Innovative Education.



Aukštelkės mokykla-daugiafunkcis centras is a public rural school that aims to become a center of attraction for the whole community. The school not only provides primary and secondary education, it also has preschool, run

projects for school and community. In total 120 children are enrolled in the whole school. From this number, 75 children (from 2 to 6 years old) attend four groups of preschool. During the EDUCAS project Šiauliai district politicians established the first joint school in Lithuania, original not only in its structure but also in an exclusive name. After merging the Bubiai, Aukstelke and Kurtuvėnai schools, the Dubysos Aukstupio School of Siauliai District was established, which operates in three buildings and have 400 students in total.



The unified school model allows to preserve smaller schools in rural areas by saving administrative costs. As well as guaranteed children to go to schools in their area and do not feel social exclusion not only for education but also for afterschool activities.

Together with the preschool education teacher, educational activities are organized by a special educator, a speech therapist, a health care specialist, a music teacher, a psychologist and a physical education teacher. Pupils with special needs are included in quality learning in the institution. The educational content and process is adapted considering the needs and possibilities of each child, expectations of parents (guardians) and following the recommendations of the pedagogical - psychological service. The school creates environments focused on the needs of children and families living in the community. The school maintains family-friendly social and physical environments focused on strengthening communication, understanding, and support for the child and each other. The school together with partners provides social and youth employment services to the families of the community. ECEC setting provides safe, supportive, and stable environment for children and their family members.



'**Vaikystės Sodas**' is the biggest chain of private preschools in the Baltic states. The preschools are situated in 4 biggest cities in Lithuania: Vilnius, Kaunas, Klaipėda, Panevėžys. Children (from 1 to 6 years old) attend the preschool.

"Vaikystės Sodas is more like a Lab where modern educational ideas are developed and accomplished. It is a proof that possibilities are endless." Vaikystės Sodas curriculum is based on Dr. Austėja Landsbergienė contextual education curriculum, Reggio Emilia approach, Swedish National Preschool curriculum, educational ideas of H. Gardner and L. Vygotsky and scientific research. There are 4 main areas of Vaikystės Sodas curriculum:

- literacy,
- science,
- emotional intelligence,
- mathematics and IT.

The classroom's environment is divided into centers (math, literacy, engineering, etc.), children are working in small groups. All the supplies and materials are on children level, they are encouraged to be independent when working and playing in the classroom. Children's competencies are developed through positive interactions, daily activities, play and activities in a variety of educational environments (libraries, museums, national parks, etc.).

"Vaikystės Sodas is the place where children grow and teachers bloom. Guided by the values of our organization, we create warm and comfortable environment to work in. In fact, the teachers at Vaikystės Sodas are creative and talented experts of their field. We truly believe that the key to success is to work and grow together" (teacher).



Ugdymo inovacijų centras

The Lithuanian pilot has been coordinated by UIC and developed together with the staff of the Aukštėlkės mokykla-daugiafunkcis centras and 'Vaikystės Sodas'. In the frame of the EDUCAS project the staff of ECEC services had specific questions:

- how to adapt pre-school spaces to everyone's needs;
- how to make the learning processes of children visible to parents;
- how ECEC quality should be linked to a holistic approach in which education and care are intertwined and all spaces and all routine moments are equally important;
- how ensure that low qualified assistants would understand that they not only take care of the physical needs of children, but also participate in education and vice versa enhance understanding of teachers of the crucial role of 'care' in the upbringing of children;
- how to ensure integrity of activities: continuity of indoor activities in outdoor spaces;
- how to provide children possibility to explore the world visiting community resources outside the school (libraries, museums, theaters, parks, forests, rivers, etc.).

Within 16 months, an action research path took place, starting with a need analysis followed by a CPD path with the ECEC staff involved. In the development of the pilot, an important role has been played by the local Stakeholder Group, which was composed by representatives of Ministry of Education, local governments, teacher training institution and practitioners. The Stakeholder Group gave us valuable advice concerning the Recommendations for policy and practice.

2.2 Needs analysis

We started needs analysis with literature review in Lithuanian language. Analysing existing studies, governmental orders, methodological recommendations on ECEC environments published in Lithuania it was possible to form an opinion about the attitude towards the environment and its importance when speaking about the quality of education and care in ECEC settings and learn what kind of recommendations related to the environment teachers use in their practice, how space can support children's development how space can support an *educare* approach, how space can support the inclusion of all children and families.



According to the literature review in Lithuanian language space should be child-centered, with opportunities for children to play actively, make choices and take responsibility. Space should be enriched with a variety of educational environments (libraries, museums, shops, national parks, etc.). The teaching team has a fundamental role in creating the environment and transforming it into a kind of laboratory where children experiment many roles. Space should be welcoming, accessible, and comfortable and create a sense of belonging, enhance children's wellbeing and involvement of families. At the same time Lithuanian studies show a significant interest of the government on spatial issues, with the production of many documents, recommendations, methodological tools and orders to provide indications for education professionals and designers. Lithuanian literature also pay attention to space as a dimension to enhance inclusion, in terms of promotion of equal opportunities for all children and participation of parents and communities.



After a comprehensive literature review, we conducted four focus groups with families and staff in two ECEC centers involved in the project: Vaikystes Sodas and Aukstelke School – Multifunctional Center. In all focus groups, high quality of discussions occurred. We were thankful to teachers and parents for their readiness to cooperate on rethinking and improving learning environment in ECEC centers in the future.

The main findings and conclusions after discussions in 4 focus groups:

- Physically safe environment is important, but psychologically safe and stimulating environment even more influences children's development.
- Clear understanding and expectation of parents that in the preschool the most important is that their children can learn how to communicate, share, take responsibilities, respect different points of view.
- The presence of cozy spaces as well as spaces in the classrooms in which children can play/be alone are important to meet children's need for privacy, withdrawal and intimacy.
- Continuity home – preschool is very important as it helps children faster develop their knowledge and skills; toys from home give them feeling of safety and comfort.
- It is important to incorporate varied, plentiful, natural materials that stimulate children to explore, play and learn. Parents would like to see bigger difference in materials, less activities with very strict templates, more cognitive games and possibilities to stimulate creativity and possibility for children
- There is communication gap between educators and parents. There are problems which can be solved on the level of managers. The educators should better involve family members in shared decision making about their children's learning as well as concerning children's learning environment, invite to work together in order to provide suitable spaces for child development.
- There are some contradictions in opinions of parents and teachers speaking about autonomy and interactions during routine moments.
- It is important to strengthen not only understanding that all the spaces where children live their days contribute to their growth in a holistic way, but what is especially important - to put this into everyday practice. The sleeping room, the toilet and the eating room have the same importance like the playing rooms.
- Learning environment outside the classroom and outside the preschool can be used better for activities that encourage exploration, experimentation, and creativity. As everything that can be learned and taught indoors can be done outdoors.

"I never thought about it. It is obvious that our reflection and feedback from parents can help to improve the overall quality of the pedagogical practice" (teacher).

The two Lithuanian ECEC centers involved in EDUCAS in addition to the focus groups conducted a survey of all parents to find out their views on the quality of services provided at the institution. Each teacher presented the opinions she collected in her group to the colleagues, the information was summarized at the level of separate group and the whole institution. Parental responses allowed teachers to decide what should be changed in the school or classroom environment. A survey of parents and further discussions with the school community showed that many parents understand that well-being is the basis for successful child development.

Understanding the importance of parent 's involvement, teachers from Aukštelkės mokykla-daugiafunkcis centras conducted a questionnaire survey in the institution, aiming to learn how to improve the cooperation between parents and teachers. Survey and semi-structured interview revealed that first of all they need to improve the quality of communication with parents. The results of the survey helped to indicate the main obstacles for cooperation with parents. One of the obstacles, according to parents, was that teachers talk to them mostly when there are problems with their child. If parents are mainly getting negative information from teachers, they start avoiding further communication with educators. At the same time, teachers were complaining that some parents deliberately withhold information that would help teachers better respond to children's needs. The results showed that parents would like educators to devote time to individual conversations with parents through all means of communication.

2.3 Implementation

Taking into account the main findings emerging from the literature review, results of the focus groups conducted, a questionnaire survey of parents and the first transnational learning activity in Italy, a CPD (continuous professional development) path started with the ECEC staff and families involved, supported by UIC.

2.3.1 Main areas identified

- Strengthening of cooperation between teachers, teacher's assistants (technical workers) and parents – building learning community.
- Stimulation of deeper understanding of the *educare* approach and practical implementation of this approach in everyday practice, giving 'education' and 'care' the same value.
- Foster effective use of learning environment not only in the classroom, but also outside the classroom and outside the preschool.
- Stimulate family participation in shared decisions about their children's learning and the environment in which they learn.

Building collaborative learning community

When (re)designing ECEC spaces, dedicated spaces for staff to meet, discuss, reflect together, exchange, and share their experiences and concerns were created. A school becomes a learning organization when the whole community participates in the self-evaluation process, where the quality of activities is constantly reflected, systematic cooperation at all possible levels takes place, and attention focuses on the most relevant (both strong and challenging) aspects of activities, that determine the quality of education. Having a clear focus, as well as shared ownership of goals helped to promote collaboration between teachers,



provided opportunity to learn from each other, visit each other's classrooms and to provide constructive feedback. Weekly meetings provided possibilities for sharing achievements and challenges, creating an atmosphere where the success of others could be shared and replicated. Each ECEC centre developed a professional development plan which reflected the aspirations of all community to improve the quality of education through a well-thought-out and discussed directions of professional development. Developing common education and

training programmes for all staff working in an ECEC helped to create a shared agenda and understanding of quality, taking in account *educare* approach and importance of learning environment. Having a common path responded to the need to give the whole team the possibility of reflecting together on their practice, from their different perspectives, to reach a coherent framework that orients their daily work with children and families.

Collaborative learning community of teachers and parents helps to ensure high quality support for children's development and learning. "We care about the emotional well-being of practitioners. Every month we show our gratitude to the worker that gets the most „thank you“ from their colleagues.



Twice a year we hold a professional day, and two professional half-days for reflection on our practice.

Once a week we have online professional 30 min. meetings. Considering our workers emotional well-being, we are not working between Christmas and New year eve" (teacher).

Deeper understanding of the *educare* approach and practical implementation of this approach in everyday practice

In the Lithuanian pilot, it was decided to provide 2 ECEC centres the possibility of reflecting together on their practice using the same quality framework which was developed in Lithuania in 2020 under the guidance of UIC experts. The quality Framework and self-evaluation instrument is based on an *educare* approach, in which ECEC centres support the holistic development of children, collaborate with families and create networks with the community. Starting a self-evaluation process at school and striving for ever-increasing quality was not easy. The school community had to be determined to learn to accept different opinions, to discuss, and find agreements; to recognize not only the strengths of their work, but also failures, learn to provide and accept help. All of this required courage and skills. The implementation of an *educare* approach in everyday life of ECEC settings, supporting wellbeing and development of children was assured by working on the ECEC spaces and materials, giving appropriate attention to all spaces in the preschool and all routine moments. Mutual reflections and discussions with all staff helped to strengthen understanding of a low qualified teacher's assistants that they not only take care of the physical needs of children, but also participate in education and vice versa enhanced understanding of teachers of the crucial

role of 'care' in the upbringing of children. Regular documentation of changes in environment as well as in pedagogical practice helped to stimulate reflection on their practice within the *educare* approach.

The voices of children have been taken into account too. Besides observing them, a specific path with drawings and individual interviews took place. Children expressed a desire to spend more time playing with their friends, spend more time being outdoors, a desire to have the opportunity to take care of animals in the ECEC center, to see pictures of their families in the environment, etc. The analysis has been implemented with the support of the Ph.D student from the University of Parma who was involved in the project.



Three Transnational Trainings, each of 3 days throughout the project had a huge impact on deeper understanding of the *educare* approach and practical implementation of this approach in everyday practice of ECEC centers. The first transnational training took place in Italy in June 2019 and has been focused on the role of

pedagogical documentation in reflecting with ECEC staff about spaces/materials, and on the 'less is more' pedagogy. The second training took place in Belgium (Fl) in February 2020, and focused on how observation and video-coaching can help reflecting on practice, with specific attention to *educare* and spaces. The third Transnational Training was supposed to take place in Lithuania in September 2020, but due to COVID-19 it has been transformed in an online-offline training which took place in May 2021 and has been focused on how to organize the outdoor spaces within an *educare* perspective.

Reinforced integrity of activities in the classroom and in outdoor ECEC spaces

Significant changes were initiated in both institutions, influenced by the results of the focus groups and after the first transnational training in Italy. Inspired of EDUCAS project ECEC centers rethought educational spaces indoor and outdoor. The space was organized into logically defined interest areas that support learning and development. In the classrooms there are libraries, engineering, academic and artistic educational spaces. "By creating activity centres, we have allowed each child to experience success, which is critical to children's motivation and self-confidence" (teacher).

The new type of documentation was introduced for each area in the classroom: posters with pictures and



short descriptions of what children do in that area explaining which materials are used, what competencies are being developed in the center, advice on how parents can contribute to the development of those competencies at home by using the strategies used by teachers in the classroom, etc. Every two months teachers are changing this information.

Parents like to be informed in such a way and discuss this information with other parents and the teacher. It helps strengthen the understanding that wellbeing, learning, and playing are equally crucial for child development. This helped parents to better understand what the individual activity centers are used for and what the children learn in them.

According to parent advice the amount of toys was reduced. Some materials made of plastic were replaced with natural materials. When designing ECEC spaces, it was decided to follow a 'less can be more' approach.

ECEC spaces don't need to be overstimulating but rather to offer selected well thought materials (mainly non-structured and natural – for example wooden blocks, recycled elements, and in general materials that don't indicate the scope of their use, but they leave it open to children) that can support children's discoveries and create a 'calm' environment where creativity and relationships can grow.



Overloaded shelves have been cleaned up, and materials have been labeled so that children know where to find them. Clean, well-organized shelves and materials facilitated children's ability to use and explore them, making them feel more autonomous.



Understanding that learning can equally happen indoors and outdoors, it was decided to rethink how better arrange the school yard for learning, enhance purposeful use of the spaces available in the surrounding neighborhood of the ECEC center, significantly enriching the children's educational environment and helping to achieve educational goals, linking them with the real life of children. Both indoor and outdoor environments offer significantly different—but complementary—experiences and 'ways of being' to young children. They are available simultaneously and experienced jointly, with each having equal status and attention because both contribute to young children's wellbeing, health, stimulation and general development.



Outdoor space is considered a necessary part of an early years' environment; it was organized in a way that maximizes its value

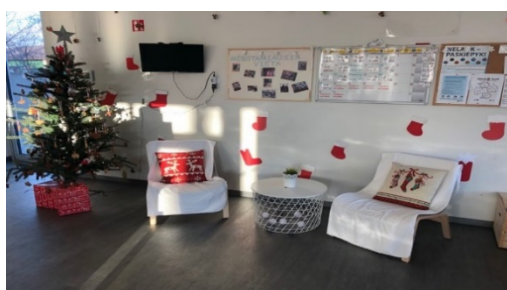
and usability for children and adults. Following the popular in Lithuania approach "City is our classroom" the ECEC centers purposefully use the resources available in the community (library, bakery, fire station, post office, etc.), which significantly enriches the children's educational environment and helps to achieve educational goals, linking them with the real life of children. That approach provides children with new impressions, experiences, develop social, cognitive, communication, artistic skills, help children to be in harmony with the surrounding socio-cultural environment and nature. Cooperation with social partners provides an opportunity for children to be educated in other environments: zoo, botanical garden, puppet theater, etc. Organized trips, excursions, various events influenced children's socialization processes, encouraged children to improve their knowledge and skills.



Creation of appropriate conditions for both physical and psychological participation of parents in shared decisions about their children's learning and the environment in which they learn

An *educare* approach is a participatory and inclusive one, in which the partnership with families is crucial. Early childhood programs, particularly in the context of increasingly diverse populations, must intentionally involve parents and communities to support young children's holistic development. As parents are the first educators, they are acknowledged as such and are included as partners in program design, in their children's learning and development and in decision-making concerning children's learning environment. They are welcomed and invited to engage in this partnership in a meaningful and respectful manner. A strong commitment to working with parents – including the involvement of parents in making decisions about the education and care of their children promote higher levels of parental engagement and shared understanding of *educare* approach.

The professionals from Lithuanian ECEC centres, partners in the EDUCAS project, traditionally engage in various ways of cooperation with families. Within the EDUCAS they developed this aspect further, based on



what came out from the focus groups, focusing on spaces and *educare*. Reflecting on the fact that, in the focus groups, parents expressed the need to have a 'space' in the ECEC centre, both of the Lithuanian centres decided to create a 'parent corner' – a pleasant space for parents which shows them that they are welcome and gives them a place to meet. Space has been arranged with a sofa, a table, and a shelf with books/materials about parenting.

The space is aesthetically pleasing to make families feel welcome. Family pictures have been put on the wall to create a connection between home and ECEC centre: professionals asked parents to bring the photos they like, telling stories about their everyday lives, pleasant moments at home, or holidays. Parents hung up all pictures along with their children. Children and their families feel they 'belong' when they can recognize themselves in the ECEC environment.



"I think it would be good to have a special shelf with books for parents: about parenting, psychology, etc." (parent). In response to the parents' wishes expressed in the questionnaires, a mini library for parents was established in the "parent corner." Teachers asked parents what literature they would be interested in, collected books, pedagogical and psychological magazines with valuable information for parents, and put it on the table and the shelf. Parents after work can sit for a bit to read while they wait for kids to dress up or borrow a book for the weekend. During the day, this same corner can be used as a quiet place to comfort a child or a place where children can see pictures from their homes and share about them. Parents

appreciated this corner very much, and many of them use it now when picking up their children; they sit down, read a newspaper, have a chat. In this space, an EDUCAS stand is present, in which all information about the project activities is placed. In addition, a calendar created by the center is posted, with all the upcoming events and activities under the project. This helps

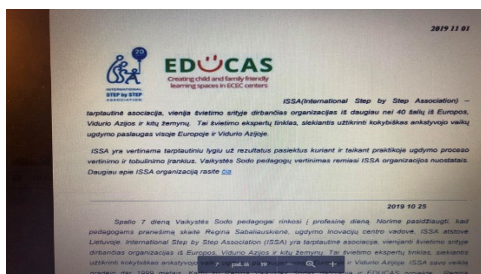


inform families in advance about the planned activities, but it also allows them to plan in which activities they could or would like to participate and reserve their time for it.

Teachers actively engaged in various methods of communication in an effort to reach out to parents and win their trust by using specific strategies, including weekly emails to parents, and up-to-date online information about classroom activities. Teachers invited parents to participate in pre-school activities as often as possible. Parents were able to observe their children participating in a different activities and environments. Parents also had possibility to see child's interactions with the teacher and other children. Proactive communication, balancing reports with both student problems and positive feedback, promote active parent involvement in pre-school activities as often as possible.



Teachers make observations on each child throughout the day and create detailed reports that track development over time. Teachers spend more time talking to parents about their children. These reports were shared with parents, opening the lines of communication and putting them both parents and teachers on the same page. It helped to involve parents in the decision making process about their child's education. Teachers set a goal for each week to communicate three positive observations to parents whose children don't generally receive them. Parents and teachers identified proactive, regular parent-school communication about student problems both at home and at school as an effective way to intervene early when issues arise.



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

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

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

a comfortable and pleasant space at the entrance of the kindergarten. We hung up the principles of our educational institution, relevant information, EDUCAS stand, and a calendar that marks an important dates and events". When the parents, children and the teachers walk in the kindergarten they are met with a pleasant smell of orange and chocolate, and the sound of classical music" (teacher).



"We have a Kindervibe app for parents, where each day we write a short comment about their child's day. We also upload photos of the day activities, add the information on how much they ate, how long they have slept, and how long they have been outside. We have also decided to add how many, and what kind of activities a child has done. Considering observations made by parents, we renewed a Friday letter. It includes the most important kindergarten's information. The format of the letter is much more convenient and more detailed. We invite parents and grandparents to come and read a book or share their stories" (teacher).

The COVID 19 situation is clearly showing the crucial role of the ECEC sector in supporting the wellbeing of children and families. It is pointing out the challenges in promoting inclusion and equity for all in our societies. Additionally, it is showcasing the hard, motivated, and warm work done by the ECEC professionals in this period, and relevance of the interconnection between 'education' and 'care'. It underlines how socio-emotional wellbeing of children is at the core of their 'learning' and how essential interactions and relationships are in the lives of children and families.

"Our school at the beginning of the quarantine did research by asking families if they have computers and the internet connection. For families without computers, we are giving them to use school laptops, tablets. Families without the internet we are providing the mobile internet connection. We do our best in this situation" (teacher). "We keep virtual contact with families and children during the Corona pandemic. We use different platforms to contact the families: Zoom, Facebook, Viber, phone, email etc." (teacher). "We have a Facebook group in which we are sending our weekly tasks (using internet platform) for children. So we can get feedback from the parents, they are sharing the pictures, video with us in the group or private messages. We are communicating with parents every day, consulting them, providing ideas for activities with children. We offer pedagogical support to parents. For example, they exchange ideas about how to talk about the coronavirus with the children. Families/children keep in contact with each other through virtual meetings. We organize virtual calls for kids on Friday. We do a conference call so they can see each other and ask questions to friends or us. Our day center is providing food for vulnerable families. We respect their privacy, so we communicate via phone. All our teachers are collaborating and sharing ideas how to serve children and families better using IT. We are collaborating with other pre-school institutions in Lithuania sharing resources and best practices" (teacher).

2.3.2 Impact on children, families and professionals

CHILDREN

Children benefit from the new pedagogical practices. Because of the changes in the physical and emotional environment, professionals in ECEC centers observed that children feel valued, relaxed and more open to

taking risks that are required in learning, feel both successful and challenged using open ended materials, become more independent and take more initiative, develop greater self-esteem as they feel that they are actively contributing to their own learning and are valued and appreciated.

FAMILIES

“When you realize that parents and teachers all want the best for kids, there must be some common ground to start quality communication” (parent). Taking into account the parents needs, a comfortable and pleasant space was created in ECEC centers. Regular, positive communication with ECEC centre reduced parent stress. Parents reported that when teachers reached out to them, they felt like teachers cared about their family. Parents reported greater overall satisfaction with the method and tone of communication at ECEC centres. They feel informed about their child’s progress and included in planning and decision making. Parents feel happy that their opinion is valued, become more open with teachers about their child.

ECEC STAFF

EDUCAS encouraged deeper cooperation, regular staff meetings. Increased inter-institutional cooperation at local level and networking among ECEC institutions at national level for the exchange of good practice provided possibilities for professionals to share educational materials and ideas, to feel part of a community that strives for perfection in ECEC. Teachers are developing a common understanding of quality by collaborative planning and reflection (including all staff and parents). ECEC teachers plan activities together, share success stories and fails, together they seek and find solutions to difficult situations. Through the project ECEC staff acquired deeper understanding of the *educare* approach and improved practical implementation of this approach in everyday practice, increased their reflective competences. “All of the changes have improved communication and collaboration between teachers. We have improved relationships with parents, more often involving them in educational activities. Parents express their opinions more openly and offer their help more often” (teacher).

3 Evaluation and sustainability

3.1 What changed?

By looking back at the whole process, the following changes can be identified in the ECEC centres involved in the following areas: change in educator’s and parent’s attitudes; change in the ECEC center’s environment; change in pedagogical practice.

Change in educator’s and parent’s attitudes. Increased awareness of the importance of involving the voices of families and children when (re)organizing the spaces/materials of the ECEC centres. Deeper understanding of *educare* approach by ECEC staff and by the parents, giving appropriate attention to all spaces in the preschool and all routine moments. A deep understanding of the importance of cooperation between all those involved in the well-being of children.

Change in the ECEC center’s environment. Dedicated spaces for staff to meet, discuss, reflect together,

exchange, and share their experiences and concerns were created. A 'parent corner' – a pleasant space for parents which shows them that they are welcome and gives them a place to meet was created in each ECEC center involved in the project. The space in the classrooms was organized into logically defined interest areas that support learning and development. The new type of documentation was introduced for each area in the classroom: posters with pictures and short descriptions of what children do in that area. According to parent advice the amount of toys was reduced. Some materials made of plastic were replaced with natural materials. When designing ECEC spaces, it was decided to follow a 'less can be more' approach. The necessary changes have been made in the school yards for learning and purposeful use of the spaces available in the surrounding neighborhood of the ECEC center enhanced, following the popular in Lithuania approach "City is our classroom".

Change in pedagogical practice. Increased ECEC staff's reflective/relational/methodological competences related to the connection space/*educare*, with special attention to involving children and families, particularly the ones at risk of social exclusion. Practitioners/teachers/assistants developed competences related to how to organize the environments, how to transform them, how to negotiate meanings with parents. Regular meetings of teachers for reflections and discussions with all ECEC staff. Regular documentation of changes in environment as well as in pedagogical practice helped to stimulate reflection on their practice within the *educare* approach. Well discussed the *educare* approach helped deeply understand the important role of relational and communicative competences of staff. Teachers actively engaged in various methods of communication in an effort to reach out to parents and win their trust by using specific strategies, including weekly emails to parents, and up-to-date online information about classroom activities.

3.2 How did the changes happen? Challenges and success factors

CHALLENGES

The main challenges foreseen in this process have been:

- 1) Time in order to meet and reflect as a team, time is needed. According to the national regulation in Lithuania there are 3 childfree hours per week for teachers to meet together and reflect on their practice. During the project implementation, teachers had to rethink how to agree to use childfree hours not only for routine work but also for collaboration with their colleagues.
- 2) The COVID-19 situation. During the lockdown due to the COVID-19 situation it was needed to rethought how to collaborate with parents and move some activities with children to the virtual environment, to create virtual *educare* spaces. For example the parents 'corner was adjusted by a global pandemic when parents could not get inside the institution. ECEC centers tried to create something like this in the hallway and outdoors.
- 3) Some changes in administrative staff participating in the project activities. In both ECEC centers there was a change of team members, so additional efforts were needed to transfer to a new member the work already done in the project and experience gained.

SUCCESS FACTORS

- 1) A shared agenda and understanding of quality, taking in account *educare* approach and importance of learning environment.

- 2) Having a clear focus, as well as shared ownership of goals helped to promote collaboration between teachers, provided opportunity to learn from each other, visit each other's classrooms and to provide constructive feedback.
- 3) Data-based solutions convinced the entire ECEC community the importance of intertwining 'education' and 'care', giving them the same value, within a holistic approach.
- 4) Transnational Trainings had a huge impact on deeper understanding of the *educare* approach and practical implementation of this approach in everyday practice of ECEC centers. Transnational Trainings provided huge inspiration and motivation to try successful practice of other countries in the national context.
- 5) Commitment of the project participants to implement and closely monitor the implementation of the recommendations produced by all partners.
- 6) Effective co-ordination of the project activities by partners from VBJK.



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