



SUPPORTING THE COLLABORATION BETWEEN ECEC CORE AND ASSISTING PRACTITIONERS

Experiences of contextual
professional development
in two Portuguese pilot schools



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Value diversity
in care and education

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1.

INTRODUCTION

In this report we present a description and reflection of the learning path carried out in Portugal, by the teams of Lisbon and Santarém. After a previous contextualization about the ECEC system in Portugal, we share information on the two institutions where the pilot studies took place (one located in Lisbon and the other in Santarém).

The contents and methodologies of each learning path are presented through the description of the processes and learning carried out in each pilot. Both contents and methods were jointly defined by the teams of Lisbon and Santarém based on the objectives set out by the Value Project.

Finally, the report summarizes the findings and information resulting from the initial baseline, individual portfolio and focus group interviews carried out at the end of the learning path. This includes the main issues pointed out as well as an analysis of the aspects to be considered for the continuity of a consistent path of collaboration between ECEC core and assisting practitioners.

2.

**SITUATING
THE PILOTS IN THE
PORTUGUESE
CONTEXT**

2. SITUATING THE PILOTS IN THE PORTUGUESE CONTEXT

2.1 HISTORICAL AND SOCIO-CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT OF ECEC IN PORTUGAL

The ECEC system in Portugal is characterized by a split system of childcare (0-3 years old) and preschool education (3-6 years old). The Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity is responsible for childcare, while early education is governed by the Ministry of Education. Provision for children up to the age of 3 encompass infant-toddler centres and family day carers, and centre-based preschool provision for children from 3 years up to primary school age (6 years). Both sectors are centralised, i.e., responsibilities at the level of ECEC financing, monitoring and curriculum development are set at the national level (Araújo, 2017).

Last data reports that childcare reaches a coverage rate of 50,3% (Faria, 2018), distributed through non-profit and private schools, and preschool education a coverage rate of 100% (DGEEC, 2017-2018), distributed through public, non-profit and private schools.

ECEC in Portugal developed especially after the revolution of April 1974. Because of this late start of public ECEC, the split and hierarchy between care and learning is less dominant than in other countries with long existing traditional ECEC split systems such as Belgium and France.

The Basic Law of the Education System (Law no. 5/1986, of October 14) integrated the education of childhood (by naming it, however, “pre-school education”) in the formal education system and the Framework Law on Preschool (Law no. 5/1997, of 10 February) defined preschool education as the first stage of basic education, though only including children aged 3-6 (educational responses for children aged 0-3 is the responsibility of Social Affairs). Curricular

guidelines for preschool education were defined by the Ministry of Education (1997, updated in 2016).

Since 1986, the training of early childhood education professionals belongs to higher education. There are specific training courses for assisting practitioners, but this is not compulsory. The assisting staff should have completed compulsory education, corresponding presently to a minimum of 12 years of schooling.

The assisting practitioners have their functions defined in the legislation but have a very differentiated status of that of the preschool teachers. Because of the historical evolution, this differentiation was established. Yet, reviewing the identity of these professionals and investing more in their training is urgent in ECEC, especially in working with children under 3 years of age (50,3%).¹

2.2 PROFESSIONAL PROFILES AND COLLABORATION IN PORTUGAL

Assisting practitioners are called educational action auxiliaries (or educational action assistants, or operational assistants). The functions of assisting practitioners are described in Decree Law 184/2004, 29 July (Ministry of Education) and include the logistical support of the preschool teacher, hygiene and cleaning of spaces, space security and surveillance/supervision of children indoors and outdoors, and guaranteeing the opening and closing times, including welcoming the children and being there when the children are picked up by their parents.

The assistants of the Portuguese schools are poorly paid, often work in difficult and pre-

1. Faria, 2018

carious conditions and are insufficient for the existing needs. This situation appears in various studies (Araújo, 2017; Formosinho & Figueiredo, 2014).

In the Curricular Orientations for preschool education, teamwork is emphasized, involving all pedagogical staff (teachers and assisting staff and other technicians) as well as the active involvement of children and families throughout the educational process. Notwithstanding, the collaborative practice between preschool teachers and assisting staff is very dependent on the institutional dimension, the existing working conditions, and the access to in-service training.

Usually the collaborative practice is done through meetings with the pedagogical coordination of the institution. Nonetheless, in some institutions the assisting practitioners are not always integrated in the team meetings which include only preschool teachers. The collaboration between teachers and assisting practitioners often happens in an informal and timely manner, though it is one of preschool teachers' function supervising the work of assistants.

For further information about the Portuguese ECEC system we recommend reading the [desk research](#) supporting the VALUE Project.



3.

**THE VALUE PILOT
IN SANTARÉM**

3. THE VALUE PILOT IN SANTARÉM

3.1 INFORMATION ON THE PILOT SCHOOL

Name of the school	Basic Education School of S. Domingos (EB S. Domingos)
Inauguration	2004
Number of pupils	192 in the whole EB S. Domingos (3 to 12 years old), 43 children in preschool education (3 to 6 years old) divided in two groups

3.1.1 Belonging to a large school cluster

The Basic Education School of S. Domingos (EB S. Domingos) was inaugurated in 2004 and is part of the Alexandre Herculano School Cluster in Santarém. The EB S. Domingos is in a peripheral area of the city of Santarém. In total, there are 7 elementary school classes, 2 Kindergarten groups and 1 multideficiency unit. EB S. Domingos includes also a library, a gym, an artistic expressions room, a cafeteria, a practice rooms, multipurpose space and an outdoor space for sports and recreation.

Despite Alexandre Herculano School Cluster being a large school cluster, EB S. Domingos is a small school unit. There are children of various nationalities, ethnicities and socioeconomic background. The group can be considered as characterized by a great diversity. About 3% of the children do not speak Portuguese at home. About 10% of the children have educational needs. Some of the children come from low income families.

The diversity of children is increasing in the school cluster, so the diversity of tasks is increasing too.

That's why the number of assistants is very unsatisfactory according to the number of children and their needs but overcoming this encompasses, namely, many bureaucratic impositions.

3.1.2 The pedagogical culture of the Pilot School

The Alexandre Herculano School Cluster thrives at developing productive citizens, able to make good life choices, able to progress in studies or to integrate active life, for having attended a school where one learns to learn, to do, to be and to be through knowing. It aims at being a vanguard and reference school cluster, with a dignified and public image, a school cluster that nurtures multiple literacies and intelligences, as well as multiple competences, principles and values and that gives educational and organizational answers, appropriate to each and every one's different needs and rhythms of learning. The Alexandre Herculano School Cluster's key values are citizenship, freedom, solidarity, integrity, respect and acceptance of other's differences, on a basis of sustainability, responsibility and inclusion.

3.1.3 The team of the Pilot School

All the staff involved in the pilot are female, speak Portuguese and most of them were born in Portugal. Only one assistant was born in Angola. All the assistants work full-time (35 hours)

Teachers and assistants are trained in accordance with the legislation, but also dependant on the organizational culture and management's approach to professional development and continuous training as an important investment. In the case of EB S. Domingos, they are dependent on the Municipality.

The assistants have a great knowledge of the children because they are with them all day long

even in their free time and they also have great knowledge of the children's families. In many occasions they must take decisions with families but lack autonomy as well as sustained knowledge to make their own decisions. The establishment of cooperation between the school and a higher school of education has been enabling processes of professional development that improve the assistants' qualifications as to be helpful at the pedagogical level. Although recognizing the importance of the assistants' professional development to improve ECEC quality, these processes are slowed down by the many bureaucratic impositions faced by the Municipality, the institution that handles everything concerning assistants.

EB S. Domingos has been chosen because the Santarém's Higher School of Education (Escola Superior de Educação de Santarém - ESES) team has other projects and students' internships with Alexandre Herculano School Cluster and the EB S. Domingos itself and, in the other hand, we had those projects and internships in the first place because of social and ethnical diversity that characterizes Alexandre Herculano School Cluster and namely EB S. Domingos and the availability of the EB S. Domingos' team itself.

3.2 FACILITATORS' VIEWS ON THE VALUE LEARNING PATH

3.2.1 Goals of the VALUE learning path

Relating to the aims of the VALUE learning path we presented as goals: 1) to create professional development paths that promote and strengthen the professional identity of practitioners in contexts of diversity (professional identity); 2) to uphold practices of collaboration between practitioners as a means to value diversity (collaboration); 3) to support the creation of more adequate and integrative responses to the needs of diverse children, families and communities (educare approach).

This meant reaching the shared awareness and appreciation of each (and all) practitioner(s) and her know-how (professional identity); 2) the development of teamwork as an everyday practice of practitioners and management (collaboration); 3) the development of communicative and interactive practices sensitive to the needs of care and learning of diverse children, families and communities (educare approach).

3.2.2 Process of the VALUE learning path

Within the VALUE pilot project – Valuing Diversity in Care and Education, and from the perspective of co-building of collaborative educational teams, we developed different actions with the assistants, with the responsible of the pedagogical coordination and with the responsible of EB S. Domingos.

The operational assistants of the school centre (11) were then contacted and all were available to participate in the learning path. Although only 2 are responsible for the pre-school classes there is a flexibility in which all may have to support all the groups of the existing valences. In this sense, and with the consent of the management, all 11 school-based operating assistants participate in the learning path.

In the preparation phase of the pilot were involved the director, the institution pedagogical coordinator, all the assistants, the coordinator and the teachers. The CPD sessions were developed with five assistants and a final moment with the large group of staff.

Given the need to involve the remaining team in the process of analysing a participatory pedagogy and valuing diversity in care and education, and with the perspective of co-constructing collaborative educational teams, staff meetings were suggested at the beginning and the end of the

3. THE VALUE PILOT IN SANTARÉM

process, involving the core practitioners, the pedagogical coordinators and the assistants. During the sessions we worked directly with the assistants, however activities were planned to be developed in articulation with the teachers during the teaching time. We must consider the functional impossibility of bringing together (in all the sessions) the total group of assistants and core practitioners.

The methodologies followed in the learning lab were based on a participatory model that reinforced the awareness of learning in participation, by the children and professionals, from their own daily life and experience and, also, the baselines of the childhood pedagogy. Based on a learner-centred approach, the main goal has been to lead to the development of self-learning processes in educational cooperation, in which each person contributes with their own knowledge, in equity position and through the development of partnerships. That's why we have considered some flexibility in the process so that we can make changes to the initial planning, according to the suggestions and issues that emerged from the reflections of the assistants who participated in the learning path.

For us the ethical issues were a concern in the VALUE learning path, based on core values and principles such as diversity, participation and collaboration. So, all the methodologic decisions have been taken under the assurance that: i. (real) opportunities will be created for reflection on one's own experience; ii. that all stakeholders participate actively and voluntarily; iii. that it will be valued, effectively, a collective and collaborative construction of knowledge and action; iv. that it exists a horizontality in the relevance of contributions, regardless of each professional's role.

It's important to underline that the facilitators, before the beginning of the learning path, observed

the Kindergarten daily schedule to make all the contextual adjustments to the action plan.

Despite being a group of 11 assistants at EB S. Domingos, only 6 finished the Value learning path. There were some dropouts due to health issues and the difficulty to deal and combine the post labour sessions with personal life. The learning path took place between November 2018 and May 2019 with the length of 30 hours.

The creation of spaces and times to meet represented a significant organizational challenge, that's why the assistants' learning path took place over several sessions in an afterschool schedule (after 6pm, 2 hours per session).

The sessions and meetings between coordinators of the school cluster, core practitioners and assistants encouraged both their motivation and the perspective of a collaborative dialogue between the two professional groups, emphasizing that:

- ▶ The exchange of ideas is very important. The existence of possibilities for dialogue and cooperation between assistants and core practitioners benefit the professional development of each other (as a way of developing collaborative educational teams and benefit the educational daily life of children and adults);
- ▶ The collaborative dialogue and practice make the assistants felt more valued and motivated.
- ▶ It's important to extend these learning path to the rest of the assistants in the school cluster.
- ▶ It's relevant, in the future, to involve more the municipality, so they realize that short-

term training does not add much to the professional development of the assistants.

These various activities (developed and experienced individually and collectively) allowed the group to reflect on the images of children and professionals that are competent, collaborative, have agency, are creative, and on a conception of participatory early childhood education whose integrative and interdependence of pedagogical dimensions (and in particular each dimension), are important for the constitution of a whole: a participatory and inclusive educational environment that responds to the care and learning needs of diverse children, families and communities.

3.2.3 Content of the VALUE learning path

A curriculum plan was designed in accordance with the trainees' profile and their context, based on a learner-centred approach. The main idea is to lead to the development of self-learning processes in educational cooperation, in which each person contributes with his own knowledge, in a plan of equity and through the development of partnerships.

The contents were defined according to the assistants' professional profile, namely their role in the collaboration with the educator and in the support to the development of educational activities and the care of children from 0 to 6 years.

The learning path was designed to be both informative and interactive, articulating theory and practice, so that the participants can share their own expectations, their experiences and knowledge of daily work (professional identity) and articulate these with an educare approach and its concepts sit in a participatory, collaborative and inclusive childhood pedagogy (collaboration and educare approach).

In a preliminary phase we develop some sessions with the Director of EB S. Domingos, the Alexandre Herculano School Cluster's Pedagogical Coordinator, all the assistants and teachers, to ensure a common understanding about the goals and values of the learning path, namely the importance of co-building of collaborative educational teams.

Then we follow the common plan previously discussed with the Lisbon team, in which the following contents were set: Pedagogical Pathways (intentionality in education; conceptions of early childhood education; the organization of the educational environment) Adult-child interactions (child well-being; child involvement in the learning process; adult engagement in an inclusive and responsive pedagogical perspective; the importance of pedagogical documentation for children, families and professionals in the kindergarten daily life); Families' engagement (families well-being; inclusive interactions and relationships taking into account sociocultural diversity; families participation in the kindergarten daily life); collaborative educational teams (professional identities and understanding of roles and functions of each team member; collaborative work; transitions and collaboration between educational team, children and families).

The working method meant to support the inter-professional learning between core practitioners and assistants through reflecting and debating the care and learning practices in light of: i) the images of children, practitioner and conceptions of education; ii) the educational intentionality and the organization of a care and learning environment; iii) the adult- children interactions and the well-being of children and families; iv) the respectful and inclusive interactions and relationships of diverse families and communities; v) the collaboration of families in the everyday activities of care and learning; vi) the collaboration be-

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tween core practitioners and assistants through the understanding of each one's role and shared purpose – a quality response to the care and learning needs of diverse children, families and communities.

The individual learning portfolio was chosen to document each process of professional development with the purpose of gathering information resulting within the sessions, as well as information about the experiences that emerged from the co-creation of focuses. The construction of this document also foresees the compilation of reflective written records that mirror their authors' perceptions, feelings and learning achievements about creating educational environments based on a holistic and integrated view of education and care.

3.2.4 Results of the VALUE learning path

The observation of activities led by the practitioners in collaboration as well as the dialogues highlighting important changes of mind-set and learning revealed as results from the VALUE learning path that for both assistants and core practitioners:

- ▶ The assistants have better understood what each one does (themselves, their peers, the teachers). Observe the work of their colleagues make them realize that there are different ways of doing it and this fact improved a more collaborative practice;
- ▶ They feel (more) confident about collaborating with teachers, there is a more collaborative and inter-helpful work;
- ▶ The assistants recognized they are all different, but there are common values, a common vision that unifies them.
- ▶ They recognize that the Child (wellbeing, involvement, development and learning) is what the assistants have in common. This fact underlines the necessity of being more closed to each other in order to better work, in a collaborative way;
- ▶ The assistants felt more valued and empowered;
- ▶ They found that the shared dialogue and the collaborative work is very important to the development and wellbeing of the child, so they make the commitment to create/continue, not only the opportunities to share and plan, but also to publicize (to the rest of the school cluster) the importance of sharing moments with colleagues;
- ▶ Assistants develop participation skills; they exceeded the fear/difficult of exposing themselves on talking. They understand the benefits of a participative professional development.

3.3 PARTICIPANTS' VIEWS ON THE VALUE LEARNING PATH

3.3.1 Professional identity

Although the majority of the assistants perceive themselves as competent practitioners which is met with the acknowledgment of their work from the children and the families (though the latter in a lesser degree), this same majority also perceive that their expertise and competences are not fully recognised, especially by the municipality.

Assistants consider their work important and that children have great confidence in them, but spaces do not always facilitate care and that it is not easy to take good care when there are too many children. The diversity of children is increasing, so the diversity of tasks is increasing too.

Even the management (in the school cluster) considers that the number of assistants is very unsatisfactory according to the number of children and their needs. There are also many bureaucratic impositions. From the teachers' perspective, the assistants are those who are alone with the children for a long time, namely in the Inclusive Education Unit and in the kindergarten, they have several moments assuming everything alone. The Law allows the assistants in kindergarten may replace educators if necessary.

The assistants expressed high expectations of achieving many gains by participating in the VALUE learning path:

1. Cooperative and collaborative role;
2. Motivation, experience and sharing;
3. Support from hierarchical superiors;
4. [Learn about] intentionality, valorisation of the collaborative dimension, look at each other's professional practice, union.

The assistants recognize that the learning path program, performed after working hours, implied a great intrinsic motivation and commitment from the participating assistants. From their learning path, they highlight:

- ▶ “[The learning path was] based on what we are and know, always supported by the facilitators.”;
- ▶ “It helped to realize that the child is at the centre and to understand our roles and functions.”;
- ▶ “[Contributed to] develop skills, for example around computing.”;

- ▶ “[In pre-school] I did an activity in collaboration with my partner (reading a story) and under the supervision of the facilitator.”;
- ▶ “In the kindergarten and primary school, we develop activities, namely the exploitation of the book *The Bird of the Soul*. The children participated in the representation of the story and we gave them a positive encouragement.”;
- ▶ “We learn about educational intentionality, value the collaborative dimension, look at each other professional practices, the union.”

The journey helped each of the colleagues to begin to better understand the way they viewed the work, how and why each one does what she does, leading to a greater educational intentionality and the improvement of each one's practice.

«Helped to begin to better understand how each of them and their colleagues saw the work, better understand how each one does and why, led to greater educational intentionality, which naturally helped and helps improve the practice..»

(assistant)

«Observing each colleague's practice, seeing why she did it like that, maybe I did it the other way I did, but it also works like that.»

(assistant)

3. THE VALUE PILOT IN SANTARÉM

They feel competent, recognized and valued at work. Sometimes with the children they would act on instinct but now they are more conscious of what they had naturally acquired with the experience. They value their learning in order to improve their own professional development, but also on behalf of children's well-being.

«We feel competent and valued in working with children. Seeing the work of colleagues and better understanding what they do was very important. We work mostly in groups, but the learning path helped us getting to know each other better individually.»

(assistant)

«Assistants are feeling valued and have a focus: the child.»

(teacher)

Both teachers and management consider the assistants as part of the organization and understand that one must always listen to them and take the right decisions. They recognize that the assistants want to learn and to improve what they are doing.

«Assistants have a great knowledge of children.»

(teacher)

«They have a different knowledge of children; they are with them more in their free time. Their knowledge complements and enriches teachers' knowledge of children. They spend a lot of time with the children and with their families. Many times, they must take decisions. With families, for example, they are a fundamental link. That's why they really have to have autonomy and decision-making ability.»

(management representative)

From the Board's perspective, it must be attentive to the selection of the assistants, although it is the Municipality that manages this process. Care should be taken on assistant's qualifications and choosing helpful people who are also helpful at the pedagogical level.

«There have been concerns about the qualifications... People have also been chosen who help at the pedagogical level.»

(management representative)

3.3.2 Collaboration

Despite feeling moderately involved in the teamwork within the classrooms, the assistants assert that the collaboration with other practitioners, especially the core practitioners, in the planning, development and reflection of daily activities

(namely, reflecting and developing an educare approach responsive to the diverse children and families) is infrequent.

«Sometimes we work side by side a long time and do not see or know each other, and do not realize how they [core practitioners and other colleagues] do their work.»

(assistant)

According to the teachers in order to overcome this there has to be a good understanding in order to not undermine the integration of children. Sometimes it's not easy and there are problems that go beyond the team.

The learning path helped a more collaborative practice (although there were colleagues who gave up). The assistants consider that the biggest profit was what they discovered and gain in each colleague, the empathy.

«On the 1st day I was the only one who didn't want to do it, but in the end what resulted has a lot of each and was the biggest gain... Empathy, what I have discovered from each colleague was very important.»

(assistant)

Assistants feel they are all different but there are common values, a common vision that unifies

them. The child is what the assistants have in common, the necessity of being more closed to each other in order to work in a collaborative way.

3.3.3 Educare approach

Assistants consider that spaces do not always facilitate care and that it is not easy to take good care when they are too many. Management considers that the number of assistants is very unsatisfactory according to the number of children and their needs. There are also many bureaucratic impositions. The diversity of children is increasing, so the diversity of tasks is increasing too.

«But there are many children for few assistants, and they do all types of work: take care of the children, do cleaning...»

(management representative)

Assistants consider their work is an important work and that children have great confidence in them and feel safe.

«But we have an important job and the children develop a great trust towards us. Almost as if we were mothers. For example, the case of diabetic children, they feel safe with us.»

(assistant)

There are different works (from teachers and assistants) but they complement each other. The child

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emerges as the centre of everything, her well-being is the focus of the work.

«We are in school for the children. Even in the 1st cycle if they are not well they do not learn.»

(coordinator of EB S. Domingos)

«They go calm to the classroom when they know someone takes care of them.»

(assistant)

3.4 REFLECTIONS

3.4.1 Conditions

The exchange of ideas is very important, participants feel more valued, better understood and empowered. It was very important to look at the work of their colleagues and to realize that there are different ways of doing it.

It is not easy for participants to take time off for learning beyond working hours, these are hours “lost” to do the usual family tasks. Overcoming these constraints requires sensitive and engaged facilitators that make the learning path enjoyable, relaxed and diverse. Facilitators that respect each participant’s willingness to share, to expose themselves, to participate actively in the development of the learning path.

Furthering effective strategies of communication between all the participants through deconstructing a vertical way of communication (top-down)

to be equitably circulated demonstrates respect and recognition for each group valuing each one’s professional (and personal) identity. The learning path created a space where the participants interacted freely and spontaneously.

This interaction between the facilitators, teachers and assistants allowed to demonstrate a great confidence and high expectations of their work, valuing the central role of children; the frequent and close communication with families; collaboration and complementarity in their work with the teachers.

The VALUE path seemed to be an instrument to reinforce the intentionality of their work, particularly in the educare approach.

Finally, it is crucial to raise municipalities’ awareness of the rigorous criteria needed to select and hire assistants and, simultaneously, to organize their professional development plan, taking in account the educare approach and importance of collaborative work.

3.4.2 Expectations (and commitments) for continuity

The balance was very positive. For the future, the assistants think it is important to publicize the importance of sharing moments with colleagues. The teachers propose to extend the learning path to the rest of the group, although it is difficult in terms of time and space. They find it’s important to involve more the municipality, because they realize that short-term training does not add much. Municipalities have promoted only short training, just the School Cluster and Training Centre have done longer and more specific training.

Doing a seminar to publicize the process is a very good proposal and raise awareness to have sharing meetings. It is important to discuss ideas and



to give continuity to the professional development. The idea would be to start with grouping and start alerting institutions.

Meetings have already been planned and will be held at the beginning of the next school year. These meetings will involve the pedagogical coordination and leadership of Alexandre Herculano School Cluster. The learning path will be presented and discussed. Among other topics of discussion, will be the extension of this learning path to other schools, with other facilitators.

The background is a vibrant orange color with several overlapping, semi-transparent shapes in varying shades of orange and red, creating a dynamic, layered effect. The shapes are organic and flowing, resembling stylized leaves or petals.

4.

**THE VALUE PILOT
IN LISBON**

4. THE VALUE PILOT IN LISBON

4.1 INFORMATION ON THE PILOT SCHOOL

Name of the school	APISAL (Associação Pró-Infância Santo António de Lisboa)
Inauguration	1891 (as nursing home for orphan girls); 1980 (as non-profit school, IPSS)
Number of pupils	443 in the whole APISAL (4 months to 12 years old), 243 children in nursery, crèche and preschool education (4 months to 6 years old).

4.1.1 Belonging to “the most multicultural neighbourhood in Portugal”

APISAL is a non-profit school (IPSS) offering services of nursery and crèche (98 children, 5 early years’ teachers, 11 assistants), preschool (145 children, 6 early years’ teachers, 6 assistants) and primary school (200 children, 8 teachers, 8 assistants). The staff-child ratio at preschool level (nursery, crèche and preschool) is in line with the overall structural state regulation for staff-child ratios of 1:4 (minimum) and 1:11 (maximum).

The school is surrounded by various facilities, from commercial businesses and shops to municipal and state offices, as well as private business offices. It is located in a main traffic road of the city and is well served by public transports. This makes APISAL an important education and community resource to support families and children.

It is in a highly diverse neighbourhood in the city centre of Lisbon, considered “the most multicultural neighbourhood in Portugal”. The school re-

sponds mainly to the local population, presently welcoming 24 different nationalities among children and families. Given the geographic context in which the institution operates, the most vulnerable group of children attending APISAL is migrant children, due in particular to low resources, a lack of family stability and a language barrier. A quarter of the children are in a situation of vulnerability (at-risk children).

The choice of APISAL as a school-pilot for VALUE results from the relationship and the knowledge AKF has about this school’s context. The school is part of AKF territory of community intervention and has been involved in several projects approaching diversity and integration, namely INTESYS.

The choice also concerns the fact that the involvement of parents and families has been a topic of reflection among staff and several activities have been developed to promote and facilitate their involvement in school.

4.1.2 The pedagogical culture of the Pilot School

The school prioritizes equity and inclusion of all children and develops strategies and seeks the development of pedagogical practices that are collaborative and integrative.

The school is eager to recognize children, families, school staff and community as key actors in the life and learning of the school. Their diversity is to be welcomed and included through the creation of an environment that promotes and facilitates relationships, sharing, active listening, dialogue, cooperation. Respect, solidarity and inclusion are core values in the vision of the school.

The leadership and staff have been expressing their will to develop a participatory, intercultural pedagogical approach for the last years in face

of innovative pedagogical approaches they've come to acknowledge and the increasing awareness of the importance of quality responses to diverse children, families and communities.

Another reason for the choice of APISAL results from the fact that the pedagogical coordinators (two educators among the staff) are involved in a CPD path focusing in the training of facilitators for the contextualization and development of a participatory pedagogical approach, involving teachers, assistants, children and families.

4.1.3 The team of the Pilot School

APISAL has 57 staff members in total. At pre-school level (nursery, crèche and preschool) there are 11 core practitioners (4 with a bachelor's degree, 5 with an academic degree (licenciatura, in Portuguese), and 2 with a master's degree in childhood education) and 17 assistants (8 have the compulsory degree (12 grade), 7 have a middle degree (9 grade), and 2 have not finished the secondary (1 – 10 grade and 1 – 11 grade).

There are four staff members with management roles: the head/principal (social worker), a pedagogical director (primary school teacher) and two coordinators (1 early childhood teacher coordinates the nursery/crèche and another early childhood teacher coordinates preschool). Also included in the larger team is a psychologist, an informatics teacher, a music teacher and an English teacher. There are also various therapists collaborating with the institution through a protocol.

All the staff members were born in Portugal, speak Portuguese and are female, except for the informatics teacher, a primary school support teacher and the receptionist (all male).

Teachers and assistants are trained in accordance with the legislation, but also dependant on the or-

ganizational culture and management's approach to professional development and continuous training as an important investment. APISAL compiles an annual training plan involving teachers and assistants. Staff are also encouraged to seek training at their own initiative in order to promote individual professional growth.

All the assistants work full-time (35 hours) and on average have been working at APISAL for 20 years. A minority of them has worked in other preschools or worked in other jobs (not related with education).

4.2 FACILITATORS' VIEWS ON THE VALUE LEARNING PATH

4.2.1 Goals of the VALUE learning path

Relating to the aims of the VALUE learning path we presented as goals: 1) to create professional development paths that promote and strengthen the professional identity of practitioners in contexts of diversity (professional identity); 2) to uphold practices of collaboration between practitioners as a means to value diversity (collaboration); 3) to support the creation of more adequate and integrative responses to the needs of diverse children, families and communities (educare approach).

This meant reaching the shared awareness and appreciation of each (and all) practitioner(s) and her know-how (professional identity); 2) the development of teamwork as an everyday practice of practitioners and management (collaboration); 3) the development of communicative and interactive practices sensitive to the needs of care and learning of diverse children, families and communities (educare approach).

4.2.2 Process of the VALUE learning path

In face of the invitation to participate in VALUE the leadership of the school, the pedagogical coordi-

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nators, the teachers and the assistants have been prompted to engage themselves in the creation and implementation of a school approach and environment of collaboration. Also prompted to enable the involvement of families, children and other staff in the school life and learning, as to generate belonging and collaboration.

The school leaders worked together with the pedagogical coordinators (two teachers among the staff) and the facilitators of the VALUE project in the creation of consistent environments to support the practitioners learning paths, as well as to support meetings between core practitioners and assistants, as a support to the learning path's follow-ups and to reflect on the contextualization of a participatory, collaborative and inclusive pedagogical approach.

The creation of spaces and times to meet represented a significant organizational challenge because of mismatched schedules of assistants and educators in order to attend the opening hours of the school (11 hours), but the management was willing to create the conditions for team meetings, particularly between core practitioners and assistants, and both practitioners engaged in close collaboration and support to enable these meetings.

The 17 assistants working in nursery, crèche and pre-school made all part of the project, meeting with the facilitators on a fortnightly basis. The 11 teachers working in nursery and pre-school were also part of the project, meeting with the facilitators and the assistants on a quarterly basis.

The 30 hour "Professional Development of Assistants in the context of early childhood education and care" learning course took place between November 2018 and April 2019, engaging 17 assistants working in crèche or in kindergarten, as participants.

The learning path took place over several sessions and during working hours, involving two groups of assistants (8 in each group; a mixed group of assistants who develop their professional action in kindergarten and kindergarten), two hours with each group, and at different times in the morning (9:30 - 11:30; 11:30 - 13:30).

Throughout the learning process, a participatory, collaborative and inclusive approach was discussed, focusing on the professional identity of the assistants (perceptions, expectations, concrete actions, learning paths) and their daily work with children, peers and families to (de)construct the pedagogical way of doing in a path of a participatory, collaborative, intercultural and integrative pedagogical practice.

During the sessions, various activities were promoted, including:

- ▶ Observation and recording of concrete situations of daily educational action, and focusing on certain dimensions of the educational environment (spaces and materials; activities and projects; adult-child or child-child interactions), in the light of the dimensions of pedagogy, child and adult images, and early childhood education;
- ▶ Participation of two assistants from another ECD in one of the training sessions, having a group discussion about the central aspects inherent to the development of an explicit pedagogical perspective, Pedagogy-in-Participation, in collaboration with the remaining pairs (classroom team colleagues, extended team and leadership);
- ▶ Visit an ECD centre managed by AKF (which develops an explicit pedagogical perspective, Pedagogy-in-Participation), to stimulate the debate on education and

care within a participatory, collaborative and intercultural approach;

- ▶ Planning, promoting and documenting activities developed with the children in partnership with the classroom core practitioner.

These various activities (developed and experienced individually and collectively) allowed the group to reflect on the images of children and professionals that are competent, collaborative, have agency, are creative, and on a conception of participatory early childhood education whose integrative and interdependence of pedagogical dimensions (and in particular each dimension), are important for the constitution of a whole: a participatory and inclusive educational environment that responds to the care and learning needs of diverse children, families and communities.

Given the need to involve the remaining team in the process of analysing a participatory pedagogy and valuing diversity in care and education, and with the perspective of co-constructing collaborative educational teams, staff meetings were suggested (initially organized by the facilitators) involving the core practitioners, the pedagogical coordinators and the assistants. The idea was/is to create a regular practice.

In order for the meeting to take place during working hours (and in view of the impossibility of bringing together the total group of assistants and core practitioners), the assistants proceeded to select their representatives, appointing two colleagues, one working in the nursery and the other working in kindergarten. The two assistants were held responsible for representing their professional group at the meetings, expressing their ideas, knowledge and interests, as well as subsequently informing the rest of the assistants about the issues discussed in each meeting.

The meetings between core practitioners and assistants encouraged both their motivation and the perspective of a collaborative dialogue between the two professional groups, emphasizing:

- ▶ The group's competence to identify and suggest solutions together (rather than just identifying obstacles);
- ▶ That the existence of possibilities for dialogue and cooperation between assistants and core practitioners benefit the professional development of each other (as a way of developing collaborative educational teams and benefit the educational daily life of children and adults).

Of the various topics discussed at these meetings, the identification of key ideas leading to the definition of APISAL's vision and mission stood out. Key ideas emerged through conceptualizing children, families, professionals and the community within a participatory, collaborative and inclusive approach, and articulating these concepts with the vision (beliefs, values and core principles) and mission (the processes that realize the vision) of the school, presented as such:

- ▶ Solidarity and inclusion: [...] the way we welcome, respect and include individuality [...] recognizing and valuing the cultural heritage of all individuals involved in the process.
- ▶ Parental involvement: [...] promotion of parental involvement creating conditions for working in partnership.
- ▶ Educational purposes: [...] that everyone develops their skills to be participating citizens in society.
- ▶ Child image: [...] competent, curious, participative.

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- ▶ Adult image: [...] listen to better answer; learning is achieved by collaborating.

From this reflective and critical debate emerged the first outline of APISAL's vision and mission. The group (core practitioners, pedagogical coordinators and assistants' representatives) intend to organize means of dialogue with their other APISAL colleagues, as well as with the children and families in order to also integrate their ideas and conceptions in APISAL's vision and mission. A work in progress.

Along the VALUE learning path, the practitioners built an individual learning portfolio as to document each process of professional development with the purpose of gathering information resulting from the sessions, as well as information about the experiences that emerged from the co-creation of focuses. The construction of this document also included the compilation of reflective written records that mirror their authors' perceptions, feelings and learning achievements about the creation of educational environments based on a holistic and integrated view of education and care.

In July 2019 the assistants finalized their portfolio, based on the following index: i) presentation of the portfolio's author; ii) presentation of the learning path; iii) description and reflection of the VALUE learning journey; and iv) self-assessment. Through this document, the assistants revealed their feelings, thoughts, and educational doing throughout the VALUE learning journey. These individual documents reveal the impacts of this journey on their professional learning and daily performance.

The positive evaluation of the learning process was emphasized by all assistants.

4.2.3 Content of the VALUE learning path

Contents were chosen according to the assistants' professional profile, i.e. their role in the collabora-

tion with core practitioners and in the support to the care and learning activities of children.

The environment for the learning path was set to be informative and interactive in which practitioners could share their own expectations, experiences and knowledge on their professional day to day (professional identity). And articulate these with an educare approach and its concepts sit in a participatory, collaborative and inclusive pedagogy (collaboration and educare approach).

An environment set to foster a learning community through experiencing processes of educational cooperation (between assistants, between these practitioners and core practitioners, between both and management, between children, families and practitioners). Processes in which each person is encouraged to contribute with one's know-how as to develop an effective partnership.

This meant supporting the interprofessional learning between core practitioners and assistants through reflecting and debating the care and learning practices in light of: i) the images of children, practitioner and conceptions of education; ii) the educational intentionality and the organization of a care and learning environment; iii) the adult-children interactions and the well-being of children and families; iv) the respectful and inclusive interactions and relationships of diverse families and communities; v) the collaboration of families in the everyday activities of care and learning; vi) the collaboration between core practitioners and assistants through the understanding of each one's role and shared purpose – a quality response to the care and learning needs of diverse children, families and communities.

We situated our working method within a participatory approach to early childhood professional development, Contextual Professional Learning

(CPL), meaning we focused on the assistants' professional identity (perceptions, expectations, actual doing, learning paths) and their daily working with children, core practitioners, families and community.

Starting with thinking and dialoguing around these questions:

1. What is my daily working?
2. How do I perceive my role?
3. What would I like to learn (either as knowledge construction or improvement of daily working)?
4. What are my expectations on CPL?

Involving them in the development of processes of critical awareness through sharing real situations of their daily working with children, core practitioners, families and reflecting critically about them – meaning reflecting on images, concepts, beliefs, pedagogical practices that lie underneath those situations. That meant challenging them to gather information (either images taken from the classroom or from activities with children, core practitioners, families) from their daily working and share it during our meetings as to be analysed and discussed, having the following questions as guidance:

1. What is my image of child? How is she? What does she do? How does she learn?
2. What is my image of the practitioner (either assisting or core)? What do I do? How do I do it? Why do I do it?
3. What is early childhood and care? What is done in early childhood and care? To what purpose? For whom?

Creating multiple and diverse opportunities of listening, reflecting, interacting, expressing – individual, pairs, small groups, whole group; orally, written, visually; video, pictures, excerpts of real situations of the pedagogical day to day, excerpts of theoretical sources, etc.

Co-creating focuses on progressive transformation of pedagogical practices within the daily working with children, core practitioners, families – namely, pedagogical approaches (images, concepts, educational environment); adult-children interactions (children well-being and involvement, adult involvement; family and community involvement (well-being, participation and collaboration of families); collaborative teams (professional identities; opportunities of listening, dialoguing, deciding and working together).

4.2.4 Results of the VALUE learning path

The observation of activities led by the practitioners in collaboration as well as the dialogues highlighting important changes of mindset and learning revealed as results from the VALUE learning path that for both assistants and core practitioners:

- ▶ There is a new way of looking at children which also implies another adults' role, that is of attentive listeners of children's needs and purposes, therefore of facilitators of empathic responses and equitable opportunities of care and learning for the diverse children, families and communities.
- ▶ A respectful and inclusive communication is important to get everyone involved – practitioners, children, families, management, communities.
- ▶ Each one involved in an educare approach has a collaborative role through sharing

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and suggesting ideas, debating and come to decisions together on the issues of school as a whole and its parts.

These changes and learning also revealed as results for both children and families that:

- ▶ There is a shared awareness influencing the everyday care and learning practices as to listen and value children's and families' choices.
- ▶ Their individuality is to be respected.
- ▶ Reorganizing an educational environment that is welcoming, nurturing, reflects the diverse identities of children, families and communities, does allow children and families to be agents of care and learning activities.

The VALUE learning journey made it possible to achieve values such as mutual respect, sharing experiences, the participation of assistants, the recognition of their voice, the creation of space and time to make use of their voice. There is a recognition of this diversity, but this recognition can benefit even more from systematization through greater visibility of listening and participation.

The main differences identified: more collaborative teams; more openness to each other (leadership, coordination, core practitioners, assistants); creation of spaces and times for weekly classroom meetings and monthly management and assistants' meetings.

The main actions of this journey were: learn; know; understand what you do; rethink what you do; change.

The participants show themselves very proud of their team and of their professional journey during the VALUE pilot. They show great enthusiasm about

their present but also future collaborative work. Throughout the VALUE project the team gained a common perspective of a holistic and integrated approach in early childhood education.

Coming to these results enabled by the VALUE learning path implied for both assistants and core practitioners, as well as for management, to be committed with its continuity, meaning being committed with: i) creating space and time for the dialogue between practitioners, including management; ii) listening and valuing the choices of children and families; iii) reflecting on everyday practices for better care and learning responses to diversity; iv) giving the child, the family, the practitioner more power of voice and action, enabled through collaboration and support.

4.3 PARTICIPANTS' VIEWS ON THE VALUE LEARNING PATH

The assistants expressed high expectations of achieving many gains by participating in the VALUE learning path:

1. Teamwork is very important because work flows much better and that perpetuates on the children and their families.
2. Without teamwork, everyday activities aren't as significant and rich; we can enhance our everyday performance!
3. Teamwork must incorporate communication, support and respect among all team members.
4. In order to achieve success, there must be a collaborative effort.

4.3.1 Professional identity

Beginning the VALUE learning path the majority of the assistants perceived themselves as competent

practitioners which was met with the acknowledgment of their work from the children and the families (though the latter in a lesser degree). However, this same majority also perceived that their expertise and competences were not fully recognised by their better-qualified colleagues, especially by the school's management.

Throughout the VALUE learning path they saw their role being more participatory, facilitated by working together on the same project, a project shared between core practitioners and assistants. As a result, both practitioners are giving a greater voice to the children.

«After this whole learning process, I look at my role as more participative. This school year I intend to be more participative, all working as a team and always giving voice to the children (...).»

(assistant)

There is a greater proximity between core practitioners and assistants through the creation of closer encounters, as well as through sharing a similar vision/pedagogical knowledge and a willingness to work more as a team.

«The team is now more knowledgeable and with a different work practice (...). We are all moving towards a new vision of childhood development.»

(core practitioner and pedagogical coordinator)

The openness and willingness of the core practitioners brought closer the two professional groups (core practitioners and assistants) promoting also a change in management that is now more aware of the role of the assistants.

«Just as we want to give more voice to the children, we also have to give more voice to the assistants.»

(teacher and pedagogical director)

A willingness and motivation to rethink behaviours, relationships, communication has emerged during this entire process, enhancing openness, motivation for learning and collaboration. Assistants feel more valued because they have now a "voice".

«The openness that the core practitioners showed us has helped us feel more comfortable going forward [giving opinions, sharing ideas, suggesting activities].»

(assistant)

«Inside my classroom I felt more valued. I felt that besides the children having a voice, I was also having a voice. ... People are feeling good. People feel like they belong.»

(assistant)

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This transformation is continually being developed. There is a current awareness of the transformation, the way both practitioners work with each other changed.

«I felt that although the assistants did not notice the changes right away, we core practitioners felt it very much (...). We noticed how they were becoming increasingly looser with us and working with the children. (...) I feel it has been a change and I feel that it will bring us a lot closer. (...) A similar language, speech, availability (...). It's different.»

(core practitioner and pedagogical coordinator)

«[Preparing for the Seminar was very important]. This work was very important. They felt valued. (...) They encouraged each other (...).»

(core practitioner and pedagogical coordinator)

The recent assistants' collaborative role in the organization of a school event is understood as an affirmative action in decision-making.

4.3.2 Collaboration

These practitioners recognise the absence of team meetings including assistants and core

practitioners, as well as between assistants and management (at this level, school and team issues are discussed between the head/principal, the pedagogical director and the two coordinators). Despite these perceptions, the assistants value the utility of interprofessional collaboration, namely team spirit, teamwork, collaborative work, cooperation, sharing, mutual help.

«It is very beneficial for daily teaching to have teamwork. Children and adults benefit from this collaboration.»

(assistant)

Overall, personal and professional experiences are valued, but there is still some resistance from some colleagues.

«I don't know if everyone was willing to collaborate the same way.»

(assistant)

«There are people more committed to moving forward, to collaborate. Others who are more resistant to change.»

(core practitioner and pedagogical coordinator)

However, the environment of mutual trust, of respect for different rhythms and willingness, as well as of appealing challenges, helped the resist-

ant ones becoming more involved and committed to experimenting new proposals, ideas, etc.

«In terms of vision and values, we identify respect, appreciation, sharing, participation.»

(assistant)

«We have a voice. We can give our opinion and we are heard.»

(assistant)

Participating in shared learning processes helps to blur professional resistance to collaboration and change. It helps recognizing equitable access to learning and to professional development opportunities and helps to identify a common path.

«I feel privileged (...). Talking about these achievements makes us more aware of the changes that have happened.»

(core practitioner)

«We are all working towards the same end and for all the children. (...) We are working as a team and this is very important.»

(teacher and pedagogical director)

«This journey has influenced a new way of being together.»

(Isabel, assistant)

4.3.3 Educare approach

Practitioners assert firmly that care and learning are inseparable recognizing there is an educare approach in the everyday practices.

«Integrating care and education makes great sense and there is no distinction of tasks, both assistants and core practitioners are involved in teach and care.»

(assistant)

«An integrative approach of care and education makes perfect sense. It's essential. One thing is linked to the other and we are working hard [fully committed] towards it.»

(core practitioner and pedagogical coordinator)

Nonetheless, a considerable number of assistants recognize being unprepared to work with child education, inclusive pedagogical work, childcare, the inclusion of families' views and experiences in an integrated approach. The scarcity of collaborative activities between practitioners has negative implications to the response to the

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diverse children, families and communities in an integrated approach.

«In theory, we are aware of the appeal that exists for this integration, but in practice we see it as an obstacle, because conditions [infrastructural and human] do not allow this integration.»

(assistant)

Despite this lack of conditions, the quality of the adult's relationship with the child during care makes a difference in how they are experienced by the child and the adult.

«Give children a voice, give their parents a voice, accept different cultures, religion... [We are now] Trying to put ourselves in the other person's shoes without judgement.»

(assistant)

There is work to be done to establish continuity in the development of care and education, and there is a desire to experience this change in thought and action.

«We have to learn that the way we see things is not always the right way.»

(assistant)

«It isn't an obstacle, but there are still changes to be made and things to achieve. They must become a continuity of the activities. (...) [It will happen]. We have the motivation, mindset and willingness to do it.»

(core practitioner and pedagogical coordinator)

4.4 REFLECTIONS

4.4.1 Conditions

In order to make the VALUE learning path work it was important to take into consideration key aspects of the role of facilitators, of the school context, of the role of management and practitioners, as well as of children, families and communities, of the care and learning practices in development. A reflection that needed to be continuous as to support a learning path meant to be empowering, transformative and sustainable.

These key aspects concern:

- ▶ Guaranteeing, right from the start, that all the participants are informed about the aims, processes and engagement intended of the project – that means, management, practitioners, children, families and communities;
- ▶ Creating respectful space and time to listen to each group of practitioners as to develop trust, recognize (and discover) one's professional identity, one's voice, from which we start creating encounters and build collaboration;

- ▶ Sitting in an explicit, cohesive and coherent educate approach that supports the reflection and debate of professional practices in early childhood education fostering deconstructing ways of thinking and doing and influences mind and practices shifts – this gives management, practitioners, children, families and communities a shared awareness, a shared language and shared action that facilitate the collaboration in the development of responsive and inclusive care and learning activities;
- ▶ Sharing the ownership of the learning path through developing a jointly planning and reflection of the diverse activities that reflect the participants' purposes and the VALUE learning intentionality – meaning that it's everyone's commitment;
- ▶ Fostering a strong leadership equally engaged in the learning path, also deconstructing and constructing together the collaborative approach to respond to diversity – this gives the leadership awareness of the changes to be operated, of the conditions to be enabled, of the communication to be equitably shared; a strong leadership motivates and supports each and everyone's commitment and engagement to the learning path.

Along the VALUE learning path some obstacles stood out and required a sensitive and thoughtful mediation. The persistent negative perceptions of assistants towards core practitioners and management, and sometimes from the latter towards the assistants; the ineffectiveness in enabling communication of all sort of information between assistants, core practitioners and management, as well as with families; all led to miscommunication between assistants, core practitioners and management, and sometimes with families, that hindered the VALUE learning path.

This required a listening attitude that doesn't take sides and presents assertions according to the theoretical and empirical framework that might be pertinent and useful to overcome resistances, answer to doubts and questions and give the participants the (thoughtful) tools to deconstruct perceptions and build bridges that lead to collaboration.

Given the specificity of the Value Project, based on core values and principles such as valuing diversity, participation and collaboration, it is essential that some ethical concerns be considered. Thus, it will be necessary to ensure that:

- ▶ (Real) Opportunities will be created for reflection on one's own experience;
- ▶ All stakeholders participate actively and voluntarily;
- ▶ That it will be valued, effectively, a collective and collaborative construction of knowledge and action;
- ▶ That it exists a horizontality in the relevance of contributions, regardless of each professional's role.

The organization of two seminars with the two participant groups (Lisbon and Santarém) to present the work carried out was very important for exchanging experiences and reflection on the learning process. One took place in Lisbon and another in Santarém.

4.4.2 Expectations (and commitments) for continuity

It is still necessary to define time and space to meet and improve communication and decision making inside the institution. Involvement in decision making will benefit when monthly meetings

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start gathering management and assistants and the weekly meetings start between core practitioners and assistants (classroom educational teams). In these meetings people will have the opportunity to be face to face, listen and decide.

As future actions it is important to stand out the following:

- ▶ Completion of the Vision and Mission, encompassing the contributions of all employees and families;
- ▶ Scheduling and holding regular meetings of classroom teams, general decision-making meetings with the representation of auxiliaries, along with other actions that support professional development and the implementation of a participatory pedagogy;
- ▶ Meeting encounters for sharing classroom teams' experiences;
- ▶ Co-construction of the educational project / activity plan 2019/2020, involving the extended team (core practitioners, pedagogical coordinators and assistants);
- ▶ Conducting an exhibition of the assistants work in the scope of VALUE project and Pedagogy in Participation.
- ▶ Strengthen relationships with stakeholders to enhance communication and interactivity within the partners' network, consolidating VALUE's project purposes.

The school pilot is also committed to present an exhibition of the learning path inviting the school community and local stakeholders.

5.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMENDATIONS

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMENDATIONS

The Lisbon and Santarém’s facilitators, reflecting on the work done and difficulties experienced, found similar issues.

Creating respectful space and time to listen to each group of practitioners about their own perceptions of what they do, how and why they do it, and how they feel about it, is a crucial starting point to develop trust between participants and facilitators and engage them in the processes of the learning path. They feel recognized and valued and grow confident about their professional identity. When each one’s professional identity is valued it is possible to create encounters and build collaboration.

Yet, creating this space and time to have a voice, share and be recognized isn’t enough. The learning path needs to sit in an explicit theoretical and empirical framework that sustains a reflexive and critical dialogue on professional practices in early childhood education. It fosters deconstructing ways of thinking and doing, and influences mind and practices shifts. This gives management, practitioners, children, families and communities a shared awareness, a shared language and shared action that facilitate the collaboration in the development of responsive and inclusive care and learning activities.

Finally, and foremost, the leadership needs to be equally engaged in the learning path, meaning that it is also deconstructing and constructing together the collaborative approach to respond to diversity. This gives the leadership awareness of the changes to be operated, of the conditions to be enabled, of the communication to be equitably shared. A leadership that is learning together and is mutually informed about the approach in development is a strong leadership that motivates and supports each and everyone’s commitment and engagement to the learning path and to the transformation

of thinking and doing, thus sustaining its continuity and sustainability.

However, regarding each context there are specific key-issues to be highlighted. APISAL’s learning journey revealed some critical aspects:

- ▶ Some difficulties regarding the establishment of communication channels between assistant and core practitioners, and with coordinators/directors.
- ▶ Though, conquests were already made in terms of a participatory common approach, the organizational constraints still restrain crucial changes such as weakly meetings, gathering classroom teams (assistants and educators) as well as gathering assistants with leadership members (coordinators and directors).
- ▶ Some difficulties in the identification of key stakeholders as a means to enlarge to other participants the values, vision and mission of the project.
- ▶ The specificity of the context of Santarém highlights the following critical aspects:
- ▶ The difficulty of the availability of institutions for the professional development of assistants during normal working hours;
- ▶ The need for more moments of meeting and reflection of educational practices between educators and assistants.

Throughout the VALUE journey APISAL’s staff recognizes the gains of being reflexive, collaborative, sensitive and responsive professionals implementing a participatory pedagogy. The team is now working on extending the school’s internal dialogue to other stakeholders in order to

enhance the impact of the pilot and consolidate VALUE's project purposes. The first step will be to create instruments of communication with other members of the school community such as an exhibition of the learning journey.

In Santarém, the team is now working on extending the school's internal dialogue to stakeholders in order to enhance the impact of the pilot and consolidate VALUE's project purposes. The first step is to organize and develop a seminar to publicize the pilot, all its processes and learning path and, also, raise awareness to have sharing meetings; and take in account the relevance of the pedagogical and collaborative skills and the benefits of long-term training actions, where core practitioners and assistants work together.

Both Portuguese facilitators' teams are committed with fulfilling the initial expectations and commitments for continuity of the establishment of collaboration between core and assistant practitioners in a sustainable way. It is intended to reach the aims of the VALUE project – developing a collaborative approach; valuing diversity; creating quality responses to diversity – echoing the assistants' expectations for a collaborative teamwork and, therefore, addressing the following key issues:

- ▶ improving communication with children and families of diverse nationalities;
- ▶ developing sensitive and supportive interactions with the diverse children;
- ▶ creating educare quality responses.

The professional development path will be continued focusing on a participatory and ethical approach, engaging all participants in a shared and reflexive dialogue, and with a common understanding of an educare quality response.

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