



“Little Children, Big Opportunities”

‘Kleine Kinderen, Grote Kansen’

a project focusing on (future) preschool teachers and teacher training institutes - 2016 - 2018

General Introduction

The KKGK project in Flanders and its output

The initiator of the 2,5 years project “**Little Children, Big Opportunities**” (‘Kleine Kinderen, Grote Kansen’, KKGK project) was the Flemish Minister of Education. The goal was (and is) to **professionalise students in teacher training institutes in dealing with poverty, diversity and social equity**.

The interesting idea of this project was to bring together all **14 Flemish teacher training institutes** (TTI) (bachelor) focusing on pre-school education (2,5 to 6 years old – in Flanders, a child becomes subject to compulsory education on 1 September of the calendar year in which it becomes 6 years old).

The project’s main **method** was bringing together lecturers of all these institutes in a **Professional Learning Community** (PLC – ‘*Lerend Netwerk*’) having 8 full-day meetings in 16 months (once every two months). Also present in these PLC’s were, next to the 14 TTI’s:

- **external organisations** with expertise in poverty and social inequalities, children’s rights, equal opportunities, early childhood education etc.;
- **pedagogical counsellors** who coach and guide school teams on different pedagogical items in different lengths of trajectories.

Together, we worked on the 'deconstruction' of what competences a (future) professional/teacher might need in order to provide each child with an equal opportunity. We came to 2 main focuses:

Quality Interaction - Conceptualisation

- Training and challenging the professional in **qualitative interactions** with children (and stimulating these interactions amongst children as well). This focus is important in relation to *every* child, but children in social vulnerability need compensation and anticipating actions.
- Training and challenging the professional in **conceptualising** (alternative terms: framing & perceptions) his/her own **values and beliefs**, the dominant educational framework, in relation to poverty and vulnerability, and **acting** accordingly. This focus is oriented towards the main theme of the KKGK-project (dealing with child poverty), and stimulates a meta-reflecting attitude of the professional ('leaving your own mindset behind and learn about other mindsets').



$$7 + 4 + 1 = 12$$

In deconstructing these two focuses, we discovered that there are:

- **4 levers** on the first one ('*quality interaction*'): be competent/skilled
 - 1) in language stimulating interactions ('rijke taal' in the illustration),
 - 2) in cognitive/exploring/research stimulating interactions ('onderzoeken'),
 - 3) in relational interactions ('warme relaties') and
 - 4) artistic-creative/expressive interactions ('expressie'). Advice from the KKGK Learning Community: you need to see this in a holistic approach!
- **3 levers** on the second one ('*conceptualisation*'):
 - 1) be competent in knowing the mechanisms of poverty and social injustice/exclusion – the 'head' (inzichten),
 - 2) try to contact people that live or have been living in poverty or vulnerability and organisations who defend them or are involved in advocacy work, be 'touched' by the confrontation/meeting – the 'heart' ('geraakt worden'),

3) professionalise in reflection methods that can help you in changing behaviour, attitude, actions in order to deal with children in vulnerable situations and backgrounds – the ‘hands’ or ‘the mirror’ (the ‘double star’ spinning: acting-reflecting-acting-... - In Dutch ‘handelen-reflecteren’)). Advice from the KKGK Learning Community: start with one of these three levers in your training programme, it doesn’t matter which one, but eventually take all three into account! **Video coaching** is a strong method in this specific lever.

Result: **7 levers** to reach equal educational opportunities for every child.

In the same process, we discovered that it is still important to emphasise other concepts as well, which cannot be traced to one or another lever. We called them the ‘**connecting concepts**’. For the moment, we defined **4** of them:

- 1 – **general professional attitude** of respect, openness, flexibility, antiracism, antidiscrimination ...
- 2 – competences in **dealing with diversity** in a broad sense,
- 3 – competences in **staging partnerships**: with parents, with external organisations (on several life domains, in the school environment), ...
- 4 – competences in creating a **powerful life and learning environment** in the classroom and school.



The **Convention on the Rights of the Child** (UNCRC) acts as an overall and general framework which guides every aspect of our professional attitude towards children. This is the ‘**1**’ in the ‘**7 + 4 + 1**’-formula.



Website 'grotekansen.be'

This whole **7 + 4 + 1-framework** is translated into a **website** for (baseline) '**all professionals guiding children from age 0 to 6 (and more)**'. At first, the output of our KKGK project would only have been the pre-school teachers (and students studying to become one) as the target group. But because we are in favour of a more integrated system for children between 0 and 6, instead of the split system that we know now in Flanders, the KKGK project team decided to 'open its doors and borders' and make a website that is suitable for early childhood educators (ECE's) as well. (The 'and more' in the baseline: we have the ambition to broaden this framework to all teachers in primary education – and maybe secondary as well?).

Because of this choice, we are working with organisations that are supporting and training these ECE's, such as *Kind & Gezin* ('Child & Family'), VBJK ('Innovation in the Early years') ... They too provide our website with content.

This text

This text gives you an idea of how we have developed 7 of these 12 concepts. We are aware that each concept might result in large thick courses and prolonged training modules – and eventually should. But in order to keep this document surveyable, we will **summarise our main ideas**. Most of the 12 concepts, research findings and good practices have been introduced during the Learning Community meetings, derived from the members of the Community themselves and from other research done in different universities. Most of the texts are brief summaries of the main ideas. In some levers we will give you some research inputs as well. On our KKGK website we will provide the Flemish professionals with checklists and item lists, which we will skip in this text.

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7 levers to reach equal (educational/development) opportunities for every child

explanation of the used concepts



A - Quality interaction

The professional can make all the difference

'Working on quality interactions' and 'bringing children to quality interactions' are core competencies in dealing with diversity, child poverty and disadvantaged situations. International research of the past 20 years shows that for young children the professional can make all the difference. This is true both in dealing with the individual child, with the group of children and with the parents.

In addition, we know that high-quality ECEC-facilities especially have a positive impact for **socially vulnerable groups**, because that is how the spiral of deprivation can be broken.

Interaction becomes **quality interaction** when the professional stimulates **1) language, 2) relationships, 3) thinking and exploring, 4) the artistic-expressive and creative aspect** (see the

illustration with the four blue 'levers'). The professional's interaction quality is an important key to full growth and development of all children, and particularly of the most vulnerable children.

This does not mean that the professional is the only expert or that he/she stands alone. Ideally, he or she looks for and finds expertise and support with the parents, colleagues, in the institutions and partners within the context of private child care, family support or education. So, in that way, there are always links with a basic attitude of flexibility, critical reflection, dialogue, cooperation, learning-from-each other, ...

Focus on vulnerability

This kind of content rating system and mental models are obviously designed to observe all children. At the same time, each child has its own vulnerabilities, originated from very different causes: educational situation at home, survival mode, environment without stimuli, few challenges and expression opportunities, ... The challenge for the professional is here to act **with foresight and compensatory**. For children who have less experiential opportunities, incentives, encouragement, ... in the home context, the professional should compensate this by offering extra experiences, incentives and compliments.

Lever 1 – Rich language!

The professional puts in 'language developing interaction skills'

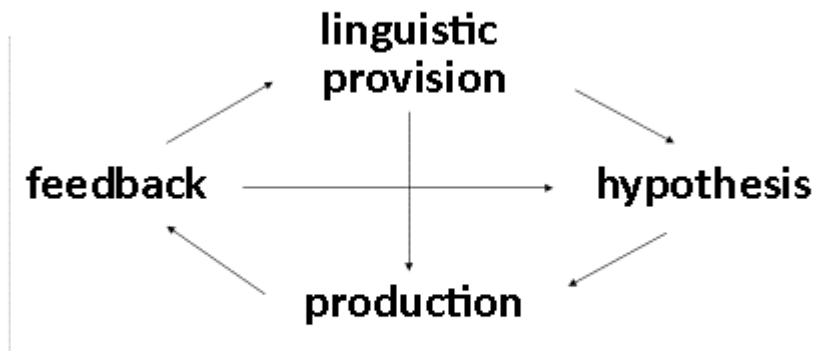
Language is capital; cultural and symbolic capital. When children are challenged to form and communicate their thoughts in one or even several languages, they hold the most important tool to grow, to learn. Here, family context and child care/pre-school education complement each other perfectly. The challenges are nothing to sneeze at: how do you deal with multilingualism as a professional and your team? How do you stimulate 28 toddlers to language interaction when you are alone – as is common in the Flemish context? How do you deal with the very different home languages that children and their parents bring with? How do you deal with children from disadvantaged linguistic, (half) illiterate contexts? How do we design our communication and language policy so that any person concerned feels respected and valued?

It is a bit artificial to separate this language-lever from the other ones. First, there is an unbreakable link with the lever 'thinking and exploring interactions'. Second, language is also about developing relationships. Positive dealing with the many language repertoires of the children and families is part of your basic attitude. And to express yourself through art and creative methods is also language, right? So, we should keep in mind the connections with those other levers.

A lot of language!

Children want to talk, want to learn to talk, like to be challenged to express in words their emotions, desires and opinions. For every parent, educator or professional this is self-evident. But how exactly do the processes of language acquisition work? What can we learn from linguistic research? How do you, as a professional, put that into daily practice? And what about multilingualism and the position of the home language if it differs from the instruction language?

In processes of language and second language acquisition – as concluded by international research – the following concepts always seem to return: language input, language output, language interaction, feedback, hypothesis. By 'hypothesis' is meant that children try and practice, for example on the basis of earlier (implied) scholarly principles and rules. The professional can then use this explicit expressions in the language acquisition.



It includes both the language learning process in child care as in pre-school. It is important for you as a professional to use a rich and varied language, to offer the children a lot of speaking opportunities and to properly respond to the language utterances of the children.

Actually it comes down this: lots of everything!

- a lot of interaction and **production**,
- a lot of **linguistic provision** ('taalaanbod'),
- a lot of opportunities to produce linguistic messages (**hypothesis**), and
- a lot of opportunities to get **feedback** on.

Language sensitisation

"To reject a child's language in the school is to reject the child." (Jim Cummins)

In addition to knowing and developing these principles of language acquisition, the whole '**climate**' set up by the professional and his team is crucial. A disadvantaged linguistic environment does not contribute to achieving language acquisition. Thinking about these very different aspects of language and **rich linguistic environments** and integrating this throughout the child care and pre-school approach, is called 'language sensitisation'. Teaching with language sensitisation is about building social relationships, about spreading a positive basic attitude, an attitude in which we see multilingualism as a wild card and daring to play that wild card.

Lever 2 – Thinking and exploring

The professional stimulates thinking and exploring skills

Thinking problem-solving, learning how to plan, reflecting on the process, focusing on good questions, reasoning, acting self-managing, regulating emotions. We have to admit it, that is 'heavy

artillery' on the usually playful 'battleground' of a child care or pre-school. And yet, young children can already quite early be stimulated and challenged in (the start of) these processes. This lever focuses on how we teach children to think, explore, look forward, ... from the intrinsic quality of 'being curious and surprised'.

This lever, too, cannot be disconnected from the other levers and concepts. The most obvious is this with the language-lever. After all, how would you think and explore without linguistic interaction?

Lever 3 – Warm relationships

The professional puts in 'relationship developing interaction skills'

Children develop and learn in a safe, structured and at the same time challenging context offered by adults. Relationships with parents and professionals determine their growth. Toddlers and pre-schoolers need warm and consistent interactions with the adults in their environment. At the same time, they learn how to build relationships with other children, how to live and work together. Own growth (autonomy, self-management) linked to social relations (solidarity). This lever goes into both of these aspects.

Well-being and involvement

The concepts of 'well-being' and 'involvement' are known through and through in Flemish education by the well-known publications of the Centre for Experiential Education (CEGO – www.cego.be – university KU Leuven). Their description makes immediately clear their interest in this 'relational' lever:

Well-being: If children feel at home, are spontaneous, open to the world, inner calm and relaxed, radiate confidence and vitality, fully enjoy, ..., then we know they emotionally develop properly. Well-being indicates that the social-emotional development is unchallenged, that children succeed to interact with the environment in such a manner that basic needs are satisfied.

Involvement: If children are concentrated and absorbed, fascinated, motivated, mentally intense focused, fully experience sensations and thoughts, are driven by the urge to explore, balance on the border of their abilities, ..., then we know that they learn in depth. Involvement is the 'zone of proximal development'.

Does an approach centralising well-being and involvement make a difference in the growth and learning development in children? CEGO currently carries out prolonged and longitudinal research into this. The first results are very encouraging.

Does that approach **make a difference for disadvantaged children**? It refers to findings of the OECD that compares in a note two pedagogical models:

"Generally speaking, we observe two different models in various countries. France and the English-speaking countries tend to see a partnership [between child care and pre-school education] from the school's point of view: early education best serves the educational objectives and provides children in the best way with 'ready for school' skills. In contrast, countries that adhere to the 'process approach' ('social pedagogy tradition') (the Northern and Central European countries) see child care

as a private institution, more focused on supporting the families and the broad need development of young children."¹

The **process approach** emphasises well-being, social-emotional development and motivation for learning, attention for social relations, play and free moments in which own choices can be made. International research suggests that this approach works better for the learning of young children. In pre-school education, there are four leading models, including Reggio Emilia (an approach in which the visual expression is central) and the approach of CEGO.

Lever 4 – Expression

The professional puts in on the artistic-creative aspect

Working artistic is to express your own experience using the language of the arts. Just like the other three levers of 'high-quality interactions', this artistic-creative-expressive lever is also very important in the development of every child. The artistic and expressive aspect is pre-eminently the language of wonder, curiosity, exploration, fantasy, sometimes the non-verbal. This gives perfect occasion to also use rich language in the artistic process, to stimulate exploring skills and to create solidarity in the children's group.

"The child has a hundred worlds to discover, a hundred worlds to invent, a hundred worlds to dream. The child has a hundred languages (and another hundred hundred hundred) but the school and society steal ninety-nine of them." (Loris Malaguzzi²)

The artistic language is a universal language that can remove thresholds of social exclusion and inequality. Art recalls recognisable emotions, removes thresholds and ensures people from different backgrounds to find each other.

Children who develop artistically practice a number of **21st-century skills** in a playful way: creative thinking, self-regulation, communication, social and cultural skills and teamwork. The **universality of the artistic language** increases the children's involvement and interest, which stimulates them, through the artistic method, to learn language in a very natural way, to learn the various skills and also to learn to express themselves.

The strength of the artistic method is that **language does not lie at the heart**, increasing children's involvement and linguistic development at the same time. If the artistic method also lies in line with the children's development level, you have a very powerful medium. This means, there will be less social exclusion and inequality because you make **all children** more competent through the artistic method.

¹ OESO, "Education Today 2010: The OECD Perspective", p. 13.

² Malaguzzi is the founder of the pedagogy of Reggio Emilia.

Conceptualisation

(alternative phrasing: framing & perceptions)

The core theme 'quality interactions' focuses on the relationship between professional and children. This theme, 'conceptualisation', goes more into the meta level: how to look at ourselves as a professional, at our own frame of reference? How to learn to critically reflect on it, how to learn to tune our actions with experiences and insights in terms of vulnerability, disadvantaged situations and child poverty?

All three levers in this core theme are of importance. It does not matter from what lever you would start in a training or professionalising about conceptualisation: as long as you include the other two! That is what we call 'complete the whole circle'.

Lever 1 – Being touched

The professional learns to know the world of poverty and social inequality ('to meet – to be immersed')

Being immersed into the world of social poverty and exclusion induces haunting experiences, sometimes a **shock effect**. Whether you are a student, teacher, supervisor, pre-school teacher, ..., experiencing personally what social exclusion does to a person's dignity, is a powerful lever for a deeper **empathic ability**.

In teacher trainings for pre-school, teachers and/or students are immersed into the world of social inequality. They do so by talking with local poverty and social justice organisations in districts and neighbourhoods where they are located, by letting students do their internship (e.g. study support at home) and by coaching them well, ...

In one teacher training, the effects have been measured (by in-depth interviews with students and teachers) and can be summarised as follows.

- a) A sharpened consciousness: in each interview the lecturers spontaneously mentioned 'consciousness' or 'I am more aware of ...' as effect.
- b) Questioning his/her own background
- c) Remarkably less clichéd images
- d) More empathy and respect for the complexity of poverty
- e) More frames to indicate their intuitions

In various trainings has also been experimented with forming a **tandem between a teacher and an experience expert in poverty**. The purpose of forming this kind of tandem partners is: strengthen

and support the pedagogical supervisors (lecturers) in power-oriented support for people in poverty. One of the principles is to work **binding and invigorating**, in dialogue with people who daily experience exclusion mechanisms, racism and discrimination. Thus, insights are built and the environment perspective of people in poverty is central. At the same time, it is important to put positive examples in the spotlight, taking into account their vulnerability.

Lever 2 – Knowledge and insights

The professional learns to know frames, concepts and insights in poverty and (mechanisms of) social inequality

Why do social and child poverty exist? What are the **mechanisms** behind social inequality? What does poverty do to a person? Which theories, concepts and frames exist to explain well the **structural** causes? And how can they help us identify what we see and experience in our classes, nurseries and child care?

(There are many **models and theoretical concepts** – in Flanders and abroad – that in a clear way explain one aspect of the causes of poverty and social exclusion. That is why we are not going to go into that here).

Lever 3 – Acting/reflecting

The professional can reflect critically on own actions and adjust his/her actions to it

From the two other levers at 'Conceptualisation' – 'being touched' and 'knowledge and insights' – it is ultimately intended to **adjust your own actions** as a (future) supervisor of children. In order to really put in your class, school, child care and nursery practice to offer each child **equal development opportunities**.

Reflecting on your actions, and then acting to it, is actually a lifelong process. This professionalisation never stops – or should at least be constantly stimulated. In addition, this is a professional development that is taking place not only at the individual level but also on team level. What methods have been effective and deserve attention? What is needed to turn a reflection into a 'quality' reflection? Bringle and Hatcher³ (1997) put first these criteria:

"high-quality reflection

- takes place on a regular basis,
- links experiences to (proposed) learning and training goals,
- also leaves room for personal values and behaviour,
- reflection is controlled and monitored,
- is succeeded by feedback and evaluation."

According to Hattie, **video coaching** is a very strong method to empower this.

³ Hatcher, J. and Bringle, R. G., "Bringing the Gap between Service and Learning" (1997). Evaluation/Reflection. Paper 20. <http://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/slceeval/20>.

