

Policy recommendations for education-related decision makers and leaders to promote collaborative reflective methods - based on REC experiences



Our recommendations for education policy are inspired by the experience of educators and facilitators of the reflective processes in 10 ECEC institutions and schools participating in the REC programme in Belgium, Croatia, Hungary and Slovenia. The below recommendations are based on the main conclusions from the questionnaires, focus group and Most Significant Change interviews carried out with the participating professionals. The data also gave insights on necessary conditions to strengthen collegial reflection and quality ECEC practice. They were analysed cross-country in search for recurring topics, closely related to the participants' experiences in the REC reflective meetings.

1. Recognize and promote collaborative pedagogical reflection as a motor for quality education

Educators who have an opportunity to cooperate with others on analysing their own practice become more competent but also more committed to their job. Regular team reflection enhances professional self-awareness, a sense of value and belonging and helps to reduce stress. Reflective group thinking contributes to the professionalisation of educators' practice, since educators will start to perceive themselves more intensively as professionals who make impact on all levels, from classroom to community and society and finally on the level of decision-making in education.

2. Promote an inclusive and supportive institutional culture

For a supportive reflection atmosphere, it is necessary to promote an institutional culture where:

- respecting diversity and child-centeredness are common values;
- educators are encouraged to have open discussions how they can work towards sharing norms and expectations of quality teaching;
- quality improvement is no longer considered to be the sole responsibility of leadership or a single teacher, but rather a collective one.

A supportive institutional culture is also necessary to help to overcome the commonly held belief that 'good educator' should always and immediately know the 'right' answers for all the issues and can help to perceive challenges in an atmosphere where it is encouraged to pause, challenge, reflect on old and create new pathways together when needed.

3. Provide structures for regular, collaborative, personalized pedagogical reflection

Regular, structured pedagogical reflection with motivating, collaborative and creative methods facilitates the everyday work of teachers and educators and positively transforms their teaching practice.

Structured and regular group reflection sessions have numerous positive results, among others they provide emotional and professional support, increase ECEC and school professionals' sense of belonging and esteem. Sharing experiences, getting the support and the development of togetherness helps to build resilience, feel more supported and build more self confidence.

4. Involve leadership

It is important to have a regular communication with leadership (principals, vice-principals, maintainers, etc.) to make the importance of collaborative reflection visible. By providing regular opportunities for leaders to get information about the reflective process – which can range from separate meetings to involving them in reflective sessions with the consent of educators – increases their commitment to creating a supportive and inclusive institutional culture.

5. Dedicate childfree hours regularly to professional reflection conducted in a safe and inspiring learning environment.

Adequate and fair working conditions are necessary for educators so they can support children in their care better and for reflective processes to be beneficial. Among these conditions it is of utmost importance that ECEC institutions and schools guarantee regular paid hours without children to educators during which they can reflect on their practice.

6. Make pedagogical reflection sustainable

The aspect of sustainability should be present in the reflective process from the beginning, and what sustainability means on a personal and institutional level should be reflected upon together. When designing a reflective path in an institution, enable professional learning communities and reflective teams to be sustainable through participatory methods (e.g. community planning). When institutions invest in making reflective processes through participatory methods, it results in engaged professionals taking responsibility over their professional development collectively and individually as well.

7. Ensure visibility and celebrate success.

The purpose of a reflective professional learning community is to have a broader impact on its members and on the institution as a whole. In order to influence the quality of work of all educators in the ECEC/school, it is encouraged to present the PLC's work in teacher rooms and meetings to other educators, celebrating successful activities they tested. These displays have a purpose to draw attention not only to improved practices but so that other teachers can join or rethink their own practices even if they are not PLC's members.

8. Ensure monitoring of the learning process within the community.

The facilitator(s) of the group reflection process should ensure that community members have the opportunity to give feedback on the process and facilitation after each session. Also, it is a good idea to ensure at least twice a year educators give feedback on the whole path of learning and professional development. Feedback can be organised in various ways, from giving written feedback to group conversation with attached notes to collecting and analysing stories that describe the experience of the participants. The feedback should be used only for the improvement of the educators' process of group reflection and professional development. Monitoring, as any other content shared within the stakeholders, should never be shared with outside individuals, such as institution leadership or administrators, without the consent of everyone.