**ToWe focus-group**

*[Talking about the recorder][Recorder did not record the first 10 minutes]*

S1: We have a very big problem: in our place we do not offer help to everyone, just to the families who are coming. There are so many people who need help in Spain and there is nowhere to go, you here one place open for everyone, free, that can help everybody, but our school we can work only with the parents that we have, we can share time with them, offer a place for them to come and play with their children; but all the families that cannot pay this and cannot stay in somewhere like our nurseries, we are forgetting a lot of people who need help and somebody help with their concerns; children with disadvantages, they are in their house and until they are six years old nobody knows .

UK 1: Do you have community groups, like toddler groups, like maybe in church or community set ups?

S1: No and most of the families who are coming from Morocco or Gambia families or the new-coming people are really lost, because nobody is going to their houses and tell them “you are welcome, you can come and tell us your concerns, you are welcome to share with us, to receive our help if you need something”. Nobody is doing this. We think not just our nursery but the foundation – Suara – works with people from the moment they are born until they die, because we have palliative care. We think we must talk with the foundation and think a way to help this people, offer services and places to help these people, talk with the government; we must do something like what you are doing. That is our aim now, we are talking about this every night. We must do something to help these people.

S2: It is true! Every night!

N1: We are quite fortunate in Norway than, because the healthcare system takes care of the child from the moment the mother is pregnant all the way up to school and more. We have a lot of services that are providing what you are providing in England. We have a good provision. In the kindergarten we have so many children, I think the 80 or 90% of the children of the community attend kindergarten in Norway; it is a high percentage. And we have open kindergarten for the other ones, so there is a lot in terms of offer actually. I am not concern about that. But I think that we in the kindergarten who see so may kids should have more tight relationships with the health services; it’s like we have to fill out forms, there are so many things we need to do before we can ask them. It takes too long.

*H: With the children centres, because everybody is in the same place, it is that multiprofessional working… if you have to ask a question the person would be in the office next to you.*

N1: But they are working on that in Norway. The care system, they call us if they have a kid and they monitor the language and if they are concerned they contact us and we cooperate with the parents too on how to work with this. We have this, but it takes long.

UK: So you have it?!?!

N2: We have it. And it is not so frequent… We have it in the same place but we don’t…

S2: I’d like to say that in Spain there are social services and family carers, but it is just for few people and it is very slow. It’s a money problem. They do not have enough for everyone who needs support. Normally those who have big problems can access this kind of help…

S1: And you have to go there, nobody is coming for you.

*H: And that’s a difference.*

S1: If you are arriving in a new country you are not going to say “Hello I need help”. You need somebody who welcomes you and gives you help. The social services are like “We are here and we are open, if you need something come”. No, it is more than this.

*H: But it is knowing where to find it; as where most people know where the local school is, cause you can’t miss it when you walk pass.*

N: I’ d like to go back to the question. We meet the parents everyday as you do, but what is so brilliant here is that you are actually role modelling for the parents in the sessions, how they can play with the children, how they can help the children develop. [In Norway]the parents do not see that, because they are just delivering their kids and then they will go away.

*All: Yes*

N: H. has started “Stay and play” sessions, she is inviting the parents in. Earlier we had this “parents coffee time”, but the parents sat at the large table drinking coffee while the children are playing. Now she says: “No, it is not for the coffee actually”. So that is good, she has started something. We will do it more, cause we see it is so valuable.

UK1: We can identify with this. Few years ago many parents use to think “Stay and play” was somewhere your children play and they go for the socializing, which many of them did need; but when we said “No, hot drinks; it is not about you having coffee”, I think the centres have worked really hard these last few years to get that. I do not think anybody thinks that now; I think everybody knows you go to play, to learn how to play. But equally like you in our day nursery – which is where you are from – I think we have a long way to go in terms of building on what the centres do. So a lot of our nurseries now are doing “Stay and play” sessions to get parents to know that learning is the same. You might see at “Stay ad play” they still play in a day nursery and in reception at school the play is still the basis. But some schools in particular areas have been very much “Handle children over, that’s it”. And we need to build on that good relationship that is established in the centres and keep that going. So we are working on the same thing.

S1: When we were observing the “Stay and play” sessions we thought about this: parents talked to each other, they asked questions, they shared, but nobody was just chatting; they were all taking care of their children, watching them, playing with them.

UK1: Say three years ago I can think of one centre where I went to and there were chairs – a lot of it is how you set your environment – chairs around the wall and you can imagine parents might be nervous not knowing what to do; so they go sitting on the chairs and you have a line of parents on the chairs. It has been a lot of work and thinking form the staff on how to ensure the parents are engaged. Things like the learning prompts you know, come and see what this child is doing here, all of that kind of before-hand thinking and preparation, that is what started that; but also the way you sensitively engage with parents is the key.

UK J: Cause some parents the important thing is just to get them to come and you and you do not want to put too much pressure on them while they are there, because the main thing is we want the children to come and have these nice play opportunities, because that might be the only play opportunities that they get where they can really get involved in sensory play and make a mess. It is knowing your parents and their background, so you can engage them sensitively cause I think we were saying not all parents can play and all parents you can expect to play either because they have so much domestic issues going on. You know in our area there is a refuge for people who left because of domestic violence; those parents when they come to the centre their aim is not to play. They are thinking “Where am I gonna be living next week? What school my child is gonna be sent to?” because their world has been turned upside down. So yes, we want to model the play and encourage parents to play and hopefully take home some ideas, but we also have to be really sensitive that not everybody can play or is in the right frame of mind.

UK1: They need to feel good, don’t they? If they leave your session knowing that for that period that child has been happy and content and fulfilled, you hope that in some way this will make them feel good then about one thing in their life.

UK J: And that they will come back.

UK1: Yes

UK J: Because it is a challenge for us being in setting and being available for parents, but even that is a challenge when you are in a busy “Stay and play” environment, or you have parents asking you different things, from the sign post to the health visitor, the dentist or whatever service they need. There may be another parents who wants to talk to you about a domestic issue – a break-up, a divorce – you know - happening to the family. Being available is not always possible; every day for them to catch you, so it is difficult. And it is like you said as well, you were very good with your observation about the mood of the parents: there is things going on in these parents’ lives and it does bring the energy down and it does bring the mood down and it is just being aware that we are there to play with the children and help them develop through their learning and through play, but also there are stuff going on here and it is almost visible but we just need them to find the right time just to be available so know they can tell us now.

*H: thank you for that J. So can you talk about your experience of your actual job shadowing and being an observer. How you found that?*

S: For us watching other professionals work actively is the best way of learning. We have visited other schools and other centres sometimes and when you see the place and the materials you learn something, but that is much less than what you learn by watching professionals working in their everyday routine. But what is even more important is to complete this circle by watching space, materials, actions and then work behind the action using reflection and meetings – we said that before. We feel that job shadowing has been this complete circle: we watched the centres from all the different perspectives and in different moments and that has been really fulfilling and was great learning.

*H: Fantastic.*

S1: And we think that it must be a part of Early Years practitioners practice. In Spain they just stay in the moment they are working but they don’t go to the meetings, they do not know about evaluation and they don’t know about the observations. We take care of this and we show them all of this, but in the universities they are not told they must come to the meetings of the team or what is the way to observe the child. And we think that is very important from the universities should teach them that they have to take care of this, because it is an important part of our work.

*H: I started to develop that in my programme for my students to go to each other settings to mentor and peer-observe each other, just so that they can get a picture of how other people work and different ways of working , ‘cause otherwise you can be quite insular...*

UK1: We are going to be doing that too in the new children-centre model, when we have less designated centres, but more outreach sites and established teams and we have created the role of lead practitioner, so they are going to lead everybody in terms of best practice and they are going to start with looking at each other, ‘cause they have been very very busy for the last few years, busy developing their provision, but no opportunities to go and see others, so that’s key. We recognize too that job-shadowing is the key way to learn; it is not just going on courses.

N2: I think so too. In my normal work I do things and react immediately. When I observe than I can reflect and I can sit back and watch, so it is a completely different setting that we don’t often get to do; so I think that this is a positive thing as well.

*H: Anything, any strategies that you have picked up in relation to the IO that you all have been working on so hard? You compared and considered and talked about similarities and differences or…*

S3: We have been talking about similarities and differences in the wellbeing output and we have seen many similarities. Like in Spain, all the centres we have seen have asked the families about wellbeing/what is wellbeing for you and they have got displays on the walls talking about wellbeing, the importance of the environment, etc. The differences again: we have talked about the networking, the EY foundation, other shared tools for the observation of children and wellbeing, but we are working in a similar way about voices and expressions; we look at the adult attitude towards toddlers listening to the voice, the tone of the voice, the respect they show for the child, giving them choice, this is quite similar to what we aim to do in Spain. But then we have also seen many differences because of the type of centres we have been visiting here – not the nurseries but the children centers – are quite different from a nursery school. The fact of having parents in the sessions makes the interactions among children much different; and then what I was saying before: our intervention with the families is much poorer, than theirs, here parents can learn from practitioners and we also value – another difference with us – the great respect that practitioners show for toddlers, ‘cause they can solve problems or answer questions or doubts; the child is there playing, they are talking with parents, there is a great respect for the child. And then we have also seen that sometimes they have private meetings with the family and the child can be there playing while they talk to the parents; that’s a good way of working and we have seen a difference there. In mealtimes the similarities are very big in the autonomy: we have seen children serving their own food, they can cut their fruits, there is peace during meal times, it is a nice moment, a time to taste new heathy food, that is very similar; then we found some cultural differences in the type of food they eat, the quantity of courses we have on a lunch and there is a kind of cultural ritual we have at mealtime: it is longer, more special, and there is a table cloth, we set the table and it is all very beautiful, we take care of the presentation…

[Support with words]

S1: and while you are eating you cannot stand up and go, leave everything there and come and go. When you are eating, you sit down and eat.

S2: we are slow

S1: Yes, slower and we take more care.

H: That social time is it?

S1: Yes. It is a social time and it is really important not to leave things on the table and go. When one child is eating we say he must be sitting and eating and when he’s finished he has to take all the things and wash it or put it in somewhere. This is the difference, we stop to eat. They are eating until they are playing and eating and play. We stop to eat.

UK1: also during snack-time?

S1: yes and in the nursery too.

UK1: in the nursery too?!?

S1: yes, they stop eating and go to play. They also have to take care of the presentation.

UK1: They saw a mixture yesterday. Some children did and some children didn’t.

S1: OK, we have not seen this.

UK1: That is something we could build on that. It would be nice to present with a nice table cloth and in the past nurseries have done that. Some feel very strongly that they should and some feel very strongly that they shouldn’t, so it is really good to have your feedback and see how we can share that with the families.

H: Is the aesthetic of the environment for the children, isn’t it?

K: Do you think it makes the children value lunchtime more, if the aesthetic is better?

[Catalan]

S1: I think for the child of Spain you cannot get something and not eat it. If you cook something, you have to eat it. You are cooking because you are hungry; the food is not a play. You know for us, maybe it is because in Spain we are having a bad moment in our economy and everybody knows that some people cannot eat what they want.

UK1: no waste!

S1: and it is very important no, and I think this is the difference.

S2: I have also seen another cultural difference: we do not have a snack moment. There is breakfast time: where we sit down and have breakfast; then there is lunchtime: where we sit down and have lunch; then there is teatime: where we sit down and have tea. And so children see this at home and act like this in schools act like this ‘cause it is our culture.

S1: nobody is eating when he is…

S2: We stop working to eat. We stop working and we do not have a sandwich and here I see you have a sandwich. So this is cultural, it’s normal, you have different fruit to eat while they are … here I have seen adults… I see it is a cultural thing. You will see when you come to Spain you will see it can be very interesting to see what you think about our meal times!

[laughter]

UK1: It is interesting because I think the message is very much… we know that many parents at home – I have seen it myself – at home children would be walking past and mum will pass the child food. So through snack-time the idea is we model that they sit down and eat, but then you go back to play, it is children eating and then going off eating… we should be model that they sit, they stay… that is the ultimate aim, that we get them to enjoy the snack sitting down, not just to walk around with food.

S1: there is so many child going around with food, I did not want to mean this. They get food and leave it there.

H: we have talked about that time that social experience.

UK J: was there some thig you said at [children’s centres name]

S1: I think it is something that we have seen everywhere. Not in the nursery.

UK J: Cause you came at the end and we were trying to peace it together, it was tidy up time, song time, the snack table still waiting to be put away and usually a lot of children they spend the session just playing, they do not want to stop and snack, but then at the end of the session when we are singing, that’s when they will sit down.

S2: No, just for example, if you cut off a piece of fruit and they leave it… it is not experimentation.

UK K: They do that a lot with us and I think one of the reasons that we let them do that, is the thinking behind it is for them to practice. Ideally they would eat it as well, but for some children we know this is the only opportunity that they have to practice the cutting, because at home parents do not let them do that.

S: that is a good reflection, but we are not used to share our food like [Catalan] “half apple for me and half for who is coming next”. It is from our cultural thing it is not bad but it is different.

[laughter]

N1: I think with Norway it is a bit in between. We have meals like you have and it is not like the children can leave the table. Some years ago …. you had to eat all your food; you had to eat it all. Now we are more into letting children trying different things but not throwing so much food of course away. We are thinking about it, we want children to have a really good relationship with food and not feeling like that mealtime it is something like “Oh no now I have to eat all the food I have on my plate”. What I think it’s a big difference is in Norway we see voices and expressions in different way. If you read the manual the M and Y have written, it talks a lot about play, children’s play; that is the main voice and expression for the child. All the things you are talking about, I feel they are in the wellbeing manual. How to interact with a child, how to respond… the voice and expression for us is about how can we interact with the children and observe them and make sure that they are playing in a good way and they are happy. Like M says, if a child does not play and [Norwegian] explore, than we should think “What’s wrong?”, because that is the natural way for child voice and expression. So we are working in a very different way on that actually. At the same time it is about how you see the child. Do you see him as an individual, do you see him as somebody who is not sensible, somebody you have to decide for. We are working in a different way we that.

S2: We agree. We have understood this part of M and Y’s manual like the part that we can do something when the adult interact, our image of a child as a person who can decide, who is free, we agree with that and when we give them the environment, the way, the freedom to play and choose to interact; what do we have to work on, work on is our attitude while the play is going on. I think you have misunderstood something: when I was talking about the economy and finishing food, also in Spain they do not have to finish what they have in the plate and they can taste, it is not like “We have to eat at lunchtime!”, it is more like “Try and have a nice time, if you have had enough [food] you have had enough”. Maybe there was a confusion here. We agree with you on that part.

S1: Yes, we agree. Nobody in the school says “You must eat everything!”, but we say “If you put more, because you want more. You are not playing right now. You put more food in the plate because you wat to eat it”. And we are working with this we don’t say you must eat it. When he or she is putting more food in the plate, you remember him/her this, that you are putting more food because you are more hungry you will eat it or...

N1: I see that in Norway, the ratio for grownups, it seems so nice that the adult do everything, washing all the clothes, the tablecloth we can’t really … and we have really strict rules, from the services about how you can serve the food. So if we use a tablecloth, than you have to wash it every day.

N2: Yes. We wash it every day.

N1: We have thought that we can make the environment cosy in other ways. I do not even know if in Norway anybody uses a tablecloth… I don’t think so… you may have seen Scandinavian design…

*[All laughing and talking together]*

*H: and that is the great thing about this: you see different cultures and ways of working.*

UK1: And also can I just say, I remember Jo said she is actually working on the placemats idea, which she took form J’s snack-café. They have the napkins, but they do not have any particular demarcation for their plates so she is taking each child individually to record their favourite meal on a plate to draw it and then put some comments around the mat so that each child has a own individual mat. That is the thing they are currently working on. They are using it instead of the tablecloth, or if they have had a cloth in the past, if there is an issue, I know some nurseries some while ago they used to say their tablecloths get caught dropping things off the table, so there may be a reason why they do not have cloths; I do not know, but we can share that. The fact that they are making the mats is the way of saying to the child “It’s a special place for you to sit”.

H: the sense of belonging, but also there are ways of making the table look aesthetically pleasing without necessarily having to use the cloths.

UK1: I know somewhere they put some little flowers.

S1: Flowers or something like lamps… it looks more like you are in your home.

UK J: I think in the children centres very difficult ‘cause our work it is it is never done, it is never like “Oh, we got it right!” Just to give you an example, we do as much as possible to get the children to sit at the tables and there was a mum the other day – she is new to the children centre – she was feeding her children over the roleplay and I asked her to go to the snack table and she refused “No, she wants to play! I want to feed her while she is playing”. I had to tell her three times: “Look, I am sorry, we have rules because we have all the children wanting to play and…”, but it was like so tense, this mum was like “No, she wants to play!”

UK1: How skilful to be a children’s centre practitioner. I think some other practitioners working in nurseries that maybe have applied for jobs to work in the centre, they see it as just a transfer and sort of EY foundation stage knowledge and then work in the centre, cause everybody works with EY foundation stage, but you do need the skills of tact, diplomacy, confidence and you develop those – don’t you? – over the years. I think for somebody coming in brand new it is really challenging, but again it is how you give reasons to parents so to say and to help a parent to understand if everybody does this… “Oh yes, that might be a bit chaotic, dangerous…”

UK J: And also if they are busy playing then let them play, they are not hungry. You know you can take a piece of fruit at the end, when you are going home. You can never relax.

N1: I think there is a difference in Norway in what we are serving: we are very fond of slices of bread and I know that many in Southern Europe think that is not food, you cannot serve… I have some friends you know like “What?!?” In Norway we really love it and we think it is healthy and we usually we have one hot meal during the day and the parents have that at home when they finish job.

*All: That is cultural to.*

N1: The parents want us to serve more hot food, but then again we do not have anyone cooking, it is the practitioners that cook.

S1: We talked about similarities and differences in the early languages output. We have seen lot of respect for families’ languages, many displays in different languages and in every session we have seen, we have always heard a conversation about the language at home, speaking Polish, speaking English, speaking Spanish, speaking English, you talk about this topic and we can see this in the centres, on the walls. The way of working with English is also very important: UK K was telling us about it, speaking slowly, singing slowly to let the children pick up the words and we do this in a similar way in Spain and the difference in our case – the [name of setting] – as we work with an additional language we didn’t see this here in the nursery, but we know that Spain has something with English, so that was a difference.

N1: Not for us, no sorry.

*H: also in London you can have a setting where you have got 50 different languages being spoken, but of course that causes other challenges*

N1: We have this as well and we have to be better in seeing what kind of languages the child is speaking because normally it is not only two, it could be three or four languages.

*H: So just to finish off, has there being any challenges or difficulties that you have experienced with this activity or… any final thoughts…*

N1: I think it was strange just sitting observing. I wanted to participate a lot more so and of course I also do that but then I realised when I was participating I couldn’t see what the practitioners did so then I lost something else.

*H: It is getting the balance.*

*All agree*

S1: for the Spanish team it was the same. The first days was strange getting somewhere new and sitting down, looking. We knew we weren’t bothering anyone but you have that kind of feeling like “Oh, children are looking at me, I am so big here!”

*All laughs*

S1: Because you are used to work in similar environments you want to say something and sometimes I spoke too much I think but I couldn’t help it and you did so well as being observed. I think it is very difficult to let people coming to see you while you are doing your everyday job. You acted so normally in a relaxed way and you made us feel so comfortable and really thank you!

*All: agree ‘really’*

UK K: Thank you for saying that, it is really kind but you also made it very easy, because you were so natural and so calm and it felt natural when you did participate the parents thought it was lovely because they knew you were coming and they were very interested as to why you were there and if you had sat in silence it would have been so awkward, so everybody did participate a good amount and it made it feel really nice.

S2: We are really pleased too. And I’d like to say to K, there was a situation where we were four adults and one baby and she was amazing, working really well and I would like to tell her that if this happens to me, I am gonna cry. She had to sing along with one child, it is difficult what you have done this day was so difficult and you did really good.

*All laughs*

UK K: You sang as well! We sang together to one baby.

*All laughs*

*H: Obviously the way you have worked as well has provided that good balance and I think that this is important that you had the balance of observing and interacting and using your experience to when to engage and when not to. ‘Cause toddlers do come up to you and hand you things – don’t they? When I was there trying to observe my students and this toddler from the side kept handing me things. How can you not interact and engage with that child, you know, cause you could have think of their wellbeing.*

UK1: When I am observing to look at quality of “Stay and play” you do not want the parents to think that you are some stuffy inspector person, you want them to that you are interested and “Is it everything all right here?” and “Can you suggest anything?”, so we all have to be natural so thank you for being like that.

S2: Some parents where asking us questions and we did not know the answer. Some parent asked “Where is the place of this?” and I was like “I do not know”.

*All laughs*

N1: We felt so welcome everywhere.

*All: thank you very much*

N1: K, J, everyone has been so lovely.

UK J: I wish you could stay another week, I would do everything better!

*All laugh*

N1: I would have to say to J then because that you have said so much lovely to K and many lovely things as well, I think the way you interacted with some of the children at the snack table was so brilliant and you explained us afterwards your actions and I think it was a truly sensible and good way of acting towards the child.

UK J: ‘Cause I was explaining to N1 there is a couple of children in our “Little explorers” group and they do not eat, they have food issues, so for them to come at snack table, “Wow, they are at the snack table!”, so for them I am not gonna say “Wash your hands first” cause otherwise we would have lost that moment so it was just quickly get a little piece of orange, cut it out for them and see if they’ll taste it, because that is the wow moment for them, even though it looks like “You did not wash your hand, you haven’t taken any of this clothes off”, it has to be so quick for those children and the you see when they had enough it was just run.

N1: And then you did something so good: you went after him and said “Sit down” and then “Have you finished”

UK J: Yes I did, just to let him acknowledge that you had finished. I mean, by that time we were outside. Acknowledging: “Finished, no more snack” I could see then that he had settled on an activity so I went back inside.

N1: And you were modelling for the parents as well.

S2: And your colleague, JK, the both of you are acting very senior and I love the way that you are yes really … with the child and with the families, very good.

S1: There is something in the team… you feel a lot of connections.

N1: And NL, she was brilliant.

UK1: I too was feeding back to the leadership team in AFC the other day about just the impact of the work – just since Christmas really – in developing and sharing the knowledge that K and J and everybody has with other people, because they do not have the same people there every day but I have seen how JK and everybody has taken things on.

UK J: Until January it was just me and then JK came on board, we were able to get JK, R and there was another lady NL and they just embraced ToWe and wellbeing, they just got it, reading the materials, talking with me about it afterwards and NL for instance, the manual on children play and interactions and how the practitioners support that, I did give that to NL and say “If you read that, you will see you in there”, that is everything she does. And also I showed you photographs of NL in the summer when I came to show an example of where this lovely direction and direct strategies and indirect strategies and how she just displays it all in one activity and I was so over the moon because you picked up on how brilliant she was and I was able to say that, I got you to say that because I thought it just means so much coming from someone to recognise that she has got a lovely special quality with children and parents.

N1: but you all have and also the lady, D, all environment was so welcoming.

UK K: Something that you said. When you were talking about NL there is something that you said “When people have it in their heart” and I would like to think everybody around this table has it in their heart and the project has given us time and enabled us to think about it more with our head as well.

*All: agree - that is true.*

UK1: The things I have found professionally – ‘cause obviously I know our settings and centres, I do not know [location] as well, ‘cause this is not really my setting – but I have found it really reassuring that people’s perceptions, noticing strengths, areas for development, it has been exactly where I feel and I think we would all would say that the perception you all have, the way you talk about the different skills and the things you have highlighted, it just shows to me how the knowledge everybody around the table must have and that we all have similar thinking, which is amazing when we are across three different countries.

*H: And different settings within those countries.*

UK1: It has been really reaffirming to me whether it has been a social chat when we were walking around or a quick “How do you think that session went?” it really made me think “Oh yeah, what I think is similar” and “Yes, we can do that differently maybe”, or the way you highlighted that’s K’s conversation with the parents, I just find it really rewarding to be part of it and that we are thinking the same way. And I do not know how that has happened but it is really amazing.