



Co-reflecting in daily practices.

Introducing the WANDA Method:

how appreciative analysis of practices can be an added value for the Early Childhood
Education System

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1. Working with children and families in a society of diversity



The complexity of our society and its constant transformations need a workforce that is capable to deal with differences and commonalities between people by valorizing them. Therefore, in order to reach quality in the educational system, we need practitioners/teachers that are able to negotiate, to deal with uncertainty, to reflect on the meanings of what they think and do (Schön, 1983), to question themselves and constantly find the balance between *agreement* and *disagreement* in the group. The transformation that involved modern European societies during the last decade have made the very family institution, and the educational system, change. It is then impossible, today, to define a single model of “the family”, “the child”, “the school”. At the same time it becomes urgent to reflect on these concepts, to deconstruct their meanings, in order to rediscover them in a negotiating process.

Especially when talking about ECEC (Early Childhood Education and Care), but also referring to the whole educational system, international research has shown the importance of well-trained and well-paid staff to ensure the quality of ECEC. Moreover, staff must be given social appreciation (Children in Europe, 2012; Oberhuemer, 2005; Unicef Innocenti Research Centre, 2008). This is exactly where the problem lies for many countries in Europe, where staff in the ECEC sector is not well qualified: on one hand there are low qualified practitioners in the 0-3 sector, on the other hand there are low qualified employees that assist high qualified ones (teachers, pedagogues) in the educational facilities (mostly 3-6 sector). In some countries the “assistants” represent up to 50% of the staff (Van Laere, Peeters and Vandenbroeck, 2012). The explanation of this low qualification of assistants, according to OECD, finds its roots in the fact that working with young children is often considered related just to physical care, a task that each woman can perform (OECD, 2006: 163). The salary of assistants is significantly lower than the one of teachers (OECD, 2006: 164; Van Laere, Peeters and Vandenbroeck 2012). Moreover, assistants have less opportunities of professional development and of growing in their competences. The job mobility is therefore low and this ensures that there is a

shortage of especially male workers in the childcare sector in many European countries.

Increasing the number of qualified staff and providing good working conditions is, however, not sufficient. As pointed out by the CoRe Research commissioned by the European Commission DG for Education and Culture, and carried out in 15 European Member States, ECEC quality is strongly related to a professional competent workforce. But a competent workforce has to take shape in a “competent system”, which includes collaborations between individuals, teams and institutions, as well as competent governance at policy level. A competent system has to link staff’s initial good education to the possibility of constantly reflecting on ideas and practices (Urban, Vandenbroeck, Peeters, Lazzari, Van Laere, 2011). Therefore we should recognize in the concept of quality the same complexity that lives in our society. Quality is then linked to negotiation (Moss, 2009), and practitioners become *researchers of daily life* (Schön, 1983; Mantovani, Gattico, 1998).

In such a context, co-reflecting methods (like WANDA, which we are going to present in the next pages) can play an important role when they bring together low and high qualified practitioners/teachers and assistants in order to build a “professional learning community” where staff becomes able to stay in its questions before reaching contextualized answers (Peeters, 2008; Bove, 2009). Through critical reflection on practices, staff can develop new learning practices that meet the needs of a specific social context (Children in Europe, 2012; DECET & ISSA, 2011).

2. What does it mean concretely?



"A mother comes with her son into the class and sees Jason² standing there. Suddenly she turns around and walks out. After fifteen minutes, the mother comes in again to bring her child to the group. Jason wants to initiate a conversation with the mother, but the situation overwhelms him so

² Fictitious name of practitioner

that he can't. Jason feels uncomfortable and does not dare to speak with colleagues about this. In the coming weeks, this moment keeps going through his mind."

There are numerous times when we do not know how we should respond to what is happening. When such situations arise, we often tend to instantly come up with a solution or a conclusion. In this way, we develop all kinds of standard procedures. What do we do in situation A? How do we react in situation B? Nonetheless, we do not always have the right 'answers' or 'solutions' on hand. In the case just mentioned here above, we can for instance consult our colleagues, we can find an article about men in childcare or hone our communication skills through training courses. Although this research certainly makes sense, this input is not always sufficient. That is because all our experiences take place in a specific context: in a specific place, at a particular time, with certain parties who have their own history together. Consequently, we do not simply have a "recipe book" that will support us in 'tackling' a situation. We can choose to let a situation like this simply pass and hope that it improves. In some contexts, this will indeed be a good approach. In other contexts, we will, in this way, unknowingly cause harm to the interactions among children, parents and practitioners/teachers.

How can we turn such a situation into a learning moment, in order to improve quality for children and families and to acquire new insights to grow as professionals and as organization? In this article we present an approach for teams and groups to transform significant moments into learning moments.

2. The WANDA project and its roots

In 2010, Artevelde University College and VBJK (Centre for Innovation in the Early Years) started a transnational ESF (European Social Fund) project to develop a new method for the childcare sector. The method, called WANDA has been created for teachers, practitioners and students and developed in the childcare sector (0-3 years old) in the Flemish Community of Belgium³, but it can be used also with groups that work with older children, with kindergartens and

³ Belgium consists of three Regional Governments (French, Flemish and German speaking communities) who are each responsible for childcare (0-3), which is under the Ministry of Welfare, and kindergarten (2,5-6), which is under the Ministry of Education. As most of the European countries, Belgium has a split system, which means that different qualifications are required to the staff working in these two sectors, different salaries are given, and more in general the concepts of *care* and *education* seem to be divided. In this article we address a project

schools, and in any working and learning context that work with children and families. Today, schools, organizations that work with older children or adolescents have indeed all to deal with the increasing diversity of our societies and with the need of constant reflection on the meanings of what we do and think (DECET, & ISSA, 2011; ISSA, 2006).

The acronym WANDA stands in Dutch for Appreciate [Waarderen], ANalyse and Deeds [Daden]. The WANDA method is the result of an intensive study trajectory in which 12 facilities in the ECEC sector and 7 training institutes were involved.

The roots of this method are based on two approaches: 'Analyse de Pratiques' and 'Appreciative Inquiry'. These two approaches have been adapted to the Flemish context, where by 'Wanda method' we mean 'appreciative analysis of practices'.

Before explaining the WANDA method, it can be important to understand better its roots:

Analyse de pratiques (analysis of practices) originated in the 1960s in France on the incentive of Michael Balint. This English-Hungarian psychoanalyst analysed together with doctors their practices, since a disease is not always simply cured by a proposed treatment. They focussed on the underlying question of the patient behind the symptom. This way of working later found its way into the broader social sector and came to be utilized from a systemic perspective. In France, many professionals - affiliated groups, students groups, etc. - work in childcare and other social fields with *Analyse de pratiques*. For many, it turns out to be a tremendous asset in the workplace: the atmosphere on the work floor improves, people feel supported and valued in their jobs, which results in less absences at work. ESSSE – Ecole de Service Social du Sud Est, Lyon – introduced the WANDA team to the work methods and the educational effects of this French methodology. *Analyse de pratiques* is not just a coaching tool: the training course for *Éducateur de jeunes enfants* (training “educator of young children”) breathes, as it were, ‘analyse de pratiques’: various forms of ‘analyse de pratiques’ are given as much attention as the traditional education courses in which the knowledge of the teacher is transferred to the student. ‘Analyse de pratiques’ constantly connects the student him/herself with the practice and the theory by critical reflection within the group (Favre, 2004).

Appreciative inquiry was developed in the mid-80s in the US by David Cooperrider and Srivasva. They found that the focus on successful experiences yields more and leads more quickly to effective changes than problem-oriented strategies. Literally, 'Appreciative Inquiry' means appreciatory investigating and it's based on the strength that is inherent in people and organizations. The

located in the Flemish community of Belgium and referred to the childcare sector (Oberhuemer, 2005; Vandenbroeck, Pirard, Peeters, 2009).

exploration of positive stories instigates change (Cooperrider, 2003).

By bringing together these two approaches, we can combine co-reflection on practices to an analysis done in an appreciative way, with respect towards children, parents, colleagues, the neighbourhood.

3. Wanda in practice



Wanda can be organized within a team of practitioners/teachers that work together, or by creating a group made by people that work in different institutions and want to reflect on their practices. Each group gets together around once every 5-6 weeks to have a Wanda session. This takes one and a half to two hours and goes through 5 different phases. Although each meeting will deal with one specific situation, it's important to know that this method is "process oriented", which means that the meaning of it cannot be revealed in one or two sessions, nor in sessions that are too far one from each other. Each session is related to the others, and individuals and groups will grow during the process. That is why it's important to create a "path" during which several WANDA sessions can take place with the same group of people.

Initially, each participant can bring up a situation which touched him or her in one way or another. That may be an unexpected event, something that was surprising in a positive sense, or something that affected - or even shocked - the person in question. In short, there is a kind of 'special feature' here that calls for further examination. The situation should be explained in a very concrete way and not in general terms. From all the cases, the group chooses then one situation that may be

of interest to everyone: that is the case. Subsequently, participants ask questions to the contributor (the person that brought the case) in order to contextualize better the case. Then, the group tries to look at the same situation through the different glasses of the people that are involved, so the thoughts, emotions and impressions from that specific case are discussed and deconstructed. In this way, the group can then try to transform the issue into possible actions that would be of value to the contributor, well as to the team, to the organization, to society. Once the group has started with WANDA, each session will begin by looking back to the last meeting and to what happened during the period between the two sessions.

During each meeting, the group is guided by a pedagogical coordinator, a supervisor, a trainer. In this project we call the person that guides the WANDA session “facilitator”.

4. Questioning and looking through various glasses



Appreciative analysis of practices aims to support professionals and students in learning to observe with respect and appreciation for children, parents, colleagues, community and society. One learns to consciously observe without being hindered by social conventions. Participants of a community wonder: ‘do we describe what we see or what we want to see?’ (Sellenet, 2004). When one sees no way out in certain situations in practice, or when one has the feeling that he/she is in a deadlock with respect to the relationship with a particular child, parent or colleague, it can be necessary to deconstruct our viewpoint. Through discussions in the group, other ways of viewing the situation and other perspectives are introduced. In this way, the group seeks to create openness to change.

Jason introduced this meaningful moment a few weeks later in a WANDA session. His colleagues are surprised by this and decide as a group to unravel his situation. In the beginning of the session, Jason talks about his experience and often speaks in terms such as, "because I'm a male employee, the mother was startled and left immediately". He had no idea how to act in front of the mother and tried to avoid any contact with her by leaving the contacts to his female colleagues. Jason's colleagues ask him a great many questions about what exactly happened, who was there and

what he thought and felt at the time. The facilitator sounds Jason out about what he hopes to achieve. He indicates that he wants to feel more comfortable when communicating with parents in similar situations.

Most of the WANDA sessions get started in this way. The participants explore the situation. Perceptions, (often opposing) ideas and emotions are brought together in a chaotic coherence. Under the stimulation of the facilitator, the group asks open, non-interpretative questions, in order to clarify the context. You could compare it to a theatrical performance. More is done than simply examining the interaction between a few key players in the spotlight. An effort is made to map out the whole theatre scene to obtain more insight into what exactly is happening in the spotlight. This is a phase that proportionally requires the most time: the more contextualized a situation becomes, the more the group can search for possible meanings and, ultimately, develop possible actions. At the end of this phase, the facilitator asks the contributor what he/she would consider to be a desired situation.

In the next phase, the various parties involved are mapped out by making a mind map or a sociogram in order to explore the case through different glasses (the glasses of the child, of the parents, of society, of the ISSA quality principles etc.). Based on this, various hypotheses are gathered for all those involved. What significance could this situation have for all of them? What could the various parties possibly be thinking, feeling, and wanting? The basis of an appreciative perspective is that behind every behaviour a positive intent is hiding and that everyone is taken into account with respect. By bringing in the perspectives of the other involved parties, the tenor of the case becomes very different.

Jason has the impression that parents are not comfortable with him as a male worker. During the discussion, the group focuses on what parents do greatly appreciate in the presence of Jason. If it is examined from the perspective of the mother, one wonders whether or not she was equally surprised. Jason takes on butterfly function in the groups. Could it be that the mother was not comfortable with leaving her child with someone she didn't know? The mother is of Moroccan origin. Perhaps the norms and values of her home culture play a role here as well? Moreover, she only speaks and understands French. Jason was not aware of this. From the perspective of the organization, the question is whether enough attention is given when new practitioners/teachers come to work in the group. The staff is not in the habit of spending much time informing the parents. Furthermore, the question is asked whether the organization and the local government are clear enough in their mission, which is that the team should be a reflection of society and that, therefore, male employees are also important for

the children and the team.

5. A dynamic relationship between knowledge and reflection

“ En théorie les théories existent, en pratique elles n’existent pas (In theory theories exist, in practice they don’t)” Bruno Latour.



Appreciative analysis of practices is characterised by a dynamic relationship between reflection and knowledge. The staff builds experiential knowledge through the analysis sessions. Facilitators try to hold onto this accumulated knowledge by regularly documenting it together with the participants in the quality policy. Theoretical knowledge is also called upon. In order to formulate hypotheses, several theories and knowledge sources are unravelled. By knowledge sources, we mean knowledge you get primarily from the children in the group, the parents, yourself as a practitioner/teacher, the mission of the organisation/school, the local society and the legislation. In the second instance, an appeal is made to social, educational and pedagogical theories (e.g., children's rights, the theory of well-being and involvement by Laevers, the theory of social vulnerability, Malaguzzi's image of the rich child, ISSA's principles and the Quality Resource Pack etc.).

In order to discuss the case on its merits, the team uses the ISSA and the DECET principles on

diversity in childcare⁴. These principles offer an ethical framework for developing the practice with respect for everyone's identity. Some colleagues discover for the first time that these principles also appear in the mission of the organization. They get to work to give the mission a more concrete interpretation on the basis of what was discussed in the WANDA session.

This continuous linking of practice with knowledge and vice versa is a point of interest for the organisation/schools and trainings. In particular in a training context the question arises of how theoretical frameworks can be linked to practical experiences. This is most successful if one leaves the decision to the group if a specific theoretical insight can be discussed in detail. The theoretical frameworks should also be recognisable for the participants. The facilitator then openly assesses what the participants think: 'Which theoretical frameworks does this remind you of? Which ones can be used for this analysis?'. In some courses and services, knowledge packets are developed afterwards on the basis of the results of the case discussion. Thus, the practitioners/teachers can consult them without obligation. By placing the ownership within the participants, we see that practitioners/teachers start to work effectively with it. Theoretical knowledge then becomes more attractive and is much more in keeping with the situations that people have to deal with.

6. The crucial role of the facilitator

⁴ ISSA (International Step by Step Association) is a membership organization that connects professionals and organizations working in the field of early childhood development and education. ISSA's principles of quality, exposed in the *Quality Resource Pack* (ISSA, 2006) focus on 7 areas (<http://www.issa.nl>):

- interactions,
- family and community,
- inclusion, diversity and value of democracy,
- assessment and planning,
- teaching strategies,
- learning environment,
- professional development.

DECET brings together a network of European organisations and projects with common goals on diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training. The quality criteria are for childcare centres, preschool facilities and kindergartens in which everyone <http://www.decet.org>:

- has the feeling that he/she belongs,
- feels that all aspects of his/her identity are being recognised and appreciated,
- can learn from each other about cultural and other boundaries,
- can participate as active citizens,
- deals consciously with prejudice through open communication and an eagerness to learn/curiosity
- works together to combat institutionalised forms of prejudice and discrimination.

Appreciative analysis of practices is a process-based work method in which the facilitator (pedagogical coach, coordinator, trainer etc. that guides the reflection in the group) has a crucial role. The facilitator takes on the role by creating a climate of dialogue and participation. By this, we do not simply mean a place where we exchange some ideas and experiences. We mean instead a democratic place where we question assumptions, where relationships are placed in the foreground and knowledge of situations can be disputed. In order to do this, you must have, as they say in France, an atmosphere of 'libre parole': the freedom of expression (to speak, be silent, think etc.) (Favre, 2004). In services in France in particular, external psychologists (psychoanalytically or system theoretically-oriented) take on the role of facilitators. The coordinator of the team or the director of the ECEC centre is often not present at these sessions. In the Flemish project, we have worked, on the one hand, with external facilitators, and here the coordinators are indeed present and participate along with the facilitators. On the other hand, coordinators/directors themselves have assumed the role of facilitators. The 'free space' will differ depending on the choices that are made. In all situations, it is good to reflect on the conditions that allow the participants to express themselves freely and openly. Working on trust and security is an ongoing process, and not a final stage. It is not simply because a group just determines some rules at the beginning that one is in a 'safe' group after some sessions. It is a shared concern and this will occasionally create a situation where the analysis coach is faced with dilemmas: how can I create a stimulating and informal learning space while I am occasionally (outside the Wanda sessions) also supposed to evaluate the practitioners/teachers? In the project, all of the facilitators themselves have regularly reflected on such dilemmas by discussing their own case histories (about their role as facilitators within the process and in the organization) and analysing them via the WANDA method. Since this field of tension 'support versus evaluation' is not, as such, fixable, the facilitators search together for a contextualised approach instead of employing unequivocal principles. By bringing the facilitators together into a critical learning group, they also learn from each other how to facilitate analysis on practices and they experience what this can mean for their own participants. As such, they take part in meta-analysis-of-practices. During these sessions, a second important field of tension was also dealt with. To what extent can analysis on practices create therapeutic effects for the participants?

By using various glasses, participants are confronted with their own visions, ways of cooperating, etc. Sometimes, the participants' own personal stories come up. In WANDA, we try to use utmost care in dealing with this, especially if you are both a facilitator and a coordinator/director. Appreciative analysis on practices is not group therapy. The accent lies in the fact that people

feel supported and grow in their role as professionals. In this way, the organization can change along with them. In contrast, group therapy sessions would focus more on personal change. This does not mean that these personal changes could not take place due to the Wanda sessions, but they are more of an indirect result. The situations and their context are the central focus of attention (Favre, 2004).

7. ...With an eye on quality improvement



Many intervention and supervision methods are available for teams and study groups in the welfare and educational sectors. WANDA has a place within this 'family'. The power of basing this on the practice makes the WANDA method useful in work contexts with a wide variety of educational levels. Appreciative analysis characterises itself by being responsive to the different perspectives and to the learning achievements at the individual, team and organizational levels. In the last phase of a WANDA-session, participants give opinions on possible new pathways and/or behaviours for the contributor, for the team, for the facility or training institute, for (local/national) policy and even for society as a whole.

Jason's colleagues formulate various advise for him. For example, one colleague gives the tip to always present himself clearly to the parents. "Good morning, I am Jason, your child's teacher". With that simple sentence, you can avoid a lot of uncomfortable contacts and ambiguity. Since male teachers are in the minority in this sector, most parents would expect that Jason was a father, and not a teacher. One colleague suggests that Jason could organise an activity with the mother and her child so that the parents could see him in action and their confidence in him could grow. The colleagues emphasise their own appreciation for Jason. From their views on diversity in education, Jason plays an

important role for young children. At the level of the organization, the reception policy for new employees will be reconsidered. How can trusted colleagues build a bridge between parents and new colleagues? They will make sure that the diversity of the team (gender, ethnic-cultural, age ...) will be more clearly reflected in the documentation material of the organization. The team feels that this is also a focus for the local board of directors and the local government. One should better communicate the added value of diversity in the staff to all citizens. At the social level, the participants emphasise that the ECEC sector and the Government should get to work to improve the perception of what ECEC actually is. It is indeed more than simple care, since care is often solely associated with female workers, it is about bringing up and socialising children in a diverse society.

In this case, it is demonstrated how the individual interest of the contributor of the case is linked to the interest of the organization and even to social importance. The ultimate goal of organizing WANDA sessions is that the quality of the services/schools is increased for each child, his/her family and the neighbourhood. We emphasise that the one cannot be required to follow the advice given. The participants themselves determine what is appropriate and what they do with them. Generally, the participants also need some time to allow this intensive discussion to sink in. The different advice for the organization and the government are recorded by the coordinators/directors. Appreciative analysis of practices thus becomes a driving force in your quality policy. Through these thinking exercises, it is not only the participants who learn. The coordinator, the facility/training course and society as a whole are also the wiser for it.

Conclusion



The WANDA project has teamed up with childcare facilities and training course to create a

reflection method, useful for pedagogical coordinators, supervisors, trainers who provide educational support in facilities and training course. This method can be used also in schools, out of school cares, and in any organization that work with children and families. In appreciative analysis of practices, a meaningful moment is examined from a number of different angles. Thus, not only this leads to the appreciation for the work (for one's own work and that of one's colleagues), but also the empathy (for children, parents, colleagues, neighbourhood...) of the teachers increases. This results in insights and change strategies for the employee who brings the case, the team, the quality policy of an organisation/school, and even for the Government. Situations that take place in the here and now are connected with a long-term quality policy. How do we look at our work? What do we stand for? What drives us? The adjustment of the practice and the mission on the basis of appreciative analysis of practices is a process that never ends. Policy and facilities are committed to ensuring that staff and students are invited to continually question, enrich and innovate their educational or socio-pedagogical practices.

All information about the WANDA method can be found on www.projectwanda.be.

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