

# CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF CARE AND EDUCATION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

Katrien Van Laere

Promotor: Prof. Dr. Michel Vandenbroeck

Academiejaar 2016-2017

Doctoraat ingediend tot het behalen van de academische graad  
van Doctor in het Sociaal Werk



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## Preface

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While finalising this dissertation, I read in several newspapers about a court case between parents and a preschool somewhere in Flanders. A father went to court because his daughter's preschool prohibited children from eating a snack (fruit or cookies) in the afternoon. According to the media, the preschool found it unnecessary to give children a snack since they already had a big lunch at noon. However, this father didn't agree with this decision and took the issue to court. He felt that, especially since his daughter is of slender build, she should eat something in the afternoon. The judge decided that it is up to the preschool and not the parents to decide whether children have an afternoon snack or not. The verdict was as follows: "We can not equate the general interest of the child with the personal wishes of the parents."

Without knowing the details of the actual situation, I was wondering how it could come this far that parents sue the preschool to debate caring issues of their children in preschool education. It seems that a lot must have been going on before somebody institutes legal proceedings. How was the relationship between preschool staff and parents in this particular setting? Did possibilities exist for parents and preschool staff to discuss and negotiate the care and education of children? A lot of questions can be asked. But the impact of this court case kept me especially puzzled and somewhat shocked, leading me to ask: What will this mean now for the well-being and learning of the involved child? How will the preschool teachers and the father be able to face each other after disputing their disagreement in a legal procedure, symbolising the fundamental distrust between each other? What does this mean for other parents and preschool staff in the same school, in the same region or for parents and preschool staff in Flanders who also have read this story in the news papers? It is hard to believe that an intervention of a judge is desirable in order to decide how parents and preschool staff should co-educate children.

Although I will not provide the right answers, our study attempted to explore conceptualisations of care and education in preschool through the eyes of different people like parents and preschool staff. It is hoped that the analysis in this dissertation will be thought provoking and enrich the scholarly, policy and practice debates on preschool education in a context of social inequalities and diversity.



## Table of contents

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<b>Chapter 1</b>	
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>19</b>
1.1 Introduction.....	21
1.2 Schoolifying preschool into ‘prep school’ .....	21
1.2.1 Investing is preventing .....	21
1.2.2 Questioning the schoolification of preschool .....	23
1.2.3 Radicalising parental responsibility.....	25
1.3 Research questions and aims .....	27
1.4 The case of preschool education in Belgium / Flanders.....	29
1.4.1 The golden 1960s - 1970s: the idea of democratising preschool education .....	30
1.4.2 The mid-1970s: dealing with the economic recession.....	32
1.4.3 The 1980s and 1990s: interludium.....	35
1.4.4 The new millennium: the revival of the idea of making preschool mandatory.....	36
1.4.4.1 Relaunching legislative proposals .....	36
1.4.4.2 Developing alternatives in order to increase preschool attendance rates .....	40
1.4.4.3 Shifting views on the preschool teacher’s role .....	44
1.4.5 Some transversal reflections.....	46
1.5 Overview of the chapters .....	47
1.6 References.....	48
<b>Chapter 2</b>	
<b>Methodological approach</b>	<b>61</b>
2.1 Introduction.....	63
2.2 Policy perspectives on care and education .....	63
2.3 Parents’ and Preschool staff’s perspectives on care and education .....	65
2.3.1 Video-elicited focus groups.....	65
2.3.1.1 Making a movie.....	67
2.3.1.2 Inviting participants .....	72
2.3.2 Data Analysis .....	78
2.4 Some reflections on the positionality of the researcher .....	81
2.4.1 Working on and working with my personal stance.....	82
2.4.2 The inevitability of research as an intervention.....	85
2.5 References.....	87

**Chapter 3****The Education and Care Divide: the role of the early childhood workforce in 15 European countries 91**

3.1	Introduction.....	93
3.1.1	Schoolifying the Early Years .....	94
3.1.2	Assisting Core Practitioners .....	96
3.1.3	Integrating Caring and Learning.....	97
3.2	Methodology .....	98
3.2.1	Data Sample .....	98
3.2.2	Collecting Data .....	98
3.2.3	Analysing Data.....	99
3.3	Findings .....	99
3.4	Discussion.....	103
3.4.1	Caring Matters .....	104
3.4.2	From a Divide to a Hierarchy.....	105
3.4.3	Conceptualisations of Care .....	105
3.5	European Policies .....	107
3.6	References.....	108

**Chapter 4****The Democratic and Caring Deficit in ‘Parental Involvement’: Examining Perspectives of Migrant Parents on Preschool Education 115**

4.1	Introduction.....	118
4.2	Research context: the Flemish Community of Belgium .....	121
4.3	Methods .....	121
4.4	Results .....	123
4.4.1	The eagerness to know, experience, and communicate.....	123
4.4.2	Questioning care in preschool practices .....	124
4.4.2.1	Care as an activity and mental disposition .....	125
4.4.2.2	Care as a phenomenon .....	126
4.4.2.3	Discontinuity in care .....	127
4.4.3	Adopting a subordinate position.....	128
4.4.3.1	From silent to silenced voices.....	128
4.4.3.2	Following scripted practices.....	130
4.4.3.3	Challenging scripted practices .....	131
4.5	Discussion .....	132
4.6	References.....	135

**Chapter 5****Early learning in preschool: meaningful and inclusive for all? Exploring perspectives of migrant parents and staff 141**

5.1	Introduction.....	144
-----	-------------------	-----



5.2	Research context .....	146
5.3	Methods .....	147
5.3.1	Inviting respondents .....	147
5.3.2	Video-elicited focus groups .....	149
5.3.3	Data recording and data analysis .....	149
5.4	Results .....	150
5.4.1	Fear of exclusion .....	150
5.4.2	Managing the body .....	152
5.4.3	Readying children for early learning .....	155
5.5	Discussion .....	156
5.6	Implications for policy and practice .....	158
5.7	References.....	159

## Chapter 6

### **The (in)convenience of care in preschool education: examining staff views on educare 167**

6.1	Introduction.....	170
6.2	Hamington's theory of embodied and performative care .....	171
6.3	Research context .....	173
6.4	Methods .....	174
6.5	Results .....	176
6.5.1	Embodied potential to care .....	176
6.5.2	Mind-body dualism .....	177
6.5.3	Professional identities.....	178
6.5.4	The hierarchy between education and care .....	180
6.5.5	Educare as social justice.....	182
6.6	Discussion .....	184
6.7	References.....	187

## Chapter 7

### **Challenging the feminisation of the workforce: rethinking the mind–body dualism in Early Childhood Education and Care 193**

7.1	Introduction.....	196
7.2	A retrospective look at the history of women as carers and educators .....	198
7.2.1	The origins: an ideal mother .....	198
7.2.2	The 1970s: equal rights .....	199
7.2.3	Definitions of 'care' throughout history.....	200
7.2.4	The turn of the century: schoolification.....	200
7.3	Mission accomplished? .....	202
7.4	An almost entirely female workforce: missing an empty goal? .....	202
7.5	Rethinking the mind–body dualism in care from the perspective of contemporary feminism.....	204
7.6	Corporeality in the ECEC workforce .....	206

7.7	Conclusions and implications .....	209
7.8	References.....	210
<b>Chapter 8</b>		
	<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>217</b>
8.1	Introduction.....	219
8.2	Main findings.....	220
8.2.1	Care: The Achilles' heel in preschool education .....	220
8.2.2	Continuing or disrupting the underlying mind-body dualism .....	223
8.2.3	Uncovering the social and political potential of educare in preschool education .....	225
8.2.4	Confirming and contesting social problem constructions.....	226
8.2.5	Intersecting the private and the public domain: debating responsibilities .....	228
8.3	Limitations of and recommendations for further research .....	231
8.4	Recommendations for preschool policies and practices.....	234
8.4.1	Adopting a democratic commitment to justice, equality and freedom for all .....	234
8.4.2	Being attentive to caring needs in preschool education.....	237
8.4.3	Taking responsibility to care in preschool education.....	239
8.4.4	Being responsive to the experiences of children and families.....	242
8.4.5	Being competent in care in preschool education .....	243
8.5	References.....	245
<b>Nederlandstalige samenvatting</b>		<b>253</b>
<b>Data Storage Fact Sheets</b>		<b>271</b>

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

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## 1.1 Introduction

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is the term most commonly used in international policy documents and research to designate all provision of care and education for children before compulsory school age (Urban, Vandenbroeck, Peeters, Lazzari, & Van Laere, 2011). Many countries, including Belgium, are historically characterised by an ECEC split system, where care services for children up to three years of age (*kinderopvang*) are under the auspices of the Minister for Welfare and preschool institutions (*kleuterschool*) for children from two and a half to compulsory school age are under the auspices of the Minister for Education. Throughout this dissertation, we focus on the latter component of ECEC by using the term ‘preschool’ or ‘preschool education’ (*kleuteronderwijs*), with special emphasis on the youngest children in this provision.

In this introduction, we analyse a dominant international policy and research discourse in which a social investment logic implies that preschool should be understood as a ‘prep school’. Based on the blind spots in this discourse, we developed several research questions that involve exploring the perspectives of parents and preschool staff on education and care in preschool in the Flemish Community of Belgium in relation to policy perspectives in various European countries. In the second part of this introduction, we demonstrate that investing in the equalising potential of preschool education is not an entirely new idea in Belgium. This idea has permeated political and public debates on preschool education since the 1960s and is exemplified by the political aspiring to lower the compulsory school age.

## 1.2 Schoolifying preschool into ‘prep school’

### 1.2.1 Investing is preventing

Since the beginning of the new millennium, many international bodies have been using social investment language to frame policy advice on preschool education in both developed and developing countries (Jenson, 2009; Morabito, 2015; Perkins, Nelms, & Smyth, 2004). We illustrate this perspective

in the 2011 communication of the European Commission on childcare and preschool education, which states:

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“ If solid foundations are laid in the early years, later learning is more effective and is more likely to continue life-long, lessening the risk of early school leaving, increasing the equity of educational outcomes and reducing the costs for society in terms of lost talent and of public spending on social, health and even justice systems. (European Commission, 2011, p. 1)

---

Studies on economic returns (Barnett & Masse, 2007; Heckman, 2006) and the positive effect on brain development (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000) are used in this policy debate to legitimise investments in early childhood education. Longitudinal studies in the USA and the UK have demonstrated that high-quality preschool can improve outcomes in terms of children’s cognitive development, socio-emotional functioning and educational performance (see reviews of Lazarri & Vandenbroeck, 2013; Melhuish et al., 2015). Although preschool education is considered beneficial for all young children, the highest ‘return’ is expected for children from low socio-economic backgrounds and children with migrant backgrounds, particularly those who speak a minority language at home (Bennett, 2012; Leseman & Slot, 2014; Matthews & Jang, 2007; Melhuish et al., 2015).

These arguments are further strengthened by evidence that early childhood education reduces social problems such as early school leaving, school failure, unemployment, and poverty (European Commission, 2011, 2013; OECD, 2012; UNESCO, 2007). On an individual level, investing in high-quality preschool education would enable children to be better prepared for further schooling and employment issues in our current economies (Williams, 2004). As children are increasingly considered to be human capital for a future society (Perkins et al., 2004; Williams, 2004), these individual prevention strategies serve the purpose of creating better social and economic development for society at large. In other words, existing inequalities and problems of exclusion are predominantly framed from an economic point of view as poverty and unemployment may hinder economic prosperity (Ang, 2014; Williams, 2004; Wong & Turner, 2014).

Due to the emergence of social investment language in social policies, scholars have identified a gradual shift from ‘equalising outcomes’ to ‘equalising

opportunities' (Morabito & Vandebroek, 2015; Staab, 2010). Accordingly, public investments in preschool education and the family life of young children gradually tend to prevail over income redistribution and other structural measurements to combat social inequalities (Gray, 2013; Schiettecat, Roets, & Vandebroek, 2015). Early childhood is identified as a crucial period in which children's outcomes are determined by circumstances and not by one's individual responsibility (Morabito & Vandebroek, 2015). Although the educational gaps between children with high and low socioeconomic status (SES) and children with and without migrant backgrounds remains persistent in many countries (OECD, 2013, 2014, 2016; Stanat & Chistensen, 2006), it is believed that for those children at risk of school failure, preschool education even has the potential to compensate for the unequal distribution of opportunities allocated to them (Barnett, 1995; Dhuey, 2011).

By underlining the future equalising potential of the early years, preschool education is increasingly constructed as a 'prep school' in which the significance of preschool education lies in later stages of life (Ang, 2014; Vandebroek, Coussee, & Bradt, 2010). This entails that in many countries more formalised learning approaches, in which children are expected to acquire (pre-) literacy, (pre-) numeracy and (pre-) scientific skills from a young age, are introduced (OECD, 2006; Woodhead, 2006). This phenomenon has been labelled as the 'schoolification' of preschool education (Moss, 2013; OECD, 2006).

### 1.2.2 Questioning the schoolification of preschool

Over the last decade, many researchers have debated and problematised the possible effects of schoolification on preschool pedagogy. A primary criticism concerns children's learning processes, which tend to be decontextualised: since the main focus is on cognitive and language learning, there is a risk that children's natural learning strategies - play, exploration, freedom of movement, relations and discussions with other children - may be less encouraged (Broström, 2006; Hjort, 2006; Noddings, 2005). Moreover, the interpretation of learning as a preparation for compulsory schooling tends to limit the attention given to the caring dimension of education (Alvestad, 2009; Forrester, 2005; Kyriacou, Ellingsen, Stephens, & Sundaram, 2009). Recent empirical studies, both in split and integrated ECEC systems, claim that due to schoolification tendencies, preschool curricula focus less on bodily care, emotions, relationality and solidarity (Garnier, 2011; Löfdahl & Folke-Fichtelius, 2015).

Remarkably, the same international organisations that frame policy advice on preschool using social investment language demonstrate an awareness of the corresponding risks of schoolification. They concur that preschool education should adopt a holistic pedagogical view, in which education and care are inseparable concepts, also commonly referred to as 'educare' (Cameron & Moss, 2011; European Commission, 2011; Kaga, Bennett, & Moss, 2010; Penn, 2009). Indeed, UNESCO describes the role of education during this time period in the following way:

---

“ Early childhood is defined as the period from birth to eight years old. A time of remarkable brain growth, these years lay the basis for subsequent development. ECEC is more than a preparatory stage assisting the child's transition to formal schooling. It places emphasis on developing the whole child - attending to his or her social, emotional, cognitive and physical needs - to establish a solid and broad foundation for lifelong learning and wellbeing. (<http://en.unesco.org/themes/early-childhood-care-and-education>)

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This UNESCO mission statement on ECEC shows how the international community constructs preschool education as a preparatory phase for formal schooling. Simultaneously, UNESCO highlights a possible tension that this future oriented perspective can produce as it attempts to coexist with support for the holistic development, at any time, of all children.

A second series of criticisms on schoolification deals with the more technical conceptualisation of professionalism and the focus on prescribed learning goals and curricula (Oberhuemer, 2005). Preschool teachers are seen as technical experts teaching specific subjects that prepare young children to enter primary school. Their professional development includes mastering different subjects, using didactics based on evidence of 'what works' and applying prescribed school programmes (Jensen, Broström, & Hansen, 2010; Samuelsson & Sheridan, 2010). Moreover, the care dimension of preschool pedagogy is at risk of being eliminated in the training of professionals (Brougère, 2015; Löfgren, 2015; Peeters, 2013; Warin, 2014). Yet, this is in conflict with international policy and research reports, which are likeminded in their pleas for competent systems where preschool staff members conjoin care and education (Children in Europe, 2008; Kaga et al., 2010; Urban, Vandenbroeck, Van Laere, Lazzari, & Peeters, 2012). Oberhuemer, Schreyer, and Neuman (2010), as well as Dahlberg



and Moss (2005), underline the perspective that pedagogical quality should encompass ethical and philosophical dimensions. Essentially, the argument states that working and dialoguing with children, families and local communities from diverse backgrounds are indeterminate, value-bound practices which go beyond applying prescribed teaching methods (Kunneman, 2005).

### 1.2.3 Radicalising parental responsibility

The social investment rhetoric, calls upon parents, just like on their children, 'to invest in their own human capital' (Jenson, 2009, p. 454), as it is assumed that their activation can reduce dependency ratios (Jenson, 2009; Jenson & Saint-Martin, 2006). The social investment paradigm caused an intensification or - according to Vandenbroeck, Roose, and De Bie (2011, p. 4) - *radicalisation* of parental responsibility in order to ensure positive child development and future school success (K. Clarke, 2006; Gray, 2013; Jenson, 2009; Schiettecat et al., 2015; Vandenbroeck, Roose, et al., 2011).

Besides inciting parents to send their children to preschool, international organisations have recently been making pleas for more parental involvement in children's early learning at home and in the preschool environment (European Commission, 2015; OECD, 2006, 2012). Research demonstrating how parental involvement is associated with better learning outcomes and later academic success (Arnold, Zeljo, Doctoroff, & Ortiz, 2008; Castro, Bryant, Peisner-Feinberg, & Skinner, 2004; Eldridge, 2001; Galindo & Sheldon, 2012; Halgunseth, 2009; Marcon, 1999; McWayne, Hampton, Fantuzzo, Cohen, & Sekino, 2004; Miedel & Reynolds, 2000; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2004) shows how parental involvement is considered as an important means to reduce educational gaps between children with higher and lower socioeconomic statuses (SES) and between children with and without migrant backgrounds. In sum, ideas for closing these educational gaps involve action by the disadvantaged parents themselves.

However, scholars have questioned this radicalisation of parental responsibility for how it individualises social problems like school failure, as shown in Figure 1 (K. Clarke, 2006; Vandenbroeck, Roose, et al., 2011). Through processes of decontextualisation, responsibilisation and pedagogisation, parents tend to be held responsible for counteracting the school failure of their children,

regardless of the societal conditions in which they live; or regardless of the access they have to quality ECEC. Consequently, school failure risks to be increasingly framed as a deficiency of families, rather than of schools or of governance (K. Clarke, 2006; Vandebroek, Roose, et al., 2011)

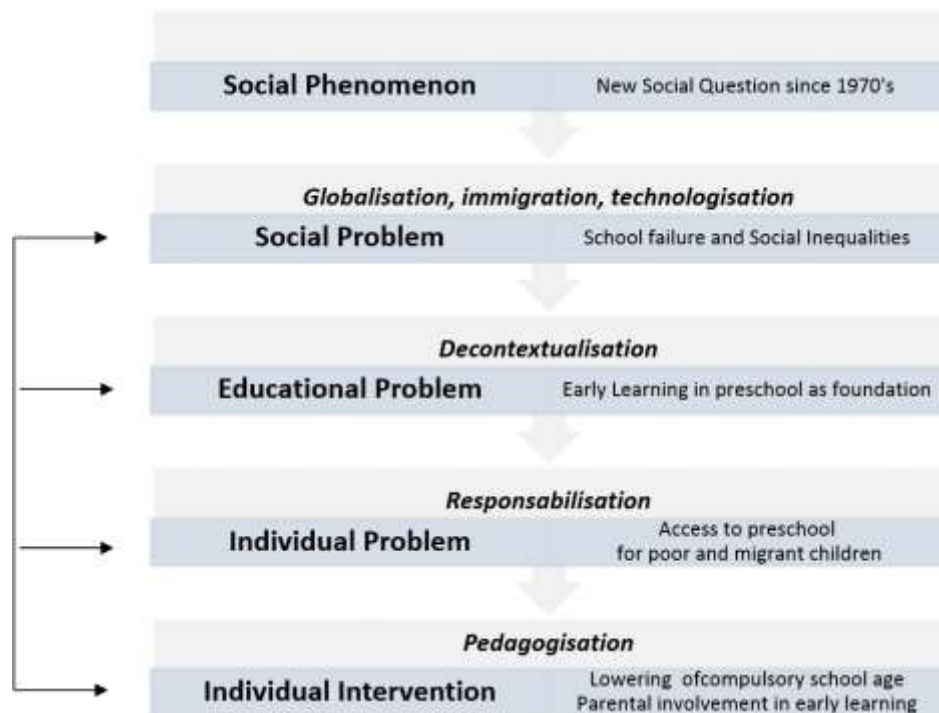


Figure 1.1.: The social construction of educational problems applied to school failure (Vandebroek, Coussee, & Bradt 2010)

There is criticism that parents' voices and lived experiences may be fairly absent in policy debates (Hughes & Mac Naughton, 2000). Parents are given a more instrumental role in the learning process of their children, meaning that they are expected to help their children to achieve the learning outcomes that the educational system has set, without being involved in discussions on these outcomes or on the kind of education they want for their child (Brougère, 2010; Doucet, 2011; Hughes & Mac Naughton, 2000; Lawson, 2003; Vandebroek, De Stercke, & Gobeyn, 2013).

### **1.3 Research questions and aims**

The absence of parental voices is especially salient in the case of families that are the object of concern for policy makers and scholars: children at risk of school failure (i.e., children from families with migrant backgrounds and from lower socio-economic statuses). In order to gain a better understanding of the meaning of preschool education in a context of social inequalities, one needs to better understand parents' lived experiences and perspectives. Furthermore, the voices of preschool staff are also fairly absent in the debates on the meaning of preschool and therefore preschool staff may be silenced in discussions on their very profession.

The few existing studies on this topic have suggested that parents and preschool teachers understand preschool education as a means to prepare children for primary education by teaching them pre-academic and social skills (Gill, Winters, & Friedman, 2006; Lara-Cinisomo, Sidle Fuligni, Ritchie, Howes, & Karoly, 2008; Lin, Lawrence, & Gorrell, 2003). Some studies revealed how parents with migrant backgrounds and preschool teachers highlighted the importance of care and social, emotional and physical support of children in preschool (Brougère, 2015; Hwa-Froelich & Westby, 2003; Vandenbroeck et al., 2013; Wesley & Buysse, 2003). Despite a parental focus on care, scholars have warned that care may gradually disappear from preschool policies and practices (curricula, professional profiles, etc.) due to schoolification tendencies (Alvestad, 2009; Forrester, 2005; Kyriacou et al., 2009; Smith & Whyte, 2008). This might suggest that the meaning parents give to care and education in preschool is associated with the relation between preschool and educational inequality and/or inequity. This is precisely what this study seeks to explore.

By taking three different perspectives (parents, policies, preschool staff), we examine the following research questions:

- How do parents, preschool staff and policies conceptualise ‘care’ and ‘education’ in preschool?
- What do similar and opposing conceptualisations of ‘care’ and ‘education’ signify for the increasing attention given preschool education as an important equalising condition for later school success?
- How do diverse and opposing conceptualisations of care and education relate to on-going inequalities in the educational system?

In this study, we focus alternately on European and Flemish fields of preschool education as compelling cases in relation to the alleged equalising potential of preschool. The first research question will be explored in the different chapters of the dissertation. Although we briefly touch upon the relation between conceptualisations and social inequalities in the discussion of each chapter, the overall conclusion of this study specifically connects the first with the second and third research questions.

In order to examine the policy perspectives, we conducted an analysis of policy documents in 15 European countries from 2010 and 2011. This was part of a larger study on Competence Requirements for Early Childhood Education (the CoRe Study), commissioned by the European Commission, Directorate General for Education and Culture (Urban et al., 2011; Urban et al., 2012). In a subsequent study, we organised 10 video-elicited focus groups in the cities of Ghent, Antwerp and Brussels with parents who are the object of concern for the Flemish Government, i.e. predominantly parents with migrant backgrounds. The focus groups in Brussels were part of a larger study on transitions from home and childcare to preschool, commissioned by the Flemish Community Commission (Vlaamse Gemeenschapscommissie). It has to be noted that we did not assume that parents with a migrant history are a homogenous category, nor that they have some essential features in common. We also did not assume that they differ in opinion from parents without migrant backgrounds. In addition, we organised six video-elicited focus groups with diverse preschool staff in the cities of Ghent and Brussels. The overarching data analysis of the focus groups corresponds with principles of abductive analysis, which is “a creative inferential process aimed at producing new

hypotheses and theories based on surprising research evidence” (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012, p. 170). The three chapters that cover different ways of presenting the qualitative data from the focus groups, have different approaches: chapters four and five are more data driven, while chapter six is more theory driven.

Our study adopts a social pedagogical perspective in social work research. Social work intervenes in sites, such as preschool education, where the private concerns of families or individuals and public concerns intersect (Bouverne - De Bie, 2015; Neyrand, 2010; Parton, 1998). A social pedagogical perspective signifies that preschool pedagogical practices are always analysed and situated in relation to social and political contexts and the broader structures of society. More specifically, we examine the ways in which conceptualisations of care and education in preschool are challenging or confirming social inequalities (Vandenbroeck, Coussée, Bradt, & Roose, 2011). In so doing, we aim to continually re-examine what the problem might be in participatory ways and contribute to the international body of theoretical and empirical knowledge on preschool education, early learning and parental involvement in the context of social inequalities and increasing social and cultural diversity. In addition, we hope we enrich the current international and national policy debates in which preschool is reduced to a means to equalise opportunities. Finally, recommendations for preschool practices and policy recommendations will be given.

## **1.4 The case of preschool education in Belgium / Flanders**

Investing in the equalising potential of preschool education is not entirely a new idea in Belgium. Since the 1960s, political discussions have repeatedly taken place regarding making preschool education mandatory in order to raise the educational attainment of, originally, working class children, and later children with migrant (Van Laere & Vandenbroeck, 2014). The 1914 law on compulsory schooling set the starting age of compulsory education in Belgium at six years old (De Vroede, 1970). In the following section, we situate the political and public debates on lowering the compulsory school age that started in the 1960s

in order to explore socio-political objectives and the legitimization of preschool education<sup>1</sup>.

Education became a competence of the Flemish Community in 1988, while determining the compulsory school age has remained a federal competence. Before, education belonged to the federal government. Therefore, we focus alternately on both Belgium as a federal government and the Flemish Community as a regional government. We also draw attention to the fact that in the Dutch language there is a substantial difference between *opvoeding* and *onderwijs*. Many discussions have taken place on how to translate these terms into English, as both terms could be translated as 'education'. *Opvoeding* is an intentional intervention in the socialisation processes of a child (Bouverne - De Bie, 2015) (cfr. upbringing and raising children) and *onderwijs* is concerned with learning and instruction, usually (yet not exclusively) in a school setting (CBS, 2015). For the remainder of the document, we will use these English terms, followed by the original Dutch: education (*opvoeding*), educators (*opvoeders*), learning /schooling / schools (*onderwijs*) and teachers (*onderwijzers*).

#### 1.4.1 The golden 1960s - 1970s: the idea of democratising preschool education

In the 1960s, there was growing concern about the discrepancy between the ideals of democracy and actual social inequalities. Inspired by previous proposals by educational scientists such as Dujardin in 1962, liberal senator Bascour (*PVV - Partij voor Vrijheid en Vooruitgang*) proposed in 1968 to lower the compulsory school age to five as a means to reduce grade retention in the first grade of primary school (Brackeva, 1986). Building on the preparatory work of the socialist trade union (*VSO - Vereniging van het Socialistisch Onderwijzend Personeel*) and the socialist party (*BSP/PSB - Belgische Socialistische Partij / Parti Socialiste Belge*), the socialist Minister of Education of the French Community, Abel Dubois, joined Bascour in his plea to combat selective mechanisms in primary education that harmed the educational success of working class children. He founded a special commission in 1970 that included the parents' association (*CNAP - Confédération nationale des Associations de*

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<sup>1</sup>This section is an adaptation of an article published as Van Laere, K, and M Vandenbroeck (2014). 100 jaar leerplicht in België: en nu de kleuters? [100 years of compulsory school in Belgium: and now the toddlers? ] *Pedagogiek* 34 (3):191-208.

*Parents de l'Enseignement libre*) and proposed to lower the compulsory school age. At the same time, he also initiated a educational structure for children between five and seven years of age, integrated the preschool programme into primary school education, aimed to ameliorate parent-school contact and aimed to lower the student-teacher ratio in classes. Dubois started pedagogical experiments with a mandatory transition class in preschool so five-year-old children could be prepared for primary school. He underlined that class activities at all times should start from the physical, affective, intellectual and social being and becoming of children (Brackeva, 1986). From a similar position of concern, the socialist Minister of Education of the Flemish Community, Willy Claes (*BSP*), initiated, in 1972, open discussions with all educational stakeholders regarding lowering the compulsory school age while also rethinking preschool and primary school education. Supported by the socialist (*VSO*) and Christian trade unions (*ACW* - *Algemeen Christelijk Werknemersverbond*, *COV* - *Christelijke Onderwijzersverbond*), several schools experimented with the integration of preschool and primary school education within a coherent pedagogical climate and vision based on the holistic development of children between two-and-a-half and twelve years of age (*VLO* - *Vernieuwd Lager Onderwijs*) (Brackeva, 1986).

For the first time, preschool education was given the explicit function of making working class children 'ready for school' (*schoolrijp*) and eliminating social-cultural 'handicaps'. At the same time, concerns were made explicit that preschool education should support the holistic development of children and avoid a schoolified approach to learning based solely on the didactics and norms of primary school (Brackeva, 1986). During this time period, preschool staff was portrayed predominantly as educators (*opvoeders*) rather than teachers (*onderwijzers*) as illustrated in the following excerpt from a professional journal for preschool educators :

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“Conquer their heart”<sup>2</sup> was the strategy, “and you should not be afraid to show that you love them”. Caressing and hugging were in due time allowed, because “which toddler doesn’t want to be rocked to sleep in the arms of or on the lap of the educator (leidster)?<sup>3</sup>” Only in a climate of freedom and security, every toddler (irrespective of their social origins or family circumstances) can come out of their shell<sup>4</sup> (Depaepe 1990, p. 27; translation by author)

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These professional journals suggested that they had to act as mother-like figures in terms of being naturally affectionate and playful towards children (Depaepe, 1990).

#### 1.4.2 The mid-1970s: dealing with the economic recession

From the mid-1970s, the economic trend changed and a recession took place over a considerable amount of time. Belgium faced its biggest economic crisis since World War II. Proposals to lower the compulsory school were instrumentalised to prevent massive unemployment (De Ceulaer, 1990). The liberal Minister of Education for the Flemish Community, Herman De Croo (PVV), introduced his innovative plans in order to confront the technological revolution and growing job insecurity. School became an instrument for the self-realisation of children in future uncertain economic times (Brackeva, 1986; De Croo, 1975). De Croo proposed a new fundamental structure in which preschool would stop at the age of five and primary school would be comprised of two educational structures: from five to seven years of age and from eight to eleven years of age. In addition to lowering the compulsory school age, it was felt that primary school should initiate a playful learning class (*speelleerklas*) in which children learn basic skills like mathematics, reading and writing so “the best possible conditions are provided for the best possible course of the school trajectory of each child” (De Croo, 1977, p. 19, translation by author).

However, children had to take a school readiness test (*schoolrijpheidstest*) before entering this playful learning class. Scholars of the University of Leuven and the Vrije Universiteit Brussel contested the selectivity of this test since it would contradict the original intention of Minister De Croo, in which he, in line with previous Ministers, wanted to prevent grade retention in primary school

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2 CSPP, LXVII (1960) 152. (in Depaepe, 1990)

3 O, LXVI (1969) 366. (in Depaepe, 1990)

4 O, LXVIII (1971) 345. (in Depaepe, 1990)



and compensate the 'socio cultural handicaps' of working class children (Vlaamse Onderwijsraad, 2004). Moreover the socialist (*BSP*) and the Christian democrat (*CVP - Christelijke Volkspartij*) parties, the parent associations and the Christian trade union (*ACW*) denounced the economic goals of efficiency and performance since this new structure would exclude working class children and only benefit 'gifted' (*meerbegaafde*) children (Brackeva, 1986; De Ceulaer, 1990).

Despite the criticism, De Croo initiated pedagogical experimentation in several schools. At the same time, the Christian Democratic Minister of Education of the French Community, Antoine Humblet (*PSC - Parti Social Chrétien*), proposed a similar change in the foundations of education in combination with lowering the compulsory school age. His proposal was received more positively by the trade unions and the French speaking Catholic schools on the condition that learning would not start immediately at the age of five. Nevertheless, in contrast to the beginning of the 1970s, the parent associations of Catholic education (*CNAP – CNP*) were strongly against this plan. They referred to the free educational (*opvoeding*) responsibility of parents and the fact that the learning time of children would be extended. They also feared that the free school choice of parents, embedded in the Belgian constitution, would be hindered since lowering the compulsory school age would have implications on the peaceful agreement (*schoolvrede*) between different school providers (Catholic, state, municipalities). The latter argument prevailed in the later opposition of especially Catholic entities and the Christian Democrat political parties (Brackeva, 1986; De Ceulaer, 1990; De Smet, 1977; De Volksmacht, 13/6/78). Both Ministers De Croo and Humblet eventually did not manage to convert their proposals into laws (Brackeva, 1986; De Ceulaer, 1990), however.

Because of the government's priority to combat unemployment, the Belgian government inserted a proposal to lower the compulsory school age to five years old in the coalition agreement of 1977 in order to "combat the social-cultural inequalities and affective handicaps so they will not be transformed into scholastic delay (*schoolse achterstand*)" (Regering Tindemans II, 7/6/77, p. 23, translation by author). The educational Ministers of both the Flemish and French Communities, Jef Ramaekers (*BSP*) and Joseph Michel (*PSC*), transformed this intention into multiple legislative proposals. Ramaekers argued that children should be made resilient for school (*schoolweerbaar*) and

the transition between preschool and primary school education could be organised more smoothly (Het Nieuwsblad, 1/09/1977; Vooruit, 4/2/78). He accentuated his view that teachers should not provide techniques in mathematics, reading and writing to toddlers. Instead they should focus on playful activities, in which conditions are created to bring children gradually to more systemic and intentional oriented approaches of learning (Ramaekers, 1977, 1979). By lowering the compulsory school age, the Minister hoped to reach out to working-class children and children who did not attend preschool (Het Laatste Nieuws, 6/12/77; Vlaams Weekblad, 5/12/77). For the socialist party, the aim of education (*opvoeding*) and schooling (*onderwijs*) was to enable the social, cultural, political and economic emancipation (*ontvoogding*) of working-class children: the educational attainment should by no means rely on the social origins of a person (Colebunders, 1980). It was argued that, by reaching more working class children at an earlier age, “learning difficulties and affective disorders could be intercepted and disadvantages from the social background could be compensated in preschool”(Volksgazet, 9/2/78, translation by author).

At the same time, they wanted to offer a broad social environment to children in preschool in order to further develop their personalities and socially integrate them into the broader community (Vlaams Weekblad, 5/12/77; Volksgazet, 9/2/78). Minister Ramaekers, however, drew attention to the fact that the school could not do this alone, pointing to the educational (*opvoeding*) responsibility of parents. He strongly questioned “the mentality of many parents who consider school to be an easy parking spot for their children and who think that children need to be educated (*opvoeden*) in preschool”(Knack, 24/08/77, p. 12, translation by author).

His proposal to lower the compulsory school age was connected with ongoing pedagogical experimentation projects (VLO and Cycle 5-8) in both the Flemish and French Communities. Besides some local parent associations, most national parent associations (*CNAP*, *NCOV* - *Nationale Confederatie van Ouderverenigingen*, *CNP* - *Conseil National des Parents*), representatives of the Catholic schools and Christian trade unions (*COV* – *ACW*) were rather resistant to making the last year of preschool mandatory. Although they concurred with the idea to combat and eventually eliminate ‘socio-cultural delays’, they stated that more research was needed on the impact of early intervention on the

school career of children, on the five percent of toddlers that were not enrolled in preschool and on the effect of good adult-child ratios and pedagogic support for teachers (Brackeva, 1986; Het Belang van Limburg, 21/12/77; Vlaams Weekblad, 5/12/77). Additionally, they asked whether it was better to 'deschoolify' (*ontscholen*) the first years of primary school and make it more age appropriate and playful instead of preparing toddlers for the 'real school' (De Smet, 1977). As stated before, an important bottleneck for them was to maintain the peaceful agreement (*schoolvrede*) between the different school providers (Catholic, state, cities, municipalities) since lowering the compulsory school would raise questions about which schools would have enough students and, thus, could continue to exist (Brackeva, 1986; De Ceulaer, 1990; De Smet, 1977; De Volksmacht, 13/6/78).

Despite many legislative proposals (20/12/1977, 12/7/1979, 18/12/1980, 5/5/1981) and the fact that lowering the compulsory school age was inserted in all coalition agreements of the Belgian government from 1977 until 1981 (Tindemans II, Martens I, II, III, IV, Van den Boeynants I, en Eyskens I), no change in the law ever resulted. Due to the economic crisis, the social-political discourse regarding enabling the social and cultural emancipation of working class children was increasingly contrasted with a more economic approach in which the future employability of children and the prevention of school failure and later unemployment were seen as key elements for economic growth (De Ceulaer, 1990; Brackeva, 1986; Van Laere & Vandenbroeck, 2014). Accordingly, this time period was characterised by a continuous discussion of desirable pedagogical approaches for preschool education: Should preschool education imitate primary school education and initiate learning activities from a young age or should preschool education maintain and develop its own pedagogical, playful identity?

### 1.4.3 The 1980s and 1990s: interludium

In the beginning of the 1980s, more people, led by the French speaking parent associations and the Christian Party (*PSC*), progressively opposed the idea of lowering the compulsory school age. Out of fear of a schoolified approach to preschool, they preferred stimulating, rather than coercive measures (Conseil National Des Parents, 1980; De Ceulaer, 1990). Only the socialist Minister of Education of the Flemish Community of Belgium, Willy Calewaert, kept submitting legislative proposals to lower the compulsory school age in 1980 and

1981. The next Christian Democrat Minister of Education, Daniel Coens, managed in 1983 to pass a new law extending the compulsory school age from 14 years to 16 years (Coens, 1985). Purposely, he did not include the idea of lowering the compulsory school age, referring to the high numbers of toddlers already attending preschool and confirming the schoolification concerns of the French speaking parent associations (Brackeva, 1986; Commissie voor Opvoeding Wetenschapsbeleid en Cultuur, 9/6/1983). He continued supporting the pedagogical VLO experiments, initially started by Willy Claes, but he did not mainstream them into the majority of schools. After the passage of a new law extending the compulsory school age, the topic of lowering the age was dismissed in political debates and thus not addressed for approximately two decades (Van Laere & Vandenbroeck, 2014).

#### 1.4.4 The new millennium: the revival of the idea of making preschool mandatory

##### 1.4.4.1 Relaunching legislative proposals

After nearly two decades of silence, the idea of lowering the compulsory school age was put forward by a liberal representative of the people, Marleen Vanderpoorten (*VLD - Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten*) in order to ameliorate the situation of children with migrant backgrounds in education. Her plea however, received little support in the Flemish parliament (Vlaams Parlement, 1998, 1999). In the French Community, the question of lowering the compulsory age arose because of the implementation of the five to eight cycle in which the last year of preschool and the first two years of primary school were organised as one pedagogic unit. The ecologist Minister of Education, Jean-Marc Nollet (*Ecolo*), claimed that when children of socially disadvantaged families did not attend preschool regularly, their chances for a successful school career would significantly decrease (Klasse, 2000; Knack, 30/8/2000). Two years later, he commissioned a study to examine this statement. Researchers of the Université Catholique de Louvain (*UCL*) demonstrated how social inequalities are shaped early in the educational system.

Nevertheless, they refuted Nollet's hypothesis by underlining how the quality of children's preschool experience is equally and even more important than the frequency of attendance (Mangez, Joseph, & Delvaux, 2002). Despite these results, the Minister continued to defend the proposal to lower the compulsory

school age. Since changing compulsory school age is only possible by federal law, he asked the Flemish and German-speaking communities in 2000 and 2004 to consider this as well (Dautrebande, 2008). During that time, there was no apparent consensus in the Flemish Community on this issue; attention was instead devoted to sensitising and guiding parents to send their children to preschool (Commissie voor Onderwijs Vorming en Wetenschapsbeleid, 28/9/2002).

In 2004, several federal legislative proposals were submitted by Dutch and French speaking liberal and socialist MPs, all of whom used a similar problem analysis and definition (Belgische kamer van volksvertegenwoordigers, 7/1/2004, 16/2/2004). They assumed that irregular attendance of children who do not have French or Dutch as their home language would cause them to suffer from a later 'learning delay' (*leerachterstand*). By obliging parents to send their five-year-old children to preschool, it was assumed that these children could start in primary school 'with the same baggage' (*met gelijke baggage*) as their peers. The last year in preschool was constructed as a period in which toddlers learn the basics of mathematics and reading, while stating that preschool should not completely become schoolified according to the norms of primary school (Belgische kamer van volksvertegenwoordigers, 7/1/2004, 16/2/2004). Reinforced by poor results by Belgium in relation to social inequalities on the PISA studies (*Programme for International Student Assessment*)(OECD, 2003), these proposals gained political attention at the beginning of the new millennium (Agirdag, 2016; Stanat & Chistensen, 2006; Van Laere & Vandenbroeck, 2014).

Moreover the HIVA (*Onderzoeksinstituut voor Arbeid en Samenleving*) research centre, based at the University of Louvain, conducted a study in 2003 statistically demonstrating how social inequalities are reproduced in the Flemish school system. The researchers, Groenez, Van den Brande, and Nicaise (2003) suggested that if children do attend preschool frequently, they would develop a 'learning delay' in the last year of preschool. This was especially the case for children who had a non-European language or did not have Belgian nationality, as well as for children of lower educated parents, single mothers, self-employed parents or parents working in liberal professions (Groenez et al., 2003). Moreover, they recommended lowering the compulsory school age to three years, albeit halftime (Groenez et al., 2003). The trade unions (ABVV, ACV

and ACLVB) and the Flemish education council (VLOR - *Vlaamse Onderwijsraad*) raised concerns that these legislative proposals were no guarantee for the prevention of 'learning delays' in children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. Alternatively, the government could better invest in ensuring quality education by professionalising staff and extending the 'equal opportunities decree' to preschool (*GOK Gelijke Onderwijs Kansen*). This decree was established in 2002 to give schools extra funding based on the SES and ethnic backgrounds of the populations they served (Agirdag, 2016).

In 2006, socialist federal Minister of societal integration, Christian Dupont (PS), revived the discussion to lower the compulsory school age to five years old as part of poverty reduction measurements (De Standaard, 29/4/2006). In response, several local poverty organisations and the federal poverty organisation, *Steunpunt tot bestrijding van armoede bestaansonzekerheid en sociale uitsluiting*, underlined the importance of investing in quality education for children living in poverty, better partnerships with parents and the establishment of a welcoming atmosphere with respect for diversity and awareness of social inequalities (Steunpunt tot bestrijding van armoede bestaansonzekerheid en sociale uitsluiting, 2006). With the exception of the French speaking Catholic parent association (UFAPEC - *Union des Fédérations des Associations de Parents de l'Enseignement Catholique*), this plea received little attention (Dautrebande, 2008). In 2007 and 2008 the federal government inserted the proposal to lower the compulsory school age to five years old in the coalition agreements (Federale Regering Leterme I, 18/3/2008; Federale Regering Verhofstadt II, 21/12/2007). French speaking liberal, socialist and Christian democrat representatives have submitted legislative proposals up till today without any success. By referring to the UCL study of 2002 (Mangez et al., 2002), it was assumed that high educational attainment and good employability depends on an early basis in preschool (Belgische kamer van volksvertegenwoordigers, 7/3/2008; Belgische Senaat, 18/3/2008).

In 2011, Dutch speaking liberal representatives proposed a new law, inspired by the 2003 HIVA study (Groenez et al., 2003), in order to prevent 'learning delays' and 'school fatigue' (*schoolmoeheid*) of children with migrant backgrounds, children of single parents and children of low educated parents (Belgische kamer van volksvertegenwoordigers, 25/2/2011). In the same period, several members of the liberal party (e.g., Bart Somers and Marleen

Vanderpoorten) called upon members of the socialist party to successfully lower the compulsory school age to three years old (De Tijd, 31/05/2012). Their plea was worded as follows:

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“ Education (*onderwijs*) must emancipate and must not create social inequality. It should ensure equal starting opportunities (*gelijke startkansen*). (...) Social origin is and remains determinative for the schooling career (*schoolloopbaan*) of a child. On average, 36 percent of children with migrant backgrounds between two and a half and three years of age do not attend preschool. Also, the children of single parents and children from lower educated parents are less likely to attend the first year in preschool compared with their peers from a different SES. Because these underprivileged children (*kansarme kinderen*) only go to school at an older age, they often start with a ‘handicap’. Studies show how they deal with learning delays that will follow them for the rest of their studies, leading to an increasing outflow of school leavers (*schoolverlaters*) without successfully completing secondary school. (De Tijd 31/05/2012; <http://www.bartsomers.be/verlaag-de-leerplicht-hoe-vroeger-naar-school-hoe-beter>; translation by author)

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Gradually, debates in parliament and the senate began to focus on increasing the attendance rates of the three-year-old in preschool instead of solely five-year-old children. Early regular attendance in preschool of underprivileged three-year-olds was considered a means for preventing later early school leaving (*vroegtijdig schoolverlaten*). Although the new federal government, Di Rupo I, did not include an intention to make the last year of preschool mandatory in 2004, legislative proposals by different political parties continued to be submitted (Belgische kamer van volksvertegenwoordigers, 9/7/2014). The regionalist French speaking representatives of the FDF (*Front démocratique des francophones*) submitted a proposal in 2013 to lower the compulsory school age to three years old.

By referring to economic return studies in the USA, they stated that the education (*opvoeding*) of children living in poverty would significantly improve because their families are believed to be lacking the skills to offer a good education to their children (*opvoeding*) (Belgische kamer van volksvertegenwoordigers, 27/5/2013). In 2016, the senate commission on transversal issues concerning different communities, led by socialist senator Ingrid Lieten (SP.a), proposed to lower the compulsory school age from six to

three as one measure to combat child poverty (Commissie voor de Transversale Aangelegenheden – Gemeenschapsbevoegdheden, 1/02/2016).

By using the work of Heckman (2006) on the returns on investment, these senators made a plea for investing in preschool and childcare services in order to stimulate the future learning processes of underprivileged children since later high educational attainment is understood as a crucial factor in overcoming poverty (Commissie voor de Transversale Aangelegenheden – Gemeenschapsbevoegdheden, 1/02/2016). Senator Lieten (*SP.a*) underlined that because underprivileged children have ‘poor language’ (*taal arm*) and lack social skills, they must attend preschool as early as possible (De Morgen, 1/02/2016). The senators urged that parents need to realise the importance of this early intervention since it was argued that “often underprivileged parents do not think it is necessary to send their children to preschool, although the opposite is true” (Commissie voor de Transversale Aangelegenheden – Gemeenschapsbevoegdheden 1/02/2016, p. 97, translation by author). This proposal has so far been well received and unanimously approved in the senate commission. The plan to lower the compulsory school age to three also found support in political discussions in the French Community of Belgium (e.g., *Pacte pour un Enseignement d'Excellence*).

#### 1.4.4.2 Developing alternatives in order to increase preschool attendance rates

Since lowering the compulsory school age is only possible by federal law, the Flemish government developed and implemented alternative pathways to increase the attendance rates of toddlers in preschool. In 2004, the Flemish government proposed that all children in Flanders should attend preschool for at least one year (Vlaamse Regering Leterme I, 22/7/2004). The socialist Flemish Minister of Education Frank Vandenbroucke (*SP.a*) promised to support the federal initiatives to lower the compulsory school age on the condition that it is financially feasible for the Flemish community and that the change would be accompanied by other measures, e.g. sensitising parents of vulnerable children in order that they would “realise the importance of early and regular toddler participation in preschool” (Commissie voor Onderwijs Vorming Wetenschap en Innovatie, 24/3/2005, p. 22, translation by author; Vandenbroucke, 2004).



Former Minister Vandenbroucke gradually distanced himself from the federal debate and started developing his own policy in order to stimulate so-called 'toddler participation' (*kleuterparticipatie*) (Vandenbroucke, 2007). He focused on the group of children that were enrolled yet attend preschool irregularly because "exactly these children, who live in unstructured home environment, have an additional need for educational stimuli offered by the schools" (Vandenbroucke, 2007, p. 2, translation by author). By referring to the HIVA study (Groenez et al., 2003), the Minister stated that "especially early intensive intervention in a structured environment will have positive effects for the social weak and it will diminish the risk of having a learning delay in primary school" (Vandenbroucke, 2007, p. 3; translation by author). For these reasons, he developed a stimulus plan in 2007 for 'toddler participation' based on seven pillars:

- Gathering efficient statistical data on the enrolment and attendance rates of toddlers. The Departments of Education (*Agodi*) and Child and Family (*Kind & Gezin*) need to collaborate and exchange data. Parents with migrant backgrounds and parents living in poverty receive a home visit when their child is between 30 and 36 months to convince them of the benefits of attending preschool. This is repeated when they do not enrol their child.
  - Building a support system for the preschools by providing extra staff (preschool teachers and childcare workers) to pay special attention to the care of the youngest children.
  - Eliminating financial barriers for parents by granting them scholarships on the condition that children attend preschool a minimum 220 half days.
  - Attributing an official role to the Centres for Pupil Guidance (*CLB - Centra voor Leerlingbegeleiding*) in supporting the schools to sensitize parents, doing a follow-up of toddlers who do not attend regularly and collaborating with welfare and health organisations in order to increase the attendance rates.
  - Attributing an official role to the Local Consultation Platforms (*LOP – Lokaal Overlegplatform*) in equal parts for information sharing regarding toddler participation statistics and actions with schools.
  - Ensuring a smooth transition between childcare services or out of school care and preschools.
  - Setting up campaigns to raise awareness for parents.
- (Vandenbroucke, 2007)

Vandenbroucke's successor, Pascal Smet (*SP.a*) continued this 'toddler participation policy' (*kleuterparticipatiebeleid*) and also initiated a language test in 2010 for children who were present less than 220 half days in the last year of preschool and did not have Dutch as their main home language. If children did not pass this test, they had to attend an extra year of preschool before being allowed in primary school (Commissie voor Onderwijs en Gelijke Kansen, 8/10/2009; Commissie voor Onderwijs Vorming Wetenschap en Innovatie, 23/4/2009). After years of criticism by several stakeholders, the language test was abolished in 2014. Instead, the class councils (*klassenraden*) now decide whether children are admitted to primary school when they have not attended the required number of half days (220) during the final year of preschool (Commissie voor Onderwijs en Gelijke Kansen, 11/4/2014; De Standaard, 1/09/2014; Departement Onderwijs en Vorming, 2014). In addition, some policy makers (e.g., the liberal politician Geert Versnick in 2012) proposed to make welfare allowances conditional upon the regular attendance of children in preschool (Commissie voor Onderwijs en Gelijke Kansen, 19/4/2012; Het Nieuwsblad, 27/3/2012). The current Christian Democrat Minister of Education, Hilde Crevits (*CD&V*) continued the "toddler participation policy" of her predecessors, while stating that lowering the compulsory school age is not an urgent issue (Crevits, 2015; De Standaard, 6/01/2015, 30/04/2015; Vlaamse Regering Bourgeois, 23/07/2014).

Commissioned by Minister Crevits, the Department of Education and Training executed in 2015 a qualitative study of literature and focus groups with stakeholders, as well as a quantitative analysis of statistics concerning enrolment and attendance of toddlers (Departement Onderwijs, 2015). The qualitative study hypothesised several barriers hindering the increase of 'toddler participation', such as a lack of information on the school system for parents, a parental concern on caring questions, an inappropriate care infrastructure, a lack of a smooth transition between childcare and preschool, and different home- and school cultures. From that perspective, better parental involvement before and after children start in preschool, attention for children's physical and emotional well-being, a more inclusive approach for vulnerable families and high quality professional preschool staff are hypothesised to be good levers to increase the 'toddler participation' (Crevits, 2016; Departement Onderwijs, 2015). The quantitative part of the study revealed that 99 percent of five-year-old children and 82,2 percent of two-and-

a-half-year-old children are enrolled in preschool in the Flemish Community of Belgium. Children of non-Belgian nationality, especially those between two and four years of age, are enrolled later, compared to their peers. The figures further indicate that 97,5 percent of five-year-old children attend preschool more than 220 half days and 94,3 percent of three-year-old children attend preschool more than 150 half days. The probability of children not attending preschool frequently enough, according to the Department of Education and Training<sup>5</sup> increases when children are non Belgian nationals, have a lower educated mother, receive a school allowance and/or speak a language other than Dutch at home. Moreover, the report suggests that a later start in preschool is associated with grade retention in primary school, yet other variables could be at stake in explaining the grade retention in primary school. According to multivariate analysis, the criteria of having a lower educated mother, receiving a school allowance and/or speaking a language other than Dutch at home, explains 12,9 % of grade retention. Additionally, when in this analysis they also add the trajectory of a toddler in preschool (e.g. how many days present for every age), this explains 18,1 % grade retention, which implies that the trajectory of a toddler clarifies 6% of the grade retention (Departement Onderwijs, 2015).

By referring to these results, the responsabilisation of parents also permeated the new legislation on child allowances (*Groeipakket op maat voor elk kind en gezin*) that was approved by the Flemish government in May 2016 (Vlaamse Regering, 31/05/2016). From 2019 on, child allowances will be divided into different types of benefits: (1) a standard unconditional benefit, (2) a selective social benefit for the family in case of special needs (*zorgtoeslag and sociale toeslag*) and (3) participation allowances (*Participatietoelagen*). The latter are conditional (Vlaamse Regering, 31/05/2016)

- Universal participation allowance:

When the children are officially enrolled in preschool within two months after their third birthday, the parents receive € 150. They can receive another € 150 a year later, on the condition that they have enrolled their

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<sup>5</sup> Before three years of age, a minimum attendance of 100 half days is required; three-year-olds are required to attend a minimum of 150 half days; four-year-old, a minimum required attendance of 185 half days; for at five-year-olds, a minimum attendance of 220 half days is required.

four-year-old child again in preschool and that the child regularly attended preschool in that year. When children are five years old, they will receive € 35 per year.

- Selective participation allowance:

Parents living in poverty can receive an additional financial allowance to pay school costs, on the condition that they have enrolled and have sent their children regularly to preschool. This allowance replaces the scholarship grant, initiated by Minister Vandenbroucke (2007), as part of the ‘toddler participation’ policy, that parents could receive for preschool if their five-year-old child has attended preschool a minimum of 220 half days (Vlaamse Regering, 31/05/2016).

In an action plan, titled ‘Preschool counts every day’ plan Minister Crevits subsequently proposed to increase the minimal attendance from 220 to 250 half days for five-year-old children. She argued that this would prevent a scholastic delay and would prepare children better for the primary school. (Crevits, 2016; De Standaard, 23/12/2016).

In sum, since lowering the compulsory school age is only possible by changing federal law, the Flemish Community has bypassed this constitutional issue by developing a ‘toddler participation’ policy and rethinking a new child benefit system, aiming to increase the attendance rates of underprivileged children in preschool as early as possible. In so doing they added to the parental responsibilities and to the framing of the preschool as the solution to educational inequality in primary school.

#### 1.4.4.3 Shifting views on the preschool teacher’s role

The desired profile of the preschool teacher has changed over the years. In the 1980s the Christian democrat Minister of Education Daniel Coens (CVP) underlined that preschool teacher’s priority should be the crucial educational (*opvoedende*) development, associated with a ‘motherly like’ caring and loving approach, with their teaching (*onderwijzende*) role having less emphasis (Coens, 1985). By 1998 and 2007, however, the first official professional profiles were established which attributed preschool teachers with ten roles, including clear teaching (*lerende*) and educational (*opvoedende*) roles (Vlaamse Regering, 5/10/2007). It was the first time that the preschool teacher was made gender neutral and consequently all references to motherly love were eliminated. As a

result, the educational (*opvoedende*) role encompassed, among other things, the teachers' responsibility for insuring the physical and mental well-being and health of children (Vlaamse Regering, 5/10/2007).

Despite the fact that the preschool teacher's profile with its ten professional roles was approved and disseminated by the Flemish government, the educational (*opvoedende*) role has been questioned during recent years by the current Flemish government and its Christian democrat Minister of Education, Hilde Crevits (*CD&V*). The coalition agreement of the Flemish government Bourgeois stated that the schools should refocus on their core task of learning, stating that:

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“ The government must also be more reluctant in allocating new tasks to the schools (*onderwijs*), such as those concerning social problems or even educational (*opvoedende*) issues. The focus must once again lay on the core task of the schools (*onderwijs*): developing necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes in order to become persons that can participate and contribute to society in a more critical, societal engaged, autonomous, tolerant, creative and responsible way (Vlaamse regering Bourgeois 23/07/2014, p. 95; translation by author).

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In this line of thinking, the Minister of Education recently emphasised in a discussion on potty training, that education (*opvoeden*) is the core task of families and not schools (*onderwijs*):

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“ I think we can draw boundaries and assume that schools (*onderwijs*) will not do certain things. When I see that now some parents realise that children are being potty trained in the preschool and are taught all kinds of health-related things, then I consider this beyond the limits of the schools. Parents who bring a child into the world have a task as well. Education (*opvoeding*) is foremost the task of the families at home (VRT Pano, 26/10/2016; De Standaard, 26/10/2016, translation by author).

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Although the professional profile of the preschool teacher encompasses a clear educational role in which, among other things, supporting physical and health aspects of development of children is important, the Minister tends to reduce the educational (*opvoedende*) role in favour of a sole focus on the teaching (*onderwijzende*) role of preschool teachers (Vlaamse Regering, 5/10/2007).

### 1.4.5 Some transversal reflections

The case of preschool education in Belgium / Flanders demonstrates how politicians over more than 50 years have been showing a considerable interest in investing in preschool because of it allegedly equalising potential. Whereas in the 1960s and the 1970s the focus was on the social and cultural emancipation and social mobility of working class children, future employability became more important in the second half of the 1970s, encouraged by the economic recession. The 1960s and 1970s were characterised by ideological debates between the different political parties accompanied by discussions and pedagogical experiments on what are appropriate preschool practices for all children. One of the concerns was that, due to lowering the compulsory school age, preschool education could become more schoolified and, by doing so, preschool could lose its playful identity and could fail to address all aspects of the development of the whole child. This early fear indicates that concerns about the schoolification of preschool are not new in Belgium or in Flanders.

Since its amplification in the new millennium, the social investment discourse has intensified without much questioning. Belgian and Flemish politicians relaunched the debate on lowering the compulsory school age in the early 2000s, assuming that early learning in preschool is a most important foundation for later success both in school and in the labour market. Irrespective of the political party, it is generally believed that the earlier and the more frequently underprivileged children attend preschool, the less chance children will have to develop 'learning delays' in later education. Liberal politician Bart Somers confirmed this in 2012: "Since socialist and green party members submitted similar legislative proposals, it is clear that there is no ideological fault line in this matter" (De Tijd, 31/05/2012). Indeed, according to Paes de Barros (in Morabito, 2015) constructing preschool education as means to equalise opportunities as early as possible "will overcome political dissent by meeting the concern of the 'political left' for social justice and fairness, as well as that of the 'political right' for individual responsibility and economic returns of public spending" (Paes de Barros in Morabito, 2015, p. 182). Some scholars warned that supporting this claim could however result in a total depoliticisation of social policies since the political will to invest in equalising outcomes tends to be further pushed to the background (M. Clarke, 2012; Fielding & Moss, 2011; Morabito, 2015; Nicaise, 2012). Consequently, social policies could gradually

move away from a structural welfare approach to a dominant focus on interventions in preschool education and in the families of children (Gray, 2013; Schiettecat et al., 2015). So, in short, it is as if there is no debate possible anymore about the meaning of preschool. In contrast to earlier political discussions, these discussions were less accompanied with the fear of schoolifying the early years and the question of what kind of pedagogy would be appropriate for a diversity of children. Moreover, it seems that the social investment discourse on preschool education has contributed to a uniformity of the social construction of educational problems such as school failure. Because of the allegedly overwhelming consensus across political parties that school failure can and will be solved by enforcing higher preschool attendances, parental responsibility tends to be further radicalised without exploring other possible problem constructions and ways to address social phenomena. This again makes it harder for parents to contribute to the discussion of exactly what their 'problem' is.

## **1.5 Overview of the chapters**

The different chapters are, with the exception of the methodological chapter, clustered according to the three different perspectives we explore in the research questions: policies, parents, and preschool staff.

### **Chapter 2: Methodological Approach**

Chapter two describes the methodological framework of this study, including some reflections on the positionality of myself as the main researcher.

### **Chapter 3: Policy**

Chapter three presents a document analysis of policy documents in 15 European countries. We specifically focus on concepts of care and education in the workforce profiles of preschool staff.

### **Chapters 4 and 5: Parents**

Chapters four and five explore the perspectives of parents with migrant backgrounds on conceptualisations of care and education derived from the

video-elicited focus groups in this study. The fourth chapter focuses on parents' general understandings of preschool education embedded in the scholarly and policy debate on parental involvement. The fifth chapter starts with parents' understanding of the relationship of preschool staff to early learning in preschool as this is assumed to be an important foundation for later life in a social investment paradigm.

### **Chapters 5, 6 and 7: Preschool staff**

Chapters five, six and seven address the meaning-making of preschool staff. Chapter five starts with preschool staff's understanding of early learning in preschool, and how this is similar or different from the parents' understanding of early learning. Chapter six starts with the scholarly debate on 'educare'. Conceptualisations of care seem to have a strongly gendered dimension. Therefore, in chapter seven we explored more conceptual theoretical implications of the connections among preschool professionalism, care and gender. Although the starting point of this particular chapter is the normative question on how to attract more male preschool teachers, for the purpose of this dissertation the historical perspective and conceptual theoretical contemplation are our interest.

### **Chapter 8: Conclusion**

Chapter eight brings the different chapters together in concluding results and reflections. In addition, limitations of the study and recommendations towards preschool policies, practices and research will be given.

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# Chapter 2

## Methodological approach

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## 2.1 Introduction

In our study, we examine how parents, preschool staff and policies conceptualise ‘care’ and ‘education’. We focus alternately on European and Flemish fields of preschool education as compelling cases in relation to the alleged equalising potential of preschool. In order to examine the policy perspectives on care and education, we conducted an analysis of policy documents in 15 European countries in 2010 and 2011. This analysis was part of a larger study on Competence Requirements for Early Childhood Education (the CoRe Study), commissioned by the European Commission, Directorate General for Education and Culture, and carried out by the University of East London and the Ghent University (Urban, Vandenbroeck, Peeters, Lazzari, & Van Laere, 2011; Urban, Vandenbroeck, Van Laere, Lazzari, & Peeters, 2012). In order to examine parents’ and preschool staff’s perspectives on care and education, we organised 16 video-elicited focus groups in the cities of Ghent, Antwerp and Brussels. The focus groups in Brussels were part of a larger study on transitions from the home environment or childcare to preschool, commissioned by the Flemish Community Commission (*Vlaamse Gemeenschapscommissie*). In this chapter, we clarify the methodological approaches of both the study on policy perspectives and the study on parents’ and staff’s perspectives on care and education. We conclude this chapter with some reflections on the positionality of the researcher.

## 2.2 Policy perspectives on care and education

We conducted an analysis of policy documents from 15 European countries in 2010 and 2011. Countries in the geographically balanced sample included Belgium (both the Flemish (Fl) and French-speaking (Fr) communities), Croatia, Denmark, France, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom (England and Wales). In order to gather the data for each country, we asked locally-based researchers, selected for their long-standing expertise in the field and their

knowledge of both legislation and practice, to collaborate<sup>6</sup>. These twenty local ECEC experts from 15 EU countries provided data on competence requirements for ECEC practitioners, including the assisting staff, according to official regulations. A semi-structured questionnaire was sent to these experts. It contained questions about competence requirements for all ECEC staff and their working conditions (adult-child ratio, professional support system, salaries and unions). The open-ended questions related to competence requirements in official regulations and national and regional policy documents. Local policies (at the municipal level, for instance) were not included. The local experts were also asked to analyse Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT), including personal opinions about the effects of the implementation of formal regulations in day-to-day practice. Hence, the data are a combination of factual information and subjective, informed interpretations by the ECEC experts who decided autonomously how to collect the data (in collaboration with experts from the local field, through focus groups, etc.).

The country reports produced by the experts served as raw data for our study, presented in the framework of the present PhD in Chapter three. A preliminary analysis showed that their nature varied widely. Some contained more extensive contextual information than others. In order to contextualise some of the data, concepts needed to be negotiated for a full understanding of the meaning through consultation via email and individual interviews via Internet telephony (Skype®). Key issues and fields of tension were identified in a thematic analysis and afterwards discussed in a focus group with 15 of the 20 local experts and five international scientific supervisors of the CoRe study<sup>7</sup>.

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One of the main themes concerned the relationship between preschool teachers and assistants, seemingly reflecting an underlying divide and even hierarchy between education and care.

## **2.3 Parents' and Preschool staff's perspectives on care and education**

### **2.3.1 Video-elicited focus groups**

In the search for a suitable research method, we drew upon the work of Barbier (2009), who made a distinction in the French language between 'sense' and 'signification'. Whereas 'sense' concerns the intuition and feeling that people construct regarding their actions towards themselves, 'signification' is the ability to give meaning to this feeling and impression towards external people (Barbier, 2009). Although there is a strong connection between 'sense' and 'signification', these entities are not entirely the same: 'sense' concerns the order of representation to oneself and 'signification' concerns the order of communication towards others (Barbier, 2009). The experience itself, the memory of the experience, the representation of this experience, the meaning that people explicate towards others and connecting different meanings into a concept, are actions often happening at different points in time (Barbier, 2009). Some parents may have clear educational ideas due to conversations with their children, other parents and educators. Other parents may notice certain things and develop an intuition, but do not necessarily connect this with a concrete idea or concept. Since the participants in our study are often passive bystanders in terms of thinking about and changing preschool practices and policies, an important question was: "How can spaces be created in which participants, who are often in a subordinate position, felt acknowledged and worthy enough to discuss their feelings, impressions, thoughts and experiences on 'care' and 'education' in preschool?"

Focus groups are a good research method since they are a form of collective research of participants, in which the authority of the researcher is decentred (Howitt, 2011a; Kamberilis & Dimitriadis, 2003). By having multiple participants, several perspectives can be brought into the discussion, and this variety of perspectives can result in a dynamic process in which participants can transform their 'sense' into 'signification' (Barbier, 2009; Rodriguez, Schwartz,

Lahman, & Geist, 2011). In this vein, the studies 'Preschool in Three Cultures (Revisited)' and 'Children Crossing Borders' by Joe Tobin and colleagues were important sources of inspiration (Tobin, 2009, 2016; Tobin, Arzubiaga, & Adair, 2013; Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989). Tobin and colleagues drew on the philosophical work of Spivak (1988), who rhetorically asked why the *subaltern* cannot speak. In an unpublished paper on the methodology of video-elicited focus groups, Tobin (2009) explained that there are several reasons why parents with migrant backgrounds may not speak up in relation to the school and why it is very difficult to capture their meaning making in research. These include:

- Unfamiliarity with the task and conversational conventions of engaging in discussion with teachers.
- Discomfort in the school setting (sometimes due to bad memories from their own student days).
- Language barriers (which produces parents not just an inability to express oneself but also frustration that the version of oneself one is expressing when speaking a second language will come across as unsophisticated, banal, or even stupid).
- A lack of trust and fearfulness that expressing complaints or even making suggestions may provoke negative reactions from school staff directed at them or their children. This can lead to the belief that speaking out can be a trap and that it is safer to say nothing.
- Fatalism ("Nothing I say to teachers will make a difference, so why try?")
- Parents' social isolation and economic stress (which make it difficult for them to attend meetings and to form alliances with other parents when they do). Most parents with migrant backgrounds do not come to school as members of a coherent pre-existing group (they often come to school not knowing the other parents with children in the same class on more than a nodding basis).
- A tendency (stronger among some communities with migrant backgrounds than others) to show deference to teachers and to the host society, even when one does not agree.

(Tobin, 2009, pp. 14-15)

In response to these difficulties, Tobin and colleagues developed a method by which parents with migrant backgrounds are invited to express themselves in

ways that they can be heard and understood by researchers, practitioners, and policy makers (Tobin, 2009). They showed a movie of a “typical” day in preschool to the participants in the focus group in order to evoke genuine, spontaneous reactions and reflections of parents and staff. The movie stimulates a sensorial, emotional and intellectual experience within the viewers (Tobin, 2009; Tobin & Hsueh, 2007; Tobin, Mantovani, & Bove, 2010). It has been demonstrated that this stimulus is richer, better contextualised, and less abstract than a verbal question asked in an interview (Tobin, 2009). It should be noted that the movie is not considered as data, but as a trigger for the data to occur.

The thread in the focus groups is a question asking whether people consider the preschool practice shown in the movie as a typical practice. Different from classical positivistic viewpoints in anthropology where typicality and representativeness are measurable characteristics of people, events, or institutions, Tobin (1992) uses the concept of ‘typicality’ to reveal implicit and underlying social and political core beliefs and cultural phenomena on which parents and preschool staff build their discourses. The question that should interest and concern us is not whether the movie shows a ‘typical’ Flemish preschool and what the characteristics of a ‘typical’ Flemish preschool are. Rather, by asking the question “Do you find this typical?”, the participants in the focus groups have the opportunity, power, and responsibility to decide whether the movie is consistent with their own experiences (Tobin, 1992). This method has proven to be an accessible way for participants to discuss their own experiences, thoughts, feelings and ideas without necessarily having to express any disloyal feelings towards their preschool and its staff.

In the following sections, we clarify how the movie in our study was made, how the participants for the focus groups were organised and how the empiric data were analysed.

#### 2.3.1.1 Making a movie

In order to create a movie, the following steps were undertaken in 2013 and 2014:

### Exploratory visits to eight preschools (April-June 2013)

In 2013, we conducted an exploratory round in which we visited eight preschools in Genk, Sint-Niklaas and Lokeren. These visits, which lasted between one and three days, allowed us to gain more insight on how preschools organise the care and education of the youngest children and at the same time search for a suitable movie location. We explained the purpose of our visit to the director, the teachers and the teacher's assistants and asked their permission for us to assist them in the daily routines (circle time, play time in the class and in the playground, toilet, etc). The exploratory and participatory visits gave us a sensorial and bodily experience of the work of a preschool staff member and made us more familiar with our research context. At moments we were emotionally and physically overwhelmed by the many children who needed help with putting their jackets on or by children crying in the outdoor playground or competing to hold our hands. Some scholars have used the concept of 'scripted practice,' in which material and social space is never a neutral context as it directs human action much as scripts do (Antaki, Ten Have, & Koole, 2004; Bernstein, 2009; Vuorisalo, Rutanen, & Raittila, 2015). By undergoing the 'scripted practice' of the eight schools, interesting conversations occurred with professionals about their struggles matching their pedagogical ideals with the practical daily reality. For example, a preschool teacher whispered while we were supervising children who were sleeping in the afternoon:

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“ I'm not able to work with the youngest toddlers because they cry the whole time. Once I worked in the reception class and there was one child who was crying non-stop for a week. That drove me crazy. The children, of course, experience anxiety but you have to be able to ignore this. You need a heart of stone.”

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While she was whispering this, her body and voice were trembling. We documented these little conversations and observations, personal reflections, impressions and feelings in a research diary without the intent of considering this as data in our study. Nevertheless, two years later, some of these conversations, like the citation above, helped us to “connect some dots” in the data analysis.

The exploratory visits created opportunities for us to learn how to explain the research objectives to preschool staff and parents in personalised ways. We noticed that informing people and being transparent about the research objectives, set-up and ethical principles required time and continuous awareness to rephrase. Even when the preschool staff gave permission for us to be there, they repeatedly asked what the purpose of the study was later in the day. This can be interpreted in multiple ways. But most importantly, this experience gave us a deeper understanding about the ethical importance of approaching ‘informed consent’ as “an interpersonal process between researcher and participant, where the prospective participant comes to an understanding of what the research project is about and what participation would involve and makes his or her own free decision about whether, and on what terms, to participate” (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 272).

### **Preparing and shooting the movie (September – October 2013)**

From the eight exploratory visits, we selected the entry class (*instapklas*) of the preschool ‘Duizendvoet’ in the city of Lokeren as a suitable site to shoot the movie. The teacher and the teacher’s assistant, who each have more than 10 years of professional experience, had strong personalities and were intrigued by the research subject and the method of video-elicited focus groups. As a result, they agreed that the footage could be shown in different locations throughout the country. Establishing a respectful, trustworthy relationship between the researcher and the preschool staff was and still is of great importance. Based on our experiences in the exploratory round, we deliberately took time to discuss and re-discuss the goals and method of this research with parents and staff in various, personalised ways. They gave their permission by signing informed consent forms. One mother did not agree, and we made sure that she was not in the movie. We provided a passive informed consent form to the parents, children and teachers of the other classes who might appear in the background. The ethical committee of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of the Ghent University approved this procedure.

Before shooting the movie, we observed the class for five days in order to identify the specific routines and get to know the children, parents and staff. Because structuring the day is an important aspect of the first class of

preschool, we decided that the scenario of the movie should be based on the chronological, rather predictable class routines and time slots. Following the advice of Tobin and colleagues, we selected a limited number of three children who would function as protagonists in the movie, and they were followed more closely than the others in order for future viewers of the movie to identify with the children. While we were looking for children who expressed both educational and caring needs, we deliberately avoided selecting children who were predominantly and very explicitly in need of care (expressed for instance by on-going crying or repeated crises).

For videos of classrooms to function effectively as provocations and stimuli, they must be hybrid constructions, blurred genres that are simultaneously social scientific documents and works of art—if they come across as insufficiently systematic, they will be dismissed for lacking rigor; if they feel insufficiently artful, they will be ignored for being boring and visually unappealing (Tobin & Hsueh, 2007, p. 79).

On the 17<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> of October 2013, we had the opportunity to work with a professional camera crew to shoot the movie<sup>8</sup>. Working with a professional crew ensured high quality images that would be appealing for outsiders to watch, while moving them in emotional, sensorial or intellectual ways according to what they see. Two cameras and microphones were available for the staff members. Before filming, we discussed a scenario with the camera crew, based on the daily routines we had observed and on the three children we had selected in advance. While daily routines tend to be rather predictable, actual interactions between children, staff and parents are, of course, unpredictable, and we tried not to steer or stage interactions. After the first day of shooting, we had a first look at the footage and, based on this first analysis, we decided on the focus of the next day of shooting. Since the final movie would depict only one day in the preschool class, the second shooting day was more focused on filming moments we were unable to film properly on the first day (lunch, etc.). Parents were asked to ensure that their children wear the same clothes both days.

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<sup>8</sup> [www.deepfocus.be](http://www.deepfocus.be)

**Editing the movie (October 2013 – January 2014)**

We edited, with the technical support of the professional crew, the approximately 25 hours of footage into a roughly 60 minute film. We decided to have a mix of scenes in which the three children were closely followed, as well as other interesting incidents. On November 15, the rough version was shown to the preschool teacher and the teacher's assistant. They had the opportunity to veto specific scenes they did not feel comfortable with. Then, we asked them if this represented a typical day, according to them. Based on these discussions, we re-edited the movie to a shorter version of approximately 25 minutes. The version was discussed with the gym teacher in a separate meeting and again with the preschool teachers and teacher's assistant. In this meeting the teacher and teacher's assistant explained in detail what the intentions and ideas were behind certain attitudes, activities and routines in the movie. These insider explanations were used during the focus groups to inform participants when clarification or more contextualisation was needed. After receiving staff member permission, the movie was shown to parents in two group meetings and two individual meetings on December 12<sup>th</sup>, 2013. In these meetings, parents gave their permission to show the movie to a broader audience of parents and preschool staff. As one girl who obviously needed much care drew a lot of attention, we decided to talk to her parents in an individual conversation and check how they felt about this movie. It turned out that the mother, father and the older sister were happy to be able to see what their daughter was experiencing throughout the day. They were convinced that their daughter's situation would improve in time, as had been the case for the elder sister. Moreover, they gave permission to portray her as a protagonist. After the meetings with the parents, the film was shown to the other teachers, the preschool director and lunch supervisory staff of the preschool. All the parents and staff members involved received a copy of the movie on DVD afterwards. Additionally, the movie was subtitled in four languages (Dutch, French, English and Turkish) for use in multilingual focus groups.

The final movie can be viewed at the following link:  
<https://vimeo.com/199802331>.

### 2.3.1.2 Inviting participants

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“ In doing research in local early childhood education and care settings, we held to the belief that it is more important to adjust to local wishes, needs, and conditions than to attempt to impose methodological rigidity (Tobin et al., 2013, p. 27). ”

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#### Parents

We conducted 10 focus groups with 69 parents in the cities of Ghent, Antwerp and Brussels. We decided to particularly invite parents to participate who are objects of policy making (i.e. the Flemish ‘Toddler Participation Policy’ or *kleuterparticipatiebeleid*) yet are seldom heard in the public debate. This entails a focus on parents with a migrant family history. It should be noted that our study does not frame parents with a migrant history as one homogenous category, nor do we assume that these parents have some essential features in common. We also do not assume that they differ in opinion from parents without migrant backgrounds. We first organised a series of five focus groups in Ghent and one focus group in Antwerp in 2014. A second series of focus groups was organised in Brussels, where the local authorities (i.e. *VlaamseGemeenschapscommissie*) expressed a desire to look into this. These cities are characterised by a high concentration of poverty and having many inhabitants with migrant backgrounds.

Whether participants should know each other or not is a much debated subject in the scientific literature on focus groups. Some researchers prefer that participants not know each other in order for them to feel free enough to speak (Tonkiss in Hopkins, 2007). Participants who are used to sharing reflections on life may have developed a common discourse previous to the focus group, which makes it more difficult to have an open debate with possible disagreement. Morgan and Krueger (in Peek & Fothergill, 2009), however, demystified the idea that participants in focus groups ideally should not know each other beforehand. They argue that working with existing friend, family and collegial relationships, can enable a dialogue that will evoke more ‘natural’ data. Through the method of ‘Culturally Responsive Focus Groups,’ Rodriguez and colleagues (2011) underlined that researchers should look for pre-existing groups because respondents will feel safe and comfortable enough to share



their unique interpretation with each other in the presence of an outsider-researcher (Rodriguez et al., 2011). Holbrook and Jackson (in Hopkins, 2007) emphasise that there is no right or wrong way in organising focus groups. Each choice has its advantages and disadvantages.

Consequently, in our study we were open to both possibilities as for some parents knowing each other could be supportive, while for others it could be threatening. Rodriguez and colleagues (2011) stated that the location of the focus group is a more critical factor than whether participants know each other. It is recommended that the location of the focus groups be accessible. They also stressed the importance of organising focus groups in a 'natural' environment known to the participants, especially in the case of participants who are often marginalised (Rodriguez et al., 2011). One obvious known environment for parents of young children is the preschool institution itself. The moment that parents bring their children to the preschool in the morning presents an interesting occasion for the organisation of immediate, adjoining focus groups. Nevertheless, the preschool as a location for the focus groups may also be a threatening experience because of the policy pressure to send their children as much and as early as possible to preschool or because of the fear that the anonymity of their narratives would not be guaranteed.

Therefore, we decided to also invite parents through social workers they know from intermediary social and community-based health organisations. However, surprisingly, we reached more parents by inviting them through the preschools than through social and community-based health organisations. This may have biased our results. With the exception of some parents that we met through a community-based toy library in Ghent, the perspective of parents who do not send their children regularly is less present in our study. Nevertheless, the multiple perspectives of parents who send their children regularly to preschool also revealed possible dynamics about why some parents may be more reluctant to send their children and would prefer to keep them at home longer.

Much time was devoted to establishing trusting contacts with the parents. In two weeks prior to the focus group, we met parents several times at the school gates or in intermediary organisations (see Table 1 below). We invited them to participate in the study by repeatedly discussing the research goals, the design and ethical principles. Parents had the opportunity to explore and question our

intentions as a necessary step to trust that we would listen and analyse their stories and discussions in a respectful, anonymous and non-exploitative way. It was important to ensure that parents not only were fully aware of their voluntary engagement, but that they understood that they could end their participation at any time. They also needed to know that we were outsiders to the school and that we guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity. We also discussed what parents would need in order to fully participate in the focus group. Some parents would bring friends for translation or we looked for translators. Other parents wanted to come if they could bring their youngest child. So then we planned a peaceful space with toys in the focus group room. Additionally, we gave parents a paper version of the invitation, available in four different languages (Dutch, French, English and Turkish). During the focus groups, participants gave permission to participate in this study by oral informed consent and approval was received from the ethical committee of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of the Ghent University.

In order to also reach fathers, we planned two focus groups specifically for men. According to Howitt (2011a) and Rodriguez et al. (2011), it is productive for the dynamic of a focus group to put participants together who have a similar societal status, with similar experiences and group identities, such as being a father with a migrant background in Flanders (Howitt, 2011a; Rodriguez et al., 2011). This is especially important when it concerns participants who have a rather invisible role in the educational debate of young children (Fallon & Brown, 2002; Madriz, 1998; Tavecchio, 2002). However, the turn-out on these two occasions was extremely low, reaching only one father with a migrant background (FG8) in a focus group of three participants. The other focus group had to be cancelled. The general focus groups reached four more fathers.

In one intermediary organisation (a toy library), a mother who participated in an earlier focus group in the community based health centre supported us by explaining the goal of the study and the course of the focus group in Turkish. This mother gave a motivating speech advocating attendance in the focus group by referring to her own focus group experience in which she felt that she was 'really listened to'. Possibly because of this approach, eight mothers attended the following focus group. In some intermediary organisations, social workers or doctors invited the parents of young children to join the focus groups. This approach of inviting parents was, however, generally less successful.

According to the scientific literature, a focus group needs to be small enough for participants to feel safe and be able to speak up. At the same time, a focus group needs to be large enough in order to have a variety of perspectives that create a dynamic discussion amongst participants (Howitt, 2011a). In our study, the attendance rates of the focus groups varied considerably from two participants to 13. We noted, however, that the dynamic of the interaction and discussion depended less on the group size than on the specific combination of people who were interacting in a specific context. For instance, a small focus group of three parents had a much more in-depth and diverse debate than a larger focus group of ten parents who shared a similar understanding on education and care. Because the circumstances, the context and the course of the focus groups were different, a researcher's note book was kept to document these aspects immediately after the focus groups. It required a lot of flexibility to deal with unexpected practical and ethical situations in the moment (e.g., a teacher, visibly annoyed, enter the room at the start of one focus group because she wants to use the computer and states that the parents should not pay attention to her). Moreover, in the majority of the focus groups, we arranged for other researchers from Ghent University and VBJK to help us conduct the focus groups. Besides their practical support, they followed up the general content of the discussions, asked follow-up questions to the participants if needed, and identified first themes by taking notes of the general themes that are discussed.

Table 2.1. Participants of the focus groups for parents

Parents	#	♂	♀	One of the home languages = Dutch	Home languages # Dutch	Language focus group	Invited by who and where	Region
FP1	3	1	2	0	3	Dutch	Researcher and social workers in NGO for undocumented persons	Ghent
FP2*	8	0	8	2	6	Dutch, Turkish, Slovak and English**	Researcher in municipal school	Ghent
FP3	3	0	3	0	3	Turkish and Dutch**	Social workers in community health center	Ghent
FP4	11	1	10	1	10	Dutch, Turkish and Arabic	Researcher in catholic school	Ghent
FP5	8	0	8	2	6	Turkish**	Researcher and social workers in toy library	Ghent
FP6	2	0	2	2	0	Dutch	Social workers in meeting space for young children and parents and doctors in community based health centre	Antwerp
FP7	8	1	7	1	7	Dutch, French and English	Researcher in state school	Brussels
FP8 ***	1	1	0	0	1	French and Dutch	Researcher in out-of-school care and state school / Social worker of center for intercultural community development	Brussels
FP9	13	1	12	2	11	Dutch, French, Turkish and English	Researcher in private NGO school (Catholic)	Brussels
FP10	9	0	9	1	8	Dutch, French, Turkish, Arabic and English**	Researcher in private NGO school (Catholic)	Brussels
Total	66	5	61	11	55			

\* Including 1 grandmother

\*\* With professional translator Turkish-Dutch, Turkish-French

\*\*\* Three fathers participated in this focus group, one of which had a migrant backgrounds

### Preschool Staff

We conducted six focus groups with 69 preschool staff members (preschool teachers, teacher's assistants, after school care workers, bridging persons, and

care coordinators) in the cities of Ghent and Brussels. We chose to include the different professional profiles that work directly with young children and their families. Preschool teachers of children between two-and-a-half and four years of age often have additional support from a teacher's assistant for a few hours per week, depending on the number of toddlers. All preschool teachers hold bachelor's degrees in pre-primary education, and teacher's assistants typically have a secondary vocational degree in childcare. Many preschools collaborate with after school care services either within or outside of the school building. After school care workers organise the leisure time of children after school and may also supervise children between educational activities and during lunch. They have a minimum of three months of training and many hold a secondary vocational degree in childcare. Some preschools have staff members who act as a 'bridge' between the school and parents, with a focus on disadvantaged families. This staff profile began in the late 1990s after concerns about the growing achievement gap between children with migrant and/or poor backgrounds and other children. Although some of these bridge persons may have a teaching background, this is not a requirement, as their selection is based on social, communication, and organisational skills, as well as on their experience within the local communities (Agirdag & Van Houtte, 2011). Since the beginning of the new millennium, every school has a care coordinator who is responsible for developing a care policy with the aim of improving educational opportunities of all children. Care coordinators, responsible mostly for pupil guidance, consist of teachers, speech therapists, special needs educators or other persons with a social or educational bachelor's degree (Blommaert, 2011).

These various professionals were personally invited by key persons in the pedagogical guidance centers of different educational umbrella networks or by key persons in their regional school networks. The focus groups of the teacher's assistants, the bridge figures and the care coordinators were planned within a pre-existing consultation forum for this professional group. We planned preparatory meetings with these key persons to discuss the research goals, the design and the ethical principles so they were able to invite and talk with potential participants. Key persons received invitations to send to the potential participants. Participants gave permission to participate in this study by written informed consent and approval was received from the ethical committee of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of the Ghent University.

In order to invited school directors, we worked with key persons in the pedagogical guidance centres of different educational networks; we attended a directors' meeting to invite them to participate, and in Brussels, we personally contacted several directors by phone. Despite these efforts in three different locations (Ghent, Brussels and Antwerp), these focus groups had to be cancelled because only two directors were willing to participate. Consequently, the perspective of school directors is unfortunately absent in our study.

Table 2.2. Participants of the Focus Groups for Preschool Staff

Staff	Profile	#	♀	♂	Experience in school ≤ 10 years	Experience in school > 10 years	Educational umbrella	Region
FS1	Preschool teachers	8	8	0	4	4	Catholic education	Ghent
FS2	Teacher's assistants	13	13	0	5	8	Catholic education	Dender*
FS3	Preschool teachers and teacher's assistants	12	12	0	10	2	Catholic, municipal Flemish community education	Brussels
FS4	Bridge figures	11	11	0	6	5	Catholic and municipal education	Ghent
FS 5	Care coordinators	16	16	0	5	11	Go! – Education of the Flemish Community	Ghent
FS 6	Supervisory and out-off school care staff	9	8	1	9	0	Different out-of-school centers having children from schools from various educational umbrellas	Brussels
Total		69	68	1	39	30		

\* The pedagogical guidance service of the Catholic schools, situated in Ghent, organises twice a year a collective meeting for teacher's assistants in the Dender region, not far from the city of Ghent.

### 2.3.2 Data Analysis

All focus groups were audio-taped and transcribed in 2014 and 2015 by us and by two Master Degree students in social-political and medical sciences, who have mastered three languages (Dutch, French and English). As part of the transcription process, the bilingual group facilitator (FG 5) first translated the group discussions from Turkish into Dutch.

Because the actual meaning making and the understanding of parents and staff on education and care are at the heart of our study, predefined and strict

concepts of care and education were not designated at the start of the data analysis. In 2015, we conducted a thematic analysis after the first series of focus groups in Ghent and Antwerp and a second thematic analysis after the second series of focus groups in Brussels (Howitt, 2011b). Transcripts of the focus groups were coded along this initial coding scheme by using the NVivo software. This first phase of the data analysis was characterised by getting to know the data and exploring the different voices and debates in the focus groups. This describing and exploratory phase gradually evolved towards identifying underlying conceptualisations of 'care' and 'education' by make multiple interpretations and hypotheses that went beyond what was literally said in the focus groups. This shift in the process of analysing the data can best be described by referring to the concept of 'abductive analysis': "a creative inferential process aimed at producing new hypotheses and theories based on surprising research evidence" (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012, p. 170).

An abductive analysis seeks to find an answer on the inductive dilemma of grounded theory in which researchers try to develop new theoretical insights without adhering to preexisting theories. Yet, they are expected to develop a theoretical sensitivity combined with an ability to make something of insights (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Moreover, Timmermans and Tavory (2012) claimed that both induction and deduction do not logically lead to novel theoretical insight as intended. In the case of deduction, we find, guided by the theory, what we expected to find. Timmermans and Tavory (2012) problematised the juxtaposition between induction and deduction by stating that researchers 'must be neither theoretical atheists nor avowed monotheists, but informed theoretical agnostics' in order to develop new theoretical insights (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012, p. 169). Instead of an inductive or deductive logic, they called upon an abductive logic, developed by the pragmatist philosopher Charles S. Peirce. Abduction starts with consequences and then constructs reasons:

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“ The surprising fact, C, is observed.

“ But if A were true, C would be a matter of course.

“ Hence, there is reason to suspect that A is true.  
(Pierce in Svennevig, 2001; Pierce in Timmermans & Tavory, 2012)

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An example of the abductive process in our study where data and theory merge is the following:

*The starting point is identifying surprising facts that cannot be simply explained by induction or deduction. For example, several preschool teachers perceived caring activities as a burden or as a necessary evil. Surprisingly, the majority of these participants felt emotionally and bodily touched and disturbed by the movie footage in which a little girl with a pacifier cries a lot ('my heart broke'). Although they did not want to engage in care, they did notice and identify possible emotional and physical care needs of this child. How can we clarify this field of tension? By repeatedly revisiting the phenomenon, defamiliarising the taken for granted assumptions and alternative casing, a more likely 'abduction' can occur according to Timmermans and Tavory (2012). Many hypotheses exist why teachers tend to perceive care as a burden. One popular hypothesis is that preschool teachers in split systems are not trained in and expected to care due to the institutional split between childcare centres and preschool institutions (Kaga, Bennett, & Moss, 2010). Another hypothesis could be that teachers associate care with a deprofessionalisation tendency and devaluation for their job (Cameron, Moss, & Owen, 1999). Or maybe care is constructed as a private or parochial matter (Tronto, 1993). Yet, these hypotheses do not explain why teachers did identify caring needs of the crying child in the movie. This field of tension and especially one phrase in the focus group with staff members kept me puzzled for a while: 'we should not give in to this', referring to refusing to hug a child that is crying non-stop for weeks. I heard this phrase before in the preparatory visits in which preschool teachers told me 'I should not give in', when I was allowing children to grab my hand on the outdoor playground. These comments gave me the impression that I was perceived as a weak, soft and naive adult in the school. The words 'we should not give in' made me wonder – give in to what exactly? Give in to whom? To our soft side, to our bodies, to the child, to the other colleagues? I gradually started making the association with what a preschool teacher told me in another preparatory visit about 'having a heart of stone'. While she whispered this, her voice and body was trembling. At the same time, I was reading the work of Maurice Hamington (2004) on an embodied approach of care ethics (Hamington,*



2004). *In the process of connecting all the dots, the words of Hamington started making sense. He made the ontological statement that human bodies are built to care, thus everybody as a human being has the potential to care due to the conscious and unconscious caring knowledge and habits situated in and maintained by our bodies. By telling each other 'we should not give in', it seems like strategies are actually developed and cultivated to restrain or suppress caring responses. This is an example of abductive thinking: "the hypothesis should be explanatory means that it should account for the concrete, observable phenomena by invoking facts or rules from some other domain, for instance some abstract law or nonobservable process" (Svennevig, 2001, p. 3).*

In repeatedly revisiting the phenomenon, defamiliarising the taken for granted assumptions and alternative casing, the positionality of the researcher is approached as a strength instead of a hindrance in the data analysis. Therefore, we conclude this methodological chapter with some critical reflections on the positionality and the personal stance of the main researcher.

## 2.4 Some reflections on the positionality of the researcher

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“ To achieve pure objectivism is a naïve quest, and we can never truly divorce ourselves of subjectivity. We can strive to remain objective, but must be ever mindful of our subjectivities. Such is positionality. We have to acknowledge who we are as individuals, and as members of groups, and as resting in and moving within social positions. (Bourke, 2014, p. 3) ”

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Social science has been critiqued for the manner in which it, obscures the dominant powerful position of the researcher and does not make the motivations of the researcher transparent, possibly out of concern for being objective (Moffatt, George, Lee, & McGrath, 2005). Many scholars, however, underline how subjectivity in research can become an opportunity rather than a problem by engaging in reflexive analysis (Finlay, 2002a, 2002b). In this section, we demonstrate how my personal stance could be a hindrance and at the same time a strength in our study. Finally, we demonstrate how research is never a neutral process and inevitably tends to intervene in social problem constructions and in the lives of the participants and the researcher.

### 2.4.1 Working on and working with my personal stance

Since my teenage years, I have been developing a strong interest in how we as human beings socially, politically and culturally can flourish as a superdiverse and multilingual society in which social injustice, inequalities and oppression are proactively fought and human rights are respected and protected. Living as an 18-year-old exchange student in a so called Coloured community in South-Africa and studying educational sciences at Ghent University helped me to move away from an essentialist multicultural discourse and to specialise myself in issues of social inclusion, third wave feminism, respect for diversity and accessibility of social and educational organisations. After my initial training, I was fortunate to get a job in VBJK, a Centre for Innovation in the Early Years. Since its origins in 1986, VBJK has heavily invested in action research projects with a focus on professionalising the ECEC workforce and improving the quality and accessibility of ECEC for a diversity of children, parents, and local communities. In 2010, the opportunity arose to develop a PhD study in Social Work on the accessibility of preschool education in relation to conceptualisations of care and education.

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“ Social work is, besides being a practice-based profession, a more recent academic discipline that promotes social change, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work (IFSW, 2014). ”

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Although my personal stance has a clear common ground with the international, value driven definition of Social Work, I questioned since the beginning whether I was the right fit for this PhD study. I considered my personal stance and motivations to be both the biggest strength and, simultaneously, the biggest weakness of our study. Would I be too biased and thus too blind to understand the empiric data and construct new knowledge in a scientific manner? Or, on the contrary, did I have a relevant profile to do this study considering my professional history and my internally motivated quest for developing new concepts and ideas on how to live in a super diverse society? As this seemingly contradiction kept me puzzled for a long time, I developed several strategies to enable myself to be as open as possible for different discourses, theories and multiple interpretations.

A main strategy was to first allow myself time and space to express my personal feelings, thoughts and normative viewpoints on my experiences and the data during different research phases. By not suppressing or denying it, but making myself aware of this personal stance, I felt mentally much more capable to make multiple interpretation of the data. Building upon the work of Camilleri and Cohen-Emerique (1989), I kept a diary in the exploratory round in which I wrote down my cultural shocks (from a broad sense) on how, for example, the children and parents were approached or even, in my view, sometimes neglected in preschool practice. By visiting the preschools, my childhood memories came back in a quite emotional and even frustrating manner: in some schools it seemed that practices had not really changed since I was a toddler in preschool in the second half of the 1980s. Another strategy to try to mentally separate my own personal normative views from my research activities, was to audio tape two types of director's commentary on the movie. In the first commentary, I expressed my personal, normative reflections on the movie scenes. In the second commentary, I clarified the editing choices from a scientific perspective. A third strategy was the main research method itself: working with video-elicited focus groups ensured that the power of the researcher was more decentered. The movie served, therefore, as an accessible stimulus for further open discussion.

At one point in the study, I was so focused on trying to mentally separate my normative views that I was not aware how my personal stance also brought me some specific advantages in the research process. Because of my interest in living in a diverse society, my personal life is also affected by this. I lived as a White, European, middle-class outsider in a lower income Coloured community in South-Africa for a year. I moved from a homogeneous White middle-class village to a socially, culturally and economically diverse neighbourhood in Ghent. I married someone who migrated from the United States to Belgium, and I have several friends with migrant backgrounds who each face their own challenges in the migration process. Throughout these encounters, I have developed (broad) intercultural skills, such as negotiating understandings, interacting in mixed multiple languages and dealing with uncertainty. All these skills proved to be very useful in inviting participants and facilitating the focus groups for the present research.

In the focus groups, I had the habit of not discussing my own motivations and personal stance concerning this research. Although I did not want to steer and influence the participants' discourses too much, in some cases it felt like the participants needed to know what my personal stance was in relation to our study. In one focus group, for example, we discussed with 13 mothers different fragments of the movie. The discussions were intense, and it seemed like all the participants were engrossed in it and enjoying the meeting. After two hours a mother suddenly turned to me and asked: "But tell us, what do you really need to know from us?" This question caught me by surprise. Since everybody was participating intensively in the discussion, I thought that the goal of this focus group was clear by now for everybody. I slightly felt like I was busted in having a secret agenda or I was deceiving the participants by taking a more neutral stance. I decided to reveal a bit more about my own personal stance in terms of working on issues of respect for diversity, social inclusion and accessibility of preschool. I told them that this study would not just be theoretical research and that their discussions could be essential input to rethink some quality issues of preschool education, aiming to include instead of exclude children and families. People listened carefully while some were non-verbally agreeing. After my requested 'outing', the mothers continued their discussions on inclusion and exclusion of children with migrant backgrounds in preschool. At the end of the focus group many mothers told me that they wanted to engage in these types of group meetings on a more regular basis.

This incident kept me busy afterwards. It demonstrates that it is not just a matter of 'revealing' my agenda. Also the mother, as a research participant, "has power in the production of knowledge as she has her own agenda with the researcher and decides what to share and how to share, i.e. using words, silence and/or body language" (van Stapele, 2014, p. 15). This mother's question could signify many things. One possibility is that the participants needed to know what my intentions were in order for them to open up even more: Are you trustworthy? How will you as a non-migrant women without children portray us, like silent victims or more like agents? How will you present and report the data? What will change for our children? On one hand, one could argue that I influenced the further course of the focus group. Yet, on the other hand, mothers started pointing out elements of seemingly discriminatory practices, which they would not have told us otherwise. Maybe parents were reassured with my answer that our aim is by no means to portray them as silent victims

and that this study will give recommendations towards preschool policies and practices. These are solely possible interpretations since talking about what exactly is going on meta level requires more trust between the participants and the researcher.

### 2.4.2 The inevitability of research as an intervention

For nearly 10 years, I have been working in VBJK, a Centre for Innovation in the Early Years. In order for innovative practices and policies to thrive, VBJK collaborates with several actors in the field of ECEC, and with civil society and social policy makers. In contrast to the action-oriented studies we conduct in VBJK, my intention was not to directly intervene in practices involved in this PhD study. Adopting a social pedagogical perspective in research, allowed me to 'take a step back' from developing actions to increase the accessibility of ECEC. I considered it my responsibility as a researcher to 'slow down' the process in which international and local scholars, practitioners, policy makers and even organisations including VBJK seem to find common ground in the future equalising potential of the early years. In this study, we attempted to unravel dominant social problem constructions by asking the following questions: what exactly is the problem and by whom is it defined? We argued that international and national policy and scholarly debates need to encompass the perspectives of the people whom it concerns more, i.e. children, parents, local communities and preschool staff. It needs to be said that by widening the debates while attempting to disrupt the tunnel vision on the future equalising potential of preschool education, we as researchers are not simply outsiders but are actually intervening in dominant social problem constructions as well. While we address it, we contribute – whether we want it or not – to the idea for example that the educational gap can be closed in preschool, outside of the primary school system.

Notwithstanding our non interventional research approach, it should be noted that participants had strong agency in deciding what this research could mean for themselves. It became clear that the focus groups were more than simply a research method as they acted as spaces in which pedagogy, theory, research and politics came together (Kamberilis & Dimitriadis, 2003). In several cases, participants turned the focus groups into opportunities to connect with each other, to exchange experiences and even 'reclaim' their position and humanity in a caring and nurturing context. One mother, for example, had a strong 'A-ha!

experience' by listening to a discussion between two other mothers and realising she could also ask questions to the preschool staff. Although she claimed to have a lot of questions on caring issues, it never crossed her mind to ask these questions out loud as she thought that she was not in the position to change the system. In another focus group, one of the care coordinators was moved in a sensorial and emotional (*'my heart broke'*) manner after seeing, discussing and interpreting the situation of the crying girl in the movie. She stated that because of this focus group experience, she came to the realisation that she urgently had to deal with her ongoing discomfort in not addressing a child emotional and bodily caring needs. She decided to take action and to confront the teacher and support her in taking care of a child that cried daily for nearly 10 months.

Although the focus group could be an enriching and supporting experience for participants, this was not always the case. One school director was initially very excited that I would organise a focus group for parents in the preschool because in the near future he wanted to improve the relationship between the parents and the school. Distancing myself from my action oriented VBJK position, I made it clear that there would be no immediate answers for them as this was not my goal and the data should remain anonymous. Yet, at the end of the study I was definitely open to discuss the anonymous results of all the focus groups with the school team. During the preparatory conversations and visits, they warned me that parents probably would not attend the focus group due to a lack of interest and care in the education of their children. On the day of the focus group, the director was present and somehow it seemed like he wanted to see with his own eyes how we would manage or struggle to reach parents. At one point he was even standing in front of the entrance of the room of the focus group, which for some parents seemed like a hindrance to enter the room. Eventually, many parents participated in the focus group and requested that the school would organise more of these group meetings. When I called the director to thank him for his collaboration, he was rather quiet and curt in comparison with our first conversations. Although they initially wanted to enable more dialogue with parents, it is quite possible that our study created an opposite effect and may have contributed to their dominant deficit view of parents: Why do parents go to a focus group for a study, but they do not want to come to our own parent meetings? All these examples illustrate how

research by itself is an intervention in the relationship between preschools and parents, even when the researcher does not have the intention to intervene.

Because the researcher is inherently part of the research process, the study also intervenes in the researcher's life. When doing the visitor's round and conducting the first focus groups with preschool staff, I was initially a bit shocked how care was considered cumbersome and how some teachers would even refuse to do caring activities or be caring towards the children. Because of my judgemental first reflections, I was not able to make multiple valuable interpretations of the data. While reading feminist literature on ethics of care and the politics of care, I reflected a lot on my own struggle as a young girl in dealing with gender (in)equality in a school and in a village. Triggered by my own mother, grandmothers and great grandmother, I was from a young age busy to make sure that I would not become a 'typical' 'caring' women who is the subordinate to 'her husband' or to men in general. Consequently, I would refuse to learn to cook, do household chores, knit, etc.... When reading feminist studies on how care has been locked up in the private sphere, resulting in a rather complicated or invisible position for many women, I started to realise that I possibly refused (besides laziness) to do caring activities out of fear that I would not be taken serious as a girl or women in public life. In thinking about this, I started to read the data with different eyes and could somehow relate to the struggle that several female preschool teachers and teacher's assistants were dealing with. How can we cultivate and be proud of a professional caring identity without devaluating our own job in a context of a patriarchal society? Both the stories of the participants and the theoretical frameworks we used in the seventh chapter of this dissertation, helped me to discover my own embodiment, challenge my own mind-body dualism and further develop my female identity in which caring is inherently present. In sum, it is fair to say that this study also intervened in my own life as the researcher.

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# Chapter 3

## POLICY

### **The Education and Care Divide: the role of the early childhood workforce in 15 European countries<sup>9</sup>**

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<sup>9</sup> Based on Van Laere, K, J Peeters, and M Vandenbroeck. 2012. "The education and care divide: The role of the early childhood workforce in 15 European countries." *European Journal of Education* 47 (4):527-541.



### 3.1 Introduction

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) has recently gained acknowledgement in the European public and political sphere. Whereas political discussions regarding ECEC have traditionally focused on quantity, growing interest has been evidenced on the part of policy-makers in the quality of provision at both local and international levels (European Commission, 2011; OECD, 2001, 2006, 2012; Penn, 2009). Although conceptualisations of quality vary considerably across countries, research and international policy reports show a clear consensus. Quality in ECEC should encompass a broad, holistic view on learning, caring, upbringing and social support for children. Quality services thus require both 'care' and 'education' as inseparable concepts (European Commission, 2011; Eurydice, 2009; UNESCO, 2010). In these debates, the workforce is seen as a critical factor (Oberhuemer, 2005; Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2002). Several international policy and academic reports have helped to better understand ECEC workforce profiles in European and other OECD countries since the 2000s (Cameron & Moss, 2007; Oberhuemer *et al.*, 2010). Most, however, consider the staff profiles of core practitioners without focusing on the profiles of 'assistants' or 'auxiliary staff'. Assistants support higher-qualified core practitioners in working with children and their families. In this article, we examine their profiles in 15 European countries and relate them to the ongoing quality debate in ECEC. What is the role of assistants in quality ECEC based on a holistic conceptualisation of education and care? To analyse this question, we frame it within the context of the increasing schoolification of the early years. On the basis of academic discussions of the concept of schoolification, we argue that it can lead to an education and care divide which may be reinforced by the divided roles between assistants and core practitioners. The methodology and results of a thematic analysis are presented, followed by a discussion on the implications for practice and policy. The findings in this article are part of a European research project entitled 'Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care' (CoRe), conducted by the University of East London and the University of Ghent and funded by the European Commission (Urban *et al.*, 2011).

### 3.1.1 Schoolifying the Early Years

Early years policies and practices take place in an international context of ‘schoolification’ where ECEC is increasingly conceptualised as preparation for compulsory schooling and the didactics of compulsory schooling therefore tend to determine ECEC programmes. Children are expected to acquire (pre-)literacy, (pre-)numeracy and (pre-)scientific skills from a young age (OECD, 2006, 2012). To ensure this, more formalised approaches have been adopted, goals and standards being distinctly formulated and indicators used to measure children’s achievements (Cameron & Moss, 2011). In this vein, pre-schools and primary schools strive for a closer relation so that children experience smoother transitions. This approach has been criticised by researchers and some international organisations, including UNESCO (2010) and OECD (2006). The different standpoints were most obvious when countries like Denmark, Sweden, Norway, France and the UK introduced early years programmes, partially influenced by the results of the triennial PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) studies. A growing criticism of this trend towards schoolification can be observed.

A primary criticism is about the children’s learning process, which tends to be decontextualised with the development of predefined standards and individualised learning goals. Since the main focus is on cognitive and language learning, there is a risk that children’s natural learning strategies — play, exploration, freedom of movement, relations and discussions with other children — are less encouraged (Broström, 2006, 2009; Hjort, 2006). Moreover, the interpretation of learning as a preparation for compulsory schooling tends to limit the attention given to the caring dimension of education (Alvestad, 2009; Forrester, 2005; Kyriacou *et al.*, 2009). For example, according to Garnier (2009, 2011), since the French government introduced an official school programme for the *école maternelle* initiated by ‘readiness for school’ ideas, the care function seems to have disappeared from official texts. The programme emphasises cognitive and language competence rather than children’s social and affective development. Moss and Cameron (2011) and Smith and Whyte (2008) agree that schoolification results in a narrow view of education and contributes to the separation of ‘education’ and ‘care’ in ECEC services. This can hinder early year practitioners and pre-schools in creating an educational context that adopts a holistic viewpoint on children’s needs and

takes into account the multiple identities of children and their families. Parents are given a more instrumental role in the learning process of their children in the sense that they can help them to achieve the learning outcomes that the school or government has set. Hence, they are less involved in discussions on the kind of education they want for their child (Garnier, 2010b; OECD, 2006; Vandenbroeck *et al.*, forthcoming). Schoolifying the early years risks educational practices becoming merely places for 'adjustment' instead of places where children and parents can participate in democratic educational practices (Broström, 2006).

A second series of criticisms deals with the more technical conceptualisation of professionalism and the focus on prescribed learning goals and curricula (Oberhuemer, 2005). Practitioners are seen as technical experts teaching specific subjects that prepare young children to enter primary school. Their professional development includes mastering different subjects, using didactics based on evidence of 'what works' and applying prescribed school programmes (Jensen *et al.*, 2010; Samuelssona & Sheridan, 2010). Oberhuemer *et al.* (2010) and Dahlberg and Moss (2005) question this conceptualisation, since working on pedagogical quality should encompass an ethical and philosophical dimension. Essentially, the argument states that working and dialoguing with children, families and local communities from diverse backgrounds are uncertain, value-bound practices which go beyond applying prescribed teaching methods (Kunneman, 2005). A normative conceptualisation which is based on a "broad and integrated understanding of care, well-being, learning and pedagogy which values reciprocal relationships and an element of not-knowing" (Oberhuemer *et al.*, 2010, p. 496) is proposed in this debate. Considering the uncertain nature of social practices, professional development should include time to document educational practices and reflect on these with colleagues and families (Peeters, 2008; Urban, 2008). Emotions should be given an important place in work with children and their parents (Colley, 2006; Osgood, 2006; Taggart, 2008). Caring and learning are thus approached equally. Kyriacou and colleagues (2009) concur that, within a technical conceptualisation of professionalism, the caring role of the teacher has been continually marginalised.

### 3.1.2 Assisting Core Practitioners

Several international policy and academic reports have analysed working profiles of core practitioners. They are paid to work in ECEC services and are responsible for the care and education of a group of children and families. Oberhuemer and colleagues (2010) identified a variety of recurrent profiles of core practitioners in European countries. Most have a teaching profile, a minority a social-pedagogical one. In split systems, where ECEC is divided into childcare for the youngest (birth to three) and pre-school for toddlers (3–6-year-olds), core practitioners predominantly have a caring or health profile. In Europe, those with a teaching or social-pedagogical profile are more highly qualified (bachelor, master) than those with a caring profile who are mostly low- or non-qualified (lower or upper secondary level) (Oberhuemer *et al.*, 2010). There is also staff that is paid to ‘assist’ core practitioners. Although Chartier and Geneix (2006) estimate their numbers to be high, there is very little research on their role, status, position and identity. Studies on the tasks of assistants in the French *écoles maternelles*, in the UK and in the US are scarce, contexts that are all characterised by a clear schoolification tendency in the early years. In these countries, assistants have either no qualification or a lower qualification than core practitioners. In the UK and the US, they mainly contribute to better academic achievements of children and help with their learning processes (Farrell *et al.*, 2010; Ratcliff *et al.*, 2011; Thomas *et al.*, 2004). They have a clear *teaching* role. Yet the substantial increase in the number of assistants in recent years in the UK and in the US has not led to the expected improved learning outcomes and pro-social behaviour of children (Blatchford *et al.*, 2007, 2009; Finn & Pannozzo, 2004; Gerber *et al.*, 2001; Hughes & Westgate, 1997; Sosinsky & Gilliam, 2011). Some assistants or ‘paraprofessionals’ in the US also fulfil a *bridging* role. They need to raise educational attainment, especially in Afro-American children, by serving as role models and bridging the gap between schools and families and communities (Abbate-Vaughn & Paugh, 2009; Manz *et al.*, 2010; Villegas & Clewell, 1998). Both these roles are often intertwined.

A third role — the caring role — can be observed in countries such as France. The assistants in preschools are responsible for children’s hygiene, protection and emotional well-being so that the teacher can focus on the learning processes (Garnier, 2009, 2010a, 2011; Vasse, 2008). Compared to the learning



and bridging role, the caring role of assistants is addressed far less in research. Barkham (2008), Dyer (1996) and Garnier (2010a) relate this role to the gendered nature of the job. According to Barkham (2008, p. 851), assistants are ‘those whose perceived primary role is that of “housewife and mother” and who subordinate their needs to those of the children and class teachers’. Their caring role is closely intertwined with their role as a mother. Qualitative research shows that assistants, as well as parents and children, consider the caring role as crucial. Garnier (2010a) shows that assistants believe it fundamental to care for and ‘love’ children. As assistant Louise, working in an English school, testifies:

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“ One of the most important parts of my work is being good at making connections between pupils, the teacher and myself. Connections are part of a relationship and are usually emotional’ (Fenlon, 2001, pp. 13–14).

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Barkham (2008) states that some fear that their caring role will be neglected because of professional development initiatives that are solely based on professionalising the learning roles. From the parents’ perspective, the assistants’ caring role is indispensable; the teacher prepares the children for primary school, while the assistant takes care of their emotional needs. They help to ensure that children ‘learn to like the school’ (Garnier, 2010a). “Asachildsaid ofassistant Deborah: she really cares” (Barkham, 2008, p. 852).

In sum, the scarce literature on assistants addresses three different roles: a learning role, a bridging role and a caring role. The learning and bridging roles are often emphasised, as assistants are expected to raise the (pre-) academic achievements of children, an idea which fits in with the schoolifying of ECEC. The caring role is addressed less, despite its importance, as shown in qualitative research.

### 3.1.3 Integrating Caring and Learning

Notwithstanding the focus on ECEC as a preparation for compulsory schooling, international reports emphasise the importance of a holistic view of education that equally balances children’s learning, caring, upbringing and social support (UNESCO, 2010). The *Starting Strong 2* report stressed that the task of practitioners, whatever their profile, should be geared towards this holistic approach (OECD, 2006). Hence, ‘unitary’ ECEC systems where care and

educational services are integrated at institutional level are often preferred (Children in Europe, 2008; European Commission, 2011). ‘Split’ systems prevail in Europe, however. For historical reasons, some national and regional policies on care and education have developed separately, leading to separate services under the responsibility of different ministries (Bennett, 2003). It should be noted, however, that schoolification also occurs in unitary systems (OECD, 2006). By collecting data on the workforce profiles of assistants in relation to core practitioners in 15 European countries, we examined to what extent the potential division between education and care was reinforced by workforce profiles.

## **3.2 Methodology**

### **3.2.1 Data Sample**

To study the assistants’ role in the early years in relation to core practitioners, we conducted a cross-national survey in 15 countries as one phase of the CoRe project. The countries were Belgium (Flemish- and French-speaking communities), Croatia, Denmark, France, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and the UK (England and Wales).

### **3.2.2 Collecting Data**

Twenty local ECEC experts from 15 EU countries provided data on competence requirements for assistants according to official regulations. These experts were selected for their long-standing expertise in the field, their previous contribution to three key European networks (Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training, International Step by Step Association, Children in Europe), and their knowledge of both legislation and practice. A semi-structured questionnaire was sent to these experts. It contained questions about competence requirements for all ECEC staff and their working conditions (adult/child ratio, professional support system, salaries and unions). The open-ended questions related to competence requirements in official regulations and national/regional policy documents. Local policies (at the municipal level, for instance) were not included. ‘Core practitioners’ were defined along the

lines of the SEEPRO study (Oberhuemer *et al.*, 2010) as early years workers with a group or centre responsibility. We used two criteria to define ‘assistants’:

1. the assistants work directly with children and their families;
2. the assistant’s main job is to assist the core practitioner, who has the responsibility for a group of children and families. The assistant has no final responsibility, yet supports a practitioner with a final responsibility.

The local experts were also asked to analyse Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT), including personal opinions about the effects of the implementation of formal regulations in day-to-day practice. Hence, the data are a combination of factual information and subjective, informed interpretations by the ECEC experts who decided autonomously how to collect the data (in collaboration with experts from the local field, through focus groups, etc.).

### 3.2.3 Analysing Data

The country reports produced by the experts served as raw data for this study. A preliminary analysis showed that their nature varied widely. Some contained more extensive contextual information than others. In order to contextualise some of the data, concepts needed to be negotiated for a full understanding of the meaning through consultation via email and individual interviews via Internet telephony (Skype®) (Fontana & Frey, 2008). Key issues and fields of tension were identified in a thematic analysis. They were discussed in a focus group with 15 of the 20 local experts and five international ECEC experts. One of these tensions concerned the role of the assistants. We used the typology of their learning, bridge and caring roles as a conceptual framework to analyse these data. The local experts were asked to verify the thematic analysis. Space precludes an overview of all the results in this article. We will therefore focus on the assistants’ roles and how they relate to the conceptualisation of care and education.

## 3.3 Findings

Table I includes the official title of assistants in the original languages, their numbers, whether or not they have a formal job and/or training competence

profile, the role(s) they take up, and whether or not they have formal professional development opportunities.

In 13 of the 15 countries, assistants work to support core practitioners (in Croatia and Italy, 'assistants' as defined in this study do not exist). Official accounts of their numbers were unavailable. Hence, our analysis is based predominantly on estimations. Although in some countries (e.g. the Netherlands, Poland) their numbers are limited, in many (e.g. France, Sweden, Slovenia, Lithuania, Denmark), they make up as much as half the workforce.

TABLE I. Assistants<sup>1</sup>

Country	Assistant title	%	Job profile	Training Profile (ISCED)	Role	PD
Belgium (Fl/Fr)	<i>Begeleider kinderopvang (2,5-6)</i>	9.42	/	X (3B)	Caring	/
	<i>Doelgroepverzorger (0-3)</i>	0.08	/	X (in training for 3B)	Caring/Bridging	/
	<i>Publicultrice (2,5-6)</i>	N.A.	X	X (3B)	Caring	/
Denmark	<i>Assistent aux instituturs précolaire (2,5-6)</i>	N.A.	X	/	Caring	/
	<i>Pædagogmedhjælper (0-6)</i>	+/- 40	/	/	Caring/Learning	/
	<i>Aide-auxiliaire (CAP petite enfance) (0-3)</i>	N.A.	X	X (3)	Caring	X
Greece	<i>ATSEM Agent territorial spécialisé des écoles maternelles (2,5-6)</i>	+/- 50	X	X (3)	Caring	X
Ireland	<i>Beithas nípáirveólakomán / naithos pedagógú (0-6)</i>	N.A.	/	/	Caring/Learning	/
	<i>Basic practitioner in early childhood education/care (0-5)</i>	N.A.	/	/	Caring/Learning	/
	<i>Community Worker –Employment Scheme (0-5)</i>	N.A.	/	/	Caring/Learning	/
Lithuania	<i>Auklėtojos padėėja (1-6)</i>	+/- 50	/	/	Caring	/
The Netherlands	<i>Onderwijsondersteuner (4-12)</i>	2.76	X	X (4)	Learning	X
	<i>Klassexistent (4-12, special education)</i>	N.A.	X	/	Caring/Learning	N.A.
	<i>Groepshulp (0-4)</i>	N.A.	/	/	Caring	/
Poland	<i>Pomoc nauczyciela (3-6)</i>	+/- 2	/	/	Caring	/
Romania	<i>Îngrijitoare (0-7)</i>	+/- 28	/	/	Caring	/
Slovenia	<i>Pomočnik vzgojitelja (0-7)</i>	+/- 50	X	X (4A)	Caring/Learning/	X
Spain	<i>Técnico/técnica Educador o Asistente en educación infantil (0-6)</i>	N.A.	/	/	Bridging	/
UK (England and Wales)	<i>Nursery assistants (0-5)</i>	presence has doubled over the last 10 year	/	/	Caring/Learning	/
	<i>Teaching assistants (0-5)</i>	presence has doubled over the last 10 years: +/- 50	/	/	Learning/Caring	/

<sup>1</sup> N.A. – not available; X-present in official documents; / – not addressed in official document

It should be noted that the responsibility of assistants is rarely covered by policy documents or official regulations, unlike that of core practitioners. Assistants have far fewer job or training profiles. Moreover, they are poorly qualified or unqualified, unlike core practitioners, who have a wide range of qualification levels: from upper secondary to Master's level. Only Belgium (for 2.5–6-year-olds), France, the Netherlands (4–12-year-olds), Slovenia, Sweden and the UK have specific training requirements for assistants. Slovenia and Sweden are the only countries that require a three- to four-year upper secondary vocational qualification.

Core practitioners working in unitary systems and in schools for the oldest children (3–6-year-olds) in split systems have a clear educational or pedagogical job and/or training profile. Those working with the under-threes in split systems have a caring or paramedical profile. Most countries seem to have assistants who play a predominantly *caring* role. Where descriptions are available, they are often framed in technical 'caring' tasks. In Lithuania, the *Auklėtojos padejeja* are described as technical workers who are in charge of cleaning the facilities, feeding children and other 'routine' chores. Other tasks include supervising children, scheduling nap time, assisting with their hygiene routine, dressing children to go outside, helping with discipline, etc. Care in many countries is seen as offering practical help and satisfying the physical needs of children, especially the youngest, in ECEC services. In Belgium (Flemish- and French-speaking communities), assistants (*Begeleider kinderopvang*, *Puéricultrice*, *Assistant aux instituteurs préscolaires*) help pre-school teachers (*Kleuterleid(st)er*, *Instituteur/ Institutrice préscolaire*) by taking over the caring duties for the youngest children in pre-school to ensure that the core professional can focus on 'education'. Only in a few countries such as Spain are assistants (*Técnico/técnica o Asistente en educación infantil*) also responsible for the children's well-being and satisfaction of their emotional and physical needs. In the UK, France, Ireland, and The Netherlands, they also adopt a *learning* role according to the data. They have a supporting role in the learning process of individual children (including those with special learning needs), whereas the core practitioners have a teaching responsibility for the whole group. In Scandinavian countries, core practitioners have a social pedagogical role which encompasses learning and caring dimensions. Danish and Swedish assistants have a social- pedagogical role under the supervision of core practitioners.

The bridging role of assistants, as described in the introduction, is mentioned less frequently by the local experts (only in Belgium (Fl), and Slovenia). These assistants come mostly from local poor communities or ethnic minority communities. They are employed to introduce the institutions to families and local communities and enhance the accessibility of services for vulnerable families. In Slovenia, Roma teaching assistants, who are separate from other teaching assistants, are also employed to raise the educational attainment of Roma children. In these cases, the bridging role is closely linked to the learning role of assistants.

Assistants have far fewer opportunities to engage in professional development activities. In Denmark, whereas some local governments provide core practitioners (*Pædagog*) with non-contact time for planning and pedagogical documentation, this is less usual for assistants (*Pædagogmedhjælper*), although they have the same schedule and work with the same children and families. This trend can be seen in most countries, yet there are notable exceptions. In The Netherlands and France, all ECEC practitioners, irrespective of their profile, have the same opportunities and obligations regarding professional development. In Slovenia, teacher assistants must participate in five days of training per year. Moreover, assistants and teachers are entitled to extra time to jointly prepare, plan and evaluate activities. Regarding the assistants' working conditions, it was difficult to find statistics on the salaries in the different countries. Trade unions for assistants are quite rare. They only exist in Slovenia, Sweden and Denmark. In Sweden and Denmark, the assistants are represented by the union for nursery staff. In Slovenia, by the same trade union as the core practitioner.

### 3.4 Discussion

There are several limitations in this study and conclusions need to be drawn with some caution. First, the data are constructed from official national and regional policy documents. For a full understanding of the role of assistants, the local policy dynamics need to be understood. Sometimes local governments have greater responsibility for providing ECEC (Italy and Denmark) than regional and national governments. Unfortunately, this study does not cover local policy documents owing to budget and time constraints. Second, since many policy

documents did not cover the role of assistants, the local ECEC experts presented extra data on the assistant's role, based on their own experience. These data are interpretative. Finally, there are considerable variations in the organisation of ECEC both within and across countries and regions in terms of historical, social, and political contexts. Analysing workforce profiles in different countries is a complex matter, and it is difficult to identify trends and common fields of tensions without decontextualising national/regional policies and practices. Despite these limitations, by analysing policy documents and local ECEC experts' opinions in 15 European countries, we gained more insight into the role of assistants in ECEC.

### 3.4.1 Caring Matters

Although academic research focuses on the learning and bridging roles of assistants and less on their caring role, the latter prevails in most EU countries. In some countries, assistants also have a learning and/or bridging role. We identified a divide in the tasks between core practitioners and assistants. Whereas the core practitioner's role is more educational (teaching or pedagogy), the assistants assume a more caring role. This divide seems to be apparent in pre-schools for children from three to six in split systems, but also in some unitary systems, despite notable exceptions. In Denmark, Sweden, and Slovenia, which are unitary systems, both core practitioners and assistants have a social pedagogical role which includes caring and learning. In services for the under-threes in split systems, there is less of a division, since the core practitioners, mostly women, share a caring profile with their assistants.

One could argue that this division of tasks does not necessarily jeopardise a holistic view of education where both caring and learning are addressed. An essential question, however, is whether holistic education needs to be embodied in one person or whether it can be assumed by different people with different roles. When holistic education is embodied in practitioners with complementary tasks, it is of crucial importance to make sure that the caring and learning functions are equally valued. In the current situation, this can be challenging since assistants and core practitioners have unequal professional statuses. The core practitioners are covered by official regulations, whereas in many countries assistants are not. They have professional competence profiles and training requirements, higher salaries and more opportunities to participate in professional development activities than assistants. The



invisibility of assistants in most policy documents suggests a fragile position and denies both the value of their work and their professional prospects.

### 3.4.2 From a Divide to a Hierarchy

Questions arise on the relation between education and care. There seems to be a hierarchy between education and care, embodied in the different professional statuses of core practitioners. The concept of 'education' seems to be narrowed down to learning, and 'care' is subordinate or even 'inferior' to learning. This hinders a holistic conceptualisation of education in its broadest sense, as advocated by many international reports. The hierarchy between education and care fits in a European context of increasing schoolification. A focus on the children's cognitive and language development means that social and emotional development are addressed to a lesser degree. The caring dimension is overlooked. This is especially true in pre-schools (for 3–6-year-olds) that are increasingly perceived as preparing for learning in compulsory schooling.

In this hierarchy, the assistants' job is seen as satisfying physical and emotional needs, addressing learning needs of children who differ from the 'average' (children with special needs or ethnic minority children), and connecting with parents. The idea that these are tasks that hinder education is reinforced. One could also hypothesise that core practitioners do not feel competent to deal with these aspects. This is supported by two small-scale studies on assistants with a bridging role. Depoorter (2006) and Mihajlovic' and Trikić (forthcoming) showed that, although *Doelgroepwerknemers* and *Roma teaching assistants* were hired because of the problems that core practitioners encountered in communicating with ethnic minority families and families living in poverty, they paradoxically tend to reinforce or maintain this perceived deficiency. When hiring 'assistants' from ethnic minorities and/or poor backgrounds, programmes may paradoxically reproduce the very communication gaps they wish to eliminate (Depoorter, 2006). Hence, the presence of assistants may devalue the competences of the core practitioners.

### 3.4.3 Conceptualisations of Care

The analysis of policy documents and opinions of ECEC experts suggests that care is oftenseen as addressing the physical needs of children. This has multiple

interpretations. First, an underlying duality, as expressed by the Roman poet Juvenal's 'mens sana in corpore sano' ('a healthy mind in a healthy body'), suggests that physical and emotional needs, as connected with the body, are fundamentally different from intellectual needs, in line with the division of body and soul that has prevailed since early Christendom (Foucault, 1984). Children's physical needs need to be taken care of so that their minds are free for learning. Hence, caring may be perceived as a necessary evil. Second, when care is defined as addressing children's physical needs, it becomes an age-related concept. The results of our study suggest that assistants are responsible for the youngest children in ECEC. Even in countries with a socially pedagogical vision which includes care and education for all children, assistants mostly work with the youngest children, whereas qualified pre-school educators mostly work with the older children (Oberhuemer & Ulich, 1997). The implication is that, as children become older, they require less 'care'. This reinforces the hierarchical position in which children gradually 'grow out' of a more primitive stage of physical care to enter the more 'human' world of learning. Third, caring is often analysed from a deficit perspective. According to Cameron and Moss (2007), this is especially true in English- and German-rooted languages. Children lack something and need help and practitioners must 'worry' about them. In this sense, care is associated with children in need, meaning children who differ from the white, middle-class, able norms. Finally, 'care' is seen as a simple matter and can be provided by low-qualified or unqualified practitioners, mostly women. It is what 'women naturally do' and does not require specific training or professional development. Important interactions such as feeding, putting children to bed, going to the toilet are stripped of their educational value. These interpretations not only allude to a narrow view of care, but also narrow the view of education, as they reduce education to cognitive development, leading to lack of continuity in the child's care and education.

The scarce qualitative research suggests that assistants and parents find the caring dimension of education very important. Yet, as stated in the Introduction, they describe care in terms of emotional 'labour' rather than of executing a technical job. Some scholars, along with assistants, relate this conceptualisation to the gendered nature of the job. It has to do with 'loving' children, ensuring good relations between teachers, children and parents and that children like their school, and supporting children's self-esteem. Assistant

Deborah, who works with 5–6-year-old children in an English school, describes her engagement as follows: “One of my personal concerns is the lack of opportunity for the child to express him/herself within the school day. The constraints of a timetable do not allow for listening to the voice of the child” (Skuse, 2001, p. 58) She advocates for the children’s agency so they can express themselves and be respected in their identity. Care goes beyond a physical dimension and encompasses an emotional, societal and political dimension. In this context, it is seen as an important element of both democratic practice and citizenship (Pols, 2006; Tronto, 1993). Since democratic practice takes place in the present, care seems to be more oriented towards current experiences of children and parents. In the trend towards schoolification, learning focuses on the children’s future. If assistants and parents find it important to ensure warm and loving interactions with children, what does this say about the role of the core practitioner? Does this need of parents and assistants imply that core practitioners have more distant interactions with children since they focus on their cognitive and language learning processes? This type of professional fits with the technical conceptualisation of professionalism, which is typically endorsed by schoolification and is meeting increasing criticism.

### **3.5 European Policies**

Many reports plead for unitary systems where care and education meet at an institutional level. Yet our study suggests that, even in unitary systems, a hierarchy between care and education can exist, embodied in the relationship between core practitioners and assistants. Early childhood policy-makers should be critical about what drives their policy and how their choices may be moulded by and contribute to social constructions of ‘care’, ‘education’, ‘professionalism’, ‘quality’, etc. As many reports emphasise a holistic view of education in the early years, policy should be geared towards this. From a systemic perspective, the integration of care and education needs policy interventions at macro, meso and micro levels alike. Integrating care and education at an institutional and regional or national level is an important pathway, yet clearly not sufficient. The implementation of a holistic view of education should be negotiated with all stakeholders (practitioners, parents, local communities, schools, training institutions, local, regional, and national governments, European policy-makers . . .) and be addressed in general

frameworks on ECEC curricula, initial training and other professional development initiatives. Parents are thereby respected and invited to co-construct educational practices. This signals that we insist that explicit caring tasks such as feeding or putting to bed are educational in nature, just like play, that we consider learning as relational and to be about developing cognitive, motor, emotional, social, creative and other aspects of the child, that supporting learning requires a caring attitude and that families and local communities are partners in education. Garnier (2010a) states that a democratic collaboration between core practitioners and assistants is impossible when their working conditions differ significantly. The deployment of assistants should go beyond their 'usefulness' and truly value their role as part of an educational community. The strongest working relationships are developed when core practitioners involve assistants in planning, when they meet regularly, when schools offer professional development opportunities for all staff, and when opportunities are provided for sharing and reflecting on practices (Groom, 2006; Urban *et al.*, 2011).

Qualitative studies on how the conceptualisations of care and education are related to assistants and core professionals remain all too scarce and the voice of assistants and parents is often overlooked. Future research should address these issues from multiple perspectives, including analysing how the conceptualisations play out in daily practice. How do assistants perceive their role(s) in a context of increasing schoolification? What significant roles do assistants develop in the early education of children? The perspectives of the core practitioners, the parents, children and local communities are also lacking. Encountering these perspectives may help to reconceptualise workforce profiles in order to enhance a holistic view of early childhood education.

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# Chapter 4

## PARENTS

### **The Democratic and Caring Deficit in ‘Parental Involvement’: Examining Perspectives of Migrant Parents on Preschool Education<sup>10</sup>**

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**Abstract**

The discourse on parental involvement as a means to increase the educational attainment of underprivileged children has gained ground in the scholarly and policy field of preschool education. Nevertheless, this discourse is characterised by a 'democratic deficit' in which parents themselves are rarely involved in determining goals and modalities of parental involvement in sociological and educational studies (Tronto, 2013). 10 video-elicited focus groups with migrant parents were organised in the Flemish community of Belgium in order to explore their meaning-making of preschool education and the parent-school relationship. The qualitative data suggest a perceived lack of attention for the care dimension in education. While parents are eager to know more about preschool, they cannot always express this eagerness. Based on these results, we recommend that preschool policies, practices, and research should consider communicative spaces for parents, professionals, and researchers in which multiple, yet opposing, meanings can be discussed.

## 4.1 Introduction

Since the 1960s, the relationship between social inequality and school has been of considerable interest to sociological scholars and policy-makers (Downey & Condrón, 2016). The mass dissemination of primary education in many countries after WWII and of secondary education in the 1960s was envisioned as an 'equaliser' (Van Houtte, 2016; Peschar & Wesselingh, 1985). In most affluent countries, the construction of preschool education as an equaliser before compulsory education gained momentum (Van Laere & Vandenbroeck, 2014; Zigler & Styfco, 2010). This is considered especially important for working class children or children living in poverty, who are believed to need compensation for their 'social-cultural handicaps', enabling them to start 'on an equal foot' with the other children in primary education (Van Laere & Vandenbroeck, 2014). The idea of 'preschool as equaliser' gradually permeated policies worldwide, consolidated by various studies that underlined the importance of early learning as a foundation for reaching high educational attainment and employment in later life, especially for children living in poverty and children with migrant backgrounds (Heckman, 2006; Matthews & Jang, 2007; Unicef Innocenti Research Centre, 2008). In response to a recent overview of fifty years of research on 'inequality and school' (Downey & Condrón, 2016), Torche (2016) urged for the need to focus on preschool education to give children equal educational opportunities, as societally disadvantaged children have inequalities in skills that are critical for learning even before children enter the formal educational system (Torche, 2016). Despite this gradual shift in focus to the equalising potential of the early years, the educational gap between children with high socioeconomic status and low socioeconomic status (SES) and between children with and without migrant backgrounds, remains persistent in many countries, albeit to a different degree. According to the latest PISA studies, Belgium is one of the countries with the most pronounced educational gap, which is related to the home situation of the children (OECD, 2013, 2016).

In order to 'close' the persistent educational gap, international organisations have pleaded for increased parental involvement in preschool (European Commission, 2015; OECD, 2006, 2012). Similar to studies in primary education (Barnard, 2004; Carter, 2002; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995), research suggests that parental involvement in the preschool learning of children is

associated with better learning outcomes and later academic success (Arnold, Zeljo, Doctoroff, & Ortiz, 2008; Castro, Bryant, Peisner-Feinberg, & Skinner, 2004; Eldridge, 2001; Galindo & Sheldon, 2012; Halgunseth, 2009; Marcon, 1999; McWayne, Hampton, Fantuzzo, Cohen, & Sekino, 2004; Miedel & Reynolds, 2000; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2004). Several of these studies draw upon the Epstein's Overlapping Spheres of Influence model (Epstein, 1987, 1995; Epstein & Salinas, 2004). In Epstein's model, different types of parental involvement are described in terms of what parents can do at home and in the school environment to help their children perform well at school and in later life (Epstein, 1987, 1995; Epstein & Salinas, 2004). Scholars in the field of sociology of education have criticised this line of thought for several reasons (Lareau, 1987; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Lareau & Shumar, 1996). They point out that Epstein promotes a model of consensus by using terms such as 'partnership' and 'reaching common goals'. By assuming consensus, this model fails to acknowledge patterns of unequal power distribution between diverse parents and schools (Lareau & Shumar, 1996; Todd & Higgins, 1998). When Epstein's theoretical model is translated into educational policies, the focus is on increasing the individual parent's involvement in education, starting from the assumption that all parents are equal. According to Lareau (1987) and other scholars who use concepts of the Bourdieusian social reproduction theory, the equality of parents is a problematic assumption, since parents have to deal with unequal financial, social, and cultural resources. Parents, therefore, have different skills to activate their cultural and social capital in order to create an educational advantage for their child. By ignoring these differences, it is argued that it is hard for parents from working or lower classes to comply with the staff's expectations about parental involvement, as these are permeated by social and cultural experiences of the economic middle class and elites (Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003; Lareau, 1987; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Lareau & Shumar, 1996). Consequently, scholars point out that schools' efforts to involve parents may paradoxically create greater inequalities in children's learning, resulting in an even larger educational gap (Gillanders, Mc Kinney, & Ritchie, 2012; Horvat et al., 2003; Lee & Bowen, 2006).

A more participatory approach on parental involvement may shed additional light on this debate, by relating this sociological approach to a analysis of daily practice and the lived experiences of parents themselves (Vandenbroeck,

Coussée, Bradt, & Roose, 2011). It can indeed be noticed that both the work of Epstein and Lareau bear a striking commonality: they do not question the ultimate purpose of parental involvement and the very meaning of preschool as increasing academic performances of especially underprivileged children. It seems that the goals and modalities of parental involvement are defined without the involvement of parents themselves. Tronto (2013) framed this phenomenon as a 'democratic deficit', "the incapacities of governmental institutions (such as preschools) to reflect the real values and ideas of citizens" (Tronto, 2013, p. 17). As a result, they risk instrumentalising participation, reducing the parents to spectators of their alleged problems.

This instrumentalisation of parents in the debates on parental involvement has been severely criticized for thinking *for* parents, yet not *with* parents (Rayna & Rubio, 2010). Parents can help their children to achieve the learning outcomes that the educational system puts forward; yet, they are hardly involved in discussions on the kind of preschool education they want for their child (Brogère, 2010; Doucet, 2011; Garnier, 2010; Hughes & Mac Naughton, 2000). In this instrumentalising discourse, parental involvement has an alleged preventive value in terms of avoiding school failure. One of the side effects of this discourse is that non-participation of parents is considered to be a problem (Bouverne-De Bie, Roose, Maesele, & Vandenbroeck, 2012; Brogère, 2010). All too often, it is assumed that poor and migrant parents therefore need to *learn* to participate. Doucet (2011) and Dahlstedt (2009) pointed out that ways to increase parental involvement are actually codes or implicit strategies to socialise underprivileged parents into the mainstream white middleclass norms, but still within an inequitable educational project. Studies that give voice to these parents, however, are only recently emerging (e.g. Tobin, Arzubiaga, & Adair, 2013).

In sum, instead of constructing parental involvement as a 'solution' to the educational gap in preschool, it is important to counter, what Tronto (2013) referred to as, the 'democratic deficit' and gain insight into what is at stake for parents themselves: what meanings do parents attribute to preschool education? How do parents understand the relationship with the preschool staff? In this article we explore multiple perspectives of parents with migrant backgrounds in the Flemish Community of Belgium, as they are objects of concern with regard to parental involvement and potential school failure of



their children (Dahlstedt, 2009; Doucet, 2011). Finally, we discuss what parents' meanings of preschool education signify for conventional approaches to parental involvement.

## **4.2 Research context: the Flemish Community of Belgium**

The Flemish Community of Belgium is historically characterised by a split system with care services for children from zero to three years old (*kinderopvang*) under the auspices of the Minister for Welfare; and preschool institutions (*kleuterschool*) for children from two and a half to six years old belonging to the educational system (Oberhuemer, Schreyer, & Neuman, 2010). Every child is entitled to free preschool from two and a half years onwards. Over 99% of the five-year-old children are enrolled in preschool, and 82.2% of the two-and-a-half-year-olds are enrolled in a preschool in Flanders (Department of Education, 2015). Despite almost universal enrolment in preschool education, there is an unequal attendance – children from migrant and/or poor families are more often absent from preschool than their more affluent peers – that causes policy concerns, as it is associated with later school failure (Department of Education, 2015).

## **4.3 Methods**

We organised ten focus groups in the autumn of 2014 and spring of 2015 of parents with migrant backgrounds (n=66) in Ghent, Brussels, and Antwerp, the three largest cities of the Belgian Flemish community. All parents in the focus groups had children between two and a half and four years old. They gave permission to participate in this study by oral informed consent and approval was received from the ethical commission of the authors' university. In a period of two weeks prior to the focus group, we met parents several times at the school gates and repeatedly invited them to participate in this study. These focus groups took place at the preschool premises without the presence of the preschool staff. With the aim of including some harder-to-reach parents, we also invited parents through the staff of five intermediary organisations that work with young children (see Table 1). In order to include fathers, we organised two focus groups solely for fathers. However, the turn-out was low,

reaching only one father with migrant backgrounds (FG8) and one focus group was cancelled.

Table 4.1. Participants of the focus groups for parents

Parents	#	♂	♀	One of the home languages = Dutch	Home languages Dutch	Language focus group	Invited by who and where	Region
FP1	3	1	2	0	3	Dutch	Researcher and social workers in NGO for undocumented persons	Ghent
FP2*	8	0	8	2	6	Dutch, Turkish, Slovak and English**	Researcher in municipal school	Ghent
FP3	3	0	3	0	3	Turkish and Dutch**	Social workers in community health center	Ghent
FP4	11	1	10	1	10	Dutch, Turkish and Arabic	Researcher in catholic school	Ghent
FP5	8	0	8	2	6	Turkish**	Researcher and social workers in toy library	Ghent
FP6	2	0	2	2	0	Dutch	Social workers in meeting space for young children and parents and doctors in community based health centre	Antwerp
FP7	8	1	7	1	7	Dutch, French and English	Researcher in state school	Brussels
FP8***	1	1	0	0	1	French and Dutch	Researcher in out-of-school care and state school / Social worker of center for intercultural community development	Brussels
FP9	13	1	12	2	11	Dutch, French, Turkish and English	Researcher in private NGO school (Catholic)	Brussels
FP10	9	0	9	1	8	Dutch, French, Turkish, Arabic and English**	Researcher in private NGO school (Catholic)	Brussels
Total	66	5	61	11	55			

\* Including 1 grandmother

\*\* With professional translator Turkish-Dutch, Turkish-French

\*\*\* Three fathers participated in this focus group, one of which had a migrant backgrounds

We chose to work with focus groups as they are considered a form of collective research for participants in which the authority of the researcher is decentred (Howitt, 2011a; Kamberilis & Dimitriadis, 2003). Furthermore, since the method of video-elicited focus groups by Tobin (1992) has proven to be a good way to capture parents' voices with multiple language backgrounds, discussions and reflections among parents were triggered by showing a 20 minute movie of a day in preschool in the focus groups. This self-made movie showed various learning and caring moments and activities in a Flemish reception class starting from the moment the parents and the children arrive at the preschool. Participants were invited to interrupt the movie and discuss it, which gave them the opportunity to discuss meanings of preschool education without necessarily having to criticise the school their children attended. They were also asked whether they found the movie to be 'typical'. While discussing typicality, underlying understandings and meanings of preschool education and the relationship between parents and schools were identified (Tobin, 1992). The focus group sessions lasted from between one and a half to three and a half hours.

All focus group sessions were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. In conducting a thematic analysis (Howitt, 2011b), we identified several general themes that emerged from the data such as curiosity, inability to speak out loud, care of the body, and belonging. Transcripts were coded along this initial coding scheme. In a next step, we performed secondary coding guided by additional literature on the dimensions of care and scripted practices, which resulted in the identification of three main themes: parents' eagerness to know; the value of caring practices; and parents' subordinate position.

## **4.4 Results**

### **4.4.1 The eagerness to know, experience, and communicate**

An eagerness to know more about the daily experiences of their children in preschool ran through the discussions of parents, many of whom expressed the hope that their children would feel well and actively participate in preschool practice. They professed to having little knowledge about what exactly happens at preschool and this was explained as having limited possibilities to

communicate with the preschool staff and by an inability to enter the classrooms in many preschools:

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“ Every day I pass the school at about 10 a.m. You can see the children playing at the playground. And when your child is in one of the classes in front, you can peek inside. But now my child is in one of the classes located on the other side of the playground. I just don't know; I cannot see her. I tried to ask this of the preschool teacher: as I'm not able to see her, are you treating my child well or not? (FP3)

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Many parents like this mother wanted to see for themselves and experience how their children were doing in the preschool environment and how they were being approached by the preschool staff. Other parents stated that they did not necessarily need to enter the preschool and talk to the teacher. Still, this did not necessarily mean they were not eager to know what was happening. One father claimed to not have a desire to enter the school; however, it turned out at the end of the focus group that he was very curious to know more. He asked the researcher for a copy of the movie so he could watch and discuss the movie with his children. Generally, most parents expressed the desire to have more contact with the staff and not only as a one-way process of the school giving information to the parents:

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“ Parent 1: It would be a good idea if they could organise times at which the school staff talks to the parents. How is it going for you as a parent?

“ Parent2: So they listen to our concerns about what we feel and experience.

“ Parent 3: It would be good to resolve some frustrations and even fears of parents before the start of preschool.(FP9)

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For several parents, the lack of concrete knowledge about what happened in preschool, the perceived lack of reciprocal communication, or the inability to be able to be present in preschool and experience it for themselves, generated feelings of uncertainty, worries, and sometimes even frustration.

#### 4.4.2 Questioning care in preschool practices

The eagerness to know, experience, and communicate about their children's preschool experiences was in many cases associated with questions about

physical, emotional, and even political notions of care. A recurrent general remark was that preschool classes were understaffed which was believed to hinder the ability to meet the care needs of all children.

#### 4.4.2.1 Care as an activity and mental disposition

Many parents had questions about how preschool staff addressed the physiological and emotional needs of the child during various moments of the school day. Parents wondered how the school ensured that children ate and drank enough during the school day as they had noticed that children often came home with full lunchboxes. Parents also problematised toilet events and the perceived lack of follow-up by the staff, some of them having no idea if and when their children were being taken care of after a toilet visit or after a peeing accident or when their diaper was changed. Other parents complained that their child was very tired from being in preschool. They stated that their child needed sufficient sleep and were worried about the limited possibilities in school to sleep or rest. The question of whether children were being well taken care of not only concerned the physiological, but also the socio-emotional, needs of the child.

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“ Parent: *I noticed in the movie that the teacher does not want to see the child.*

“ Researcher: *What do you mean by that?*

“ Parent: *During the whole morning she did not once go to the child that was sitting alone and crying. At the start of the school day the teacher could embrace the child and talk to the child. A teacher for me is a bit like a mother to the children in the class. They have to be able to laugh with the child. Really embrace the child! So the children can feel from the teacher that they are here and they matter. I really was fed up with it last year. My child started in September and everything went well until January. All of a sudden my child did not want to go to school anymore. This lasted until June.*

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“ Researcher: *So what was happening?*

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“ Parent: I don’t know! I really don’t know. I went to the teacher and asked her what was going on. The teacher just said ‘everything is good’, nothing more. So I asked my son, he was just crying. Everyday this was happening! I did not know what the problem was. But I don’t think it is normal that this took such a long time: six to seven months! The teacher needs to provide warmth if they do this work – taking care of children. The child needs to feel ‘my mother is gone, but my teacher is with me’. (FP 4)

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This mother addressed how care requires actual concrete actions like embracing and talking to the child, which should stem from the preschool teacher being caring and warm to children. Care was viewed as both an activity and a mental disposition that the teacher should embody (Tronto, 1993).

#### 4.4.2.2 Care as a phenomenon

The statements of this mother also reveal several symbolic meanings of care, which – according to Wikberg and Eriksson (2008) – refer to care as a phenomenon. In the last participant quotation, the parent used the words “the teacher does not want to see the child”, which refers indirectly to the importance of attention, a symbolic meaning of care that appeared repeatedly in many stories of the participants. Several parents contested the perceived lack of attentive supervisory staff during recess time: who supports the children, particularly as some children can fall and hurt themselves or can be hurt by other children in the outdoor playground? Although attention as a symbolic meaning of care was highly valued by the majority of parents, the way in which care is acted out was expressed differently depending on the parent’s own personality, history, gender, socio-economic, and cultural backgrounds (Tronto, 1993; Wikberg & Eriksson, 2008). Some parents thought that the supervisory staff should be immediately adjacent to the children and protect them from falling or fighting. Other parents underlined that falling is part of learning life, yet the staff should be attentive and able to comfort and actively listen to children’s needs. A few parents – who all happened to be fathers – emphasised that children need to learn to defend themselves as many conflicts can occur in the outdoor playground. They emphasised the importance of an attentive staff that can balance between giving freedom to children and intervening in order to resolve a conflict or in order to physically take care of the child when they are hurt.

Besides the emphasis on attention, we identified other symbolic meanings of care in the focus groups. In her exclamation, “Really embrace the child!” in the last citation, the mother highlighted the need for bodily contact between the preschool teacher and the child as a way to comfort and interact with the child. At the same time, she symbolically referred to the importance of children ‘being there’ and ‘knowing that they matter’. Care was understood as giving presence to somebody and respecting and acknowledging the child in his/her individual personality. The concern that children may be forgotten in the collective preschool environment was particularly salient, as many children from the participants had not mastered the dominant school language, which according to the parents could jeopardize the full participation of the child in preschool learning activities. From that perspective, parents hoped that children, irrespective of their backgrounds, belonged to the group. Many parents expressed fears that their child could be excluded in preschool, but also in later educational, societal, and economic life. The focus on attention, presence, and belonging in the class and in society as symbolic meanings of care, seems to touch upon a more political connotation of care (Hamington, 2015; Tronto, 1993).

#### 4.4.2.3 Discontinuity in care

The mother finished her thought by articulating that the child needs to have the feeling that “my mother is gone, but my teacher is with me”. Attention, giving presence, and being connected are considered important symbolic meanings of the care of a child in every life domain, including preschool and home. As care permeates the human condition (Hamington, 2004; Wikberg & Eriksson, 2008), several participants drew attention to a discontinuity of care between the home and preschool environment. They expressed their wish for a more continuous care across the private-public boundaries between home and preschool.

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“ Parent: My child is actually not obliged to attend preschool yet. I think he would rather stay with me. My child has a medical problem and I have asked the teacher to ensure that he receives his medication with some yoghurt. When I told her about the yoghurt, she told me she couldn't find it in his schoolbag. Moreover, the teacher this week gave him triple the amount of medication that he actually needed. That made me angry and concerned. (FP2)

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Due to the discontinuity of care, this mother claimed to feel a desire to keep her child at home. Some parents proposed to collaborate more with the preschool on the care of the children by, for example, making healthy warm food for the children in the preschool so they would eat.

### 4.4.3 Adopting a subordinate position

#### 4.4.3.1 From silent to silenced voices

While parents had questions on how care was provided in preschool, it did not always occur to them that they could raise these questions with the staff:

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“ Parent 1: *But you went to the teacher to ask this. I also have this question but it never occurred to me to ask it, because school is a system and who am I to change this system? Do you think it would really matter if I asked this question?*

“ Parent 2: *That is not true. You cannot think like that. I had the same experience: I thought it was too cold for the children to eat their fruit on the outdoor playground. If you have a question, you should raise it. (FP3)*

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The first mother did not consider addressing questions about care because she identified herself as being powerless in the school system. In response, the second mother urged the first one to raise questions with the staff. But even within the stories of the second mother, a dynamic of being silenced is noticeable when she, for example, tried to ask the teacher why she was not able to see her child in the classroom when she passed the school, as presented earlier in this article.

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“ Parent: *I discussed this with the preschool teacher. The teacher told me that when she goes to higher grades, I will not be able to see her either. In the beginning it was difficult for me to accept this, but now I'm used to it. (FP3)*

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Moreover, this mother found it important to ask questions; yet, she perceived her questions as an indication of being stupid:

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“ Parent: *I know that some of my questions are bad or silly questions. It is a personal issue: I experience psychological issues because my mother was never really there for me when I was young.*

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“ Researcher: So, according to you, what is another bad or silly question?

“ Parent: Let me think. For example, is there a toilet connected to the classroom of my child? If not, how does my child has to go to the toilet by herself? I asked this question to the teacher and she responded that children go collectively to the toilets. And then I asked her ‘but if they are all together on the toilets which bottom will you wipe first?’(FP3)

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It is remarkable that she – by referring to her psychological problems – blamed herself for having ‘bad’ questions that were actually along the same lines of the concerns of other parents in the focus groups. Another mother implied that staying silent is the best strategy for a parent in order to ensure that your child will receive the best learning opportunities and not fail in preschool.

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“ Parent: You are already happy that they do not send your child to special needs education. Therefore, you accept the minimum (FP8)

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Researcher: Any other reflections or thoughts on the movie?

Parent: No really big issues. I do not attach a lot of importance to the small details of a preschool day. I know that it is not easy for a teacher to care for 15 children, for example when one cries. I do not want to judge this. I have other things on my mind to think about: is my son doing well at school? Can he read and write? That is what interests me the most. Ok, sometimes when he is pushed by another child... for example, he broke his glasses one time. But I did not say anything; I know these things can happen. Another time my son was pushed and I had to come to the school myself to call an ambulance.(FP 8)

This quotation demonstrates that the father seemed to juggle between consciously remaining silent and hoping that his child received good education and care. In general, parents tended to be rather compliant and subordinate by adapting their expectations to the implicit and explicit rules, norms, and routines of preschool institutions. Some scholars have called this ‘scripted practices’ in which material and social space is never a neutral context as it directs human action as scripts (Antaki, Ten Have, & Koole, 2004; Bernstein, 2009; Vuorisalo, Rutanen, & Raittila, 2015). We found that some participants tried to go along with these scripted practices, while others challenged these scripts.

#### 4.4.3.2 Following scripted practices

Despite some exceptions, most parents wished to have more contact with the preschool staff. Nevertheless, since it was not customary in many preschools to enter the class or have extended talks with the teachers, parents tried to approach the teacher, but restricted themselves to a maximum number of visits per week.

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“ Parent 1: *I don't talk to the teacher every day but I try to do it twice... twice a week is perfect. [Other participants nod their heads].*

“ Parent 2: *I try to contact the teacher once a week.*

“ Researcher: *Why this exact number?*

“ Parent 1: *If we talk every day to the teacher, it will be hard for her.*

“ Researcher: *Would you like this to be different?*

“ Parent 1: *Yes of course. Like, one hour per week so every day we can talk with the teacher for 10 minutes. (FP4)*

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On the surface, it seems that these participants took a respectful position towards the teachers in order not to bother them too much. Yet, their stance is more likely to be coming from deference, acting according to the assumed wishes or opinions of the teacher. The way parents engaged in activities that the school organised to stimulate parental involvement, can also be interpreted as yet another example of their subordinate position.

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“ Parent 1: *Yesterday it was fruit day at the school. Parents cut the fruits and brought them to all the preschool classes. Although I do not speak Dutch, by showing my presence, the preschool staff, director, and school can feel that I'm an involved parent.*

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“ *Parent 2: I have noticed that the more a mother is busy with the child, the more the school will be concerned with the child and the mother. A lot of other mothers unfortunately didn't come to the fruit day. I told them they should come since you do not need language to cut fruit.... I would like to ask you what we can do for other mothers so they can become more involved in the school. I don't want the other mothers to feel excluded from the school. How can we make clear to the other mothers 'Please, come to the school and dare to ask questions to the preschool staff!?' (FP3)*

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By doing these activities and expressing the desire that more mothers do this as well, these mothers confirmed the construction of school-centric approaches of parental involvement (Lawson, 2003). Yet, at the same time, by reading the scripts and 'performing' parental involvement accordingly, what they actually hope for themselves and for other mothers is to create a possibility to have more communication with the teachers, even when parents did not speak the school language. Since school-centric parental involvement activities were merely a means to this end, these mothers followed, but simultaneously challenged, scripted practices with regard to parental involvement.

#### 4.4.3.3 Challenging scripted practices

As parents were often not allowed in the preschool classes, several parents challenged these scripts by using the physical space in unconventional ways in order to gain more information about their child's preschool experience.

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“ *Parent 1: When I am bringing my daughter to preschool, I sometimes try to peek through the windows. One day the teacher caught me doing this! [Some participants laugh].*

“ *(Grand)Parent 2: You can also watch them from behind the trees! Just try the trees! That is what I do when my grandson is playing on the outdoor playground. [Laughter of other participants increases] (FP 2)*

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The words “the teacher caught me” and the laughter in response from the other participants, indicate how the layout of a school is a powerful tool to script human actions according to certain expectations and constructed power relations. The parents told us that the windows in this preschool were recently painted blue so parents would not be able to look inside the classrooms. When parents did manage to have contact with preschool teachers, they stated that

it was not easy to discuss matters of caring for children. It is noteworthy that parents who tried to ask questions of the preschool staff wanted to legitimise or excuse their need from a cultural, gender, or personal perspective.

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“ Parent 1: *We, as a group of Turkish mums, we are always concerned. Will my child experience difficulties, will they be sad, will they receive sufficient attention?*

“ Researcher: *That is an interesting statement you make. How is this for the others?*

“ Parent 2: *No, being concerned for your child is the same for all mothers, not only Turkish mothers. (FP2)*

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The mothers discussed whether being a caring mother was a typical characteristic of being of Turkish origin. A few mothers explained their urge to discuss questions about care as the result of having only one child or of having a concerned personality (“I’m an extreme case, I know”). This resulted in parents apologising for asking ‘stupid’ caring questions on issues that seemed to matter less for the preschool staff. These explicit legitimations may also be understood as a form of agency of mothers resisting being submissive to the preschool scripts. By ‘blaming themselves’ because of their personality, gender, or culture, they actually managed to table their questions in the preschool.

## 4.5 Discussion

We started this article by problematising the democratic deficit in educational and sociological studies on parental involvement (Tronto, 2013). Due to an increasing belief in the equalising potential of the early years, the dominant understanding of parental involvement as a means to increase academic performances of underprivileged children has also gained ground in the field of preschool education. Instead of adopting an instrumental role of parental involvement in preschool learning, we explored the meanings parents – in this case with migrant backgrounds – attributed to preschool education and how they position themselves in relation to the preschool staff.

With regard to meaning-making about preschool education, parents in our study concurred with concerns about the academic and economic future of their children and the role played by early learning in preschool in this future; yet, this is not what worried them most. Their primary questions concerned the child and their bodily and socio-emotional care needs in the present and the actual belonging and participation of the child in the classroom, no matter what their backgrounds or language skills are. Reinforced by the alleged importance of early learning as an important foundation for later successful school and work life for children with migrant backgrounds and/or children living in poverty, aspects of care seemed to be undervalued in preschool policies, practices, and research. Parents' requests for more attention, presence, and belonging as symbolic meanings of care activities and attitudes touch upon an even more political connotation of care since parents feared that their children could be excluded from school and society. Tronto (1993) and Hamington (2015) highlighted the political potential of care in public institutions like preschools, claiming that care can "maintain, contain and repair our 'world', including our bodies, ourselves and our environment, so that we can live in it as well as possible" (Tronto, 1993, p. 101).

With regard to the relationship between parents and preschool, the focus groups revealed an eagerness of parents to know what was happening to their child in preschool, even when they did not show this eagerness by entering the school or communicating with the preschool staff. Our data indicate that parents take a rather subordinate position in relation to the preschool staff and preschool as an institution. Accordingly, Lareau and Shumar (1996), Hughes and Mac Naughton (2000), and Todd and Higgins (1998) drew attention to the fact that relationships between parents and schools are characterised by unequal power dynamics, which are often masked by notions of 'partnerships'. From that perspective, Spivak (1988) asked herself the rhetorical question '*can the subaltern speak*'? What is the *voice-consciousness* of parents in hierarchical systems in which their knowledge about care and education is overlooked, not recognised, or considered to be subordinate to the knowledge of the preschool staff (Hughes & Mac Naughton, 2000)? Indeed, our results show how subaltern parents find themselves in complex and ambiguous positions in which they adhere to, yet simultaneously challenge, scripted preschool practices.

Despite these attempts, the request to be more connected with the staff and to be able to communicate and share in the care of their children remains somewhat unanswered in the stories of parents. Due to a lack of reciprocal communication and dialogue between parents and preschool staff, aspects of care remain under the radar. Tronto (2013) relates this democratic deficit to a caring deficit; that is, “the incapacities in advanced countries to meet the caring needs of children” (Tronto, 2013, p. 17). The connection between those two deficits originates from “the construction of a public/private split that is an outdated inheritance from Western political thought that misses important dimensions of both contemporary caring and democracy” (Tronto, 2013, p. 17). Parents in our study indeed questioned the discontinuity in care between the home and school environment and asked to install a shared caring responsibility, since care permeates the human condition and therefore cannot be compartmentalised (Hamington, 2004; Wikberg & Eriksson, 2008). In this vein, Tronto (1993, 2013) argued that it is impossible to work on a more socially just and inclusive society when care remains locked up in the private and parochial spheres.

Our study has some important limitations. Despite efforts, the focus groups predominantly consisted of mothers, which could have resulted in gender-biased data. A second limitation is that we predominantly reached parents who felt enough at ease to participate in a focus group in a school environment. Future studies may wish to encompass the perspectives of parents who do not send their children or rarely bring them to preschool.

What do these meanings of preschool education and the parent-school relationship signify for policies and practices in parental involvement in preschool education? First, this study demonstrates that when parents’ participation is considered an ontological fact rather than an instrument for the sake of ‘closing’ the educational gap between privileged and underprivileged children, other insights (e.g., the importance of care) appear. Taking into account the position of parents as subalterns, preschool policies and practices should develop conditions in which *voice consciousness* is addressed. This is not a simple endeavor. Rather than claiming an equal partnership, schools may wish to encompass a continuous search for creating moments of reciprocal dialogue within unequal relationships. Instead of the more school-centric approaches of parental involvement (How can the parents help the teacher and the preschool

in reaching a higher educational attainment?), more parent and community centered approaches of parental involvement are desirable (Doucet, 2011; Lawson, 2003). Our results suggest that school-centric approaches risk failing to address what really matters for parents. Parents 'perform' as the good parent in these activities as a means of sharing information and caring responsibilities of the children with preschool staff. Finally, in contrast with the common understanding of parental involvement as an individual responsibility, preschool policies and practices should encompass a systemic view in which the preschool plays a crucial role in initiating connectedness and solidarity with parents.

Our study suggests that parents want to be connected to the preschool and share the care of their children, but face many barriers. Ideas on individual parental involvement as a means to increasing educational attainment of underprivileged children risk perpetuating social inequalities rather than challenging them (Clarke, 2006). We therefore advocate that further research take on a more systemic approach towards the parent-school relationship that explores how a democratic and open atmosphere in the context of unequal power dynamics may influence inclusive pedagogical practices for a diversity of children, families, and communities. Quality indicators may be discussed with parents and include well-being and physical health of children or ways in which parents and communities feel supported by the preschool.

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# Chapter 5

## PARENTS & STAFF

### **Early learning in preschool: meaningful and inclusive for all? Exploring perspectives of migrant parents and staff<sup>11</sup>**

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**Abstract**

Over the last decades, increasing attention has been paid in research and policies to the importance of children's early learning in preschool as a foundation for later life. This is considered especially beneficial for children living in disadvantaged societal conditions and those at risk of school failure. However the perspectives of those most closely involved in a child's learning, namely parents and preschool staff, are often absent in early learning debates. 10 video-elicited focus groups with migrant parents and 3 focus groups with preschool staff took place in the Flemish Community of Belgium. By conducting a 'conventional content analysis', we present similar and opposing meanings that parents with migrant backgrounds and preschool staff attribute to early learning in regard to managing bodily needs of children and (dominant) language learning in preschools. Based on these results, we recommend that preschool policies and practices should continuously conceptualize early learning in dialogue with parents so that inclusion and exclusion mechanisms can be tracked, revealed, and dealt with.

## 5.1 Introduction

Over the last 40 years, increasing attention has been paid in research and policies to the importance of children's early learning in preschool as a foundation for later life. This is considered especially beneficial for children living in disadvantaged societal conditions and/or those at risk of school failure (Bennett 2012; Leseman and Slot 2014; Matthews and Jang 2007; Melhuish *et al.* 2015). We use the term preschool to designate all educational provision before the compulsory school age.

Scholars present various viewpoints on what children need to learn in preschool. In analyzing OECD countries, Bennett (2005) identified a continuum between curricula with a focus on broad developmental goals (health and physical development, emotional well-being and social competence, communication skills, and general knowledge) and curricula with a focus on cognitive goals in school-like learning areas (mathematical development, language, and literacy skills). Some scholars have focused on pre-academic learning including early language, math and science (Jordan *et al.* 2009; Kermani and Aldemir 2015; Poe, Burchinal and Roberts 2004), while others stress social learning including civic and democratic learning (Dahlberg and Moss 2005), developing pro-social behavior and self-regulation (Shanker 2013) or developing identity and self-esteem (Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke 2000). Early learning can also concern physical development (i.e. gross and fine motor skills) (Turner and Hammer 1994) and embracing physicality and the body as a way to communicate (Giudici *et al.* 2001) or as a way to develop more cognitive self-regulation (Becker *et al.* 2014).

Whilst researchers have different views about what they value in early learning, there is little research on the views of parents and preschool staff. The focus in scholarly publications is often on what parents can do to help their children achieve the learning outcomes that the preschool or government has set, rather than on involving parents in discussions on the meanings of early learning (Doucet 2011; Garnier 2010; Lawson 2003). A small number of qualitative and quantitative studies have given a voice to parents, some focusing on general opinions and expectations of preschool (e.g. Foot *et al.* 2000; Gregg, Rugg and Stoneman 2012), while others have addressed the perspectives of parents and staff on early learning during a child's transition to preschool or primary school



(e.g. Arndt *et al.* 2013; Piotrkowski, Botsko and Matthews 2001). In these studies, parents view early learning in preschool predominantly as a way to prepare children for primary school. Therefore early learning is seen to concern pre-academic skills in language, math and science (Arndt *et al.* 2013; Diamond, Reagan and Bandyk 2000; Doucet 2000; Piotrkowski, Botsko and Matthews 2001; Tobin, Arzubiaga and Adair 2013; Whitmarsh 2011). Especially parents who use a different language at home, consider learning the school language as a key objective to ensure a successful school career for their child (Durand 2011; Gillanders, Mc Kinney and Ritchie 2012; Gregg, Rugg and Stoneman 2012; Tobin, Arzubiaga and Adair 2013; Whitmarsh 2011). Other parents have pointed to objectives such as learning to socially interact, learning the routines of school or learning to obey the teacher (Evans and Fuller 1998; Foot *et al.* 2000; Hwa-Froelich and Westby 2003; Mc Allister *et al.* 2005; Piotrkowski, Botsko and Matthews 2001; Wildenger and McIntyre 2011).

Several studies have shown how parents and teachers share a similar view that early learning is about acquiring pre-academic skills which prepare children for primary school (Gill, Winters and Friedman 2006; Lara-Cinisomo *et al.* 2008; Lin, Lawrence and Gorrell 2003). In some studies parents have questioned this sole focus of readying children in pre-academic skills, instead underlining the importance of social, emotional and physical support as necessary aspects of early learning in preschool (Hwa-Froelich and Westby 2003; Mc Allister *et al.* 2005; Piotrkowski, Botsko and Matthews 2001; Wesley and Buysse 2003). Especially parents with migrant backgrounds have emphasized this as they are often concerned that their child will face discrimination and prejudice in (pre)school and society (Jeunejean *et al.* 2014; Mc Allister *et al.* 2005; Tobin, Arzubiaga and Adair 2013). Equally so, Wesley and Buysse (2003) have documented that some teachers in the US may oppose the idea that early learning is primarily about pre-academic skills and school readiness as they claim to have less time to support children's social and emotional development and their need to explore and discover things on their own (Wesley and Buysse 2003). In the same vein preschool teachers, in a study by Adair (2012), have expressed fear that children from migrant backgrounds are pressured to give up their identity, due to discrepancies between school and home cultural contexts. Several scholars have demonstrated how preschool teachers in Nordic, Balkan and Continental European countries value more facilitating the social, interpersonal and aesthetical development of children over the formal

learning structures, such as circle time and (preparatory) reading and writing activities (Arndt *et al.* 2013; Broström *et al.* 2014; Broström *et al.* 2015; Johansson and Sandberg 2010).

In conclusion, the apparent international consensus on the importance of early learning may hold profound disagreements on what early learning *is*. The views of parents and teachers continue to be under-explored and under-theorized. This article contributes to closing this gap by analyzing the multiple meanings that parents and preschool staff working with young children between two and a half and four years old attribute to early learning in preschool. The Flemish Community of Belgium is a unique setting to do so, because it offers free preschool for all children from two and a half years onwards. This allowed us to concentrate on parents with migrant backgrounds in mainstream provision, as these parents are often of political and scientific concern in regard to equal educational opportunities (Bennett 2012; Authors own 2013)

## 5.2 Research context

Belgium is characterized by a split system in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) with childcare services for children from zero until three years old (*kinderopvang*) under the auspices of the Minister for Welfare, and preschool services (*kleuterschool*) for children from two and a half until six years old belonging to the educational system (Oberhuemer, Schreyer and Neuman 2010). Every child is entitled to free preschool from two and a half years onwards. Of the five-year-old children within Belgium 99% are enrolled in preschool, and of the two-and-a-half-year-old children 82.2% are enrolled in preschool (Department of Education 2015); this is one of the highest enrolment rates in the EU (European Commission 2011). In many preschools, entry classes (*instapklassen*) or reception classes (*onthaalklassen*) are organized for children who are between two and a half and three years old. In other preschools, the youngest children attend the first grade class of preschool, which comprises children from two and a half to four years old. A preschool class consists on average of 20–25 children with one teacher, although this may vary depending on the school and the time of year (Hulpia, Peeters and Van Landeghem 2014; Authors own 2011). Teachers often have additional support from a teacher's assistant for a few hours per week. Teacher's assistants are typically responsible

for caring for the youngest children (e.g. potty training, eating) while preschool teachers are responsible for the formal learning activities. All preschool teachers hold a bachelor's degree in pre-primary education and teacher's assistants usually have a secondary vocational degree in childcare (Authors own 2012).

## **5.3 Methods**

### **5.3.1 Inviting respondents**

We organized 10 focus groups of migrant parents who had children between two and a half and four years old (n=68) and three focus groups of preschool teachers and teacher's assistants working with the youngest children (n=33) in the cities of Ghent, Brussels, and Antwerp. The respondents gave permission to participate in this study by oral or written informed consent and approval was received from the ethical commission of the authors' university. Parents were invited by the researcher who repeatedly was present in different schools and organizations that work with young families. Staff members were invited through different educational umbrella networks. With the exception of three teachers, most staff members worked in schools than the schools that the parents' children attended. While speaking to potential respondents, some parents (n=7) who could not attend the focus group, provided relevant information concerning the research question. Therefore we also included their input in the data analysis.

Table 5.1. Respondents Focus Groups Parents

Parents	#	♂	♀	One of home languages = Dutch	Home languages * Dutch	Language focus group	Invited in
FP1	3	1	2	0	3	Dutch	NGO for undocumented persons
FP2	8	0	8	2	6	Dutch, Turkish, Slovak and English**	municipal school
FP3	3	0	3	0	3	Turkish and Dutch**	community health center
FP4	11	1	10	1	10	Dutch, Turkish and Arabic	catholic school
FP5	8	0	8	2	6	Turkish**	toy library
FP6	2	0	2	2	0	Dutch	meeting space for young children and parents
FP7	8	1	7	1	7	Dutch, French and English	state school
FP8	3	3	0	2	1	French and Dutch	center for intercultural community development , out-of-school care and state school
FP9	13	1	12	2	11	Dutch, French, Turkish and English	private NGO school (Catholic)
FP10	9	0	9	1	8	Dutch, French, Turkish, Arabic and English**	private NGO school (Catholic)
Other parents	7	2	5	2	5	French, English and Dutch	small conversations while inviting parents for focus groups
Total	75	8	67	15	60		

Table 5.2. Respondents Focus Groups Staff

Staff	Profile	#	♀	♂	Experience in school ≤ 10 years	Experience in school > 10 years	Invited through
FS1	preschool teachers	8	8	0	4	4	pedagogical guidance center of private NGO schools (Catholic)
FS2	teacher assistants	13	13	0	5	8	pedagogical guidance center of private NGO schools (Catholic)
FS3	preschool teachers and teacher assistants	12	12	0	10	2	local network of private NGO schools (Catholic), municipal schools and state schools
Total		33	33	0	19	14	

\*\* = with professional translator Turkish-Dutch, Turkish-French

### 5.3.2 Video-elicited focus groups

Spivak (1988) argues several reasons why the *subaltern* cannot or does not speak; capturing the opinions of parents from migrant backgrounds is therefore not self-evident. A lot of hegemonic colonial research that aims to 'give voice' to people who find themselves in the margins of society, often result in the reverse effect by addressing people in their victim- and helpless position and by doing so people are unintentionally silenced (Spivak, 1988). Because of this, Tobin (2013; 2007) developed a method of conducting video-elicited focus groups that has shown to give a voice to parents and preschool staff. In this study, discussions and reflections among parents and preschool staff were stimulated and evoked by showing a short movie of a day in a preschool entry class. The movie shows how 19 children, with and without migrant backgrounds, experienced a half or full day at a preschool in Lokeren, a small town in Belgium. The scenes include parents bringing and fetching their children, teacher-guided and free activities in class, free time at the outdoor playground, toileting, snack time and lunchtime. Respondents were invited to interrupt the movie and discuss it. They were also asked whether they found the movie to be 'typical'. While discussing typicality, underlying understandings and concepts of early learning were identified (Tobin 1992). No additional pre-structured questions concerning early learning were asked. The focus group sessions lasted from between one and a half and three and a half hours.

### 5.3.3 Data recording and data analysis

All focus group sessions were audio-taped and transcribed. In conducting a 'conventional content analysis' (Hsieh and Shannon 2005) the first author did axial coding and identified themes separately for staff and parents: language development; social development; discipline and structure; self-regulation and autonomy; and preschool readiness. After discussing these initial themes with the second author, the first author regrouped and recoded the data. Within this time consuming process, three underlying core themes became apparent: fear of exclusion, managing the body; and readying children for early learning. These three themes were of a different analytical order than the initial themes that were more clear and seemingly evident when listening to the focus group discussions. These higher order themes were then coupled with the initial themes to discover similarities and differences between the perspective of parents and preschool staff.

## 5.4 Results

### 5.4.1 Fear of exclusion

A fear of exclusion from early learning ran through the discussions of parents, many of whom expressed the hope that their children can actively participate in preschool learning practices. Other parents associated this fear with the desire that their child will have a prosperous future in terms of school and employment. Some parents were concerned that their child will not succeed and will get left behind in school or be sent to a special needs education facility.

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“ Parent: *You are already happy that they do not send your child to special needs education. Therefore you accept the minimum. (FP 8)*

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In order to prevent this from happening, this parent tends to be compliant with the preschool institution. The fear of exclusion towards their children causes parents to be prepared to adapt their expectations to the norms of the teacher and the school system.

Parents addressed different aspects of children's inclusion/exclusion in early learning practices, such as language learning. They considered learning the dominant language (Dutch) of the school to be imperative for inclusion. They claimed to notice a difference in the treatment, and consequently the learning, of children who speak the dominant language compared to those who do not.

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“ Parent 1: *The other children have Dutch as their mother tongue. Our children have Turkish as their mother tongue and Dutch is the second language. That is why those children have more priority than our children.*

“ Parent 2: *Actually, there is no difference because they are all children. But the language is the big difference. One child masters the Dutch language better than the other children. That difference will disappear from the moment the child masters the Dutch language. (FP2)*

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This quote illustrates a common belief among parents that all children will be treated equally once they master the Dutch language. For this reason some parents tried to teach their children Dutch or to find other organizations (e.g. child care) or persons to assist them in teaching their children Dutch prior to preschool. In contrast, other parents considered Dutch language teaching to be

the responsibility of the preschool because it is something the school can offer and because they wish to preserve their home language. Some parents questioned the tendency for them to be held responsible when their child does not make enough progress in learning the dominant school language:

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“ *Parent: The teachers often tell me that my child speaks a foreign language with the other children. But it is their task to teach them Dutch! Once they told me to find another school. But what is wrong with my child when the basis of learning in preschool is not properly done? Teachers should have better training in supporting children in learning the language. The teachers should work harder and not conveniently state that my child has a problem. I do not talk Dutch at home because I am not able to speak it well. At home I speak French and Arabic. And when my child comes home, he sleeps and doesn't see me so much as the teacher.*(FP9)

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Because the preschool teacher masters the dominant language of school and society, they were by many parents considered as a gatekeeper to their children's learning possibilities in order to be included in (pre)school and society. They urged, for example, more teacher-initiated early language learning instead of child-initiated learning activities, especially in situations where all children in the class spoke different home languages. From this perspective, some parents expressed worry that there are too many children in each class for the teacher to give each child the necessary language support. Other parents questioned the initial training of preschool teachers, which they considered insufficient for enhancing the second language development of young children in a multilingual context.

Besides the importance of learning the dominant language, many parents addressed the social learning processes that emanated from being in a group of diverse children. Parents considered the diversity of the children to be a potential enrichment for the personal, social and pre-academic learning opportunities of the children, which in turn could endorse their inclusion in school and society. It was for example assumed that by being in a diverse group of children, children could help each other to learn so no child would be excluded.

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“ *Parent 1: They see the world in the class. They learn habits in how to deal with people.*

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“ Parent 2: That is how they gain self-consciousness and more self-confidence. (FP7)

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This concern for exclusion in early learning practices was entirely absent in the focus group discussions of preschool teachers and teacher's assistants. Only two teacher's assistants problematised potential exclusive mechanisms in preschool and underlined that early learning, if well organized and well thought out in preschool can make a difference in a child's life, relating the acquisition of the Dutch language and social and intrapersonal competences to be an asset for further educational possibilities.

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“ Teacher's assistant: We have a unique task that is invaluable for many children. In a school career of a child this really can make a difference.(FS2)

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#### 5.4.2 Managing the body

Parents and preschool staff expressed similar views that young children learn to manage bodily needs such as eating, drinking, blowing their nose, toileting, sleeping, comforting, and dressing themselves. Learning to deal with these processes, which are connected with the physiology and emotional state of the human body, was considered a crucial issue for young children. Notwithstanding this common ground, there were differences between parents and preschool staff' reasoning regarding why this is considered important and how, when and where children are supposed to acquire these abilities. While many parents considered 'becoming autonomous in life' to be a shared educational mission of teachers and parents, teachers considered 'becoming self-sufficient in (pre)school' to be the individual responsibility of the child (or the parent-child unit). This subtle but important difference between the teachers' conception of the 'self-sufficient' child and the parental conception of the 'autonomous' child should be noted. Teacher's assistants took an intermediary position in this divide.

Several parents and teacher's assistants understood managing bodily processes to be a part of the upbringing of a child which will help the child in their present and future lives to become autonomous at home, in school, and in broader society.

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“ Parent 1: The children need to learn things that will help them in their lives

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“ Researcher: Like?

“ Parent 1: Things for in the home like dressing themselves, go to the toilet.

“ Parent 2: They learn to be autonomous!

“ Parent 1: Yes, that is it! (FP7)

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From this viewpoint some parents and teacher's assistants stated that preschool teachers do not always facilitate these learning processes enough in preschool.

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“ Parent: One of my friends sends her child clean and tidy to school. Although my friend always puts a handkerchief in the pants pocket of the child, her child often has snot on her face when returning from school. The teacher told her that her child needs to learn to blow her nose herself. My friend thinks that her daughter is too young for this and this causes issues. For example last year her child had snot on her face on the school picture.(FP 5)

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As shown in this citation, some parents and also some teacher's assistants, expressed that preschool teachers often consider toileting and nose-blowing to be the sole responsibility of the child. These practices were considered age inappropriate because the child's own rhythm is not respected when it comes to natural processes such as toileting and eating or because parents were used to different educational practices in the country of origin. A few parents wondered if a child needs to be trained to have no support at all from others in learning and be completely independent, which indicates a sense of 'interdependency' within the educational goal of human 'autonomy'. Some teacher's assistants stated that they try to compensate for the perceived lack of individual support from the teachers as they consider this a vital part of a child's well-being and learning in preschool.

Several teachers stated that learning to manage the bodily needs was a typical learning process for young children. Some teachers said they prefer children who have already learned to manage their bodily needs at home or in a childcare center. Some parents concurred with this idea as they were afraid that their children will not receive appropriate attention from the teacher in early learning processes if they cannot manage their bodily needs by themselves. If

this was the case, the teachers stated that children should learn to control their needs as soon as possible in order to become 'self-sufficient' in the preschool.

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“ *Teacher 1: In gymnastics the older children go alone to the toilet and the younger ones go to my class. But they all do this independently.*

“ *Teacher 2: That is fantastic!*

“ *Teacher 1: I find this convenient as well...I tell them 'everybody put his pants down' and they stand in line with their pants down. One on the toilet and off the toilet and ...hop, time for the next one.*

“ *Teacher 2: Wow, that is great! You drilled them well! (FS1)*

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The use of the verb 'to drill' in the last phrase indicates that the teacher needs to discipline the child's body in order for them to achieve 'self-sufficiency'. Disciplining the body also played a role in ensuring that children sit still and obey the rules of the teacher:

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“ *Teacher: I have a serious little fellow in my class. I only have 16 children in my class. He is a very bright child. But to me it felt on the first school day like he was the equivalent of 14 children. So I was like 'oops, I have to do something about this', I took him five times around his waist under my arm. Just to let him know 'hey you, it is like this' and then I put him on the bench. Well, results started showing, he stays on the bench. (FS1)*

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Many teachers and some teacher's assistants urged children to become 'self-sufficient' as soon as possible so children do not have to depend on them as they regularly claimed in the focus groups that the adult-child ratio does not suffice in preschool: learning children to control their bodily needs was considered a way to unburden the teacher.

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“ *Teacher: I run around a lot and when I want to start my painting activity, he pees in his pants. Then I have to remove the painting materials and the scissors so I can first clean the kid. Sometimes I feel the frustration at the end of the week: 'what did I actually achieve this week?'(FS1)*

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The focus on 'self-sufficiency' went beyond merely a pragmatic stance. As illustrated in this quote, the undisciplined body of a child was perceived as a

hindrance to the educational work of being a teacher, which is in clear contrast with the parental conception of the 'autonomous' child.

### 5.4.3 Ready children for early learning

A recurrent view of preschool teachers was that young children between two and a half and four years old are often not yet able to 'really learn' because of their undisciplined bodies and their lack of understanding of the dominant language of instruction.

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“ *Teacher: It is impossible to do everything you have planned with the young children. In the second and third class of preschool you can progress more than with the younger children. With the young ones a toilet accident happens now and then. (FS 1)*

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“ *Teacher: Their concentration is excessively low that ...well, they are just not interested. They do not understand when I say 'take a big apple'. They do not know what 'big' means. So they cannot do this task. But these are such basic things! (FS 1)*

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Accordingly, preschool teachers expressed frustration that they cannot do their job as they learned it in University College. When asked what was meant by *real learning* and *real job*, haziness prevailed among the teachers. Indirectly, we identified some discussion items related to this real job. Some teachers addressed the importance of activities such as painting or circle time and learning about time and weather. Others referred to mathematical initiation or sensory exercises. Disciplining the bodies of the children and learning the basic Dutch terminology was seen as prerequisite for children to be ready for early learning in preschool. Several staff members stated that parents should make their children ready for early learning prior to starting preschool, which in some cases resulted in incidents in which parents were pushed to keep their children at home if they are not considered ready enough (e.g. toileting). One teacher's assistant tried to problematise these incidents by addressing her own experience as a mother to the other teachers and teacher's assistants in the focus group.

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“ *Teacher’s assistant: Aren’t you bothered by this? You have children who are just not ready for potty training and then you tell them ‘You cannot come to the preschool’. My first son is born prematurely and he wasn’t ready to become potty trained. I tried many times. He started to become potty trained in the beginning of the first year of preschool. But then I started thinking. He would miss a whole year of school if he wasn’t allowed. Because in preschool they learn a lot, don’t they? (FS3)*

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Some parents have adopted the view that they are responsible for preparing their child for preschool. To this end, some of these parents tried or advised other parents to send their children to childcare to make them ‘ready’ for early learning in preschool. Other preschool teachers and teacher’s assistants considered it a shared responsibility between parents and staff to make children as soon as possible ‘ready’ for early learning. In contrast, some teacher’s assistants and several parents considered (dominant) language learning and learning to manage bodily needs inherent to early learning in preschool instead of viewing it as a prerequisite for early learning.

## 5.5 Discussion

Despite the proclaimed importance of early learning as a foundation for later life, the voices of parents and preschool staff of young children are often absent in these debates. In this study we have demonstrated how parents and preschool staff attribute similar, yet at times opposing meanings to early learning.

As previously pointed out in a few studies (Mc Allister *et al.* 2005; Tobin, Arzubagi and Adair 2013), the data results reveal an omnipresent fear of exclusion in early learning which can be concerns for all parents but have particular relevance to parents with migrant backgrounds. With the exception of two teacher’s assistants, preschool staff did not address the issue of possible exclusion in early learning. While parents assigned a central role to the staff as gatekeepers to inclusion (i.e. through language support) the teachers did not explicitly acknowledge this role. Instead, teachers often used deficit terms to refer to children from migrant backgrounds as being ‘language poor’ or ‘having language delay’ and as a consequence sometimes these children were perceived as being not motivated or interested in early learning. This implies

that teachers view dual language learners as problematic and situate the problem first and foremost in the child or the parent, rather than considering how these learners enrich the school environment or seeing the children's learning as their responsibility. This is a troubling tendency since teachers' deficit beliefs in the learning capabilities of children inform how they interact with these children, which in turn impacts negatively on their learning outcomes (Pulinx, Van Avermaet and Agirdag 2015; Souto-Manning and Swick 2006; Van Houtte 2011). This field of tension between the perspectives of parents with migrant backgrounds and preschool staff, challenges the popular consensus that ECEC is particularly beneficial for migrant and disadvantaged children (Bennett 2012; Matthews and Jang 2007). When emphasizing the importance of early learning of young children as a foundation for life, it is imperative that (often unintentional) inclusion and exclusion mechanisms in early learning are tracked, revealed, and dealt based on continuous dialogue with children, parents and preschool staff themselves.

The existing literature seems to display a consensual opinion that early learning in preschool makes children ready for learning in primary school (e.g. Arndt *et al.* 2013; Lara-Cinisomo *et al.* 2008). Our study shows how readiness ideas also occur in regard to making children ready for learning in preschool. Many teachers, some teacher's assistants and parents assume that readying practices, such as disciplining the body or teaching the dominant language, should take place prior to preschool entry which implies that children must beforehand adapt to the preschool system in a unidirectional way. In contrast, several parents and teacher's assistants, who view bodily management and learning the dominant language as an inherent part of early learning in preschool, seem to place less emphasis on readying children and adapting them to the system. Bloch and Kim (2015) problematised the introduction of a formal notion of 'readiness' in the Head Start programs in the US in which, for example, children's needs for emotional stability and security were increasingly reframed as competences or skills within a developmental hierarchy that children need to possess and demonstrate. If the child cannot sufficiently self-regulate and demonstrate the required skills it becomes the problem of the child instead of the problem of the teacher, the preschool or the curriculum (Bloch and Kim 2015). Moreover in our study many parents and preschool staff experienced that children who did not master the dominant language and had not attended childcare before, had a higher risk of experiencing adaptation problems, which

in turn could hinder their early learning. Nevertheless, they assumed that each child had to adapt in a unidirectional way to the preschool system. In this line of thinking, Lehrer, Bigras, and Laurin (2014) pointed out how implicit ideas and practices of readying children for Canadian preschools has paradoxically contributed to marginalizing and stigmatizing children considered disadvantaged. Despite the omnipresent fear of exclusion, it is remarkable how many parents did not address the unidirectional adaptation discourse. While they were fully aware of the gap between where their children were at and what the school expected, they did not explicitly ask how the preschool staff and system would adapt to the different experiences and starting positions of children. This may confirm the question Spivak (1988) raised about whether the subaltern can speak, and it may be associated with the notion of a 'culture of silence' (Freire 1996). He used this term to express the internalized oppression that parents experience in a school system in which knowledge is given by those who consider themselves knowledgeable (i.e. teachers) to those whom they consider to know nothing (i.e. children and their parents). This may help to explain the conformity of parents with the dominant norms of the preschools despite these norms possibly contributing to the exclusion of their children.

There are some limitations of this study to consider. First, despite efforts to recruit fathers, the focus groups predominantly consisted of mothers, which could result in gender-biased data. Second, this study predominantly covered the perspective of parents whose children regularly attend preschool. In order to focus on the meanings of early learning in preschool for all children, it is important to also enter more into dialogue with parents who do not often make use of the preschool system.

## **5.6 Implications for policy and practice**

In order for preschool staff to constantly re-examine how the conceptualizations of early learning can benefit all children, including children from migrant backgrounds, continuous critical reflection is recommended on different levels. These critical reflection processes cannot take place without dialogue with parents as the meaning making of early learning should be the result of a democratic reflection involving those who are involved in the life of a young child, rather than the result of mere scientific discourse as

communicated through curricula, equal opportunities policies and professional training. On the micro-level this implies that preschool institutions and staff members engage in dialogue with a diverse group of parents and enhance their listening skills. This will enable them to share their thoughts on early learning processes of children in view of also adapting their own practices and systems in order to accommodate diverse children and families. Nevertheless, dialoguing and negotiating requires a reciprocity and democratic atmosphere which remains challenging in hierarchical systems in which the valuable knowledge of parents is often considered subordinate to the knowledge of the preschool staff on the children (Hughes and Mac Naughton 2000).

To this end, we endorse the plea of many scholars to continue working on a more normative-reflective conceptualization of ECEC professionalism in which the use of emotions and value-bound elements of professional actions, such as personal involvement and social responsibility, have a central place (Colley 2006; Kunneman 2005; Osgood 2010; Peeters 2008). Being open for multiple perspectives and being aware that knowledge about a 'good practice' in early learning is always provisional and tentative, is the core of the matter (Urban 2008; Authors Own 2009; Dahlberg and Moss 2005). Therefore preschool staff members need to be more supported in order to be able to critically reflect and develop early learning practices in conjunction with parents, such as providing adequate pre-service and in-service training, reflection time in teams without the presence of the children, and good working conditions (Peeters and Sharmahd 2014). These discussions on early learning between preschool staff and parents will not only serve a purpose on the micro-level of the individual child and parents and the meso-level of all the children and families from the preschool institution. It should also be used as valuable input for local and national policy makers in ensuring meaningful and inclusive early learning for diverse children in different contexts.

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# Chapter 6

## STAFF

### **The (in)convenience of care in preschool education: examining staff views on educare<sup>12</sup>**

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<sup>12</sup> Based on Van Laere, K., & Vandenbroeck, M. (2016). The (in) convenience of care in preschool education: examining staff views on educare. *Early Years*, 1-15.





**Abstract**

It is generally accepted that Early Childhood Education and Care should adopt a holistic view on education, in which education and care are inseparable concepts. Perspectives of staff members themselves are, however, often absent in these educare debates. We conducted six video-elicited focus groups with various preschool staff members ( $n = 69$ ) in Flanders (Belgium), which is well known for its split system in which children between two and a half and four years old are confronted with the pivotal transition from an informal or formal caring environment (home or childcare service) to a formal learning environment (preschool). With Maurice Hamington's theory of embodied and performative care as a theoretical lens for this empirical study, we propose a new direction for pre- and in-service training, in which the use of emotions, embodied exchange and social responsibility has a central place.

## 6.1 Introduction

It is generally accepted that Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) should adopt a holistic view of education, in which education and care are inseparable concepts (Cameron and Moss 2011; European Commission 2011; Kaga, Bennett, and Moss 2010). In countries with an integrated ECEC system, or with a social pedagogical tradition like the Nordic countries and Germany, this conceptual integration (*educare*) is more prevalent than in countries with a split system with separate childcare services and preschools (Kaga, Bennett, and Moss 2010). Several scholars have argued that the holistic concept of *educare* is challenged by an international context of *schoolification*, in which ECEC is increasingly understood as preparation for compulsory schooling (Moss 2013; OECD 2006). Some scholars believe that, by focusing on the importance of teaching children pre-academic skills as preparation for the future, the schoolification of the early years is contributing to intensifying Cartesian rationalism, signifying a further disembodiment of education, with the body being subordinate to the mind (Fielding and Moss 2011; Tobin 1997; Van Laere, Peeters, and Vandenbroeck 2012; Van Laere et al. 2014; Warin 2014). This thinking has been contested due to children's natural learning strategies – play, exploration, freedom of movement, relations and discussions with other children – being less encouraged (Broström 2006; Hjort 2006; Noddings 2005). Another scholarly criticism on the disembodiment of education is that interdependent and caring characteristics of human beings are neglected, as children are considered autonomous and rational beings who need to be made ready for future economic, political and cultural life in the public sphere (Lynch, Baker, and Lyons 2009; Noddings 1984).

Recent empirical studies, both in split and integrated ECEC systems, do indeed claim that due to schoolification tendencies, ECEC curricula focus less on bodily care, emotion, relationality and solidarity (Garnier 2011; Löfdahl and Folke-Fichtelius 2015; Löfgren 2015). accordingly, professional training of ECEC professionals tends to be reduced to the fostering of children's learning and development for their future school career. Consequently, the care dimension of *educare* is at risk of being eliminated in the training of professionals working in integrated ECEC systems. For professionals working in preschool education in split ECEC systems, care may remain undiscussed in their professional training (Brougère 2015; Löfgren 2015; Peeters 2013; Warin 2014). Yet, this is

in conflict with international policy and research reports, which are likeminded in their pleas for competent systems where preschool staff conjoin care and education (Children in Europe 2008; Kaga, Bennett, and Moss 2010; Urban et al. 2012). It should be noted that perspectives of staff members themselves are often absent in educare debates. as a matter of fact, it is particularly interesting to study the views on educare of professionals in countries with a split ECEC system, in which children between two and a half and four years old are confronted with the pivotal transition from an informal or formal caring environment (home or childcare service) to a formal learning environment (preschool) (Garnier et al. 2016). For this reason, we conducted six video-elicited focus groups with various staff members ( $n = 69$ ) working with children starting preschool in Flanders, which is well-known for its split system.

The concept of educare, ontologically and epistemologically, presupposes that the mind and body are inseparable entities. We consider Maurice Hamington's (2004, 2014) theory of embodied and performative care as a suitable theoretical backbone for the conceptualisation of educare as his work is built upon the deconstruction of the Cartesian dualistic tradition that values the mind over the body.

## **6.2 Hamington's theory of embodied and performative care**

For Hamington, care, when seen in its embodied aspects, permeates the human condition. Care is about who we fundamentally are as human beings. Therefore, care is more than just a normative ethical perspective: it also encompasses ontological and epistemological aspects (Hamington 2004, 2012, 2015b, 2016).

Hamington (2012, 2015b, 2016) argues that, on an ontological level, human beings are fundamentally relational and embodied beings. This is based on the work of Merleau-Ponty (1945, 1964), a French philosopher of the first half of the twentieth century, who strongly opposed the Cartesian mind-body dualism dating back to Socrates and Plato. Merleau-Ponty disagreed that human beings consist of a material physical body and a non-material mental substance. Instead, he argued that humans experience themselves through their bodies and engage in various projects in relation to the environment in which they find

themselves (Hamington 2004). In valorising the body, Merleau-Ponty does not marginalise the mind but instead reconceptualises it as inextricably intertwined with the body; we perceive the world through our bodies. In addition to Merleau-Ponty's claim that our bodies are built for perception, Hamington (2004) emphasised that our bodies are also built to care. From that perspective, Hamington articulated that education is not simply a matter of shaping the mind. rather, it is an 'embodied exchange'. When adults teach a child to ride a bicycle, embodied aspects of care are always inherently present.

Hamington (2015b, 2016) pointed out that, on an epistemological level, caring and knowing exist in a dynamic relationship. The more knowledge we have about another person, the more we have the potential to care. Vice versa, the more we care for another, the more we like to learn from that person, which in turn can ameliorate the quality of care (Hamington 2012). The knowledge that affects care is more than a collection of articulated data: it includes a web of entangled feelings and subtle perceptions understood through the caring habits of the body, as stated in the corporeal or body-centred epistemology of Merleau-Ponty (1945, 1964). Caring knowledge of the other person is necessary but, due to low expectations of the feasibility of care in a certain context, it is not always sufficient to enable care (Hamington 2004, 2010). When one lacks knowledge of another, it is still possible to transcend the social and physical disconnection if one is stimulated to use *caring imagination*, which promotes empathy, critical reflection and understanding of another's context (Hamington 2004, 2010). On an ethical level, people are confronted with moral choices to be made in order to 'do the right things'. rather than prescribed caring behaviours, the normative caring response is a product of openness and attentiveness to the needs that emerge in a particular relationship, in a specific context (Hamington 2016).

In sum, Hamington suggests that care affects who we are, what we know, and our moral behaviour. Care aims at contributing to the prosperity and personal growth of individuals, while acknowledging their interconnectedness and interdependence. as Hamington understands the personal as the political, he uses, for example, the work of Jane Addams to demonstrate that care has a radical political potential for building a solidarity and inclusive community and for developing corresponding social policy (Hamington 2004, 2015a, 2015b). Within these processes, caregivers develop a notion of caring *identity*, built on

iterations of conscious and unconscious habits of care. Hamington calls this the *performativity of care*, as care as a performance is both a mental disposition and an activity that can be witnessed in time and space (Hamington 2010, 2015a). It should be noted that caring performances are dictated and often restrained by social and political norms and practices; however, people can resist these forces as performativity operates in the space between absolute individual agency and social or natural determinism (Hamington 2015b).

### 6.3 Research context

Historically, ECEC in the Flemish community of Belgium is built on two traditions: childcare services for children from zero to three years of age, and preschools for children from two and a half to six years of age (Oberhuemer, Schreyer, and Neuman 2010). These two types of institutions are under the auspices of different ministries and have distinct curricula, professional profiles and child–staff ratios. Preschools enjoy a high degree of autonomy, which allows each school to develop its own educational policies, as well as to appoint its own staff and decide the child–staff ratio (OECD 2011). In many preschools, entry classes (*instapklassen*) or reception classes (*onthaalklassen*) are organised for children who are between two and a half and three years of age. In other preschools, the youngest children attend the first grade class of preschool, which comprises children from two and a half to four years of age.

A preschool class typically consists of 20–25 children with one preschool teacher (Hulpia, Peeters, and Van Landeghem 2014; Van Laere, Vandenbroeck, and Peeters 2011). Preschool teachers often have additional support from a teacher’s assistant for a few hours per week, depending on the number of toddlers. Teacher’s assistants are typically responsible for caring tasks for the youngest children (e.g. potty training, meals and snack time) while preschool teachers are responsible for the learning activities. All preschool teachers hold a bachelor’s degree in pre-primary education and teachers’ assistants usually have a secondary vocational degree in childcare (Van Laere, Peeters, and Vandenbroeck 2012). Many preschools collaborate with the after school care services either within or outside of the school building. After school care workers organise the leisure time of children after school and may also supervise between educational activities and during the lunch break. They have

a minimum of three months of training and many hold a secondary vocational degree in childcare. Some preschools have staff members who act as a 'bridge' between the school and parents, with a focus on disadvantaged families. although some of these bridging persons may have a teaching background, this is not a requirement, as their selection is based on social, communication, and organisational skills as well as their experience within the local communities (Agirdag and Van Houtte 2011). Every school has a care coordinator who is responsible for developing a 'care' policy with the aim of increasing the educational opportunities of all children. Care coordinators, responsible mostly for pupil guidance, consist of teachers, speech therapists, special needs educators or other persons with a social or educational bachelor's degree (Blommaert 2011).

## **6.4 Methods**

We organised six focus groups with 69 staff members (preschool teachers, teachers' assistants, after school care workers, bridging persons, care coordinators) working in preschools with the youngest children in the cities of Ghent and Brussels. although three different focus groups with school directors were planned in Ghent, Brussels and Antwerp, they had to be cancelled because the school directors were not able to find time to participate in a focus group regarding conceptualisations of educare. all respondents agreed to participate in this study by giving written informed consent. The ethical commission of the authors' faculty approved the procedure. Respondents were recruited through different educational umbrella networks.

Table 6.1. Respondents Focus Groups

	Staff Profiles	#	♀	♂	Experience ≤ 10 years	Experience > 10 years	Invited through	Region
FG 1	preschool teachers	8	8	0	4	4	pedagogical guidance center of private NGO schools (Catholic)	Ghent
FG 2	teacher 's assistants	13	13	0	5	8	pedagogical guidance center of private NGO schools (Catholic)	Region Dender
FG 3	preschool teachers and teacher 's assistants	12	12	0	10	2	local network of private NGO schools (Catholic), municipal schools and state schools	Brussels
FG 4	after school care workers	9	8	1	9	0	network of all after school care services associated with private NGO schools (Catholic), municipal schools and state schools	Brussels
FG 5	bridging persons	11	11	0	6	5	network of all bridge figures associated with private NGO schools (Catholic), municipal schools and state schools	Ghent
FG 6	care coordinators	16	16	0	5	11	network of state schools	Ghent
Total		69	68	1	39	30		

Discussions and reflections among the focus group participants were stimulated through a 20-min movie showing a typical day in a preschool entry class (Tobin 1992; Tobin, Arzubaga, and Adair 2013). The movie shows how 19 children, with and without migrant backgrounds, experienced a half or full day at preschool. The scenes include parents bringing and fetching their children, teacher-guided and free activities in class, free time at the outdoor playground, toileting, snack time and lunchtime. During the day, several incidents happen, such as a bicycle conflict between toddlers in the playground and a girl crying regularly during the morning activities. respondents were invited to interrupt the movie and discuss it. They were also asked whether they found the movie

to be typical. While discussing its typicality, participants' underlying understandings and concepts of education and care became apparent (Tobin 1992). No additional pre-structured questions concerning education, care or educare were asked. The focus group sessions lasted between one and a half and three and a half hours. All focus group sessions were audio-taped and transcribed. In a first thematic analysis (Howitt 2011), we identified several themes, such as the divide between learning and care; care as shared versus divided responsibility; and professional versus mother-like conceptualisations of care. Then we conducted a directed content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon 2005) guided by the theoretical framework of Hamington, in which five themes of a higher order were identified: embodied potential to care; mind–body dualism; professional identities; hierarchy between education and care; and educare as social justice. Secondary coding then related these meta-themes to the first thematic analysis.

## 6.5 Results

### 6.5.1 Embodied potential to care

Different views were encountered regarding educare and the relation between care and learning. Whereas some staff members addressed the importance of care, others stressed the difficulties and hindrances of caring for young children in preschool education. Irrespective of their views and practices, the majority of the staff members noticed and identified the emotional and physical care needs of children, which is in accordance with the ontological statement of Hamington (2004) that human bodies are built to care, thus having the potential to care due to the conscious and unconscious caring knowledge and habits situated in and maintained by our bodies. The respondents empathised with the perspective of the crying toddler shown in the movie and perceived her to be sad and lonely. One care coordinator associated the scene with her own attempts to answer the care needs of a child in the classroom:

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“ Care coordinator: We have a toddler who started preschool 10 months ago and still cries daily. I have noticed how this crying drives the preschool teacher crazy. When I visit the class, the child runs immediately to me and embraces me. Each time that I comfort her, the teacher takes the child away while stating that ‘we should not give in to this’. In those moments my heart really breaks. (FG 6)

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This quote, and especially the phrase ‘we should not give in to this’, shows that staff members are aware of certain care needs of children, but that some may have developed strategies to restrain caring responses, not fully utilising their embodied potential to care.

On an epistemological level, Hamington (2015b, 2016) underlines that the more concrete knowledge we have about a person, the more we are able to care, as some staff members have experienced:

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“ After school care worker 1: I have learned to identify when children are in need of rest, even when they cannot tell it to me.

“ After school care worker 2: You can see it or they show it to you. I give them the possibility to go to bed and sleep or rest.

“ After school care worker 1: Yes, I do the same or I ask the child if they want to be left alone in peace.(FG 4)

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The unconscious and conscious caring knowledge that these respondents have been building is derived from the feelings and attitudes expressed by the children and from reading the body language of the children. Other staff members, like bridging persons, teacher’s assistants and some preschool teachers, pointed out that parents are valuable sources for gathering concrete knowledge in order to better care for children in preschool education.

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“ Researcher:Why do you like it when parents come in the classroom?

“ Preschool teacher: It is easy to quickly ask something or receive information from the parents. Like ‘yesterday she didn’t sleep well’, or ‘something happened yesterday on the outdoor playground and she is afraid now’. These are small things that give you a lot of information to take into account when teaching. (FG 3)

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### 6.5.2 Mind-body dualism

We identified a dominant tendency for caring and learning to be considered separate entities.

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“ *Preschool teacher: I already have to invest a lot of teaching time in caring tasks. If I also have to start caring for children individually, that is too much. (FG 1)*

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Caring actions and learning activities were considered to take place independently from each other and, in this citation, the preschool teacher expresses the difficulty of one person having to care and educate simultaneously. accordingly, the teachers' assistants claimed that they took up caring tasks (i.e. fostering the well-being and self-confidence of the children and supporting potty training and eating) to allow teachers to focus on the learning activities. However, some assistants and preschool teachers also claimed that caring for children is equally as important as organising learning activities.

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“ *Preschool teacher: When you qualify as a preschool teacher, you have the idea that you are a good preschool teacher when you organise activities in which children can learn all kinds of things. after a few years of working I learned to focus less on learning activities in favour of seeing to it that children are happy. If there is time left, I will do a planned teacher-directed learning activity as we were trained to do in college. This doesn't mean that you never have to do something of course. But the well-being of the children is more important than the success of a learning activity. (FG 3)*

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Even though the teacher articulates that she wants to answer the caring needs of the children, caring and learning are still perceived as separate and incompatible. In her perspective, caring – as fostering the well-being of children and taking care of their physical needs – needs to happen prior to learning activities that shape the mind.

### 6.5.3 Professional identities

In Hamington's theory of performative care, care as a performance is both a mental disposition and an activity that can be witnessed in time and space by others and by the caregiver (Hamington 2010, 2015a). Performances of care constitute a caring identity, including the ability to respond to emergent needs (Hamington 2015b, 2016). Most respondents, except the teachers' assistants who have formal caring mandates, did not identify that caring for the emotional and physical needs of children is part of their professional duty. Some allocated

care to the private familial sphere, in which parents – and particularly mothers – are responsible for care.

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“ *Preschool teacher: When you work with the young ones, it is like people expect you to hug the children. I don't think this is my task. They already have a mother. I am not the mother. (FG 1)*

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Yet respondents were aware of the care needs of children. Some respondents dealt with this tension by envisaging their caring identity as distinct from their professional identity. For them, it is impossible not to care in preschool and they conceptualise and justify their caring identity in relation to their personality:

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“ *Preschool teacher: But I'm a cuddly person and the children know this and are used to this. (FG 3)*

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As discussed in a focus group of after school care workers, framing themselves as having 'a caring personality' may also be a way of resisting professional preschool norms while still adhering to the separation of care and education.

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“ *After school care worker 1: She works from the heart. I'm also a bit like this but in your work you have to think from here [respondent points at her head]. But some of us think a lot from the heart.*

“ *Researcher: So in the job you have to think from the mind?*

“ *After school care worker 1: Normally I work like that*

“ *After school care worker 2: But you need a good balance between the heart and the mind. (FG 4)*

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In this quote, after school care workers expressed the desire to think and act more from the body and the heart, but they perceive the prevailing norm to be focused on the mind. Other staff members framed their caring identity in relation to their being a mother, rather than a professional:

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“ *Researcher: You just told us that you have become a mother of two children. Why do you share this information with us?*

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“ *Preschool teacher: I started as a teacher when I didn’t have children. By having children now, I realise the importance of giving time and supporting the children individually so they can be at ease while, for example, eating their fruit. Before becoming a mother, I was more in a hurry because I had a lot of children and I needed to do many learning activities with them.*(FG 1)

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This preschool teacher attributed her caring knowledge and habits to her embodied maternal experience. This separation of care (as motherly) and education (as professional) was also illustrated by this teacher:

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“ *Preschool teacher: I always explain to other people that I’m more a mother than a teacher in working with the young children in preschool.* (FG 1)

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Teachers’ assistants considered care to be part of their professional role and identity, while few teachers did so. Yet, the assistants also framed this in a mother-like way.

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“ *Teacher’s assistant 1: Irrespective of their age, a child likes to be ‘mothered’ in preschool.*

“ *Researcher: What do you mean by ‘mothering’?*

“ *Teacher’s assistant 1: Love them and give them attention. When needed, we comfort them.*

“ *Teacher’s assistant 2: So the children feel that they matter in preschool.* (FG 2)

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#### 6.5.4 The hierarchy between education and care

Several respondents expressed that they refrain from caring as it is inconvenient or a nuisance, or because they feel uneasiness or doubt when confronted with caring tasks:

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“ After school care worker: I used to go to the playground and all children would come to me to receive a hug. I was happy and excited towards the children and would interact with the children at eye level. The problem was that every time the children would literally pull me over because they were so many. Now I stopped doing this and I limit the hugs and interactions. When everybody wants to give me a hand, I’m not able to make a train to go upstairs with the children. Teaching structure to children is also important. (FG 4)

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This quote illustrates how caring performances and caring identity are influenced by institutional logics. The after school care worker felt she had to adjust her caring actions and attitudes because she was overwhelmed by the multiple care needs of the children in the outdoor playground. It illustrates that caring dispositions should not just be seen on an individual level, but also need to be examined at the institutional level. Many respondents claimed that they are not able to meet all of the children’s care needs with the present adult–child ratio. Teachers questioned how they often work alone with a class of 25 children who are two and a half to three and a half years of age. Yet, it is not so much the feasibility of care that we are interested in, in this study, but rather its conceptualisation in relation to education. One after school care worker also expressed having to restrain her caring responses because she felt she should focus on teaching children structure, as that was what was expected from her in a preschool context. This again demonstrates a dualism between mind and body, where the body needs to be disciplined and where learning and caring are distinct. In preschool contexts, learning is considered more important than caring; caring is subordinate to learning and may – at most – be a precondition to what really matters: learning.

This hierarchy is also reflected in the relations and division of labour in preschool workforces. Many teacher’s assistants underlined that they would like to be able to care more and that learning and caring should coexist; however, because of their lower position in the staff hierarchy (e.g. lower initial qualification and lower salaries compared to preschool teachers), they understand that they depend heavily on the permission of the teacher to apply their educational beliefs. This is especially evident when the teacher’s understanding of education is different from theirs, thus creating problems. This issue is explained by a teacher’s assistant:

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“ *Teacher’s assistant: What I find difficult is that the teacher has a certain view on education which doesn’t always comply with my view on education. Often I see how the well-being of the children is jeopardised. I find it difficult to address this since I do not want to undermine the authority of the teacher. Going to the director is also not an option since I would also not appreciate it if teachers went to the director behind my back. (FG 2)*

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Moreover, it turns out that teacher’s assistants are more focused on acquiring concrete knowledge from the child about whether they respond well to the given care, which according to Hamington (2015b, 2016) enhances the potential for care, and thus the quality of care. Similarly, bridging persons claimed to have easy access to parents’ concrete knowledge about whether the caring needs of their children were met.

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“ *Bridging person 1: I have noticed that many children who start preschool do not eat properly.*

“ *Bridging person 2: This is indeed a huge problem. Many parents come to me and complain that their child doesn’t eat well. Often they find full lunchboxes in the schoolbag of their child at the end of the day. I have discussed this with the care coordinator and the preschool teachers. They told me that this is normal for children who start preschool because they experience difficulties adapting to the new school context. (FG 5)*

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Although bridging persons have valuable information for enhancing the quality of care in preschool education, they stated that they do not have the mandate to ensure that preschool teachers take this caring knowledge into account. In contrast, many preschool teachers did not consider the parents as potential valuable resources and partners in the education of the child.

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“ *Preschool teacher: Parents expect you to talk with them every day about the most silly things like ‘did they sleep and eat well?, yesterday she was a bit sick’. I don’t think this is added value because the children are just standing there and I can’t do anything with them. (FG 1)*

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### 6.5.5 Educare as social justice

Hamington (2004, 2015a,b) claimed that thinking about care has radical political potential. Indeed, one care coordinator and a few teacher’s assistants

questioned the hierarchy between learning and caring, as it contributes to confirming the existing social inequalities between children. In the following example, a care coordinator brought a controversial standpoint to a discussion dominated by the idea that children should be potty trained before they enter preschool.

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“ Care coordinator: Last year they asked me to send a letter to parents whose child was not potty trained yet. I had to ask them to keep their children at home. I refused to do this. First of all, this is illegal according to the law. Second, by denying extra support and care for potty training, we endorse that parents keep their children at home. Especially for children who do not have Dutch as their first language, this is a problem. They will not receive the opportunity to learn Dutch. If they are not potty trained within the next six months, they will stay at home even longer. So I strongly disagree that children who are not potty trained at the age of two and a half years should be excluded from learning in preschool. (FG 6)

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This care coordinator used her caring imagination in order to better understand the situation facing children and parents and to critically reflect upon the possible effects of taking such measures in preschool and in society. The idea that children could be excluded from learning as a result of their natural care needs and of the absence of available care in preschool conflicted with her caring performance and caring identity. This caused her to resist the request from the director and other preschool teachers as caring performances are dictated and often restrained by social and political norms and practices, this care coordinator resisted the social forces within the institution, reminding her colleagues of the legal framework, in which preschools are not allowed to refuse children who are not potty trained. The caring identity of this care coordinator is inherently moral and political, as she negotiated social forces and a practice seeking to constrain behaviour; if she had executed what was expected of her, she would not have been caring for the children and some of the children would have been excluded from preschool and exposed to discrimination and social exclusion. This example may illustrate Hamington's statement that thinking about care is fundamentally, and inevitably, political.

## 6.6 Discussion

Naturally, there are limitations to our study, one being the absence of perspectives of policy-makers and school directors responsible for the overall coordination of educational policies in preschools. Since the main data of the study are solely the verbal discussions amongst participants of the focus group, we recommend, in line with the non-dualistic, phenomenological stance of Hamington, that further research should focus on gathering more data in which verbal discussions are analysed in relation to the actual bodily interactions of staff in preschool practice (e.g. through video analysis or observations in combination with inter-views). However, the results of the study may bring new insight into educate debates.

In contrast with the internationally proclaimed importance of a holistic view on preschool education, the viewpoints of professionals are often absent from educate debates. Encompassing their perspectives are, however, crucial to understanding educate in countries with a historical divide between childcare and preschool. This may also be relevant for countries with an integrated ECEC system, as there is increasing concern that the conceptual integration of caring and learning is under pressure due to international schoolification tendencies (Löfdahl and Folke-Fichtelius 2015; Löfgren 2015).

We organised focus groups comprised of various preschool staff working with children in the pivotal age group of two and a half to four years. The narratives of the participants were analysed, making use of Hamington's theoretical framework, as we consider that a genuine holistic view of children and the adoption of an educate perspective assume the integration of mind and body. In contrast with this assumption, we found that preschool staff members explicitly refer to a divide between learning and caring and a hierarchy in which caring is subordinate to learning. This divide and hierarchy stem from an underlying mind-body dualism, which is also reflected in the division of labour and tasks of the different professional groups. Whereas the preschool teachers in our study predominantly focus on 'shaping' the minds of children by organising learning activities, the teacher's assistants and after school care workers focus on taking care of the children's bodies and their physical and emotional needs. Some preschool teachers claimed to engage in this as well, but when they did so, they constructed a carer identity which was separate



from their professional teacher identity. Since teachers' assistants and after school care workers have lower professional qualifications and lower salaries compared with preschool teachers, care seems to be attributed to the staff members who have the least leverage to influence the educational approach to preschool children. Sociologists like Wolkowitz (2006) and Hochschild (2003) have problematised how care consisting of 'dirty body work' (e.g. potty training) and 'emotional labour' (e.g. comforting and hugging children) is considered inferior and is mostly done by the 'lowest of the pecking order'. Moreover, teachers' assistants explained their professional caring role as being surrogate mothers to children, which implies that care is understood as a private matter instead of a public, professional and educational one. Feminist and ethics of care scholars have rightly criticised that specific care-related tasks and responsibilities remain locked in the private sphere and are therefore too often absent from public discussions on human rights and social justice (Aslanian 2015; Hughes et al. 2005; Taggart 2011). Instead, authors such as Joan Tronto (1993) have made strong pleas for care to be placed at the centre of our political, public and moral lives. Taking into account the interdependency of human beings, Tronto (1993) advocates that the structures and values of political and social institutions (e.g. preschools) should become fundamentally more caring, and thus aim for greater solidarity, democracy and social justice (Fielding and Moss 2011; Taggart 2011; Tronto 2013). By refusing to write a letter to parents about potty training, claiming that exclusion mechanisms would occur when splitting education from care, a care coordinator in this study demonstrated the social and political potential of merging care and education. although learning was appointed a higher status than caring, many preschool teachers were aware of the emotional and physical caring needs of children because of their embodied potential, as human beings, to care (Hamington 2004). Yet, this often caused feelings of inconvenience, uneasiness, doubt, and even nuisance. as they had a narrow understanding of teaching as having the primary goal of enhancing the learning of children, many respondents did not want to 'give in' to their urges to care. Instead, they suppressed and constrained these urges as they do not consider caring to be professional. Due to this hierarchy between education and care, preschool teachers construct a rather technical and distant conceptualisation of ECEC professionalism. In the context of a diverse society, a purely distant and technical concept of professionalism has been severely criticised for several reasons, including the potential exclusion of children who are not socialised in this narrow definition of

education and the lack of democratically debated meanings of preschool (Colley 2006; Dahlberg and Moss 2005; Peeters 2008). ECEC is in need of a more normative professionalism, in which the use of emotions and value-bound elements of professional actions, such as personal involvement and social responsibility, have a central place (Colley 2006; Kunneman 2005; Osgood 2010; Peeters 2008). In agreement with Taggart (2011, 2014) and Goldstein (1998), we underline the importance of developing an ethics of care framework for ECEC professionalism based on *educare*, in which the care focus involves more than simply offering some hugs and kisses as a surrogate mother. By addressing care in education as deeply experiential, ethical, philosophical and political, and deconstructing discourses of maternal-ism, the ability to meet the care needs of a diversity of children may significantly increase (Aslanian 2015; Goldstein 1998).

As preschool staff may suppress the caring responses they feel, we recommend that pre-service and in-service training focus on developing a professional reflective language on *educare* that enables staff to utilise their embodied potential to care. rather than simply 'introducing' care into what previously seemed to be low-care situations like for example preschools in ECEC split systems, we underline that care is pervasive and can be enriched by stimulating staff's caring imagination which promotes empathy, critical reflection and understanding of another's context (Hamington 2014). In accordance with a corporeal or body-centred epistemology, critical reflection is not simply an intellectual endeavor, but incorporates the body as inherent part of the analytical process. a more embodied understanding of professional reflection can transcend traditional dualisms between mind and body, thought and action, and theory and practice (Kinsella 2007; Macintyre Latta and Buck 2008; Ord and Nuttall 2016). For integrated ECEC systems, the challenge due to schoolification tendencies is to remain explicitly recognising and valuing care as inherent to education. In so doing, caring and learning in both split and integrated systems can be equally valued and linked with aims of inclusion and social justice. Tronto (1993, 2013) focuses on the attentiveness, responsibility, competence, responsiveness and solidarity of care as moral qualities. This framework is useful for analysing and conceptualising *educare* not only on an individual level, but also on an institutional and political level. Based on her framework and the plea of Lynch and colleagues (2009) to better recognise and support bodily and emotional work, we recommend that preschool policies not

only emphasise taking care of children and families, but also taking care of preschool staff members by, for example, ensuring reflective, co-constructive and supportive spaces and installing supportive child–staff ratios. By valuing genuine educare in professional development strategies and staff policies, staff members may feel more competent and motivated to both educate and care for all children.

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# Chapter 7

## STAFF

### **Challenging the feminisation of the workforce: rethinking the mind–body dualism in Early Childhood Education and Care<sup>13</sup>**

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<sup>13</sup> Based on Van Laere, K., Vandenbroeck, M., Roets, G., & Peeters, J. (2014). Challenging the Feminisation of the Workforce: Rethinking the Mind-body Dualism in Early Childhood Education and Care. *Gender and Education*, 26(3), 232-245.



**Abstract**

Despite the political and academic debate on the demands for more male workers in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), no European country has reached the benchmark set for 2006 to have 20% male early childhood workers. This has predominantly been countered by challenging the idea that care for the youngest implies an activity 'that women naturally do' and by consequently arguing for a higher status and better working conditions for caring jobs. In this article, we analyse the recent 'schoolification' of ECEC, and in so doing, we argue that the traditional explanations of the feminisation of the early years workforce do not suffice. In addition, we dwell upon contemporary feminism to challenge the mind–body dualism in discourses and practices of care and explore the concepts of embodied subjectivity and corporeality to further explore pathways to a more equally gendered workforce in early childhood provision.

## 7.1 Introduction

Since its origins, Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in most European countries has been characterised by an almost entirely female workforce (Cameron, Moss, and Owen 1999; Oberhuemer, Schreyer, and Neuman 2010; OECD 2012). Despite important variations in ECEC systems, related to varying historical, social and political contexts, they all share the common feature that it is predominantly female practitioners who take on all or most of the jobs for working with young children and their families. There is, however, an ongoing debate in academia and among policymakers that the ECEC workforce should attract more male workers for various social, educational and economic reasons (OECD 2006; Council of the European Union 2011; European Commission 2011; Children in Europe 2012). After the introduction of a first Gender Equality programme by the European Union at the beginning of the 1980s, the European Commission Childcare Network was launched in 1986 (European Commission Childcare Network 1993, 1996). To create a more 'gender-neutral' caring culture in the families in which men and women divide the caring of children and other household tasks, the network stressed the importance of 'men as carers' in the household. In order to provide male 'role models', it was stated that more men needed to join the early childhood workforce (Moss 1996). It was argued that children would also benefit from meeting different role models and that this, in turn, might affect their gender socialisation, which may enhance more equal gender roles in future generations (European Commission Childcare Network 1993). This goal was also expressed by recommendations from the Council of Ministers of the European Union, advocating an increased participation of men (Council of Ministers of the European Union 1992). In 1995, this recommendation was translated into a quantitative benchmark: it was stated that by 2006, 20% of practitioners employed in centre-based childcare should be men (European Commission Childcare Network 1996). In a more recent communication of the European Commission on ECEC, the need to increase the proportion of men in the workforce was emphasised again as a means to reduce gender segregation in the labour market (European Commission 2011). Having role models of both sexes is considered to be a positive incentive for children, as it can help to challenge gender-stereotyped perceptions since 'a workplace composed of both sexes contributes to widening children's experience' (Council of the European Union 2011, 2).

Not a single European country, nevertheless, has reached the 20% target so far. In more than half of the EU member states, the participation of male practitioners is below 1%. This is especially the case for countries that entered the European Union later than 2003 (Oberhuemer, Schreyer, and Neuman 2010). Some (especially Scandinavian) countries have adopted concrete strategies to increase gender parity with moderate success. After 20 years of actions from the Norwegian authorities, for example, 8.3% of staff working with children between 0 and 6 are men (Royal Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research 2012). Denmark is a notable exception as well with the highest level of male participation in the EU – 27. In 2007, 6% of staff in infant-toddler centres, 10% in kindergartens, 12% in age-integrated centres, 27% in school-based out- of-school provision and 28% in separate leisure-time facilities were men (Oberhuemer, Schreyer, and Neuman 2010). Yet even in Denmark, only the out-of-school care facilities manage to reach the 20% target. In most countries, the proportion of male staff working in ECEC comprises only between 1% and 4% (Rubio 2012).

In this article, we focus on possible explanations to understand why it is so difficult to challenge the gender order in the ECEC workforce. First, we will briefly look back into historical developments in ECEC to understand how the early years workforce perpetuates gender inequalities. We focus on the ways in which traditional practices of ECEC evolved and pay specific attention to developments during the last two decades, including changing conceptions of ECEC that are labeled as increasing ‘schoolification’. Second, we conclude that, in spite of all the efforts done, the idea that care for the youngest implies an activity ‘that women naturally do’ remains dominant, and consider the lack of an in-depth understanding of why we fail to attract more men in ECEC provisions. Third, we then turn to a more theoretical analysis of the feminisation of care professions that is inspired by contemporary feminist theory in which the mind–body dualism is challenged and the sociology of the body and emotion in which so called ‘body work’ and ‘emotional’ work is theorised. We attempt to gain an understanding of why the early years’ workforce remained female in order to reconceptualise the ways in which care is understood in the early childhood workforce. Finally, we look at possible implications of our analysis for policy and practice.

## **7.2 A retrospective look at the history of women as carers and educators**

### **7.2.1 The origins: an ideal mother**

Historically, ECEC builds on two traditions: care and education. On an institutional level, a conceptual and practical division between care and education was common in many European countries (Kaga, Bennett, and Moss 2010). Irrespective of the tradition and the system, the care and education of young children have always been considered 'women's work' (Cameron, Moss, and Owen 1999; Cameron 2001). In the nineteenth century, care services were often developed as a welfare measure for children of working-class families while their parents were at work (Kaga, Bennett, and Moss 2010). In many countries, this was contingent on increasing female participation in the industrial revolution and the need for a (cheap) female workforce. Moreover, childcare created an opportunity for the upper-middle class to fulfil a social mission: civilising the working class and protecting working-class children from child mortality and infections (Vandenbroeck 2004; Vandenbroeck, Coussee and Bradt 2010). Child-care was based on the bourgeois, patriarchal model of the family, with the male bread-winner and the female carer as the pillars of both the social and moral order in society (Holmlund 1999; Vandenbroeck 2006). Carers were traditionally recruited from women of the lower classes and their profession was based on, and legitimated by, stereotypical constructions of the ideal mother. Simultaneously, kindergartens for older children were developed to offer pre-primary educational activities prior to formal schooling and cared for children's moral well-being and preparation for primary school (Oberhuemer, Schreyer, and Neuman 2010). In these educational institutions for young children, conventional and 'natural' gender roles of the maternal teacher and the paternal head or manager were also mapped out (Prentice and Theobald 1991). The education of young children was seen as an acceptable form of female employment because it allowed women the opportunity to have a social life and have a job outside the home, while conforming to the patriarchal model of the bourgeoisie that embodied the idea that women naturally take care of children (Forrester 2005; Barkham 2008). As feminist historians rightly argued, the stereotypical idea that women are most suited to work in ECEC was reinforced by psychological theories of attachment after World War II, projecting the loving mother as the ideal childcare worker (Singer

1993; Burman 1994; Canella 1997). Thus, practitioners were modeled after the symbolic personification of a loving mother (Burman 1994; Vandenbroeck 2003; Peeters 2008).

Therefore, ECEC originated as a job that 'women naturally do' and was caught in a vicious circle. As it was 'natural', no specific qualifications were needed: being a good professional was similar to being a good mother. Only in some countries, initiatives were taken to provide professional training for kindergarten teachers of especially older children. Working with young children was predominantly badly paid and very few opportunities for further professional development were available for the early years workforce. The lack of formal qualifications, in turn, yielded low social status and reinforced the idea that ECEC was a female business. Up till today this history has a major impact on the underlying views of ECEC. Several qualitative studies, for example, quite recently confirmed that early years workers connect their practitioner's role with their role of being a mother and their natural ability to 'love children' (Dyer 1996; Cameron, Moss, and Owen 1999; Dalli 2002; Barkham 2008; Garnier 2010).

### 7.2.2 The 1970s: equal rights

In the 1970s, in many European countries, ECEC became a battleground influenced by second-wave feminism in the realm of the civil rights movement, challenging patriarchy in all aspects of daily life and claiming women's rights, also in the labour market (Friedan 1963). Childcare was an important issue in the second-wave feminist movement in relation to their labour market claims (De Smet et al. 1978; Pot 1981; Farquhar et al. 2006). The women's emancipation movement also had an important impact on the increase of professionalism in childcare, as well as on the increase of the salaries. For the feminist movement, on the one hand, childcare aimed to give women the chance to work outside the home, and on the other hand, it also represented an important labour market in itself, and hence served their striving for better working conditions as carers. As Farquhar et al. (2006, 3) state: 'Early childhood services have always been promoted by women, used by women and worked in by women'. As a result of considering ECEC as a labour market for women, the second-wave feminist movement made a plea for more involvement of fathers in the education of children, but not as workers in ECEC. Moreover, some feminists claimed that caring work was essentially feminine (Noddings

1984). As a consequence, in the 1970s, marked by a growth in ECEC in many countries, the workforce remained extremely gendered and men as carers were, although rather unintentionally, marginalised (Cockburn 2010).

### 7.2.3 Definitions of 'care' throughout history

What is understood as care in one country may not be the case for another country, due to their specific contexts and histories. The Care Work in Europe study revealed that the term 'care' has a more limited, concrete and deficit meaning in English and German rooted languages and a more holistic, abstract and empowering meaning in Hungarian and Latin languages (Cameron and Moss 2007). In the first case, caring is often associated with nursing, in which practical help and understanding is offered. Care work satisfies all the basic needs (physical, emotional, social and mental) in order for people to live with their limitations or illnesses. When applied to an ECEC context, it is derived that adults care by addressing the basic needs of children since they are not considered capable to care for themselves. The concept of care was often viewed as more oppressive rather than in an emancipatory way, since children tended to be patronised or kept in a dependency (Cameron and Moss 2007). In countries with a more holistic view, the approach to children originated in care, upbringing and education as equal, intertwined concepts (OECD 2006). Care is not just a commodity, function or service, but is best treated as an ethic of care, a way of relating to others (Dalli 2006; Peeters 2008; Moss and Cameron 2011). In these practices, care goes beyond a physical dimension and encompasses an emotional, societal and political dimension. Care is seen as an important element of both democratic practice and citizenship (Tronto 1993; Pols 2006). On a micro-level, this implies that in countries with a more holistic view, activities such as nurturing, feeding, blowing noses, going to the bathroom or putting children to bed are educational in nature, and that supporting learning requires a caring attitude and behaviour (Jensen 2011; Urban et al. 2011) As Jensen (2011, 149) states, "the psychical tasks themselves do not define what care and education is, but how the tasks are performed, does define what care and education is" (Jensen 2011).

### 7.2.4 The turn of the century: schoolification

In recent decades, the meaning of ECEC has substantially shifted from a caring to an educational environment. Under the influence of neuroscience (Shonkoff



and Phillips 2000) and economic science (Heckman 2006; Barnett and Masse 2007), there is now an apparent consensus that the early years are the most important period in life and that investments in the early years yield substantial economic benefits. In short, ECEC is considered as the best preparation for compulsory school and for academic achievements in later years as well as for a thriving labour market. To this end, ECEC does not solely prevent future individual problems of young 'pupils', it can also counter social problems such as early school leaving, unemployment and social disintegration. Consequently, didactics of compulsory schooling now tend to determine ECEC programmes: more formalised approaches have been adopted; distinctive goals and standards are formulated to measure children's achievements (Cameron and Moss 2011); and this trend also affects early childhood systems that traditionally have been based in social pedagogy, such as in Norway (Otterstad and Braathe 2010).

Nevertheless, this evolution, labeled as schoolification, is often deplored (Moss 2013). One of the criticisms is that although many research and international policy reports agree that reason, emotion, body and mind of children are equally important from a holistic viewpoint of education (Eurydice 2009; Kaga, Bennett, and Moss 2010; European Commission 2011), ECEC programmes emphasise mere cognitive and language competences. As a result, the social, physical and affective existence of children tend to be neglected (Broström 2006, 2009; Hjort 2006). It is argued that because of the schoolification of the early years, less attention is given to the caring and the emotional nurturing dimension of education of young children. The devaluation of care and emotions is also related to a more technical conceptualisation of professionalism, in which rational and instrumental notions of teaching are central (Dahlberg and Moss 2005; Oberhuemer 2005). The driving force for greater efficiency and accountability has transformed teaching into 'performing' (Forrester 2005), especially in an international context where competition is endorsed through measuring performances in league tables, such as Programme for International Student Assessment (Kamens 2013; Meyer and Benavot 2013). Moreover practitioners are constructed as technical experts teaching specific subjects that prepare young children to enter primary school (Jensen, Broström, and Hansen 2010; Samuelsson and Sheridan 2010). Some scholars connect these rational understandings of teaching with more

‘masculine’ conceptualisations of education and teacher professionalism (Dillabough 1999; Forrester 2005)

### **7.3 Mission accomplished?**

It is striking that what is today labeled (and criticised) as the schoolification of the early years matches, to a large extent, what scholars considered important steps to attract more men in ECEC. First, the work with young children today receives a higher social esteem than it ever had, as it is now considered the best base for further learning as well as ‘the greatest of equalizers’ (Bokova 2010). In many countries, the renewed social value has led to higher qualifications as well as better salaries. Scholars concerned with gender equality in the early years workforce assumed that by raising the professional status and the working conditions of the job, working in the ECEC field becomes a more viable career option and will attract more men (Peeters 2003; Simpson 2005; EASPD 2010). Second, the persistent gender gap has predominantly been explained by a deeply embedded ‘habitus’ associating caring jobs with low-paid, low-status jobs and essentially female jobs. It has been argued that one of the main reasons why the feminisation in the workforce is perpetuated goes back to the historically rooted social and cultural essentialist beliefs that the care of the youngest is ‘what women naturally do’, as demonstrated in the previous historical overview (Cameron, Moss, and Owen 1999; Rolfe 2005; Cortina and San Román 2006). Therefore it is imperative to uncouple early years professionalism from mother-like practice (Cameron, Moss, and Owen 1999; Rolfe 2005; Peeters 2008). One could argue that the new, more ‘masculine’ notions of education and teacher professionalism, which tend to oversee caring for and emotional nurturing of children, could be seen as an opportunity to challenge a mother-like conceptualisation of education and care.

### **7.4 An almost entirely female workforce: missing an empty goal?**

Remarkably, these hypotheses seem to be incorrect for the time being: ECEC remains an almost entirely female workforce. As Cameron (2006) previously emphasised, a high degree of professionalism does not automatically lead to an

increase in the number of male staff members. Apparently, the imagined solutions to attract more men as a consequence of this process of professionalisation, including the realisation of a higher social status, a focus on education, and better working conditions, do not suffice to have a more gender balanced workforce (Cameron, 2006). This is the case for the recent schoolification movement and was also the case in the seventies when attempts to professionalise the ECEC sector unintentionally excluded men from having a job in ECEC. Second, it should be noted that despite the introduction of a more rational, masculine understanding of education and teaching to the detriment of caring, caring did not completely disappear in ECEC. Recent research in 15 European countries demonstrates how in kindergartens and early childhood centres, caring activities are executed by invisible, low-qualified auxiliary staff whereas teachers are in charge of the educational activities (Van Laere, Peeters, and Vandenbroeck 2012). Because the educational and caring tasks are done by staff with a different professional status, there seems to be a hierarchy between care and education in which caring activities are instrumentalised for the learning activities. In so doing, the physical and emotional needs of children are reduced to a prerequisite for educating children (Van Laere, Peeters, and Vandenbroeck 2012), so that children's minds are free for learning. This reinforces the hierarchical position in which children gradually 'grow out' of a more primitive stage of physical care to enter the more 'human' world of learning. These interpretations not only allude to a narrow view on care, but also narrow the view on education, as they reduce education to cognitive development, leading to a lack of continuity in the child's care and education. They also allude to a separation between mind and body that is believed to be feasible as well as desirable. Furthermore, unlike the expectation that men could be more attracted to work in the ECEC sector due to an overemphasis on the mind, a divide exists between highly qualified and better-paid women who are responsible for the 'mind', and lower-qualified women with a more invisible position and who are responsible for the 'body' (Van Laere, Peeters, and Vandenbroeck 2012).

By further analysing this mind-body dualism, we aim to discover a more in-depth understanding why the ECEC culture remains female.

## 7.5 Rethinking the mind–body dualism in care from the perspective of contemporary feminism

From a perspective of contemporary feminist theory (Haraway 1991; Gatens 1996), it is argued that discourses and practices in Western societies often quite implicitly embody an underlying mind–body dualism. In the 1980s and 1990s, however, this has led to heated feminist debates and controversies over essentialist claims that the body is separated from the mind, and early third-wave feminists rejected these essentialist onto- logical and epistemological assumptions (Braidotti 1991; Butler 1991; Gatens 1991; Haraway 1991; Grosz 1994). They asserted that European humanist ideals, resulting in a modernist gaze of rationality and progression, are founded in the impossible separation of body and mind, as the body seems to have been regarded always with suspicion as the state of unruly pas- sions and appetites that might disrupt the pursuit of truth and knowledge. ( ... ) It can be argued that the denial of corporeality and the corresponding elevation of mind or spirit marks a transhistorical ( ... ) rejection of the body as an obstacle to pure rational thought. (Price and Shildrick 1999)

This so-called Cartesian error in Western cultures, which refers to the assumption that there exists a dualism of mind and body, ‘a mind somehow cut off from matter’ (Grosz 1994, 86), is challenged in favour of feminist theorists who argue that the mind is always embodied or based on corporeal relations, and that the body is always social, political and in-process rather than natural, referring to a non-unitary vision of the subject whose mind and body are intrinsically interrelated (Braidotti 2006).

In that vein, sociologists who have theorised the body challenged dominant and historically rooted discourses and practices in which ‘body work’ such as care, nursing, and emotional work, clearly belongs to the household of emotions in Western societies (Hochschild 2003a; Wolkowitz 2006). In their point of view, the gendered nature of care constructs women as ‘natural’ subjects: caring work is seen as the duty and responsibility of women, being considered as unpaid work that women naturally do in the private sphere (Lister 1997). And if caring work is paid, the wages tend to be low, and conditions of employment poor, which reinforces already existing inequalities in the labour market (Rake 2001). This implies that certain types of needs and care will continue to be

largely absent from public discussion, and are relegated to a private domain of human activity beneath the public sphere where concerns about rights and justice prevail (Hughes et al. 2005). They criticise dominant assumptions in which care, being perceived as inferior 'body work' or 'emotional labour', is expected to happen in the shadows of the symbolic order (Hughes et al. 2005). In that sense, body work ('bodies' work on other bodies'), a concept of Wolkowitz (2006), consequently can be considered as 'dirty work', as workers have to negotiate the boundaries of the body and deal with matter out of place (Douglas cited in Twigg et al. 2011). Based on the notion of 'leaky bodies', caring is predominantly about the containment, in its material form, of bodily fluids, and in its symbolic form, of bodily difference that is perceived as a burden to the social order (Hughes et al. 2005). Thus, those who give and receive care are marginal bodies. A similar, slightly different concept is 'emotional labour' of Hochschild (2003b). Because physical as well as emotional feelings involve vulnerability, emotions become uncomfortable in a context of increasing evidence-based practice. As a result, it is argued that emotional work such as caring involves the suppression, rather than expression, of emotion (Hochschild 2003b; Twigg et al. 2011). Moreover, they assert that the Cartesian division between mind and body appears not solely a strongly gendered construction, but also a classed and racialised construction, which implies how caring and body work carries a stigma and will be done by the 'lowest of the picking order' (Wolkowitz 2006; Isaksen, Devi, and Hochschild 2008; Twigg et al. 2011). This could partially clarify why high-qualified women in the ECEC workforce are in charge of educational tasks and lower-qualified women are in charge of care.

In search for alternative understandings of this mind–body dualism, feminists who theorise the body argued for anti-essentialism as an alternative basis for feminist

politics and collective concerns for women and men. The underlying universalistic interpretations of subjectivities, underpinned by biological essentialism, are challenged, and the notion of 'corporeality'– or 'embodied subjectivity'– is introduced (Braidotti 2006). From the perspective of third-wave feminist theory, rather than reducing the body to an unspoken being in Western societies, the body matters (Witz 2000), and not just to women, as 'an open-ended, pliable set of significations, capable of being rewritten, reconstituted, in quite other terms than those which mark it, and consequently capable of reinscribing the forms of sexed identity' (Grosz 1994, 61). The rejection of the

mind–body dualism is seen as the starting point to call for the body-and-mind as a socio-political issue: ‘the world is translated into a problem of coding, a search for resistance to control ( ... ), and all heterogeneity can be submitted to disassembly, reassembly, investment and exchange’ (Haraway 1991, 163). These extended interpretations of the body assert new figurations of embodied rather than purely rational subjectivity, and a multiplicity of ways of knowing that start from a relationship between multiple, decentred selves and others (Lather 1991; Braidotti 2006, 2011).

In third-wave feminism, definitions of care are placed within broader social and political concerns rather than within an essentialist, individual-gendered psychology (Cockburn 2010). Tronto (1993), for example, shows how the concrete giving and receiving of care is, in a male imaginary, left to the least powerful in society (Tronto 1993; Cockburn 2010). In feminist thought, the caring relationship is valorised for its potential to symbolise the very embodiment of intimacy, interdependency and reciprocity in our societies; so that the male-stream interpretation of caring as marginal work is challenged and claims upon dignity and respect for both the giver and receiver of care can be made (Hughes et al. 2005). From a third-wave feminist perspective, with a hint of late psychoanalysis (Braidotti 2011), an ethics and politics of care implies an embodied ethics where one has to live with and should come to celebrate leakiness, contingency and tactility as the touchstone of ethics. This issue of leaky bodies and boundaries is imperative (Shildrick 1997), breaking down the modernist myth of the rational (or becoming-rational) subject and signalling a world of relational economies of caring and mutual recognition. This also enables us to reconsider which ethics and politics of care are at play in ECEC. Care, referring to love, tactility and bodily emissions, takes us back to forgotten issues of children who are being and becoming citizens, and enables us to draw on a diversity of embodied experiences of both men and women in the ECEC workforce.

## **7.6 Corporeality in the ECEC workforce**

From this feminist perspective, the schoolification of ECEC not only signifies an enhanced social value (and in many cases better working conditions), but also a disembodiment of education. This leaves little room for feminine as well as

masculine corporealities, and therefore this may eventually lead to a gender-neutral rather than a gender-sensitive reality. As Tobin (1997) argued, the denial of embodied subjectivities leads to the elimination of pleasure in early childhood, since it is believed that the body needs to be tamed and disciplined in order to disappear and make place for the mind. Several examples appeared in a series of interviews conducted with male students in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking community of Belgium (Vandenbroeck and Peeters 2008). Male students complained that during their internship in early childhood services where the staff wore a uniform, there were no alternatives to the female apron-like uniform for them. They were also shocked by the absence of separate toilets for them. These examples show that the denial of the body of the child also denies the body of the professional. The denial of the professional body fits very well with the more distant conceptions of professionalism that accompany schoolification. Proponents of such a detached approach often refer to what is called a 'professional attitude' in other fields. The medical and legal professions, for instance, assume that the professional will keep a certain distance, including first and foremost a physical distance, and not become personally involved with his/her client. In ECEC professions as well, some may feel that this is appropriate, that 'becoming too involved with the children is not professional' (Manning-Morton 2006).

However, several studies on professionalism in occupations with young children show that this particular interpretation of professionalism is not desirable for ECEC (Moyles 2001; Dalli 2006; Peeters 2008). First of all, it needs to be taken into account that medical and legal professions do not usually establish continuous, long relationships with their 'clients' or 'patients' as ECEC professionals do. More importantly, by denying embodied subjectivity, the idea of a normative body is installed that is supposed to be asexual, but may also be unemotional and without feelings, passion or pleasure. Yet 'it is impossible to work with very young children effectively without a commitment to these children that you could describe as "passionate"' (Moyles 2001, 81). At the same time, there are also inherent challenges in this specific view on professionalism, in which it is expected that the childcare worker must not allow him/herself to be guided by his/her own emotions. The childcare worker or kindergarten teacher must gear his/her approach (kind words, hugs, comforting) to what is good for the child; it must not be a function of his/her own feelings (Peeters 2013, 134). Another inherent challenge of

professionalism that deals more explicitly with emotions and physicality is that this view could paradoxically increase the fear of men of being accused of sexual abuse in ECEC. This fear is a major reason why men are discouraged from choosing a job with young children (Rolfe 2005; Farquhar et al. 2006; Peeters 2013). In New Zealand, in the 1990s, for example, the percentage of men dropped from 2 to 1% after a case of sexual abuse that was extensively publicised in the gutter press and consequently created a public moral panic (Farquhar et al. 2006).

Third-wave feminist theory, therefore, enables us to rethink the issue of corporeality in ECEC provisions, which is materialised in staff profiles and practices (Van Laere, Peeters, and Vandenbroeck 2012). In the field of ECEC, it is very significant that the concept of corporeality is only rarely mentioned, since it is only used gingerly in the Danish context as a pedagogical concept and an interpretation of professionalism (Peeters 2008). *Kropslighed*, for example, refers to how 'one senses the body, and includes a strong element of experiencing the world through your body' in childcare practices (Cameron and Moss 2007; Jensen 2011). In this Danish interpretation, corporeality is strongly linked to activities during outdoor play and is perceived as an alternative for the more 'feminine' kind of physical contacts that are less accepted when done by men, like caressing or embracing. Here, at least the operational code of the foundational mind–body binary is challenged. From the 'Care Work in Europe' study, a research that studied the interpretation of professionalism in three countries (Hungary, England and Denmark) with the video elicitation methodology (Declercq 2002), it appears that the Danish professionals have a different vision of their profession compared with their Hungarian and English colleagues. The Danish (female) pedagogues felt that the Hungarian attitude in the film represented an extremely feminine world (replacing the mother): 'The conceptualizing of the everyday life space [in the Hungarian film] was linked to the pace of the day, which was very quiet, calm and predictable.' Some (Danish) observers noted that it would be a 'boring workplace' (Cameron and Moss 2007, 76). The English video attests, according to the pedagogues, on the other hand, to an 'institutional logic, a school rationality controlling the practice' (Cameron and Moss 2007, 75). As far as the aspect of '*kropslighed*' is concerned, the Danish pedagogues who took part in the study see a great deal of 'body discipline' in the English ECE centres. They observe that a great deal of attention is paid to the 'head' and little to the 'body' as 'one way or another,



the body has been reduced to a head in the English centres'. This example demonstrates how different contexts conceptualise care and education in various ways and according to various discourses.

## 7.7 Conclusions and implications

We have argued that the underlying and rather implicit division between body and mind and the subsequent denial of the body created a technical, distant professional, who had to deny his or her embodied subjectivity. The denial of the body, of course, installs a mute body that is still female, making it difficult for men to find their place in the ECEC workforce. It also makes it difficult for women to act as women in ECEC.

The issue is, therefore, not to strive for a gender-neutral ECEC, as disembodied practices would not be a suitable environment for a holistic view on care and education. There is good reason to think that this would not benefit children (OECD 2006), as it would not benefit male or female teachers. Rather, the issue would be to challenge the imprisonment of increasingly inadequate categorical thinking to enable gender-sensitive practices, where different embodied subjectivities and 'bodies and minds in process' evolve (Braidotti 2006). By recognising the centrality of body work and emotions in the ECEC systems and society, new understandings of the body, of emotions and mind will be developed and reflected upon (Hochschild 2003b; Wolkowitz 2006). The notable exceptions of Norway and Denmark regarding the percentages of male staff seem to confirm this analysis.

An interesting example from Denmark shows what this may mean in terms of curriculum. As Kolding College, a college for early childhood education professionals (paedagogs), replaced the traditional courses about the care of the body with courses on sports and nature (as other bodily experiences), they noticed that the number of male inscriptions increased and also that male dropout rates decreased (Wohlgemuth 2003). In Norway, the strong focus on bodily experiences in nature and outdoor play is one of the crucial factors to explain why the number of male workers is higher than anywhere else in Europe. According to these men, the opportunity to stay outdoors gives more freedom to work with children in their own ways, freeing themselves from the

tradition of caring in a mother's home (Emilsen and Koch 2010). The study of Emilsen and Koch (2010) among male and female professionals in outdoor as well as indoor playgroups in Norway showed that the dichotomy between mind and body— where the assumption goes that the mind is male and the body female — does not exist in their reality. Men are very physical in their play, albeit in different ways to women. Of course, it does not make sense to fall back into an essentialist view on male versus female corporeality. As we learn from third-wave feminism, gender is only one of the many intersections in always hybrid, nomadic, embedded and embodied subjectivities (Braidotti 2011). In that sense, ECEC should cherish diversity in its work- force while creating opportunities for both staff and children to transform and reconfigure diverse aspects of their embodied subjectivities.

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# Chapter 8

## Conclusion

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## 8.1 Introduction

The introduction explained how both international and Flemish preschool policies are permeated by a social investment logic which assumes that school failure can be prevented by more preschool education at an earlier age, or, as Moss (2013) summarised it:

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“ The interest in preschool education is bolstered by its perceived potential as an early intervention technology for children variously described as poor, vulnerable, excluded or disadvantaged, which, it is argued, can determine later performance, be it in school, employment or wider society, so reducing the inequalities that remain stubbornly persistent or are even growing. (Moss, 2013, p. 10)

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However, parents and preschool staff are rarely included in these policy and scholarly debates. This applies especially to families with children who are labelled “at risk for school failure” (i.e., children from families with migrant backgrounds or from a lower socio-economic status); they are the predominant object of concern for policy makers and scholars. By conducting an analysis of documents from fifteen European countries and organising video-elicited focus groups for parents with migrant backgrounds and preschool staff in the Flemish community of Belgium, we examined the following research questions:

- How do parents, preschool staff and policies conceptualise ‘care’ and ‘education’ in preschool?
- What do similar and opposing conceptualisations of ‘care’ and ‘education’ signify for the increasing attention given preschool education as an important equalising condition for later school success?
- How do diverse and opposing conceptualisations of care and education relate to on-going inequalities in the educational system?

In answering these research questions, we cluster five interrelated findings, including components for further theory development. Based on the limitations of our study in combination with the main findings, we also make some

suggestions for further research. Finally, we present recommendations for preschool policies and practices, relevant for both the Flemish community in Belgium and the international ECEC world.

In answering the research questions, it is important to acknowledge the monolingual nature of the academic debate. In Europe, English is the most widely used language in academic literature, and it also represents a particular way of speaking about education (Vandenbroeck, Forthcoming). In the Dutch language, however, there is a substantial difference between '*opvoeding*' (which encompasses upbringing, learning, caring, and socialising) and '*onderwijs*' (which refers to learning and instruction, usually (yet not exclusively) in a school setting). Many discussions have taken place on how to translate these terms into English, as both terms could be translated as 'education'.

## 8.2 Main findings

### 8.2.1 Care: The Achilles' heel in preschool education

In adopting a participatory approach, our study demonstrates the heterogeneity of possible meaning-making in preschool education by parents and staff. The data from the focus groups and the policy document analysis reveal both common tendencies and points of dissent. Although many international policy advising bodies have underlined the importance of the conceptual integration of caring and learning in 'educare' (European Commission, 2011; Kaga, Bennett, & Moss, 2010; Penn, 2009), the relationship between caring and learning was a controversial topic in the focus groups, as it evoked many questions and caused uncertainty, discomfort, and even nuisance amongst the participants of our study. Whereas the discourse of some parents and staff members assumed the intertwined nature of learning and caring, a conceptual divide and even a hierarchy between learning and caring was predominant in the perspectives of other staff members and parents. This conceptual hierarchy could also be identified in the policy documents of several European countries with regard to the workforce profiles of preschool teachers and teacher's assistants. In what follows, we present these similar and opposing conceptualisations of care and education that appeared in the focus group discussions.

Many preschool teachers and teacher's assistants understood education to be learning in a formalised preschool setting. They adopted a more didactic approach toward learning, which included being focused on teacher-directed activities such as painting, circle time, mathematical initiation, sensory exercises and learning about time and weather. Additionally they underlined the importance of teaching children to listen and follow teacher instructions. Many of these staff members stated that their jobs were in jeopardy when they had to do caring activities. Just like the parents, preschool staff members acknowledged that young children are in the process of dealing with their bodily needs, such as eating, drinking, blowing their noses, using the toilet, sleeping, etc. Nevertheless, several teachers viewed supporting these processes as subordinate to preschool learning. Some teachers, for example, urged the deployment of more teacher's assistants who can support children in their physical and emotional needs so that they can focus on 'real learning'. In line with the work of Wyns (2015), some teacher's assistants seemed to confirm this hierarchy between learning and caring by disqualifying and minimising their own role in the preschool practice. Other teachers expressed the expectation that parents, in the home environment or childcare workers, in the childcare center, should have already taught their children to become 'self-sufficient' in their physical needs before entering preschool. Discipline in controlling bodily functions was seen as a prerequisite for early learning in preschool. Some parents concurred with this idea as they were afraid that their children would not receive appropriate attention from the teacher in the early learning processes if they were not able to manage their bodily needs by themselves. Several of these parents also understood discipline and obedience to the teacher as important aspects of education since it is assumed that a well-behaved child will do better in preschool and later schooling and will even be better prepared to work for a boss in later life.

Conversely, other parents and teacher's assistants understood dealing with bodily processes to be a part of the upbringing of children that will help them in their present and future lives to become autonomous at home, in school, and in broader society. A few parents nuanced the teacher's focus on 'self-sufficiency' preschool care and underlined the importance of learning to care for each other, which indicates a sense of interdependency within the educational goal of human autonomy. Some teacher's assistants emphasised that their physical and emotional caring role is indispensable in the education

of children. In addition, they questioned the fact that they are mostly deployed to work with the youngest children, stating that educare is important for every child, irrespective of age. In the stories of these parents and teacher's assistants, it became clear that caring and learning cannot exist independently: caring activities like eating, drinking, toilet training, sleeping, and comforting are educational in nature; supporting cognitive, social, motor, artistic learning processes requires that the educator have a caring attitude. This more holistic conceptualisation of education, or educare, is in accordance with the scholarly work of Hamington (2004), who articulated that education is not simply a matter of shaping the mind. Rather, it is an 'embodied exchange': when adults, for example, teach a child to ride a bicycle, embodied aspects of care are always inherently present (Hamington, 2004). From this educare view, it is hardly surprising that parents had many questions about how the physical and socio-emotional caring needs of their children were being met in preschool.

In sum, the stories resulting from the research show a continuum in which, some participants problematised the lack of care in preschool education -- building on a conceptual *integration* of caring and learning, while at the other side of the continuum participants understood care as a burden for preschool education -- building on a conceptual *hierarchy* between learning and caring. Many participants took intermediate positions within this continuum, however. Despite the contentious relationship between learning and caring, focus groups with staff members clearly demonstrated that the caring needs of children did not just simply disappear, making such care the 'Achilles' heel' of preschool education. The majority of preschool staff members did identify the physical and emotional caring needs of children, but had different ways of coping with these needs. Building on the philosophical work of Hamington (2004), we showed how preschool staff members developed strategies for restraining their caring responses and not fully utilising their embodied potential to care. However, some teachers stated that they do find it important to engage in care in preschool. They legitimised their caring responses either as part of their own caring personalities or attributed them to the fact that they were mothers themselves. Irrespective of whether or not teachers engaged in care, there was a clear consensus that care in preschool education did not fundamentally belong in the professional repertoire of teachers. As theorised in chapter seven, this could also be related to the fact that care signifies a devaluation of the

preschool teacher profession, historically associated with lower qualified women assumed to 'naturally care' for children.

### 8.2.2 Continuing or disrupting the underlying mind-body dualism

The conceptual divide and hierarchy between learning and caring in our study originates from a Cartesian mind-body dualism that has permeated Western philosophical thought. Since early Christianity, it has been believed that physical and emotional needs connected to the body are fundamentally different from intellectual needs, in line with the division of body and soul (Braidotti, 2006; Foucault, 1984; Gatens, 1996; Haraway, 1991; Merleau-Ponty, 1945; Merleau-Ponty & Lefort, 1964). Even when participants underlined that learning and caring are equally important, some constructed the two as separate entities unable to take place simultaneously. It seems that a child's body needs to be managed in order for it to grow from a more primitive stage of physical care before the mind is prepared to enter the more 'human' world of learning. Given the corresponding division of labor between the higher qualified preschool teachers and the lower qualified teacher's assistants who take in a rather invisible position in several European preschool policies, the undisciplined body seems to hinder learning activities in preschool. Building on the notion of 'leaky bodies', caring has been shown to be predominantly about the containment, in its material form, of bodily fluids, (B. Hughes, McKie, Hopkins, & Watson, 2005). Sociologists like Wolkowitz (2006) and Hochschild (2003) confirmed how care consisting of 'dirty body work' (e.g., potty training) and 'emotional labour' (e.g., comforting and hugging children) is mostly done by the 'lowest of the pecking order'.

By increasingly emphasising the future employability of children, some scholars believe that schoolification of the early years contributes to intensifying Cartesian rationalism, signifying a further disembodiment of education in which those who give and receive care have marginalised bodies (Fielding & Moss, 2011; Tobin, 1997; Warin, 2014). To this end, Lynch (2016) stated that Cartesian rationalism has actually slightly changed the hegemony of the *homo sapiens* to the hegemony of the *homo economicus* (the self-sufficient, rational and economically productive citizen) in education. Both concepts deny the existence of the *homo sentiens* (the interdependent, affective, relational human being) contributing strongly to the invisibility of affective and caring

relations among human beings in education (Lynch, 2016; Lynch, Lyons, & Cantillon, 2007). Many scholars, including Merleau-Ponty (1945); Merleau-Ponty and Lefort (1964) and Hamington (2012, 2015, 2016), indeed argued that, on an ontological level, human beings are fundamentally relational and embodied beings, while also claiming that human bodies are built for both perception and care. The disembodiment of education not only affects children and parents, but staff's bodies also tend to be denied or marginalised. For example, staff members in the focus groups stated that the physical work is difficult; therefore many teachers decide to stop working with the youngest children due to continuous back problems. As suggested in chapter six, when staff members are not supported or listened to regarding the care of their own bodies and emotions, they tend to not fully utilise their own embodied potential to care for others, resulting in restrained or suppressed caring responses in preschool practices.

In chapter seven of our study, we drew upon contemporary feminist theory to demonstrate how this dominant mind-body dualism can be disrupted. By viewing children, parents and staff members as embodied subjectivities, the body and underlying *homo sentiens* should be drastically valued and brought to the foreground in education. For example, one mother reflected on the video shown in the focus group, stating that the teacher in the movie 'did not want to see the child' by not 'really embracing' her body and comforting her. Consequently, her interpretation was that the child was not allowed to exist in this class, a shared concern of many parents in the focus groups, especially those whose children do not understand or speak the dominant school language. In this line of thinking, Kurban and Tobin (2009) analysed the statement of a five-year-old girl of Turkish descent in a German preschool who said 'they do not like our bodies'. They hypothesised that this is an expression of a young child's awareness of otherness, alterity and feelings of alienation in terms of race and identity. The girl felt that she was viewed as 'less than fully human' (Kurban & Tobin, 2009). From that perspective, B. Hughes et al. (2005) theorised that bodily difference in its symbolic form is often perceived as a burden to the social order (B. Hughes et al., 2005). In contrast, Braidotti (2006) argued that the mind is always embodied or based on corporeal relations, and that the body is always social, political and in-process rather than natural, referring to a non-unitary vision of the subject whose mind and body are intrinsically interrelated (Braidotti, 2006). Consequently for the theoretical



debates on ECEC professionalism, this unitary social and political vision should be more incorporated, resulting in the development of a professional embodied educational language. In chapter seven, we hypothesised that this new professional language could also help us challenge the feminisation of the workforce.

### 8.2.3 Uncovering the social and political potential of educare in preschool education

Caring educational activities and a caring attitude are more than the simply assurance that children feel emotionally and physically well in preschool. Several parents and staff members referred to symbolic meanings behind care, such as attention, presence and belonging, in education. They assumed that children, irrespective of their backgrounds, would know that they matter and thus would feel recognised as valuable human beings in the preschool class, as well as on a broader scale in life. This is an important dimension of care as the focus groups, in general, exposed a fear amongst parents that their children might be excluded in preschool and broader society. These parental concerns were also confirmed in the perspectives of some bridge figures and care coordinators. It is alarming, however, that the concern for exclusion in preschool and society was, except for the deviant perspectives of some care coordinators, bridge figures and teacher's assistants, nearly absent in focus group discussions. One care coordinator and teacher's assistant clearly stated that by artificially denying or removing care from preschool education, preschools are excluding some children already from the start, especially those who find themselves in more vulnerable positions (i.e., those who do not manage the school language and those who have never attended childcare).

The plea of this care coordinator and teacher's assistant points to the relationship between social inclusion and care as an indispensable one for education and social inclusion. On a theoretical level this reminds us of the scholarly work of Lynch, Baker, and Lyons (2009), who identified four major social systems which can produce equality and inequality in society: the economic, the political, the socio-cultural and the affective. Whereas the first three systems are often addressed in social studies, the latter (the affective system), has received the least attention in academic debates. Affective inequalities are concerned with how people are unequally provided with love, care and solidarity. This unequal dynamic is assumed to be intertwined with

other types of inequalities, since people living in poverty, people with migrant backgrounds and other people who are underrepresented in the political system often have less access to care, love and solidarity in society (Lynch et al., 2009).

Thus, parents' and staffs' requests for 'educare' cannot simply be reduced to a decontextualised pedagogical plea to stimulate the 'holistic' development of children (Vandenbroeck, Coussée, Bradt, & Roose, 2011). Our study shows that the ways in which care and education are conceptualised significantly impact inclusion and exclusion mechanisms in preschool. Building further on the theoretical work of Tronto (1993) and Hamington (2015), and being aware that much more is needed to combat social inequalities, as demonstrated in the works of Lynch et al. (2009) and Fraser, Honneth, and Golb (2003), it seems that educare has the social and political potential to effect the social inclusion of children in preschool and broader society. This finding has important implications for the further theory development of educare in ECEC, which has previously remained under theorised in the academic debate, especially in the English language.

#### 8.2.4 Confirming and contesting social problem constructions

From a social-pedagogical perspective on social work research, a lot of attention is given to 'the social construction of problems'; in other words, much effort is expended on the question of why certain phenomena are constructed as social and, eventually, educational problems (Bouverne - De Bie, 2015; Vandenbroeck, Coussee, & Bradt, 2010). Transforming the occurrence of certain human events into a social problem actually evokes a political action in which private concerns are made public concerns (Biesta, 2011). The construction of social problems is not a neutral process in which selected intervention contributes to the perception of an issue as a social problem (Bouverne - De Bie, 2015). It is remarkable in our study how some parents confirmed, while others attempted to challenge the dominant discourse. Figure 1.1. in the introduction illustrated how social phenomena may be transformed into social problems and then further into educational problems. In these social and educational 'problem constructions', processes of decontextualisation, responsabilisation and pedagogisation make parents responsible for preventing the school failure of their children, regardless of the societal conditions in which

they live or the inequalities in access to quality preschool education they face (Clarke, 2006; Vandenbroeck, Coussée, et al., 2011). Although there is no legal obligation, parents in Flanders are expected to send their children to preschool as early and as frequently as possible. Many parents in our study concurred with the concerns of policy makers for the academic and economic future of children and the preparatory role of early learning in preschool. Both parents and Flemish politicians considered learning Dutch, for example, to be of great importance (Crevits, 2015, 2016). Both believed that the inequality between children with and without migrant backgrounds would disappear once their children mastered the Dutch language. Because the preschool teacher masters the language dominant in school and society, they were considered by many parents as gatekeepers to their children's inclusion in school and society.

However, teachers themselves did not explicitly acknowledge this role. Instead, they often used deficit terms to refer to children from migrant backgrounds as being 'language poor' or 'having language delay.' As a consequence, these children were sometimes perceived as not being motivated or interested in early learning. This implies that teachers view dual language learners as problematic and situate the problem first and foremost in the child or the parent, rather than considering how these learners enrich the school environment or seeing the children's learning as their responsibility. From that perspective, some parents were looking for additional ways to teach their children Dutch before and while attending preschool. A small group of parents opposed these actions, stating that it was the responsibility of preschool teachers to teach their children correct Dutch, especially since they are stimulated to send their child as early and as frequently as possible. Some parents suggested that the government in the first place must ensure high quality teaching in multilingual contexts. Further, within this small group some parents felt frustrated and concerned when being held responsible by the school and teachers for their children's lack of progress in learning the dominant school language. Because they want to teach their children the home languages and they speak little or no Dutch, they did not consider themselves to be the best teachers of the Dutch language.

The data show that this dynamic of parents confirming and challenging dominant problem constructions is more complex than a simple difference of opinion or opposing viewpoints by different parents. In many cases, parents

both confirmed and challenged dominant problem constructions. For example, one mother regularly engaged in parental involvement activities set up by the preschool, such as cutting fruit for the children. As shown in chapter four, a dominant problem construction is that parents need to be involved in children's early learning in preschool; this aims to close the educational gap between children with and without migrant backgrounds. It became clear that this mother 'performed' what the school expected from her, but not because she necessarily was interested in cutting fruit. Since two-way communication between parents and staff was lacking in this preschool, she utilised parental involvement activities as a way of communicating about how her child was experiencing preschool. Yet at the same time, she asked at the end of the focus group session how we, the researchers, could help set up projects to convince other mothers to also participate in school-centered parental involvement activities.

Importantly, when parents do not explicitly question certain dominant problem constructions, it does not mean that they necessarily agree with them. By relating our data to the work of Spivak (1988) and Freire (1996), our study demonstrates how parents adopted particularly subordinate positions in relation to both preschool teachers and the preschool as an institution. Hierarchical systems continuously cultivate a 'culture of silence', causing a negative, silenced and suppressed self-image by the 'oppressed' (Freire, 1996).

### 8.2.5 Intersecting the private and the public domain: debating responsibilities

In our study, we approached preschool education as a site where private and public concerns intersect (Bouverne - De Bie, 2015; Neyrand, 2010; Parton, 1998). The public domain has different meanings from the private. It can refer to a spatial conception where areas are accessible for everybody. It can refer to the 'general interest', enforceable, for example, through the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights. Finally, it can have a political interpretation whereby people have the right to listen, speak and be heard; people can then discuss different views and beliefs on how to organise society. On this political level, a distinction can be made between the 'public debate' and the 'state'. The state inspects by parliamentary decision-making the democratic nature of the public debate, while institutionalising the consensus created through public debate (Bouverne - De Bie, 2015). When the state is not capable of nurturing the real values and

ideas of citizens, this phenomenon is called ‘democratic deficit’, according to some authors like Tronto (2013). The private domain, on the other hand, refers to individuals and families (Bouverne - De Bie, 2015; Neyrand, 2010; Parton, 1998). The boundaries between the private and the public domain are open: they change depending on historical and societal developments (Bouverne - De Bie, 2015). For example, the societal transformations caused by the processes of industrialisation, proletarianisation and urbanisation at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century evoked many political discussions on the relationship between child, parent and the state (De Bie & Roose, 2005). By establishing laws prohibiting child labor, protecting children and initiating compulsory education from the age of 6, the state attributed an explicit societal function to the education (*opvoeding*) of children; all children needed to receive a ‘proper’ education in order for them to grow into responsible human beings, able to engage in the greater societal good (De Bie & Roose, 2005). These laws signified a drastic change for parents’ ‘natural’ educational responsibility towards their children, as they could be prosecuted or deprived from their parental rights if they failed, in which case schools and child protection services would compensate for or correct possible educational deficits (De Bie, De Vos, & Roose, 2014). Although these laws were not of general concern to preschool education at that time in Belgium, the introduction to our study showed how Belgian and Flemish politicians since the 1960s wanted to lower the compulsory school age, which implies a desire to change the relationship among children, their parents and the state from a young age. Moreover, the dominant position of social investment thinking in policies caused a radicalisation of parental educational responsibility since parents need to ensure positive child development and future school success. In the end, this contributes to the ‘greater good’ of society (Clarke, 2006; Gray, 2013; Jenson, 2009; Schiettecat, Roets, & Vandenbroeck, 2015; Vandenbroeck, Coussée, et al., 2011).

Many parents in our study constructed preschool education as an important complementary educational environment since preschool can offer learning opportunities for children different from what parents can offer in the home environment (e.g., learning Dutch and social skills). Nevertheless, parents had many questions regarding the apparent lack of emotional, physical and even political care in preschool education, raising the question of whether their private concerns should be turned into public concerns. This was especially

apparent in cases where parents indicated that they would rather keep their children at home if the caring needs of their children were not properly met.

A commonly used metaphor to debate the discontinuity of care between home and preschool in the focus groups was the identification of the absence or presence of a 'mother figure' for children in preschool education. This gendered notion did not necessarily mean that the participants wanted to go back to a time when preschool policies and practices constructed care as solely and naturally feminine. By referring to someone who 'is a little bit like a mother', female participants, especially, wanted to underline the importance of attention and recognise presence and belonging as symbolic equivalents for care in both home and preschool environments. Despite their low numbers, the few fathers who were part of our study highlighted, in line with the female participants, the same symbolic meanings of care in preschool education without explicitly referring to a mother figure.

Due to a lack of reciprocal communication and dialogue between parents and preschool staff, aspects of care continue to elude public attention. Tronto (2013) relates this democratic deficit to a caring deficit or "the incapacities in advanced countries to meet the caring needs of children" (Tronto, 2013, p. 17). The connection between these two deficits originates from "the construction of a public/private split that is an outdated inheritance from Western political thought that misses important dimensions of both contemporary caring and democracy" (Tronto, 2013, p. 17). In this vein, Tronto (1993, 2013) argued that it is impossible to work on a more socially just and inclusive society when care remains locked up in the private and parochial spheres. In aiming to place care at the centre of our political, public and moral lives, Noddings (2002) proposed to build schools based upon the model of the family. Yet, a question that we ask ourselves is 'which family model' are we thinking of in a diverse society? Moreover, Tronto (2010) addressed the challenge that some elements, such as helping family members to flourish both together and as individuals, cannot be taken for granted in an institutional context (Tronto, 2010). The elements of care and love that are more evident in the family must be made explicit, discussed and organised in a public institutional setting (Tronto, 2010).

### **8.3 Limitations of and recommendations for further research**

Our study has some important limitations in regards to the research problem, the data sources, the participants, and the research methods.

Our study was inspired by the observation that parents and preschool staff are rarely included in policy and scholarly debates on the construction of preschool education as a potentially equalising educational foundation. We deduced that the same applies to children -- and especially children who are the concern of policy makers and scholars: children who are labelled at risk for school failure (i.e., children from families with migrant backgrounds or from a lower socio-economic status). Betz (2015) recently problematised that children are often passive bystanders in studies of the relationship between parents and preschools. We are aware that this is also a serious limitation of our research. However, it is good to know that other studies in Flanders may compensate for this. Together with colleagues from Ghent University (Steunpunt Diversiteit en Leren), our Department of Social Work and Social Pedagogy has set up a qualitative study in the Flemish community of Belgium to examine the lived experiences of eight children from families living in poverty, some of whom have migrant backgrounds. In that study, children's first year in preschool was documented by video-observations. After completion in 2017, we will present the results of these two studies in order to enrich international and Flemish policy debates on the meaning of preschool for the youngest children and their families.

We analysed policy documents from 15 European countries in order to examine policy perspectives on the conceptualisations of care and education. We only briefly sketched the political debates from the past 50 years on lowering the compulsory school age. More in-depth historical studies, looking into primary sources, should be done on the origins of preschool education in Belgium and Flanders in relation to the pedagogical discourse and changing societal contexts. Since preschools receive financial support for the development of a 'care policy', it would be interesting to examine underlying conceptualisations of care and education in these policies as related to the results of our study.

Despite attempts to organise two focus groups for fathers in the presence of a male researcher and in the evening, the focus groups predominantly consisted of mothers (n=62). Since care is historically constructed as a feminine, private matter, the results of our study are probably gender-biased. In line with the plea of Tavecchio (2002) to counter the democratic deficit of fathers in the educational debate of young children, we recommend the setting up of an additional qualitative study on the preschool experiences and meaning-making of a diverse group of fathers. This does not, however, mean that we assume that fathers are a homogenous category, nor that they have some essential features in common. But considering the persistent feminisation of the preschool workforce, we do need to urgently develop a conscious, gender-sensitive understanding of educare and its practices that is meaningful for both boys and girls, as well as for both fathers and mothers.

Although we attempted three times to organise a focus group with school directors in the cities of Ghent, Antwerp and Brussels, all these focus groups were cancelled. Taking into account the important role school directors potentially play in creating conditions for more caring and democratic preschools, their meaning-making and experience in preschool education should be studied further.

Since our study only analysed existing discourse and perspectives regarding preschool education, we did not examine actual preschool practices. Notwithstanding our recommendation for a corporeal, body-centred epistemology in preschool education and preschool professionalism, the data of the study consist of policy documents and verbal discussions amongst participants of the focus group. In line with the non-dualistic phenomenological stance of Hamington (2004, 2014), further research could focus on gathering data in which verbal discussions are analysed in relation to actual physical interactions of children, parents and preschool staff.

During our study, we were particularly concerned about how we could do justice to the multiple voices of parents as subalterns in school systems. A lot of research that aims to “give voice” to people who find themselves in the margins of society often results in the reverse as it addresses people as victims and helpless; by doing so people are unintentionally silenced (Mutua & Swadener, 2004; Spivak, 1988). Although we tried to set up conditions that



would make as many parents as possible feel comfortable and free to speak up in the focus groups, there were probably some parents who wanted to say more but did not because of the lack of a translator or because of the size of the group. In future research set ups, it might be interesting to combine a focus group with individual follow-up interviews for people who would like to say more to the researcher. Another important issue to address that might prevent study participants from becoming silenced, helpless victims is the development of structures to provide participants the opportunity to discuss the ways in which researchers analyse and interpret the data. Although we initially planned to do two follow-up focus groups with parents and staff, we did not manage to organise these within the time frame of our study. In this humble attempt to challenge the democratic deficit of preschool policy and research debates, we think that much more can be done in future research to disrupt the status quo. Instead of trying to reach as many parents as possible in a one-off focus group, we suggest the development of structures where participants can also be heard and understood during the data analysis and interpretation process. An interesting example of this is Lawson's (2003) qualitative ethnographic study of conceptualisations of parental involvement in primary school education. By working in a school in a low-income and racially-segregated area in the Midwest of the USA and building trusting relationships over two years in the community, Lawson managed to gain rich and deep insights into parents' perspectives, including so-called hard-to-reach parents. Another way of doing this is by designing a cooperative research study in which parents are included as co-researchers (Parents as researchers, 2011) or by setting up action research over a considerable amount of time. A crucial aspect of this type of research is an examination of the politics of knowledge underpinning the relationship between preschool and parents (Cardona, Jain, & Canfield-Davis, 2012; P. Hughes & Mac Naughton, 2000).

In general, we recommend that sociologists and social work, educational and ECEC researchers who develop theories of preschool related to social inequality look further into the role of educare, as both an actual practice and a more theoretical phenomenon, as well as a contributing factor of inclusion and exclusion in preschools, as related to the context of social inequalities. Moreover, we advocate for a more systemic, longitudinal research approach to the parent-preschool relationship that explores how a democratic and open atmosphere in the context of unequal power dynamics may influence inclusive

pedagogical practices for a diversity of children, families and communities. Quality indicators of inclusive pedagogy should be discussed with parents and can include well-being and the physical health of children or ways in which parents and communities feel supported by the preschool.

## **8.4 Recommendations for preschool policies and practices**

### **8.4.1 Adopting a democratic commitment to justice, equality and freedom for all**

In the introduction to this dissertation, we discussed the increasing tendency to develop a dominant social investment discourse around the framing of preschool education as a potentially equalising foundation for underprivileged children. One of the main characteristics is that this social investment paradigm caused an intensification or - according to Vandenbroeck, Roose, and De Bie (2011, p. 4) - a *radicalisation* of parental responsibility in order to ensure positive child development and future school success (Clarke, 2006; Gray, 2013; Jenson, 2009; Schiettecat et al., 2015). Our study found that in setting up dialogical spaces for parents and staff, other meanings of preschool education also became apparent which had previously remained under the radar (e.g., focus on educational autonomy and interdependence). Many parents in our study at first seemed to concur with policy concerns for the academic and economic future of children, as well as the role of language learning in preschools. Yet, whereas preschool policies address the prevention of later school failure as means to stimulate the economic prosperity and reduce dependency ratios (Jenson, 2009; Jenson & Saint-Martin, 2006), parents were concerned if their child would have the experience of belonging and participating in the classroom and preschool, which was considered a crucial foundation for later school success and inclusion in the labour market and broader society. Parents' primary questions concerned children's bodily and socio-emotional caring needs in the present, which has implications for the future. In contrast to the perspective of staff members, the focus groups with parents exposed a fear that their children might be confronted with discriminatory preschool practices. These results imply that the much debated issue of future school failure is more complex than framing it as solely the responsibility of parents, as contrasted with that of schools or governance (Clarke, 2006; Vandenbroeck, Roose, et al., 2011).

Moreover, since the conceptualisations of care and education vary among parents, preschool staff and preschool policies, there is a need to reconceptualise the meaning of preschool education based on the lived experiences of children, parents and preschool staff. Over the last 10 years, the popular social investment thinking in ECEC for preventing school failure and boosting the future economies of the nation states and the European Union, has increasingly tended to overshadow other ways of thinking on the meaning and role of preschool education in society. Tronto's ethical framework seems to have more affinity with the concerns many parents and staff members in our study are struggling with. In Tronto's framework, the main question is how to ensure justice, equality and freedom for all. This makes it possible for people to take collective responsibility, to think of citizens as both receivers and givers of care and to think seriously about the nature of caring needs in society. The practice of putting care at the heart of public life, like preschools, does not just concern fellow citizens, but also benefits democracy itself (Tronto, 2013). The ethical framework of the DECET<sup>14</sup> principles may also serve as an inspiration for the development of an alternative ways of thinking and speaking about preschool education (DECET, 2007). This framework is embedded in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and is applied to preschool education, as outlined by below:

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“ All children and adults have the right to evolve and to develop in a context where there is equity and respect for diversity. Children, parents and educators have the right to good quality in early childhood education services, free from any form of - overt and covert, individual and structural - discrimination due to their race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status (in reference to Article 2, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). (DECET, 2007, p. 6)

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DECET (2007) advocates that all children, parents, preschool staff and local communities:

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<sup>14</sup>DECET (Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training) brings together different European organisations and projects with common goals about the value of diversity in early childhood education and training. DECET aims at promoting and studying democratic ECEC, and acknowledging the multiple (cultural and other) identities of children and families.

- feel that they belong in preschools
- are empowered to develop the diverse aspects of their identity
- can learn from each other across cultural and other boundaries
- can participate as active citizens in preschools
- actively address bias through open communication and a willingness to grow
- work together to challenge institutional forms of prejudice and discrimination

Preschool education should be a place where children, parents, staff, and local communities can participate in democratic educational practices (Jésu, 2010; Rayna & Rubio, 2010). This is not an easy mission due to the fact that preschool institutions are strictly predefined and organised in a fairly hierarchical way. Considering the existing diversity and societal power differences amongst families, practitioners and local communities, democratic practice is a constant search for a way to create conditions where everyone has the right to be heard and experience respect, recognition, solidarity, care and a sense of belonging. Quality in this approach is the inventing and reinventing of ways in which preschool education can function for all children and families by negotiating meanings among all stakeholders. From a social work perspective on preschool education this concerns offering a forum to learn to deal with diversity and learn to translate private concerns into public issues (Biesta, 2011). It should be noted that the focus on preventing later school failure can indeed be a legitimate concern of the stakeholders; this study, however, points out multiple ways of thinking so that preschool education itself is not just a preparatory phase, but has value in and of itself.

Although the universal approach and access of preschool education in the Flemish community of Belgium is something to be applauded, questions do arise as to why Belgian and Flemish political debates on lowering the compulsory school age and 'toddler participation' policies especially focus on parents who are from migrant or poor backgrounds. This assumes a viewpoint that especially these parents need to be more involved in their children's education. In the Belgian and Flemish political debates on lowering the compulsory school age, illustrated in the introduction to this dissertation, it is

remarkable how parents with the same profile were continuously ‘targeted’, even when studies show lower attendance rates for boatman’s children in the 1970s and children of self-employed parents or parents working in liberal professions in the 2000s. When taking Tronto’s ethical care framework or the DECET principles as a foundation, we should be attentive to the caring needs of all children and families in preschool education instead of problematising some groups.

#### 8.4.2 Being attentive to caring needs in preschool education

In order to offer good care, one needs to be attentive and perceive caring needs of others with as little distortion as possible (Tronto, 1993). Especially in an international context of the schoolification of the early years, it is recommended that policy makers, both in split and integrated ECEC systems, become or remain attentive and vigilant when putting or keeping care at the center of preschool education. In order to do this, governmental policies can implement systemic approaches in order to listen to the articulated caring needs of children and parents and recognise unspoken needs (Tronto, 1993).

In Flemish and Belgian policy debates on toddler participation and the lowering of the compulsory school age, a number of assumptions are made on behalf of the children, parents and staff without directly consulting them. Given that statements by the last Ministers of Education assume that Flemish preschool education stands ‘at the top’ (Commissie voor Onderwijs en Gelijke Kansen, 8/03/2012; Crevits, 2016; Vandenbroucke, 2007), such statements should be qualitatively evaluated from time to time by taking into consideration the lived experiences of the stakeholders with preschool experience. The main question is: How does a diversity of children, parents, local communities and preschool staff experience and give meaning to preschool education? In addition, it might also be helpful to turn more to existing experience based studies of advocacy groups representing a diversity of parents (e.g. Dautrebande, 2008; Jeunejean, Chevalier, Grosjean, & Teller, 2014; Steunpunt tot bestrijding van armoede bestaansonzekerheid en sociale uitsluiting, 2006).

In the Flemish community of Belgium, all children aged two-and-a-half to six are legally entitled to a free place in preschool. In contrast to many other countries, this policy choice deserves full praise. Nevertheless, our study showed that

many parents have identified caring needs of their children that remain unaddressed during teachers' coffee and lunch breaks, when children are expected to play outside (*speeltijd*) with little supervision. Considering that teachers are officially expected to stay 15 minutes after the lesson and that many lunch time breaks last a lot longer, this raises many questions on how this 'remaining time' is organised and whether this actually is in tune with the caring needs of children (Kint, 2016). It should be noted that because Belgium has a long preschool tradition, the institution still stems from an older societal model in which more mothers were home more to take care of the children. Moreover, Belgium is historically characterised by an ECEC system that separates 'caring' childcare services and out-of-school care services from preschool institutions that focus on 'learning'. The idea that care belongs in the private household or in other early years services does not yet accommodate the needs of children and families in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There is a fundamental need to rethink educare from the perspective of a diverse group of young children and families instead of continuing the institutional, organisational perspective.

The fact that this divide between care and learning is no longer sustainable also shows in the Flemish policy debates. Some policy makers have, from time to time, debated who is responsible for the 'burdens' of bodily care -- referred to in academic literature as 'dirty work' since it is concerned with bodily fluids or other 'matter out of place' (e.g., potty training) (Grosz, 1994). However, our study demonstrates that care in preschool education can mean much more, from physical and emotional to even political understanding; according to several participants, caring is inseparable from support for the learning processes of children. In order to shift the cumbersome tone into a more positive and constructive debate, policy makers could make use of the international scene to exchange experiences and knowledge concerning educare in preschool education (i.e., conferences, study visits, innovation projects). Simultaneously, exchange projects could be set-up for preschool staff. Well-integrated ECEC systems in countries like Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Slovenia and New Zealand as well as the split ECEC systems in countries like Italy, that work proactively on a better transition from childcare to preschool, can provide inspiration in this regard. Also, within the Flemish community, awareness of caring needs can be raised by organising a better

exchange of experiences and knowledge between policy makers and childcare, preventive family support, and preschool sector professionals.

### 8.4.3 Taking responsibility to care in preschool education

Simply being attentive to caring needs is not sufficient. Preschool governmental policies should ensure that preschool institutions and preschool staff are actually held responsible for responding to caring needs (Tronto, 1993). This refers to a more systemic approach to quality development and ECEC professionalism like that clarified in the study on Competence Requirements for Early Childhood Education (the CoRe Study), commissioned by the European Commission, Directorate General for Education and Culture (Urban, Vandenbroeck, Peeters, Lazzari, & Van Laere, 2011; Urban, Vandenbroeck, Van Laere, Lazzari, & Peeters, 2012). This study pointed out the necessity of developing ECEC policies that strengthen a competent system instead of simply addressing the required competences of the individual preschool teacher.

We propose different points of attention in this matter.

- **Update preschool workforce profiles to include the creation of caring and democratic preschool practices**

In 1998 and 2007, the Flemish government formalised and initiated a professional profile for preschool teachers in which the job of a teacher is explained in ten roles<sup>15</sup> and required professional attitudes (Vlaamse Regering, 5/10/2007). As this should be an important source for university colleges and preschool institutions, an update of this profile, in which the emotional, physical and political caring aspects of the educational role (*leraar als opvoeder*) are made more explicit, is suggested. With regards to 'stimulating learning processes' and 'educating children', it is important that the teacher dialogue with parents on the meaning-making of preschool and educate (Vlaamse Regering, 5/10/2007). As there is no clear vision of the educational role of a teacher's assistant, and our study confirmed their often invisible, complex

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<sup>15</sup>These teacher roles are: (1) facilitator of learning and developmental processes, (2) educator (*opvoeder*), (3) content expert, (4) organiser, (5) innovator - researcher, (6) partner of parents or care givers, (7) member of a school team, (8) partner of externals, (9) member of the educational community (*onderwijsgemeenschap*), and (10) cultural participant.

position in preschools, it would be good to initiate a debate with different stakeholders in the field regarding that role and what it ideally could be in relation to a diverse group of children, parents, and preschool teachers, as well as the preschool institution.

- **Ensure that quality inspection bodies assess the extent to which preschool practices are caring and democratic**

Governmental quality inspection teams could better evaluate how preschools actually identify, recognise and respond to the caring needs of a diverse group of children and families in preschool education and how the preschool promotes a democratic atmosphere enabling children, parents and staff to communicate with each other. The concept of 'onderwijstijd' could be reviewed from an educare viewpoint, in which learning and caring are inseparable.

- **Invest in good working conditions for preschool teachers and teacher's assistants**

Preschool institutions need sufficient personnel to achieve adequate child-staff ratios throughout every moment of the day (including lunch breaks). Furthermore, preschool institutions need to assure that the number of children in classes is adequate so teachers and teacher's assistants can provide sufficient individual attention and give support to children regarding their caring and learning needs. Smaller groups can make it easier for the staff members to build good relationships with parents. Some preschool institutions work with mixed age groups, which may serve as an inspiration as these schools manage to construct a concept of educare in which children also care for each other as an important part of growing up. The transition into these class groups is smoother both for children and preschool staff than, for example, the case of 20 children who all start school at the same time and in the same class.

Since teacher's assistants can play an important role in educare, they should be able to work substantially more hours in one class. Currently, many of them work in more than one school or class. Because of their irregular presence, teacher's assistants in the focus groups reported that it is very challenging to build up quality caring relationships with children, parents, teachers and other staff members in the preschool.



As shown in the CoRe Study, ample evidence exists to show that short-term in-service training courses (e.g. *pedagogische studiedag, vorming*) are not sufficient to ensure sustainable quality improvement. Preschool teachers and teacher's assistants should have enough child-free hours to reflect upon and develop their practices based on the needs of children and families in the context of social inequalities (Urban et al., 2011; Urban et al., 2012).

As a result of having noted an artificial division of education into different functions and the attribution of these functions to different staff members, it is strongly recommended that the essential roles of teachers and teacher's assistants, as first confidants of children and families, receive reinvestment and refocusing. Bridge figures and care coordinators, for example, could mentor or support preschool teachers and initiate professional reflections on how to respond to caring needs and how to collaborate with and share responsibilities with parents. Yet, it is up to the teachers and teacher's assistants in the first place to interact, for example, with parents, as the presence of a bridge figure often devalues the democratic competences of teachers (Depoorter, 2006; Mihajlović, Trikić, Skarep, Duvnjak, & Stojanovic, 2010).

- **Invest in age-appropriate infrastructure and rearrange space to increase the well-being of children, parents and preschool staff**

Since many parents and staff members in the focus groups problematised the care facilities, preschool policies should address this need by providing the necessary resources for preschool institutions that have a more classical lay-out. This would help them rebuild their preschool infrastructure into age-appropriate and peaceful eating, toileting, outdoor playing and sleeping facilities for young children. Preschool institutions could rethink and rearrange their infrastructure and lay-out spaces in order to improve the well-being of children and parents. Preschool, for example, can become much more welcoming to parents when there are meeting spaces with couches in or close to the classes. Creating a welcoming environment for parents will automatically evoke more opportunities to share the educational responsibilities of children. As preschools collaborate with out-of-school care centres, it could be interesting to explore possibilities for sharing space and caring facilities in order to develop continuous educare practices for children and parents. Finally, it should be noted that by investing in age-appropriate infrastructure and

rearranging space, an increased sense of well-being for preschool staff themselves will result, as it will be more peaceful and enjoyable to work in the classes.

#### 8.4.4 Being responsive to the experiences of children and families

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“ The truth is, however, that the oppressed are not “marginals,” are not people living “outside” society. They have always been “inside”—inside the structure which made them “beings for others.” The solution is not to “integrate” them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become “beings for themselves.” (Freire, 2009, p. 165)

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This dimension concerns how children and families respond to the given care in preschool education. Whether or not their caring needs have been met, there will be some response to the care that has been given (Tronto, 1993). Therefore preschool staff and preschool institutions should be sensitive and responsive in interactions with children and parents.

We build upon the work of Canella (1997), who problematised the dominant terminology of ‘parent involvement’, which implies from an institutional point of view that parents need to be more involved in their children’s learning. In actual reality, parents are already involved in the lives of their children in multiple ways. In her renowned book on ‘Deconstructing Early Childhood Education’ Canella (1997) underlined that: “Educators (and we include ourselves) have not yet constructed a language that gives the message that we want to learn from and with parents and their children”(Canella, 1997, p. 107). It is not just about preschool staff members getting better at explaining themselves to parents; it is also about staff members getting better at listening to parents’ needs and concerns (Tobin, Arzubiaga, & Adair, 2013). This necessitates a willingness and ability to dialogue, let go of a utilitarian mind-set and negotiate meanings on educate with parents (Brougère, 2010; Tobin et al., 2013). Nevertheless, listening, dialoguing and negotiating requires a reciprocity and democratic atmosphere which remains challenging in hierarchical systems where the valuable knowledge of parents on the care and education of their own children is often not seen or recognised, or is simply considered subordinate to the knowledge of the preschool staff.

Rather than claiming equal status in a partnership, schools may wish to encompass a continuous search for opportunities to create moments of reciprocal dialogue with a diversity of parents within unequal relations. By raising the awareness that the history of school systems and accompanying societal dynamics make it easier for some parents to speak up, and by introducing them to contextualised approaches to their children's education, preschool staff may be more likely to interact with parents. As a result they might be willing to adapt their own practices and systems in order to accommodate diverse children and families. Nevertheless, this is not a simple endeavor, considering the fact that many parents in our study reported that they were not allowed to enter the preschool class and thus did not have a lot of contact with staff members.

On the level of the preschool institution, it is strongly recommended that school policies allow parents full access to classes so relationships with staff members can be built and parents can experience the class practice of their children. Directors should invest in quality feedback mechanisms in which they evaluate how parents experience and give meaning to the preschool, and indicate whether and how the caring, learning and other possible needs of their children are met. The formal parental board may not suffice since this is often not representative of the diversity of parents in the school. The core of this kind of feedback is an awareness that different parents have different needs and, therefore, they should be addressed in different ways. Some might prefer a digital school platform, while others would rather have daily talks with the teacher. Some parents prefer to talk in private, while others might feel more comfortable talking in a group of other parents. An important focal point is the development of communication strategies that are sensitive to the needs of fathers. With regards to the preschool team, directors could organise regular staff meetings to discuss provided feedback on the quality of their educare approach. Promoting a more democratic and caring atmosphere in relation to children and parents also implies that staff hierarchies within the preschool institution may eventually become more flattened (Tronto, 2010).

#### 8.4.5 Being competent in care in preschool education

When preschool staff members take on the responsibility of engaging in democratic educare practices, they must be knowledgeable and skilled in order to do this qualitatively. We recommend that international and Flemish

preschool policies stimulate a normative critical professionalism beyond a didactical approach in pre- and in-service training, in which the use of emotions, embodiment and value-bound elements of professional actions (such as personal involvement and social responsibility) are central (Colley, 2006; Kunneman, 2005; Osgood, 2010; Peeters, 2008). Being both open to multiple perspectives and aware that knowledge about 'best practices' in educare is always provisional and tentative are critical aspects of the matter in a context of social inequalities and diversity (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Urban, 2008; Vandenbroeck, Roets, & Snoeck, 2009).

Our study demonstrates how many preschool teachers viewed being caring as not part of their professional identity and doing caring activities as not part of their professional repertoire. Both pre-service (university colleges) and in-service training should pay extra attention to how to discuss different ways of being professional in the preschool education environment. Considering how preschool staff in our study identify caring needs but suppress caring responses, it might be beneficial for all involved for them to develop a professional, reflective language of educare which enables staff to utilise their embodied potential to care and reclaim care in a professional and gender-neutral way. This is not a simple endeavour since 'care' has been used for a long time as a means of disciplining and keeping women docile in patriarchal structures (Canella, 1997). Instead of simply 'introducing' care into what previously seemed to be low-care situations (like, for example, preschools in ECEC split systems) assuming that no staff member engages in care, we underline that care is pervasive and can be enriched by stimulating staff's caring imagination, thereby promoting empathy, critical reflection and the understanding of another's context (Hamington, 2014).

In order for preschool staff to adapt their practices to the needs of children and families in the context of a diverse society, it is important that teachers and teacher's assistants critically reflect with colleagues and feel supported by them, thereby transforming uncertainty into a professional strength (DECET & ISSA, 2011; Peeters & Sharmahd, 2014). From that perspective, we recommend that preschool institutions invest in team learning for all staff members involved with young children and their families (including teacher's assistants and other supervisory staff members). The study on Competence Requirements for Early Childhood Education (the CoRe Study), commissioned by the European

Commission, Directorate General for Education and Culture, showed how most innovative high-quality preschool practices in Europe are accompanied by the use of a method of critical group reflection (e.g., analyse de pratique, wanda, pedagogical documentation, ...), often facilitated by a *pedagogista* (or *pedagogisch begeleider*, pedagogical coordinator, adviser – people who support the team in quality improvement through the development of their professional competences) (Urban et al., 2011; Urban et al., 2012). Also in case of the pre-service training, these critical reflection methods may serve as an inspiration to support students in reconceptualising care and education in dialogue with parents.

In accordance with a corporeal or body-centered epistemology, it should be noted that critical reflection is not simply an intellectual endeavor but should incorporate the body as an inherent part of the analytical process. A more embodied understanding of professional reflection can transcend traditional dualisms between mind and body, thought and action, and theory and practice (Kinsella, 2007; Macintyre Latta & Buck, 2008; Ord & Nuttall, 2016). To this end, it is recommended to combine critical team learning activities with video-interaction analysis or with forms of role play where preschool staff and students become more aware of and experiment with their own embodiment in preschool practice. Moreover, as argued in chapter seven, this corporeal epistemology creates opportunities to discuss the presence and importance of attracting more male preschool teachers. By recognising the centrality of both male and female body work and emotions in the preschool system and society, new understandings of the body, emotions and mind will be developed and contemplated (Hochschild, 2003; Wolkowitz, 2006).

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## Nederlandstalige Samenvatting

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### Inleiding

In deze studie focusten we afwisselend op het Europese veld van kleuteronderwijs en Vlaanderen als interessante case in relatie tot de constructie van kleuteronderwijs als preventie van schools falen voor kinderen met kansarme en/of migratie achtergrond. Door in te zetten op het 'gelijkmakend' potentieel van kleuteronderwijs hoopt men de onderwijskloof te verkleinen. Sinds de jaren '60 hebben politieke debatten in België en Vlaanderen plaatsgevonden over het responsabiliseren van maatschappelijk kwetsbare ouders om hun kinderen naar de kleuterschool te sturen via de verlaging van de leerplicht of kleuterparticipatie maatregelen (Van Laere & Vandenbroeck, 2014). In de jaren '60 en '70 werden deze politieke debatten opvallend meer gekenmerkt door ideologische meningsverschillen over de maatschappelijk rol, betekenis en bijhorende gewenste pedagogiek van het kleuteronderwijs. Sinds het nieuwe millennium wordt voornamelijk een economische investeringslogica naar voren geschoven door Belgische en Vlaamse beleidsmakers, ongeacht hun politieke achtergrond. Dit sluit aan bij een wereldwijde tendens waarin internationale organisaties volop promotie maken bij overheden om te investeren in voorschoolse voorzieningen (Jenson, 2009; Morabito, 2015; Perkins, Nelms, & Smyth, 2004).

Studies over de potentiële economische opbrengst voor de samenleving (Barnett & Masse, 2007; Heckman, 2006) en de positieve effecten op de hersenontwikkeling van kinderen (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000) worden herhaaldelijk gebruikt om deze vroegtijds 'investering' te legitimeren. Bovendien verwijst men naar verschillende longitudinale studies die aantonen dat kleuterschool van een hoge kwaliteit positieve effecten zou hebben op de cognitieve en sociaal-emotionele ontwikkeling van kinderen, wat later betere schoolresultaten met zich zou meebrengen (zie bijvoorbeeld het Europese literatuur overzicht Lazarri & Vandenbroeck, 2013; Melhuish et al., 2015). Omdat kinderen als het toekomstig menselijk kapitaal van een samenleving worden beschouwd, gaat men ervan uit dat kleuteronderwijs kinderen beter kan voorbereiden op een verdere succesvolle schoolcarrière en tewerkstelling op de arbeidsmarkt (Perkins et al., 2004; Williams, 2004). De hoogste return ziet of verwacht men bij kinderen van een lagere socio-economische klasse en

kinderen met een migratie achtergrond, zeker diegene die thuis niet de dominante schooltaal spreken (Bennett, 2012; Leseman & Slot, 2014; Matthews & Jang, 2007; Melhuish et al., 2015).

Men gaat er in andere woorden van uit dat investeringen in voorschoolse voorzieningen sociale problemen zoals falen op school, vroegtijdig schoolverlaten, werkloosheid en armoede kan voorkomen (European Commission, 2011, 2013; OECD, 2012; UNESCO, 2007). Typerend aan dit sociaal investeringsparadigma is dat bestaande ongelijkheden en uitsluiting voornamelijk benaderd worden als een economisch probleem (Ang, 2014; Williams, 2004; Wong & Turner, 2014). Omdat de focus ligt op de economische toekomst van een samenleving, lijkt het alsof de kleuterschool enkel een voorbereidende functie in relatie tot het verder onderwijs heeft zonder dat het zelf een finaliteit en identiteit op zich heeft (Ang, 2014; Moss, 2013; Vandenbroeck, Coussee, & Bradt, 2010). Dit internationaal fenomeen noemt men de 'verschoolsing' van voorschoolse voorzieningen. Bijgevolg dreigen formele leerbenaderingen vroeger geïntroduceerd te worden omdat men ervan uitgaat dat kinderen al best zo jong mogelijk preschoolse academische en sociale vaardigheden aanleren (OECD, 2006; Woodhead, 2006). Sommige auteurs hebben erop gewezen hoe het sociale investeringsdenken tegelijkertijd een 'radicalisering' van de ouderlijke verantwoordelijkheid met zich mee brengt (Clarke, 2006; Gray, 2013; Jenson, 2009; Schiettecat, Roets, & Vandenbroeck, 2015; Vandenbroeck, Roose, & De Bie, 2011): ouders worden veronderstelt, sterk aangemoedigd of quasi gedwongen om hun kind zo veel en vroeg mogelijk naar de kleuterschool te sturen. Idealiter wordt er van ouders verwacht dat men ook betrokken is in het voorschoolse leren van hun kind.

### **Probleemstelling en onderzoeksvragen**

In deze beleids- en academische debatten is het opvallend dat de stem en ervaring van ouders zelf vaak afwezig is (Hughes & Mac Naughton, 2000). Ouders krijgen een meer instrumentele rol in de leerprocessen van hun kinderen zonder dat ze zelf betrokken worden over de betekenis van leren, onderwijs en opvoeding (Brougère, 2010; Doucet, 2011; Hughes & Mac Naughton, 2000; Lawson, 2003; Vandenbroeck, De Stercke, & Gobeyn, 2013). Ook de stemmen en ervaringen van leerkrachten en kindbegeleiders in het kleuteronderwijs zijn onderbelicht. Beperkt kleinschalig onderzoek over het

perspectief van ouders en leerkrachten wijst, naast het aanleren van pre-academische en sociale vaardigheden, ook naar het belang van emotionele en fysieke ondersteuning van kinderen in de kleuterschool, zeker voor kinderen in maatschappelijke kwetsbare situatie (Brougère, 2015; Hwa-Froelich & Westby, 2003; Vandenbroeck et al., 2013; Wesley & Buysse, 2003). Enkele onderzoekers hebben echter gewaarschuwd dat zorg van jonge kinderen geleidelijk aan zal verdwijnen door de verdere verschooling van het kleuteronderwijs (Alvestad, 2009; Forrester, 2005; Kyriacou, Ellingsen, Stephens, & Sundaram, 2009; Smith & Whyte, 2008). Dit zou er op kunnen wijzen dat de manier waarop ouders betekenis geven aan zorg, leren en opvoeding in relatie tot kleuteronderwijs een relatie heeft met sociale insluitings- of uitsluitingsmechanismen in kleuteronderwijs. Deze hypothese onderzochten we verder aan de hand van volgende onderzoeksvragen.

- Hoe conceptualiseren ouders, medewerkers kleuteronderwijs en beleid 'zorg', 'leren' en 'opvoeding' in kleuteronderwijs?
- Wat betekenen deze verschillende en gelijkaardige conceptualiseringën voor de toenemende aandacht voor kleuteronderwijs als gelijkmakende voorwaarde voor later school succes?
- Hoe verhouden deze verschillende en tegengestelde conceptualiseringën zich met de hardnekkige sociale ongelijkheden die bestaan in het onderwijssysteem?

Dit onderzoek neemt een sociaal pedagogisch perspectief in op sociaal werk. Sociaal werk komt tussen waar private en publieke bekommernissen samenkomen zoals bijvoorbeeld het kleuteronderwijs (Bouverne - De Bie, 2015; Neyrand, 2010; Parton, 1998). Een sociaal pedagogisch perspectief betekent dat kleuteronderwijs altijd geanalyseerd wordt in relatie tot een maatschappelijke en politieke context en de bredere structuren van de samenleving. Door het perspectief van de betrokkenen te onderzoeken, proberen we telkens opnieuw te analyseren wat precies door wie gepercipieerd wordt als een probleem (Vandenbroeck, Coussée, Bradt, & Roose, 2011).

### Onderzoeksmethodes en overzicht hoofdstukken

Om het beleidsperspectief te onderzoeken, analyseerden we verschillende beleidsdocumenten samen met lokale kleuteronderwijs experts in 15 Europese lidstaten. Deze studie was een onderdeel van de CoRe studie in opdracht van de Europese Commissie, Directoraat-generaal Onderwijs en Cultuur (Urban, Vandenbroeck, Peeters, Lazzari, & Van Laere, 2011; Urban, Vandenbroeck, Van Laere, Lazzari, & Peeters, 2012). Om het perspectief van ouders en medewerkers te onderzoeken, zochten we een methodiek die ervoor kan zorgen dat ouders en medewerkers open en oprecht kunnen spreken en discussiëren. Een focusgroep of een groepsinterview is een goede methodiek om mensen bij elkaar te brengen en de centrale plaats en invloed van de onderzoeker te minimaliseren. Bovendien zijn visuele materialen zoals een film een krachtige manier om oprechte, spontane reacties bij mensen op te roepen. Daarom maakten we een film over een dag in de instapklas. In deze film volgden we een diversiteit aan kinderen gedurende een hele dag tijdens verschillende zorg- en leermomenten (bijv. aankomst ouders, onthaal, vrij spel, toiletmoment, speelplaats, kring, eetmoment,...). De discussies die ontstonden na het bekijken van de film vormden de onderzoeksdata. We startten de focusgroepen door te vragen aan de participanten of zij dit een typische kleuterschool praktijk vinden. Door deze vraag te stellen, werden mensen uitgedaagd om zich te positioneren ten opzichte van de kleuterschool in de film, waardoor het meer duidelijk werd welke betekenissen ouders en medewerkers zelf aan zorg, leren en opvoeding gaven (Tobin, 2009; Tobin, Arzubaga, & Adair, 2013; Tobin & Hsueh, 2007). Hoofdstuk twee beschrijft verder de gekozen onderzoeksmethodes in het verzamelen en analyseren van de empirische data. Dit hoofdstuk probeert ook transparantie te bieden over het onderzoeksproces en sluit af met persoonlijke reflecties van de hoofdonderzoeker over haar positie in het onderzoek, werk en leven.

Concreet organiseerden we tien focusgroepen in Gent, Antwerpen en Brussel voor ouders met een migratieachtergrond (n = 65). We kozen deze groep omdat zij in het beleid vaak geproblematiseerd worden. Het was enigszins niet onze bedoeling ouders met migratieachtergrond als een homogene groep te beschouwen of op zoek te gaan naar essentiële kenmerken in hun perspectief. De meeste respondenten waren moeders en zes respondenten waren vaders.



De focusgroepen in Brussel maakten ook deel uit van een groter onderzoek over Educare in opdracht van de Vlaamse Gemeenschapscommissie. De data-analyse over het perspectief van de ouders wordt beschreven in hoofdstukken vier en vijf. Deze hoofdstukken sluiten aan bij internationale academische debatten over ouderbetrokkenheid in relatie tot de kleuterschool en voorschools leren (early learning) in kleuteronderwijs. We organiseerden zes focusgroepen met medewerkers in het kleuteronderwijs in Gent en Brussel (n=69). We spraken met kleuterleid(st)ers, kinderbegeleid(st)ers, naschoolse begeleid(st)ers, zorgcoördinatoren en brugfiguren. Buiten één mannelijke begeleider waren alle participanten vrouwen. De data-analyse van het perspectief van de medewerkers is terug te vinden in de hoofdstukken vijf en zes. Deze hoofdstukken vinden aansluiting bij de academische debatten over professionalisering, 'educare' en voorschools leren in kleuteronderwijs. Aangezien conceptualisering van zorg een sterke gender dimensie hebben, hebben we hierover een theoretisch conceptueel hoofdstuk toegevoegd. Alhoewel hoofdstuk zeven vertrekt van de normatieve vraagstelling hoe meer mannelijke medewerkers in voorschoolse voorzieningen aan te trekken, biedt dit hoofdstuk nieuwe inzichten in de relatie tussen gender en concepten van zorg, leren en opvoeding door beroep te doen op feministisch academische literatuur.

## Resultaten

### *Meervoudige betekenissen van de relatie tussen zorg en leren*

Deze studie toonde de heterogeniteit van betekenissen die ouders en medewerkers toekennen aan het kleuteronderwijs. De relatie tussen zorg en leren bleek een controversieel gespreksonderwerp omdat het vele vragen, onzekerheid en ongemak bij de participanten in de focusgroepen opriep. Sommige participanten spraken in termen van de verwevenheid van leren en zorg in een overkoepelend concept van opvoeding gebaseerd op autonomie in verbondenheid. Andere deelnemers wezen op een conceptuele opsplitsing of zelfs een hiërarchie tussen zorg en leren. Deze hiërarchie werd ook zichtbaar in de analyse van beleidsdocumenten in 15 Europese landen: waar de hoger geschoolde leerkrachten verantwoordelijk zijn voor het leren van kinderen, zijn lager geschoolde 'assistenten' (bijv. kinderbegeleid(st)ers in het kleuteronderwijs met een diploma kinderopvang) verantwoordelijk voor fysieke

en emotionele zorg. Aangezien de positie van deze assistenten complex en onzichtbaar was in vergelijking met de positie van de leerkracht, riep dit vragen op naar de plek van fysieke en emotionele zorg in kleuteronderwijs.

Leerkrachten en assistenten begrepen kleuteronderwijs vaak als het leren in een formele setting. Zij namen een eerder didactische benadering in door het belang van volgende leerkracht geleide activiteiten te benadrukken: verfactiviteiten, kringmomenten, wiskundige initiatie oefeningen, zintuiglijke oefeningen en oefeningen over tijdsbegrip en het weer. Bovendien werd duidelijk dat veel belang gehecht werd aan het leren luisteren naar de leerkracht en gehoorzaam zijn. Deze participanten stelden dat zorg activiteiten het leren in de weg doen staan, waardoor leerkrachten gehinderd zijn in hun job. Net zoals vele ouders, erkenden medewerkers dat jonge kinderen fysieke en emotionele noden hebben: zij zijn bezig met het ontdekken van hun eigen lichaam, met lichamelijke en emotionele noden zoals eten, drinken, neus snuiten, naar het toilet gaan, lichamelijk contact met anderen of slapen. Deze processen werden echter gezien als ondergeschikt aan het aangeboden onderwijs, wat impliceerde dat zorg in essentie als iets niet pedagogisch of niet leerrijk werd beschouwd. Sommige assistenten bevestigden deze hiërarchie door hun eigen zorgende rol te minimaliseren of te diskwalificeren. Vanuit dit hiërarchisch denken, benadrukten of verlangden sommige medewerkers dat de ouders en de medewerkers in de kinderopvang de kinderen beter al zouden voorbereiden op de kleuterschool door hen 'zelfstandig te maken' in het managen van hun lichaam en emoties. Algemeen werd er gesteld dat het 'zelfstandig' maken van kinderen, een conditie is om te kunnen leren. Sommige ouders gaven inderdaad aan hun kind zo snel mogelijk zelfstandig te willen maken uit vrees dat hun kind anders niet gezien zou worden in de klas of niet volwaardig als leerling geaccepteerd zou worden en dus minder leerkansen zou krijgen.

#### *Pleidooi voor de integratie van zorg en leren*

Alhoewel dit een dominant discours was, waren er ook afwijkende stemmen van ouders en vooral kindbegeleiders. Deze participanten achtten het leren leven en de opvoeding van kinderen heel belangrijk: kinderen zijn en worden autonoom en tezelfdertijd groeien ze in verbinding met anderen. Vanuit dit perspectief kan zorg niet bestaan zonder leren en vice versa. Dit betekent dat

zorgactiviteiten zoals eten, drinken, naar het toilet gaan in essentie pedagogisch en leerrijk zijn, terwijl het ondersteunen van cognitieve, sociale, motorische en artistieke leerprocessen ook een zorgende houding van de opvoeder vraagt. Op basis van deze visie, hadden ouders en kindbegeleiders vragen over wat zij beschouwden als een gebrek aan gepaste en kwaliteitsvolle fysieke en emotionele zorg in de kleuterschool. Deze participanten begrepen opvoeding als een gezamenlijke verantwoordelijkheid van ouders en school vanuit de idee dat het kind beiden nodig heeft. Bovendien werd het duidelijk dat de kleuterschool een zinvolle en complementaire opvoedingsomgeving kan zijn voor hun kind: vele ouders vonden het belangrijk dat hun kind naar de kleuterschool gaat om de Nederlandse taal te leren, zowel voor de sociale interacties in de klas als voor succes in de verdere schoolcarrière van hun kind. Ook achtte men de kleuterschool belangrijk zodat kinderen leren in groep te zijn, zelfvertrouwen te ontwikkelen, elkaar te helpen en leren om te gaan met diversiteit. De school werd vanuit dit oogpunt als een mini-samenleving beschouwd. In de thuisomgeving hebben kinderen andere leerervaringen zoals het leren van de thuistaal en het leren omgaan met conflict met broers en zussen. Kortom, de ouders die deelnamen aan ons onderzoek vonden kleuterparticipatie belangrijk en vaak om dezelfde redenen dan het beleid die deze participatie aanmoedigt. Maar ze vroegen wel meer aandacht voor zorg en de integratie van zorg en leren.

De omstreden relatie tussen zorg en leren waarin zorg vaak als ondergeschikt werd benaderd, betekende niet per definitie dat medewerkers geen zorgnoden van kinderen konden identificeren. Het filosofisch kader van Hamington (2004) theoretiseert dat op ontologisch vlak menselijke lichamen gemaakt zijn om te zorgen: elke mens heeft genoeg bewuste en onbewuste kennis opgebouwd in het lichaam. Door menselijke empathie via de geest en het lichaam zijn mensen in staat om een zorgende respons te geven aan bijvoorbeeld iemand die op straat valt. Het lichaam weet wat de mogelijke pijn kan zijn bij een val en van daaruit kunnen mensen een zorgende respons ontwikkelen. Het werd echter duidelijk dat vele leerkrachten deze zorgende respons onderdrukten en hun belichaamd potentieel om te zorgen niet ten volle benutten. De schaarse leerkrachten die hier toch aan 'toegaven', verantwoordden dit door te verwijzen naar hun persoonlijkheid of het feit dat ze moeder zijn geworden. Weinig of geen leerkrachten begrepen zorg en opvoeding als deel van hun

professionele identiteit en repertoire. Sommige kindbegeleiders suggereerden wel het belang van zorg als deel van het kleuteronderwijs, maar konden dit enkel verwoorden door te verwijzen naar het zorgrepertoire van een moederfiguur.

*Een alternatief voor de cartesische opsplitsing tussen geest en lichaam*

In deze studie hebben we de opsplitsing en de hiërarchie tussen zorg en leren verder geanalyseerd door het bestuderen van feministisch academisch werk. De hiërarchie tussen leren en zorg vindt zijn origine in het cartesische denken waarin lichaam en geest als twee onderscheiden entiteiten beschouwd worden. Reeds in het vroegere Christendom is men ervan uitgegaan dat fysieke en emotionele noden aan het lichaam toebehoren en intellectuele noden aan de geest (Braidotti, 2006; Foucault, 1984; Gatens, 1996; Haraway, 1991; Merleau-Ponty, 1945; Merleau-Ponty & Lefort, 1964). Als kinderen de menselijke wereld van het leren willen aanvangen, dienen zij eerst uit hun meer primitieve zorgfase te groeien. De verschooijsing van het kleuteronderwijs, met haar nadruk op de toekomstige schoolcarrière en arbeidsmarkt, zou het cartesische dualisme verder versterken met als gevolg dat diegene die zorg geven en krijgen genegeerd of ondergewaardeerd worden (Fielding & Moss, 2011; Tobin, 1997; Warin, 2014). Bovendien stelt Lynch (2016) dat het denken in termen van het creëren van zelfstandig en economisch productieve burgers via onderwijs, de mens als relationeel, affectief en interafhankelijk wezen ontkent (Lynch, 2016; Lynch, Lyons, & Cantillon, 2007). Deze ontkenning heeft niet enkel effect op kinderen en hun gezinnen zelf maar ook op het ontkennen van fysieke en emotionele zorgnoden van medewerkers. In onze studie wijzen we op een alternatieve conceptuele manier van denken waarin de geest ook belichaamd is en waarin het lichaam als iets sociaals, politieks en in proces benaderd wordt eerder dan een louter natuurlijk gegeven (Braidotti, 2006). Door het bespreekbaar maken van de verbinding tussen lichaam- geest en zorg-leren, kan er bovendien ook op een andere manier nagedacht worden over de positie van mannelijke begeleiders of leerkrachten in het kleuteronderwijs, die nu vaak moeilijk is of als een taboe gezien wordt.

*Gebrek aan zorg kan uitsluiting creëren*

De zorgvragen die vele ouders uitten, gaan verder dan het louter beantwoorden van fysieke en emotionele noden. Achter de zorgvragen identificeerden we verschillende symbolische betekenissen: is er aandacht voor mijn kind? Mag mijn kind bestaan? Mag mijn kind er bij horen in de klas? Zorg gaat volgens deze ouders over de vraag of hun kind kan mee participeren in de kleuterschool op een zinvolle manier in het hier en nu. Dit zijn geen triviale vragen omdat vele ouders vreesden dat hun kind zowel in de school als in de samenleving uitgesloten zou worden. Deze angst voor uitsluiting en discriminatie werd erkend door enkele brugfiguren, zorgcoördinatoren en kindbegeleiders, maar merkwaardig genoeg niet door de leerkrachten zelf. Eén zorgcoördinator en twee assistenten stelden vast dat heel wat kinderen reeds van bij de start dreigen uitgesloten te worden door het kunstmatig wegdenken van zorg in het kleuteronderwijs. Dit gold volgens hen zeker voor kinderen die voordien nog nooit naar de kinderopvang geweest zijn of de kinderen die de schooltaal niet machtig zijn. Het uitgangspunt van sommige participanten waarin zorg en leren zomaar niet gescheiden kan worden, ging dus verder dan een louter pedagogisch pleidooi voor het stimuleren van een holistische ontwikkeling van kinderen. (Vandenbroeck, Coussée, et al., 2011). Ook de sociale en politieke dimensie van zorg, leren en opvoeding werd mee in rekening gebracht. Verder bouwend op het theoretisch werk van Tronto (1993, 2013) en Hamington (2015), suggereerden we in deze studie dat een conceptuele integratie van zorg en leren in een breed opvoedingsconcept op basis van autonomie in verbondenheid, een maatschappelijk en politiek potentieel heeft in het waarborgen van inclusie van een diversiteit van kinderen en ouders in de kleuterschool.

*Een pleidooi voor dialoog*

Tenslotte bleek in deze studie dat het geen evidentie is voor zowel medewerkers als ouders om in dialoog te gaan over de opvoeding van de kinderen. Door een gebrek aan wederkerige communicatie, blijven daardoor aspecten van zorg onder de radar. Bovendien toonden we in deze studie ook aan dat het niet is omdat ouders geen vragen stellen, dat ze daarom geen vragen hebben. In het algemeen zagen we een tendens waarin ouders zich vrij gehoorzaam en ondergeschikt opstelden ten opzichte van de kleuterschool

door de impliciete en expliciete, regels, normen en routines van de kleuterschool aan te nemen. Zowel het werk van Spivak (1988) als Freire (1996), wijzen in die zin op onderwijs als hiërarchische systemen die vaak een 'cultuur van het zwijgen' (Freire, 1996) stimuleren waarbij de 'onderdrukten' vaak een negatief zelfbeeld hebben. Tronto (2013) legt een duidelijk verband tussen een 'zorg deficit' en een 'democratisch deficit' in samenlevingen: wanneer het beleid er niet in slaagt om een zicht te krijgen op de bezorgdheden en bekommernissen van burgers, dan blijven de zorgvragen die het verschil kunnen maken, onzichtbaar (Tronto, 2013). In deze zin, beargumenteert Tronto (1993, 2013) dat het onmogelijk is om een meer inclusieve en meer sociaal rechtvaardige samenleving te realiseren wanneer zorg opgesloten blijft in de private sfeer.

### **Implicaties voor beleid en praktijk**

Op basis van dit onderzoek formuleerden we aanbevelingen voor beleid en praktijk in het kleuteronderwijs. We hanteerden het theoretisch kader van Joan Tronto (1993, 2013) om die aanbevelingen te clusteren.

De focus op preventie van schools falen, het dichten van de resultaten kloof tussen kinderen met en zonder kansarme en/of migratie achtergrond en de bijhorende ouderlijke verantwoordelijkheid lijkt meer complex te zijn dan voorgesteld in het huidige Vlaamse kleuterparticipatiebeleid en het federale debat over de verlaging van de leerplicht. Ook de overheden, onderwijskoepels, initiële opleidingsinstituten, pedagogische begeleidingsdiensten en kleuterscholen hebben een belangrijke verantwoordelijkheid om de ervaringen voor een diversiteit van kinderen en ouders in de kleuterschool zinvol, betekenisvol en kwaliteitsvol te maken. Het is aangewezen om de betekenissen van het kleuteronderwijs samen te construeren met de mensen waarover het gaat: kinderen, ouders, lokale gemeenschappen en medewerkers. Een van de belangrijke bezorgdheden van ouders is dat hun kind niet uitgesloten zou worden in de kleuterschool in het hier en nu maar ook niet in het toekomstige schoolsysteem en de arbeidsmarkt. Door naar de ouders en medewerkers te luisteren, kunnen ook andere kaders gehanteerd worden dan enkel te focussen op het instrumentele karakter van de kleuterschool in een sociaal investeringsparadigma. We denken hierbij aan de Universele Verklaring van Rechten van de mens, het Kinderrechtenverdrag of het ethisch kader van het

Europees DECET netwerk over diversiteit in kinderopvang en kleuteronderwijs (DECET, 2007). Overeenkomstig met de data en in de visie van Tronto (2013) gaat het centraal zetten van zorg in publieke voorzieningen gepaard met een democratisch engagement met het oog op het streven naar vrijheid, gelijkwaardigheid en rechtvaardigheid voor iedereen, inclusief kinderen en ouders met kansarme en/of migratieachtergrond.

Binnen dit kader is het belangrijk dat nationale, regionale en lokale overheden in eerste instantie **aandacht hebben** voor de zorgnoden van kinderen en ouders. Zeker door de uitdaging die een historisch gesplitst systeem in Vlaanderen tussen kinderopvang en kleuteronderwijs met zich mee brengt, dienen beleidsmakers waakzaam te zijn om zorg niet over het hoofd te zien. In lijn met de politieke bewering dat het Vlaams kleuteronderwijs van hoge kwaliteit is, is het aangewezen om deze stellingname regelmatig te onderzoeken vanuit het perspectief van kinderen, ouders en medewerkers zelf. Alhoewel er in elke legislatuur signalen zijn opgepikt, worden de zorgvragen (vb. zindelijkheid en andere fysieke noden) voornamelijk begrepen als iets lastigs. Het zou goed zijn om beleidsmakers en sleutelfiguren kennis te laten maken met praktijken en beleid die uitgaan van een bredere en meer geïntegreerde visie op educare, waarin zorg als iets positiefs benaderd wordt. Daarvoor kan het interessant zijn om inspiratie in het buitenland te halen en in te zetten op een betere uitwisseling met de kinderopvangsector.

Aandacht hebben voor mogelijke zorgvragen is niet voldoende. Het beleid zou de condities kunnen creëren zodat de kleuterscholen en medewerkers daadwerkelijk hun **verantwoordelijkheid kunnen opnemen** om een meer democratische en zorgende praktijk vorm te geven. We denken hierbij aan vier punten:

- Update van de professionele profielen van leerkrachten kleuteronderwijs en kindbegeleid(st)ers
- Waarborgen dat inspecties ook de mate waarin kleuteronderwijspraktijken zorgend en democratisch zijn evalueren
- Investeren in goede tewerkstellingscondities voor leerkrachten, maar ook voor kindbegeleid(st)er in de kleuterklas, met specifieke aandacht voor de jongste leeftijden

- Investeren in leeftijdsaangepaste infrastructuur en het herdenken en inrichten van ruimtes in de kleuterschool met het oog op het verbeteren van het welbevinden van kinderen, ouders en medewerkers.

De kleuterscholen denken best na hoe ze een systemische aanpak en sfeer kunnen creëren waarin men sensitief en **responsief kan zijn** voor bezorgdheden en bekommernissen van kinderen en hun ouders. Een meer democratische sfeer creëren, betreft ook nadenken over de fysieke plek van ouders en het ondersteunen van medewerkers om te kunnen luisteren en in dialoog te gaan met een diversiteit van ouders.

Tenslotte dienen medewerkers ook **competent te zijn** om een meer zorgende en democratische aanpak in het kleuteronderwijs vorm te geven waarbij de opvoedingsverantwoordelijkheid met ouders gedeeld kan worden. Zowel in de initiële opleidingen (bijv. hoge scholen kleuteronderwijs, opleiding kinderopvang) als in de begeleiding en training van mensen op de werkvloer, is het aangewezen om te vertrekken vanuit een normatieve kritische professionaliteitsopvatting, die voorbij de loutere didactische aanpak gaat en waarin het gebruik van emoties, het lichaam en waardegebonden elementen zoals persoonlijke betrokkenheid en maatschappelijke verantwoordelijkheid een belangrijke plaats krijgen (Colley, 2006; Kunneman, 2005; Osgood, 2010; Peeters, 2008). In deze studie deden we verschillende suggesties hoe dit verder uit te bouwen.

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## Data Storage Fact Sheets

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Policy perspectives on care and education

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### 1. Contact details

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### 2. Information about the datasets to which this sheet applies

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\* Reference of the publication in which the datasets are reported:

Van Laere, K., Peeters, J., & Vandenbroeck, M. (2012). The Education and Care Divide: the role of the early childhood workforce in 15 European countries. *European Journal of Education*, 47(4), 527-541.

Van Laere, K. (2017) Conceptualisations of care and education in early childhood care and education (Doctoral Dissertation)

\* Which datasets in that publication does this sheet apply to?:

Policy documents on professional profiles in 15 countries and SWOT analysis from local ECEC experts

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Van Laere, K. and M Vandenbroeck (2017, forthcoming) Early learning in preschool: meaningful and inclusive for all? Exploring perspectives of migrant parents and staff. European Early Childhood Education Research Journal.

Van Laere, K., Van Houtte, M. and M Vandenbroeck (2016, submitted) The Democratic and Caring Deficit in 'Parental Involvement': Examining Perspectives of Migrant Parents on

Preschool Education. British Journal of Sociology of Education.

Van Laere, K. (2017) Conceptualisations of care and education in early childhood care and education (Doctoral Dissertation)

\* Which datasets in that publication does this sheet apply to?:

10 focus groups of parents with migrant backgrounds in Ghent, Antwerp and Brussels

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Van Laere, K., & Vandenbroeck, M. (2016). The (in)convenience of care in preschool education: examining staff views on educare. *Early Years*, 1-15.

Van Laere, K. and M Vandenbroeck (forthcoming) Early learning in preschool: meaningful and inclusive for all? Exploring perspectives of migrant parents and staff. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*.

Van Laere, K. (2017) Conceptualisations of care and education in early childhood care and education (Doctoral Dissertation)

\* Which datasets in that publication does this sheet apply to?:

6 focus groups of preschool staff (teachers, teacher's assistants, care coordinators, bridge figures, after school care workers) in Ghent and Brussels

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- ☒ responsible ZAP
- ☐ all members of the research group
- ☐ all members of UGent
- ☒ other (specify): Server administrator of the departement

#### 4. Reproduction

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\* Have the results been reproduced independently?:

☐ YES / ☒ NO

\* If yes, by whom (add if multiple):

- name:
- address:
- affiliation:
- e-mail: