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Parents' perspectives of social support and social cohesion in urban contexts of diversity

Het ouderperspectief op sociale steun en sociale cohesie in stedelijke contexten van diversiteit

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ABSTRACT

Although provisions for young children are increasingly considered as ideal places to foster an inclusive and socially just society by embracing issues of social support and social cohesion, there is no in-depth understanding of the role these provisions can play in enabling supportive and cohesive encounters in contexts of diversity. Even more striking is the absence of parents' voices in this discussion. Based on an analysis of qualitative interviews with 18 parents who use childcare services in urban contexts of diversity, our findings show the relevance of ephemeral contacts with diverse people that could offer *bridging* opportunities in terms of social connectedness to familiarise within diversity while decoding the other in urban contexts of diversity. However, neither bonding nor bridging contacts appear as self-evident. Our research shows that the role of childcare services might be vital in creating *light* and temporal communities as the prerequisite for social cohesion to flourish, in both individual as well as collective dimensions.

SAMENVATTING

Voorzieningen voor jonge kinderen worden steeds meer gezien als ideale plaatsen om een meer inclusieve en sociaal rechtvaardige samenleving te realiseren. Hoe deze voorzieningen echter kunnen inzetten op processen van sociale steun en sociale cohesie in contexten gekenmerkt door diversiteit, is tot nu toe nog nauwelijks onderzocht. Opmerkelijk daarbij is de afwezigheid van de stem van ouders hierin. Op basis van een analyse van kwalitatieve interviews met 18 ouders die gebruik maken van kinderopvang in stedelijke contexten, stellen we vast dat de zorg voor jonge kinderen een grote impact heeft op het sociaal leven van ouders. Het kondigt tegelijk een periode aan van meer op zichzelf aangewezen zijn (isolatie) én zich meer verbonden voelen met het ruimere sociaal leven (integratie). Ouders hechten belang aan zowel kortstondige contacten met onbekenden als duurzame relaties met familie, vrienden en kennissen. Echter, noch duurzame *bonding* relaties, noch kortstondige *bridging* relaties komen vanzelfsprekend tot stand in stedelijke contexten gekenmerkt door een grote diversiteit en veel verhuizingen. Verschillende ouders delen hun ervaring van er alleen voor staan, ondanks dat ze gebruik maken van kinderopvang. Andere gezinnen tegenkomen in het kinderdagverblijf betekent namelijk niet dat gezinnen er elkaar ook werkelijk ontmoeten. De resultaten in dit artikel tonen aan dat de ervaring van ouders samenhangt met hoe

KEYWORDS

Early childhood education and care services; parenting; equality/diversity; family relationships; human rights/social justice

TREFWOORDEN

Gelijkwaardigheid/diversiteit; Opvoeden; Voorzieningen voor jonge kinderen; familiale relaties; mensenrechten/sociale rechtvaardigheid

voorzieningen hun eigen rol conceptualiseren en de mate waarin professionelen de bezorgdheden van ouders in acht nemen.

Introduction

Over recent decades, early childhood education and care (ECEC) services have gained more significance for social policy makers who are concerned with issues of (in)equality and social exclusion (Geens & Vandebroek, 2013; Melhuish, 2011; Schmid, 2015). These services have also increasingly been considered by international organisations as ideal places to foster inclusive and socially just societies (European Commission, 2015). In that vein, reference has pertinently been made to the social function of ECEC services as social work practices, and this social function is broadly defined as the efforts made by ECEC services to contribute to a more just society. As the OECD (2006) indicates, ECEC services need to embrace issues of social support and social cohesion, emphasizing that 'in the future, [early childhood] practitioners will be required to play an enhanced role in developing social cohesion, for which new skills and understandings about community and society will be critical' (p. 167). The question how social services, such as ECEC services, might make 'space for thinking about how programs can shape, rather than simply respond to, the social terrain in which some families struggle while others may easily thrive' (Fram, 2005, p. 516) is crucial here. As Sharmahd (2009) asserts, 'for an ever growing number of families, childcare initiatives become the first real meeting place, the first exchange context in which different types of parenting come together' (p. 58). Although there seems to be a consensus in the international realm on the value and vital role of ECEC services in enabling social support for children and parents, social support is a complex and ambiguous concept (see Sarason & Sarason, 2009; Valentine, 2009). The question of how social support is shaped by ECEC services remains therefore largely under-theorised in contexts of diversity (see Geens & Vandebroek, 2014 for an extensive literature review).

In this article, we discuss the findings acquired during a qualitative research project about the role of ECEC services in enabling social support in urban contexts of diversity (see Geens, 2015; Geens, Roets, & Vandebroek, 2015). As the absence of the voice of parents in this discussion is striking (see Harding & Darlington, 2008), we explored the experiences of social support of a highly diverse range of families who use childcare services that aspire to give shape to a social function. In what follows, we will first elaborate on the methodology and findings of our previous and extensive literature review that crucially informs the reported qualitative study in theoretical and conceptual terms.

Social support and social cohesion: the debate so far

Previously, we analysed how social support in parenting contexts appears in the literature to discuss and develop a state of the art (see Geens & Vandebroek, 2014). This study examined research articles in international peer-reviewed journals.¹ The critical analysis of this literature, informed and driven by a social work perspective, allowed us to identify the core aspects and foci in the existing body of research. The literature review also enabled us to reflect upon the meaning of social support and social cohesion for child and family social work.

In the existing body of research about social support, this issue appears as an important but complex and ambiguous concept. Current research proves a focus predominantly on capturing the social support experience of specific and targeted groups of parents who are believed to be at risk. As we have argued elsewhere, focusing on at-risk groups implicitly assumes that homogeneity is a condition for parent support, thus ignoring the actual diversity as well as the multiple belongings of parents (McLeod, Baker, & Black, 2006). Most studies focus on lasting relationships between

intimates that are mainly established on the basis of homogeneity (cf. bonding-type relationships) (Geens & Vandebroek, 2014).

Equally so, several authors have stressed the importance of social cohesion: a cohesive society is believed to be characterised by consensus on a given set of norms and values, and by the absence of disruption (e.g. Kearns & Forrest, 2000). Yet, it is asserted that the mobility of goods and people in our globalised world challenges the homogeneity and durability of social systems (social networks as well as communities) (Schrooten, Geldof, & Withaecx, 2015). Social support and social cohesion might therefore require different interpretations in contexts of diversity.

Concerning social support, some authors argued that ephemeral relations with strangers are relevant too (Soenen, 2006). As Fram (2005) asserted, it is exactly 'the blending, or overlapping, of bonding and bridging relationships' (p. 514) that is meaningful to parents. Also Buysse (2008) stated that parent support initiatives should offer the possibility to meet like-minded people *and* bring them in touch with 'other' narratives to fill the gap between diverse families. In that sense, Sarason and Sarason (2009) suggested that 'acceptance and a sense of belongingness engendered by seemingly weak or superficial ties might play more important roles in schemas of oneself and others than one might initially think possible' (pp. 117–118).

When it comes to social cohesion, some authors argued that, despite an attempt to approach diversity positively, policy makers are often using '*a priori* conceptualisations of community life' (Soenen & Verlot, 2002, p. 108), thereby not questioning 'the normalisation power of discourses informing the mind-set and practices regarding diversity' (Ghorashi & Ponzoni, 2014, p. 171).

Nevertheless, the actual encounters in which processes of social support and social cohesion take place are also neglected, especially when diversity is put into practice in everyday encounters on a micro-scale (Valentine, 2009). Interestingly, Soenen (2006) developed a useful approach to unravel whether interactions can be experienced as supportive and cohesive with attention to diversity. Soenen (2006) argued that ephemeral encounters can create so-called *light* communities, offering opportunities for relationships between people from diverse backgrounds. She was inspired by Lofland's (2009) analysis of interactions, divided in the public-relational sphere with unknown persons, the private-relational sphere with intimate people and the parochial sphere with acquaintances. Soenen (2006), in turn, observed interactions based on homogeneity (among intimates), recognisability (familiarity via small talk) and ambivalence (light forms of belonging that allow connection and disconnection). In that light, we discuss the findings of our research project.

Methodological approach

Research settings

In Belgium, most childcare centres (including the two in our study) are publicly funded and regulated, meaning that they comply to structural governmental quality standards (i.e. adult-child ratios, qualifications, etc.). Parents pay a fee according to their income. We selected two childcare services that reached a diverse range of families (regarding income, marital status, and ethnicity, located in highly diverse neighbourhoods in Ghent and Brussels. Ghent is marked by rejuvenation and the number of children born in disadvantaged families is rising (from 10% in 2002 to 15% in 2009). Nineteen per cent of the population belongs to an ethnic minority group (Stad Gent, 2013). The childcare centre is located in a less well-off area, currently undergoing urban renewal processes. The neighbourhood is marked by a high density (9611 inhabitants/km²) and growth; a high proportion of families with children (29%) and single-parent families (10%); high unemployment rates (17%, twice the Ghent average); high proportions of ethnic minority families (51%); low incomes (2/3 of median and mean net incomes in Ghent) and only half of the households having a car at their disposal (51%) (Wijkmonitor, 2015). Brussels is characterised by rejuvenation; 18% of the children live in single-parent families (Algemene Directie Statistiek en Economische Informatie [ADSEI], 2009b) and almost a quarter of the children grow up in a family with no income from employment (Grouwels,

2010). It is estimated that over 40% of newborns belong to ethnic minority families (ADSEI, 2009a). The childcare centre is located in a town on a border-area with the inner municipality of Brussels and two other districts. The district is characterised by economic, cultural, and social activity and diversity: more than 130 nationalities live close to one another (19,954 inhabitants/km²; Brussels Instituut voor Statistiek en Analyse, 2014). Whilst 73% of men and 59% of women are employed, it is one of the poorest municipalities in Brussels (and in Belgium), with an average yearly income 29% below the national average income (ADSEI, 2009a).

The Ethical Commission of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences (Ghent University) approved the study before we actually engaged in the field.

Data collection and participants

In an extensive ethnographic study, 75 hours of observation were done in the childcare centres (between October 2013 and September 2014), in the mornings and evenings when parents brought or picked up their child, and on occasional gatherings. During the observations, we focused on what people actually did: where did they sit, stand, how did they walk and talk, did they use (non)verbal communication, how did they position themselves and were they positioned by others, and in which context did events such as supportive and cohesive encounters occur? This ethnographic study concentrated on the durability or fleetingness of interactions, on facilitating and breaking elements, on the impact of professional practices (attitude of the staff, the use of the physical surroundings, etc.), with attention to how the children (re)acted in this social space.

Our ethnographic endeavour generated relevant field knowledge and enabled the researcher to build rapport with the families involved. Based on a combination of background criteria (gender, origin, marital status, mother tongue, family size, length of use of the service) and observational information on the nature of parents' interactions in the centre, this ethnographic involvement allowed a purposive sample selection (see Mortelmans, 2007) for the qualitative interviewing as the main method of data collection. The construction of a topic list for the semi-structured interviews was inspired by our theoretical framework and by the observational reports, that were scanned to collect markers for further discussion (e.g. examples of interactions they had with other parents, something parents said about their daily experiences, etc.). All parents were informed verbally, and invited to talk about their interactions with other parents and the professionals in the service, their social relations outside the centre and the meaning of these contacts. Eventually, we interviewed 8 fathers and 10 mothers, who agreed to the interview being audio-taped and who participated on a voluntary basis. The conversations lasted between one and nearly three hours and were conducted in a private room in the centre (10), at the parent's home (3), or in a coffee bar (1). The names of the research participants were changed to increase confidentiality (Table 1).

Data analysis

A thematic analysis was conducted on the transcribed interviews (Mortelmans, 2007). In a first phase, a series of broad themes were identified in the data: (1) having children generated opportunities but also isolation; (2) parents' feelings of being alone in the care of their child and their need for social support; (3) the act of decoding others as well as the service; (4) the issue of social cohesion, as parents question if there is place for everyone in our diverse society; and (5) parents' demand for 'connections, time, and care' as an overarching theme, that touches upon the ambiguous role and expectations of ECEC services in the eyes of parents. In a second phase, these results were confronted with the theoretical frame of reference (see Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) and the insights were refined while discussing the data with the supervisor of the research project. We use many quotes of parents in this paper to stay close to their viewpoints.

Table 1. Profile of the parents.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	No. of children	Use of the centre	Origin	Marital status	Professional status
Dochka	Mother	30–40	2	7 months	Bulgarian	Bulgarian partner	In training
Petya	Mother	<30	1	8 months	Bulgarian	Bulgarian partner	Unemployed
Zoran	Father	30–40	2	15 months	Kurdish	Kurdish partner	Unemployed
Soraya	Mother	30–40	4	15 months	Turkish	Single	Employed
Koen	Father	30–40	2	23 months	Belgian	Partner of Louise	In training
Louise	Mother	<30	1	23 months	Belgian	Partner of Koen	Employed
Mehtap	Mother	<30	2	13 months	Turkish	Turkish partner	Unemployed
Eric	Father	30–40	2	30 months	Belgian	Partner of Kathy	Employed
Kathy	Mother	30–40	2	30 months	Belgian	Partner of Eric	Employed
Peter	Father	30–40	1	13 months	Belgian	Belgian partner	Employed
Fatima	Mother	40–50	6	20 years (incl. interval)	Turkish	Turkish partner	Employed
Hanne	Mother	30–40	1	8 months	Belgian	Single	Employed
Raymond	Father	>50	4	12 months	Belgian	Chilian partner	Employed
Bernard	Father	30–40	2	24 months	Belgian	Partner of Monique	Employed
Monique	Mother	30–40	2	24 months	Belgian	Partner of Bernard	Unemployed
Bastien	Father	30–40	1	12 months	Belgian	German partner	Employed
Tom	Father	30–40	2	22 months	Belgian	Single	Employed
Aleksandra	Mother	30–40	2	23 months	Serbian	Dutch partner	Employed

Results

Several parents' stories revealed a strong feeling of isolation. The intensive care for their young children and families' migration within and across countries impacted their social networks and feeling of connectedness to their neighbourhood. In addition, not having a decent job, a car, steady financial resources and a proper house in a family-friendly area, made the life of some parents more complicated and stressful. In what follows, we focus on the relational issues, notwithstanding the relevance of more material necessities in the parents' lives.

Relationship brokers and breakers

Having young children has a tremendous effect on the parent's life, at the same time separating them from and integrating them into social contexts. Parents explicitly said that 'one has no friends' (Fatima) as a parent because of the lack of time and energy, that they 'sometimes feel a bit lonely' (Hanne) and they stressed how hard it is not knowing other people around: they 'can go nowhere, they are at home' (Petya, translation by Dochka). Even if parents knew others to visit, the presence of children set up a barrier, as meeting in one's home was often experienced as 'turbulent' (Aleksandra, Soraya, Dochka, Fatima), leaving not much room for a relaxed talk.

Soraya: But I do[n't] like to go visiting people just like that. If we go to friends, she runs around, destroys things, makes the carpet dirty, and I don't like [that], I get stressed. She's my daughter, you know, then I start to clean and put things away. She doesn't stay calm for two hours. [...] And it's about six months now, it's actually more than 6 months, since I stopped visiting my friends.

It seemed normal that once one gets older and 'settled' (having a family) social contacts diminish (Koen), and that families with young children 'are for a time more on their own' (Eric). Nevertheless, several parents regretted 'not having gone out since the birth of the youngest child' (Dochka) and looked forward to the moment their children go to school: 'a lot of people told me "yes, but when they start school, then you meet a lot of parents there"' (Aleksandra).

Sleepless nights and the time-consuming nature of having young children together with people's increased mobility (moving from one place to another), put their social life under pressure, especially when this went hand in hand with a demanding (search for a) job, loss of close relatives, housing issues, or not mastering the dominant language.

- Bastien: Remi didn't sleep a night before one year old. [...] A social life, at that moment, is just impossible. [...] Now he's been sleeping properly for some months, it did us good, we have the impression of reviving.
- Aleksandra: Having a child puts you in a category that's not– you simply aren't that social. [...] I think you feel a bit lonely in situations. [...] In April this year, three of my close contacts here, not like close but– [...] they all moved out. [...] And you feel sometimes like you stay behind or– Even though I really like it. [...] I think it's okay for us here. But like, you need some stable elements in life. And people are kind of just moving.

At the same time, it was widely experienced that the presence of children facilitates small encounters with strangers, for example, in the street, on public transport, in the park, at school. Children were brokers of relations and an easy topic of conversation. These talks were valued as 'nice' but by some also as 'superficial', partly because of the lack of knowing the other's background. Whereas some ephemeral contacts were an exchange of very personal stories, 'it is still not friendship', said Hanne, as the chance to re-encounter is rather small. Yet, having children integrated parents socially and it could boost them to undertake action.

- Peter: It's only since Mike that we are more obliged to engage in social contexts that are more mixed than before. Previously, we just went out to have fun, never with the intention 'oh now we will expand our circle of friends' or so. While now, it happens spontaneously because we're more involved in a social context of searching for a school, childcare, playgrounds where other children play. [...] You become more in touch automatically.
- Aleksandra: Because of Maud and Dimitri [children], I feel like I should [get to] know better the– you know, the system here. [...] Even if you want to stay out of– say, 'Belgian culture', and you don't want to, not assimilate but, yeah, integrate, I think it's very difficult when you have kids and– [...] all these things really make you learn things better. And of course, there's this emotional side [...] because I think they're Belgians. Dimitri will grow up here and he'll have an identity [...] Just like I was formed in my home country. [...] in that way, it will be– he'll be like a local I guess.

While most parents had quite a lot of small talk during the day thanks to or about their children, 'it's more quantity than quality' (Aleksandra). When these *light* encounters were the only social contacts left, a lack of support was felt. Several parents were longing for more durable friendships on which they could rely for practical and emotional support. Others, in turn, were stressing the importance (and sometimes lack) of these plural *light* encounters, which (should) make their environment (and themselves in this neighbourhood) more well-known. There was a wish to see others, and maybe even more, to be seen by others as well. Such encounters could be facilitated by children.

- Monique: There are many people living in their own world, they– they don't want to say good morning, they go directly to their homes [...]. But with– with the children it is easy.

Every family for itself?

Having a place in a qualitative service represented a huge support to the parents (relief, free-time for work and other activities, social environment for their child, place to learn Dutch, staff as important support figures). 'The fact that I heard that everybody does it' (making use of centre-based care) (Aleksandra), made it an acceptable form of support that they could rely on. In contrast, relying on informal networks, even if available, seemed difficult to ask for. In some cases, important persons in the family's life had health problems, or did not live nearby. Hanne, a single mother, regretted not knowing neighbouring parents in the service as it may happen that she cannot make it to the centre before closing time. But many parents had the feeling of being alone in the care of their child(ren) as it was their 'choice' to become a parent.

- Eric: Yeah, you cannot burden everyone else with that, as in the end, it was your own choice somehow. [...] It's not a gift waking up every two hours. You don't drop them off at someone's– you're not supposed to do that you know.

According to Fatima, asking for help puts you in a position of debt, as others ‘too have so many things to do’. When one of her sons was having trouble with math, she found a student to help him, and she paid him for it: ‘nothing is free nowadays you know’. She remembered a time when one just helped another, ‘now that doesn’t exist anymore’ because ‘nobody has any time left, I think [they’re in a] hurry and well, trust has gone a bit’. Proposing unconditional help raised suspicion, ‘if you do something, most people expect something back’. Soraya stressed the lack of an informal network as well and stated that it would be easier for her to get a day off if she lived near her family in Turkey, as they would look after her children. Dochka’s and Petya’s mothers even came over from Bulgaria to help them with their children when they had no one else to look after them while working or taking Dutch lessons. Also Aleksandra identified differences regarding parenting responsibilities.

Aleksandra: Here, everyone is an individual and [in Serbia] it’s still the group. Let’s say, not a group but we rely on other people so I think it would be different if I had that here. [...] I find it a bit sad. I see that for my husband Dimitri [coming from the Netherlands] privacy is more important, time for yourself. [...] When I was a child, people were popping in all the time and somebody came for a cup of coffee, without any announcement. And I’m quite social and I like that [...] but I think here it’s different because you must plan a bit and uh— so, yeah.

Some fathers contrasted the city where they lived, with places where ‘neighbouring’ was still common. Living in a smaller town, felt –to them as natives– more relaxed because ‘you’re in your milieu, you know the parents’, ‘you have more of a street life’ (Raymond). Being more acquainted with the background of the other families (cf. nativeness) made it easier to get in touch and to build relationships. Whilst it might be even more difficult for non-natives to get included there, compared to the city where there is space for ‘multi-ness’ (see below), it points at people’s need for predictability, familiarity and support.

Raymond: You don’t even know where those people live, where they come from, what their background is, where they go to after the crèche? Well, it may be in this neighbourhood too. Or perhaps not.

Raymond doubted that strong bonds with other parents would be formed where he lives now as he experienced an inscrutable diversity (in ethnic-cultural terms), an unpleasant aggressiveness in the interactions on the streets as well as hostility towards local residents by municipal services.

De-coding the context and the other

That several parents’ life context was different from what they were used to (cf. in terms of ‘milieu’, ‘concept’, ‘system’ or mastering the dominant language) made it hard to experience support and cohesion.

Dochka: In the beginning [first years in Belgium] it was sad for me, very difficult. I always said that I could not go on anymore, but ten years passed, it’s already– (gesticulates ‘evolution’ with her hand)
 Researcher: Changed?
 Dochka: Yes. And if you start to understand the language of the place, it becomes even easier in fact.

Several parents argued that contacts with local people would help them to gain a better understanding of the system or to practice Dutch in everyday life. Daily encounters with others were an important source of learning about different ‘codes’.

Aleksandra: You know, Luke’s mom, I didn’t know that they lived nearby. Once I ran into her, it was like ‘oh, you live here!’ And she said something like ‘oh, but you’re always welcome.’ Which I think– honestly I think it’s kind of a standard phrase that you say to– you know. But I should like– ‘let’s try it’, really show up there. No, I don’t know. But it’s sometimes confusing to me, especially as a foreigner, I don’t always read people well. My husband does it better.

Bernard lived in a town before, where ‘you always say hello when seeing someone and most of the time you know them’. Moving to Brussels, he found it ‘strange’ that one does not know one’s neighbours and that one does not greet them. It was the hardest thing for him to accept. Knowing how to

relate to diverse others, in the street, for example, was a learning process and influenced future encounters.

Bernard: I think the mother of Nimsat is sympathetic, but what hinders me with her is that I don't know exactly her stance towards religion, her stance towards men and woman. I see that it's always she who brings Nimsat. So, automatically in my head, I place her in a position of a traditional family: the husband works, the wife looks after the children. And immediately I associate that it might be a problem if I initiate casual contact too readily with her. But, it's unconscious, I think that by myself, I realise this just now. [...] I'm afraid to go against traditions of people, that's really one of the blocking elements you know.

Avoiding contact then, can be a sign of respect for the other rather than disinterest. People often observed the other, 'like scanning and see if there's something interesting for me' (Aleksandra). In this regard, Bastien mentioned the existence of very subtle 'codes' that can be noticed.

Bastien: Here [in the crèche] there are effectively uh metis populations, but you can sense that— one sees that there's a man of African origin, yet, observing the way he behaves, the way he dresses, the way he expresses himself, etcetera. Uh, he's not a— I'd say, he's not an unemployed man, he's not a manual worker, obviously. And that, well, there's nothing to do about it, that's yeah— that's something you see. It facilitates a whole series of exchanges, that's for sure.

A shared 'code' facilitated interactions, whereas crossing them 'demands a lot more energy' (Bernard). This explains why some contacts crossing borders, such as origin in the case above, were easily made and others were less fertile, despite the shared experience of having children.

Aleksandra: There are a lot of mothers with kids. But like my babysitter, she's Moroccan and she has five kids and she's younger than me. But then again, I don't know what we would really do together. You know, like we don't match in that way.

Not knowing if there was a shared language presented yet another barrier for interactions.

Kathy: Maybe it is because, to my feeling, there are now more non-native speakers, or a more mixed, diverse public and they are surely— they don't really make contact, uh, they really go straight by— it's more— yeah, that's something you notice. [...] You never know how understandable you're for them. [...]

Eric: Yes, they don't always dare to say that they don't understand you because for them it's uncomfortable too.

As long as these gaps were not bridged, stereotypes remained. Often, parents were not enough acquainted with other families to know who was speaking which languages. In the Brussels centre, the multilingual background of the families remained invisible, which might be an unwanted effect of the strong emphasis on learning the dominant language in the service. The influence of language policies either in facilitating or obstructing encounters between diverse families should not be underestimated.

A place for everyone (?)

Previous citations illustrate that some perceived diversity as a threshold and others as an opportunity. The 'multi-ness' of Brussels is what made it attractive to some parents. After several years of travelling abroad, Hanne made an explicit choice to move to Brussels from West Flanders, even when, as a single mother, she left her existing networks behind: 'I feel at ease with the multicultural character of Brussels, I kind of need that'. Also Aleksandra and her husband found a place in Brussels, as it does not belong to one in particular.

Aleksandra: We lived in Serbia before, yet here it's no-man's-land [...] it's a bit a neutral place where we had to start from scratch, we didn't know many people before so it was kind of balanced. [...] Our kids were born here, we have a bit stronger bond with the city [...] I really liked it, it was really the atmosphere— [...] like trash on the streets, a little bit chaotic. And people were quite uh— you know, you feel like there are so many different people that there's place for everyone. If you go to the bakery and you speak in bad French they still understand me and— I thought that was good.

It was exactly the ambivalent character of the city that offered Alexandra the possibility to feel connected in a context marked by diversity. Yet, some fathers doubted if they could feel connected to the place where they lived as they faced 'aggression' and hostility or felt exclusion and had the impression that there was no place for all guaranteed.

Bernard: Since we're not seeing each other anymore at Sunday mass, we lack— except maybe for the World Cup [laughter], but we lack things that regroup people. And I think that there have been strong changes in society and that we're increasingly heading towards a model of society [...] where everyone lives for himself. We notice this strongly with the Portuguese in our neighbourhood, the Portuguese rule. They own all the bars and when you enter a Portuguese bar, you don't feel welcome. Not because they don't like you, but because they feel just fine among themselves.

Bernard pointed to a wish to matter as part of the society in which he lives, to be noticed, heard or recognised. He urged the necessity to regroup diverse people and talked about 'a policy of welcoming', that could enable a mix of people to connect in one way or another. He questioned leaving this 'search for the other' up to individual responsibility. He pondered that 'the school is the number one driving force for social cohesion. It's the most important means for social cohesion. It's the only common thing left'. Yet, even there separate groups have formed and it is up to the engagement of the parents to interact. In the end, Bernard and Monique felt left by themselves to feel connected to people in their neighbourhood. In that sense, neither the formation of strong or ephemeral contacts appeared to be self-evident for various reasons explained above.

What matters: 'connections, time, and care'

This duality also became apparent when Aleksandra spoke about one of her first encounters after arriving in Belgium, six years ago. She ran into one of the visitors she met in the hostel where she worked in Belgrade, just a couple of weeks before: 'I felt like I knew some people, but I only know this one friend (an acquaintance of her partner), but actually I didn't know anyone'. All parents looked for supportive and cohesive relations and they found it particularly worrying when these were absent. Yet, 'everybody works and is in a hurry and has no time' (Fatima). Several parents expressed that taking time created space to talk about other things than solely the care of their child. Yet, the majority of parents perceived childcare as a service where relations are expected to be focused on the child: 'The crèche is more a place where you bring and pick up your child. In that moment I'm focusing on Rafaël to hear if everything went well' (Hanne). An inherent focus on *childcare* might prevent parents from perceiving it as a place where they too can find supportive and cohesive interactions. Hanne enjoyed the strong bond with her son, yet her feeling of being somewhat overwhelmed by the care of her child and the worries that went with it did not leave much space for coming out. In the end, she missed more sociability with others.

Maybe I'd have known more people by now if I had been more open and a bit more social. Anyway, sometimes I'm like that, but sometimes— [...] I kind of cocoon myself. [...] And I don't initiate contacts that much. Just because now I don't have— it's not that I don't feel the need as I kind of do, I notice, I do need it. But I just lack the energy to socialise or uh— yes. [silence] Whereas I think now, that I'm starting to miss that.

Although all the parents in this study made use of childcare, and thus de facto met other parents there, a lack of connections was felt. For some, the childcare centre was the only place where they might encounter 'locals': 'I met these two women nowhere else but here' (Aleksandra). Several parents said they really wanted to meet others, mainly for the social dimension, but some also for practicing Dutch. Surprisingly, these parents did not mention childcare as a place for fostering social support or social cohesion. Furthermore, the need for meeting other parents was often not picked up by the childcare staff.

Aleksandra: I asked once, but I think also they didn't— I was like 'Robin, is the—?' And they were like 'yeah, Robin is the boy with the long hair.' [...] But I think for them it wasn't a sign that I'm interested in Robin's parents. [laughs]

This is not to blame staff, as the perceptions of parents too might prevent them from finding the support they need, as is obvious in the case of Zoran, a Kurdish father of two children, living in Belgium for 5 years and having almost no network. He is convinced that the childcare centre is not a place for sociability, as the staff has other duties.

Zoran: In the day care centre, it is not good maybe to talk a lot, it is not a café. [...] And, we should respect everyone. Just two minutes 'Hello, how are you? Everything okay?' But not 'Hello, how are you and do you know what happened in Palestine?' That's not right, you should talk outside. [...] But most of the time, I'm alone. When I see someone, I love to talk and talk [laughs]. I'm sorry, that's not good. [...] Also to improve my Dutch. And I'm very social. I want to talk to many people. I don't want silence all the time. Making a joke with people. Back in Iraq, they know me like this".

Concluding reflections

As the study focused on gaining an in-depth understanding of the diverse experiences of the sample rather than on generalisability (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), our qualitative study allows us to reflect on the social function of ECEC services for young families, regarding the ways in which these services embrace issues of social support and social cohesion (OECD, 2006) and the question how families experience these services.

Although children are known to be brokers of relations as they generate familiarity (Soenen, 2006), our results show that they can be 'breakers' as well: having young children impacted parents' sociability, at the same time separating them from and integrating them into social contexts. The importance of informal supportive relations (Buisse, 2008) was confirmed, yet, most parents expressed a lack of social support, due to migration and restrictions felt to enact support. Parenting was predominantly experienced as an individual responsibility. Parents were, however, also in search of both light encounters with strangers *and* stronger relations with family, friends, and acquaintances. Although stronger ties, labelled as *bonding* ties (Fram, 2005) in which homogeneity in 'code', language, background, or perspective plays a role, remain important, several parents emphasised the relevance of ephemeral contacts with diverse people that could offer *bridging* opportunities. Bridging is to be understood not only in terms of social leverage, but also in terms of social connectedness: to familiarise within diversity while decoding the other in contexts of increased diversity. In that sense, diversity was perceived as a threshold to encounter the other (for example, to connect with neighbours) as well as an opportunity to find one's place in the 'multi-ness'.

However, neither bonding nor bridging contacts appeared evident in urban contexts of diversity: a place where various people meet others, sometimes bearing different 'codes', is not necessarily a meeting place. These findings therefore require that we consider vital implications for professionals. As suggested by the OECD (2006) 'new skills and understandings about community and society will be critical' in the creation of the social function of ECEC services (p. 167). Although the existing research evidence shows that social services are well-placed to offer bridging opportunities to families as professionals have access to resources, their possible roles in stimulating informal support (e.g. among families) is still under-theorised (de Jong, Schout, Meijera, Mulder, & Abmaa, 2015; Sheppard, 2004). Our study shows that the provision of social support and social cohesion requires a reconsideration of traditional child-centred philosophies, supporting the idea that ECEC professionals have to take the concerns of parents and the wider community into account. Moreover, our study reveals the productive nature of creating *light* and temporal communities as the prerequisite for social cohesion to flourish, in both individual as well as collective dimensions. Social work practices such as ECEC can play an important role in generating equity (as discussed in Geens, Roets, & Vandenbroeck, 2015) among the different normative frameworks that people bring to situations by creating a so-called 'temporarily emptied interspace that enables unexpected new connections of perspectives' (Ghorashi & Ponzoni, 2014, p. 168).

Note

1. Considering the overwhelming and increasing amount of literature, we limited our selection to the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI), as it covers all research fields, is readily accessible and includes journals with a relevant number of citations, which 'is considered as evidence of the usefulness, quality and/or impact' (Archambault, Vignola-Gagne, Cote, Lariviere, & Gingras, 2006, p. 331). We selected articles between January 2000 and November 2011. The analysis included studies that were categorised as 'articles', ranging from empirical studies to more conceptual and theoretical reflections. Book reviews and proceedings papers were not included. All articles containing *social support** AND *parent** OR *mother** OR *father** in the title and articles containing *social network** AND *parent** OR *mother** OR *father** in the title were included. This generated 225 unique articles on which a screening was conducted to see whether they related to the topic of interest. Fifty-four articles were excluded, mainly because the studies were focusing on (i) social support from parents, peers and others as experienced by childless adolescents and (ii) social support between parents and their adult children. The remaining 171 articles were included in this literature review to gain a better understanding of how social support was used as an object of study.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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