



CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF CARE AND EDUCATION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

Katrien Van Laere

Promotor: Prof. Dr. Michel Vandekerckhove

Academiejaa2016-2017

Doctoraat ingediend tot het behalen van de academiegraad
van Doctor in het Sociaal Werk



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Preface

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. He felt that, especially since his daughter's 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. According to the media, the preschool found it unnecessary to give children a snack since they already had a big lunch.

Without knowing the details of the actual situation, I was wondering how it could come this far that parents sue the preschool. 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 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? What does this mean for other parents and preschool staff in the same school 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 do.

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.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is the term most commonly used in international policy documents and research to designate provision of care and education for children before compulsory school age (Urban, Vandebroek, 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 provision of 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 developed. We have 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 untapped 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 aspiration to lower the compulsory school age.

1.2 S

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:

“ If solid foundations are laid in the early years learning is more effective and is more likely to continue, 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 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

socioemotional functioning and educational performance (reviews of Lazarri & Vandebroek, 2013; Melhuish et al., 2015). Although preschool

is expected for children from low-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 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 prospects (Perkins, 2014; Williams, 2004; Wong & Turner, 2014).

Due to the emergence of social investment language in social policies, scholars

U b, 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 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, 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 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

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 is that:

since the main focus is on cognitive and language learning, there is a risk that play, exploration, freedom of movement, relations and discussions with other children may be less encouraged (Broström, 2006; Høj, 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, & Sund, 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, 2011).

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

Moss, 2011; European Commission, 2011; Kaga, Bennett, & Moss, 2010; Penn, 2009). Indeed, UNESCO describes the role of education at 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 transition to formal schooling. It places emphasis on developing the whole child - attending to his or her social, emotional, cognitive and physical needs establish a solid and broad foundation for lifelong learning and wellbeing. (<http://en.unesco.org/themes/early-childhood-care-and-education>)

This UNESCO mission statement on ECEC shows how the international community constructs preschool education as a preparation 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 of 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 children to enter primary school. Their professional development includes mastering different subjects,

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 (Brogère, 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 *practices* which go beyond applying prescribed teaching methods (Kunneman, 2005).

1.2.3 Radicalising parental responsibility

their activation can reduce dependency ratios (Jenson, 2009; Jenson & Saint Martin, 2006). The social investment paradigm caused an intensification or according to Vandebroek, Roose, and De Bie (2011) radicalisation of parental responsibility in order to ensure positive child development and future school success (K. Clarke, 2006, 2013; Jenson, 2009; Schiettecat et al., 2015; Vandebroek, 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 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-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 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; Vandebroek, Roose, et al., 2011). Through processes of decontextualisation, responsabilisation 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)

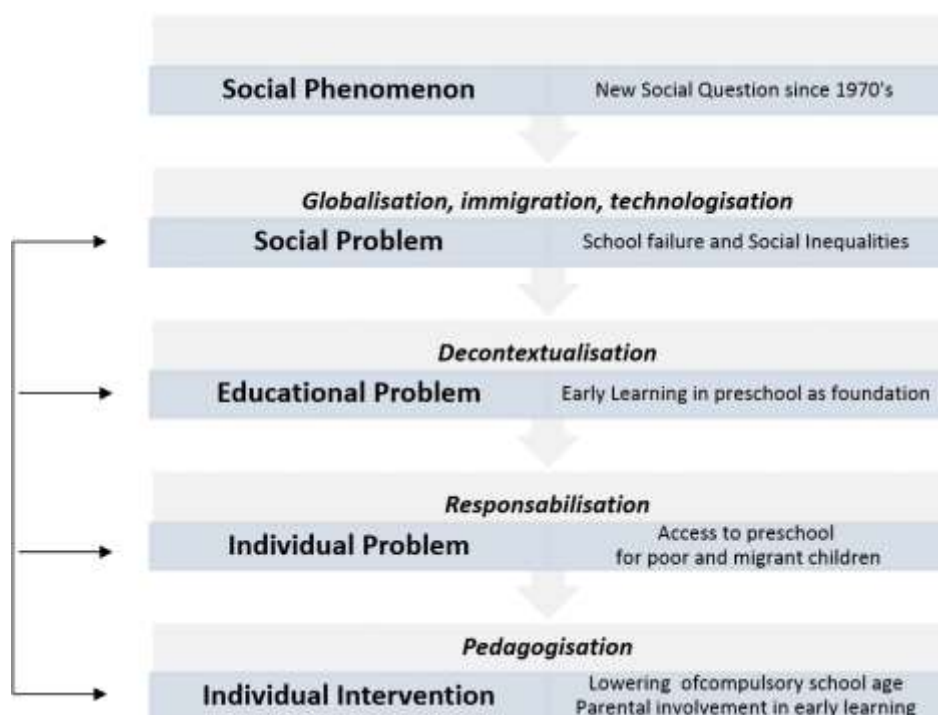


Figure 11.: The social construction of educational problems applied to school failure (Vandebroek, Coussee, & Bradt 2010)

u
in policy debates (Hughes & Mac Naughton, 2000) 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 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 socioeconomic statuses). In order to gain a better understanding of the meaning of preschool education in a context of social inequalities, one needs

the voices of preschool staff are also fairly 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 academic and social skills (Gill, Winters, & Friedman, 2006; Laiso, 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; Friedrich & Westby, 2003; Vandebroek et al., 2013; Wesley & Buysse, 2003). Despite a parental focus, 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:

- < =
- < †
- signify for the increasing attention gives school education as an important equalising condition for later school success?
- < How do diverse and opposing conceptualisations of care and education relate to ongoing 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 European Commission, Directorate General for Education and Culture (Urban et al., 2011; Urban et al., 2012). In a subsequent study, we organised 10 invited focus groups in the cities of Ghent, Antwerp and Brussels with parents who are the object 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 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

& Tavory, 2012, p. 170). The three chapters that cover different ways of presenting the qualitative data from the focus groups are 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 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 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

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 political objectives and the legitimation of preschool education

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 (De Bouverne Bie, 2015) (cfr. upbringing and raising children). *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 / school (*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 (*VV - 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 (Brackevaert, 1986). 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 in 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 on *CNAP - Confédération nationale des Associations de*

¹This section is an adaptation of an article published as Van Laere, K, and M Vanderhoeck (2014). *leerplicht in België: en nu de kleuters? [100 years of compulsory school in Belgium: and now the toddlers?]* *Pedagogiek* 34 (3):192-208.

Parents de l'Enseignement (1966) 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, integrating the preschool programme into primary school education, aimed to ameliorate the contact and aimed to lower the student-teacher ratio in classes. Dubois started pedagogical experiments with a mandatory transition class in preschool where five 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 union (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 and a half and twelve years of age (Brackeva, 1986).

For the first time, preschool education was given the explicit function of making children school-ready and eliminating social

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 rather than teachers, as illustrated in the following excerpt from a professional journal for preschool educators :

“ # . 2 #
 to sleep in the arms of or on
 the lap of the educator (leidster)?\n
 every toddler (irrespective of their social origins or family circumstances) can
 come out of their shell (Depaepe 1990, p. 27; translation by the author)

These professional journals suggested that they had to act like mother 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 age 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 selfrealisation 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 (speelklas) which children learn basic skills like mathematics, reading and writing under the best possible conditions are provided for the best possible course of the school year.

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.

2CSPP, LXVII (1960) 152. (in Depaepe 1990)
 30, LXVI (1969) 366. (in Depaepe 1990)
 40, LXVIII (1971) 345. (in Depaepe 1990)

(Vlaamse Onderwijsraad, 2004). Moreover the (BSP) and the Christian democrats (VP- *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 (*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 agreements (*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.

" Belgian government inserted a proposal to lower the compulsory school age to five

cultural inequalities and affective handicaps so they will not be transformed into scholastic delay (*schoolse achterstand*) (Roger 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 Miché (PSC) transformed this intention into multiple legislative proposals. Ramaekers argued that children should be made resilient for school (*schoolverbaard*)

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 ~~coaching~~ 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 (*emancipatie*) of working class children: the educational attainment should by no means rely on the social origins of a person (Calebunders, 1980). It was argued that, by

affective disorders could be intercepted and disadvantages from the social background could be compensated in preschool ~~translation~~ (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~~ (

parents who consider school to be an easy parking spot for their children and who think that children need to be educated ~~in~~ (M 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 COLO) in both the Flemish and French Communities. Besides some local parent associations, most national parent associations (CNAP, NCOV - *Nationale Confederatie van Ouderverenigingen*, CNCP - *Conseil National des Parents*) representatives of the Catholic schools and Christian trade unions (CWU) were rather resistant to making the last year of preschool mandatory. Although they concurred with ~~cultural~~ 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 conditions 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 (ontscholent) the first years of primary school and make it more age appropriate and playful instead of (De Smet, 1977). As stated before, an important bottleneck for them was to maintain the peaceful agreement (overeenkomst) between the different school providers (Catholic, state, cities, municipalities) since 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 (20/12/1977/1979/2/18/12/1980, 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, 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 & Vandebroek, 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 PSOP, progressively opposed the idea of lowering the compulsory school age. Out of fear of a radical 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). However, 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; Coomis 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 & Vandembroeck, 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 Vanderpoort (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 (colo), 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.

V V

 are 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 urging 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 *leerachterstand* (By obliging parents to send their five-year-old children to preschool, it was assumed that these children could *met gelijke bagage*) 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 & Vandebroek, 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

case for children who had European language or did not have Belgian nationality, as well as for children of lower educated parents, single 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 *ABV Unie* (

and ACLV) and the Flemish education council (Vlaamse Onderwijscouncil) raised concerns that these legislative proposals were no guarantee for the backgrounds. Alternatively, the government could better invest in ensuring

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 measures (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 equality 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 (CFA) *Union des Fédérations des Associations de Parents de l'Enseignement Catholique* received little attention (Dautrebande, 2008). In 2007 and 2008 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 start 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 *schoolmoehed* 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:

“ Education (onderwijs) must educate and must not create social @

Social origin is and remains determinative for the schooling career (schoolloopbaan) of a child. On average, 66 percent of children with a low background 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

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/verplichte-hoeropleger-naarschoolhoebeter> translation by author)

Gradually, debates in parliament and the senate began to focus on increasing the attendance rates of the year-old in preschool instead of solely five year-old children. Early year attendance in preschool of underprivileged threeyearolds 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 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 Fédération 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 countries led by socialist senator Ingrid Lieter (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 studied as a crucial factor in overcoming poverty (Commissie voor de Transversale Aangelegenheden Gemeenschapsbevoegdheden, 1/02/2016). Senator *Pieter De Maesseneke* (Dutch: *Pieter De Maesseneke*)

and lack of 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

do not think it is necessary to send their children to preschool, although the

Gemeenschapsbevoegdheden 1/02/2016, p. 97, translation by author). This proposal has so far been well received and unanimously approved by the commission. The plan to lower the compulsory school age to three also found support in political discussions in the French Community (e.g. *Belgique 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 (Dutch: *Frank Vandenbroucke*) 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 early and regular toddler

(Commissie voor Onderwijs Vorming Wetenschap en Innovatie, 24/3/2005, p. 22, translation by author; Vandenbroucke, 2004).

Former Minister Vandembroucke gradually distanced himself from the federal debate and started developing his own policy in order to stimulate so-called *kleuterparticipatie* (Vandembroucke, 2007). He focused on the group of children that were enrolled yet attend preschool irregularly. These children are called *kleuters*, who live in unstructured home environment,

(Vandembroucke, 2007, p. 2, translation by Bythoff) referring to the HIVA (Highly Intensive and Structured) 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. For these reasons

pillars

- ◁ Gathering efficient statistical data on the enrolment and attendance rates of toddlers. The Departments of Education (Agentschap voor Kind & Gezin) and Child and Family (Agentschap voor de Kinderbescherming) 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 send 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 grants and scholarships on the condition that children attend preschool a minimum 220 half days.
 - ◁ Attributing an official role to the Centres for Pupil Guidance (Centra voor Leerlingbegeleiding) 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 (Lokaal Overlegplatform) 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.
- (Vandembroucke, 2007)

† *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 do 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, Wetenschap en Innovatie, 23/4/2009). After years of criticism by several stakeholders, the language test was abolished in 2014. Instead, the *klassenraden* now decide whether children are admitted to 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). Some policy makers (e.g., the liberal politician 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), her predecessors, while stating that lowering the compulsory school age is not an urgent issue (Crevits, 2015; De Standaard, 2015, 30/04/2015; Vlaamse Regering Bourgeois, 23/2014).

Commissioned by Minister Crevits, the Department of Education 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

parents, a parental concern on caring questions, appropriate 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 well-being, a more inclusive approach for vulnerable families and high quality professional preschool staff are

2016; Departement Onderwijs, 2015) quantitative part of the study revealed that 99 percent of five-year-old children and 82,2 percent of two

a-half-year-old children are enrolled in preschool in the Flemish Community of Belgium. Children of 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 four-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 Department of Education and Training⁵ 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, explain 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 day of the week), this explains 18,1 % grade retention, which implies that the trajectory of a toddler explains 6 % of the grade retention (Department Onderwijs, 2015).

By referring to these results, the responsabilisation of parents also permeated the new legislation on child allowances (*Onroepbaar pakket 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 (*speciale toelagen* and *sociale toelagen*) and (3) participation allowance (*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

⁵ Before three years of age, a minimum attendance of 100 half days is required; between three and four years of age, a minimum required attendance of 150 half days is required; 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 regularly attend preschool 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

year-old child has attended preschool a minimum of 220 half days (Vlaamse Regering 31/05/2016)

@ subsequently proposed to increase the minimal attendance from 220 to 250 half days for five-year-old children. She argued that this would prevent scholastic delay and would prepare children better for the primary school. (Crevits, 2016; Standaard, 23/12/2016)

In sum, since lowering the compulsory school age is only possible by changing federal law, the Flemish Community bypassed this constitutional issue by

system, aiming to increase the attendance rates of underprivileged children in preschool as early as possible. In so doing they attribute parental responsibilities and to the framing of the preschool as the solution to educational inequality in primary school.

1.4.4.3 Shifting the role

The desired profile of the preschool teacher has changed over the years. In the 1980s the Christian Democrat Minister of Education Daniel Coens (

opvoedende)

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 education (*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 role encompassed, among other things -being and health of children (Vlaamse Regering, 5/10/2007).

) roles was approved and disseminated by the Flemish government, the educational 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

“ 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) to provide 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 translation by author).

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

“ I think we can draw boundaries and at 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 kind of related health 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 Radio 2/10/2016 Standaard 26/10/2016, translation by author).

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 role in favour of a sole focus on 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 its ~~allegedly~~ 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 ~~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~~ 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 ~~more~~ chance children will have to

Liberal politician Bart Somers

similar legislative proposals, it is clear that there is ~~no~~ ~~real~~ ~~factor~~ in

Morabito, 2015) constructing preschool education as means to equalise

the concern

that supporting ~~this~~ 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 are no longer any possibilities 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 the 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 of political parties that school failure can and will be solved by enforcing higher preschool attendances, parental responsibility tends to be radicalised without exploring other possible problem constructions and ways to address social problems. This in turn again makes it harder for parents to contribute to the discussion of exactly what

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 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
 general understandings of preschool education embedded in the scholarly and

understanding of the relationship of preschool staff to early learning in
 preschool as this is assumed to be an important foundation for a
 social investment paradigm.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7: Preschool staff

Chapters five, six and seven address the ~~making~~ of preschool staff.

 preschool, and how

 Conceptualisations of care seem to have a strongly gendered dimension.
 Therefore, in chapter seven we explored 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

2.1 Introduction

In our study, we examine how parents, preschool staff and policies

Flemish fields of preschool education as compelling cases in the relation to 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).

education, we organised 16 videoed 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 (Gemeenschapscommissie). In this chapter, we clarify the methodology

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 (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 researchers, selected for their longstanding expertise in the field and their

knowledge of both legislation and practice, to collaborate 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 (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 today 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 top-down 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 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 international scientific supervisors of the CoRe study

⁶Dr Ana Ancheta Arrabal (Departamento de Educación Comparada, Universitat de Valencia, Spain), Ana del Barrio Saiz (Bureau Mutant, The Netherlands), Anna Tornberg (Läraryrbundet, Sweden), Anke van Keulen (Bureau Mutant), Carmen Anghelescu (CEDP Step by Step, Romania), Dr Claire Cameron (Care Work in Europe, Thomas Coram (Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London), Colette Murray (Pavee Point and EDeNn, Ireland), Prof. Dr Florence Pirard (Office de la Recherche en Éducation, Université de Liège, Belgium), Helena Buric (Open Academy Step by Step, Croatia), Jytte Juul Jensen (College of Pedagogy, Århus, Denmark), Mariacristina Picchio (ISTEC Rome), Marie Paule Thollon Behar (Ecole de Recherche en Éducation, Université Lumière Lyon 2, France), Dr Natassa Papaprokopiou (Technological Educational Institute of Athens, Greece), Nives Milinovic (Open Academy Step by Step, Croatia), Pascale Camus (Office de la Recherche en Éducation, Université de Liège, Belgium), Regina Sabaliauskiene (Centre for Innovative Education, Lithuania), Dr Tatjana Vonta (DRIJaha, Slovenia), Teresa Ogrodzinska (Comenius Foundation for Child Development, Poland), Dr Tullia Muscarelli (ENRISTE, Italy) and Stig Lunde (BUPL, Denmark).

⁷Pamela Oberhuemer (SEEPRO, Staatsinstitut für Frühpädagogik, Munich), Dr Claire Cameron (Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London), Dennis Sinyolo (Education International), Dr John Bennett and Prada Miller (Open University, Milton Keynes, United Kingdom).

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 h education

2.3.1 Videoevoked focus groups

In the search for a suitable research method, we drew upon the work of Barbier (2009)

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ability to give meaning to this feeling and impression towards external people (Barbier, 2009). Although there is a

communication towards others (Barbier, 2009). The experience, 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 participants in our study are often passive bystanders in terms of thinking about and changing preschool practices and policies, an are often in a subordinate position, felt, valued and worthy enough to

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 several participant

important sources of inspiration (Tobin, 2009, 2016; Tobin, Arzubaiaga, & Adair, 2013; Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989). Tobin and colleagues drew on the philosophical work of Spivak (1988), who rhetorically asked *subaltern* the cannot speak. In an unpublished paper on methodology of videoed 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 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' 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 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.
 - ◁ 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 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. 113)

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 preschool to the participants in the focus group in order to evoke genuine, spontaneous reactions and reflections of 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 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 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

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 (one 2013)

In 2013, we conducted an exploratory round in which we visited eight preschools in Genk, Sint-Laas 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 asked for 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

neutral context as it directs human action much as scripts do (Antaki, Ten Have, & Koole, 2004; Bernstein, 2009; Vuorisalo, Rutanen, & Raittila, 2015). By

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:

“ @
time. Once I worked in the reception class and there was one child who was crying nonstop 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.

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 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 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

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

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Preparing and shooting the movie (September-October 2013)

From the eight exploratory visits, we selected the entry class of the

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u) have more than 10 years of professional experience, had strong personalities and were intrigued by the research subject and the method offered of 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 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 explicitly in need of care (expressed for instance by ongoing 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 17th and the 18th of October 2013, we had the opportunity to work with a professional camera crew to shoot the movie. 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 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.

Editing the movie (October 2013 – January 2014)

We edited, with the technical support of the profession, 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 p

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 edited the movie into a shorter version of approximately 25 minutes. The version was discussed with the gym teacher in a separate

at 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 31st. In these meetings, parents gave their permission to show the movie to a broader audience of parents and preschool staff. As one 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 w their daughter was experiencing throughout the day. They were convinced that

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 submitted 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

“ 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). ”

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

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 share 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. *Vlaamse Gemeenschapscommissie*) 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), how demystified the idea that participants in focus groups ideally should not know each other beforehand. They argue that working with existing friend, family and

data. Through # and colleagues (2011) underlined that researchers should look for pre groups because respondents will feel safe and comfortable enough to share

their unique interpretation with each 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

known to the participants, especially in the case of participants from 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 school 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 health organisations. However, surprisingly, we reached more parents by inviting them through the preschools than through social and community health organisations. This may have biased our results. With the exception of some parents that we met through a community-based toy library in 6, 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 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 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 ethics 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, on these two occasions was extremely low, reaching only one 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

the following focus group. In some intermediary organisations, social workers or doctors invited the parents of young children in 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, 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 10. 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 deeper 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

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 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

Parents	#			One of the home languages = Dutch	Home Dutch	Language focus group	Invited by who and where	Region
FP1	3	1	2	0	3	Dutch	Researcher and social workers 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 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 the library	Ghent
FP6	2	0	2	2	0	Dutch	Social workers 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 in 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, Turkish-French

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

Preschool Staff

We conducted six focus groups with 69 preschool staff members (preschool

In order to invited school directors, we worked with key persons in the pedagogical guidance centers of different educational networks; we attended contacted several directors by phone. Despite these efforts in three different locations (Ghent, Brussels and Antwerp), these 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. Participants of the Focus Groups for Preschool Staff

Staff	Profile	#			Experience in school	Experience in school > 10 years	Educational umbrella	Region
FS1	Preschool teachers	8	8	0	4	4	Catholic education	Ghent
FS2	u assistants	13	13	0	5	8	Catholic education	Dender*
FS3	Preschool teachers and 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-of school care staff	9	8	1	9	0	Different out-of school centers having children from school from various educational umbrella	Brussels
Total		69	68	1	39	30		

* The pedagogical guidance service of the Catholic schools, situated in Ghent, organises twice a year a

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 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 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 an abductive inferential process aimed at producing new hypotheses and theories based on

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

(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:

“ 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)

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 the participants felt emotionally and bodily touched and disturbed by the movie footage in which a little girl 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 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 referring to refusing to hug a child that is crying stop for weeks. I heard this phrase before in the preparatory visits in which preschool 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 what exactly? Give in to whom? To our soft side, 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 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 bodies are actually developed and cultivated to restrain or suppress caring responses. This explanatory means that it should account for the concrete, observable phenomena by invoking facts from some other domain, for*

p. 3).

In repeatedly revisiting the phenomenon, defamiliarising the taken for granted assumptions and alternative casing, the positionality of the researcher 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

“ 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 know who we are as individuals, and as members of groups, and as resting in and moving within social positions. (Bourke, 2014, p. 3)

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, 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 achieving 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.

“ Social work is, besides being a ~~practical~~ 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).”

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 ~~it be~~ I 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 Cohe~~E~~merique (1989), I kept a diary in the exploratory round in which I wrote down my cultural sh~~h~~ocks (in 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 preschools 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 tap

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 in the 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 used to 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 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, 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

participants needed to know what my personal 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 a

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 *specific* 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 *verbally* agreeing. After my

exclusion of children with migrant backgrounds *in 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 *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. *silence* words (van Stapele, 2014, p. 115) *the* mother

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 *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 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 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

accessibility of 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? that international and national policy 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 of equalising potential of preschool education 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

in 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 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 the 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 the data should remain anonymous. Yet, at the end of the study I was definitely open to discuss the anonymous results of 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, the study also

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. After reading feminist literature on ethics of care and the politics of care, I drew a lot on my own struggle as a young girl in dealing with gender (in)equality in school and in village. Triggered by my own mother, grandmothers and great grandmother, I was from a young age

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 about this. I started to read the data with different eyes and could somehow relate to

were dealing with. How can we cultivate and be proud of a professional caring identity without devaluing 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 body dualism and to 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.

2.5 References

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Chapter 3

POLICY

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

⁹Based on Van Laere, K, J Peeters, and M Vandebroek. 2012. "The education and care divide: The role of the early childhood workforce in 15 European countries." *European Journal of Education* 47(4):525-541.

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 policymakers 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 public opinion show a clear consensus. Quality in ECEC should encompass a broad, holistic view on learning, caring, upbringing and social support for children. Quality

(European Commission, 2011; Eurydice, 2009; UNESCO, 2010). In these debates, the workforce is seen as a critical factor (Oberhuemer, 2005; Sindt *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; OECD, 2010). Most, however, consider the staff profiles of core practitioners without

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 leads 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 'Quality in ECEC: A European Research Initiative' (ERA-2010-246486) 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

compulsory schooling and the ~~dis~~ 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 goals and standards being distinctly formulated and indicators used to measure

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 year 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.

ing 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 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~~ the caring dimension of education (Alvestad, 2009; Forrester, 2005; Kyriakou, 2009). For example, according to Garnier (2009, 2011), since the French government introduced an official school programme for the *école maternelle*

the care function seems to have disappeared from official texts. The programme emphasises cognitive and language competence rather than

Smith and Whyte (2008) see that schoolification results in a narrow view of

services. This can hinder early year practitioners ~~and~~ in creating an educational context that adopts a holistic

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 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; Vandebroek *et al* forthcoming). Schoolifying the early years risks educational 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

(Jensen *et al* 2010; Samuelsson & Sheridan, 2010). Oberhuemer (2010) and Dahlberg and Moss (2005) question this conceptualisation. 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, valuable practices which go beyond applying prescribed teaching methods (Kunneman, 2005). A normative conceptualisation which is -being, learning and pedagogy which values reciprocal relationships and care (Jensen *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) contrast 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 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 for toddlers (3 yearolds), core practitioners predominantly have a caring 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 nonqualified (lower or upper secondary level) (Oberhuemer 2010). There is

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 *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 (Faerell 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 social behaviour of children (Blatchford *et al*, 2007, 2009; Finn & Pannozzo, 2004; Gerber 2001; Hughes & Westgate, 1997)

also fulfil a bridging role. They need to raise educational attainment, especially in African American children, by serving as role models and bridging the gap between schools and home and communities (Abbott & 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 the social 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 in researches i
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

who subordinate th
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) states that assistants believe it

English school, testifies:

“ 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
14). ”

7

Barkham (2008) states that some fear that their caring role will be neglected
because of professional development initiatives that are solely based on
professio 7

primary school, while the assistant takes care of their emotional needs. They

8

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 academic
achievements of children, an idea which fits in with the schoolifying of ECEC.
The caring role is addressed less, despite its importance, as stated in quali
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
upbringing and social support
(UNESCO, 2010). The *Starting Strong* report stressed that the task of
practitioners, whatever their profile, should be geared towards this holistic

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educational services are integrated at institutional level are often preferred 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

Over the last 10 years in relation to core practitioners, we conducted a 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 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 or regional policy documents. Local policies (at the municipal level,

lines of the SEEPRO study (Oberhelme, 2010) as early years workers with a group or centre responsibility.

1. the assistants work directly with children and their families;
2. 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 formalities in day-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 guiding 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 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, whether or not they have formal professional development opportunities.

In 13 of the 15 countries, assistants work to support core practitioners (in # @ accounts of their numbers 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 one-third of the w

TABLE I. Assistants¹

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>Doeigrpouwerbemer (0-3)</i>	0.08	/	X (in training for 3B)	Caring/Bridging	/
Denmark	<i>Publ. icultrice (2,5-6)</i>	N.A.	X	X (3B)	Caring	/
	<i>Assistent aux instituturs prscolaire (2,5-6)</i>	N.A.	X	/	Caring	/
France	<i>Pedagogmedicup (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 spcialis des ccoles maternelles (2,5-6)</i>	+/- 50	X	X (3)	Caring	X
	<i>Βοηθος υπαγωγικου / βοηθος παιδαγωγου (0-6)</i>	N.A.	/	/	Caring/Learning	/
Ireland	<i>Basic practitioner in early childhood education/care (0-3)</i>	N.A.	/	/	Caring/Learning	/
	<i>Community Worker –Employment Scheme (0-5)</i>	N.A.	/	/	Caring/Learning	/
Lithuania	<i>Auklotojos padleja (1-6)</i>	+/- 50	/	/	Caring	/
	<i>Onderwijsonderzester (4-12)</i>	2.76	X	X (4)	Learning	X
The Netherlands	<i>Klassexistent (4-12, special education)</i>	N.A.	X	/	Caring/Learning	N.A.
	<i>Groep hulp (0-4)</i>	N.A.	/	/	Caring	/
Poland	<i>Pomoc nauczycielki (3-6)</i>	+/- 2	/	/	Caring	/
	<i>Ingrititoare (0-7)</i>	+/- 28	/	/	Caring	/
Romania	<i>Pomoobuk vzgojitelja (0-7)</i>	+/- 50	X	X (4A)	Caring/Learning/	X
					Bridging	
Spain	<i>Tcnico/tcnica Educador o Asistente en educaci3n infantil (0-6)</i>	N.A.	/	/	Caring	/
	<i>Nursery assistants (0-3)</i>	presence has doubled over the last 10 year	/	/	Caring/Learning	/
UK (England and Wales)	<i>Teaching assistants (0-3)</i>	presence has doubled over the last 10 years: +/- 50			Learning/Caring	

¹ 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 (6-year-olds), France, the Netherlands (2-year-olds), Slovenia, Sweden and the UK have specific training requirements for assistants. Slovenia and Sweden are the only countries that require a three- or four-year upper secondary vocational qualification.

Core practitioners working in unitary systems and in schools for the oldest children (3-year-olds) in split systems have a clear educational or pedagogical job and/or training profile. Those working with the youngest children in split systems have a caring or paramedical profile. Most countries seem to have assistants who play a predominant caring role. Where descriptions are available, they

Aukletojos are described as technical workers who are in charge of cleaning the

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 speaking communities), assistants (*Begeleider kinderopvang*, *Puéricultrice* Assistant aux instituteurs préscolaires) help preschool teachers (*Kleuterleid(st)instituteur/ Instituteur préscolaire*) by taking over the caring duties for the youngest children in school to ensure that the core

assistants (*Técnico/técnica o Asistente en educación infantil*) are responsible for the 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 caring 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 in (Belgium (FI), 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 unusual for assistants (*Pædagogmedhjælper*) though 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 t

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

are interpretative. Finally, there are considerable variations in the organisation of ECEC both within and across countries and regions, in its 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 practice. Despite these limitations, by analysing policy documents and local ECEC role of assistants in ECEC.

3.4.1 Caring Matters

Although academic research focuses on the learning and less on 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. Where a pedagogy), the assistants assume a more caring role. This divide seems to be apparent in preschools for children from three to six in split systems, but also in some unitary systems, despite 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 underthrees in split systems, there is less 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 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 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

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 means that social and emotional development are addressed to a lesser degree. The caring dimension is overlooked. This is especially true for schools (for 3-year-olds) that are increasingly perceived as preparing for learning in compulsory schooling.

(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 several studies on assistants with a bridging role. Depoorter (2006), Hajlovic´ and Trikić (forthcoming) showed that, although *Opelgroepwerknemers* and *Roma teaching assistants* were hired because of the problems that core practitioners encountered in communicating with ethnic minority families and families living in the periphery, they paradoxically tend to reinforce or maintain this perceived deficiency. When

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 K suggests that physical and emotional needs, as connected with the body, are fundamentally different from intellectual needs, in line with the division of body physical needs need to be taken care of so that their minds are free for learning. Hence, care may be perceived as a necessary evil. Second, when care is concept. The results of our study suggest that assistants are responsible for the youngest children in ECEC. Even with a socially pedagogical vision which includes care and education for all children, assistants mostly work with the youngest children, whereas qualified educators mostly work with the older children (Oberhuemer & Ulich, 1997). This implies that, as 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 meaning children who differ from the white middle class norms. Finally, 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 the view of education, as they reduce care and education.

The scarce qualitative research suggests that assistants and parents find the caring dimension of education important. Yet, as stated in the executing a technical job. Some scholars, along with assistants, relate this conceptualisation to the gendered nature of the job. It has to do with children, ensuring good relations between teachers, children and parents and esteem. Assistant

Deborah, who works with 5-year-old children in an English school, describes the opportunity for the child to express him/herself within the school day. The

(Skuse, 2001, p. 58) She advocates that children should be seen 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 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 focu

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 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 in the relationship between core practitioners and assistants. Early childhood policy should be critical about what drives their policy and how their choices may be

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 (parents, local communities, schools, training institutions, local, regional, and national governments, European policymakers . . .) 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 one kind 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 democratic collaboration between core practitioners and assistants is impossible when their working conditions differ significantly. The deployment 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 staff reflecting on practices (Groom, 2006; Urban 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 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 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 h @ Perspectives of Migrant Parents on Preschool Education¹⁰

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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

determining goals and modalities of parental involvement in sociological and educational studies (Tronto, 2013). ~~10~~ ~~11~~ ~~12~~ ~~13~~ ~~14~~ ~~15~~ ~~16~~ ~~17~~ ~~18~~ ~~19~~ ~~20~~ ~~21~~ ~~22~~ ~~23~~ ~~24~~ ~~25~~ ~~26~~ ~~27~~ ~~28~~ ~~29~~ ~~30~~ ~~31~~ ~~32~~ ~~33~~ ~~34~~ ~~35~~ ~~36~~ ~~37~~ ~~38~~ ~~39~~ ~~40~~ ~~41~~ ~~42~~ ~~43~~ ~~44~~ ~~45~~ ~~46~~ ~~47~~ ~~48~~ ~~49~~ ~~50~~ ~~51~~ ~~52~~ ~~53~~ ~~54~~ ~~55~~ ~~56~~ ~~57~~ ~~58~~ ~~59~~ ~~60~~ ~~61~~ ~~62~~ ~~63~~ ~~64~~ ~~65~~ ~~66~~ ~~67~~ ~~68~~ ~~69~~ ~~70~~ ~~71~~ ~~72~~ ~~73~~ ~~74~~ ~~75~~ ~~76~~ ~~77~~ ~~78~~ ~~79~~ ~~80~~ ~~81~~ ~~82~~ ~~83~~ ~~84~~ ~~85~~ ~~86~~ ~~87~~ ~~88~~ ~~89~~ ~~90~~ ~~91~~ ~~92~~ ~~93~~ ~~94~~ ~~95~~ ~~96~~ ~~97~~ ~~98~~ ~~99~~ ~~100~~ ~~101~~ ~~102~~ ~~103~~ ~~104~~ ~~105~~ ~~106~~ ~~107~~ ~~108~~ ~~109~~ ~~110~~ ~~111~~ ~~112~~ ~~113~~ ~~114~~ ~~115~~ ~~116~~ ~~117~~ ~~118~~ ~~119~~ ~~120~~ ~~121~~ ~~122~~ ~~123~~ ~~124~~ ~~125~~ ~~126~~ ~~127~~ ~~128~~ ~~129~~ ~~130~~ ~~131~~ 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4.1 Introduction

Since the 1960s, the relationship between social inequality and school has been of considerable interest to sociological scholars (Downey & Condon, 2016). The mass dissemination of primary education in many countries after WWII and of secondary education in the 1960s was envisioned as a means to reduce social inequality. In affluent countries, the construction of preschool education as an equaliser before compulsory education gained momentum (Van Laere & Vandenberg, 2014; Zigler & Styfco, 2010). This is considered especially important for working class children or children living in poverty, who are believed to need

early educational 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, Ma, & Jang, 2007; Unicef Innocenti Research Centre, 2008). In response to a recent

call (Condon, 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 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 different degrees. 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).

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; Downey & 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-Folsom, & Skinner, 2004; Eldridge, 2001; Galindo & Shummar, 2010; Halgunseth, 2009; Marcon, 1999; McWayne, Hampton, Fantuzzo, Cohen, & Sekino, 2004; Miedel & Reynolds, 2000; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Blair, & Taggart, 2004).

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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 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's model of consensus by

consensus, this model fails to acknowledge patterns of unequal power distribution between diverse parents and schools (Lareau & Shumar, 1996; Todd & Hig

involvement in education, starting from the assumption that all parents are equal. According to Lareau (1987) and 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

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 scho

resulting in an even larger educational gap (Gillanders, Mc Kinney, & Ritchie, 2012; Horvat et al., 2003; Lee & Bowen, 2006).

A more participatory approach to 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 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

institutions (such as preschools) to reflect (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 this kind of participation, 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 (Brougère, 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 participation of parents is considered to be a problem (Bouverne de Bie, Roose, Maesele, & Vandebroek, 2012; Brougère, 2010). All too often, it is assumed that poor and migrant parents have not yet learned 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 with an inequitable educational project. Studies that give voice to these parents, however, are only recently emerging (e.g. Tobin, Arzubiaga, & Adair, 2013).

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educational gap in school, it is important to counter, what Tronto (2013)

parents themselves what meanings do parents attribute to preschool education? How do parents understand the relations between 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). 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 (*kleuterspeelzalen*) under the auspices of the Minister for Welfare; and preschool institutions (*kleuterscholen*) 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. This 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 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 and approval

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 hard-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, in the autumn,

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

Table 4.1 Participants of the focus group parents

Parents	#			One of the home languages = Dutch	Home 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 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 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, Turkish/French

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

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, 2011; Kamberillis & Dimitriadis, 2003). Furthermore, since the method of video-elicited focus groups by Tobin (1992) has proven to be a good way to

reflections among parents were elicited by showing a 20 minute movie of a day in preschool in the focus groups. This 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 had any 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 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

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 at 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:

“ 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 school. I want to see her, are you treating my child well or not? (FB) ”

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. 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, 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 way to get more information to the parents:

“ 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? ”

“ Parent 2: 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. (FB) ”

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

u preschool experiences was in many cases associated with questions about

physical, emotional, and even political notions of care. A recurrent general remark was that preschools 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 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 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 emotional, needs of the child.

“ 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 the child 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.

“ Researcher: So what was happening?

“ h @ @ u

So I asked my son, he was just crying! Every day this was happening! I did not 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

(FP4)

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 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) to care as a phenomenon. In the last participant quote the teacher , 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 personality, history, gender, socioeconomic, and cultural background (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 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, ~~wifid ent~~ the symbolic meanings of care in the focus ~~@ Really embrace the child!~~ the last citation, the mother highlighted the need for bodily contact between the preschool teacher and the child as a way to comfort ~~and in the act~~ and in the act.

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 ~~full~~ the 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, 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~~ . 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.

“ Parent: My child is actually not obliged to attend preschool yet. I think he would rather stay with me. My child has a ~~medication~~ ~~problem~~ ~~and~~ ~~he~~ ~~could~~ ~~have~~ ~~asked~~ ~~the~~ ~~teacher~~ ~~to~~ ~~ensure~~ ~~that~~ ~~he~~ ~~receives~~ ~~his~~ ~~medication~~ ~~with~~ ~~some~~ ~~yoghurt~~. When I told

Moreover, the teacher this week gave him triple the amount of ~~medication~~ ~~that~~ ~~he~~ ~~actually~~ ~~needed~~. ~~That~~ ~~made~~ ~~me~~ ~~angry~~ ~~and~~ ~~concerned~~. (FP)

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 ~~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:

“ 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~~ 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 ~~estiga~~, you should raise it.” (FP)

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 ~~to~~ 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.

“ 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 t 3)

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

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

“ 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 thiquestion to the teacher and responded that children go

toilets which 3) 7 h

It is remarkable that by referring to her psychological problems blamed

concerns of other parents in the focus groups. mother implied that staying silent is the best strategy for a parent in order to ensure that your ch will receive the best learning opportunities and not fail in preschool.

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

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

not say anything; I know 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

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 scripts, 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 over extended talks with the teachers, parents tried to approach the teacher, but restricted themselves to a maximum number of visits per week.

“ Parent 1 : @
a week is perfect. [Other *ipartis* nod their heads].

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

“ Researcher: Why this exact number?

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

“ Researcher: Would you like this to be different?

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

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 the circumspect position.

“ 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 an involved parent.

“ 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

I would like to ask you what we can

want the other mothers to feel excluded from the school. How can we make clear to the other moth h

(FP3)

By doing these activities and expressing the desire that more mothers do this as well, these mothers confirmed the construction of school approaches of parental involvement (Lawson, 2003). Yet, at the same time, by reading the

hope for themselves and for other mothers is to create a possibility to have more communication with the teacher 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 experience:

“ 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 in FP2]

u 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.

“ 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 question you make. How is this for the others?

“ Parent 2: No, being concerned for your child is the same for all mother only Turkish mothers.”

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 (or a single) child. This resulted in 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 staff. In other words, even though they were from a different culture, 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 taking an instrumental role of parental involvement in preschool learning, we explored the meanings parents ascribed 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 seriotational 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 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 discourses. Practices of care 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 daycares, including our bodies, ourselves and our environment that we can live in it as

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 do 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 (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

that perspective, Spivak (1988) asked herself the rhetorical question: "What is the voicelessness of parents in hierarchical systems in which their knowledge about care and education is overlooked, not recognised, or considered 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 practices." p

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

7). The connection between those two

outdated inheritance from Western political thought that misses important
13, 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 (Horton, 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 relationship signify for policies and practices in parental involvement in

7

participation is considered an ontological fact rather than an instrument
vileged

children, other insights (e.g., the importance of care) taking into account the position of parents as subalterns, preschool policies and practices should develop conditions in which 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 restricted approaches of parental involvement (How can 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

parent in these activities as a means of sharing information and caring responsibilities of the children with preschool staff. Consistent 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. Individual parental involvement as a means to increasing educational attainment of underprivileged children risk perpetuating social inequalities rather than challenging them (Clarke, 2006) therefore advocate that further research take on a more systemic approach towards the school-parent 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 are 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
staff¹¹

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Abstract

Over the last decades, increasing attention has been paid in research and foundation for later life. This is considered especially beneficial for living in disadvantaged societal conditions and those at risk of school failure. = 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 , 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 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 practice to 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 Melgosa *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 (2012) 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 learning areas (mathematical development, language, and literacy skills). Some scholars have focused on academic learning including early language, math and science (Jordan 2009; Kermani and Aldemir 2015; Poe, Burchinal and Roberts 2004), others stress social learning including civic and democratic learning (Dahlberg and Moss 2005), developing 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 (Giusti *al.* 2001) or as a way to develop more cognitive self-regulation (Becker *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 voice to parents, some focusing on general opinions and expectations of preschool (eg. 2000; Gregg, Rugg and Stoneman 2012), while others have addressed the perspectives of parents and school 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; Hwa Froelich and Westby 2003; Mc Allister 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 academic skills which prepare children for primary school (Winters and Friedman 2006; Dinsmore *et al.* 2008; Lin, Lawrence and Gorrell 2003). In some studies parents have questioned this sole focus of readying children in academic skills, instead underlining the importance of social, emotional and physical support as necessary aspects of early learning in preschool (Froelich and Westby 2003; Mc Allister 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 (Jeune *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 academic skills and school readiness as they

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 and (preparatory) reading and writing activities (Arnott *al.* 2013; Broström *al.* 2014; Broström *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 *explored* and *undertheorized*. 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 (*kinderschool*) 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 (*thaalklassen*) 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. 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;

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 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

the cities of Ghent, Brussels, and Antwerp. The respondents gave permission to participate in this study by written informed consent and approval was

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 (17) 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 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 outof-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	Experience in school > 10 years	Invited through
FS1	preschool teacher	8	8	0	4	4	pedagogical guidance center, private NGO schools (Catholic)
FS2	assistants	13	13	0	5	8	pedagogical guidance center, private NGO schools (Catholic)
FS3	preschool 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, TurkishFrench

5.3.2 Video-elicited focus groups

Spivak (1988) argues several reasons why children cannot or does not speak; capturing the opinions of parents from migrant backgrounds is therefore not self

to people who find themselves in the margins of society. It is the reverse effect by addressing people in their less 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, 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

standings 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

axial coding and identified themes separately for staff and parents: language development; social development; discipline and structure; 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, 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 ~~in future~~ 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.

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

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 ~~the~~ expectations to the norms of the teacher and the school system.

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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.

“ Parent 1: The other children have Dutch as their mother ~~Other~~ tongue 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 ~~diff~~erence. 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)

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 ~~the~~ 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 if their child does not make enough progress in learning the dominant school language:

“ 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.

teacher.(FP9)

Because the preschool teachers speak the dominant language of school and society, they were by many parents considered as a gatekeeper to their

society. They urged, for example, more teacher-mediated early language learning instead of child-mediated 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 children's social and 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 and no child would be excluded.

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

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

This concern for exclusion in early learning practices was present in the

preschool and underlined that early learning, if well organized and well thought out of the Dutch language and social and intrapersonal competences to be an asset for further educational possibilities.

“ u † ble for many children. In a school career of a child this really can make a difference.(FS2)

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 bubbles, 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

how, when and where children are supposed to acquire these abilities. While to be a shared

self the parent-child unit). This subtle but important difference between the

intermediary position in this divide.

o es 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.

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

“ 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)

7

preschool teachers do not always facilitate these learning processes enough in preschool.

“ 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 coming 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. (F15)

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 of 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 support at all from others in learning and be completely independent, which indicates a sense of

of individual support from the teachers as they consider this a vital part of a child's 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 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

“ 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!

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 n 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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Disciplining the body also played a role in ensuring that children sit still and obey the rules of the teacher:

“ 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

knowing, he stays on the bench. (FS1)

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depend on them as the adult does not suffice in preschool: learning children to control their bodily needs was considered a way to unburden the teacher.

“ Teacher: I run around a lot and when I 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 foc

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:

5.4.3 Readying children for early learning

A recurrent view of preschool teachers was that young children between two and three years of age have a lack of understanding of the dominant language of instruction.

“ 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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 this task. But these are such basic things! (FS 1)

Accordingly, preschool teachers expressed frustration that they cannot do their job as they learned it in University. When asked what was meant by *learning* and *real job* haziness prevailed among the teachers. Indirectly, we identified some discussion items related to this sense. Some teachers addressed the importance of activities such as painting or circle time and learning about time and weather. Others referred to mathematical initiation 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

assistant tried to problematise these incidents by addressing her own

focus group.

“ U
 just not ready for potty training and then you t
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 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 miss a whole
 they? (FS3)

Some parents have adopted the view that they are responsible for preparing their child for preschool. To this end, some of these parents advised

considered it a shared responsibility between parents and staff to make children as soon

learning and learning to manage bodily needs inherent to early learning in preschool instead of viewing it as a prerequisite 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 (Metcalf 2005; Tobin, Arzubiaga 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

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

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

deficit beliefs in the learning abilities of children inform how they interact with these children, which in turn impacts negatively on their learning outcomes (Pulinx, Van Avermaet and Agirdag 2015; Smith and Swick 2006; Van Houtte 2011). This field of tension between the views 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.

The existing literature seems to display a consensual opinion that early learning in preschool makes children ready for learning in primary schools (e.g. Arndt *al.* 2013; Larøien *et al.* 2008). Our study shows how readiness ideas also occur in regard to making children ready for learning in preschool. Many

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,

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

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 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 attended childcare before, had a higher risk of experiencing adaptation problems, which

