FACULTY OF PSYCHOLOGY AND EDUCATIONAL SCIENCES

CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF CARE AND EDUCATION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

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Introduction

Since the 1960s, the relationship between social inequality and school has been of considerable interest to scholars and policy-makers (Downey & Condron, 2016). The mass dissemination of primary education in many countries after WWII and of secondary education in the 1960s was envisioned as an 'equaliser' (Van Houtte, 2016). In most affluent countries like Belgium, the construction of preschool education as an equaliser before compulsory education gained momentum (Van Laere & Vandenbroeck, 2014). The idea of 'preschool as equaliser' gradually permeated policies worldwide, consolidated by various studies that underlined the importance of early learning as a foundation for reaching high educational attainment and employment in later life, especially for children living in poverty and children with migrant backgrounds (Heckman, 2006; Matthews & Jang, 2007; Unicef Innocenti Research Centre, 2008). As children are increasingly considered to be human capital for a future society (Perkins, Nelms, & Smyth, 2004; Williams, 2004), these individual prevention strategies from a social investment logic, serve the purpose of creating better social and economic development for society at large (Wong & Turner, 2014).

Despite this gradual shift in focus to invest in the equalising potential of the early years, the educational gap between children with high socioeconomic status and low socioeconomic status (SES) and between children with and without migrant backgrounds, remains persistent in many countries, albeit to a different degree. According to the latest PISA studies, Belgium is for example one of the countries with the most pronounced educational gap, which is related to the home situation of the children (OECD, 2013, 2016). At the same time Belgium (Flemish Community) has one of the highest attendance rates of toddlers in preschool education in Europe. In this Phd study, successfully finalised and defended in June 2017, we focus alternately on European and Flemish fields of preschool education as compelling cases in relation to the alleged equalising potential of preschool education[1]

Schoolifying preschool into 'prep-school'

By underlining the future equalising potential of the early years, preschool education is increasingly constructed as a 'prep school' in which the significance of preschool education lies in later stages of life (Ang, 2014; Vandenbroeck, Coussee, & Bradt, 2010). This phenomenon has been labelled as the 'schoolification' of preschool education (Moss, 2013; OECD, 2006). Over the last decade, many researchers have debated and problematised the possible effects of schoolification. A primary criticism concerns children's learning processes, which tend to be decontextualised: since the main focus is on cognitive and language learning, preschool curricula focus less on bodily care, emotions, relationality and solidarity (Garnier, 2011; Löfdahl & Folke-Fichtelius, 2015). A second series of criticisms on schoolification deals with the more technical conceptualisation of professionalism and the focus on prescribed learning goals and curricula (Oberhuemer, 2005). A third series of criticisms concerns the instrumental role of parents, meaning that they are expected to help their children to

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[1] . 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 paper, we focus on the latter component of ECEC by using the term 'preschool' or 'preschool education' (*kleuteronderwijs)*, with special emphasis on the youngest children in this provision.

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; Hughes & Mac Naughton, 2000; Vandenbroeck, De Stercke, & Gobeyn, 2013) Moreover, from a social investment logic, there is even an intensification or - according to Vandenbroeck, Roose, and De Bie (2011, p. 4) - a *radicalisation* of parental responsibility (Gray, 2013; Schiettecat, Roets, & Vandenbroeck, 2015). 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 (Clarke, 2006; Vandenbroeck, Coussée, Bradt, & Roose, 2011).

Research Questions and aims

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. One needs to better understand parents' lived experiences and perspectives in order to counter this unilateral way of thinking. Furthermore, the voices of preschool staff are also fairly absent in the debates on the meaning of preschool and therefore preschool staff may be silenced in discussions on their very profession.

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

- How do parents, preschool staff and policies conceptualise 'care' and 'education' in preschool?

- What do similar and opposing conceptualisations of 'care' and 'education' signify for the increasing attention given preschool education as an important equalising condition for later school success?

- How do diverse and opposing conceptualisations of care and education relate to on-going inequalities in the educational system?

Our study adopts a social pedagogical perspective in social work research, in which we examine the ways in which conceptualisations of care and education in preschool are challenging or confirming social inequalities . In so doing, we aim to contribute to the international body of theoretical and empirical knowledge on preschool education, 'early learning', ECEC professionalism, transitions and 'parental involvement' in the context of social inequalities and increasing social and cultural diversity. Moreover, we hope we enrich the current international and national policy and practice debates.

Methods

In order to examine the policy perspectives, we conducted an analysis of policy documents in 15 European countries from 2010 and 2011[2]. In a subsequent study, we organised ten focus groups in the autumn of 2014 and spring of 2015 of parents with migrant backgrounds (n=66) in Ghent, Brussels, and Antwerp, the three largest cities of the Belgian Flemish community. All parents in the focus groups had children between two and a half and four years old. In addition, we organised six video-elicited focus groups (n=69) with diverse preschool staff in the cities of Ghent and Brussels. Continuous reflexivity helped us to encounter ethically important moments in the research practice and by doing so transcend procedural ethics (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

Since the method of video-elicited focus groups by Tobin (1992) has proven to be a good way to capture parents' voices with multiple language backgrounds, discussions and reflections among parents were triggered by showing a 20 minute movie of a day in preschool in the focus groups. This self-made movie showed various learning and caring moments and activities in a Flemish reception class starting from the moment the parents and the children arrive at the preschool. Participants were invited to interrupt the movie and discuss it. They were also asked whether they found the movie to be 'typical'. While discussing typicality, underlying understandings and meanings of preschool education and the relationship between parents and schools were identified (Tobin, 1992, 2009, 2016).

The overarching data analysis of the focus groups corresponds with principles of abductive analysis, which is "a creative inferential process aimed at producing new hypotheses and theories based on surprising research evidence" (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012, p. 170). The four chapters of the study cover different ways of presenting the qualitative data from the focus groups: some are more data driven[3], while others are more theory driven[4].

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[2] Van Laere, K, J Peeters, and M Vandenbroeck. 2012. "The education and care divide: The role of the early childhood workforce in 15 European countries." European Journal of Education 47 (4): 527-541. → This was part of a larger study on Competence Requirements for Early Childhood Education (the CoRe Study), commissioned by the European Commission, Directorate General for Education and Culture (Urban et al., 2011; Urban et al., 2012)

[3] Van Laere, K, & M Vandenbroeck. 2017. " Early learning in preschool: meaningful and inclusive for all? Exploring perspectives of migrant parents and staff" European Early Childhood Education Research Journal 25 (2): 243-257.
Van Laere, K., Van Houtte, M., & Vandenbroeck, M. (2017). The democratic and caring deficit in 'Parental Involvement': examining perspectives of Migrant parents on preschool education. In K. Van Laere (Ed.), *Conceptualisations of care and education in Early Childhood Education and Care* (pp. 115-139). Ghent: Nevelland.

[4] Van Laere, K., & Vandenbroeck, M. (2016). The (in)convenience of care in preschool education: examining staff views on educare. *Early Years*, 1-15. doi:10.1080/09575146.2016.1252727
Van Laere, K., Vandenbroeck, M., Roets, G., & Peeters, J. (2014). Challenging the Feminisation of the Workforce: Rethinking the Mind-body Dualism in Early Childhood Education and Care. *Gender and Education, 26*(3), 232-245.

Main Findings & Implications

Multiple meanings of the relationship between care and learning

In adopting a participatory approach, our study demonstrates the heterogeneity of possible meaning-making in preschool education by parents and staff. Although many international policy advising bodies have underlined the importance of the conceptual integration of caring and learning in 'educare' (Kaga, Bennett, & Moss, 2010; Penn, 2009), the relationship between caring and learning was a controversial topic in the focus groups. The stories resulting from the research show a continuum in which, some participants problematised the lack of care in preschool education -- building on a conceptual *coexistence* of caring and learning, while at the other side of the continuum participants understood care as a burden for preschool education -- building on a conceptual *hierarchy* between learning and caring. Many participants took intermediate positions within this continuum. This conceptual hierarchy could also be identified in the policy documents of several European countries with regard to the workforce profiles of preschool teachers and teacher's assistants.

Despite the contentious relationship between learning and caring, focus groups with staff members clearly demonstrated that the caring needs of children did not just simply disappear, making such care the 'Achilles' heel' of preschool education. The majority of preschool staff members did identify the physical and emotional caring needs of children, but had different ways of coping with these needs. Building on the philosophical work of Hamington (2004), we showed how preschool staff members developed strategies for restraining their caring responses and not fully utilising their embodied potential to care. However, some teachers stated that they do find it important to engage in care in preschool. They legitimised their caring responses either as part of their own caring personalities or attributed them to the fact that they were mothers themselves. Irrespective of whether or not teachers engaged in care, there was a clear consensus that care in preschool education did not fundamentally belong in the professional repertoire of teachers. As clarified in the more conceptual chapter, this could also be related to the fact that care signifies a devaluation of the preschool teacher profession, historically associated with lower qualified women assumed to 'naturally care' for child

Continuing or disrupting the underlying mind-body dualism

The conceptual divide and hierarchy between learning and caring in our study originates from a Cartesian mind-body dualism that has permeated Western philosophical thought (Foucault, 1984; Haraway, 1991; Merleau-Ponty, 1945; Merleau-Ponty & Lefort, 1964). It seems that a child's body needs to be managed in order for it to grow from a more primitive stage of physical care before the mind is prepared to enter the more 'human' world of learning. Given the corresponding division of labor between the higher qualified preschool teachers and the lower qualified teacher's assistants who take in a rather invisible position in several European preschool policies, the undisciplined body seems to hinder learning activities in preschool.

In a more theory driven chapter, we drew upon contemporary feminist theory to demonstrate how this dominant mind-body dualism can be disrupted. By viewing children, parents and staff members as embodied subjectivities, the body and underlying *homo sentiens* should be drastically valued and brought to the foreground in education. Braidotti (2006) argued that the mind is always embodied or

based on corporeal relations, and that the body is always social, political and in-process rather than natural, referring to a non-unitary vision of the subject whose mind and body are intrinsically interrelated . Consequently for the theoretical debates on ECEC professionalism, this unitary social and political vision should be more incorporated, resulting in the development of a professional embodied educational language. In our study, we also hypothesised that this new professional language could also help us challenge the feminisation of the workforce.

Uncovering the social and political potential of educare in preschool education

Caring educational activities and a caring attitude are more than the simply assurance that children feel emotionally and physically well in preschool. Several parents and staff members referred to symbolic meanings behind care, such as attention, presence and belonging, in education. They assumed that children, irrespective of their backgrounds, would know that they matter and thus would feel recognised as valuable human beings in the preschool class, as well as on a broader scale in life. This is an important dimension of care as the focus groups, in general, exposed a fear amongst parents that their children might be excluded in preschool and broader society. It is alarming, however, that the concern for exclusion in preschool and society was, except for the deviant perspectives of some, nearly absent in focus group discussions.

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

A plea for dialogue

With regard to the relationship between parents and preschool, the focus groups revealed an eagerness of parents to know what was happening to their child in preschool, even when they did not show this eagerness by entering the school or communicating with the preschool staff. Our data indicate that parents take a rather subordinate position in relation to the preschool staff and preschool as an institution. Both parents and also staff members find themselves in complex and ambiguous positions in which they adhere to, yet simultaneously challenge, scripted preschool practices. Despite these attempts, the request to be more connected with the staff and to be able to communicate and share in the care of their children remains somewhat unanswered in the stories of parents. Taking into account the position of parents as subalterns, preschool policies and practices should develop conditions in which *voice consciousness* is addressed. Rather than claiming an equal partnership, governments and preschools may wish to encompass a continuous search for creating moments of reciprocal dialogue within unequal relationships.

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

Over the last 10 years, the popular social investment thinking in ECEC for preventing school failure has increasingly tended to overshadow other ways of thinking on the meaning and role of preschool education in society. Our study found that in setting up dialogical spaces for parents and staff, other meanings of preschool education also became apparent which had previously remained under the radar. The much debated issue of future school failure is more complex than framing it as solely the responsibility of parents . Tronto's ethical framework (2013), the DECET ethical framework (2007) or the general comment 7 on the UNCRC (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, UNICEF, & Bernard van Leer Foundation, 2006) seems to have more affinity with the concerns that many parents and staff members in our study are dealing with. In Tronto's framework for example, the main question is how to ensure justice, equality and freedom for all. This makes it possible for people to take collective responsibility, to think of citizens as both receivers and givers of care and to think seriously about the nature of caring needs in society. The practice of putting care at the heart of public life, like preschools, does not just concern fellow citizens, but also benefits democracy itself (Tronto, 2013).

Impact and future plans

This study encompasses many recommendations for international and Belgian ECEC policies and practices on different levels (see Van Laere, 2017). It should be noted that I, together with my colleagues of Ghent University and VBJK[5], already have been working on putting these recommendations in practice. Throughout different action research projects, further research, organising conferences[6] and consultancy, I'm engaging in dialogue with several actors in the field of ECEC, and with civil society and social policy makers to discuss the results of this study and rethink preschool pedagogy[7], ECEC professionalism[8], transitions[9] and 'parental involvement' ideas[10]. It needs to be said that by widening the debates while attempting to disrupt the tunnel vision on the future equalising potential of preschool education, I, as a researcher, am not simply an outsider but I am actually intervening in dominant social problem constructions as well. While I address it, I unintentionally contribute to the simple idea that the educational gap can be closed in preschool, outside of the primary school system, irrespective of other structural welfare measures. Being vigilant ourselves and re-examine the dominant problem constructions together with the involved stakeholders remains a continuous mission as an socially engaged and critical researcher.

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[5] Centre for Innovation in the Early Years – www.vbjk.be

[6] 22nd of September 2017– *School ready children or child ready preschools?* – Conference in Ghent for Flemish policy makers and ECEC practitioners
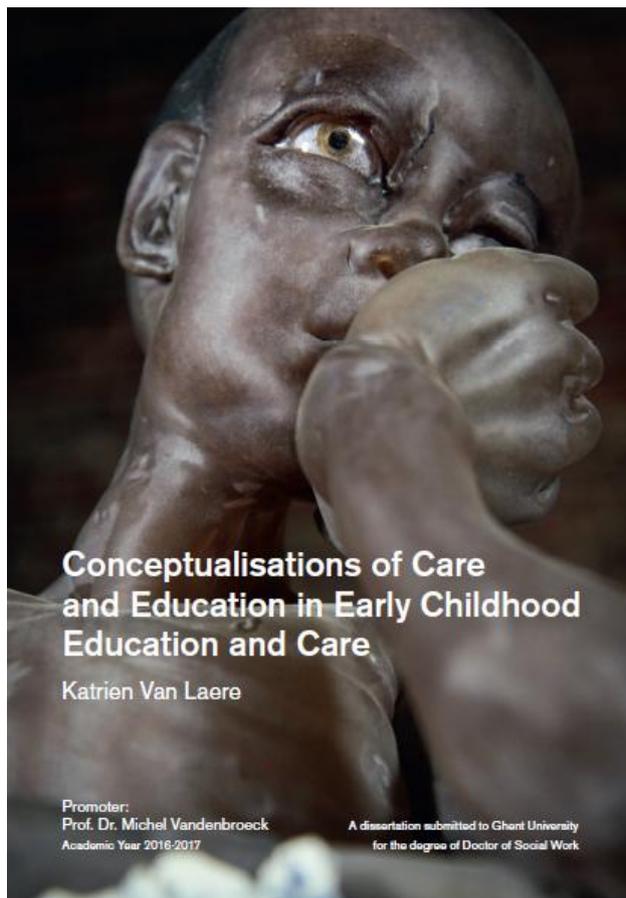
[7] e.g. De tandem - Pilot Project on Educare and structural integration of childcare and preschool in Bruges / Facilitating exchange between Flemish politicians and other countries by organising study trips in for example Denmark / Series of accessible articles in KIDDO and Kleuter & ik, magazines for ECEC staff in Flanders

[8] e.g. NESET research project on Professional Learning Communities, introducing Wanda project on analysing practices in preschool

[9] e.g. Erasmus+ project: START – *A good start for all: Sustaining Transitions across the Early Years* / Development of a movie on warm and inclusive transitions in preschool for initial and in-service training, commissioned by the city of Ghent / Consultancy for the interdepartmental governmental working group on 'warm transitions' (*Ambtelijke Werkgroep Warme Overgang*)

[10] e.g. ESF & AMIF project on parental participation in preschool education in 7 cities in Flanders & Brussels / Erasmus+ project EQUAP - *Enhancing quality in early childhood education and care through participation* / Plans to make and edit a book on participation of families, together with Joanne Lehrer and others, as part of the EECERA – SIG group

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Conceptualisations of Care
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