THEORISING SOCIAL COHESION IN CHILD AND FAMILY SOCIAL WORK

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Dutch title

Het theoretiseren van sociale cohesie in sociaalwerkpraktijken voor gezinnen met jonge kinderen

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Thank you

In mid-April 2024, the time has come. I begin to write the final pages of my doctoral dissertation, my acknowledgments. The awareness that a journey has come to an end, that a tale has been told, that the last act is performed, and that we're heading to the grand finale not only makes me proud and happy, but also melancholic.

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Five hundred, twenty five thousand, six hundred minutes
Five hundred, twenty five thousand moments so dear
Five hundred, twenty five thousand, six hundred minutes
How do you measure, measure a year?

In daylights, in sunsets
In midnights, in cups of coffee
In inches, in miles
In laughter, in strife

In five hundred, twenty five thousand, six hundred minutes
How do you measure a year in a life?

Measure your life in love.

Broadway musical Rent, 1996

With love
Melissa

Table of contents

CHAPTER 3

The (ab)sense of a conceptualisation of social cohesion in social work: a systematic narrative literature review 113

CHAPTER 6

The meaning of social cohesion in preventive family support: a
practitioners' perspective **199**

CHAPTER 7

Proportionate universalism in child and family social work **225**

CHAPTER 1

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

1.1 A focus on social cohesion in child and family social work

Social cohesion is placed at the heart of our society as - metaphorically speaking - the glue which binds this society together (Berman & Phillips, 2004). The concept received momentum in research and policy in times of distress, and as a response to a rapidly changing society (Berger-Schmitt, 2002; Novy, Swiatek, & Moulaert, 2012). Social cohesion is seen by scholars and policymakers as a necessary mechanism to allow society to function. Consequently, fostering social cohesion became a priority on the European political agenda as a result of societal developments such as individualisation. In contemporary society, there is a growing emphasis on individual rights and autonomy, which can lead to a sense of isolation and a weakening of the social fabric of society. Social cohesion initiatives may aim to balance individual rights with the need for collective well-being. Several other societal developments also contribute to prioritizing social cohesion, because they are seen as a challenge for social cohesion. Consider, for example, globalisation, competitively oriented social policies, and growing diversities in terms of class, ethnicity, gender, and age (Faist, 2010; Forrest & Kearns, 2001; Geens, 2016; Novy et al., 2012), which are deemed to inhibit this very particular social cohesion. The interest in social cohesion is not only visible in research and policy. It is also emerging in various disciplines and practices. For example, since 2014, social cohesion has been an objective of social work according to the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), the global body for the profession of social work. The Federation strives for social justice, human rights, and inclusive, sustainable social development through the promotion of social work best practices and engagement in international cooperation (IFSW, n.d.). The IFSW claims that social cohesion is one of the objectives of social work practices in general:

> " *Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, 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 (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014).*

The focus on social cohesion in these diverse disciplines and practices such as

social work is reflected by different theoretical perspectives. For instance, the ecological systems perspective emphasizes the interconnectedness between individuals and their environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), and the protective and positive outcomes a cohesive community can have. It is interesting to note how child and family social work, and, more in particular, integrated early childhood services for young children and their parents have been placed high on the political agenda by legislative bodies, such as the European Commission and the OECD to foster social cohesion (Council of the European Union, 2009; European Commission, 2015; Irwin, Siddiqi, & Hertzman, 2007; OECD, 2017; Skjesol Bulling & Berg, 2018). Early childhood services in child and family social work, such as services for families with young children, preschool facilities, childcare centres, and kindergartens, are given the responsibility to focus on both individual outcomes and social, or rather community-oriented outcomes. Community-oriented outcomes generally refer to positive changes, developments, or improvements which occur within a society, with a focus on enhancing the well-being, quality of life, and overall cohesion of the community. Consequently, these services are increasingly expected to promote social cohesion (Andrews & Jilke, 2016; Irwin et al., 2007). In Flanders (Belgium), this resulted in the implementation of the Decree on Preventive Family Support in 2013, which led to the introduction of *Huis van het Kind* (House of the Child). A House of the Child is a partnership between organisations focused on preventive family support and local policy. Nowadays, the presence of the Houses of the Child is extended to nearly all municipalities in Flanders. Houses of the Child, which we discuss in detail in the research context of this dissertation, are of pivotal interest to grasping the complexity of social cohesion, as these services have gained momentum in policy and practice as a response to the increasing segregation in our society, and the desire to build and rebuild social cohesion (Melhuish et al., 2008). In 2024, after a ten-year process that preventive family support and consequently the Houses of the Child went through, there is new legislation on the horizon under the name *Vroeg en Nabij*. Given the timeframe and context of this doctoral dissertation, the new legislation will only be considered for reflection in the conclusion and discussion of this doctoral project.

Researchers and practitioners in child and family social work have come to understand that social cohesion is a critical protective factor against various risks and challenges faced by children and families (Allik & Kearns, 2017; Choi, Kelley, & Wang, 2018). Studies in different domains have shown that social support and social cohesion have a positive impact on child and family well-being. A strong sense of community and social support networks provide families with resources, information, and emotional support, reducing, for example, the risk of child

neglect or abuse (Cao & Maguire-Jack, 2016). Socially cohesive communities also offer opportunities for parents to access quality education, healthcare, and employment (Ben-Arieh et al., 2014). The renewed interest in social cohesion within child and family social work also stems from the recognition that many contemporary social issues are complex and interconnected (Comaskey & Eith, 2023). Poverty, inequality, (domestic) violence, and mental health problems are often intertwined with social disconnection and lack of community support (Leigh-Hunt et al., 2017). This has caused a shift towards collaborative and multi-disciplinary approaches in child and family social work. Recognizing that social cohesion requires collective action, practitioners are working closely with community organisations, schools, healthcare providers, and other stakeholders to create supportive environments for children and families (Whittaker et al., 2022).

1.1.1   Towards integrated early childhood services

In recent international academic and European policy discussions, there is a growing consensus that accessible and integrated high-quality early childhood services can play a pivotal role in addressing social and cultural inequalities (European Commission, 2011; Lazzari, 2017). Investing in integrated high-quality early childhood services is increasingly perceived as a critical measure for achieving the multifaceted goals outlined in the Europe 2020 strategy (European Commission, 2010). These goals encompass promoting economic growth, enhancing competitiveness, reducing poverty, and fostering social cohesion (Lazzari, 2017). The focus on the aforementioned goals and the promotion of social cohesion in part coincides with a different evolution in early childhood services, namely a commitment to integrated early childhood services (Gray, 2014; Siraj-Blatchford & Siraj-Blatchford, 2009). Increasing specialisation resulting in segregation and fragmentation, as well as policies' expectations for these services to address both individual and societal goals, created the need for these integrated early childhood services for young children and families. An integrated partnership between different organisations is in line with several international tendencies in child and family social work. Family Centres have internationally been shaped since the 1990s in Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Finland (Kekkonen et al., 2012). In the United Kingdom, they are called Children's Centres, in the Netherlands, there are the *Centra voor Jeugd en Gezin* and in Flanders (Belgium), the *Huizen van het Kind* have emerged. Widespread diversity as well as similarities can be found in these places where preventive family support is shaped across Europe (Hoshi-Watanabe, et al., 2015). The functions ascribed to these integrated early childhood services vary according to

the political and cultural framework in which they are established. However, they all share a main characteristic, namely attending to children and parents (Hoshi-Watanabe et al., 2015). These integrated services have gained momentum in policy and practice as a response to various societal developments such as segregation, individualisation, globalisation, and growing diversities (Faist, 2010; Forrest & Kearns, 2001; Geens, 2016; Novy et al., 2012), and the desire to build and rebuild social cohesion (Melhuish et al., 2008). Accordingly, early childhood services are given the responsibility to focus on both individual outcomes and social, or rather community-oriented outcomes (Andrews & Jilke, 2016; Irwin et al., 2007), as these are supposed to offer opportunities for parents to access quality education, healthcare, and employment and combat social exclusion. In addition, they can promote the inclusion of all parents, regardless of their background or circumstances (Ben-Arieh et al., 2014; Kuusisto & Garvis, 2020). The focus on social cohesion in child and family social work and, more precisely, in early childhood services arises from a confluence of theoretical perspectives, policy discussions, and contemporary practices. While presenting opportunities for early childhood services to build cohesive, resilient communities and prevent social exclusion, early childhood services and social practitioners can also be faced with challenges related to the promotion of social cohesion.

1.1.2   Proportionate Universalism

Promoting social cohesion in child and family social work is intertwined with the theoretical framework of Proportionate Universalism (PU). PU recognises that, while interventions should be universally available to all, they must be proportionate to the level of need, ensuring that those with greater needs receive more substantial support (Dierckx et al., 2020). The integration of this PU framework into child and family social work can be essential for fostering inclusive and cohesive societies. Integrated early childhood services increasingly adopt the concept of PU to overcome the dichotomy between universal and targeted services in diverse socio-economic, gender-related, and cultural contexts (European Commission, 2013; Fenech & Skattebol, 2019). The Marmot review (2010) concluded that a targeted group-oriented policy leads to the outcome of a fair and inclusive society. A policy should target everyone, universally, with an appropriate intensity toward those families or individuals in need. Originating from the findings of the Marmot review (2010), PU addresses health disparities based on social circumstances. PU gained momentum in healthcare and related areas, including child and family social work. However, the implementation of PU in child and family social work is not straightforward. Theoretical and empirical considerations, including varying interpretations

among scholars, must be considered. The theoretical concepts underpinning PU revolve around universalism and targeted interventions (Francis-Oliviero et al., 2020). When referring to universal and targeted interventions, Korpi and Palme (1998) presented the Paradox of Redistribution, positing that a universal policy proves more redistributive than a targeted one. Traditionally, these two approaches were seen as mutually exclusive, with a policy being classified as either universal or targeted (Hogg et al, 2013). However, the boundary between these terms sometimes becomes ambiguous (Grogan & Patashnik, 2003). Carey & Crammond (2017) introduced negative and positive selectivism, together with particularism as various forms of targeted support and services. Negative selectivism aligns with means-testing, where social assistance is based on people's income. Positive selectivism targets needs, irrespective of the social position of people, whereas particularism proposes different standards for different categories reflecting diverse circumstances (Francis-Oliviero et al., 2020). Based on this division, Carey et al. (2015) stated that PU should be based on positive selectivism.

Despite PU's importance in child and family social work, it remains undertheorised and understudied. The focus lies on bridging the gap between targeted and universal services, and questions arise about integrating PU into existing integrated early childhood services which combine universal and targeted services, especially in the context of (increasing) diversity. The tension between universal and selective services is highlighted, with the European Commission advocating PU as a combination of universal and selective elements tailored to the level of disadvantage when addressing child poverty.

> " *The most successful strategies in addressing child poverty have proved to be those underpinned by policies improving the well-being of all children, whilst giving careful consideration to children in particularly vulnerable situations. (European Commission, 2013, p. 2)*

The integration of social services is seen to overcome fragmentation, but conceptual confusion about PU's nature exists. To address this, a *proportionate universalism heuristic* framework has been developed and is applicable at both the macro, meso, and micro levels of society (Carey et al., 2015). This layered model is permeated by the principle of subsidiarity, which means a preference for the least intrusive measure (De Vos, 2017). In the model of 'Proportionate Universalism heuristic', the subsidiarity principle aims to make decisions and

actions as close to citizens as possible (Carey et al., 2015). The theoretical model combines the knowledge obtained from the Marmot review with knowledge about the welfare state and social policy. A second theoretical framework concerns that of the *Family Centre Model* or *Family's House* (Carey et al., 2015; Kekkonen et al., 2012). In practice, these integrated early childhood services constitute a collaboration between different preventive family support services. In Flanders (Belgium), PU in early childhood services was presented by Child and Family (2017) using eight key components: the vision adopted (1); quality service provision (2); continuous development of professional and voluntary staff (3); transparent, easily accessible communication and information sharing (4); strong and shared leadership (5); sufficient time for cooperation process (6); sufficient and targeted deployment of financial resources (7); and monitoring and evaluation (8) (Child & Family, 2017).

1.2 Historical insights into the concept of social cohesion

The concept of social cohesion has been of interest to (social) scientists since the early 20th century. Over time, the meaning of social cohesion has evolved and has been approached from different perspectives. In this section, we briefly discuss the history of the concept from the 1900's to today from a European perspective. In this historical overview, it is important to indicate where certain theories have originated and to which extent the text advances an international, (Western) European, or even more Flemish narrative. By understanding the historical roots of social cohesion, we can critically reflect on the increasing importance which social cohesion is receiving today because of, among other aspects, increased diversity.

1.2.1 The emergence of nation-states

After the French and American revolutions, at the end of the 18th century, the 19th and 20th centuries were marked by the emergence of nation-states in Europe, ruled in the name of a nation of equal citizens (Wimmer & Feimstein, 2010), and accompanied by national policies targeted towards the creation of a sense of unity. Social cohesion, diversity, and social class, not always denominated by these specific terms, were key concerns in shaping these nation-states in Europe. Diversity refers to the variety of identities, languages, and cultures within a nation, whereas social class refers to the hierarchical division of society based on economic, social, and cultural status.

Social cohesion has its origins in the modern classics with sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies and Emile Durkheim (Fonseca, Lukosch, & Brazier, 2019). Tönnies envisioned a dichotomy between *Gemeinschaft* (community), based on feelings, connectedness, and mutual relations, and *Gesellschaft* (society), based on impersonal relations which are more instrumental (Botterman, Hooghe & Reeskens, 2012). Another classical root can be found in the work of Durkheim, a French sociologist who, in 1897, wrote about the preservation of a social order (Duhaime, Searles, Usher, Myers, & Fréchette, 2004). Durkheim argued that social cohesion was essential for the maintenance of social order and that it could be achieved through shared values and a strong sense of community.

The 19th and 20th centuries were particularly important periods in this regard, as European countries underwent significant social and economic changes, leading to the emergence of new forms of social organisation and political power. This political power was increasingly tied to a sense of shared national identity (Anderson, 1991). In this process, the heterogeneity of populations, together with their ethnic and cultural diversity was often denied or considered as a problem to overcome (Vandenbroeck, 2017). Anderson (1991) wrote in this regard about the imagined community, a very homogeneous one, where people share one history, one culture, and one language. Acknowledging diversity in the 20th century was merely a policy to frame persons or groups as *the other* and to legitimate the civilisation for these groups (Elias, 1998). Specific nation-state rationales and formations gave rise to national (European) responses to immigration and the associated increase in ethnic diversity (Castles, 1995). Castles (1995) designed a typology of policy models linked with different historical patterns of nation-state formations: formations based on ethnic belonging (1); formations based on political and cultural community (2); and pluralist nations (3) (Castles, 1995). The early 20th-century nation-state can be included in the former model of nation-states based on ethnic belonging, where cultural diversity is considered a threat to the national culture, and where social cohesion is based on the homogeneity of a set of shared norms, values, and language. Education in general as well as early childhood education was instrumentalised to civilise the poor and to reduce diversity in language and culture as well as in norms and values (Vandenbroeck, 2017).

At the same time, social class remained a significant factor in shaping the nation-state's social organisation and political power. Marxist theorists argued that social class was the primary driver of social and political change, with the bourgeoisie exerting control over the means of production and dominating the working class (Dean, Marx & Engels, 2017). The tension between social

cohesion and social class was particularly evident in the emergence of these nation-states. On the one hand, nationalist movements sought to promote a shared sense of national identity and culture, often through the promotion of national languages and cultural practices. On the other hand, these movements were driven by social and economic elites, who saw and used the creation of a nation-state as a means of consolidating their power (Hobsbawm, 1992). Research has shown that social class can have a significant impact on social cohesion (Graziano, n.d.). According to Pierre Bourdieu (1986), a French sociologist, social class is an important factor in determining an individual's social, economic, and cultural capital. Social capital is the resources and advantages which a person has, based on their social network and social position. Economic capital is defined as money or property and other material wealth, directly exchangeable for money. Cultural capital represents the knowledge, education, and skills a person possesses (Bourdieu, 1986). Social class can create divisions and inequalities within society, which can undermine social cohesion. For example, individuals from lower social classes may experience discrimination, marginalisation, and exclusion, which can make it more difficult for them to participate in society and to feel a sense of belonging (Kraus et al., 2017).

1.2.2   A political turn on social cohesion

Social cohesion remained a central concern for European governments in the 20th century. A way of looking at the development of social cohesion as a policy concept is approaching social cohesion as part of the transformation of social models (Hulse & Stone, 2007). In the early 20th century, democratic welfare regimes began to develop (Lloyd & Hannikainen, 2022). In the aftermath of World War II, for example, many European countries sought to promote peaceful and egalitarian societies through the creation of welfare states and the provision of social services, also focussing on the promotion of social cohesion (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Lloyd & Hannikainen, 2022). At the same time, however, the challenges posed by ethnic and cultural diversity remained, with many countries struggling to accommodate the needs of diverse populations while maintaining a sense of national unity. Social cohesion was considered threatened by the crisis of the welfare state, or the New Social Question (Taylor-Gooby, 2004), which resulted in the acknowledgment that the benefits and the protection of the welfare state were no longer effective for all (Jenson & Saint-Martin, 2003). Since the 1980s, an ideological shift in economic and social policy thinking towards neoliberal policies can be perceived (Jenson & Saint-Martin, 2003). Neoliberalism seeks to reduce the role of government in economic affairs. It is

characterised by a strong emphasis on market mechanisms, privatisation, deregulation, and a belief in individual freedom of choice (Springer, Birch & MacLeacy, 2016). Neoliberalism promotes the rise of the *enabling state*, in which the government withdraws from direct involvement in social issues and focuses on creating conditions for individuals to promote their well-being (Sainsbury, 2013). This approach emphasises self-reliance and the role of the market in providing services. Margaret Thatcher's (1987) statement *"there is no such thing as society"* reflects the individualistic nature of neoliberalism, in which individuals are seen as primarily responsible for their own well-being and social problems are addressed by individual efforts and the free market. The discourse of responsibility and focus on the family for generating life chances which accompanied this shift provoked reactions and different social tensions (Jenson & Saint-Martin, 2003) which led to increasing political dialogues on social cohesion in the 1990s and 2000s, because policymakers and legislative bodies such as the European Union feared the political, social and economic costs of a decreased social cohesion in society (Jenson & Saint-Martin, 2003; Kearns & Forrest, 2000).

Since the 1960s and 1970s, the homogenizing policies of the nation-state have been seriously compromised by the increase of migration from 1950 to 1960 and the economic crises during the end of the 1970s, which continued into the 1980s. From 1945 to the early 1970s, Western European countries recruited migrant workers to create economic growth (Vasta, 2010). These migrant workers were either from former colonies or from the poor European periphery. This paved the way for a range of new ideological approaches, such as the rise of extreme right-wing parties in the late 1980s within Belgium, resulting in Black Sunday in 1991. On this day, an extreme right-wing party won the elections at the cost of the governing parties. These new ideological approaches consistently have a central role to play in the governance of diversity (Watters, Ward, & Stuart, 2020).

1.2.2.1 Multiculturalism

One of these ideological approaches is multiculturalism as a new discourse (Watters et al., 2020). Multiculturalism as a policy is *"legislated to deal with the management and accommodation of diversity. Aligned to these policies are programs that support cultural diversity and facilitate equitable participation for heterogeneous ethnocultural groups"* (Berry & Ward, 2016, p. 444). This approach received many criticisms. One of these was focused on the ignorance of the diversity and heterogeneity of concepts, such as cultural identity and cultural groups. Differences within these cultural groups were not taken into

account, as groups were depicted as internally homogeneous (Berry & Ward, 2016; Vandenbroeck, 2017). Vertovec (2007) reminds both social scientists and policymakers to take account of significant variables related to ethnicity when considering the nature of different groups, their interactions, composition, and needs. Vasta (2010) argues that multiculturalism has been abandoned as a policy goal and accompanied by the abundance of the celebration of heterogeneity and differences towards a new - or should we state renewed - focus on discourses in which homogeneity is at the core (Holtug, 2010). In this respect, Stead (2017, p. 405) emphasises that "*the emergence of 'social cohesion' as a policy concept in various Western states has been widely understood as part of a backlash against multiculturalism*". In these political discourses, it is claimed that diversity and consequently diverse values in society may threaten the national identity and damage social cohesion (Vasta, 2010). The shift from multiculturalism to a focus on cohesion signals a desire to control differences and control the growth of extreme right-wing thinking (Vasta, 2010). The underlying cause of this problem, i.e., the damage to social cohesion, is often framed as migration-related (Ariely, 2014; Delhey et al., 2018; Healy, 2007; Holtug & Mason, 2010), where policymaking builds on an integration–citizenship–social cohesion nexus, according to Lithman (2010, pp. 488-490).

> *An integration–citizenship–social cohesion nexus represents a holistic ambition where each nation-state manifests its own presumed national–cultural order as normative. Migrant-related issues thus become couched in idioms focusing on culture, ethnicity, and identity. […] At the most general level, it is now commonplace for politicians, and many researchers, to claim that immigrants have to embrace liberalism, democracy, the rule of law, and human rights, and that this is what the integration–citizenship– social cohesion nexus is all about. (Lithman, 2010, pp. 488-490)*

Migration and diversity are of all times, yet their meanings have changed throughout history. Today, their meaning is molded with changes in the welfare state, expressive individualism, and far-reaching secularisation from 1960 onwards. In this period of far-reaching secularisation, population(s) with very strong religion(s) enter our country. This causes our society to reiterate the pressing questions: how can we live together?; what binds us together? (Loobuyck, 2012; Loobuyck, 2016).

1.2.2.2 Interculturalism

According to Zapata-Barrero (2017), we now have a post-Multicultural period where an InterCultural Policy (ICP) paradigm and National Civic Policy (NPC) paradigm come together. The ICP, on the one hand, is:

> " *The result of a historical process and the outcome of many factors that today reframe the migration-related diversity policy debate. The best way to focus this discussion is in terms of continuities and changes, and to approach it in terms of policy paradigm change and formation. (Zapata-Barrero, 2017b, p. 2)*

The NCP, on the other hand, refers to a *"renovated and perhaps more inclusive version of the former assimilationist policy paradigm"* (Zapata-Barrero, 2017b, p. 2). Interculturalism is presented as a possible strategy, a way of looking at creating a sense of belonging in a context where diversity is a given. From an interculturalist point of view, shared participation and equality are important. The practical implications of this strategy show the need for a social mix not only in neighbourhoods and housing, but also in schools and social services, and for a policy around this, as well as for active language policies beyond narrow nationalist perspectives (Loobuyck, 2012).

The brief historical outline shows that social cohesion is a concept, a perspective to look at everyday reality, one that changes according to the historical and political context. Bernard (1999, p. 48), in this regard, describes social cohesion as a quasi-concept *"that is, one of those hybrid mental constructions that politics proposes to us more and more often in order to simultaneously detect possible consensuses on a reading of reality, and to forge them"*.

1.2.3 The role of European Organisations

Since the mid-1990s, the concept of social cohesion emerged in Europe as well as in international organisations' publications such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (Jenson, 2010). Social cohesion subsequently appeared simultaneously in a range of key organisations, albeit in different versions. The OECD focused on the economic and material conceptualisation of social cohesion, whereas The Council of Europe used a broader definition and distinguished cultural, social, and democratic cohesion (Jeannotte, 2000). Jeannotte (2000) gives an overview of the pragmatic

responses of European organisations to the 'problem' of social cohesion and states that there is a lack of working definitions of social cohesion in international European organisations, despite an important overlapping element: European solidarity. Most of the time, the concern in international European organisations was and still is that "*social cohesion was under threat and policy steps must be taken to reinforce it*" (Jenson, 2010). The European organisations see several elements as threats to social cohesion. These elements include unemployment, poverty, income inequality, social exclusion, and exclusion from the Information Society (Jeannotte, 2000). Promoting social cohesion became a priority on the political agenda when the European Union (EU) declared that the economic and social cohesion of Europe was a main policy goal (Jenson, 2010). However, little consensus is found in legislative bodies about what promotes social cohesion.

Nevertheless, in academia, the definitions of these legislative bodies (European Commission, 2007; Council of Europe, 2008; OECD 2011) are frequently used. The OECD (2011, p.1) defines social cohesion in the following manner:

> " *[A] cohesive society works towards the well-being of all its members, fights exclusion and marginalization, creates a sense of belonging, promotes trust, and offers its members the opportunity of upward mobility. (OECD, 2011, p.1)*

The Council of Europe (2008, p.14) defines social cohesion as such:

> " *Social cohesion is the capacity of a society to ensure the well-being of all its members, minimising disparities and avoiding marginalisation. (Council of Europe, 2008, p. 14)*

The historical overview made it clear that the concept of social cohesion has been of interest to (social) scientists since the early 20th century. Over time, the meaning of social cohesion has evolved and has been approached from different perspectives. However, the meaning of the concept remains vague. Therefore, the search for a conceptual outline on social cohesion in child and family social work is the starting point of this doctoral research. This first requires a description of the concept of social cohesion and related concepts.

1.3   Social cohesion and related concepts

Diverse disciplines conceptualised social cohesion based on their specific theoretical assumptions, which led to a focus on several specific characteristics. The emphasis on social cohesion is particularly concentrated in the domains of sociology (Helly, Barsky, & Foxen, 2003; Van der Meer & Tolsma, 2014), political science (Putnam, 2007), criminology (Blevins, Cullen, & Wright, 2006), organisational psychology (Bruhn, 2009) and community psychology (Frye, 2007). As it has been studied by several disciplines, Pahl (1991, p. 413) cites that "*[d]isciplinary boundaries have protected the definitions of social cohesion and made it difficult to investigate multi-disciplinary, multilevel aspects of the concept*." Its understanding encompasses multiple interpretations, including a multilevel framework that distinguishes between individual, community, and societal levels. Recent literature reviews aim to redefine social cohesion to accommodate the diversity of values and cultures in contemporary societies. In this regard Dragolov et al (2016) have developed the *social cohesion radar*:

> " *The quality of social cooperation and togetherness of a collective, defined in geopolitical terms, that is expressed in the attitudes and behaviors of its members. A cohesive society is characterized by resilient social relations, a positive emotional connectedness between its members and the community, and a pronounced focus on the common good. (Dragolov et al., 2016, p. 6)*

The theoretical framework known as the social cohesion radar outlines three core aspects: social relations, focus on the common good, and connectedness, each with related subdomains. The social cohesion radar emerged as one of the most comprehensive frameworks, incorporating various levels and dimensions. Therefore, the social cohesion radar serves as the theoretical framework for subsequent discussions in the paper. The social cohesion radar will be extensively referenced in Chapter 2 (see 2.3.1) when describing the methodology of the various studies.

Beyond that, the different perspectives and conceptualisations on social cohesion caused some concepts to become inextricably linked to social cohesion. Through this dissertation, we discuss the central concept of social cohesion together with some interrelated concepts which are difficult to disconnect from social cohesion (Healy, 2007; Hewstone, 2015; Jenson & Saint-

Martin, 2003). As related, sensitizing concepts, we discuss the notions of social capital, social inclusion, diversity, social support, and light encounters (Blumer, 1954; Mortelmans, 2007). We chose to approach these concepts as sensitizing (in contrast with definitive concepts) for the following reason: "*whereas definitive concepts provide prescriptions of what to see, sensitizing concepts merely suggest directions along which to look*" (Blumer, 1954, p. 7).

1.3.1   Social capital

Social capital, a multifaceted and interdisciplinary concept, plays a pivotal role in shaping the dynamics of societies. Social capital, a term popularised by Pierre Bourdieu (1986) and subsequently expanded upon by scholars such as Coleman (1998) and Putnam (2000), refers to the actual or potential resources which result from having a sustainable social network of mutual acquaintance and recognition (Bourdieu, 1986). Social capital is defined by Putnam (1993, p. 167) as "*features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks, which can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions*". According to Putnam (2007), the growing immigration and ethnic diversity will inhibit this social capital and challenge social solidarity. However, a key challenge for today's modern and diversifying societies is to create in this vein a new, broader sense of *we*. Only when this condition is fulfilled, immigrant societies will be able to create new forms of social cohesion and social solidarity (Putnam, 2007). Social capital has been seen as generated through different factors (Onyx & Bullen, 2000; Purola & Kuusisto, 2021). Onyx & Bullen (2000) differentiate the following: participation in the local community (1); social agency (plan and initiate action) (2); feeling of trust and safety (3); informal neighbourhood connections (4); family and friends connections (5); tolerance of diversity (6); feeling valued by society (7); and work connections (8).

1.3.1.1 Bonding, bridging and linking

Based on Granovetter's notion of *weak ties* and *strong ties* (Granovetter, 1985), Putnam distinguishes *bonding* and *bridging* social capital (Putnam, 2000). Regardless of the type, bonding, or bridging, social capital can function as a *universal lubricant* of social relations (Putnam, 2000; Višnjić Jevtić, 2023). Bonding social capital refers to horizontal social relations which individuals form with others who are like them in terms of their background, interests, or identity. It involves the creation of a sense of belonging and solidarity within a more homogeneous group (Putnam, 2000). Bridging social capital describes formal and informal horizontal relations with people who are more heterogeneous in terms of social class, culture, communities, demographics, and social identities

(Halpern, 2005; Putnam, 2000; Szreter & Woolcock, 2004). When efforts are made to create social capital for parents in child and family services, scholars argue that, despite parents having children in the same services for families with young children, it does not automatically eliminate the differences and inequalities among them, which may hinder the easy bridging of parents (Višnjić Jevtić, 2023). Despite Putnam's valuable work, the distinctions made were also criticised. One of these critiques is that the notion of the state is absent from the conceptualisation of social capital (Agger & Jensen, 2015). To address this criticism, a third distinction of social capital was identified, namely linking social capital (Woolcock, 2001). Linking social capital includes vertical power relations inherent in the situation and interactions with institutions, such as government agencies, non-governmental organisations, and social work practices (Agger & Jensen, 2015; Woolcock, 2001; Szreter and Woolcock, 2004). Linking social capital has the weakest relationship but the most valuable outcome for the individual since this linking social capital provides access to and connection with governance structures and institutions (Hawkins & Maurer, 2010).

1.3.1.2 Unveiling positive and negative outcomes

The impact of social capital on individuals and communities is a nuanced interplay between positive and negative outcomes, and an important debate which is taking place in the literature about social capital (Hawkins & Maurer, 2010). Positive outcomes because of high social capital are, for example, community cohesion and resilience (Putnam, 2000). Here, social capital contributes to increased resilience in times of adversity, as individuals are more likely to support and collaborate during crises. Social capital also contributes to economic prosperity (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000), health, and well-being (Berkman & Glass, 2000). On the other side of these positive outcomes, there are some negative and counterproductive sides to social capital. First, strong social capital may enforce rigid norms and expectations, discouraging individuality and diversity leading to social control and conformity (Bourdieu, 1986). Secondly, while social capital can strengthen bonds within a group, it may also lead to exclusion. In some cases, communities with high social capital may inadvertently foster social inequality through social exclusion and limiting opportunities for *the other(s)* (Portes, 1998).

1.3.2 Social support

Broadly defined, social support encompasses the various forms of help, comfort, and encouragement which individuals receive from their social networks, including, for example, family, friends, colleagues, and community members

(Langford et al., 1997). It serves as a vital resource in navigating life's challenges and has been extensively studied across various disciplines, including psychology (Cohen & Wills, 1985) and public health (Kawachi & Berkman, 2001). One influential model categorizes social support into different types: emotional support, instrumental support, informational support, and appraisal support (Malecki & Demaray, 2003). Emotional support involves expressing care, empathy, and understanding, while instrumental support includes tangible assistance such as financial aid or practical help. Informational support entails providing guidance or advice, and appraisal support involves offering constructive feedback or affirmation (Langford et al., 1997; Malecki & Demaray, 2003). Numerous studies highlight the benefits of social support on physical and mental health. Having a robust social support system has been linked to lower levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, as well as enhanced coping mechanisms during challenging circumstances (Reblin & Uchino, 2008; Orth-Gomer, 2009; Weiss, 2002). While social support is more individual-focused and centers on the help people receive from their social networks during challenging times, social capital is a broader concept, encompassing the overall value and benefits which arise from social connections within a community or society (Putnam, 2007).

1.3.3   Social inclusion

Social inclusion is a multifaceted concept which has received significant attention across various academic disciplines, including sociology, psychology, economics, and public policy (Allman, 2013). The discussion of social inclusion can be framed by Allman's (2013) concept of a *sociological lens*, emphasizing that societies are organised into hierarchies, and inclusion/exclusion are features of these hierarchies (Smyth, 2017; Pocock, 1957). This challenges the notion that social inclusion is a natural state, emphasizing the role of societal and policy choices in fostering social inclusion (Allman, 2013; Sibley, 1995). The meaning of social inclusion has evolved through time towards a focus on both resource insufficiency and the inability to exercise social rights, emphasizing social cohesion and policies which grant excluded groups access, participation, and a voice in opposing their exclusion (Silver & Miller, 2003). In social inclusion definitions, two perspectives can be distinguished: one highlighting the importance of rights and the other emphasizing the significance of participation (Curran, Burchardt, Knapp, McDaid, & Li, 2007; Davey & Gordon, 2017). While these perspectives are complementary, the participatory approach has seemingly gained more prominence in literature, an evolution which has potentially been influenced by a policy discourse which in turn will provide

governments addressing social exclusion with clearer measurement possibilities of being socially inclusive (Lloyd, Waghorn, Best, & Gemmell, 2008). The recognition of rights and participation as equally important underscores the multidimensional nature of social inclusion, acknowledging the need for comprehensive approaches to address various facets of individuals' engagement with society. The multidimensional nature of social inclusion encompasses economic, cultural, and political dimensions and operates on different social levels (Das, Fisiy, & Kyte, 2013; Governance SDC network, n.d.). Economic inclusion is defined by the World Bank Group (Andrews et al, 2021, p. 19) as:

> *The gradual integration of individuals and households into broader economic and community development processes. This integration is achieved by addressing multiple constraints or structural barriers faced by the poor at different levels: the household (for example, human and physical capacity), the community (social norms), the local economy (access to markets and services), and formal institutions (access to political and administrative structures). (Andrews et al, 2021, p. 19)*

Cultural inclusion recognizes access to and engagement in cultural life as essential for enhancing well-being, fostering a sense of belonging, and creating a shared identity (UNESCO, 2021). Political inclusion asserts that each citizen, irrespective of class, age, gender, sexual orientation, ability, group, culture, or background, should have an equal right and opportunity to actively participate in and contribute to the operation of institutions and decision-making processes, ensuring that marginalised voices are heard (International IDEA, 2017). Social inclusion, therefore, transcends a single dimension, requiring a holistic approach for its realisation. The European Commission (2023) has increasingly adopted an inclusive growth approach, recognizing the interconnection between economic and social dimensions. Social inclusion is viewed not only to address poverty, but also to constitute a fundamental element for sustainable development. *"Leave no one behind"*, the pledge at the heart of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, makes social inclusion its major defining feature (UNESCO, 2021). The European Union has integrated social inclusion goals into various policy areas, acknowledging the importance of active inclusion, lifelong learning, and equal access to quality healthcare (European Commission, n.d.).

1.3.3.1 Social exclusion

When addressing the concept of social inclusion and its interconnectedness with social cohesion, the concept of social exclusion likewise needs to be considered. It is too simplistic to conceptualise social exclusion as the antithesis of social inclusion. In line with this, Walker and Wigfield (2003, p. 9) compare inclusion and exclusion as follows:

> *If social exclusion is the denial (or non-realisation) of different dimensions of citizenship then the other side of the coin, social inclusion, is the degree to which such citizenship is realised. Formally we might define social inclusion as the degree to which people are and feel integrated in the different relationships, organisations, sub-systems, and structures that constitute everyday life. (Wigfield, 2003, p. 9)*

According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2016), social exclusion describes a state in which individuals are unable to participate in different dimensions, which are in line with the multidimensionality of social inclusion, as well as the process leading to and sustaining such a state. Social exclusion can be regarded as twofold: as a property of societies (process-oriented), and as an attribute of individuals, groups, and communities (outcome-oriented) (Berghman, 1995; Berger-Schmitt, 2000; 2002). The relationship between social exclusion and social cohesion is complex and a largely unexplored area (Philips, 2008). Some scholars tried to make connections between social cohesion and social exclusion in various models. Bernard (1999) views social exclusion as a failure in social cohesion. Berger-Schmitt (2000; 2002) with the Quality-of-Life model, sees social cohesion as comprising social capital and inequalities dimensions, with social exclusion as an outcome-oriented manifestation. In contrast, the Social Quality model (Beck, van der Maesen & Walker, 2007) separates social cohesion and social exclusion as distinct dimensions without prioritizing one over the other. Despite the positive association of social cohesion and the negative association of social exclusion in these models, a potential contradiction is highlighted, namely that high levels of social cohesion might also imply high levels of social exclusion. The expected inverse relationship between these two constructs is questioned and introduces an increased complexity to their interrelationship (Philips, 2008).

1.3.4   Diversity

As globalisation, migration, and technological advancements continue to reshape demographic landscapes, societies worldwide are becoming more heterogeneous. The intensification of migration and the presence of these different (cultural and social) groups create an urgent need for redefining social cohesion and ways of living together (Dewinter, Rutten, & Bradt, 2019). The relationship between social cohesion and diversity is often perceived as incompatible (Taylor-Gooby, 2016). The assumption is too often made that integration due to growing diversity and building social cohesion presupposes people giving up their differences to be included. The integration recognition paradox, in contrast, assumes that if people are recognised in their differences, they will feel accepted and therefore identify with society (Levrau & Loobuyck, 2010). Diversity is understood as the presence of a variety of differences among individuals or groups, encompassing dimensions such as race, ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, religion, and more (Qin, Muenjohn, & Chhetri, 2014). According to Urban (2015), Europe is best described as experiencing hyper-diversity, *"an intense diversification of the population in socio-economic, social and ethnic terms, but also concerning lifestyles, attitudes and activities"* (Tasan-Kok et al., 2013, p. 6). In the context of hyper-diversity, traditional dualisms become untenable, particularly in educational relationships where questions of representation and normalisation become problematic. In the 21st century, scholars in the social sciences have embraced the concept of superdiversity to examine various forms of diversification, emphasizing the interplay between social categorisation and organisation, including issues of stratification and inequality (Vertovec, 2023). The complex categories of social difference have impacted entire societies to individual identities. While diversification often faces simplifying stereotypes and antagonism, superdiversity advocates for a perspective of acknowledging multiple social processes, flexible collective meanings, and overlapping identities (Vertovec, 2023). Diversity, hyper-diversity (Urban, 2015), or superdiversity (Vertovec, 2023), have evolved into central topics in research on social cohesion in child and family services, as the concept of superdiversity has become more evident. Superdiversity can influence, for example, various operational aspects of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings, including content, methods, and partnerships with families (Kuusisto & Garvis, 2020). ECEC and child and family services can play a crucial role in the societal arena for all families and children, serving as a platform to negotiate values, identities, and cultural and national memberships (Kuusisto & Garvis, 2020). This highlights the significance of recognizing and addressing superdiversity within child and family social services to ensure effective

engagement with the diverse backgrounds and experiences of individuals within these educational settings (Poulter et al., 2016).

1.3.5   Light encounters

Promoting social cohesion in child and family social work can involve a multitude of strategies. One of them is the creation of light encounters. Lofland's (1998) work on the public realm emphasises the significance of shared spaces in urban environments. Light encounters, occurring within these public realms, contribute to the development of a sense of community and shared identity. The everyday nature of these interactions fosters a sense of familiarity among (a diversity of) strangers, reinforcing the idea that public spaces serve as platforms for the negotiation of social bonds. Attention to light encounters in child and family social work is important when researching social cohesion, although the meaning and purpose of these light encounters are rarely mentioned in research on social cohesion (Geens, 2017). Light encounters refer to the fleeting, casual, and often overlooked social interactions which occur in public spaces. They may involve gestures like a nod, a smile, or a brief conversation between parents, contributing to a collective consciousness, breaking down social barriers, and promoting a sense of belonging. These encounters are characterised by their brevity, the involvement of strangers, and lack of deep engagement. However, these light encounters play a crucial role in shaping social dynamics (Soenen, 2006). It is in various daily social practices, such as parks, public transportation but also child and family social work, social cohesion can be shaped through these light encounters because people's paths cross briefly (Geens, 2016; Soenen, 2006). These temporary and context-specific interactions between people in a (semi-)public sphere are characteristic of light communities (Soenen, 2006). These communities are not sustainable; interactions between people will eventually dissolve.

The outline of social cohesion and the various related concepts makes it clear that these terms share much in common but are still distinct. This highlights the need for further theoretical elaboration.

1.4   Research outline

1.4.1   Problem statement

A particular field of interest to grasp the concept of social cohesion in social work lies in child and family social work (Hoshi-Watanabe et al., 2015; Melhuish et al.,

2008). The renewed interest in social cohesion has led to a shift towards collaborative and multi-disciplinary approaches in child and family social work, and partnerships which facilitate comprehensive and integrated services to address both individual and community-level needs. In Flanders (Belgium), this brought about the implementation of the Decree on Preventive Family Support in 2013, which resulted in the introduction of *Huis van het Kind* (House of the Child). A House of the Child is a partnership between organisations focused on preventive family support and local policy. They can nowadays be found in nearly all municipalities in Flanders. Integrated services, or Houses of the Child, are of pivotal interest to grasp the complexity of social cohesion and contribute to our theoretical knowledge, as these services have gained momentum in policy and practice as a response to the increasing segregation in our society and the desire to build and rebuild social cohesion (Melhuish et al., 2008). In these services, children are attributed a central role because they are depicted as potential *"brokers of relations"* (Soenen, 2006), meaning that in the creation of networks, community building, and parenting, children can be facilitators, thereby contributing to the development of social cohesion in our society (Geens, 2016). To achieve this political and societal goal, references are made to early childhood services as places where social integration and cohesion can be fostered (Hoshi-Watanabe et al., 2015; Melhuish et al., 2008). However, despite these policy intentions and theoretical approaches, policy and organisations share the conceptual confusion as well as the lack of theoretical foundations which may guide practice in how to relate to social cohesion in child and family services (Geens, 2016). While these services may be willing to take up this challenge, the conceptualisation of social cohesion in child and family social work remains undertheorised. According to Bernard (1999), social cohesion is a quasi-concept, a construct which is partially based on scientific analysis of reality which gives it its academic legitimacy, while still maintaining a certain vagueness. The vagueness of social cohesion makes it adaptable, broad, and flexible, but it also makes it more difficult to see what is meant by it (Botterman, 2015).

1.4.2   Research objective

The central objective of this dissertation is to disentangle how social cohesion is conceptualised in child and family social work and to contribute to the theorisation and conceptualisation of social cohesion in relation to child and family social work. Building on the work of Fonseca, Lukosch, and Brazier (2019), we integrate a multi-level approach, combining the levels of the community, institutions, and individuals. In so doing, social cohesion will be approached as a sensitizing concept. Sensitizing concepts are the opposite of

definitive concepts, as Blumer reports: "*whereas definitive concepts provide prescriptions of what to see, sensitizing concepts merely suggest directions along which to look*" (Blumer, 1954, p. 7). When approaching social cohesion as a sensitizing concept, it is essential to combine theory and empirical practice.

1.4.3   Research questions

The central research question, regarding the conceptualisation and theorisation of social cohesion in relation to child and family services in contexts of increased diversity, unfolds into several research questions. The search for a conceptual outline of social cohesion, which can be used as a framework for further research on social cohesion in child and family social work, is the starting point of this doctoral research. Hence, the first two research questions focus on the academic and political turn on social cohesion. While academic literature provides the research with an international and especially theoretical dimension, policymakers are important factors to be considered because they legislate and thus formalise theory in everyday practices, including in child and family services. The following two research questions aim to explore the actual day-to-day practices and the translation of social cohesion in child and family services, as well as how these everyday practices of social cohesion may emerge in child and family services. The political mission referred to in the fourth research question encompasses a broader societal role for both the field of child and family social work and practitioners employed in the field. This mission integrates, for example community engagement, and policy advocacy. By addressing the root and structural causes of social exclusion and inequality, child and family social work contributes to building stronger, more cohesive communities. Finally, the last research question focuses on the implementation of Proportionate Universalism in child and family social work in relation to the promotion of social cohesion. More concretely, we set out the following research questions:

RQ1: What could be a theoretical conceptualisation of social cohesion that is scientifically valid?

- How does social work literature conceptualise social cohesion?
- How does child and family social work literature conceptualise social cohesion?

RQ 2: How is social cohesion interpreted by policymakers?

- What do policymakers consider to be challenges and opportunities for social cohesion?
- What role is assigned to child and family social work in contributing to social cohesion?

RQ3: What is going on in child and family social work regarding the promotion of social cohesion?

RQ 4: How do (child and family) social workers give meaning to the concept of social cohesion and their responsibility in achieving this political mission?

RQ 5: How is the concept of proportionate universalism operationalised in child and family social work?

After an extensive introduction to the central theme of this doctoral thesis, namely social cohesion in child and family social work, the next chapter will elucidate the research context and applied methodology, based on the above research questions.

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CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1   A qualitative stance

At the origin of defining a research aim, constructing research questions, collecting data in the field, and analysing the data throughout the research process lies a methodological framework. For this research, we used a qualitative research design to capture the perspectives of key actors on different levels: we investigated the difference in rationales (academic scholars, policymakers, and practitioners), the difference in settings (local autonomy in shaping the Houses of the Child), and the difference in contexts (Flemish and local level). The methodological framework allowed an in-depth analysis of the multifaceted aspects of the research questions (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998).

The emergence of the insights presented in this study can be attributed to the iterative process of discussing results, revisiting original recordings, and engaging in the act of (re-)writing. These insights are inherently interpretive, and instead of being portrayed as absolute facts, they should be regarded "*as sources of understanding*", as suggested by Booth (1999, p. 249). It is our aspiration that these insights will serve as a lever for further reflection and debate on social cohesion in child and family social work (Roets, Roose, & Bouverne-De Bie, 2013). The analysis of the data gathered throughout this research process was deepened and brought to a higher level in a way that no coding tree could have done: by conducting peer reviews and discussions with (international) researchers on academic articles, by presenting the research process and findings on (international) conferences, and, lastly, by experiencing first-hand what it is like to participate in early childhood services.

In this chapter, we will comprehensively set out the methodological framework by providing insight into the research context and qualitative research methods, and by analysing strategies, ethics, and reflections on the act of doing research.

2.2   Research context

As child and family social work is influenced by the socio-economic, cultural, and political context in which they are embedded, it is important to provide detailed insights into the context in which the research took place (Coussée, Bradt, Roose & De Bie, 2010). The present research was carried out in the context of Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. The research was conducted at the level of the Flemish Community (Flanders) and at the municipal level.

2.2.1   Preventive family support in the Flemish community

Flanders is a compelling case in relation to social cohesion in child and family social work, as the Flemish Government issued the Flemish Act of Parliament on Preventive Family Support in 2013, emphasizing the promotion of social cohesion as one of three key pillars (Vlaamse Overheid, 2014). By doing so, the Flemish Government explicitly chose to put child and family social work forward as a potential driver of social cohesion (Vlaamse Overheid, 2014). The Decree of Parliament on Preventive Family Support from 2013 replaced the Flemish Act of Parliament on Parenting Support from 2007. Before the ratification of the 2013 Decree concerning the organisation of preventive family support (Vlaamse Overheid, 2013), a regulative framework was missing and structural funding for integrated early childhood services was not foreseen. As a result of the 2013 Decree, Flanders moved from solely supporting parenting to offering (preventive) family support as a broader concept. Preventive family support is aimed at families with children and teenagers, at children and young people themselves, and at parents-to-be (Vlaamse Overheid, 2013). The Decree brings together a local partnership in preventive family support under the term *House of the Child*. The Decree is a rather broad framework and only sets out general requirements, allowing local interpretation. It is therefore important to include both the Flemish and the municipal level, because, through the translation of regulations, local administrations and municipalities have acquired a great deal of autonomy over how to implement the Flemish legislation and establish a House of the Child. For instance, the Decree on Preventive Family Support, which emphasizes the promotion of social cohesion as one of the three pillars, gives local administrations complete autonomy over how it should be implemented.

2.2.2   House of the Child

Contrary to what the name suggests, a House of the Child is not necessarily a physical place. It is at least a working alliance of partners who enter a partnership on a local level and, for instance, align services, eliminate overlap, explore gaps, or needs in a municipality, and start addressing them together. A House of the Child can be formed at the intra-municipal, municipal, or inter-municipal level. When determining the area of activity, the municipal boundaries are the starting point. If, within a specific local context, it would not be interesting to take the municipality as the area of activity, it can be decided to work on a smaller scale (intra-municipal) or on a larger scale (inter-municipal). The House of the Child aims at the integrated working of different organisations and actors. A

prerequisite is that the local government is part of the partnership. As said, the ambition of the Decree was to broaden the scope of parenting support beyond the traditional interpretations. From this ambition, several life domains were proposed on which a House of the Child could focus. For example: education, health, culture, sports and leisure, socio-economic determinants, mental wellbeing, childcare, child welfare, and parenting support. Creating a House of the Child as a local primary provision was done by integrating three central pillars outlined by the Decree: the promotion of encounters and social cohesion, preventive health care, and parenting support (Vlaamse Overheid, 2014). The regulatory framework of the House of the Child additionally prescribes some forms of services. There are types of services aimed at (-to-be) families and professionals. These include accessible services in parenting support and playgroups (Needham & Jackson, 2012). Complementary, there are services aimed at (-to-be) families in vulnerable situations and professionals. These include accessible itinerant services of preventive family support, accessible outreach services of preventive family support, and accessible services of preventive family support to strengthen educational opportunities. A House of the Child can be given concrete form based on these three pillars, types of services, and, lastly, some working principles. Proportional Universalism is one of these guiding principles in the Houses of the Child (Chapter 1). Proportional Universalism in the Houses of the Child can be described as a third way (Opgroeien, 2015). This third way refers to a middle way between a universal offer of preventive family support, and a selective, integrated offer aimed at a specific target group (Van Lancker & Van Mechelen, 2015), where there is room and offer for specific, additional needs, questions and requirements of parents, educators or specific families (Emmery et al, 2013).

2.2.3 Early childhood services in the Houses of the Child

Each House of the Child is legally bound to offer a minimum set of three specific services: the preventive health care offered by the infant consultation schemes, the meeting places for parents and children (play group or drop-in), and the provision of parenting support. These three services are also at the centre of our research and are consequently explained in more detail. The infant consultation schemes have a longstanding history of offering a universal service including preventive health care for infants and toddlers, and they reach almost the entire population of parents of new-borns (Vandenbroeck, Coussee, Bradt, & Roose, 2011). The infant consultation schemes are funded and regulated by the governmental agency *Opgroeien* (Kind & Gezin, n.d.-a), which oversees child

welfare in the Flemish region of Belgium. When parents come to the infant consultation schemes, they are first directed to a waiting area, where they are welcomed by volunteers, who measure and weigh the children. Subsequently, the consultation continues with a visit to a doctor or nurse. Another universal service in the Houses of the Child is the playgroup (or drop-in). In the case of the three different Houses selected for our study, the management of the playgroup is outsourced to organisations which traditionally provide targeted services, labelled in Flanders as *Inloopteam* (drop-in team). The *Inloopteams* are also funded by *Opgroeien* (Kind & Gezin, n.d.-b) to specifically reach out to the most vulnerable families with young children, to organise peer groups with these mothers, and to facilitate access to mainstream services. A third service present in the Houses of the Child is the provision of parenting support. This support is materialised in the form of parenting groups led by different partners of a House of the Child. Besides groups for single parents, parent-child groups can also be installed. Children up to 12 years old and their parent(s) or caregiver(s) are welcomed to participate in activities together with other families in a group. These activities include cooking, crafting, playing a game, doing experiments, and so on. Based on policy documents and conversations with local administrations and coordinators of the Houses of the Child in the different cases, a selection in terms of types of services was made for each case. The following child and family social work practices were selected: infant consultation schemes, meeting places for parents and children (play group or drop-in), Dutch language practice opportunities, playful learning, reception and waiting area, group activity for parents with children, experience-based process group for parents with children, and info sessions. Table 1 provides an overview of the types of child and family social work practices which are part of the studies on the municipal level, as well as a summary of what these services entail.

Practices			Practitioners
Infant consultation schemes	Funded and regulated by the governmental agency *Opgroeien*	Preventive health support for children between 0 and 3 years old. Volunteers welcome, measure, and weigh children. Followed by an appointment with a doctor and/or nurse. Families take place in the waiting room during their visit.	Volunteers Medical staff
Meeting places for parents and children (play group or drop-in)	Management of the meeting place is outsourced to an *Inloopteam* (drop-in team) who are funded by *Opgroeien*	Parents with children between 0 and 3 years old. Possible to come and go when you want. Children can play, parents can meet.	Professional practitioners from the *Inloopteam*
Dutch practice opportunities	*Inloopteam* (drop-in team) who are funded by *Opgroeien.*	Parents can come here to practice their Dutch. Two or three groups are formed based on the language proficiency.	Volunteers
Playful learning	House of the Child and a non-profit organisation.	Parents with children between 0 and 12 years old. The children are divided into two groups and the parents stay with the children between 0 and 3 years old. Each week, a different theme provides diffe-rent activities such as a craft task, games, …	Volunteers Professional practitioners
Reception and waiting area	Organized by different organisations to provide a central point of contact for parents for all questions related to children and upbringing.	Parents can drop by without an appointment to ask questions related to children, parenting, and others. They wait in the waiting room before meeting the employee.	Professional practitioners

Practices			Practitioners
Group activity for parents with children	Organized by different organisations such as the *Inloopteam*, non-profit organisations, *Opgroeien*.	Parents and children between 0 and 12 years old do activities together such as cooking, crafting, and playing games. The youngest children can be in childcare during the activity with older children.	Professional practitioners Volunteers (childcare)
Experience-based process group for parents with children	*Inloopteam* (drop-in team) who are funded by *Opgroeien*.	Same group of parents with children between 0- and 6- years old meet on a regular basis and discuss various topics.	Professional practitioners Volunteers (childcare)
Info sessions	Organized by different organisations (together) such as the *Inloopteam*, non-profit organisations, *Opgroeien*.	Different themes can be central in an info session for (grand)parents. For example: potty training for parents with a child which will start at school.	Professional practitioners Volunteers (childcare)

Table 1: Overview of child and family social work practices included in the research context

Besides a variety of practices, practitioners in the services of a House of the Child can have diverse roles and training. For instance, there are medical staff such as doctors and nursing personnel who, along with the volunteers, look after the consultation schemes. The volunteers take care of the reception and management of the consultation schemes or are responsible for the childcare. Professionals from the *Inloopteam* are specialised in working with families in vulnerable situations and are mostly trained in social sciences. The backgrounds of other professionals and volunteers can be very diverse, partly because there is no requirement for a particular degree in social work to be employed as a practitioner in The Houses of the Child.

2.2.4 Multiple case study

In this research, exploring daily child and family social work practices not only involved delineating the practices but primarily entailed selecting the various cases to conduct the qualitative research. The doctoral research utilised a

multiple case study approach, with three cases being selected. The cases were selected to be as varied as possible. In selecting these cases we did not aimed for representativity, but for diversity. This means that we do not claim that each of these cases are in some way "typical" for all child and family social work in Flanders. However, the selected cases are in no way "atypical" for the diversity of Houses of the Child in Flanders. Given the importance of these cases and the quest for their similarities and differences concerning the theoretisation of social cohesion, this section elaborates on the three cases, while ensuring the anonymity of the cases and practitioners. The research took place in three selected neighbourhoods in the cities of Antwerp, Ghent, and Mechelen. In Antwerp and Ghent, neighbourhoods with significant cultural diversity were chosen, characterized by specific socio-economic contexts. In Mechelen, a contrasting neighbourhood was selected, with more highly educated parents, less diversity, and a significantly lower child poverty rate (compared to other neighbourhoods in Mechelen excluding the municipalities). Another important difference between the three selected cities and neighbourhoods was the implementation of the Houses of the Child. In Antwerp, the decision was made to create 16 local Houses of the Child in various neighbourhoods. In Ghent, there is currently no physical House of the Child. However, other organisations offer consultation schemes, group activities, parenting support, playgroups, and health promotion services for families in the neighbourhood across the city of Ghent. In Mechelen, there is one physical House of the Child, located in the city centre where all residents are welcomed. Additionally, there are practices from other child and family social work organisations in the various neighbourhoods of Mechelen. At the start of the qualitative research in 2022, an overview was made of the demographics of the selected neighbourhoods based on the most recent statistical data, focusing on the population, diversity, and families. It is important, for further insights and analyses, to adequately expose the demographic characteristics that distinguish these cases.

2.2.4.1 Case Antwerp

The population of this neighbourhood is relatively young and highly diverse. The group of children and youth aged zero to 17 years (minors) comprised 30.9% of the residents (Stad Antwerpen, n.d.-a). Over the past 20 years, the neighbourhood has certainly experienced rejuvenation, as in 2020, only 19.5% of the residents were between zero and 17 years old. Additionally, this neighbourhood is known for its multicultural character, which has diversified in recent years. In 2020, the neighbourhood had an international migration balance of 205. A positive international migration balance means that more people

immigrated from abroad than emigrated (Provincie in Cijfers, 2022a). The percentage of residents of foreign origin (including parents' origin) compared to the total number of residents in the neighbourhood is 70.9%. Over the past ten years, the share of residents of foreign origin has increased from 58.9% in 2012 to more than 70%. When we focus on the nationality of the residents, the largest group had Moroccan origin, followed by Belgian and Turkish (Provincie in Cijfers, 2022b). *Provincie in Cijfers* (2022b) allowed describing the evolution of nationalities and origins from 1990 to 2021. The share of residents of non-Belgian origin increased from 17.0% in 1990 to 80.2% in 2021. The share of persons with a foreign EU origin was 4.6% in 1990 and 11.0% in 2021. The share of non-Belgian non-EU origin went from 12.4% in 1990 to around 70% in 2021.

A focus on the households provided insight into the family composition of families with children. Of all households, 12.4% were single-parent families, and 31.8% of households were couples (married and unmarried) with children. The percentage of single-parent families had the highest percentage in the past 15 years. Remarkably, there was a significant share of births in disadvantaged families. Figures show that more than half of the children were born into disadvantaged families (Stad Antwerpen, n.d.-b). This is almost a doubling in just a few years. In 2010, the share of births in disadvantaged families was 29%.

2.2.4.2 Case Ghent

This case is located in a relatively young neighbourhood with 23.8% of children and youth aged between zero and 17 years. The largest group of residents was between the age of 18 and 64, comprising 66% of the total population. Over the past 20 years, there has been a clear rejuvenation in the neighbourhood. This rejuvenation is the result of births, a significant influx of new young residents of Ghent, both with Belgian and non-Belgian nationalities, and the absence of an aging population. In 2020, the neighbourhood had a positive international migration balance of 99, meaning that more people immigrated from abroad than emigrated (Provincie in Cijfers, 2022d). While natural growth has seen a slight decline in recent years, the positive international migration balance has led to a significant increase in the total population growth in the neighbourhood. When considering the proportion of residents with a non-Belgian origin (based on both parents' origins), 58.2% of residents have a non-Belgian origin. The increase since the 1990s was remarkable. In 1990, only 12.5% of residents had a non-Belgian origin, making this percentage more than four times larger over 30 years. At the level of the city of Ghent, we also see this increase and diversification, although it is less pronounced than in the selected case. When looking at the EU

origin of residents (excluding Belgian origin) the majority were from Eastern European countries (15.6%). These percentages in the neighbourhood are more than twice as high compared to the city of Ghent itself. Regarding residents with a non-EU origin compared to all residents in 2021, the largest group originated from Turkey. Most residents with a non-Belgian origin were of Turkish descent (18.5%) and Eastern European descent (15.6%). Residents of Turkish descent have a longer history in the neighbourhood than those of Eastern European descent. It is only after 2007 that a clear influx of residents with an Eastern European origin can be observed.

In this case, 23.6% of families with minor children were single-parent households (Provincie in Cijfers, 2022c). When examining the distribution of families with children, we see that 29.9% of families with children were married or cohabiting in 2020. Focusing on the poverty index from *Opgroeien* reveals that approximately 1 in 2 children is born into a disadvantaged family.

2.2.4.3 Case Mechelen

In addition to being a historic city, Mechelen is also a young city. Compared to the city of Mechelen, this case has a slightly younger population. In 2021, almost 23% of residents were children aged between 0 and 17 years old. In total, 60.3% of residents are between the ages of 18 and 64 years old (Mechelen in Cijfers, 2022). The international migration balance is also slightly positive, namely 20. This means that more people immigrated from abroad than emigrated. However, this migration balance has seen a relatively large decrease, as it was 94 in 2018 (Provincie in Cijfers, 2022e). In 2021, the share of residents with a non-Belgian current nationality is 9.0%, with a non-Belgian nationality at birth is 20.6%, and with a non-Belgian origin is 30.4%. The distribution of residents with a non-Belgian origin by country of origin made clear that 13.3% are from the Maghreb region (the north-western part of Africa such as Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Mauritania, and Libya) (Provincie in Cijfers, 2022f). In this case, the share of residents with a non-Belgian origin increased from 8.3% in 1990 to 30.4% in 2021. The share of persons with a foreign EU origin was 2.5% in 1990 and 6.7% in 2021. The share of non-Belgian non-EU origin increased from 5.8% in 1990 to 23.8% in 2021 (Provincie in Cijfers, 2022f). Some shifts can be observed in origin over the past 20 years. Regarding residents with a non-Belgian EU origin, we see that origins from the Netherlands have consistently been the largest group. The same applied to non-Belgian non-EU origins, where the Maghrebian group has been the largest since 1990. However, proportions have been adjusted as there are various shifts visible. Firstly, only the group of residents

with an Eastern European (EU) origin has experienced a clear increase over the past 30 years. A slight increase, but a decrease over the past 20 years, can be observed for the French origin (Provincie in Cijfers, 2022f). A second shift can be seen in the group of residents with a non-Belgian non-EU origin. A decrease of more than 20% is noticeable in the group of residents of Maghrebian origin. This decrease is accompanied by an increase in residents of (other) Asian and African origin and Eastern European origin (non-EU).

In this neighbourhood, 15.8% of families with minor children were single-parent households. The share of single-parent families has decreased since 2006. In 2006, there were still 18.3% single-parent families. The poverty rate in 2019 for this neighbourhood was only 8.6, significantly lower than all other neighbourhoods in Mechelen. Consequently, this neighbourhood had the lowest poverty rates of all neighbourhoods in Mechelen (except for the municipalities).

These demographic characteristics indicate that the third selected neighbourhood is a contrasting case with significantly less migration, diversity, and poverty compared to the other two cases presented earlier.

2.3   Research design

In the following section, we present an overview of the varied qualitative methods employed for data collection and analysis in each respective study. The overall research design was approved by the Ethical Committee of the Faculty of Psychological and Educational Sciences of Ghent University. As the chapters in this dissertation (except for the last chapter) are written in the format of research manuscripts, there will be some overlap regarding the methodology of some studies. An overview of the following studies with their corresponding research questions, method(s), level, and chapter can be found below (Table 2).

Study	Research question(s)	Methodological approach	Level	Chapter
1	What could be a theoretical conceptualisation of social cohesion that is scientifically valid? *How does social work literature conceptualise social cohesion? How does child and family social work literature conceptualise social cohesion?*	Systematic narrative literature review of academic literature	Academic	3
2	How is social cohesion interpreted by policymakers? *What do they consider as challenges and opportunities for social cohesion? What role is assigned to early childhood services in contributing to social cohesion?*	Analysis of policy documents combined with semi-structured interviews with policy makers on the National, Flemish, and local level	Policy	4
3	What is going on in child and family social work regarding the promotion of social cohesion?	Observations in three selected cases of child and family social work	Practices	5
4	How do (child and family) social workers give meaning to the concept of social cohesion and their responsibility in achieving this political mission?	Interviews using the Critical Incident Technique with practitioners and volunteers in three selected cases of child and family social work	Practitioners	6
5	How is the concept of proportionate universalism operationalised in child and family social work?	Analysis of national and local policy documents combined with semi-structured interviews with practitioners and observations in three selected cases of child and family social work	Policy, practices and practitioners	7

Table 2: Overview of the studies of this doctoral dissertation

2.3.1   Mapping social cohesion

"*An early and essential step in doing a study is to review the accumulated knowledge on your research*" (Van Hove & Claes, 2011, p. 38). With this in mind, the first step in this research process consisted of a mapping of social cohesion. Social cohesion, with its origins in sociology (Abrahams, 2016), subsequently made its appearance in several domains. Mapping social cohesion involved immersing ourselves in literature rooted in sociology, but also political science, urban studies, philosophy, and community psychology. Besides the importance of the historical understanding of social cohesion (chapter 1), it is of relevance for this research to consider possible interpretations of social cohesion and include them as a (possible) way of looking at social cohesion in child and family social work. Social cohesion has been defined by multiple scholars as a multilevel concept, in which different interpretations of the levels coexist (Bottoni, 2018; Langer et al., 2017). One of these frameworks elaborates a micro, meso, and macro level distinguishing the individual, the community, and the society (Dickes & Valentova, 2013; Fonseca et al., 2019). Within this framework, social cohesion is understood as a social characteristic, attributed to individual attitudes and behaviours towards these different levels (Chan et al., 2006). A similar interpretation of social cohesion differentiates a horizontal from a vertical level (Chan et al., 2006; Dragolov et al., 2016). The horizontal level constructs the relationships among individuals and groups (the micro and meso levels), whereas the vertical level constructs the relationships between individuals or groups and the society as a whole (the macro level) (Dragolov et al., 2016). A third interpretation distinguishes an ideational, relational, and distributive level of social cohesion (Moody & White, 2003; Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017). The ideational level encompasses shared norms and identities, the relational level includes the relationship between individuals in a society, and the distributive level covers the (un)equal distribution of different resources. According to the conceptualisation of social cohesion, literature reviews have been used more recently to search for a redefinition of social cohesion in order to cover the "*multiplicity of values and cultures found in current societies*" (Fonseca et al., 2019, p. 14). In attempting to structure ever-expanding meanings which are attributed to social cohesion and to obtain consensus regarding the definition of social cohesion, The Bertelsmann Stiftung Organisation (Dragolov et al., 2016) has developed the *social cohesion radar* (Figure 1), drawing upon the literature review of Schiefer and van der Noll (2017):

> *The quality of social cooperation and togetherness of a collective, defined in geopolitical terms, that is expressed in the attitudes and behaviors of its members. A cohesive society is characterized by resilient social relations, a positive emotional connectedness between its members and the community, and a pronounced focus on the common good. (Dragolov et al., 2016, p. 6)*
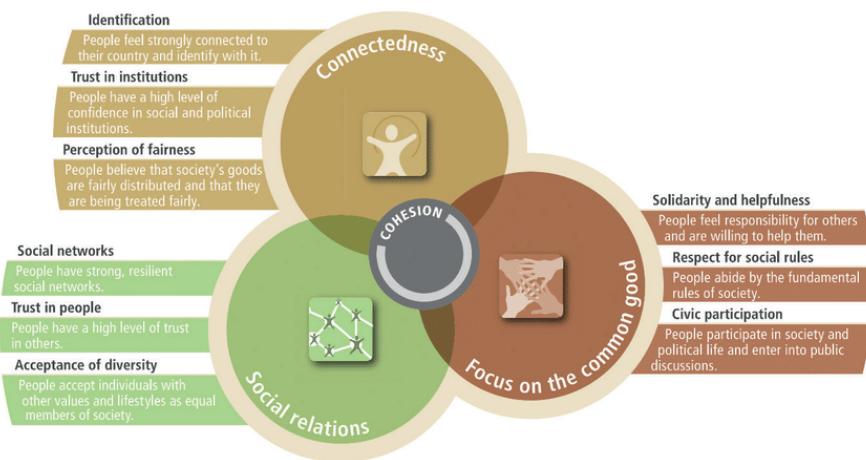
Figure 1: Domains of the social cohesion radar (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018)

The Bertelsmann Stiftung is established in 1977 by Reinhard Mohn to advocate for social causes and foster a fair society. Over the years, the foundation has prioritized social cohesion, evident through publications focusing on societal interaction. The challenge of balancing diversity and cohesion in rapidly changing societies remains relevant, as highlighted in discussions from the late 1990s. The foundation shifted its attention to the role of religion in social interaction, culminating in the Religion Monitor survey in 2008. This survey expanded to examine social cohesion explicitly in 2013, spanning 13 countries. Bertelsmann Stiftung's, Social Cohesion Radar was created and conducted by scientists specialized in social sciences, methodology, mathematics, and sociology. The social cohesion radar emerged as a tool to assess social transformation's impact on societies, going beyond religion to analyse broader societal connections. It aims to identify threats to cohesion early on.

The theoretical framework of the social cohesion radar entails three core aspects

(Figure 1), each of which unfolds into three related subdomains. The first aspect is '*social relations*' and includes social networks, trust in people, and acceptance of diversity. The social cohesion radar identifies the social networks subdimension as having strong and resilient social networks, the trust subdimension as having a high degree of confidence in others, and the acceptance of diversity subdimension means that individuals with different lifestyles and values are regarded as equals in society (Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017). The second aspect is '*focus on the common good*', and consists of solidarity and helpfulness, respect for social rules, and civic participation. Solidarity and helpfulness mean that people feel responsible for each other and are willing to help each other, respect for social rules implies that people abide by the fundamental rules of society, and civic participation is centered around the participation of people in social and political life, as well as taking part in public discussions (Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017). The third aspect is '*connectedness*', and unfolds in identification, trust in institutions, and perception of fairness. Identification is interpreted as the (strong) connection which people feel with their country and which leads them to identify with it, trust in institutions includes people's (high) trust in social and political institutions, and perception of fairness comprises people's belief that goods in society are distributed fairly and that they are treated fairly as individuals (Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017). The social cohesion radar utilised real-life data and sophisticated statistical techniques to provide a multitude of reliable empirical evidence regarding the present state of social cohesion and its evolution over time. Another pivotal objective of the social cohesion radar was to translate the theoretical concept of cohesion into an empirically quantifiable phenomenon (Dragolov et al., 2016). In this doctoral research, the dimensions and their associated quantitative measurement scales are not utilised for this purpose. Approaching social cohesion solely quantitatively would results in a simplistic representation of social reality in child and family social work. Instead, the dimensions of the radar are used as a lens through which to examine qualitative research data.

In addition, the definition of social cohesion by the social cohesion radar deliberately excludes material wealth, social inequality, values, and well-being, despite their potential significance in previous definitions, to streamline the concept (Dragolov et al., 2016). The decision to exclude material wealth, social inequality, values, and well-being from the definition is grounded in substantive considerations, particularly in distinguishing social cohesion from and individual focus on well-being. The work of Kroll and Delhey (2013) discusses the measurement of societal well-being and its relation to various indicators, ultimately highlighting the limitations in consensus and development of

measures for societal well-being. The focus of the social cohesion radar aims to counteract the individualistic trends in quality-of-life research, emphasising the collective nature of cohesion (Dragolov et al., 2016). Regarding equality, the definition prioritised the perception of procedural and distributive fairness over objectively measurable justice or inequality. In addition, cultural, ethnic, or religious diversity as a component of cohesion are excluded, instead a constructive approach to diversity is emphasized. The conceptualisation of social cohesion by the social cohesion radar diverged from previous approaches by not including shared values, recognizing the complexity and diversity within modern societies. In contrast to models based on homogeneity, the social cohesion radar asserted that cohesion in modern societies relies on diversity and mutual interdependence, rejecting exclusionary practices that may promote short-term cohesion but lead to detrimental consequences. Social cohesion, as a systemic property of society, is broader than social capital, encompassing the collective well-being of the social entity rather than individual-level constructs. To end, the definition intentionally excludes the role of the family, emphasising the importance of inclusivity and diversity in promoting social cohesion (Dragolov et al., 2016).

Based on an extensive literature study where conceptualisations of social cohesion were compared and analysed, the social cohesion radar was the most holistic framework which considered the different levels such as micro, meso, and macro, as well as ideational, relational, and distributive when conceptualizing social cohesion. The first study (chapter 3) confirmed the comprehensiveness. Therefore, we referred to this comprehensive conceptualisation of social cohesion as the theoretical framework in the following sections of this paper.

2.3.2   Study 1 – A review of the academic literature[1]

For the first study (chapter 3) of this dissertation, we conducted a systematic narrative literature review of academic social work literature in which we focused on child and family social work as a particular field to grasp this complexity. Child and family social work is supposed to contribute to social cohesion, but what is meant by that when diverse notions are used, and the same concepts can cover different meanings? A systematic literature review was a particularly suitable method to answer our research questions, given the wealth of information which

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[1] Based on Dierckx, M., Devlieghere J., & Vandenbroeck, M. The (ab)sense of a conceptualisation of social cohesion in social work: a systematic narrative literature review. *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research (in review)*

is available on our central research topic as it *'makes sense of large bodies of information'* (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006, p. 2) by robustly and reliably summarizing the current state of affairs with respect to the topic under investigation (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). The review of literature, which started in this first study, was not only carried out at the beginning of this research process but continued throughout the period of research and different studies.

2.3.2.1 Selection of the literature

To collect the data, a systematic literature search was undertaken, using the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI). The SSCI has "*access to current and retrospective bibliographic information, author abstracts, and cited references found in over 1,700 of the world's leading scholarly social sciences journals covering more than 50 disciplines*" (Russ-Eft, 2008, p. 185). The SSCI includes journals with a relevant number of citations which "*is considered as evidence of the usefulness, quality and/or impact*" (Archambault et al., 2006, p. 331). The critical analysis of this literature allows to reflect upon the conceptualisations of social cohesion for social work and for child and family social work in particular. The search term "social cohesion" was determined by the review question and papers were included if they met the following criteria:

- Type of publication: journal article reporting an original study,

- Date of publication: 1st January 1990 – 1st December 2019,

- Language: English,

- Web of Science Category: Social Work,

- Geographical location: any,

- Methodology: quantitative, qualitative, mixed method,

- Scope: conceptualisations of social cohesion, measuring social cohesion, challenging of promoting factors of social cohesion, promoting social cohesion through services or specific practices.

The first search resulted in 3320 articles. After specifying the research category in "social work" 105 articles remained. A second search was conducted to gain specific literature about social cohesion in child and family social work. Therefore, the topic of the article needed to include "social cohesion" AND "early childhood education" OR "child and family social work" OR "child and family services" This search resulted in 11 articles. After excluding the doubles, 114 articles remained. Titles and abstracts of the 114 articles were screened and full

reports were obtained for the studies which met the criteria.

When the title or abstract provided insufficient information, the full article was obtained. The same inclusion criteria were then used to review the full articles. The review resulted in mapping the full articles into a comprehensive overview. The overview consisted of (sub)topic of the research (1); definitions and conceptualisations of social cohesion (2); domains of social cohesion (3); challenging and promoting factors of social cohesion (4); social work practices (5); and other information (6). After obtaining the overview, the search and screening procedure resulted in 76 studies to include in the qualitative analysis (Figure 2). The 11 articles on social cohesion in child and family social work followed the same refinement and resulted in 10 articles, which were first included in the analysis and then also separately reviewed.
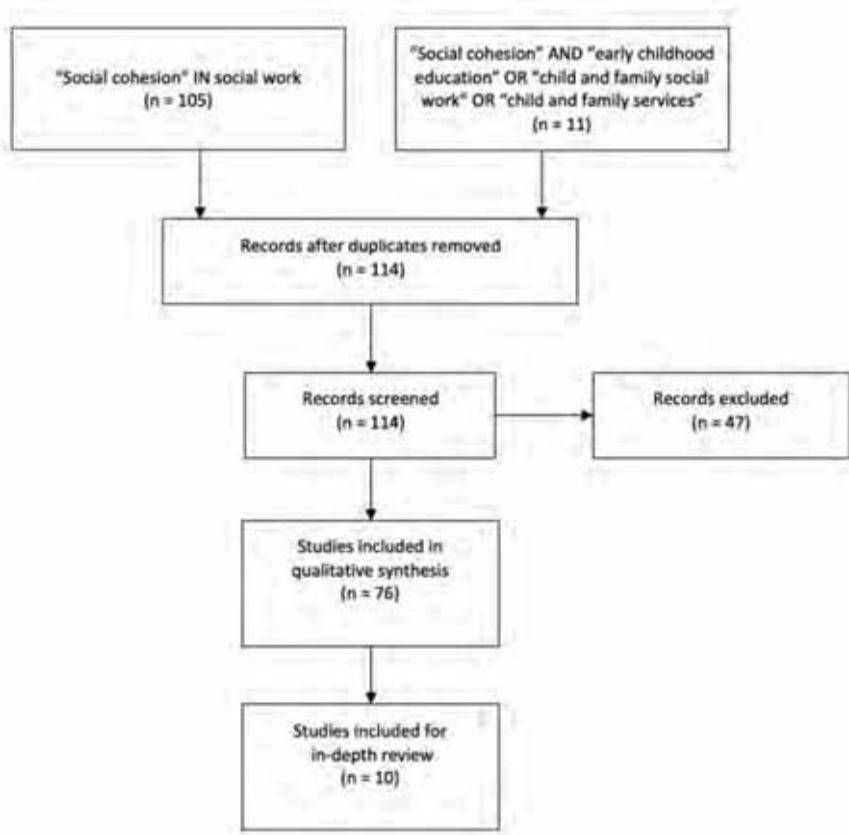
Figure 2: Search procedure. Visualisation of the search strategy (study 1)

2.3.2.2 Analysis of the literature

First, the full text of all selected articles was analysed using the comprehensive overview to determine the main conceptualisations of social cohesion (horizontal layer). Second, an in-depth thematic analysis using Nvivo 11 was carried out on the 10 articles on social cohesion and child and family social work (vertical layer). The in-depth method of analysis chosen for these 10 articles was a hybrid approach of thematic analyses. The hybrid approach is a combination of a deductive approach (Crabtree & Miller, 1999), based on the theoretical framework of the social cohesion radar (Dragolov et al., 2016), and an inductive, data-driven approach (Boyatzis, 1998). The articles were imported into Nvivo 11 and summaries were made. The social cohesion radar (Dragolov et al., 2016) was used as a theoretical framework for a first coding scheme. After creating summaries for each article and during the deductive coding, other common themes were noted which were not present in the theoretical framework. These common themes yielded additional codes.

2.3.3 Study 2 – The policy-level integrated by document analyses and interviews[2]

In study 2 (chapter 4) it was questioned how social cohesion is interpreted by policymakers. Despite being presented as separate studies, each subsequent study was based on findings from the previous study. The systematic narrative literature review (study 1) thereby validated the social cohesion radar as a holistic framework for looking at social cohesion and therefore, it is included further as a conceptualisation of social cohesion in our research. In addition, the initial results provided input for drafting the semi-structured interview guideline. The study took a broad perspective on institutions and analysed diverse interpretations of social cohesion, similarities, tensions, and contradictions in order to reflect on the potential role of child and family social work in contributing to social cohesion. The mere analysis of policy documents is insufficient to allow any conclusions to be drawn about the diverse motives, views, and rationales of legislative bodies, although these might provide important explanations of the policy rationales for focusing on social cohesion. This is not the least since policy documents are often written to communicate broad information to other

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[2] Based on Dierckx, M., Vandenbroeck, M., & Devlieghere, J. (2023). Policymakers on social cohesion : contradictory expectations for child and family social work. *European journal of social work, 26*(2), 258–271. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2022.2040434

policymakers, as well as to society. Policy documents tend to be somewhat vague and superficial (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Therefore, we also looked for in-depth explanations and rationales from legislative bodies first-hand. Accordingly, our document analysis was combined with semi-structured interviews at the level of the Flemish Community (Flanders) and at the municipal level. At the municipal level, three major cities were included in the study: Antwerp, Ghent, and Mechelen. Each city represents a different case, as they vary regarding the history and nature of both diversity and deprivation (van der Meer & Tolsma, 2014). The three cities are characterized by diversity, but within them, different neighbourhoods have emerged where diversity has a long history, where it is recent and creates tensions, or where it is lacking.

2.3.3.1 Selection of the policy documents

To explain how the selection of policy documents was conducted, we need to provide some additional context on the organisation of policy in Flanders. The Flemish government is divided into ten homogeneous policy domains including the domain of welfare, public health, and family (coordinated by a minister and directed by the ministerial cabinet), the administration, and several agencies. Another domain is The Chancellery and Foreign Affairs, headed by The Minister of Domestic Governance, Public Administration, Civic Integration, and Equal Opportunities. The policy documents were selected based on several inclusion criteria: they had been published between 2007 and 2020, and they related to the domain of welfare, public health, and family, that of domestic governance, public administration, and civic integration, or that of equal opportunities. These domains were selected because they were considered pivotal in the policymaking process of social cohesion, as well as in the coordination and implementation of policy. Furthermore, the criteria included keywords such as preventive health care for infants and toddlers, social cohesion, meeting places, preventive family support or early childhood education, and referred to Flanders, Antwerp, Ghent, or Mechelen. After a first screening, 44 documents were found to contain information about the central topic and were included.

2.3.3.2 Analyses of the policy documents

Qualitative content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005) is considered to be suitable "*to provide knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon understudy*" (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992, p. 314) and therefore, to be a valuable approach for analysing policy documents. This method allows researchers to uncover underlying themes, patterns, and nuances within textual data, facilitating a nuanced understanding of the content (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). Qualitative

content analysis involves a systematic coding process, where data is categorised into themes and patterns, allowing for the identification of key concepts and the exploration of relationships between them. The central concepts, tensions, and possibly contradictory meanings served as a basis for the construction of semi-structured interviews with policymakers to examine how their choices and behaviours were restricted by institutional structures, rules, norms, and cultures.

2.3.3.3 Selection of the participants

In relation to our study, the ministerial cabinets, the administration, and the agencies which fall under the responsibilities of ministers are considered key actors in the policymaking process of social cohesion, as well as in the coordination and implementation of policy, and this on the level of the Flemish community. At the Flemish level, we selected the most relevant actors: the cabinet of the Minister of Welfare, Public Health and Family and its administrators, the agency *Opgroeien* responsible for parent support and childcare, and the Ministry of Domestic Governance, Public Administration, Civic Integration and Equal Opportunities and its administrators. At the municipal level, the most relevant actors were the competent deputy mayor(s) or alderman, and leading civil servants in domains related to social cohesion and child and family social work. Purposive sampling combined with snowball sampling (Van Hove & Claes, 2011) was used to select and approach the most relevant policymakers at the municipal level (Polit & Beck, 2004). This led to the invitation of 21 policymakers, out of which 14 eventually participated. We acknowledge that this is a rather limited sample. Yet, we concur with Crouch and McKenzie (2006, p. 494) in that "*for this depth to be achieved, it is much more important for the research to be intensive, and thus persuasive […], rather than aim to be extensive*" (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006, p. 494).

2.3.3.4 Conducting the interviews

Before the interviews, all participants were informed about the study, were offered the opportunity to ask for clarification, and signed an informed consent. All the contacts with policymakers, even the interviews, were done online through mail and Microsoft Teams due to COVID-19 measures at the time of this study. Despite the strange time in which we found ourselves, and the online possibilities which were limited at the beginning of this pandemic, the online possibility of conducting research did create some opportunities. Due to the situation, policymakers were often working from home, had limited commitments to attend meetings and an online conference required minimal travel or other practical

matters to be arranged. For the interviews, we used a semi-structured interview scheme based on the insights from our first study and the policy document analyses as a first part of this second study. During the interviews, the scheme was slightly adapted, as participants provided us with relevant topics to include in our research (Mortelmans, 2007). The semi-structured interview approach offered a balanced blend of predefined questions and the flexibility to pursue unanticipated insights during the conversations. This balance is crucial in qualitative research, where the goal is often to comprehend the complexities of human experiences and perspectives (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). The semi-structured format provided a framework for consistency across interviews, while allowing participants the freedom to express themselves and elaborate on topics which hold personal significance (Gill et al., 2008). The interviews lasted for approximately one hour and were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. Throughout the transcription phase of the data collection period, reflections were made on the formulation of questions and alternative possibilities were written on the interview scheme, to be used in the next interviews.

2.3.3.5 Analysis of the interviews

A critical reading and theory-driven deductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Floersch, Longhofer, Kranke, & Townsend, 2010; Van Hove & Claes, 2011) — based on the social cohesion radar (Dragolov et al., 2016) — was initiated, and combined with an inductive thematic analysis using NVivo R1. Data which could not be categorized using the existing codes, based on Dragolov et al. (2016), were dealt with inductively using newly created codes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This approach provided a flexible yet rigorous framework for interpreting the textual data and uncovering the underlying meanings inherent in participants' narratives. The coding and analyses of the policy documents and interviews were verified by the second and third authors to enhance validity and reliability (Van Hove & Claes, 2011).

2.3.4 Study 3 – Observations in a multiple case study in child and family social work practices[3]

The third study (chapter 5) of this dissertation reports on the findings of an explorative multiple case study in Flanders, using (non-)participatory observations (N=40) in child and family social work practices to answer the following research question: what is going on in child and family social work

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[3] Based on Dierckx, M., Devlieghere, J., & Vandenbroeck, M. (2024). Child and family social work as a space for promoting social cohesion. *Child & Family Social Work (accepted)*.

regarding the promotion of social cohesion. By including the practices, a third rationale is brought into the research. Insights from the academic literature and policy analyses inspired the framework used to look at practices. For example, each observation included a clear context description of the space, along with photos, as well as a description of the diversity present both in staff and participants, given the emphasis on diversity highlighted in previous studies. A multiple case study is a qualitative research design which uses various, but complementary research strategies to generate rich answers to the research questions (Geens, 2016). The multiple case study design allowed for the exploration of common patterns and unique variations across cases, providing a holistic view of social cohesion in child and family social work. Each case served as a microcosm, offering insights into the multifaceted nature of social interactions, support networks, and collaborative efforts to promote social cohesion within the specific context of the study (Yin, 2014). The exploratory nature of the multiple case study aligned with the complexity of social cohesion acknowledges that this concept is context-dependent and multidimensional. Considering the local interpretation that a House of the Child is given by the limited regulatory framework of the Decree of Preventive Family Support, it is necessary to gain insight into what is happening in child and family social work on this local level.

2.3.4.1 Selection of the cases

To answer the above research questions on the municipal level, an explorative multiple case study was performed in three specific Houses of the Child (Figure 3) in selected neighbourhoods in the cities of Antwerp (Case A), Ghent (Case B), and Mechelen (Case C). Each case represents a typical but significantly different neighbourhood with respect to the history and nature of diversity, and neighbourhood deprivation, as these are important elements in the relationship between social cohesion on the one hand and ethnic diversity in a community on the other (van der Meer & Tolsma, 2014). At last, a decisive inclusion criterion for the selection of a case was the presence of a sufficient offer of child and family social work. The multiple case study was discussed at the beginning of this chapter (see 2.2.4), and important insights characterizing the cases were provided. Here, some key characteristics of the cases are highlighted, and we briefly situate again the different neighbourhoods.

Figure 3: Map of the selected cases (study 2, 3 and 4)

Because of the perceived challenges in society which are believed to jeopardise social cohesion, including the increasing diversity, and significant income and wealth inequalities (Andreotti, Mingione, & Polizzi, 2012; Chiesi, 2009), the choice was made to opt for neighbourhoods with high cultural diversities in Antwerp (Case A) and Ghent (Case B). In Mechelen (Case C), a contrasting neighbourhood, characterised by highly educated parents, less diversity, and a significantly lower child poverty rate, was selected (Table 3).

	Case A	Case B	Case C
International migration balance* (2020)	205	99	20
Residents 0 – 17 years (2021) (%)	30,9 %	23,8 %	30,4 %
Non-Belgian origin (2021) (%)	80,2 %	58,2 %	30,4 %
Poverty of Opportunity Index (2019, 2021) (%)**	52,4 %	-	8,6%
Poverty of Opportunity Index (2021) (City-level) (%)	27,32 %	18,55 %	13,18 %

*The migration balance is calculated as the difference between the total number of international immigrations and the total number of international emigrations (Statbel, 2023).
**The Poverty of Opportunity Index (by province, (type of) municipality, and mother's origin) expresses the proportion of children aged 0 to 3 years old in deprivation compared to the total number of children aged 0 to 3 years old (of that province, (type of) municipality, and mother's origin).

Table 3: Overview cases by characteristic (studies 3 and 4)

2.3.4.2 Writing monographs of the three selected cases

Conducting research in the selected neighbourhoods required a thorough knowledge of the neighbourhood demographics, the provision of preventive family support, as well as the location. Both a factual description of the current state of affairs and the historical context are of importance here. Therefore, a monograph of each neighbourhood was written prior to the observations, providing an overview of the above characteristics for each case. Writing field monographs prior to engaging in research allows researchers to familiarise themselves with the distinct characteristics and complexities of each neighbourhood. This preliminary immersion facilitated the identification of key stakeholders, structures, and nuances which can influence social cohesion within the specific context of child and family social work (Atkinson, 2007). By

documenting these details in the monographs, we built a foundation for a more informed and targeted research approach. The narratives captured in the monographs offered insights into the historical, social, and economic factors shaping the community, enabling us to contextualise their analyses and findings in the next phase of the research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The monographs were based on a comprehensive document analysis including policy documents, vision and mission statements of the organisations, websites, as well as sources reporting on the neighbourhood. The document analysis was complemented by interviews with key actors in the neighbourhood. A monograph of each case provided an important basis for understanding the neighbourhood and its dynamics. The monographs were used as an important entry point to the practices. The three individual monographs were compared and analysed for important differences and similarities between the neighbourhoods. Finally, to gain an initial insight into the practices, a full day of participating in the various child and family social work practices was performed, without already being part of the observations.

2.3.4.3 Selection of the practices

Prior to the observations, an important step was gaining access to the field (Copland, 2018), establishing a relationship based on trust with the practitioners, and selecting the practices. Frequent dialogues and interviews as part of another sub-research and for the purpose of writing the extensive field monographs provided access to the different practices. In conversation with each coordinator, a selection was made for each neighbourhood in terms of types of services which are committed to this pillar. The following early childhood services were selected: infant consultation schemes, meeting places for parents and children (play group or drop-in), Dutch language practice opportunities, playful learning, and reception and waiting area (see *research context*). The diversity present in the services across the cases is important and somewhat different. In Case A, during different activities, the ethnic-cultural diversity was more limited, and there were mainly differences in the socio-economic position of the parents. In Case B, this was precisely the opposite: there was ethnic diversity present, but all parents were from lower socio-economic gradients. Despite the choice of Case C as a contrasting case, the diversity present during different forms of activities was not that different from the other cases.

2.3.4.4 Conducting the observations

To gain insight into what is going on in child and family social work regarding the promotion of social cohesion, a combination of participatory and non-

participatory observations was performed as a data collection method. Observational research provided a first-hand and contextually rich understanding of the dynamics within child and family social work, shedding light on the social interactions, communication patterns, and the overall functioning of these services. This approach complemented the other research methods, such as interviews (studies 2 and 4), by offering a more nuanced perspective on the lived experiences of children, families, and practitioners. Moreover, integrating the observations allowed us to identify the subtle and often unspoken aspects of social cohesion within child and family social work (Angrosino, 2007). It enabled the exploration of non-verbal cues, group dynamics, and the informal networks which contributed to the sense of belonging within these environments (Punch, 2002). The advantage of observations was that they permitted us to study the practitioners and families in their native environment in order to understand things from the participants' perspective (Baker, 2006). Based on the typology of Atkinson and Hammersley (1994) and Baker (2006), we combined the roles of observer-as-participant and participant-as-observer. The role of observer-as-participant was adopted in the setting of the infant consultation scheme, and reception and waiting area. In this role, the researcher advanced very slightly in the involvement with the insiders (Baker, 2006). In the setting of meeting places, playful learning, and Dutch practice opportunities, the role of participant-as-observer was taken. Here, the researcher became more involved with the insiders' activities and sometimes took up the same role as one of the practitioners (Baker, 2006). The adopted role depended on the services and activities to be studied and on the willingness of practitioners and parents to be studied. Field notes, maps, and pictures of the setting were taken during every observation. The field notes included the following items: observational notes, method and ethical notes, and personal notes (Baker, 2006). The field notes were, especially during the moments when the role of participant-as-observer was adopted, *scratch notes*: some words or phrases which reminded the researcher of the setting, dialogues, and events which they wanted to write about later when writing up the field notes as soon as possible after every observation (Copland, 2018). Over a three-month period, 40 observations, good for a total of 110 hours of observations, were conducted across the three cases and different activities. Each observation lasted between two and three hours and a half.

2.3.4.5 Analysis of the observation reports

The observations were analysed to understand what was going on in child and family social work regarding the promotion of social cohesion. Writing field notes was an important step in the data analysis and was implemented as an

interpretive process (Emerson et al., 1995). As we worked on the field notes, we continued the process of analysis. To become more familiar with the data and perform an initial analysis, we followed two steps from the data analysis process of field notes from Copland (2018). First, the researcher reads the field notes several times to become familiar with them. This preliminary analysis created themes which inductively began to emerge from the data. During the re-reading, analytical notes were made on the field notes. In a second step, a note for every observation was written on how theoretical insights are drawn from the data and included sections of field notes to illustrate these insights. In addition, vignettes were written about several moments during the observations as "*a focused description of a series of events taken to be representative, typical or emblematic*" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 81). Following the formulation and first analysis of the field notes, an inductive thematic analysis based on the themes from the preliminary analysis using NVivo R1, combined with a deductive analysis – based on the social cohesion radar (Dragolov et al., 2016) – formed the definitive coding structure for the analysis of the field notes. The codes were used to provide insight into the activities, dialogues, and settings during the observations. After the inductive analysis, the social cohesion radar dimensions were placed on the results to review which dimensions of the social cohesion radar were recurring, as well as which were missing from the observations, and which dimensions were maybe left out, but important to consider.

2.3.4.6 Ethical considerations

Prior to this study, a specific ethical protocol (SEP) was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences. Besides a specific ethical protocol which was approved and used, the ethical considerations and informed consent of the participants were an ongoing process (Moore & Savage, 2002). The ethical reflections were included in the field notes and discussed with other researchers. Participants are potentially vulnerable (future) families living in (at-risk) poverty and/or in precarious circumstances. The study therefore deviated from written active informed consent and used oral active informed consent. The parents were given the information about the study verbally by the researcher or practitioner in Dutch, English, or Arabic, along with a flyer containing information about the study. After being provided with this information, verbal active consent was asked from parents for participation in the study regarding them as well as their child(ren). The informed consents of all participants were verbal and were re-questioned and confirmed each time the researcher encountered the same families in the services and activities.

2.3.5   Study 4 – Interviews with practitioners[4]

To gain a better understanding of the meaning-making of child and family social work practitioners regarding social cohesion in Flanders (Belgium), this fourth study (chapter 6), in parallel with study 3, was based on an explorative multiple case study in child and family social work in three neighbourhoods in Flanders. Studies 3 and 4, despite being presented separately, are connected in terms of content and staff, but also in terms of time. The observations and interviews took place partly in the same period, and through the observations, contacts were made with practitioners willing to participate in an interview. In addition, findings or questions raised during the observations were integrated into the interviews with practitioners who worked in these practices. The Critical Incident Technique was used with practitioners (N=28) to understand how they conceptualized social cohesion and viewed their role in promoting this community-oriented outcome of child and family social work. Social cohesion within child and family social work encompasses the interconnectedness and collaborative efforts of various stakeholders, including practitioners, to promote the well-being of children and families. Integrating practitioners in our research ensured that their perspectives were considered and made it possible to reflect on the realities and complexities which they encountered in their daily practices. Additionally, integrating the perspective of these practitioners made the research more applicable and meaningful within the context of child and family social work (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008).

2.3.5.1 Selection of the social practitioners

The selected practitioners were all active in those services (consultation schemes, playgroups, parents' groups) which were identified as services which can promote social cohesion. The interviews were conducted with practitioners from a variety of child and family social work practices adhering to the Houses of the Child and volunteers from the consultation schemes. To choose these participants, we looked at who worked in the Houses of the Child. These practitioners were contacted by email or in person while conducting the observations (study 3). In total, 45 practitioners were contacted, 15 for each case and 28 responded positively, stating their willingness to participate. Participants who indicated a preference not to participate cited limited time, lack of interest (volunteers), or absence as reasons. The interviewees comprised a diverse

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[4] Based on Dierckx, M., Devlieghere, J., & Vandenbroeck, M. The meaning of social cohesion in preventive family support: a practitioners' perspective. *European Journal of Social Work (in review).*

group in terms of education and age. Practitioners in the Houses of the Child may have various degrees, such as a Bachelor's degree in early childhood education, Applied Psychology, Social Work, or Special needs education. The educational diversity is rooted at the discipline level, rather than the diploma level, as this latter level of the practitioners who were interviewed was ISCED 6 (bachelor or equivalent level) in each instance (Eurostat, n.d.). In addition, they worked with volunteers in the consultation schemes. The majority of the volunteers were retired women. In contrast to diversity in age and education, limited diversity was noted in gender. Except for one interview, all practitioners and volunteers were female. Finally, the diversity of practitioners did not reflect the diversity of the parents who participated in the services. The diversity was limited to practitioners of Belgian, Turkish, or Moroccan origin. All participants were given information about the study and the critical incident technique when contacted, as well as prior to the interview. A written voluntary informed consent was used, which each participant signed before the recording of the interview. Participants had the opportunity to indicate which items could not be recorded. The incidents described in the study safeguard the anonymity and confidentiality of the practitioners and services they work in, participating in the interviews. After the interview, each participant had the possibility to proofread the transcript as well as to be informed about the results.

2.3.5.2 Conducting the interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted, using the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) (Flanagan, 1954). The critical incident technique describes a procedure for gathering observed incidents of particular importance for social cohesion and is rooted in the phenomenological research tradition (Sharoff, 2008). Hughes, Williamson, and Lloyd (2007, p. 1) stated that "*CIT is a well proven qualitative research approach that offers a practical step-by-step approach to collecting and analysing information about human activities and their significance to the people involved*". A notable advantage of using the critical incident technique was its ability to elicit detailed and contextually rich information (Flanagan, 1954). By prompting practitioners to recall and reflect on specific critical incidents within their professional practice, the technique facilitated a focused examination of real-life scenarios. This approach enabled a nuanced understanding of the challenges, successes, and decision-making processes which practitioners encounter in their work. The incident discussed during the CIT interview was chosen in advance by the participant and had to meet predefined criteria. An incident was defined as the detailed description of a moment or event where the practitioner was able to promote social cohesion. The incident needed to be an

incident before the start of the Covid pandemic, with no limitation in time. After a detailed exploration of the event, each participant was asked to conceptualize social cohesion independent of the given incident. The semi-structured format of the interviews provided the opportunity to explore the incident in depth, while also leaving sufficient room for questions which emerged from the dialogue between the interviewee and the participant (Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008). The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. In total, 25 interviews, with 28 practitioners and volunteers, were conducted between the period from March 2022 to August 2022.

2.3.5.3 Analysis of the interviews

The incidents and definitions of social cohesion were analysed to understand how child and family social work practitioners conceptualized social cohesion, and how they perceived their role in the promotion of social cohesion. In parallel with the other studies, the raw data material was uploaded into the qualitative analysis software Nvivo R1 (Mortelmans, 2007). A theory-driven deductive thematic analysis – based on the social cohesion radar (Dragolov et al., 2016) – was used to provide insight into the incidents and definitions discussed during the interviews. We looked at which dimensions of the social cohesion radar were recurring, as well as which were missing from the incidents. The dimensions and subdimensions of the social cohesion radar formed the coding structure for an initial analysis of the interviews. The deductive analysis was combined with an inductive thematic analysis. In this process, new codes emerged inductively from the data. The following in-depth analysis of the critical incidents allows us to identify similarities, differences, and patterns and to seek insight into how and why people engage in the activities which they described (Hughes et al., 2007). The coding and analyses of the incidents and conceptualisations were extensively discussed and verified by the second and third authors to enhance validity and reliability (Van Hove & Claes, 2011).

2.3.6   Study 5 – A stranger in our midst[5]

The fifth and final study (chapter 7) has a distinct position in this dissertation. First, this study took place before the actual doctoral research. As a master's student in the Master of Social Work, I conducted research on proportional universalism (PU) in the Houses of the Child for my master's thesis. Secondly,

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[5] Dierckx, M., Devlieghere, J., & Vandenbroeck, M. (2020). Proportionate universalism in child and family social work. *Child & family social work, 25*(2), 337–344. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12689

this research also used a multiple case study, but not in the same three cases as those presented earlier. The insights gained in the studies of my actual doctoral research revealed that this final study that already was performed can and should be given a place in this research. The focus on diversity as an opportunity when a diversity of families is reached, but also as a challenge when diversity makes it difficult to create connections or align services with the needs of the users raised the question about a potential new way, a principle for working in child and family social work with a diversity of families. It is here that this study attempts to look at possibilities and to explore whether Proportional Universalism can be a principle used by child and family social work to promote social cohesion, by being able to reach a diversity of families starting by transcending the dichotomy of targeted and universal child and family social work practices. The research took place in three specific cases in the city of Antwerp. The study aimed to provide more insight into how the concept of PU is operationalised in child and family social work, and therefore triangulated three perspectives: the local policy level, the organisational level, and the street level. Qualitative research was performed in three specific cases of child and family social work in Antwerp (Flanders, Belgium), the so-called Houses of the Child.

2.3.6.1 Selection of the cases

Our study took place in Antwerp, a city of approximately 700,000 inhabitants, characterised by super-diversity, which is defined as "*a dynamic interplay of variables among an increased number of small and scattered, multiple-origin, transnationally connected, socio-economically differentiated and legally stratified populations*" (Vertovec, 2007, p. 1024). In such a context, it is unclear whether responding to these diversities is still a matter of belonging to subgroups (e.g., an ethnic minority and a single-parent family) or of mere individualisation. We conducted a multiple case study in three Houses of the Child, deliberately avoiding a comparative stance. Ethnographers, since Geertz (1973), have seen comparison in stark contrast to studying the particularities of the individual case, as comparative studies tend to "*obscure case knowledge that fails to facilitate comparison*" (Stake, 2003). In order to handle the inevitable dilemma between describing the rich individual case knowledge, the thick of what is going on (Stake, 2003), and the necessity of drawing generalisable conclusions, we studied three common perspectives on each case. By asking similar questions (without expecting similar answers), we constructed a structural equivalence (Burt, 1982) allowing for the analysis of diverse findings in a shared framework. To allow thick descriptions (Geert, 1973), we triangulated diverse methodologies, including document analyses, observations, and interviews. Three Houses of the

Child were selected based on some inclusion criteria. The first inclusion criterion was the location, as all were located in areas with high socio-economic and cultural diversity. The second criterion was that they serve diverse populations through a range of both traditionally universal (e.g., the infant consultation scheme) and traditionally targeted (e.g., Inloopteams) services. In addition, the cases were selected to typify the diversity of Houses of the Child, regarding location and length of operation, rather than to be representative.

2.3.6.2 Selection of the policy documents

The first substudy comprised a qualitative analysis of local policy vision. This provided a view of the knowledge base of the policies and practices of the Houses of the Child. This approach allowed us to systematically examine and interpret policy documents to gain insights into the overarching frameworks, guidelines, and regulations which shape the landscape of the Houses of the Child in Antwerp. An overview of the documents which were analysed can be found in Table 4.

	Document	Content
A	The request for funding and recognition of the Houses of the Child (City of Antwerp, n.d.-a)	Describes how and to which extent the partnership complies with the provision set out in the Decree on the organisation of preventive family support.
B	The mission and vision text of the Houses of the Child (City of Antwerp, 2016b)	Includes the basic principles, working principles, services offered, and an explanation of collaboration at different levels.
C	The long-term planning of the Antwerp Houses of the Child (City of Antwerp, 2016a)	Describes the multiannual planning for the period 2017-2019.
D	The basic services matrix of the Antwerp Houses of the Child (City of Antwerp, n.d.-b)	The matrix of the basic offer of the Houses of the Child Antwerp clusters the services and partners of the Houses of the Child according to different domains, divided into decretal compulsory domains and additional domains.
E	The support pyramid of the Antwerp Houses of the Child (City of Antwerp, 2016b)	This pyramid contains an overview of the various services in the House of the Child based on the principle of Proportionate Universalism.
F	The municipal vision text on vulnerable families in the Houses of the Child (City of Antwerp, 2014)	The vision statement discusses focal points to make the Houses of the Child accessible to vulnerable and disadvantaged families and how to provide supplementary services for them.

Table 4: Overview of the selected policy documents (study 2)

2.3.6.3 Analysis of the local policy vision

One of the key contributions of policy document analysis was its ability to unveil the explicit and implicit assumptions, values, and priorities embedded in policy documents (Bacchi, 2009). Throughout this process, the documents were read multiple times to gain a sense of the entire collection of information. Based on these readings, we thematically coded the content of the policy documents (Floersch, Longhofer, Kranke, & Townsend, 2010; Van Hove & Claes, 2011) and identified themes and patterns such as PU, progressive universalism, accessibility, target group, and customisation. The analysis of the local policy vision guided the format and content for the observations and interviews.

2.3.6.4 Conducting the observations

The organisational perspective was studied by field observations in the three cases. The observations were conducted after the analysis of the local policy vision and covered approximately four consecutive hours of observations in each case. The part of the day was chosen in agreement with the coordinator of each House of the Child and occurs at a time when both the consultation scheme and *Inloopteam* services (see *research context*) are taking place. It is well known that physical space may determine how interactions among professionals, among users, or among professionals and users are shaped (MacNaughton, Chreim, & Bourgeault, 2013). Therefore, we integrated architecture and pathways followed by users in the observations. Different elements were used as guidelines for the observation: professionals and their contacts, users and their contacts, and design of the premises and pathways followed by the users and their conversations. Field notes were taken, and architectural plans of the premises with the pathways were drawn.

2.3.6.5 Conducting the interviews

In each case, four professionals from different sub-organisations (i.e., the consultation schemes and *Inloopteams*) were interviewed, leading to a total of 12 interviews. The social work level was studied through qualitative semi-structured interviews. One of the main advantages of a semi-structured format is that it provides ample opportunity to explore a topic in depth, while also leaving sufficient room for questions which emerge from the dialogue between the interviewee and the participant (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008). The content of this scheme emerged from both the local policy vision and the observations. Audio recordings of the interviews were made, after which the interviews were transcribed word-for-word. The

reliability and validity of the study are increased by using multiple sources. Various policy documents, observations, literature, interviews, and knowledge are brought together. The underlying idea here is that each version contains part of the truth after all, and the important thing is to extract it (Ten Have, 1999).

2.3.6.6 Analysis of the observations and interviews

The field notes from the observations made it possible to analyze the data with a theory-driven thematic analysis. Concepts related to the principle of PU were used. The architectural plans of the premises were analysed, focusing on the location of doors, different entrances, and accessibility. Pathways of professionals and their contacts, the users and professionals with their contacts, and design of the premises and pathways followed by the users individually and their conversations were all observed and analysed, together with the architectural plans and field notes. The goal was to search for specific patterns among the users and professionals and to combine these findings, together with policy-level analysis, at the social work level. The interviews were analysed using thematic analysis (Van Hove & Claes, 2011). This approach allows researchers to analyze the rich qualitative data obtained from interviews, providing a nuanced understanding of experiences, challenges, and perspectives within child and family social work about proportionate universalism. This allows for a contextually relevant interpretation of the data, because themes which emerged during our analysis were grounded in the specific experiences and perspectives of participants in child and family social work (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

2.4   Reflections on the act of doing research

Conducting the challenging yet enriching journey of qualitative research requires a thoughtful and reflexive stance on the act of doing research, acknowledging, and managing biases inherent in the research process, and a reflection of one's positionality. Engaging in a reflection on the research process as a form of reflexivity involves a self-scrutiny on the part of the researcher; a self-conscious awareness of the relationship between the researcher and an *other* (Chiseri-Stater, 1996; Pillow, 2003). Reflexivity refers to the process of acknowledging or making explicit one's own contribution to the research process (Flick, 2014). As a researcher navigating through services, human experiences, insights, emotions, and narratives demanded a nuanced understanding of my own positionality in the research process (Finlay, 2002). In this chapter, I was urged to consider how my background, experiences, and identities influenced the

research questions which I posed, and the way data was collected, analysed, and interpreted (Hesse-Biber & Nagy Leavy, 2011). To end, a reflection is made on the flexibility in different field roles which were adapted and how doing research is inherently an intervention in the field.

2.4.1   Positionality

Engaging in a reflective process provided an opportunity to scrutinise the influence of my social identities on the research decisions which have been made (Martin, Desing & Borrego, 2021). These identities could either facilitate trust with the practitioners and parents, or act as barriers to trust building (Parson, 2019). Recognizing the impact of my identities urged me to consider strategies such as minimizing bias (1); fostering trust and safe spaces, while prioritizing participants' experiences (2); and ensuring diverse perspectives within the research (3) (Secules et al., 2021). My positioning during this research process has undoubtedly been influenced by previous study and work experiences, but also by experiences and events during this research process.

To start, since the course Early Childhood Education and Care in my Bachelor of Pedagogical Sciences, my interest in child and family social work was sparked and strengthened throughout my studies. From this initial curiosity, I decided to undertake my internship as well as my student job and master's thesis in the Houses of the Child, more specifically the Antwerp Houses of the Child. Two internships, two summers, and a master's thesis later, I was fully immersed in the functioning and services of the Houses of the Child in Antwerp and their partners. After my studies, I had the opportunity to work for one year in a House of the Child, located in a very diverse and vulnerable neighbourhood with a wide range of services and many partners. I worked as a coordinator of a House of the Child in a very diverse and vulnerable neighbourhood in Antwerp. Mainly, this meant co-creating the collaborative network of the House of The Child, discovering the needs of the neighbourhood, creating new alliances to meet these needs, and so on. Theoretically, the chance to work substantive was there. However, this sometimes conflicted with reality. In practice, I was often busy going from one meeting to another, making weekly overviews for all partners, and replacing (a lot of times by myself) practitioners and volunteers who were absent. The work experience taught me a lot, but also triggered me. I witnessed all kinds of things happening in the field and, as a coordinator, I was in the middle of it all, trying to keep everything running. I liked having both feet in the field, but there was something which I missed more: the reflection on what we were doing, the space (and luxury) to look at practices with an investigative lens. I

experienced this through my master's thesis, where I had the opportunity to turn experiences from my internship into a research project on proportional universalism in the Houses of the Child. And again, now working in the Houses of the Child inspired me with questions which I was unable to address from within my position at that time. From these questions came the enthusiasm to do something with this, and that is what I did not long after that. In October 2019, I started my PhD on the theme of the Houses of the Child, and more precisely about the promotion of social cohesion in these child and family social work. The previous experiences clearly contributed to the choice of this research topic. Thanks to the practical experience which I accumulated, I had established contacts within the field and gained insights into the Houses of the Child. I undoubtedly saw this as an added value when constructing and conducting my research, but also felt that this knowledge and experience co-shaped how I conducted the research and interpreted results. Entering the field and allowing myself to be surprised by what happened was sometimes difficult because of some assumptions which I made at times, very subconsciously, based on these past experiences. Conversations and critical questions from my (co-)supervisor challenged these assumptions and allowed me to keep an open mind when necessary.

Moreover, it was especially during the intensive observation period that I, as a researcher, became keenly aware of how my own individual person had an impact on the research. For instance, it soon became clear that, as a woman, it was possible to carry out participatory observations in various forms of services, but that, as a man, it would not be straightforward to be welcomed into certain playgroups. The safety and trust of parents were foregrounded in this case and apparently, experience learned that the presence of a man caused certain women to stop participating in the services. Also, during the observations, parents asked about my (social) identities. The question of whether I had children (which at that time was still answered negatively) was raised almost every time. Above that, how old I was and if I had a husband or partner were some of the recurring questions. Parents and staff in many services shared this information about themselves. Consequently, parents felt it was perfectly normal to question this information about me. Not having children (yet) often caused parents to start explaining just a little bit more about what it is like to have children, assuming of course that I did not know what this was like. Now, I also know that I really had no idea of this at the time. My age sometimes caused parents to approach me differently. Frequently, I was not much younger than them, even though I was thought to be at first. While introducing myself as a researcher and presenting the research project, I had to strongly emphasise that I was not a student.

Regardless of my age and gender, which were quite similar to those of many parents and often practitioners too, there were some obvious differences which were important to be aware of. One of them was the fact that I was affiliated with the university. My position within the hierarchical structure of the university contributed to some possible power dynamics with the participants. In addition, I am a white, middle-class woman of Belgian origin, whereas many participants in my research lived in vulnerable situations and had a migration background.

At last, since September 2023, I, myself, became a user of the services which have encompassed my work and research context in the previous years. Since the birth of our baby son, I experienced what it meant as a young parent, still very exploring, to go to a consultation scheme where volunteers welcomed me and expected me to already know how everything worked. Luckily, through my research, I did indeed know this. As I was standing there with an 8-week-old crying baby, who had dirtied his diaper and started to vomit on the scales, I suddenly understood the added value of the light encounters described in my research when another mom smiled at me and told me not to rush, because the volunteers do not do so either. Or the quick conversations with some other parents when one evening we had to wait for up to an hour before we could get to the doctor. You soon start asking about children's ages, experiences in childcare, or physical milestones. And so, time passed just a little less slowly. After becoming a mom, the enthusiastic researcher in me was determined to go to a baby massage and participate in a playgroup. Nevertheless, here, expectations and reality clashed. For instance, it was not possible to find a time for the baby massage which was still available at the House of the Child near our home, because they were already fully booked or took place at times when I was not available after my maternity leave, as I went back to work full-time. The same thing happened with regard to the playgroup places. Once I had well and truly settled into my new role and felt ready for a visit to a playgroup, it was almost the end of December, and the playgroup was closed due to the Christmas holiday. After the Christmas holiday, I started working again, which made participating in services which only take place on Tuesday mornings not so self-evident.

2.4.2   Positioning and intervening in practice

The research project was not intended to intervene directly in practices. However, the act of conducting observations in a field is inherently non-neutral, even when the primary intention is to observe and document without influencing the natural course of events. Observations in child and family social work

inherently introduced a level of intervention, shaping and influencing the phenomena which we wished to understand. This intervention is partly shaped by the role which I took on as a researcher during fieldwork. Throughout the observations, several roles were adopted. The three most prominent roles can be described as *the researcher role*, *the social role*, and *the researcher as practitioner role*. Each role brought a unique perspective and level of involvement, influencing the dynamics of the observed phenomena.

In my *researcher role*, I tried to be as invisible as possible during observations where I was acting as an '*observer-as-participant*'. In this role, I advanced very slightly in the involvement with the insiders (Baker, 2006). This translated into taking a seat on the side, not engaging in interactions, and taking notes. However, it soon became clear that I was not invisible, which resulted in the emergence of this *social role*, alongside my role as a researcher. First, I introduced myself before obtaining verbal informed consent, and an initial conversation with the parents was initiated. Following that, sometimes parents started small talk with me while waiting. This could be about the children, but sometimes, a parent would also ask a practical question about taking off the diaper of the child, about the waiting time in the consultation scheme, or other subjects. The social role then consisted of responding to the parents and not ignoring them. Besides parents, children likewise searched for interaction. For instance, books were brought to me to read aloud, and the color of my shoes was so noteworthy that it caught the attention of a baby crawling through the consultation scheme, who, after playing with my shoes, wanted me to play with them. As well as instances of just being friendly and offering a helping hand by opening a door when I saw a parent struggling to get in while carrying their baby, there were moments when the role as researcher changed to a more social role. By adopting this social role in the field, moments were created which felt very informal, in which a closer bond was created with those involved (Roets, Roose & Bouverne-De Bie, 2013).

During the observation moments in services where it was agreed to participate as *participant-as-observer*, the flexibility in terms of roles was quite different, and the third role of *researcher as practitioner* emerged. Here, following Baker's (2006) definition, I became more involved with the insiders' activities and sometimes took up the same role as one of the practitioners. Through work experiences in the field, I usually knew what services such as a playgroup were like, and quickly felt comfortable participating. However, it was striking that, after an initial observation in some services, I was perceived less and less as a researcher, but more as an additional practitioner according to the practitioners

and parents. I always assisted in setting up the playgroup, as a kind of gratitude to the practitioners for allowing me to access the service, building trust. However, in two of the cases, this resulted in a situation where one or more practitioners were absent or late one day and it was expected that the service could continue as usual because I was present. As the observations continued, it became apparent that the line between a role as a researcher and a role as a practitioner, which was initially very distinct for me, became very thin, and even blurred to a role as *researcher as practitioner*. I found it quite challenging to safeguard this distinction, and this raised the question as to what the influence and impact of these roles on my research was. Throughout and after the observations, several conversations, and seminars on ethics in research followed in the department. Here, my story was given a place and together, we thought about how to deal with it, and especially how to look back at it reflectively in the analysis.

In addition, reflexivity on the observations was also introduced at a more theoretical level based on insight from Maharaj (2016). Based on Fook and Gardner's (2007) model, Maharaj (2016, p. 116) prepared a list of questions for reflecting upon field notes, such as: What do these notes suggest regarding my beliefs and values about myself, my relationships with others, and my assumptions about knowledge, power, and privilege?; How do I understand my role in this setting (observer/participant, insider/outsider)?; Where in my notes do I seem hesitant or uncertain about my observations?; What did I leave out of my notes and why?; How did my presence as an observer influence others around me?. Besides these questions, Maharaj (2016) explored the researcher's ability to establish themselves as an observer in a research setting, emphasizing the influence of their relationship with participants. Researchers are advised to contemplate three key aspects of their role as participant observers: their insider or outsider status, their position on the observer-to-participant continuum, and their subjectivity in the research process. The roles of insider and observer are presented as flexible vantage points rather than fixed roles, encouraging a nuanced approach to actions in the field and assumptions about participants. The distinction between my insider or outsider status played a significant role in shaping the focus and interpretation of the observations (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011) because of the degree to which I perceived myself as similar to the participants (i.e., an insider). This impacted the observational acuity, and what I chose to observe and document while potentially excluding certain elements from my field notes (Montgomery & Bailey, 2007). On a practical level, being an insider enhanced the accessibility to this specific context, providing easier entry and engagement within that environment (Pugh, Mitchell, & Brooks, 2000). The second key aspect, the position on the observer-to-participant continuum, was

decided on the basis of when the methodology for the observations was prepared and based on my insider and outsider perspective. In locating myself on this continuum, I considered the kind of pronouns used when writing the field notes in the different settings based on the role which I adopted. The third key aspect, subjectivity in the research process, encompassed my attitudes, beliefs, assumptions, and impressions which influenced methodological decisions, research questions, and interactions with participants (Maharaj, 2016). This involved also documenting and reflecting on moments in the field where strong emotions or sensations, such as relief, confusion, or irritation were experienced. This translated into writing vignettes of moments which have stayed with me, which have touched me, or when I was shocked or alarmed. This practice contributed to a more mindful and reflexive approach to my own impact on the research process. During the analysis of the field notes, these questions and theoretical insight were used to critically reflect on my own role and to ensure that, throughout the analyses, the role of researcher was reinstated as central.

2.5   Chapter outline

The first chapter of this dissertation provides a general introduction to the research topic and an extensive overview of the research problem, statement, and questions. The second chapter gives insight into our methodological framework by describing in detail the research context, methods of data collection, and data analysis, and concludes with an overview of the various studies shaping this PhD. Each chapter has distinctive research questions and a specific research design. The overview of the chapters to come will provide the central research questions, as well as the methodology and status of each article.

Chapter 3

The (ab)sense of a conceptualization of social cohesion in social work: a systematic narrative literature review

In chapter three, using a systematic narrative literature review, we explore what could be a theoretical conceptualisation of social cohesion which is scientifically valid. We carefully look at conceptualisations of social cohesion in (child and family) social work, and what roles scholars in academic literature ascribe to child and family social work regarding the promotion of social cohesion in contexts of diversity. The article, co-authored by Jochen Devlieghere and Michel

Vandenbroeck, has been submitted to Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research and is awaiting a decision after revision.

Chapter 4

Policymakers on social cohesion: contradictive expectations for child and family social work

In chapter four, we gain insight into how social cohesion is interpreted by policymakers, by analysing policy documents and interviewing policymakers in three selected cases. The aim of the study is to analyse a diversity of interpretations of social cohesion by policymakers in Flanders (Belgium) and to reflect on the role of child and family social work. The results were presented in an article together with Jochen Devlieghere and Michel Vandenbroeck, and were published in the European Journal of Social Work.

Chapter 5

Child and family social work as a space for promoting social cohesion

Chapter five draws upon observations in child and family social work to understand what is going on in child and family social work regarding the promotion of social cohesion, and to analyse how child and family social work in Flanders (Belgium) commit to the promotion of social cohesion. The findings were presented in an article which was submitted, together with Jochen Devlieghere and Michel Vandenbroeck, to Child and Family Social Work, and is accepted.

Chapter 6

The meaning of social cohesion in preventive family support: a practitioners' perspective

In chapter six, we aim to uncover how practitioners give meaning to the concept of social cohesion and their responsibility in promoting this community-oriented outcome of child and family social work. This chapter, co-authored by Jochen Devlieghere and Michel Vandenbroeck, has been submitted to the European Journal of Social Work and is awaiting a decision after revision.

Chapter 7

Proportionate universalism in Child and Family Social Work

Chapter seven provides more insight into how the concept of proportionate universalism is operationalised in child and family social work, and in integrated services in preventive health care, by triangulating three perspectives: the policy level, the organisational level, and the street level. The findings were presented in an article together with Jochen Devlieghere and Michel Vandenbroeck, and were published in the European Journal of Social Work.

Chapter 8

General conclusion

In chapter eight, the final chapter of this dissertation, the main findings of our research are summarised and reflect upon what can be learned from our findings regarding the theorisation of social cohesion in child and family social work.

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CHAPTER 3

THE (AB)SENSE OF A
CONCEPTUALISATION OF SOCIAL
COHESION IN SOCIAL WORK:
A SYSTEMATIC NARRATIVE
LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Introduction

Social cohesion, with its origins in sociology (Abrahams, 2016), subsequently made its appearance in the domain of social work. The International Federation of Social Workers (2014, July) even claims that social cohesion is one of the major objectives of social work practices:

> " *Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, 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. (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014)*

A particular field of interest to grasp the concept of social cohesion in social work lies in child and family social work as child and family services have gained momentum as ideal for creating social cohesion (Hoshi-Watanabe, Musatti, Rayna, & Vandenbroeck, 2015; Melhuish, Belsky, Leyland, & Barnes, 2008). In order to unravel this field of interest, we first address the concept of social cohesion from a historical and contemporary perspective, followed by a focus on the role of early childhood services in promoting social cohesion before addressing the methodology, findings and discussion.

3.2 A historical and contemporary perspective

3.2.1 Conceptual vagueness

Social cohesion has its origins in the modern classics with sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies and Emile Durkheim (Fonseca, Lukosch, & Brazier, 2019). Tönnies envisioned a dichotomy between *Gemeinschaft* (community), based on feelings, connectedness and mutual relations and *Gesellschaft* (society), based on impersonal relations that are more instrumental (Botterman, Hooghe & Reeskens, 2012). Another classical root can be found in the work of Durkheim, who, in 1897, wrote about the preservation of a social order in society, based on two different forms of solidarity: mechanical and organic solidarity (Duhaime, Searles, Usher, Myers, & Fréchette, 2004). Mechanical solidarity characterises

traditional communities and is based on homogeneity whereas organic solidarity starts from dissimilarity, heterogeneity and occurs in modern communities (Duhaime et al., 2004). Durkheim states that 'social cohesion is as a characteristic of society that shows the interdependence between individuals of that society' (Fonseca et al., 2019, p. 234). Its conceptualisation included shared loyalties, mutual moral support, social capital, lack of social conflict, strong social bonds and trust (Fonseca et al., 2019). Since late 20th and early 21st century, a growing research interest in social cohesion is noticeable. While numerous studies on social cohesion have been conducted over the last years, critical voices argue that the academic approach of social cohesion did not lead to solid theoretical constructions and more certainly not to a useful operationalisation of social cohesion (Bottoni, 2018). This explains the aspiration to obtain a theoretical and conceptual framework in various academic disciplines (Berger-Schmitt, 2002a; Chan, To, & Chan, 2006; Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017).

3.2.2   A growing policy domain

In addition to the academic approach of social cohesion, an institutional and political approach can be observed (Chan et al., 2006). The academic turn to social cohesion is influenced by a policy discourse where a focus on social cohesion can be seen as a political response to macro-economic and societal changes (Andrews, Downe, & Guarneros-Meza, 2014). While this political attention for social cohesion can be observed, the political turn on social cohesion is not a new phenomenon, but recent sources of pressure and tension in our society such as the information age, globalisation, growing migration and a competitively oriented social policy (Kearns & Forrest, 2000), lead towards a renewed interest in social cohesion as a key policy concern. This particular interest in social cohesion is evident in family policies. The relevance of exploring social cohesion in family policies may be illustrated by various examples. Flanders, the (Dutch-speaking Belgium) can be referred to as one example. The Flemish Government issued the Flemish Act of Parliament on Preventive Family Support in 2013, emphasizing the promotion of social cohesion as one of three pillars. By doing so, the Flemish Government explicitly chose to put childhood services forward as a potential driver of social cohesion. Although social cohesion is often conceived as a new development, it can also be understood as a historical constant.

Today, social cohesion is placed at the heart of our society as - metaphorically speaking - the glue that binds our society together (Berman & Phillips, 2003). It refers to the interdependence between individuals (Berkman & Kawachi, 2000)

and became a priority on the political agenda as a result of societal developments that are deemed to challenge social cohesion (Geens & Vandenbroeck, 2015; Novy et al., 2012). Despite the joined political and academic attention for social cohesion, it appears that if there is one thing literature agrees on, it is that there is no agreement on what social cohesion is (Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017). The diverse approaches of social cohesion, in the best case, only provide an overview of different conceptualisations and lack a proper definition. There is no framework of social cohesion that simultaneously enables theoretical deepening and policy-oriented research, which inhibits the further operationalisation of social cohesion in various fields (Forrest & Kearns, 2001; Jenson, 2010). As a consequence, possible roles of social work in promoting social cohesion remain unclear. And yet, resemblance in definitions and conceptualisations is noticeable and it would be too simplistic to say that there are no overarching elements in the academic literature. Indeed, common dimensions can be noted, such as: an orientation towards the common good (Dragolov et al., 2016; Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017); shared values (Berger-Schmitt, 2002b; Forrest & Kearns, 2001; Jenson, 2010; Maxwell, 1996); trust (Berger-Schmitt, 2002b; Chan et al, 2006; OECD, 2015); social relations (Berger-Schmitt, 2002b; Chan et al, 2006; Forrest & Kearns, 2001); and equality (Berger-Schmitt, 2002b; Bernard, 1999; Jenson, 2010; OECD, 2015). In contrast, however, social cohesion is also repeatedly interpreted in more limited ways such as social capital, defined by Putnam (1993, p. 167) as *"features of social organisation, such as trust, norms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions".* Another interpretation of social cohesion is this of social inclusion (Healy, 2007; Hewstone, 2015; Jenson & Saint-Martin, 2003), which can be seen as *"the degree to which people are and feel integrated in the different relationships, organisations, sub-systems and structures that constitute everyday life"* (Walker & Wigfield, 2004, p. 12). The relation between these concepts is complex (Philips, 2008) and there is no general agreement in literature about this precise interconnectedness. While social cohesion and social inclusion can be seen as similar concepts or as interrelated concepts, social quality is often seen as a wider analytical construct (Philips, 2008). It is conceptualised as *"the extent to which people are able to participate in social relationships under conditions which enhance their well-being, capacity and individual potential"* (Beck, van der Maesen & Walker, 2007, p. 25).

3.2.3   Towards a theoretical framework of social cohesion

With regard to social cohesion, definitions of legislative bodies (European Commission, 2007; Council of Europe, 2008; OECD 2011) are frequently used in research. The OECD (2011, p.1) defines social cohesion as:

> " *(A) cohesive society works towards the well-being of all its members, fights exclusion and marginalization, creates a sense of belonging, promotes trust, and offers its members the opportunity of upward mobility. (OECD, 2011, p. 1)*

Social cohesion has also been defined as a multilevel concept where different interpretations of the levels coexist. One of these frameworks elaborates a micro, meso and macro level distinguishing the individual, the community, and the society (Dickes & Valentova, 2013; Fonseca et al., 2019). Social cohesion is then understood as a social characteristic, attributed to individual attitudes and behaviours towards these different levels (Chan et al., 2006). Social cohesion is about how individuals experience other individuals (micro), groups and the community (meso) and society (macro) (Bottoni, 2018; Langer, Stewart, Smedts, & Demarest, 2017). A similar interpretation differentiates a horizontal from a vertical level (Chan et al., 2006; Dragolov et al., 2016). The horizontal level constructs the relationships among individuals and groups (i.e. the micro and meso levels), whereas the vertical level constructs the relationships between individuals or groups and the society as a whole (the macro level) (Dragolov et al., 2016). Another interpretation distinguishes an ideational, relational, and distributive level (Moody & White, 2003; Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017). The ideational level encompasses shared norms and identities; the relational level includes the relationship between individuals in a society; and the distributive level, covers the (un)equal distribution of different resources.

More recently, literature reviews have been used to search for a redefinition of social cohesion in order to cover the 'multiplicity of values and cultures found in current societies' (Fonseca et al., 2019, p. 14). In attempting to structure ever-expanding meanings that are attributed to social cohesion and to obtain consensus in the definition of social cohesion, Dragolov et al (2016) have developed the *Social Cohesion Radar*, drawing upon the literature review of Schiefer and van der Noll (2017):

> " *The quality of social cooperation and togetherness of a collective, defined in geopolitical terms, that is expressed in the attitudes and behaviors of its members. A cohesive society is characterized by resilient social relations, a positive emotional connectedness between its members and the community, and a pronounced focus on the common good. (Delhey et al., 2018, p. 430; Dragolov et al., 2016, p. 6)*

The theoretical framework of this Social Cohesion Radar (Figure 4) entails three core aspects. Each core aspects unfolds in three related domains that are identified and interconnected.
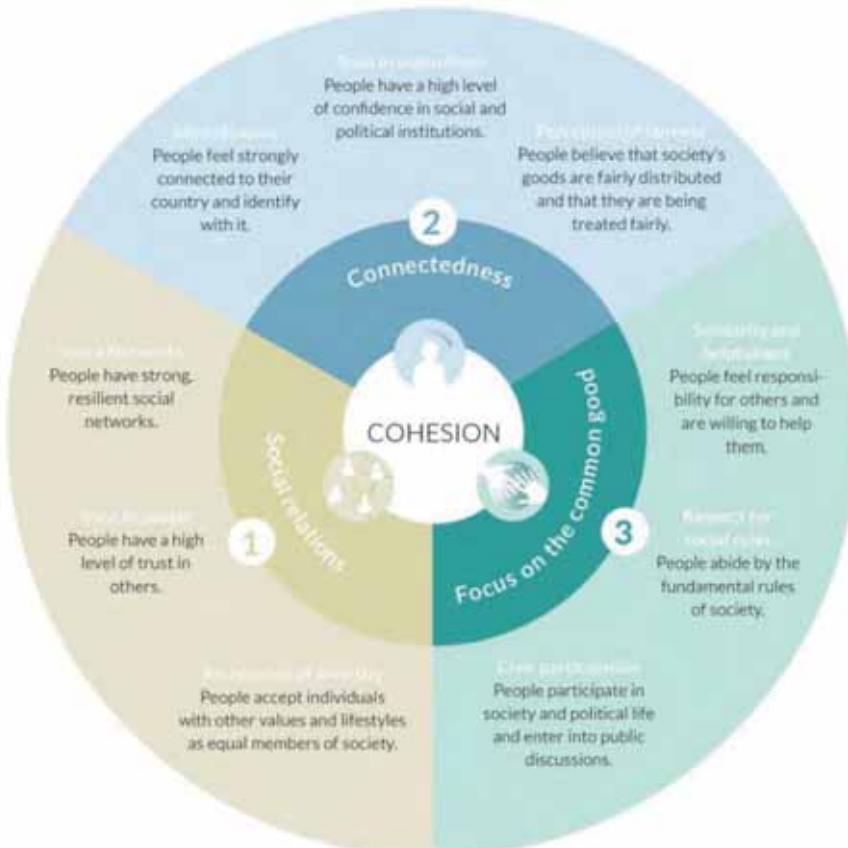
Figure 4: Social cohesion radar (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018)

The first aspect of the Social Cohesion Radar is *social relations* and includes social networks; trust in people; and acceptance of diversity. The second aspect is *connectedness* and unfolds in identification; trust in institutions; perception of fairness. The third and last aspect is *focus on the common good* and consists of solidarity and helpfulness; respect for social rules; civic participation. The Social Cohesion Radar offers a streamlined conceptualisation that allows to distinct components, consequences, and conditions of social cohesion. The concept excludes some aspects such as material wealth, social inequality, well-being, and shared values. The Social Cohesion Radar is a recent comprehensive conceptualisation of social cohesion based on an extensive study of definitions of social cohesion throughout history. In addition, some elements such as the need for shared values and norms are deliberately excluded from the conceptualisation, as these are ambiguous aspects, assuming a necessity of value homogeneity (Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017) and it remains unclear what these values should be. In contrast, a crucial dimension is the acceptance of the diversity in modern societies, including the diversity of norms and values. For these reasons, the social cohesion radar is presented as being the theoretical framework for our research and analysis.

3.3 The role of early childhood services

The importance of children's early years has led to a growing financial investment made in early intervention and prevention (Winkworth, McArthur, Layton, & Thompson, 2010). The early childhood was instrumentalised in the social investment state as a place where early socialisation can and needs to be formed. In this view, socialisation is perceived as the adjustment of both young children and their parents to the dominant, prevailing social norms and values (Vandebroeck, Boonaert, Van der Mespel, & De Brabandere, 2009).

In different parts of the world early childhood services, and more particularly places where parents come together with their children, have emerged based on diverse political rationals such as promoting social cohesion in changing demographic contexts (Hoshi-Watanabe, Musatti, Rayna, & Vandenbroeck, 2015). Social work and social work practices, including child and family services (i.e. child and family social work), have been framed by legislative bodies such

as the Council of the European Union, the European Commission and the OECD as services that could and should foster social cohesion (Council of the European Union, 2009; European Commission, 2015; OECD, 2017) as well as by NGO's (e.g. Irwin, Siddiqi, & Hertzman, 2007), and scholars (e.g. Andrews & Jilke, 2016; Skjesol Bulling & Berg, 2018). Policies strongly focus on facilities where parents and children meet because these services are recognised as having the potential to enhance their development and well-being in several areas of life (Bulling, 2018). This entails among others promoting equal accessibility into these services, installing reciprocity with and between families and local communities and contribute to creating a sense of belonging and solidarity. It is assumed that in these services, children have the ability to play an important role to *"facilitate knowing and trusting one's neighbors"* (Ravanera, 2007, p. 365). Children are depicted as potential 'brokers of relations' (Soenen, 2006), meaning that in the creation of networks, community building and parenting, children can be facilitators, hereby contributing to the development of social cohesion (Geens & Vandenbroeck, 2015). Although social work practices aim at promoting social cohesion (IFSW, 2014), it remains to be studied how social work relates to recent conceptualisations of social cohesion, such as the Social Cohesion Radar (Dragolov et al., 2016) and if – in so doing – social work literature can counter the conceptual vagueness that exists in social work literature about social cohesion as an objective to be pursued. Early childhood services are supposed to contribute to social cohesion, but what is meant by that when several notions are used, and the same concepts cover different meanings across studies?

To address this question, we conducted a systematic narrative literature review of academic social work literature in which we focused on child and family social work as a particular field to grasp this complexity. The unique expression *child and family social work* was used to indicate a wide range of early childhood education and services for families with young children such as child and family services, preschool facilities, a childcare centre, a kindergarten and so on. By addressing the questions: (i) How does social work literature conceptualise social cohesion? and (ii) How does child and family social work literature conceptualise social cohesion?, we aim to explore how social work and in particularly child and family social work conceptualises social cohesion as these practices have been placed high on the European agenda to promote social cohesion. In doing so, it is our understanding that this research may strengthen social work services, including child and family social work, to take up their role as facilitators of social cohesion and may contribute to the necessary dialogue between the policy and the academic interest in social cohesion to reflect on the

ideological interpretations of social cohesion and their implications for early childhood services.

3.4 Methods

The methodological framework consists of a systematic narrative literature review which was led by the following two research questions: (i) How does social work literature conceptualise social cohesion? (ii) How does child and family social work literature conceptualise social cohesion? A systematic literature review was a particularly suitable method to answer our research questions, given the wealth of information that is available on tour central research topic. In the end, a systematic literature review 'makes sense of large bodies of information' (Petticrew, 2005, p. 2) by robustly and reliably summarising the current state of affairs with respect to the topic under investigation, in this case social cohesion in the context of ECEC (Petticrew, 2005). This systematic literature search using the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) was followed by a narrative analysis with a horizontal layer (N = 76) where directed content analysis (Hsiech & Shannon, 2005) and a comprehensive overview was used to determine the main conceptualisations of social cohesion in social work literature. The horizontal layer was followed by an in-depth thematic analysis of articles on social cohesion and child and family social work (N = 10), referred to as the vertical layer of the narrative analysis.

3.4.1 Search strategy

To collect the data, a systematic literature search was undertaken, using the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI). The SSCI has 'access to current and retrospective bibliographic information, author abstracts, and cited references found in over 1,700 of the world's leading scholarly social sciences journals covering more than 50 disciplines' (Russ-Eft, 2008, p. 185). The SSCI includes journals with a relevant number of citations which 'is considered as evidence of the usefulness, quality and/or impact' (Archambault et al., 2006, p. 331). Search results were saved in Endnote, merged to a combined file and duplicate publications were deleted. The search term "social cohesion" was determined by the review question and papers were included if they met the following criteria:

- Type of publication: journal article reporting an original study.

- Date of publication: 1st January 1990 – 1st December 2019.

- Language: English

- Web of Science Category: Social Work

- Geographical location: any

- Methodology: quantitative, qualitative, mixed method

- Scope: conceptualisations of social cohesion, measuring social cohesion, challenging of promoting factors of social cohesion, promoting social cohesion through services or specific practices.

When the title or abstract provided insufficient information, the full article was obtained. Inclusion criteria were used to review the selected articles. The inclusion criteria for the articles were defined as followed:

- Social cohesion as a central theme in the article

- Conceptualisation(s) of social cohesion present in the article

- Full text available or possible to obtain

The first search resulted in 3320 articles. The search strategy is visualised in the following figure (Figure 5). After specifying the research category in "social work" 105 articles remained. A second search was conducted to gain specific literature about social cohesion in child and family social work. Therefore, the topic of the article needed to include "social cohesion" AND "early childhood education" OR "child and family social work" OR "child and family services" This search resulted in 11 articles. When combining the outcomes of both search strategies 116 articles were found. After excluding the doubles, 114 articles remained. Titles and abstracts of the 114 articles were screened and full reports obtained for the studies that met the criteria. After obtaining the overview, the search and screening procedure resulted in seventy-six studies to include in the qualitative analysis. The ten remaining articles on social cohesion in child and family social work followed the same refinement and were first included in the horizontal layer of the analysis, followed by the vertical, in-depth analysis.
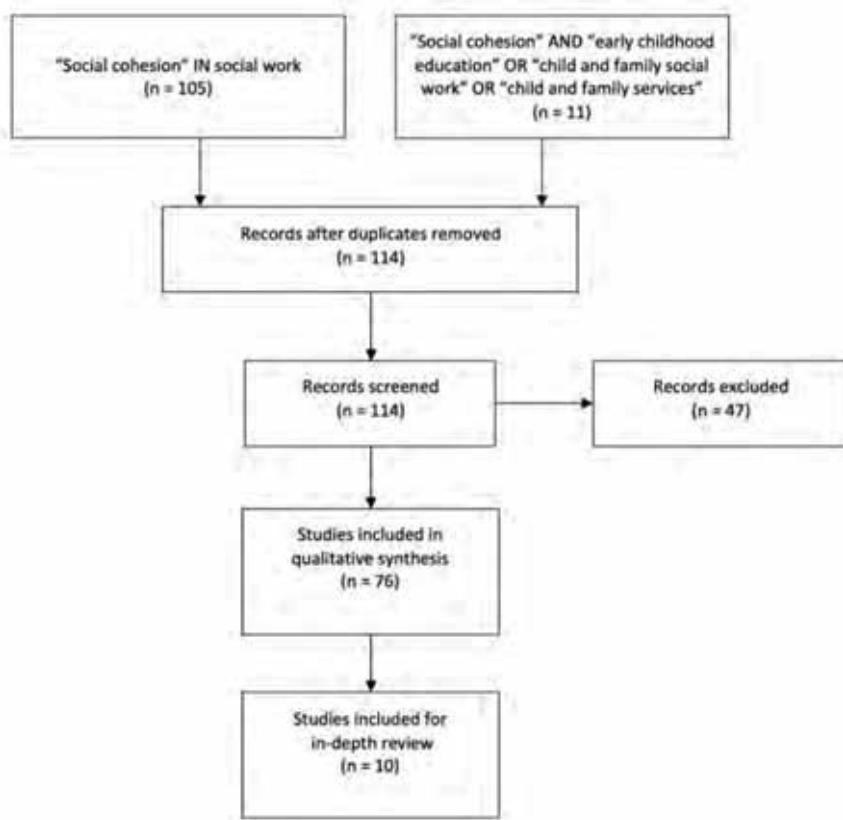
Figure 5: Search procedure. Visualisation of the search strategy (study 1)

3.4.2   Analysing strategy

First, the full text of all selected articles was analysed using the directed content analysis (Hsiech & Shannon, 2005) through Nvivo 11 and the comprehensive overview, previously drafted during the search strategy, to determine the main conceptualisations of social cohesion (horizontal layer). The goal of this directed approach is *"to validate or extend conceptually a theoretical framework or theory"* (Hsiech & Shannon, 2005, p. 1281). Coding was conducted based on predetermined codes derived from the theoretical framework of the social cohesion radar (Dragolov et al., 2016). Data that could not be coded was placed in the comprehensive overview and analysed later to determine if this data should be integrated as a new code. Second, an in-depth thematic analysis using Nvivo 11 was carried out on the ten articles on social cohesion and child and

family social work (vertical layer). The in-depth method of analysis chosen for these ten articles was a hybrid approach of thematic analyses. The hybrid approach is a combination of deductive approach (Crabtree & Miller, 1999), based on the theoretical framework of the social cohesion radar (Dragolov et al., 2016) and an inductive, data-driven approach (Boyatzis, 1998). The articles were imported in Nvivo 11 and summaries were made. The social cohesion radar (Dragolov et al., 2016) was used as a theoretical framework for a first coding scheme. After creating summaries for each article and during the deductive coding other common themes were noted that were not present in the theoretical framework. These common themes yielded additional codes. The coding and analysing were conducted by the first author to ensure conformity. Every step in the analysing strategy was in-depth discussed with the second and third author enhance the credibility of the data and findings, but also to identify, interpret and reinterpret important topics, patterns, and conceptual links during the analysis in a consistent and reliable manner (Westbrook, 1994).

3.5   Findings

The findings return to our two research questions: (i) How does social work literature conceptualise social cohesion? (ii) How does child and family social work literature conceptualise social cohesion? Social cohesion is presented as a means or a goal, related to political responses to (European) challenges. A variety of interpretations became apparent throughout the analysis with an emphasis on different domains associated with the classification of the social cohesion radar (Dragolov et al., 2016).

3.5.1   Social cohesion in social work

3.5.1.1 As a means or a goal?

Strengthening social cohesion is repeatedly described as a policy goal in public social policies (Chan et al., 2006). It is idealised as togetherness of people in society. In addition, social cohesion is not only viewed as a goal in itself to pursue, but also as a means towards other goals. Social cohesion is then framed as a protective factor against different risks, such as negative effects in the community, including demolition or disorder in the neighbourhood (Allik & Kearns, 2017); child maltreatment (Cao & Maguire-Jack, 2016); children's health (Choi, Kelley, & Wang, 2018); and parenting stress (Franco, Pottick, & Huang, 2010).

In addition to its protective role, social cohesion is also a subject of politicisation (Andrews & Jilke, 2016) and in this regard, it is advocated by policy makers as a response to the challenges facing the European welfare state (Taylor-Gooby, 2016). The rationale to strengthen, but equally study social cohesion, generally originates from a challenge or perceived change in society that is believed to put social cohesion in jeopardy (Andreotti, Mingione, & Polizzi, 2012; Chiesi, 2009). One of these challenges is diversity. Social cohesion and diversity are often considered incompatible (Taylor-Gooby, 2016). The intensification of migration and the presence of different (cultural and social) groups creates an urgent need for redefining social cohesion and ways of living together (Dewinter, Rutten, & Bradt, 2019). As a result of these challenges, many social cohesion studies focus on specific target groups such as residents in subsidised housing (Brisson, Pena, & Plassmeyer, 2018); single mothers (Barnhart & Maguire-Jack, 2016); and socio-economically disadvantaged families (Choi et al., 2018; Donley & Nicholson, 2019). Despite the conviction that the promotion of social cohesion starts from a non-stigmatizing approach (Winkworth, McArthur, Layton, & Thompson, 2010), the focus of several articles, being problem- and target-oriented, is in tension with this conviction.

3.5.1.2 Recognizing a diversity of conceptualisations

Looking at the overview of the studies reveals some notable tendencies. Social cohesion is measured using various scales and associated questionnaires. Not less than sixty-one out of the seventy-six articles approach social cohesion in a quantitative way. Most definitions and questionnaires to measure social cohesion, in this vein, are based on the work of Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls (1997) who performed research about collective efficacy. Collective efficacy brings together the concepts of social cohesion, trust and social control as it is researched in the domain of sociology of crime. Sampson et al. (1997) represented social cohesion and trust in collective efficacy by five conceptually related items. Do you live in a close knit neighbourhood (1); People in my neighbourhood are willing to help their neighbours (2); People in my neighbourhood generally do not get along with each other (3); People in my neighbourhood do not share the same values (4); People in my neighbourhood can be trusted (5) (Sampson et al., 1997). Social cohesion in this regard is exclusively located on the micro level, determined by the geographical location, the neighbourhood where people live. Furthermore thirty-four articles out of seventy-six were published in journals of community psychology (American Journal of Community Psychology and Journal of Community Psychology) whereby the majority of articles originated from the United States of America.

The majority of literature in community psychology focused on shared values and norms, the willingness to help people, trust and the strength of social relations (Brisson et al., 2018; Frye, 2007; Zuberi & Teixeira, 2017).

In relation to the dimensions of social cohesion constructed by Dragolov et al. (2016), the distributive level, which covers the (un)equal distribution of different resources (Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017), is absent from the literature, as the focus is solely on the ideational (shared norms and values) and relational (social relations) levels of social cohesion. Other dimensions of social cohesion as conceptualised in the social cohesion radar (Dragolov et al., 2016) are also missing in the literature: 'acceptance of diversity'; 'trust in institutions' and 'civic participation'. This is counter-intuitive, as it often is precisely the lack of acceptance of diversity and the worries about increasing diversity in society that, according to the articles, challenges social cohesion (Kallio & Kouvo, 2015; Lenzi, Vieno, Santinello, & Perkins, 2013). In addition, the horizontal dimension that constructs the relationship between individuals and groups in our society (Chan et al., 2006) is predominantly present in the literature we analysed, but the vertical dimension, that constructs the relationship between individuals and groups regarding the society as a whole (Dragolov et al., 2016) is nearly non-existent. However, it is important to situate social cohesion at the intersection of horizontal and vertical dimension in order to gain a full understanding of the concept (Chan et al., 2006; Dragolov et al., 2016). In the literature in this study, social cohesion is conceptualised as the relationships between individuals and groups, and in so doing, the literature predefines several elements that are supposed to give people some kind of connection: geographical location (Wang & Fowler, 2019), origin and ethnicity (Florez et al., 2016) or a person's age (Parekh et al., 2018).

3.5.2   Social cohesion in child and family social work

An in-depth analysis of the ten articles that focus on social cohesion in child and family social work provides a number of interesting insights. The articles originate from the period 1999 to 2019, but an increase in articles is visible over the last five years. Only two articles have been published before 2014, respectively in 1999 (Carnoy, 1999; Hipp, Butts, Acton, Nagle, & Boessen, 2013). The research is predominantly situated in Canada, the United States and Belgium. In contrast to the general social work literature, the study designs in child and family social work are also qualitative in nature. The qualitative research designs use literature analysis, focus groups and interviews.

In so doing, studies in child and family social work tend to give voice to parents and service users rather than to staff or policy makers. In 3 out of 10 articles, social cohesion is presented as a protective factor for (mental) health (Carter, Dubois, Tremblay, & Taljaard, 2013; Rabinowitz, Drabick, & Reynolds, 2016; Zhang, Beauregard, Kramer, & Becares, 2017). The articles only partly deal with social cohesion and definitions of social cohesion are lacking. When comparing the articles to the latest definitions, such as the definition of social cohesion given by Dragolov et al (2016) we see 'Social networks' and 'helpfulness and solidarity' as the most common dimensions of social cohesion, followed by 'trust in people'; 'identification' and 'civic participation'. Missing in the conceptualisations of social cohesion are the dimensions 'trust in institutions'; 'perception of fairness'; 'acceptance of diversity' and 'respect for social rules'. Similar conclusions from the broader social work literature are also applicable in this context. Social cohesion is conceptualised from a mainly horizontal level with an emphasis on social relations. The multiplicity of interpretations in child and family social work studies on social cohesion is overshadowed by dominant conceptualisations of social cohesion as social capital (Shan, Muhajarine, Loptson, & Jeffery, 2014), particularly on a micro and meso levels.

Diversity or hyper-diversity as Urban (2015) names it, is a central topic in research on social cohesion in child and family social work. For the promotion of social cohesion, the acceptance of diversity, consistent with the Social Cohesion Radar (2016), is crucial. However, the acceptance of diversity as a crucial dimension of social cohesion is only reported in two of the articles. In these articles an anti-essentialist approach to diversity is suggested as desirable (Geens, Roets, & Vandenbroeck, 2015). The anti-essentialist approach to diversity 'captures social issues such as diverse and changing norms and values, diverse and changing family compositions, lifestyles and situations, and diverse and changing biographical, socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds of children and parents' (Geens et al., 2015, p. 532) as productive for social cohesion. In doing so, diversity and heterogeneity are considered as a resource to promote social cohesion. The focus on the acceptance of diversity has as a consequence, that these authors emphasises the role of the professional in child and family social work in approaching and dealing with diversity issues while working with families (Urban, 2015). As an example of this focus on early childhood professionals in promoting social cohesion and therefore enhancing the acceptance of diversity, the international DECET network (Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training) developed tools to support early childhood practitioners in ensuring early childhood settings without discrimination and allowing diversity to emerge (Urban, 2015). In this regard Geens, Roets &

Vandenbroeck (2019) also refer to the OECD:

> " *There is a need for early childhood centres to respond to the changing social context [...] Working with diversity in particular milieus is a feature of ECEC professional work, to which traditional teacher training has responded insufficiently. In the future, practitioners will be required to play an enhanced role in developing social cohesion, for which new skills and understandings about community and society will be critical. (OECD, 2006, p. 167)*

A prominent question that arises from this quote is how practitioners can play a role in supporting social cohesion. However, research into this aspect of social cohesion and the role of the professional in ECE setting appeared to be absent from our systematic narrative literature review.

3.6   Discussion

3.6.1   Social cohesion as a definitive or sensitizing concept?

Throughout our systematic narrative literature review, social cohesion is presented as a goal, as well as a means, a protective factor. The pursuit of social cohesion is therefore not only central in the political agenda, but clearly also in academic literature. However, Stead (2017, p. 421) warns us to 'be wary of romanticizing an age that never was'. The dominance of quantitative research in our data predefines the concept of social cohesion, risks to avoid the discussion on conceptual definitions of social cohesion. We should not forget to take a critical stance at the concept of social cohesion itself and ask ourselves what the commitment of strengthening social cohesion should lead to and if social cohesion is seen as a goal or narrowed down to a solely instrumentalizing function. The focus on social cohesion is not to be reduced to striving for consensual approaches, but on the contrary aiming to explore conceptualisations and ways of promoting social cohesion in contexts of diversity (Novy et al. 2012). In this regard, there is a tension to be noticed between the concern about diversity as a challenge to social cohesion and the idea that shared values are an important, yet contested dimension of social cohesion (Dragolov et al., 2016). Shared values refer to the 'necessity of value

homogeneity' (Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017, p. 590) and there is no clearness on what these values should be or who is competent to determine these values. This perceived necessity of homogeneity in contexts of increasing diversity urges us to rethink the concept of social cohesion before pursuing it as an objective in policies and practices.

The articles in our systematic narrative literature review were categorised as social work literature. However, interesting to notice is that thirty-four articles out of seventy-six were published in journals of community psychology (American Journal of Community Psychology and Journal of Community Psychology). The majority of literature in community psychology focused on shared values and norms, the willingness to help people, trust and the strength of social relations (Brisson et al., 2018; Frye, 2007; Zuberi & Teixeira, 2017). Most often, a narrow focus on social relations and a mainly horizontal level prevail and are overshadowed by a dominant conceptualisation of social cohesion as social capital (Sabbe, Bradt, Spaaij, & Roose, 2018; Shan et al., 2014), defined by Putnam (1993, p. 167) as *"features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions".* The issue at stake here is that social cohesion as social capital tends to lack taking into account the horizontal and vertical dimension of social cohesion as described by Chan et al. (2006) and Dragolov et al. (2016). Hence, social cohesion as social capital places a focus on the micro and meso level and attention for the macro level, where the relationship between individuals and groups regarding the society as a whole is constructed (Chan et al., 2006), is absent. Despite the limited interpretations, it is remarkable that articles, mainly from journals with a focus on social policy, broaden the concept from a focus on social relations to a more vertical dimension, were trust in institutions, for example, is included. A reflection on the conceptualisation of social cohesion that is mainly located at the micro and meso level allows us to question whether this conceptualisation is inherent to social work and more specifically early childhood services? The majority of articles from psychology contradict this question. How social cohesion is defined by the practitioners themselves will be more apparent through subsequent research in the early childhood services. It is noticeable that research on social cohesion in daily social work practices is extremely limited and comprehensive conceptualisations are scarce. In addition, there is a need for qualitative research that includes the voices of practitioners as well as families themselves. The absence of research in the field of social work in general and child and family social work in particular contrasts with the political expectations towards social work, and child and family social work (Council of the European Union, 2009; European Commission, 2015;

Irwin, Siddiqi, & Hertzman, 2007; OECD, 2017; Skjesol Bulling & Berg, 2018). This leads to the paradoxical situation in which social work practices are being characterised as ideal to foster social cohesion, where children are depicted as potential "*brokers of relations"* (Soenen, 2006), meaning that in the creation of networks, community building and parenting, children can be facilitators, hereby contributing to the development of social cohesion (Geens, Roets & Vandenbroeck, 2015), while there is little research on what this may mean. Do we even know what policymakers mean by fostering social cohesion? A policy analysis can provide insight into these different conceptualisations. In addition, the literature does not provide insight into the consequences of fostering social cohesion in early childhood services. At last limited considerations are made in literature on *how* children should take up this attributed role and this remains to be studied. However, these studies did link some interesting insights to the role of professionals in child and family social work on how to address this promotion of social cohesion. For example, starting from an anti-essentialist approach to diversity and heterogeneity as a professional is one of the recommendations made in research (Geens, Roets & Vandenbroeck, 2015).

Our literature review suggests that the shallow conceptualisation of social cohesion in social work practices, may inhibit its further operationalisation and thus may jeopardise the study of theory-based practices. The conceptual vagueness of the concept also limits further discussions on the role of social work professionals in relation to social cohesion and the significance of social cohesion as an aspirational objective. These questions and concerns frame the importance of providing social worker professionals with adequate frameworks and training. In addition, this reveals that (historical) research into the nature of social cohesion in social work is needed.

More in-depth reflection on these findings and the implications of this conceptualisation for early childhood services reveal a need for further research. More clarification is needed on how to conceptualise social cohesion in order to make it conceptually applicable in empirical terms and to eventually translate the conceptualisations of social cohesion in specific operational definitions that can guide researchers and social workers to measure the capacity of services to promote social cohesion. In addition, the conceptualisations raise the question whether they relate to different traditions that characterise social work. For instance, can critical social work interpret social cohesion without considering the macro perspective? When critical social works seeks to address social injustices, rather than focusing on individual issues, one can argue that the microlevel as part of the conceptualisation of social cohesion is problematic in

conceptualising social cohesion from a critical social work perspective?

The selection of literature in this research serves as an indicator of possible gaps in (child and family) social work literature. Acknowledging these gaps in social work literature may suggest pathways for future research that call for further elaboration of a social work perspective on social cohesion in which besides an academic perspective, perspectives are combined from a policy to participants view on what social cohesion could entail and what the role of child and family social work in this regard could be. This should not necessarily lead to an agreement on an operational definition of social cohesion. It could be relevant not to capture social cohesion as a definitive concept but approach it as a sensitizing concept (Blumer, 1954). The conceptual openness, when approaching social cohesion as a sensitizing concept, can create opportunities for early childhood services to foreground their own interpretation, meaning that early childhood services can organise their services in ways that adapt to the changing needs in their communities. On the other hand, when early childhood services are held accountable by policy for whether or not they foster social cohesion, how will we evaluate this if the concept is ambiguous, lacking a common interpretation on an academic, policy and practice level?

When approaching social cohesion as a sensitizing concept, it is essential to combine theory and empirical practice in further studies. Everyday places and practices of early childhood education in child and family social work, such as child and family services where people engage across social, ethnic and cultural boundaries, have to be integrated in research from different perspectives (Oosterlynck, Loopmans, Schuermans, Vandenabeele & Zemni, 2014). In so doing, new ways of understanding the sources of social cohesion (Oosterlynck et al., 2014) in contemporary social work services may become visible. Questions that we take from this literature review into the following sub-parts of this research, which will focus on policies and early childhood services are: Are there aspects of social cohesion that are not part of the concept of the Social Cohesion Radar, but seem relevant to address from the perspective of (child and family) social work? (1); Do any missing aspects of social cohesion remain unaddressed throughout the sub-studies (2)?

In reconceptualising social cohesion, it should be about overcoming differences and avoid to start from a problem-oriented rational where the problem is situated in specific target groups. Such reconceptualisation of social cohesion could start from acknowledging differences and embrace diversity. Social cohesion from a social work perspective could mean that the diversity of society is given a place

in the society as such.

3.6.2   Limitations

The following limitations should be taken into account. The selected literature on social cohesion was restricted in time, language, and electronic database. Hence, the coverage of the SSCI across countries (non-English speaking) is not guaranteed (Archambault et al., 2006). In line with this finding, Archambault et al. (2006, p. 333) even point out that non-English-speaking researchers 'publish more often in their mother tongue and in journals with a more limited distribution' as concepts in social sciences are often locally oriented and the context differs the meaning of the concept. Also, it is possible that the minority of qualitative research methods, as presented in the findings, is limited because large-scale, quantitative studies are more easily published in journals available in SSCI. Furthermore, the 'file drawer problem' (Salkind, 2010) or publication bias can occur. This makes it possible that nonsignificant results that expect but not demonstrate effects of social cohesion stay in the so-called file drawers of researchers and remain unpublished in the Social Science Citation Index (SSCI) (Salkind 2010). As a consequence, generalisation of the selection of literature should be handled with care.

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CHAPTER 4

POLICYMAKERS ON SOCIAL COHESION: CONTRADICTORY EXPECTATIONS FOR CHILD AND FAMILY SOCIAL WORK

4.1 Introduction

Social cohesion is believed to be an antidote to the challenges of macro-economic and societal changes such as migration and individualisation (Andrews et al., 2014). International organisations (Council of the European Union, 2009; European Commission, 2015; OECD, 2017) have pointed to social work and child and family social work practices as important actors to foster social cohesion and, in so doing, to respond to these challenges. In order to achieve this political goal, legislative bodies refer to early childhood services as places to foster social integration and cohesion (Hoshi-Watanabe et al., 2015; Melhuish et al., 2008).

Despite the apparent consensus about the expectations for child and family social work, however, insights into what policymakers mean by social cohesion is limited. To address this lack of understanding, we combined a qualitative analysis of policy documents with semi-structured interviews held with policymakers in Flanders (Belgium), based on the following research questions: First, how is social cohesion interpreted by policymakers? Second, what do they consider as challenges to and opportunities for social cohesion? Third, what role do they assign to early childhood services in contributing to social cohesion?

Given that policymakers are considered key actors in the process of social cohesion, as well as in the coordination and implementation of policy, it is important to capture their perspective by asking them rather than only by reading policy documents, as these tend to be somewhat vague and superficial (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). The term 'early childhood services' then again indicates a wide range of services for families with young children, such as child and family services, preschool facilities, childcare centres and kindergartens. Accordingly, the current article contributes by rethinking the conceptualisation of social cohesion in contexts of increasing diversity, and by integrating the perspective of academic literature and that of policymakers, before pursuing it as a political objective through early childhood services.

4.2 Vagueness of social cohesion

Social cohesion has been defined by multiple scholars as a multilevel concept, in which different interpretations of the levels coexist (Bottoni, 2018; Langer et al., 2017). One of these frameworks elaborates a micro, a meso and a macro

level, distinguishing the individual, the community and the society (Dickes & Valentova, 2013; Fonseca et al., 2019). Social cohesion is then understood as a social characteristic, attributed to individual attitudes and behaviours towards these different levels (Chan et al., 2006). A similar interpretation differentiates a horizontal from a vertical level (Chan et al., 2006; Dragolov et al., 2016), with different dimensions linked to each level. A third interpretation distinguishes ideational, relational, and distributive levels of social cohesion (Moody & White, 2003; Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017). Considering these interpretations, critical voices have argued that the study of social cohesion has not led to solid theoretical constructions, and more certainly not to its useful operationalisation (Bottoni, 2018). Bernard (1999, p. 48) describes social cohesion as a quasi-concept, 'that is, one of those hybrid mental constructions that politics proposes to us more and more often in order to simultaneously detect possible consensuses on a reading of reality, and to forge them'. In an attempt to structure the diverse meanings and to obtain consensus in the conceptualisations of social cohesion, researchers have identified a variety of overarching elements (Fonseca et al., 2019; Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017). The central dimensions of these unifying attempts include dynamics of social relations, participation, solidarity and belonging. In this vein, The Bertelsmann Stiftung worked towards a unifying theoretical framework of social cohesion, *the social cohesion radar*, drawing on the literature review of Schiefer and van der Noll (2017), in which they conceptualise social cohesion as:

> " *The quality of social cooperation and togetherness of a collective, defined in geopolitical terms, that is expressed in the attitudes and behaviors of its members. A cohesive society is characterized by resilient social relations, a positive emotional connectedness between its members and the community, and a pronounced focus on the common good. (Delhey et al., 2018, p. 430)*

The theoretical framework of this social cohesion radar offers a streamlined conceptualisation that allows for distinct components, consequences, and conditions of social cohesion. The framework entails three core aspects (Figure 6), each of which unfolds in three related domains. The first aspect is 'social relations', and includes social networks, trust in people and acceptance of diversity. The second is 'connectedness', and unfolds in identification, trust in institutions and perception of fairness. The third and last aspect is 'focus on the common good', and consists of solidarity and helpfulness, respect for social rules

and civic participation. The framework excludes some aspects, such as material wealth, social inequality, wellbeing and shared values.
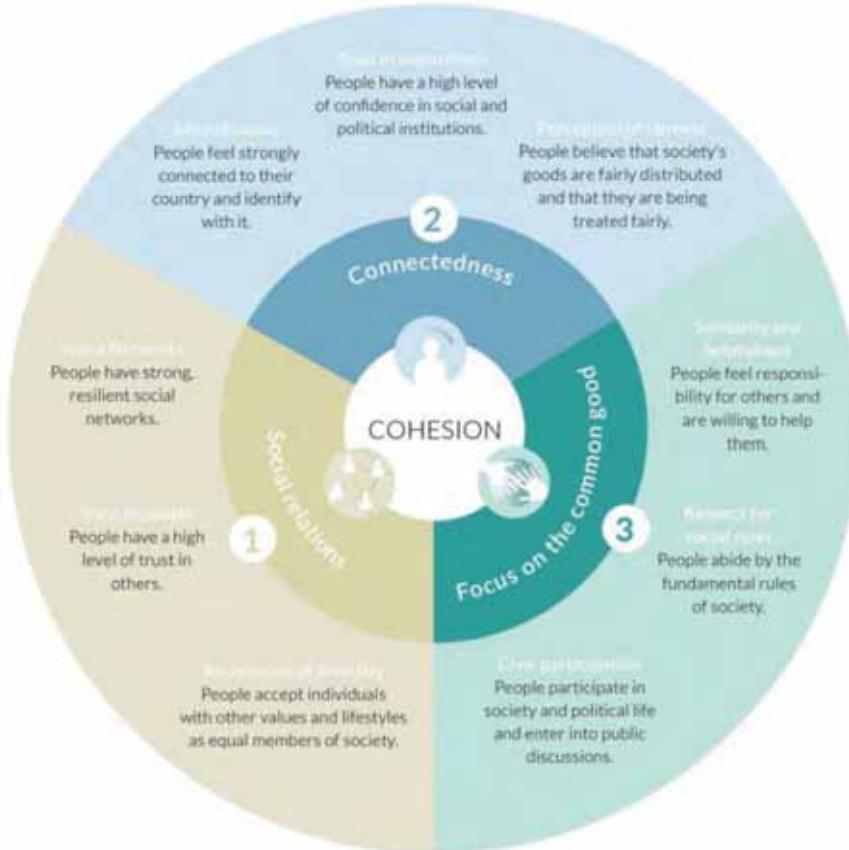
Figure 6: Social cohesion radar (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018)

In contrast to the pursuit of a comprehensive conceptualisation of social cohesion, there are also narrower interpretations that equate social cohesion to social capital (Shan et al., 2014). Social capital is defined by Putnam (1993, p. 167) as 'features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions'. Putnam (2000) distinguishes two types of social capital: *bonding* and *bridging*. The bonding type refers to social capital that is internally directed, and thereby strengthens the exclusive identity and affiliation of homogeneous groups (Putnam, 2000). Bridging social capital refers to networks that are directed externally, and include people across different social classes (Putnam, 2000).

Another interpretation of social cohesion is one of social inclusion (Healy, 2007; Hewstone, 2015; Jenson & Saint-Martin, 2003), which can be seen as 'the degree to which people are and feel integrated in the different relationships, organisations, sub-systems and structures that constitute everyday life' (Walker & Wigfield, 2004, p. 12). The relationship between these concepts is complex (Philips, 2008), and in literature there is no general agreement about the precise interconnectedness. Literature (Dierckx et al., 2021) suggests that the superficial conceptualisation of social cohesion may hinder its further operationalisation. Consequently, a comprehensive conceptualisation based on the social cohesion radar is used in the following sections of this paper. In addition to these scholarly debates, diverse political approaches to social cohesion can also be observed (Chan et al., 2006), as it has become a key policy concern (Novy et al., 2012) and a subject of politicisation (Andrews & Jilke, 2016) in the so-called political turn on social cohesion (Andrews et al., 2014). The rationale to strengthen social cohesion, but equally to study it, generally originates from perceived challenges in society that are believed to jeopardise social cohesion (Andreotti et al., 2012; Chiesi, 2009), including the increasing diversity.

4.3 A historical view on the political turn

A political turn on social cohesion is anything but a new phenomenon. In the nineteenth century, the emergence of nation states was accompanied by national policies targeted at the creation of a sense of unity. The concept of the nation state was based on ethnic and cultural belonging, where diversity was considered a threat to the national unity and social cohesion was believed to be conditioned by the homogeneity of a set of shared norms, values and language. Since the 1960s and 1970s, the homogenising policies of the nation state have been seriously compromised through increased migration and economic crises. This has paved the way for a new ideological approach and policy: multiculturalism (Watters et al., 2020). Multiculturalism as a policy has been implemented through 'programs that support cultural diversity and facilitate equitable participation for heterogeneous ethnocultural groups' (Berry & Ward, 2016, p. 444). Vasta (2010) argues that this multiculturalism has now been abandoned as a policy goal, and a renewed focus on homogeneity is apparent (Holtug, 2010). It is again claimed that diversity, and consequently diverse values in society, may threaten the national identity and damage social cohesion (Vasta, 2010). In this respect, Stead (2017, p. 405) emphasises that *"the emergence of social cohesion as a policy concept in various Western states has been widely understood as part of a backlash against multiculturalism".* The underlying cause

of this threat to national identity and the erosion of social cohesion is often framed as migration-related (Ariely, 2014; Delhey et al., 2018; Healy, 2007; Holtug & Mason, 2010), where according to Lithman (2010), policymaking builds on an integration–citizenship–social cohesion nexus.

New sources of pressure and tension in society, such as the information age, globalisation, growing migration and a competitively oriented social policy (Kearns & Forrest, 2000), have led to a renewed interest in social cohesion as a key policy concern. Political dialogues about the fear of the political, social, and economic costs of corroding social cohesion became apparent in the 1990s and 2000s (Jenson & Saint-Martin, 2003; Kearns & Forrest, 2000). In sum, social cohesion has again become a policy objective, and early childhood services are considered to be a locus for contributing to it.

By contrast, the study of what policymakers mean by social cohesion has only recently emerged, but is restricted to document analysis. Notwithstanding the fact that social work, including early childhood services, have been defined as services that could and should foster social cohesion (Council of the European Union, 2009; European Commission, 2015; OECD, 2017; Irwin et al., 2007), it remains unclear how policymakers think about legislation, funding and implementation to serve their objectives.

The present study takes a broad perspective on institutions, and analyses diverse interpretations of social cohesion, similarities, tensions, and contradictions in order to reflect on the potential role of early childhood services in contributing to social cohesion. We conducted a qualitative analysis of policy documents, combined with semi-structured interviews with policymakers based on the following three research questions: How is social cohesion interpreted by policymakers? (1); What do they consider as challenges to and opportunities for social cohesion? (2); What role is assigned to early childhood services in contributing to social cohesion? (3).

4.4   Methodology

The mere analysis of policy documents is insufficient to allow draw any conclusions to be drawn about the diverse motives, views and rationales of legislative bodies, although these might provide important explanations of the policy rationales for focusing on social cohesion. This is not least since policy documents are often written to communicate broad information to other

policymakers, as well as to society. Policy documents tend to be somewhat vague and superficial (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Therefore, we also looked for in-depth explanations and rationales from legislative bodies at first hand. Accordingly, our document analysis was combined with semi-structured interviews.

The analyses were conducted in Belgium at the level of the Flemish Community (Flanders) and at the municipal level. Flanders is a compelling case in relation to social cohesion in early childhood services, as the Flemish Government issued the Flemish Act of Parliament on Preventive Family Support in 2013, emphasising the promotion of social cohesion as one of three pillars. By doing so, the Flemish Government explicitly chose to put childhood services forward as a potential driver of social cohesion. The Act of Parliament on Preventive Family Support replaced the Flemish Act of Parliament on Parenting Support. As a result, Flanders moved from solely supporting parenting, to (preventive) family support. The ambition of the act is to broaden the scope of parenting support beyond the traditional interpretations. In addition to promoting encounters and social cohesion, the two other central pillars remain preventive health care and parenting support (Vlaamse Overheid, 2014). For a case such as Flanders, it is also important to include both the Flemish and the municipal level. Through the translation of regulations, local administrations and municipalities have acquired a great deal of autonomy over how to implement the Flemish legislation. For instance, the Act on Preventive Family Support, which emphasises the promotion of social cohesion as one of the three pillars, gives local administrations complete autonomy over how it should be implemented. It is therefore pivotal to include both levels in this research.

The Flemish government is divided into ten homogeneous policy domains (Vlaamse Overheid, n.d.) including the domain of welfare, public health, and family (coordinated by a minister and directed by the ministerial cabinet), the administration and several agencies. Another domain is The Chancellery and Foreign Affairs, headed by The Minister of Domestic Governance, Public Administration, Civic Integration and Equal Opportunities. The ministerial cabinet, the administration and the agencies that come under the responsibilities of ministers, are considered as key actors in the policymaking process of social cohesion, as well as in the coordination and implementation of policy.

At the municipal level, three major cities were included in the study: Antwerp, Ghent and Mechelen. Each city represents a different case, as they vary with regard to the history and nature of both diversity and deprivation (van der Meer

& Tolsma, 2014). The three cities are characterised by superdiversity, but within them different neighbourhoods have emerged where diversity has a long history, where it is recent and creates tensions, or where it is lacking. All three cities provide childcare (0 to 3 years), kindergarten (3 to 6 years) and a *Huis van het Kind* (House of the Child): a parent support centre that integrates an infant consultation scheme, parent support programmes and playgroups (Vlaamse Overheid, 2014).

A thematic analysis was conducted of all relevant policy documents, both at the level of the Flemish community and the three cities. The policy documents were selected based on a number of inclusion criteria: they had been published between 2007 and 2020, and they related to the domain of welfare, public health and family, that of domestic governance, public administration and civic integration or that of equal opportunities. Further, they included keywords such as preventive health care for infants and toddlers, social cohesion, meeting places, preventive family support or early childhood education, and referred to Flanders, Antwerp, Ghent or Mechelen.

After a first screening, 44 documents were found to contain information about the central topic and were thus included, and subsequently thematically analysed. The themes and their tensions, and possibly contradictory meanings, served as a basis for the construction of semi-structured interviews with policymakers to examine how their choices and behaviours were restricted by institutional structures, rules, norms and cultures (Breuning & Ishiyama, 2014).

At the Flemish level, we selected the most relevant actors: the cabinet of the Minister of Welfare, Public Health and Family and its administrators; the agency 'Child and Family', responsible for parent support and childcare; and the Ministry of Domestic Governance, Public Administration, Civic Integration and Equal Opportunities, and its administrators. At the municipal level, the most relevant actors were the competent deputy mayor(s) or alderman, and leading civil servants in domains related to social cohesion and child and family services. Purposive sampling combined with snowball sampling (Van Hove & Claes, 2011) were used to select and approach the most relevant policymakers at the municipal level (Polit & Beck, 2004). This led to the invitation of 21 policymakers, out of which 14 eventually participated. No mayors were available to take part in the research, with the current COVID-19 pandemic and the scope of their authority indicated as reasons for not participating. Some aldermen responded by passing the questions on to staff members because of lack of time. Before the interviews, all participants were informed about the study and signed an

informed consent. The interviews were conducted through Microsoft Teams due to COVID-19 measures. An overview of the respondents can be found in Table 5.

	Position	Level
1A	Minister	Flemish
2A	Ministerial cabinet	Flemish
3A	Ministerial cabinet	Flemish
4A	Agency for Child and Family	Flemish
5A	Agency for Child and Family	Flemish
6A	Agency for Child and Family	Flemish
7B	Alderman	Urban
8B	Cabinet advisor	Urban
9B	Cabinet advisor	Urban
10C	Cabinet advisor	Urban
11C	Alderman	Urban
12C	Cabinet advisor	Urban
13D	Cabinet advisor	Urban
14D	Civil servant, department of social policy	Urban

Table 5: Overview of policymakers (study 2)

The semi-structured format of the interviews provided the opportunity to explore the topic in depth, while also leaving sufficient room for questions that emerged from the dialogue between the interviewee and the participant (Gill et al., 2008). The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim.

A theory-driven deductive thematic analysis — based on the social cohesion radar (Dragolov et al., 2016) — was used, and was combined with an inductive thematic analysis using NVivo R1, in order *"to provide knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon under study"* (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992, p. 314) 'beyond merely counting words' (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278). In this process, the documents and interviews were read multiple times to gain a sense of the entire collection of information. Data that could not be categorised using the existing codes, based on Dragolov et al. (2016), were dealt with inductively using newly created codes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The coding and analyses of the policy documents and interviews were verified by the second and third author to enhance validity and reliability (Van Hove & Claes, 2011). The document analyses and semi-structured interviews were eventually triangulated (Patton, 2002), and revealed the diversity of motives, views and rationales on social cohesion, leading to varying views on the relevant role of early childhood services.

4.5   Results

A variety of interpretations on social cohesion became apparent when analysing our data, with an emphasis on different domains associated with the classification of the social cohesion radar (Dragolov et al., 2016). In the first part of the findings section, we outline these political interpretations of social cohesion. In the second part, we relate this diversity of interpretations to the role that is assigned to early childhood services as a potential driver of social cohesion.

4.5.1   A diversity of motives, views and rationales

In the data analysis, it was remarkable to note how many synonyms or explanations were used to describe social cohesion, including social fabric, networking, community building, involvement, connectedness and achieving a common project in diversity. This observation immediately foreshadowed the broad diversity of interpretations on social cohesion we uncovered through our analysis. The different interpretations through our analysis of policy documents and interviews uncover a variety of emphases placed on social cohesion. One of them is a focus on networking and social capital, which refers to the dimension of social relations from the social cohesion radar (Dragolov et al., 2016). Different perspectives on this way of connecting people coexist, and these were strongly associated with diversity. Respect for diversity was considered core to social

relations (Dragolov et al., 2016). Diversity was also a key aspect with regard to motives for fostering social cohesion. The two most clearly distinguishable and frequently used interpretations of diversity according to the participants were ethno-cultural and socio-economic diversity. Interestingly, however, when social capital was taken as the central focus of social cohesion by the participants, it was always accompanied by a narrower interpretation, only referring to ethno-cultural diversity. Hence, a distinction could be observed between bonding social capital and bridging social capital throughout the interviews and policy documents.

A first perspective in the policy documents and interviews was a focus on bonding social capital, in which people are connected from a categorical viewpoint, based on defined target groups. These groups were often defined (solely) based on their ethnic-cultural identity.

> " *Sometimes it is better to work with separate groups on the basis of their ethnic and cultural background. We have also seen this in the AMIF integration pilot projects, where it works extremely well to place a certain group in a well-defined context, and by bringing that group together, beautiful things happen. This is also true in the area of social cohesion; the informal networks that created a real group. (Policymaker 5A)*

> " *In fact, early childhood services should also be organised in this way, but we no longer dare to, for example, hold an African mother evening. (Policymaker 7B)*

This contrasted with a perspective that focused on bridging social capital as one of the guiding principles of social cohesion.

> " *So, it is a bit on both sides that efforts are being made both to strengthen networks internally, within communities, within groups, as well as to bridge with other communities. […] You can do that by supporting people in their emancipation, providing frameworks, ensuring that people can build up a personal network. This means commitment to the individual is important to me and also plays into social cohesion, but the collective is always at least as important. (Policymaker 11C)*

A second emphasis in the different interpretations of social cohesion in the policy documents and interviews was a broader, more holistic one, where an association with the wider society was made. This concerned community building, in which the participation and involvement of citizens was central and fundamental, and social rights were included as a way of 'realizing fundamental social rights through social cohesion' (Policymaker 11C). Here, other aspects of the social cohesion radar — *connectedness* and a *focus on the common good* — were included in the interpretations.

> " *I think that if I look back a while, the first concepts were social networks rather than social cohesion, where you very quickly see the importance of social networks, informal networks. […] When I reflect on social cohesion, I find that I do see a broadening of scope, which actually has an enormous holistic vision, more so than the network. (Policymaker 4A)*

Under the heading of harmonious living together in diversity, reference was made to peoples' own responsibility, and to active citizenship or civic participation as the way towards social cohesion.

> " *You are a member of a polis and you have a number of rights and obligations here. You have a number of standards to respect. You are also a member of a community and you have underlying values to respect. This does, of course, require the core of the language and the knowledge of a minimum number of underlying norms, or norms and underlying values. (Policymaker 1A)*

This is inseparably linked to the theme of diversity and brings to light the multi-layered nature of social cohesion — or at least, the different layers that policy perspectives assign to it. Diversity was viewed both as an opportunity and as a challenge, and there was continuing alternation between these two perspectives.

> " *We consider the diversity of our city to be an asset and a challenge, and choose an open and supportive urban community. (Administrative Agreement, City of Antwerp, 2019)*

When diversity was considered as challenging for the social fabric, the focus was on ethnic-cultural diversity, while abandoning its multi-layered essence. Contingent with this was a focus on a homogeneous, cohesive society with shared values and norms. The emphasis on shared values and norms yielded the assumption that designated groups in society need to be socialised in these shared values and norms.

> " *Diversity in Flemish society can be an added value, but it also presents us with challenges. That is why we resolutely choose a new approach. An approach in which we ask for more effort from those who enter our society, but at the same time we also step-up efforts to live more 'with' and less 'next to' each other. Newcomers who successfully integrate are given every opportunity in our society. Everyone has equal rights, but also equal duties. (Coalition agreement, Vlaamse Overheid, 2019)*

It needs to be noted that the focus on norms and values in the narrative of social

cohesion cannot be presented without some nuances. The social cohesion radar, for instance, explicitly excludes norms and values from the conceptualisation, as these are ambiguous aspects. According to the participants, it was further unclear what these values could be.

> *What is important is this shared pedestal of values that are universal, the declaration of human rights, in which we clearly separate church and state; fundamental values that we try to make our own as much as possible [...]. Knowledge of language is important, activation is important, but also the shared values, though not the values from a bygone romanticism about one's own nation, instead a kind that binds us as human beings regardless of our origin — what should bind us. (Policymaker 3A)*

4.5.2 Diverse views on the role of early childhood services

The role of early childhood services in contributing to social cohesion was mentioned as a third pillar, and described as:

> *the objective to create cohesion or cohesion between families beyond socio-economic and ethno-cultural boundaries. This, in turn, implies that each early childhood service should profile itself in such a way that it is clear to all families, regardless of socio-economic and ethnic cultural background, that the offer is there for each of them. (Memorandum to the Act of Parliament on Preventive Family Support, 2013)*

Early childhood services, accessible to all (future) families and based on the principle of proportionate universalism, were expected to create connections between people across differences. This is consistent with the idea of bridging social capital. By contrast, in other political texts such as the decision of the Flemish government implementing the act of parliament of 29 November 2013 on the organisation of preventive family support (Vlaamse Overheid, 2014) some early childhood services were described as being for specific target groups (for example, vulnerable families) and thus possibly reduced the opportunities for

connection across differences. However, in the interviews, it was precisely such bridging connections that were mentioned as empowering for individuals, offering them opportunities. An illustration of this was the funding of targeted organisations to set up universal meeting places.

> *As a government, you want to encourage these encounters, and above all, you want to look at what we are going to fund in order to achieve social cohesion. For example, the Inloopteams (organisations specialising in working with vulnerable families with young children – drop-in team). They organise the meeting places. In that sense, we have given some incentives to promote this social cohesion. (Policymaker 4A)*

This interpretation was consequently examined at the Flemish level and at the level of the municipalities, as they felt the challenges posed by the current structure and funding.

> *Traditionally, within the early childhood services, we have some forms of services aimed at specific target groups. This could jeopardise social cohesion and it means that we cannot fully exploit the potential of social cohesion. That is also a threat to proportional universalism, so I think we have some challenges there. (Policymaker 6A)*

The idea that early childhood services can contribute to social cohesion was not questioned by policymakers. There was, however, a difference in the interpretation of this role, related to the emphasis placed on the conceptualisations of social cohesion. These ranged from a narrower focus on *social relations* to a broader view, taking into account *the common good* and *connectedness*. The narrower focus on the domain of social relations was explained as creating encounters between people.

> " *I think that the early childhood services should be a bit like the old-fashioned baker's or greengrocer's shop in the village. […] I agree that they should be architectural, pleasant and good spaces, which is not always the case. According to their function, they should be places where people can meet fleetingly. Short encounters should be possible. (Policymaker 7B)*

In this vein, encounters between people were considered as synonymous with social cohesion, and to be promoted in early childhood facilities.

> " *We also deliberately mentioned the two things in the Act of parliament, both social cohesion and encounters, and encounters were then really facilitating playing together. But this can also be done at other times, in groups, in the waiting room and then you can work on it at those times. […] I believe that meeting each other is a way of working towards social cohesion. When I look at the play and meeting initiatives, they are one way, but not the only way. (Policymaker 6A)*

4.6   Conclusion and discussion

The interpretations of social cohesion were inextricably linked to the role policymakers attributed to early childhood services. Such an analysis may shed some light on what is expected from early childhood services, and raises the question of how these services can respond. These political interpretations of social cohesion can be placed on a continuum from a minimal to a maximal interpretation, which we can also identify in literature. The minimal interpretation presents a significant historical continuity.

4.6.1   Continuity in discontinuity

The minimalist interpretation includes a focus on social relations and approaches social cohesion as one-dimensional. Here we find a narrow interpretation of social cohesion as bonding or bridging social capital (Putnam, 2000), with a focus on ethno-cultural diversity as a challenge to social cohesion. The maximalist interpretation is in line with social cohesion as proposed by the social

cohesion radar (Dragolov et al., 2016). Such a multidimensional interpretation includes social relations, bridging social capital, participation, identification and respect for diversity. At the Flemish level, we mainly find this maximalist interpretation of social cohesion in the interviews with policymakers from the agency of child and family. However, in the translation of these views and perspectives to local policy, we see that reductions of this interpretation are possible, as in some cases, the emphasis shifts to a minimalist interpretation in which social cohesion is overshadowed by conceptualisations such as social capital. Here, social networks of families are appointed as the exclusive dimension of social cohesion.

The focus on shared values and norms as part of social cohesion in contexts of diversity can be seen as a historical continuity. Dealing with diversity by reducing it, is a long-standing strategy. Ever since the formation of the nation states, heterogeneity has been — and continues to be — constructed as a problem to overcome (Vandenbroeck, 2007). Cultural diversity is thus seen as a threat to the national culture, and social cohesion is based on homogeneity of a set of shared norms, values and language. Here, a *myth of homogeneity* arises when shared values are taken for granted and legitimated by the wider cultural and institutional milieu (Palmer, Biggart & Dick, 2008). In the interviews and documents, groups are framed that allegedly do not share these values, yet it remains unclear what these values are or who is competent to determine them. This perceived quest for homogeneity in contexts of increasing diversity urges us to rethink the conceptualisations of social cohesion, even the maximalist versions, before pursuing it as a political objective.

What is striking in our analyses — especially in the interviews with policymakers — is the minimal references to social cohesion as solidarity, as since Emile Durkheim, solidarity has been inextricably linked to social cohesion in academic literature (Duhaime et al., 2004). Durkheim wrote about the preservation of a social order in society, based on two different forms of solidarity: mechanical and organic (Duhaime et al., 2004). Whereas mechanical solidarity characterises traditional communities and is based on homogeneity, organic solidarity starts from dissimilarity and heterogeneity, and occurs in modern communities (Duhaime et al., 2004). Likewise, in the social cohesion radar, solidarity and helpfulness are part of a focus on the common good (Dragolov et al., 2016). The absence of solidarity in the different interpretations leaves us with the question of whether solidarity remains orphaned in the conceptualisations of social cohesion (White, 2003).

It should be noted that social cohesion regularly seems to be instrumentalised at the level of the individual, in order to intervene at the level of society. In this way, the creation of the social fabric potentially becomes an individual responsibility. This is a development we need to take care about, and that we may wish to counteract with a maximalist interpretation of social cohesion, abandoning the *necessity of value homogeneity* (Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017, p. 590) and replacing it with a political commitment to collective solidarity. In this respect, policy should guarantee the opportunity for every individual to participate, based on a set of inclusionary principles (Appiah et al., 1994; Parekh, 2001). Taking a critical stance concerning the interpretations of social cohesion is necessary — by asking ourselves what the rationales behind the construction of social cohesion are, where the strengthening of social cohesion should lead and how we operationalise this. In general, it is noteworthy that historical continuity is visible in the interpretations of social cohesion in which the maximum interpretation raises the demand for shared norms and values as a prerequisite for social cohesion.

4.6.2   The role of early childhood services

Our analysis allows us to reflect on the ideological interpretations of social cohesion and their implications for policy and practice. Early childhood services are supposed to contribute to social cohesion, but what is meant by that? The conceptual openness creates opportunities for early childhood services to foreground their own interpretation, meaning that services can organise their services in ways that are adapted to the needs of their communities. By doing so, social cohesion can become context-dependent, and can be given different interpretations that shift across the continuum. Here the utility, if not the necessity, of the concept of social cohesion remaining ambiguous becomes visible. On the other hand, this vagueness can be troubling. If it is not made clear what social cohesion entails, how can early childhood services work foster it? Furthermore, when early childhood services are held accountable for whether or not they foster social cohesion, how can we evaluate this if the concept is ambiguous and lacks a common interpretation?

Reflecting on the possible role of early childhood services according to a maximalist interpretation of social cohesion can involve looking beyond encounters as the sole instrument for contributing to social cohesion. Early childhood services contributing to social cohesion requires a critical attitude towards the identified continuity in the interpretation of social cohesion, and the disentanglement of the *myth of homogeneity* and its shared values that are taken

for granted by the larger cultural and institutional milieu (Palmer et al., 2015) must be questioned. In addition, it requires a critical attitude towards one's own practices and openness to the diversity in our society. Do we think in terms of target groups when organising activities aimed at promoting social cohesion or do we follow the principle of proportionate universalism, in which the services are universal with no predefined target group? Early childhood services embrace the concept of proportionate universalism (PU) as a guiding principle to overcome the dichotomy between universal and targeted services in contexts of (increasing) diversity (Dierckx et al., 2019). As accessible services for all (future) families, based on the principle of proportionate universalism, the aim is to create connections between people across differences. In this regard, from a socio-pedagogical point of view, social cohesion could imply that the diversity of society is given a place in the society as such. Hence, the ambiguous nature of social cohesion is not an issue, but rather an opportunity.

Additional research into the possible consequences of diverse interpretations of the role of early childhood services in contributing to social cohesion is needed in order to provide further reflection and possible answers to the above questions. Research that goes beyond the policy perspective and explores actual early childhood practices (where the voices of professionals and service-users are taken into account) would enrich this discussion. In this context, we should emphasise that researching social cohesion requires acknowledging our own point of view, which underlies the way we explored this concept (Vandenbroeck, 2007). The analyses were based on Flemish policy documents and interviews with Flemish and local policymakers, leading to a Flemish, Belgian point of view on social cohesion that is consequently Eurocentric.

4.7   References

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CHAPTER 5

CHILD AND FAMILY SOCIAL WORK AS A SPACE FOR PROMOTING SOCIAL COHESION

5.1   Introduction

Promoting social cohesion is frequently mentioned as an objective for child and family social work from a policy perspective (Faist, 2010; Kearns & Forrest, 2000). Despite joint academic and political attention, there is no agreement on what social cohesion is. In addition to the ambiguity about the interpretation of social cohesion, it is also unclear how policies shape concrete child and family social work practices (Andrews & Jilke, 2016; Irwin, Siddiqi, & Hertzman, 2007). However, these practices are considered crucial to foster social cohesion (Hoshi-Watanabe et al., 2015; Melhuish, Belsky, Leyland, & Barnes, 2008). Starting from this gap of insights, the following research question takes a central place in this study: What is going on in child and family services regarding the promotion of social cohesion?

5.1.1   Social cohesion

Social cohesion has received momentum in research and policy in response to macro-economic and societal changes (Andrews, Downe, & Guarneros-Meza, 2014), resulting in a political and academic turn on social cohesion (Chan, To, & Chan, 2006). In the political turn, social cohesion is believed to be an antidote to the challenges of individualisation, globalisation, competitively oriented social policies and growing diversities in terms of class, ethnicity, gender and age (Faist, 2010; Kearns & Forrest, 2000). To respond to these challenges, legislative bodies refer to early childhood services as places to foster social integration and cohesion (Hoshi-Watanabe et al., 2015; Melhuish et al., 2008). The academic turn on social cohesion is marked by a growing interest in designing a theoretical and conceptual framework of social cohesion in various academic disciplines (Berger-Schmitt, 2002; Chan et al., 2006; Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017). In academic literature social cohesion is presented as a goal, as well as a means, a protective factor. However, Stead (2017, p. 421) warns us to *"be wary of romanticizing an age that never was"*. A high level of social cohesion has also been known to have very negative consequences, for example discrimination of certain believes or confirmation to a dominant norm that puts pressure on free speech and diversity. Therefore, we need to be attentive to how social cohesion is promoted and what the consequences are. Notwithstanding the numerous research on social cohesion and the attempts to streamline the definition of social cohesion there is no such thing as a one-size-fits-all definition that encompasses the multitude of different cultures and local contexts (Bottoni, 2018; Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017). In the attempts to obtain consensus in the

conceptualisations of social cohesion, researchers identified a variety of overarching elements (Fonseca, Lukosch, & Brazier, 2019; Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017) including the dynamics of social relations; participation; solidarity; and belonging. In this vein, the Bertelsmann Stiftung (Delhey et al., 2018, p. 430; Dragolov et al., 2016, p. 6) worked towards a theoretical framework of social cohesion, the social cohesion radar, that shows the ambition to encompass many diverging viewpoints and to serve as an umbrella summarizing different dimensions of social cohesion. The Social cohesion radar conceptualises social cohesion as:

> *The quality of social cooperation and togetherness of a collective, defined in geopolitical terms, that is expressed in the attitudes and behaviors of its members. A cohesive society is characterized by resilient social relations, a positive emotional connectedness between its members and the community, and a pronounced focus on the common good. (Delhey et al., 2018, p. 430; Dragolov et al., 2016, p. 6)*

The theoretical framework of the social cohesion radar (Figure 7) entails three core dimensions, where each aspect unfolds in three related domains. The first dimension is 'social relations' and includes social networks; trust in people; and acceptance of diversity. The second dimension is 'connectedness' and unfolds in identification; trust in institutions; and perception of fairness. The third and last dimension is 'focus on the common good' and consists of solidarity and helpfulness; respect for social rules; and civic participation.
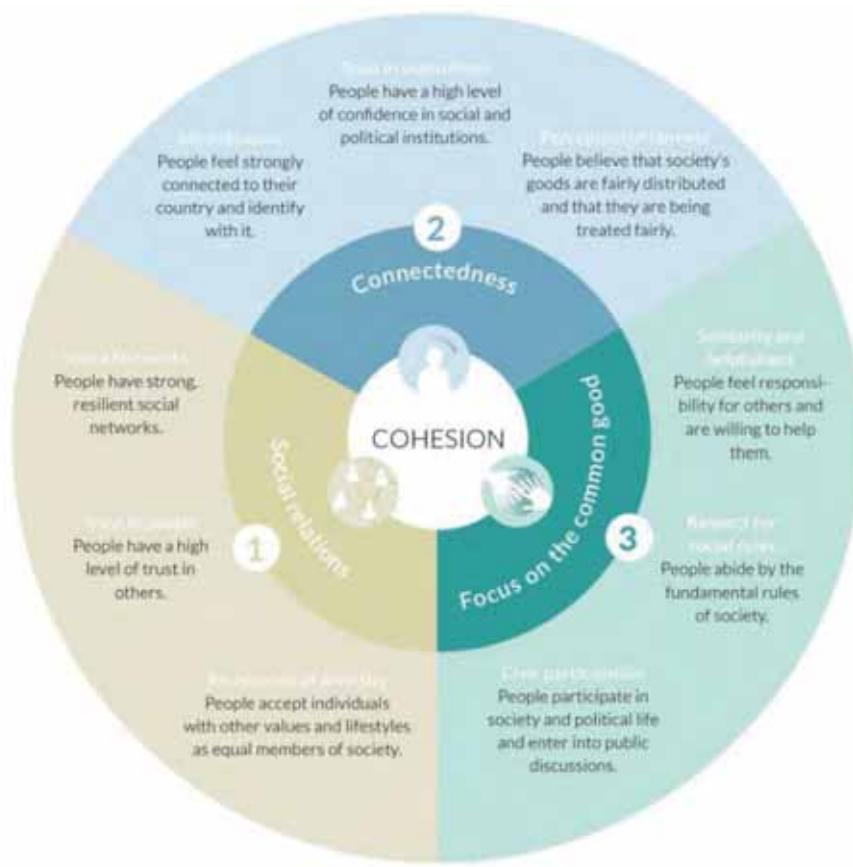
Figure 7: Social cohesion radar (Dragolov et al., 2016)

The Social Cohesion Radar offers a streamlined conceptualisation, and therefore excludes core aspects and domains such as material wealth, social inequality, well-being and values. It remains to be studied how child and family social work relates to these recent conceptualisations and if – in so doing – insight in those daily practices can counter the conceptual fuzziness. The fuzziness of the concept of social cohesion has much to do with confusion on how social cohesion relates to social capital and about the role of light encounters in that vein.

5.1.2   Social cohesion and social capital

In child and family social work, the pursuit of a comprehensive conceptualisation of social cohesion contrasts with a narrower interpretation of social cohesion as

social capital (Shan, Muhajarine, Loptson, & Jeffery, 2014). Social capital is defined by Putnam (1993, p. 167) as "*features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions*". Putnam (2000) argues that strong social networks and trust among individuals foster a sense of shared identity and collective action. These networks can be informal, such as family and friendship ties, or formal, such as membership in organisations or community groups. Putnam (2000), building on the work of Granovetter (1985), distinguishes two types of social capital: *bonding* and *bridging* social capital. Bonding social capital refers to the strong ties and relationships that individuals form with others who are similar to them in terms of their background, interests, or identity. It involves the creation of a sense of belonging and solidarity within a more homogeneous group (Putnam, 2000). Bonding social capital fosters trust, reciprocity, and social support among its members, providing a safety net and a source of emotional well-being (Claridge, 2018). However, bonding social capital can also lead to the formation of exclusive groups, reinforcing social divisions and limiting opportunities for interaction and collaboration with diverse perspectives. Bridging social capital refers to networks that include people who are more heterogeneous in terms of social class, culture, communities, and social identities (Putnam, 2000; Szreter & Woolcock, 2004). The benefits of bridging social capital are for instance community resilience and social integration (Poortinga, 2012). Communities with higher levels of bridging social capital exhibited greater levels of civic engagement, collective action, and trust (Putnam, 2000). A third type of social capital, added later to capture the power dynamics of vertical associations (Claridge, 2018), is *linking social capital* (Woolcock, 2001). Linking social capital gives individuals access to resources beyond the individual and community level (Woolcock, 2004). It involves the interactions with institutions, such as government agencies, non-governmental organisations and social work practices. Linking social capital can be viewed as part of, or an extension, of bridging social capital (Healy 2002) and can play a crucial role in addressing social inequalities and promoting social mobility, by providing access to resources, services, and decision-making processes (Claridge, 2018).

5.1.3   Light encounters

Promoting social cohesion can involve a multitude of strategies, one of them is the creation of light encounters. Despite the attention for light encounters in public space (Goffman, 1963; LofLand, 1973), the meaning and purpose of these are rarely mentioned in research on social cohesion (Geens, 2017). Unlike long-

lasting relations in close-knit communities, light encounters are fleeting and involve strangers (Soenen, 2006). It is in various daily social practices, such as parks, public transportation and child and family social work, where peoples paths cross briefly that social cohesion can be shaped through light encounters (Geens, 2016; Soenen, 2006). It may involve simple gestures like a smile, a nod, or a brief conversation, contributing to a collective consciousness, breaking down social barriers and promoting a sense of belonging. In child and family social work practices these light encounters are gradually receiving more attention (Geens, 2017).

5.1.4 Child and family social work and social cohesion

The International Federation of Social Workers (2014, July) claims that social cohesion is one of the objectives of social work practices:

> " *Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, 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. (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014)*

A particular field of interest to grasp the concept of social cohesion in social work lies in child and family social work (Hoshi-Watanabe et al., 2015; Melhuish et al., 2008). Early childhood services are given the responsibility to focus on both individual outcomes and social, or rather community-oriented outcomes (Andrews & Jilke, 2016; Irwin et al., 2007) as these are supposed to offer opportunities for parents to access quality education, healthcare, and employment, combat social exclusion and for how they promote the inclusion of all members of society, regardless of their background or circumstances (Ben-Arieh et al., 2014). The renewed interest in social cohesion has led to a shift towards collaborative and multi-disciplinary approaches in child and family social work and partnerships that facilitate comprehensive and integrated services to address both individual and community-level needs. In Flanders (Belgium) this was implemented with the Decree on Preventive Family Support in 2013 with the introduction of *Huis van het Kind* (House of the child). A House of the child is a partnership of organisations from preventive family support together with local policy and are nowadays extended to nearly all municipalities in Flanders.

5.1.4.1 Flanders as a compelling case

Flanders is a compelling case in relation to social cohesion in child and family social work, as the Flemish Government (Vlaamse Overheid, 2013) explicitly emphasises the promotion of social cohesion as one of the three pillars for Preventive family support, besides the pillars of preventive health care and parenting support. By doing so, child and family social work is seen as a potential driver of social cohesion (Vlaamse Overheid, 2014). The promotion of social cohesion can be achieved through different forms of activities in a House of the child and is not further regulated. This allows local municipalities and Houses of the Child to place distinctive emphases in services based on the needs of the families they (want to) reach.

The open-endedness of social cohesion, the narrow interpretation of social cohesion as social capital and the attention for light encounters, require insights into what the promotion of social cohesion could mean in child and family social work. In order to gain further clarity on the concept of social cohesion, research is needed that captures concrete practices of child and family social work. The houses of the Child in Flanders are particularly convenient settings to conduct such research. Therefore, the present study takes into account the processes of social cohesion in everyday child and family social work practices to further theorise the concept of social cohesion, with a focus on the role of practitioners, children, infrastructure and the significance of diversity in child and family social work practices. The central research question in this study is: What is going on in child and family services regarding the promotion of social cohesion?

5.2 Methodology

An explorative multiple case study, using (non-)participatory observations was performed in child and family social work practices in Flanders to gain insight in what is going on in child and family social work regarding the promotion of social cohesion.

5.2.1 Research context

To answer the above research question, three cases in Flanders were chosen. Because of the perceived challenges in society that are believed to jeopardise social cohesion, including the increasing diversity and significant income and wealth inequalities (Andreotti, Mingione, & Polizzi, 2012; Chiesi, 2009), these elements were important to take into account when selecting the cases. Three

Flemish cities, more specifically neighbourhoods, were selected: Kiel (Antwerp – Case A), De Muide (Ghent – Case B), Mechelen-Zuid (Mechelen – Case C). Table 6 provides an overview of some relevant characteristics of the three cases.

	Case A	Case B	Case C
International migration balance* (2020)	205	99	20
Residents 0 – 17 years (2021) (%)	30,9 %	23,8 %	30,4 %
Non-Belgian origin (2021) (%)	80,2 %	58,2 %	30,4 %
Poverty of Opportunity Index** (2019, 2021) (%)	52,4 %	-	8,6%
Poverty of Opportunity Index (2021) (City-level) (%)	27,32 %	18,55 %	13,18 %

*The migration balance is calculated as the difference between the total number of international immigrations and the total number of international emigrations (Statbel, 2023).
**The Poverty of Opportunity Index (by province, (type of) municipality, and mother's origin) expresses the proportion of children aged 0 to 3 years old in deprivation compared to the total number of children aged 0 to 3 years old (of that province, (type of) municipality, and mother's origin).

Table 6: Overview cases by characteristic (studies 3 and 4)

The diversity present in the services across the cases is somewhat different. In Case A, during different activities, the ethnic-cultural diversity is more limited, and there are mainly differences in socio-economic position of the parents. In Case B, this is precisely the opposite: there is an ethnic diversity, but all parents are from lower socio-economic gradients. Despite the choice of Case C as a contrasting case, the diversity present during different forms of activities is not that different from the other cases.

As stated in the Flemish Decree on Preventive Family Support, one of the three compulsory pillars is the promotion of meetings among parents as contribution

to social support and social cohesion (Vlaamse Overheid, 2014). In conversation with each coordinator of the child and family services, a selection was made for each neighbourhood on types of services that are committed to this pillar. The following child and family services were selected: infant consultation schemes; meeting places for parents and children (play group or drop-in); Dutch language practice opportunities; playful learning; reception and waiting area. In Table 7 you will find an overview of the types of child and family services that are part of the observations as well as a summary of what these services entail (Kind & Gezin, n.d.). Practitioners in services can have a variety of roles and training. For instance, there are medical staff such as doctors and nursing personnel who along with the volunteers look after the infant consultation schemes. The volunteers take care of the reception and management of the infant consultation schemes. Professionals from the walk-in team are specialised in working with families in vulnerable situations and are mostly trained in human sciences. Other professionals and volunteers can be very diverse, partly because there is no requirement for a particular degree in social work as a practitioner in The Houses of the Child.

Child and family services			Practitioners
Infant consultation schemes	Funded and regulated by the governmental agency *Opgroeien*	Preventive health support for children between 0 – 3 years. Volunteers welcome, measure and weight children. Followed by an appointment with a doctor and/or nurse. Families take place in the waiting room during their visit.	Volunteers Medical staff
Meeting places for parents and children (play group or drop-in)	Management of the meeting place is outsourced to an *Inloopteam* (drop-in team) who are funded by *Opgroeien*	Parents with children between 0 – 3 years. Possible to come and go when you want. Children can play, parents can meet.	Professional practitioners from the *Inloopteam*
Dutch practice opportunities	*Inloopteam* (drop-in team) who are funded by *Opgroeien*.	Parents can come here to practice their Dutch. Two or three groups are formed based on the level of Dutch.	Volunteers
Playful learning	House of the Child and a non-profit organisation.	Parents with children 0 – 12. The children are divided in two groups and the parents stay with the children 0 – 3 years. Each week, a different theme provides different activities such as a craft task, games, …	Volunteers Professional practitioners
Reception and waiting area	Organised by different organisations to provide a central point of contact for parents for all questions related to children and upbringing.	Parents can drop by without an appointment to ask their questions related to children, parenting and others. They wait in the waiting room before meeting the employee.	Professional practitioners

Table 7: Overview of child and family services included in the research context (study 3)

5.2.2   Data collection

To gain insight in what is going on in child and family social work regarding the promotion of social cohesion, a combination of participatory and non-participatory observations were performed as a data collection method. The advantage of observations is that it permits the researcher to study the practitioners and families in their native environment in order to understand things from the participants' perspective (Baker, 2006). Prior to the observations,

an important step was gaining access to the field (Copland, 2018) and establish a relationship based on trust with the practitioners. Frequent dialogue and interviews as part of another sub-research with the practitioners provided access to the practices. Based on the typology of Atkinson and Hammersley (1994) and Baker (2006) we combined the roles observer-as-participant and participant-as-observer. The role observer-as-participant was adopted in the setting of the infant consultation scheme, reception and waiting area. In this role the researcher advanced very slightly in the involvement with the insiders (Baker, 2006). In the setting of meeting places, playful learning and Dutch practice opportunities the role of participant-as-observer was taken. Here the researcher became more involved with the insiders' activities and sometimes took up the same role as one of the practitioners (Baker, 2006). The adopted role depends on the services and activities to be studied and on the willingness of practitioners and parents to be studied.

Fieldnotes, maps and pictures of the setting were taken during every observation. The fieldnotes included the following items: observational notes, method and ethical notes, and personal notes (Baker, 2006). The fieldnotes were, especially during the moments when the role participant-as-observer was adopted, *scratch notes*, some words or phrases that reminded the researcher of the setting, dialogues and events wanted to write about later when writing up the fieldnotes as soon as possible after every observation (Copland, 2018).

During the observations, the ethical considerations of the data collection were central. Besides a specific ethical protocol that was approved and used, the ethical considerations and informed consent of the participants, were an ongoing process (Moore & Savage, 2002). The ethical reflections were included in the fieldnotes and discussed with other researchers. The informed consents of all participants were verbal and were re-questioned and confirmed each time the researcher encountered the same families in the services and activities.

Over a three-month period, 40 observations were conducted across the three cases and different activities. Each observation lasted between two and three hours and a half. An overview of the observations per case can be found in Table 8.

Observation	Case	Child and family social work practice	Role researcher
2	A	Playful learning	Participant-as-observer
3	A	Reception and waiting area	Observer-as-participant
4	A	Playful learning	Participant-as-observer
5	A	Infant consultation schemes + Reception and waiting area	Observer-as-participant
8	A	Reception and waiting area	Observer-as-participant
10	A	Infant consultation schemes + Reception and waiting area	Observer-as-participant
13	A	Playful learning	Participant-as-observer
14	A	Meeting places for parents and children (play group or drop-in)	Participant-as-observer
19	A	Playful learning	Participant-as-observer
20	A	Meeting places for parents and children (play group or drop-in)	Participant-as-observer
26	A	Meeting places for parents and children (play group or drop-in)	Participant-as-observer
29	A	Meeting places for parents and children (play group or drop-in)	Participant-as-observer
31	A	Infant consultation schemes	Observer-as-participant
1	B	Infant consultation schemes	Participant-as-observer
7	B	Dutch practice opportunities	Participant-as-observer

Observation	Case	Child and family social work practice	Role researcher
9	B	Reception and waiting area	Observer-as-participant
12	B	Reception and waiting area	Observer-as-participant
17	B	Infant consultation schemes	Observer-as-participant
18	B	Reception and waiting area	Observer-as-participant
22	B	Dutch practice opportunities	Participant-as-observer
23	B	Meeting places for parents and children (play group or drop-in)	Participant-as-observer
27	B	Meeting places for parents and children (play group or drop-in)	Participant-as-observer
28	B	Meeting places for parents and children (play group or drop-in)	Participant-as-observer
33	B	Dutch practice opportunities	Participant-as-observer
34	B	Meeting places for parents and children (play group or drop-in)	Participant-as-observer
36	B	Dutch practice opportunities	Participant-as-observer
39	B	Infant consultation schemes	Observer-as-participant
40	B	Infant consultation schemes	Observer-as-participant
6	C	Meeting places for parents and children (play group or drop-in)	Participant-as-observer
11	C	Infant consultation schemes	Observer-as-participant

Observation	Case	Child and family social work practice	Role researcher
15	C	Meeting places for parents and children (play group or drop-in)	Participant-as-observer
16	C	Meeting places for parents and children (play group or drop-in)	Participant-as-observer
21	C	Meeting places for parents and children (play group or drop-in)	Participant-as-observer
24	C	Reception and waiting area	Observer-as-participant
25	C	Reception and waiting area	Observer-as-participant
30	C	Meeting places for parents and children (play group or drop-in)	Participant-as-observer
32	C	Meeting places for parents and children (play group or drop-in)	Participant-as-observer
35	C	Meeting places for parents and children (play group or drop-in)	Participant-as-observer
37	C	Infant consultation schemes	Observer-as-participant
38	C	Infant consultation schemes	Observer-as-participant

Table 8: Overview of observations by case (study 3)

5.2.3   Data analyses

The observations were analysed to understand what is going on in child and family services regarding the promotion of social cohesion. Writing fieldnotes was an important step in the data analysis and was implemented as an interpretive process (Emerson et al., 1995). As we worked on the fieldnotes, we continued the process of analysis. To become more familiar with and prepare the analyses of the collected data, we followed two steps of the data analyses process of fieldnotes from Copland (2018). First, the researcher read the fieldnotes several times to become familiar with them. This preliminary analysis

created themes that began to emerge from the data. During the re-reading analytical notes were made on the fieldnotes. In a second step a memo for every observation was written on how theoretical insights are drawn from the data and included sections of fieldnotes to illustrate these insights. In addition, vignettes were written about several moments during the observations as 'a focused description of a series of events taken to be representative, typical or emblematic' (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 81).

An inductive thematic analysis using NVivo R1, combined with a deductive analyses – based on the Social cohesion radar (Dragolov et al., 2016) – formed the coding structure for the analysis of the fieldnotes. The codes were used to provide insight into the activities, dialogues, and setting during the observations. After the inductive analyses, the Social cohesion radar dimensions were placed on the results to review which dimensions of the Social cohesion radar were recurring, as well as which were missing from the observations and which dimensions are maybe left out, but important to consider. The coding and analyses of the fieldnotes were extensively discussed and verified by the second and third author to enhance validity and reliability (Van Hove & Claes, 2011).

5.3   Results

5.3.1   Attention for light encounters

The common theme throughout nearly all activities was the creation of (light) encounters and consequently the creation of social relationships at an individual and family level. In the waiting room of the infant consultation scheme and meeting places, this often involved short encounters and contacts between parents, which can be labelled as light encounters. So, light that even talking to each other is not necessary. It is about, for example, a friendly smile or a glance of acknowledgement between parents when dressing a toddler is difficult. *"While dressing, there is contact between mothers G6 and G8. G8 smiles at G6 once because dressing is not going smoothly all the time (Observation 1)."* These light encounters between parents (who sometimes do know each other) were very often initiated by the children.

> " *The infant consultation scheme feels like a meeting place. The three mothers are sitting by the playmat, and the three children play, mainly by themselves. The mothers do not have much contact with each other. (...) While the parents sit around the playing children, some conversations start, all about the children: age, motor skills, what they are doing, what they like to play with, whether they are already talking... (Observation 17)*

Social networks, as part of social relations, are conceptualised by the social cohesion radar in a more sustainable form, and do not include the many light encounters that occur between parents. When the light encounters between parents turned into longer conversations, it is often also through a physical feature of one of the children, or because of a practitioner who initiated a conversation. These could be conversations between parents, who sometimes already knew each other through the activities in the services, who talked about a variety of topics, shared experiences, or wanted to support each other in caring for a child.

> " *M1 asks M2 if she has any children and she says that this is her first one, but that things are difficult. M2 means something by that and asks what is difficult. Despite this being M2's first time at the playgroup, she is immediately very open and talks about the difficulties she and her husband experience in getting pregnant. This opens the conversation between the three mothers about getting pregnant, IVF and others. (Observation 29)*

> " *M3's experiences of being pregnant with twins. It is a pleasant conversation between the mothers where they share experiences about pregnancy, their delivery, and so on. From there, M2 talks about the difficulties with her son who does not want to go to school. The parents mostly listen to each other, but don't really give advice. Listening without judgment means something to the mother, you notice. (Observation 35)*

It is not just the physical role of children that created these encounters, but also,

for example, reading children's names and ages on the whiteboard in the meeting place was often a starting point for a parent to start the conversation with another parent.

> " *M1 and M4 have a daughter with the same name, and they talk briefly about the different spellings. From this name and writing, the conversation continues about their ages and the soon-to-be school search. (Observation 29)*

Besides the light encounters and formations of (new) social relationships and networks between parents, also a certain degree of trust in practitioners and other parents is evident throughout the observations. This trust, or this bond of confidence is especially there towards practitioners in services such as the meeting places and Dutch practice opportunities.

> " *M2 tells the practitioner and me that she is pregnant again, but not for long yet, so she is keeping it to herself for now, but is already eager to tell the practitioner she sees every week. She talks about having two children now, what is difficult and what is not, and how she experiences it. (Observation 23)*

Parents were very open in telling some practitioners about their situation. Sharing these stories was not always to receive advice or be offered a solution, but often just to get their hearts out. Trust between parents, despite never really being named, was also visible during the Dutch practice opportunities. Quite a few parents have been in the same group for a while. They clearly trusted each other to share certain issues such as, the Taliban regime from their home country that they oppose, the lack of family, experiences as a single mother, and so on.

5.3.2   Dealing with diversities

Although the differences in diversity through the cases, child and family social work promoted respecting and creating space for diversity. This was carried out in various ways. In this way, the services focused on learning to deal with, and respect diversity. For example, different home languages were given place in meeting places because parents were allowed to speak these different languages and staff actively supported parents in translating when they wanted to enter conversations with parents who have a different home language.

> " *One of the mothers says something to mother M5, who, however, doesn't understand her. The parents realise that M5 does not speak Arabic, even though she wears a headscarf and the parents categorised her accordingly. They try to make contacts in Dutch and help each other find the right words (...) They talk about M5's choice to convert to Islam, the contacts with her parents-in-law, and about having a mix in one's family and what this means. M4, M5 and G6 talk about this for quite a long time. Mother M6 comments that, "Surely we are all created by Allah, despite different opinions. (Observation 20)*

Diversity could be a very bridging factor during for example the Dutch practice opportunities. Parents from Indonesia, Morocco, Afghanistan, Albania, Syria, and Russia came together to practice Dutch and share experiences. Practitioners, as well as parents themselves, used this diversity to address a parent with a different perspective, ask for information about a particular culture and search for connection.

> " *M6 is quite a chatty mother and grandmother in the group and dares to ask questions to the other mothers. For example, M6 asks M4 where they speak Pashtu. M4 explains that in Afghanistan they speak Dari and Pashtu, and that she can speak both. The other mothers are listening. (Observation 33)*

Gender diversity was often absent from the services, and sometimes difficult for mothers and/or fathers present in the meeting places or playful learning.

> " *I notice a man/father taking pictures of the children playing during the playful learning activity and mention this to the practitioner. The practitioner explains that this is the husband of one of the mothers who is present. He does not want to sit with the women as the only father according to the practitioner. He prefers to sit on a bench separately. His wife goes over a few moments later and brings him some snacks from the picnic. (Observation 13)*

Besides the acceptance of diversity, it is worth noting that practitioners also often talked about parents in a way that compromises this acceptance of diversity.

> *A mother talks English to her baby. The volunteers overhear her speaking English but speak Dutch to the mother for quite a while when giving instructions during the measuring and weighing process. (...) The volunteers continue talking to each other at their table about foreign names, the difficulty of communicating with parents who speak a 'foreign language'. All of this happens when parents are present in the infant consultation scheme, including parents who speak a different language to their baby. (Observation 38)*

> *V2 points out that the baby has pretty bracelets (in English). V1 immediately picks up on this (all in Dutch) and explains that this is tradition in Africa. That the string for round the belly is to keep evil spirits away. The volunteers talk about the family for a while, while the mother is standing there. You can see that the mother wonders if they are saying something she should understand, about her, but she doesn't really respond, doesn't ask a question, stays quite passive. She doesn't really get a chance either because the volunteers rattle on and on. (Observation 1)*

It was also noticeable that volunteers interacted differently with fathers compared to their contacts with mothers during the infant consultation scheme. For instance, fathers receive remarkably more instructions. As if they were less able to do so, they were not sure what to do or have never been to the infant consultation scheme before.

5.3.3 Support to enable participation in society

Throughout the observations, it was notable that the commitment to foster social cohesion is translated into the practice as supporting and being supported. Parents supported each other, are supported, and referred by practitioners to other organisations, often with the aim to enable participation for the parent and family in the wider community or society. They also attempted to include society in the services, for example when public discussions were given the opportunity to be discussed throughout the activities.

The support that parents offered each other included for example translating between parents at the reception and in the meeting places.

> " *It is lovely to see how mother M2, that is having a conversation with mother M3 in Arabic, sometimes translates for mother M5. In this way, M2 provides a connection between M3 and M5. It is mainly about the age of the children, how the mother experiences parenthood, whether she has any children and what the children are enjoying. (Observation 23)*

Furthermore, parents helped each other when, for example, a mother with twins had a hard time getting both boys dressed and ready to leave. In addition to the support parents offered each other, an important role was given to practitioners. In the reception services, the same issues often arise when parents needed the support from a practitioner. It were issues and questions about spreading the payment of invoices, making appointments with other organisations or doctor(s), filling out questionnaires (for school), give material support and so on.

> " *A mother enters the reception area, M9. The mother takes a seat at the reception desk and the practitioner helps her while the other practitioner continues working on her laptop. She needs support with paperwork to apply for parental leave. The practitioner assists the mother further and explains how the mother can order 'yellow stickers', how the application works and how her 'salary' will be paid during this period. (Observation 8)*

Practitioners also took on a bridging and linking role to other organisations. The other organisations could be located in the same building, because of the partnership House of the Child or because they organise weekly consultation hours.

> " *A mother has a question about paying an invoice. The practitioner refers to het Digipunt-colleague, who can learn her how to pay invoices online. The practitioner walks along with the mother to the room where the Digipunt-colleague has is office hours each week, in another room, but still in the same building. (Observation 18)*

Last, also public issues were discussed during playgroups, such as the Covid pandemic, vaccinations and whether to vaccinate oneself and young children, but also the shortages of (sunflower) oil in shops, partly due to the Ukraine war, were discussed. A central topic during one of the Dutch practice opportunities was living and housing conditions, here parents talked about their situation and acted by creating paper bricks with wishes, experiences of housing, and challenges to present on the day of poverty.

> " *For the day of poverty, the minister of housing is coming to Ghent. They want to display a whole square full of paper bricks with experiences of living, looking for housing and others of many families in Ghent. The assignment is quite difficult and at first the parents don't really understand what to do. The volunteer explains the assignment again. They may write everything down in their own language, can draw, help each other. The volunteer gives bricks and markers to the parents. The parents start writing and drawing. Then they share what they have written or drawn on the bricks. (...) M5, when it is up to her, tells the group about her living situation. There are four of them living in a small flat, with only one bedroom. M4 also says that it is very expensive to live in Ghent. The conversation about the difficulties, which they clearly experience, goes on for some time. They compare rents, say how much the other costs are and indicate that some housing is also not healthy because of humidity problems, for example. (Observation 22)*

This support to enable participation in society can be linked to the dimension *focus on the common good* from the social cohesion radar. The dimension consists of solidarity and helpfulness, respect for social rules and civic

participation. The subdimension of solidarity and helpfulness recured most clearly in the various situations across the services. There is a focus on helping rather than on solidarity. It is notable that there was a connection between helping and another subdimension of the social cohesion radar, namely civic participation. Often parents needed help from each other or a practitioner to participate in public and social life. Many families clearly encountered barriers to fully participate in society. Language is one of these, but often they also didn't know how certain 'systems' work. The explanation of these 'systems', but also often referral to other organisations, was given an important role. Child and family social work therefore focuses on creating (individual) prerequisites to enable this civic participation.

> " *A male interpreter accompanies the Ukrainian family. It is a mother with a 14-year-old child. The practitioner first starts by explaining the school system in Flanders for Ukrainian youngsters (secondary school). The mother asks if there is another place to learn Dutch quickly. The practitioner gives options such as Dutch courses for the mother, but for the boy she recommends the school. The mother regrets that they do not know when the son can start school but is happy that it will be as soon as possible. The practitioner notes all the details and arranges the boy's registration. The school will further contact the family. (Observation 24)*

5.4   Conclusion and discussion

The observations allow us to reflect on several dimensions of the social cohesion radar, as a possible way of looking at the theoretisation of social cohesion. A pivotal element in our analyses was the role of light encounters, and how children, infrastructure and practitioners contribute to the conditions that facilitate the creation of these light encounters. Light encounters involved simple gestures like a smile, a glance of recognition or a brief conversation. The light encounters built a collective consciousness, broke down social barriers and promoted a sense of belonging in the child and family social work services within a diverse context (Geens, 2017; Soenen). However, the theoretical framework of the social cohesion radar does not place such light encounters as a central dimension or subdimension, but assumes more enduring social relations, defined as strong

and resilient social networks. The research indicates that in the context of child and family social work, it is important to also pay attention to the meaning of light encounters as a possible way to foster social cohesion. For policy and organisations, this means investing in continuous learning process for professionals working in these child and family services (Urban, Vandenbroeck, Lazzari, Peeters & Van Laere, 2011) regarding the skills and attitudes of the professional in such matters as how to deal with and respect diversity, adopt an accepting and open attitude and promote inclusion processes (Devlieghere, 2014). In addition, it is necessary to look at how services can best be organised as a kind of scripted practice (Geens, 2016) and how in this vein infrastructure can play an important role in whether or not light encounters are promoted.

It is to be noted that social cohesion regularly seems to be instrumentalised at the level of the individual in order to intervene at the level of society. In this way, the creation of social cohesion potentially becomes an individual responsibility. This is in line with a very minimal, individual interpretation of social cohesion. Earlier research, which focused on academic literature, the policy perspective and the voice of practitioners, highlighted the same findings and problematised such limited interpretation of social cohesion as social capital and the unpoliticised nature of child and family social work services that focus on promoting social cohesion.

Despite the individual interpretation given to the promotion of social cohesion, a clear need and challenge is visible regarding the diversity in child and family social work practices. It is necessary to reach a diversity of families, reflecting the local context of where the practices are located. Reaching a diversity of families makes it possible to engage in bridging social capital in public spaces and can subsequently help to foster community resilience, social integration, greater levels of civic engagement and trust (Poortinga, 2012; Putnam, 2000). However, reaching a diverse population implies that practitioners have the knowledge and know-how in approaching and dealing with diversity issues (Urban, 2015). In this the OECD refers to:

> *there is a need for early childhood centres to respond to the changing social context […] Working with diversity in particular milieus is a feature of ECEC professional work, to which traditional teacher training has responded insufficiently. In the future, practitioners will be required to play an enhanced role in developing social cohesion, for which new skills and understandings about community and society will be critical (OECD, 2006, p. 167).*

To end, a variety of interpretations and practices committed to promote social cohesion are visible. The fuzzynes, ambiguous nature and open-endness of social cohesion is maybe not an issue, but rather an opportunity for child and family social work practices to give meaning to this concept and adjust their practices to the local context in which they are embedded?

5.5   Limitations and further research

Researching social cohesion requires acknowledging our own point of view on the conceptualisation of this concept (Vandenbroeck, 2017). The analyses were based on Flemish cases including observations in three specific cases, leading to a localised point of view on social cohesion. One needs to be cautious when generalizing conclusions about Flanders. Furthermore, the research and likewise academic literature does not provide much insight into the possible negative or positive consequences of fostering social cohesion in early childhood services, what is considered important to include in further research. Insights into what is happening in child and family social work regarding social cohesion requires several perspectives. A valuable perspective in further research that can contribute to these insights is that of parents (Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001) participating in child and family social work practices. To end, the theoretical insights and reflections on practices as a result of this research, must be translated (in)to policies and daily practices of child and family social work. The translation of this research into policy and practice contributes to the question of politicisation of social work where one should advocate for and develop social policies that promote equity, address social disparities, and engage in advocacy efforts to influence policies that support social cohesion. In contrast to a more individualizing approach to promoting social cohesion. This may include creating concrete collective interventions that anticipate and embody a different society in the present and advocating for legislation that

addresses issues such as poverty, access to education, affordable housing, and healthcare (Naert, Debruyne, Van Bouchaute & Roose, 2023). In addition, it highlights the importance of (policy) emphasis on light encounters between parents (Soenen, 2006). Finally, the results also allow us to take a critical look at the policy objectives where social work with children and families should contribute to social cohesion. Perhaps expectations here are too high and should be tempered?

5.6   References

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CHAPTER 6

THE MEANING OF SOCIAL COHESION IN PREVENTIVE FAMILY SUPPORT: A PRACTITIONERS' PERSPECTIVE

6.1   Introduction

6.1.1   Child and family social work as a place to foster social cohesion

Early childhood services in child and family social work, such as services for families with young children, preschool facilities, childcare centres and kindergartens are given the responsibility to focus on both individual outcomes and social, or rather community-oriented outcomes. Consequently, expectations are increasingly placed on the promotion of social cohesion in these services (Andrews & Jilke, 2016; Irwin, Siddiqi, & Hertzman, 2007) as social cohesion is believed to be an antidote to the challenges of macro-economic and societal changes (Andrews, Downe, & Guarneros-Meza, 2014). International organisations (European Commission, 2015; OECD, 2017), but also global federations such as the International Federation of Social Workers have pointed to (child and family) social work as important actors to foster social cohesion and, in so doing, to respond to these challenges and societal changes. To achieve this policy goal, legislative bodies refer to child and family social work practices as places to foster social integration and cohesion (Hoshi-Watanabe et al., 2015; Melhuish, Belsky, Leyland, & Barnes, 2008). Despite the apparent consensus about the expectations for early childhood services, insights into what the promotion of social cohesion could mean are limited (Dierckx, Devlieghere & Vandenbroeck, 2022). The current article contributes to the ongoing conceptualisation of social cohesion in child and family social work by integrating the perspective of practitioners as they are street-level bureaucrats whose work requires improvisation and responsiveness to the individual cases they witness in early childhood services (Lipsky, 1980).

6.1.2   Social cohesion as an open-ended construct

The academic interest for social cohesion is influenced by a policy discourse responding to macro- economic and societal changes (Andrews, Downe, & Guarneros-Meza, 2014) such as individualisation, globalisation, competitively oriented social policies, and growing diversity in terms of class, ethnicity, gender and age (Faist, 2010; Kearns & Forrest, 2000; Dierckx, Devlieghere & Vandenbroeck, in press). Notwithstanding the numerous attempts to streamline the definition of social cohesion, literature agrees that there is no such thing as a one-size-fits-all definition that encompasses the multitude of different values, cultures and local contexts (Bottoni, 2018; Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017). This

makes social cohesion an open-ended construct that can be concretised depending on the context. Despite this openness, recurrent and overarching elements in definitions of social cohesion can be recognised (Fonseca, Lukosch, & Brazier, 2019) including the dynamics of social relations, trust, participation, solidarity and belonging (Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017). The Bertelsmann Stiftung, a German foundation that focuses on social and economic issues, worked towards a theoretical framework of social cohesion, *the social cohesion radar*, as a social reporting initiative that maps social cohesion in the Western world, based on the literature review of Schiefer and van der Noll (2017). A recent systematic literature review (Dierckx, Devlieghere, & Vandenbroeck, in press), framed their definition as both theoretically sound and pragmatically operational as it allows the distinction of different levels, components, consequences and conditions of social cohesion. They conceptualised social cohesion as:

> " *The quality of social cooperation and togetherness of a collective, defined in geopolitical terms, that is expressed in the attitudes and behaviors of its members. A cohesive society is characterized by resilient social relations, a positive emotional connectedness between its members and the community, and a pronounced focus on the common good. (Delhey et al., 2018, p. 430)*

The theoretical framework of the social cohesion radar entails three core aspects (Figure 8), each of which unfolds in three related subdomains. The first aspect is 'social relations' and includes social networks, trust in people and acceptance of diversity. The social cohesion radar identifies the *social networks* subdimension as having strong and resilient social networks; *trust* as having a high degree of confidence in others; and *acceptance of diversity* means that individuals with different lifestyles and values are regarded as equals in society (Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017). The second aspect is 'focus on the common good', and consists of solidarity and helpfulness, respect for social rules and civic participation. *Solidarity and helpfulness* mean that people feel responsible for each other and are willing to help each other; *respect* for social rules implies that people abide by the fundamental rules of society; and *civic participation* is about the participation of people in social and political life, as well as taking part in public discussions (Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017). The third aspect is 'connectedness', and unfolds in identification, trust in institutions and perception of fairness. *Identification* is interpreted as the (strong) connection people feel

with their country and consequently identify with it; *trust in institutions* includes people's (high) trust in social and political institutions; and *perception of fairness* comprises people's belief that goods in society are distributed fairly and that they are treated fairly as individuals (Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017). We refer to this comprehensive conceptualisation of social cohesion in the following sections of this paper.

People have a high level of confidence in social and political institutions.

People feel strongly connected to their country and identify with it.

People believe that society's goods are fairly distributed and that they are being treated fairly.

2

Connectedness

People have strong, resilient social networks.

COHESION

People feel responsibility for others and are willing to help them.

Social relations

Focus on the common good

People have a high level of trust in others.

1

3

People abide by the fundamental rules of society.

People accept individuals with other values and lifestyles as equal members of society.

People participate in society and political life and enter into public discussions.

Figure 8: Social cohesion radar (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018)

The open-endedness of social cohesion and the apparent consensus about the expectations for child and family social work requires insights into what the promotion of social cohesion could mean. However, it remains unclear how child and family social work practitioners think about the implementation of this objective. Therefore, the present study takes into account the meaning making

of (child and family) social workers and volunteers to reflect on the potential role of child and family social work services in contributing to social cohesion and in so doing, we further theorise the concept of social cohesion. We do not approach (child and family) social workers as technical executives of policy, but rather approach them as street-level bureaucrats whose work is often highly scripted to achieve policy objectives, but on the other hand, requires improvisation and responsiveness to the individual cases they witness (Lipsky, 1980). Consequently, policy can be made bottom-up, and not only top-down. We conducted a qualitative analysis with semi-structured interviews using the critical incident technique with practitioners and volunteers based on the following research question: how do (child and family) social workers give meaning to the concept of social cohesion and their responsibility in achieving this political mission?

6.2   Materials and methods

An explorative multiple case study was performed in child and family social work in Flanders. To gain insight in the meaning making of practitioners, qualitative research methods were used.

6.2.1   Research context

Flanders is a compelling case in relation to social cohesion in child and family social work, as the Flemish Government (Vlaamse Overheid, 2013) explicitly emphasises the promotion of social cohesion as one of the three pillars for Preventive family support, besides preventive health care and parenting support. By doing so, the Flemish Government explicitly chose to put child and family social work forward as a potential driver of social cohesion (Vlaamse Overheid, 2014). This objective can be achieved through different forms of activities in a *Huis van het Kind* (House of the child). A House of the child is a partnership of organisations from preventive family support together with local policy. Today, the Houses of the child have extended to nearly all municipalities in Flanders. Each House of the child is legally bound to offer a minimum set of three specific services: the preventive health care offered by the infant consultation schemes; the meeting places for parents and children (play group or drop-in); and the provision of parenting support. The infant consultation schemes have a longstanding history of offering a universal service including medical consultations for each family and they reach almost the entire population of parents of new-borns (Vandenbroeck, Coussee, Bradt, & Roose, 2011). The

infant consultation schemes are funded and regulated by the governmental agency *Opgroeien*, which oversees child welfare in the Flemish region of Belgium. When parents come to the infant consultation schemes, they are welcomed by volunteers in the waiting area, measuring and weighting the children before they go to visit the doctor or nurse. The infant consultation schemes and more specifically the waiting areas are a distinct setting because they are the only services that are entirely staffed by volunteers. Another universal service in the Houses of the child are the meeting places for parents and children (play group or drop-in). In the three different cases selected in our study, the management of the meeting place is outsourced to organisations that traditionally provided targeted services, labelled in Flanders as *Inloopteam* (drop-in team). The *Inloopteams* are also funded by *Opgroeien* (Kind & Gezin, n.d.) to specifically reach out to the most vulnerable families with young children, to organise peer groups with these mothers and to facilitate access to mainstream services. A third service present in the Houses of the child is the provision of parenting support. This is done in the parenting groups led by different partners of a House of the Child. Besides groups for single parents, parent-child groups can be installed. Parents with children up to 12 years old, are welcomed with their parent(s) or caregivers to do activities together with other families in group, such as cooking together, doing crafts, playing a game, doing experiments and so on.

An explorative multiple case study was performed in three specific cases Houses of the child in selected neighbourhoods in the cities of Antwerp (Case A), Ghent (Case B), and Mechelen (Case C). Because of the perceived challenges in society that are believed to jeopardise social cohesion, including the increasing diversity and significant income and wealth inequalities (Andreotti, Mingione, & Polizzi, 2012; Chiesi, 2009), the choice was made in Antwerp (Case A) and Ghent (Case B) for neighbourhoods with high cultural diversities. In Mechelen (Case C), a contrasting neighbourhood is selected with highly educated parents, less diversity, and a significantly lower child poverty rate (Table 9).

	Case A	Case B	Case C
International migration balance* (2020)	205	99	20
Residents 0 – 17 year (2021) (%)	30,9 %	23,8 %	30,4 %
Non-Belgian origin (2021) (%)	80,2 %	58,2 %	30,4 %
Poverty of Opportunity Index (2019, 2021) (%)**	52,4 %	-	8,6%
Poverty of Opportunity Index (2021) (City-level) (%)	27,32 %	18,55 %	13,18 %

*The migration balance is calculated as the difference between the total number of international immigrations and the total number of international emigrations (Statbel, 2023).

**The Poverty of Opportunity Index (by province, (type of) municipality and mother's origin) expresses the proportion of children aged 0 to 3 years in deprivation compared to the total number of children aged 0 to 3 years (of that province, (type of) municipality or mother's origin).

Table 9: Overview cases by characteristic (studies 3 and 4)

6.2.2   Methods

To analyse the meaning making of child and family social work practitioners of social cohesion and their responsibility in achieving this political mission in Flanders, semi-structured interviews were conducted, using the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) (Flanagan, 1954), with staff from a variety of child and family social work practices adhering to the Houses of the Child and volunteers from the infant consultation schemes. The critical incident technique describes a procedure for gathering observed 'incidents' of particular importance for social cohesion and is rooted in the phenomenological research tradition (Sharoff, 2008). Hughes, Williamson, and Lloyd (2007, p. 1) stated that "*CIT is a well proven qualitative research approach that offers a practical step-by-step approach to collecting and analysing information about human activities and their significance to the people involved*". The incident discussed during the CIT-

interview was chosen in advance by the participant and had to meet the following predefined criteria. An incident was defined as the detailed description of a moment or event where the practitioner was able to promote social cohesion. The incident needed to be an incident before the start of the Covid-pandemic with no limitation in time. After a detailed exploration of the event, each participant was asked to conceptualise social cohesion independent of the given incident. The semi-structured format of the interviews provided the opportunity to explore the incident in depth, while also leaving sufficient room for questions that emerged from the dialogue between the interviewee and the participant (Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008). The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. In total, 25 interviews, with 28 practitioners and volunteers (Table 10), were conducted between the period from March 2022 to August 2022. To choose the participants, we looked at who worked here, and invited 10 practitioners for each case in the study. An overview of the participants and the coding system of the selected voices from the different cases can be found in Table 10. The selected practitioners were all active in the services (infant consultation schemes, playgroups, parents' groups) that were identified as services that can promote social cohesion. The interviewees were a diverse group by education and age. Practitioners in the Houses of the Child may have various degrees such as Pedagogy of the Young Child, Applied Psychology, Social Work, Orthopedagogy, and so on as a degree in social work is not a requirement to work as a social work practitioner in the Houses of the Child. The diversity in education is at the discipline level, not the diploma level. The level of the practitioners who were interviewed was ISCED 6 (bachelor or equivalent level) (Eurostat, n.d.). In addition, they work with volunteers in the infant consultation schemes. The majority here were retired women. In contrast to diversity in age and education, limited diversity was noted in gender. Except for one interview, all practitioners and volunteers were female. Finally, the diversity of practitioners did not reflect the diversity of the parents that participated in the services. The diversity was limited to practitioners of Belgian, Turkish or Moroccan origin.

Participant	Case	Child and family social work practice	Critical incident	Children present
1	A	Reception Group worker	Group activity for parents with children (0-12)	X
5	A	Playgroups Group worker	Experience-based process group for parents with children (0-6)	
8	A	Consulent parental advise	Training session for parents with children (+10)	
10	A	Playgroups Group worker	Group activity for parents with children (0-12)	X
12	A	Playgroups Reception	Reception House of the Child (question about childcare)	X
16	A	Regional nurse	Info session potty training for parents with a child that will start at school	
17	A	Coördinator	Reading volunteer in waiting room for reception and infant consultation scheme.	X
18, 19	A	Group worker	Group activity for parents with children (0-12)	X
20	A	Playgroups Group worker	Experience-based process group for parents with children (0-6)	
26	A	Volunteer	Reading volunteer in waiting room for reception and infant consultation scheme.	X
28	A	Playgroups Childcare	Playgroup for parent with children (0-3)	X
3	B	Playgroups Group worker	Playgroup for parent with children (0-3)	X
4	B	Coördinator	Dutch practice opportunities for parents	
6	B	Playgroups Group worker	Playgroup for parent with children (0-3)	X

Participant	Case	Child and family social work practice	Critical incident	Children present
7	B	Playgroups Group worker	Playgroup for parent with children (0-3)	X
13	B	Playgroups Group worker	Group activity for fathers with children (0-12)	X
21	B	Volunteer	Dutch practice opportunities for parents	
27	B	Volunteer	Waiting room infant consultation scheme	X
2	C	Playgroups Group worker Reception	Group activity for parents with children (0-6) (cooking)	X
9	C	Coördinator	Meeting with professional partners about a family.	
11	C	Playgroups Group worker Reception	Playgroup for parent with children (0-3)	X
14	C	Playgroups Group worker Reception	Dutch practice opportunities for parents with children (0-6)	X
15	C	Project House of the Child 'healthy pregnant together'	Meeting place for parents with children (0-3)	X
22, 23, 24	C	Volunteer	Waiting room infant consultation scheme	X
25	C	Reception Group worker	Group activity for parents with children (0-12)	

Table 10: Participants overview (study 4)

All participants were given information about the study when contacted, as well as prior to the interview. A written voluntary informed consent was used, which

each participant signed before the recording of the interview. Participants had the opportunity to indicate which items could not be recorded. The incidents described in the study safeguard the anonymity and confidentiality of the practitioners and services participating in the interviews. After the interview, each participant had the possibility to proofread the transcript as well as to be informed about the results.

6.2.3   Analyses

The incidents and definitions of social cohesion were analysed to understand how child and family social work practitioners conceptualised social cohesion and how they perceived their role in the promotion of social cohesion .A theory-driven deductive thematic analysis – based on the social cohesion radar (Dragolov et al., 2016) – was used to provide an insight into the incidents and definitions discussed during the interviews. We looked at which dimensions of the social cohesion radar were recurring, as well as which were missing from the incidents. The dimensions and subdimensions of the social cohesion radar formed the coding structure for an initial analysis of the interviews. The deductive analysis was combined with an inductive thematic analysis using NVivo R1, in order 'to provide knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon under study' (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992, p. 314). In this process, new codes emerged inductively from the data. The following in-depth analysis of the critical incidents allows us to identify similarities, differences, and patterns and to seek insight into how and why people engage in the activities they described (Hughes et al., 2007). The coding and analyses of the incidents and conceptualisations were extensively discussed and verified by the second and third author to enhance validity and reliability (Van Hove & Claes, 2011).

6.3   Results

6.3.1   Social relations

Almost half of the incidents discussed primarily focused on one or more of the subdimensions of social relations. Social relations in the social cohesion radar included social networks, trust in people and acceptance of diversity. The incidents narrated the creation of encounters between parents, as a way to create social networks, and formed a common theme throughout all the interviews. These encounters could be short and once-only but could also be multiple and repeated as parents continued to meet on a regular basis, for example during parent groups that come together every two weeks. The

interactions between parents often started from shared characteristics, such as their parental role or the presence of children. In addition, parents and other family members were actively encouraged to participate in certain activities such as craft activities or joint fruit breaks. By participating in these activities, contacts between parents and children could be created.

> " *If children are playing and we install this fruit moment, there will naturally be 'my child is 15 months and doesn't eat yet', 'my child is 13 months and he doesn't want to drink milk anymore, he only wants to eat plain food'. And then parents can talk about their experiences together. (Interview 3, Case B)*

Contacts could also transcend the services as the encounters that occurred during the activities led to connections between parents and family members outside the boundaries of the child and social work practices.

> " *Yes, and the parents of the parent group have a Whatsapp group where I'm not in. Parents tell me that there they occasionally interact and agree to do things together. (Interview 5, Case A)*

The question arises whether this transferability of encounters and contacts between parents was to be considered as essential for social cohesion. Several, though not all, of the participants, asserted that this was to be the case.

> " *It starts with that little chat, people just get to know each other on a very approachable level, not too deep. But I think social cohesion goes much further. Knowing that you can indeed count on each other for a number of things, that you can strengthen each other in that respect. So, I think that social cohesion goes a further and beyond what we do here. That if it extends beyond our activities, that they find each other outside our services for encounters, activities in the neighbourhood, help and so on, then you can talk about social cohesion. (Interview 18, Case A)*

Besides the creation of social networks, practitioners highlighted the importance

of creating trust and its associated safety. Trust and safety were emphasised as conditions for contacts between individuals, be it among parents, between parents and children, or between parents and practitioners or children and practitioners. Participants assigned themselves an important role in building trust among parents and between parents and practitioners.

> " *You do feel after a while that people do start to have a bit of confidence in you, so they do loosen up and dare to be themselves. If something is bothering them, they do come and tell us. And that's what we want, that there is trust. That when people have difficulties or there is something wrong, that they can come to us. We want people to have confidence in who we are and in what we do here. (Interview 11, Case C)*

An important element according to the social cohesion radar is the acceptance of diversity (Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017). In contrast, this element was never mentioned during the interviews. Only in the final question on the conceptualisation of social cohesion, this subdimension appeared to a limited extent.

> " *For me, that is contact of people among themselves, despite the origin, despite all the diversity that exists between people. That they then still have those contacts with each other despite the economic and the cultural origins they have. (Interview 25, Case A)*

6.3.2   A focus on the common good

A focus on the common good consists of solidarity and helpfulness, respect for social rules and civic participation according to the social cohesion radar. The focus on the common good implicitly expects a certain transferability of what happens in child and family social work to public life, as is clear in the narrative of a volunteer.

> " *That's a bit of connecting with society, the community. That's broader than meeting someone and having a social contact. That's really about being able to kind of make your way when they step out here. (Interview 20, Case B)*

This dimension was, however, generally absent in the interviews. Child and family social work want to adopt a bridging role in bringing parents and families into contact with social and political life, make public discussions known to parents and strengthen parents to participate in them. However, the bridging role they take up - according to the incidents they propose - remained rather limited. For example, practitioners narrated that they took public transport together with parents (which was presented as a big step for many) to visit a museum.

> " *One of the last parent groups I did myself, was a group where we went with mothers to the photo museum. From the Huis van het Kind we took the tram to the museum. So that's already a search for our mothers, which tram do we take? That's such an experience for those mothers that they have together, which makes them connect with each other. (Interview 10, Case A)*

Their aim in doing so was to create conditions on the level of the parent to enable social participation. These were often vulnerable families, many of them with migration backgrounds, who did face various barriers for participating in society.

> " *We are a place where people can come and practice, because out there, it is sometimes very difficult and they face a lot of prejudices. Sometimes barriers are very high for our families. This is a good place to practice so that people become stronger for the outside world to participate there. (Interview 2, Case C)*

Although references were made to civic participation, the incidents made clear that practitioners were mostly committed to the individual empowering of participants and rarely transcended this individual level towards actual participation in society. The examples given by practitioners showed many examples of how parents helped each other by giving (parenting) tips and by sharing their experiences. This social support among parents may take different

forms, including emotional support as this situation in case C exemplified.

> " *Twice a week, the Inloopteam offers Dutch practice opportunities for parents with (young) children. During these Dutch practice opportunities, parents start conversations, discuss and share experiences while practicing the Dutch language. At one of these moments, a large group of mothers with a migration background was present, and they stared talking on having very little family and friends in Belgium to count on, to fall back on. This was the theme of the conversation they were having because, apart from their parental role that they all shared, this was a commonality they experienced. One mother from Algeria indicated from this conversation that she had never dared to believe, even dream, after having fled from her homeland, to sit here with so many different people at the table and talk, share experiences and support each other. Naming this gave many parents a very nice and warm feeling. From the interviews that followed, it became clear that many mothers shared this feeling. (Interview 14, Case C)*

6.3.3   Connectedness

Connectedness unfolds in identification, trust in institutions and perception of fairness. Regarding the connectedness dimension, only minimal reference was made to the subdimensions 'trust in institutions' and 'identification', and when references were made, these were negative interpretations such as to the lack of fairness in society or the lack of knowledge about institutions. In the interviews, it was trust in the organisation that was highlighted rather than the trust in institutions. Trust in political institutions was rarely mentioned because the participants expected only limited knowledge about these institutions, especially among newcomer parents.

> " *It is difficult, if I look at it from the point of view of the most vulnerable parents in society. I once met a mother in the reception office in [...] who came here for the first time and who did not know a lot of things [...] and then you notice, by talking with those people, that they know very little about the institutions, for example about childcare for which this mother came to apply. (Interview 12, Case A)*

In addition, restrictions that parents experience in their participation in society, sometimes resulted in limited trust in these political institutions.

> " *You can strengthen and empower families here. But you can't change or adjust everything in the outside world. And we do see what those families collide with, the barriers they experience. That ranges from waiting lists at organisations, to phone calls where that people don't take into account that it has to be done a bit slower or without much vocabulary. Undocumented people who do not have access to regular Dutch classes, but would like to learn Dutch. [...] Yes, in order to participate in society, there are a lot of things that families do come up against. (Interview 14, Case C)*

These quotes address also another subdimension namely the perception of fairness. Throughout the interviews fairness and equity were questioned, especially by certain target groups such as parents in poverty and migrant parents. The interviewees named inequity as one of the structural barriers to engage in society, but they did not narrate incidents in which they took up a role to counter these barriers. Both these restrictions in participation, as well as the perceived lack of knowledge of institutions, provided leads in the practices to establish connections with the wider community and other services. An important connection the Houses of the child were trying to make is the connection with (pre)school.

> " *For example, when children start entering preschool, we attempt to encourage them to do one thing: apply for a school. We tell them about the information sessions and school walks there are and how we can support them. [...] That's a different kind of connecting. And that is much more about looking outside the Huis van het Kind and into the neighbourhood and society. (Interview 1, Case A)*

In addition, the (pre)school was often a topic at parent groups and playgroups due to incidents shared by parents during an activity. In case A, the House of the child was also a registration point to support parents in the online registration process for preschool as well as for primary and secondary education. Childcare was another connection that the House of the child strongly invested in. They provided childcare during group activities and tried to introduce parents to childcare explaining its importance for to them and for the children.

References to a shared national identity were not made during the incidents. The absence of a shared identity - or rather the presence of a diversity of different identities - is what led to contacts between parents, for example when parents start translating for each other in a group conversation. The shared identity that featured prominently in the incidents was the identity of 'being a parent'. This identity or role was central to the services and was used by practitioners, among other things, to build connections between parents. The interviewees did refer to the identification or connection parents had with their home country, their heritage culture and language, and how this could be valued in the services. The following example shows how the home languages of children can also be brokers of relations.

> " *Once a little boy came in and said something in Arabic. Which in principle is not the intention here, we try to speak Dutch so that everyone can follow. And then the two children who were sitting there said, do you also speak Arabic? [...] And that created some discussion topics between the children and us. And what word do you know in Arabic? Ah and what do you think? And so, we also try to make those contacts between the children who don't speak Arabic then. (Interview 1, Case A)*

6.4 Discussion

Social cohesion is placed high on the political agenda and, child and family social work is expected to contribute to the promotion of social cohesion. Due to the openness of the concept, there is no consensus, neither in policy nor in practice, on what social cohesion precisely means and how child and family social work practices can promote social cohesion. By doing interviews with practitioners in child and family social work, we explored how child and family social workers give meaning to the concept of social cohesion and to their responsibility in achieving this political mission. The data were analysed using the social cohesion radar as a theoretical framework. Using the social cohesion radar as a theoretical framework does not aim to evaluate future practices with this instrument. Rather it aims to inspire policy and organisations on how social cohesion can be shaped.

A division can be made between subdimensions that focus on the inter-individual level and subdimensions that involve a socio-political level. The latter require a certain transferability and take a societal (or communitarian) rather than an individual point of view, while the former relate to interpersonal relations and social capital issues. This distinction, that runs through all the dimensions of the social cohesion radar is informative to analyse the results and discuss which subdimensions are present and which are absent in the incidents that practitioners presented.

6.4.1 Inter-individual and relational components of social cohesion

The inter-individual and relational aspect of social cohesion, related to interpersonal relations and social capital issues, was clearly very present. Subdimensions such as commitment to the social network, trust between people, solidarity and helpfulness were highlighted. The examples given involved relationships and contacts between people (rather than families). The first step in services was often, partly because of the focus on that relational aspect, to focus on meeting and facilitating encounters between parents, children, and families. Some possible explanations for this are that policies have taken encounters and social cohesion together as one pillar for the Houses of the Child and consequently did not put forward a clear distinction, viewing them almost as synonyms (Flemish Government, 2014). Scholars in the field of child and family social work have focused on the universal participation of families (Urban et al., 2020), but in the reality of the Houses of the child, the focus is often on target

groups, rather than on universalism, even if in principle the services are presented as open to all families. If child and family social work want to contribute to social cohesion, it needs to reach out to a diversity of families. Despite the diverse population of the three cases, it was remarkable that the references to diversity were very limited. Could it be because the Houses of the Child do not (yet) succeed in reaching all families in their neighbourhood? Certainly, when practitioners present an incident of target group-oriented services, the socio-economic and ethnic diversity is often more limited. A third important characteristic that emerged is the role of the practitioners in facilitating connections that emerged from the parental role or through the presence of the children. Further studies could reveal how practitioners carry out this role, making a conscious effort to establish connections among parents, but also between parents and organisation(s), parents, and the broader community. Further studies could also include looking at how social work education programs shape the concept of social cohesion and its operationalisation. However, in the Houses of the Child you are faced with a diversity of training of practitioners and volunteers. Therefore, it seems important to strengthen practitioners within organisations or practices in how organisations perceive and operationalise social cohesion.

6.4.2 The socio-political components of social cohesion

The other subdimensions, which focus on socio-political components of social cohesion, are significantly less prominent in the narratives. The socio-political interpretation of social cohesion as presented in the subdimensions of civic participation, perception of fairness and trust in institutions was much less present in the narratives. For instance, inequity as one of the structural barriers to engage in society was mentioned, but practitioners did not narrate incidents in which they took up a role to counter these barriers. The absence of socio-political interpretations contrasts with the politicising function that social work and consequently child and family social work is supposed to fulfil (International Federation of Social Work, 2014), and has become more prevalent in research in recent years. Politicising, in its most comprehensive meaning, is defined by De Corte, Hermans, Raeymaeckers, and Bouchaute (2022, p. 33) as *"practices that contribute to the public disagreement about how we organise our society. This disagreement is inextricably linked to underlying power relations."* This politicising function is inherently linked to social work, due to the normative foundation that characterises social work (Debruyne & Bouchaute, 2021). The promotion of social cohesion in child and family social work is likewise normative

and consequently political because it questions the way we shape society and how each individual can be given an equal place (De Corte et al., 2022). The question that arises here is: do social workers have room to politicise? Or is this undermined by encroaching neoliberalism (Van Bouchaute & Debaene, 2019)? Additionally in this research we are focusing on the individual practitioner and perhaps not enough on the organisations that provide practitioners with space to interpret decrees and contexts and translate them into professional action (Hackethal & Raeymaeckers, 2023). Commitment to social cohesion must be more than individual family support and empowerment. Therefore, it is important to open the positioning of how child and family social work contributes to social cohesion. Expanding this positioning means actively working on the socio-political dimension in addition to the inter-individual dimensions in order to contribute in this way to the basic conditions needed for families and in society to strengthen family social cohesion in contexts of diversity and inequality.

6.5   Conclusion

Starting from the research question 'how do (child and family) social workers give meaning to the concept of social cohesion and their responsibility in achieving this political mission?', the study highlights the importance of social cohesion in child and family social work, acknowledging its position on the political agenda. However, the lack of a consensus on the meaning of social cohesion and how it can be promoted creates challenges in policy and practice. The study reveals an emphasis on the inter-individual and relational aspects of social cohesion, focusing on interpersonal relations, social capital, commitment to social networks, trust, solidarity, and helpfulness. The socio-political components of social cohesion of the social cohesion radar (Dragolov et al., 2016), including civic participation, perception of fairness, and trust in institutions, are found to be less prominent in practitioners' narratives. Despite the normative and political foundations inherent in social work, there is a notable absence of incidents where practitioners actively address structural barriers or engage in practices that contribute to public disagreement about societal organisation. This contrasts with the politicising function that child and family social work is supposed to fulfil (Debruyne & Bouchaute, 2021; International Federation of Social Workers, 2014) and the policy expectations imposed on practices to promote social cohesion. To effectively contribute to social cohesion, practitioners must actively work on both inter-individual and socio-political dimensions. To conclude, this advocates for a broader understanding of the role of child and family social work, encouraging practitioners and organisations to

consider the socio-political context and actively contribute to creating the basic conditions required for strengthening family social cohesion in diverse and unequal contexts.

6.6 Limitations

The critical incident technique, used during the interviews, describes a procedure for collecting observed incidents of relevance to social cohesion. The CIT has the advantage of providing narratives that shed light on the meaning practioners give to their work, yet it does not document a process, as it describes single moments or incidents (Flanagan, 1954). The CIT-method itself does not transcend the person. To partially accommodate this throughout the interviews, the incidents were further questioned to gain more context and insight and to make the process that some families went through by participating in the child and family social work practices visible. In addition, it is possible that a focus on the inter-individual is partly explained by the methodology of the CIT. When asked about a success experience of promoting social cohesion, practitioners rapidly move to this microlevel because this is where these successes are often the most visible.

At the level of social work practitioners and volunteers, there is insufficient differentiation on the characteristics we include in the cases that are of importance to the conceptualisation of social cohesion. For example, there is an equal level of education, limited difference in socio-economic status, gender, and ethnic background. In the future, it is important to invest in research conducted in settings that allow these aspects to be included also at the level of individual practitioners, in line with the literature that explores how factors such as gender, age, and background can influence individuals' conceptualisations of social cohesion (Valentova, 2016).

A voice that is absent from this study and should undoubtedly be included in further research is that of the users, the parents. It is necessary to understand what the participation in child and family social work means to them. In addition, it would also be an added strength not just to take practitioners' and parents interpretations as a starting point, but to observe practices that can be related to social cohesion in a more ethnographic approach.

6.7   References

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CHAPTER 7

PROPORTIONATE UNIVERSALISM IN CHILD AND FAMILY SOCIAL WORK

7.1 Introduction

Integrated services have gained momentum in policy and practice of child and family social work and preventive health care. This is not so much a surprise as the integration of services for families with young children is nowadays considered as a sustainable solution to the fragmentation of services that characterises child and family social work as well as preventive health care. The Sure Start Children's Centres in the United Kingdom and the Family Centres in the Scandinavian countries (Kekkonen, Montonen, & Viitala, 2012; Lindskov, 2010) are two examples of multiple organisations, located in the field of preventive health care and parent support, working together as integrated services. It is interesting that in several cases, these integrated services increasingly embrace the concept of proportionate universalism (PU) as a means to overcome the dichotomy between universal and targeted services in contexts of socio-economic, gender and cultural diversity (European Commission, 2013). The concept of PU originates with the Marmot (2010) review on the social gradient in health care. The Marmot review showed dramatic differences in health conditions and life expectancy between the best and worst off in England. It concluded that the relationship between social circumstances and health is a graded one, suggesting that the lower one's social position, the worse one's health will be (Marmot, 2010). In order to address this precarious issue, the Marmot review advocated PU as a way forward and as a universal action with a scale and intensity proportionate to the level of disadvantage. Since then, the concept has gained momentum in health care and several adjacent areas, including child and family social work. Nevertheless, the implementation of the concept of PU and its transferability to these other areas of interest, including child and family social work, is not as straightforward as it may seem. There are theoretical and empirical considerations that need to be taken into account. One important element in this discussion is the various interpretations and meanings of PU among different scholars and areas of expertise (Birch, 2010; Canning & Browser, 2010; Carey & Crammond, 2014). The concept of PU was originally framed in a medical context as a dosage—or a gradient in intensity—of universal action, based on the level of disadvantage (Birch, 2010). This so-called dose–response approach was introduced by Birch (2010) as a quantitative difference in how much action is needed. For those at the bottom of the gradient, more intensive service (e.g., health action) is required, compared with those higher up the gradient (Birch, 2010). However, due to its origin, PU has primarily been studied in a medical context (Birch, 2010; Canning & Browser, 2010; Carey &

Crammond, 2014), whereas its relevance to other fields, such as social work in general and child and family social work in particular, is rapidly increasing (e.g., European Commission, 2013). Hence, in translating PU from the medical context to child and family social work, several questions come to the fore, such as how to adapt the dosage of the universal provision for disadvantaged families and also what different provisions families may need, based on either their individual needs or their membership in specific groups (Carey & Crammond, 2014). In other words, transferring the concept to social work practice also raises the question of whether PU is simply a matter of quantitative variation in universal service, or also one of qualitative difference. It is clear that, despite its importance to child and family social work, the concept of PU remains undertheorised and understudied in this area, focusing mainly on the question of how the concept may bridge targeted and universal services. Questions, such as how PU may be shaped in existing services, integrating pre-existing universal as well as targeted provisions, and what the concepts of dosage or targeted services may mean in contexts of super-diversity, remain untouched. It is our contention to contribute to this debate by focusing precisely on those existing services that attempt to integrate the concept of PU in their daily practice whereas their practice is characterised by a combination of existing universal and targeted provisions in a context of super-diversity. Hence, our research focuses on the development and integration of PU in child and family social work, and, in particular, in the *Huizen van het Kind* (Houses of the Child) in Flanders (the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium). These Houses of the Child are a compelling case, as in these houses traditionally universal services that worked with the concept of dosage are integrated with services that traditionally functioned as targeted services. Moreover, several of these houses are located in a context of super-diversity. In order to answer our research questions, we conducted a multiple-case study in the Houses of the Child, analysing policy and practice perspectives on the implementation of the concept of PU. In so doing, we aim to contribute to a growing debate on how to deal with tensions between universalism and targeting, qualitative and quantitative differences in child and family social work (Patton, 2002). Before moving on to these findings, we first further outline the current debate on PU. Afterwards, we move on to our methodological framework in order to discuss our findings and its theoretical and practical implications for child and family social work.

7.2 Differential interpretations of PU

7.2.1 The tension between universal and selective services

Earlier on, we established that the concept of PU was developed in medical sciences in order to tackle the social gradient in health services (Marmot, 2010). We also argued that the concept became increasingly popular as a guide for policy and practice in other (adjacent) fields, such as child and family social work. In 2013, the European Commission even argued that PU should be the starting point when working with children and families in vulnerable situations: The most successful strategies in addressing child poverty have proved to be those underpinned by policies improving the well-being of all children, whilst giving careful consideration to children in particularly vulnerable situations. (2013, p. 2). In so arguing, the European Commission attempts to overcome the existing dichotomy between universal and selective services. Selective services create inclusion (and thus exclusion) criteria to determine whether welfare recipients have the right to certain services, hereby entailing conditionality as a categorisation of those families who deserve, and those who do not deserve, access to specific services (Mkandawire, 2005). Universalist services, on the other hand, imply that every citizen should have access to the existing services. However, universal services often face the problem of non-take-up, meaning that those who may need it most have less access to it, a phenomenon better known in child and family social work as the Matthew effect (Van Lancker & Ghysels, 2016). By promoting PU, the European commission — supported herein by many others — attempts to combine the best of both worlds, as PU is conceived as a combination of a universal and selective policy and defined as a *"universal action with a proportionate (or targeted) element tailored to the level of 'disadvantage' experienced by different groups"* (Carey & Crammond, 2014, p. 305). This trend has also been encouraged by the increasing consensus in the European Union that the integration of social services is the way forward (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2015), as it aims to overcome various forms of fragmentation in child and family social work (Allen, 2003), such as sectorial, age, target group, and policy segregation (Mkandawire, 2005). Integrated social services are believed to be more responsive to the needs of vulnerable families and more cost-effective (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2015; Van Haute, 2018). This integration of services may take different forms, and the target populations for these services are defined differently, varying from area-based or needs-based perspectives, to right-based perspectives (entitlements), to a combination of both. In defining

their target populations, the concept and framework of PU is often considered a valid pathway. However, there are some cracks in the apparent consensus about the concept of PU as a good policy and practice. Many of these cracks occur at the conceptual level. For example, Birch (2010) describes PU as a dosage of universal action based on the level of disadvantage, aligning with the idea that provision is universal and thus the same for everyone, yet more support and help is preferred for more vulnerable populations or individuals, whereas Canning and Browser (2010) describe PU as specific, targeted, and direct interventions for the most vulnerable. This conceptual confusion results in some distance between the theoretical conceptualisation of PU in literature and policy on the one hand and the translation into practice on the other hand (Carey, Crammond, & De Leeuw, 2015). In order to overcome this distance and bridge both worlds, Carey et al. (2015) developed a framework of PU called the *proportionate universalism heuristic*. It is intended to serve as a guideline for policy makers, professionals, and other actors when implementing PU and transferring it from its theoretical concept to a practical tool (Carey et al., 2015). The framework attempts to drive the most appropriate solutions, on various levels, differentially across the social gradient, which recent influential works describing these health inequities and their causes do not always do (Carey et al., 2015). In that vein, the *proportionate universalism heuristic framework* (Carey et al., 2015) is believed to be applicable on the macro, meso, and micro levels. This layered framework locates the principle of subsidiarity as a central concept, ensuring that the actions taken are the least radical and are as close as possible to the citizens (Carey et al., 2015). An example of how this works in daily practice can be found in the *Family Centre Model* or *Family's House* (Carey et al., 2015; Kekkonen et al., 2012), as the idea of PU forms the foundation of their work. A Family Centre is a service model in the field of child and family social work, bringing together services that work in preventive health care and the well-being of families and children (Kekkonen et al., 2012). It intends to provide universal services for all families with children and is a leading example of the trend towards integrated child and family social work. Of course, these services are not designed from scratch but situated in a historical continuity with pre-existing services and policies (TFIEY, 2013). Usually, these centres combine pre-existing universal and selective services, which seems to create specific challenges in integrating the concept of PU. Our research will address this specific challenge empirically by focusing on how PU may be shaped in child and family daily practices that integrate pre-existing universal as well as targeted provisions. We will focus on the Flemish *Huizen van het Kind,* or Houses of the Child as these services are a compelling case in relation to this specific challenge.

7.3 Research methodology

7.3.1 Research context

The research took place in the House of the Child. These houses integrate diverse social services for families with young children and are partnerships between a diverse range of organisations in child and family social work, explicitly aiming at realizing the principles of PU (Flemish Government, 2014). Each House of the Child is legally bound to offer a minimum set of services, including the preventive health care offered by the infant consultation schemes. These schemes have a longstanding history of offering a universal service including medical consultations for each family and reach almost the entire population of parents of new-borns (Bradt et al. 2011). The family support worker of the infant consultation scheme can provide additional support (e.g., home visits), based on the evaluation of a family's needs. The infant consultation schemes are funded and regulated by the governmental agency Kind en Gezin, which oversees child welfare in the Flemish region of Belgium. Another mandatory universal service in the Houses of the Child is the meeting place for parents and children (play group or drop-in). Interestingly, in many places, this function of meeting place is outsourced to organisations that traditionally provided targeted services. These organisations, labelled as *Inloopteams*, organise peer groups for mothers living in precarious situations. The *Inloopteams* are also subsidised by *Kind & Gezin* (Kind & Gezin, n.d.-a). The initial mission of these *Inloopteams* was to reach out to the most vulnerable families with young children, to organise peer groups with these mothers and to facilitate access to mainstream services. In the city of Antwerp, the *Inloopteams* are in charge of organising meeting places for parents and children in the Houses of the Child, accessible to all families with children from birth to age 3 (City of Antwerp, n.d.-b). On the policy level, it is assumed that the combination of these historically universal and targeted services will embody PU. Our study took place in Antwerp, a city of approximately 700,000 inhabitants, characterised by super-diversity, which is defined as *"a dynamic interplay of variables among an increased number of small and scattered, multiple-origin, transnationally connected, socio-economically differentiated and legally stratified populations"* (Vertovec, 2007, p. 1024). In such a context, it is unclear whether responding to these diversities is still a matter of belonging to subgroups (e.g., an ethnic minority and a single-parent family) or of mere individualisation. We conducted a multiple-case study of three Houses of the Child, deliberately avoiding a comparative stance. Ethnographers, since Geertz (1973), have seen comparison in stark contrast to studying the particularities of the individual case,

as comparative studies tend to *"obscure case knowledge that fails to facilitate comparison"* (Stake, 2003). In order to handle the inevitable dilemma between describing the rich individual case knowledge, the thick of what is going on (Stake, 2003) and the necessity of drawing generalisable conclusions, we studied three common perspectives on each case. By asking similar questions (without expecting similar answers), we constructed a structural equivalence (Burt, 1982) allowing for analysis of diverse findings in a shared framework. In order to allow thick descriptions, we triangulated diverse methodologies, including document analyses, observations and interviews. Three Houses of the Child were selected based on demographic data. The first inclusion criterion was the location as all were located in areas with high socio-economic and cultural diversity. The second criterion was that they serve diverse populations through a range of both traditionally universal (e.g., the infant consultation scheme) and traditionally targeted (e.g., *Inloopteams*) services. In addition, the cases were selected to typify the diversity of Houses of the Child, regarding location and length of operation, rather than to be representative.

7.3.2 The three cases

Case 1 is the newest Children's House. At the time of the study, the House had been open for 6 months. Case 1 is located in a neighbourhood that is quiet during the daytime. Only when the school, situated next to the premises, begins and ends does the street comes to life. The coordination of the Children's House is in the hands of the municipality, and the coordinator is a civil servant of the city of Antwerp. Two different *Inloopteams* are present in this House: one that offers the meeting place for parents (play group) and one that runs the peer group for mothers in precarious situations. Case 2 was one of the first Houses of the Child to open and has existed since 2014. It is situated in the middle of a lively street where many people pass. The coordination of the Children's House is in the hands of the municipality, and the coordinator is a civil servant. There is an *Inloopteam* located in this House. A private non-profit organisation organises the *Inloopteam*, which runs the peer group for mothers in precarious situations and the playgroups. Another partner specializing in vulnerable parents with children between 0 and 3 years is also present. It is an evidence-based, preschool development stimulating programme for parents and their children from birth until age 3. Case 3 has been open since 2015. It is located in one of the most deprived neighbourhoods in Antwerp, yet an adjacent neighbourhood is marked by gentrification, due to the influx of middle-class families with young children. The coordination of the Children's House is the responsibility of a private non-profit organisation. This is also the organiser of the mother group, as well as of the

infant consultation scheme. The building is private property, and the coordination is funded through an agreement with the city of Antwerp.

7.3.3 Data collection and data analyses

The study triangulated three perspectives, representing three levels in each case (Patton, 2002): a policy level, an organisational level, and a street level or social work level. The policy perspective encompassed a qualitative analysis of municipal policy documents. A theory-driven thematic analysis with concepts related to the principle of PU was used (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This method is considered to be suitable *"to provide knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon under study"* (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992, p. 314) and *"goes beyond merely counting words"* (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278). The following documents were analysed: (a) the request for funding and recognition of the Houses of the Child (City of Antwerp, n.d.-a); (b) the mission and vision text of the Houses of the Child (City of Antwerp, 2016b); (c) the long-term planning of the Antwerp Houses of the Child (City of Antwerp, 2016a); (d) the basic services matrix of the Antwerp Houses of the Child (City of Antwerp, n.d.-b); (e) the support pyramid of the Antwerp Houses of the Child (City of Antwerp, 2016b); and (f) the municipal vision text on vulnerable families in the Houses of the Child (City of Antwerp, 2014). Throughout this process, the documents were read multiple times to gain a sense of the entire collection of information. Based on these readings, we coded the content of the policy documents and identified themes and patterns such as PU, progressive universalism, accessibility, target group, and customisation. The organisational perspective was studied by field observations in the three cases. The observations were conducted after the analysis of policy documents and covered approximately four consecutive hours of observations in each case. It is well known that physical space may determine how interactions among professionals, among users or between professionals and users are shaped (MacNaughton, Chreim, & Bourgeault, 2013). Therefore, we integrated architecture and pathways followed by users in the observations. Different elements were used as guidelines for the observation: professionals and their contacts, users and their contacts, and design of the premises and pathways followed by the users and their conversations. Field notes were taken, and architectural plans of the premises with the pathways were drawn. The field notes made it possible to analyse the data with a theory-driven thematic analysis. Concepts related to the principle of PU were used. The architectural plans of the premises were analysed by the location of doors, different entrances, and accessibility. Pathways of professionals and their contacts, the users and professionals with their contacts, and design of the premises and pathways

followed by the users individually and their conversations were all observed and analysed, together with the architectural plans and field notes. The goal was to search for specific patterns among the users and professionals and to combine these findings, together with policy-level analysis, at the practical/social work level. The social work level was studied through qualitative semi-structured interviews. One of the main advantages of a semi-structured format is that it provides ample opportunity to explore a topic in depth while also leaving sufficient room for questions that emerge from the dialogue between the interviewee and the participant (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008). In each case, four professionals from different sub-organisations (i.e., the infant consultation schemes and *Inloopteams*) were interviewed, leading to a total of 12 interviews. To maintain this balance between a thematic structure and sufficient room for the participants to elaborate on their own perspectives, we used an interview scheme (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Gill et al., 2008). The content of this scheme emerged from both the policy text analyses and the observations. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, thematically and axially coded, and analysed by the first author. The coding and analyses were verified by the third author to enhance validity and reliability (Van Hove & Claes, 2011). The study proposal was reviewed and approved in line with the University's research ethics guidelines. Eventually, these three perspectives were triangulated (Patton, 2002) and generated three meta-themes: perseverant structuring of populations or predefinitions, image and conceptualisation of the Children's House, and organisational challenges. We discuss each of these overarching themes at each of the three levels.

7.4 Results

7.4.1 Perseverant structuring and predefinitions

The policy documents described each of the services, followed by a description of whom this service is intended for. The infant consultation schemes and the meeting places for parents and children (or drop-ins) were described as universal services for all parents. Separately, the policy documents enumerated additional services for vulnerable families. Despite the basic philosophy of PU, the policy documents clearly structure the Houses of the Child by differentiating target groups labelled as vulnerable families. A vulnerable family is described thus in the municipal vision text (City of Antwerp, 2014): A vulnerable family is a family where the capacity of the parents is under pressure from the presence of one or more stress factors. Stress in the family increases the risk of vulnerability. Stress

lowers the parents' abilities to educate their children and can jeopardise children's development. The more stress factors, and the longer they are present, the greater the damage caused. (City of Antwerp, 2014, own translation). At the organisational level, we observed that physical limitations prevented all families from entering the same premises. As a salient example, in Case 3, different entrances to the building gave access to separate services (see Figure 9). Parents entered a predefined entrance, based on the services they came to use. This implies that some parents never passed by the welcome desk or the waiting room where other parents sat and where information was displayed. In Case 2, different services took place at separate locations because of the limited space in the central building. The location and division of spaces structured (and limited) the possible contacts between different parents. Hence, parents using different services (e.g., parents from ethnic minorities versus ethnic majorities) rarely encountered one another. At the level of daily social work practice, social workers from mother groups all shared a similar vision of the importance of a heterogeneous mix of parents in their group work. One of the participants was very clear on this matter, stating that *"you cannot provide services that are solely aimed at vulnerable and disadvantages families. […] In the end, you want a social mix and not several separate groups"* (Instapje, Case 2, own translation). However, achieving this social mix is not easy, and although several participants indicated that they succeeded in doing so, a gap is to be noticed between this objective and what the realisation of this objective in practice. With regard to this matter, the coordinator of Case 3 mentions:

> *Employees of the Inloopteam perceive their group work as for everyone, but that's not true. The group work here, when I look at the municipalities' definition of vulnerable, is not open to me. They recruit in selective ways. The mother group has its expertise, services and communication channels. These are used to recruit participants, but those channels do not reach a broader public. We do not actually reach the average population here in the neighbourhood with our group work. (Coordinator, Case 3, own translation)*

The rationale at the policy level that some services need to be targeted towards vulnerable families was met with critical reactions from different partnering organisations in the Houses of the Child. They considered this predefining of populations as artificial and not representative of everyday reality. According to them, partners can be universal in their service while having the opportunity to

work in very specific ways to meet the individual needs of each family.

In the words of one of the interviewees:

I think that both specific questions of people and universal services can come together. That is the ideal. You have people who come with specific questions and then you also have people who just jump in. I think you can integrate both. (Kind & Gezin, Case 1, own translation)

During the interviews, it became obvious that different partners of the Children's House disagreed on their conceptualisation of PU. Kind en Gezin (*Kind & Gezin*, funder of the infant consultation scheme), for example, adhered to the idea of a dosage of universal service. Ten consultations are available for all families. In addition, the family support worker can provide additional support, based on the evaluation of a family's needs (e.g., additional consultations or home visits). In contrast, several practitioners from the *Inloopteam*, as well as from *Kind & Gezin*, criticised the physical limitations that prevent families from entering the same premises (in Cases 2 and 3). Different doors for different services, and doors locked with a system of badges, prevent smooth and easy pathways:

> " *You have to enter a narrow corridor and some other spaces. I don't think that's easily accessible. I don't think the house itself is easily accessible either. You have a difficult flow. There are many separate rooms and the parents are not allowed to enter all these rooms. That is not ideal. (Inloopteam, Case 3, own translation)*

The first contact for most families—and thus an important task of welcoming—is the responsibility of volunteers in most Houses of the Child. Unfortunately, the architectural design does not allow these volunteers to see every parent. Indeed, not all parents enter through the main entrance: Some enter the room of their specific service directly, without passing by the welcome area. Data from the interviews suggest that the preliminary structuration of services in predefined target groups is twofold. There are services that originated as services for vulnerable families, or families that are perceived as such. Other services represent a threshold for vulnerable families and have a history of being primarily used by middle-class families, such as midwives of the maternity care home visitors. Our data suggest that prestructuring the services is most often a matter of the former, rather than the latter. As the next section explains, this may

strongly influence the image of the integrated centre.

7.4.2 Image and conceptualisation

The policy documents state that accessibility is one of the seven basic principles for the Houses of the Child (City of Antwerp, 2016a). Therefore, a decentralised approach was adopted, with a Children's House in each area of the city, and with basic services, accessible to all families (and thus universal), in each of these centres (City of Antwerp, 2016b). Communication is considered an important aspect of availability and accessibility. A recognisable and attractive corporate identity for all Houses of the Child was developed by the city. Remarkably, however, the flyers for the different Houses of the Child used different terminologies. In Case 2, the flyers referred to the House as a "*nice place for families*". In contrast, in Case 1, the flyer (despite its similar content) referred to the House as a place where you can come when you have questions or problems regarding your children. These differences in headlines may result in diverse perceptions. At the social work level, several respondents expressed a need for communication with the general public on a wider level. In their opinion, many potential users are still unfamiliar with the concept of the Houses of the Child. Yet such a communication campaign on a wider level may conflict with the local differences of each Children's House. As the central government did not impose guidelines about the Houses of the Child, there is hardly a common message or profile that can be communicated to the general public. The services located in the Houses of the Child partly determine the image and the perception of the House by the general public. Professionals testified to their lack of satisfaction about this perception. They stressed the importance of having a variety of services and partners present in each of the houses to ensure the perception of a place that accommodates all families. Therefore, it was deemed necessary to have services that appeal to a variation in families. According to the interviewees, the need to achieve a social mix remained a real challenge for the Houses, as well as for preventive health care in general. Many families found their way to *Kind & Gezin* but did not know the other services offered by the Houses of the Child. The existence and the meaning of the meeting places for parents and children were poorly understood by the partners, let alone by the parents. The accessibility of these services was problematic due to the perception in several cases that the Houses of the Child are for problematic situations, whereas general accessibility is a fundamental condition of PU. Professionals of *Kind & Gezin*, as well as coordinating staff, indicated that some families perceive the Houses of the Child as being "*problem Houses of the Child*". This perception jeopardises the principle of PU.
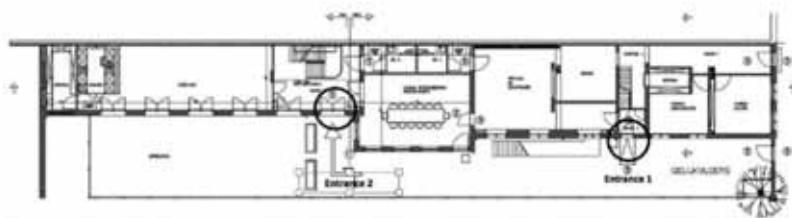
Figure 9: Design of the building in Case 3 (study 5)

7.4.3   Organisations

The infant consultation schemes were believed to serve as an ideal gateway to other preventive family services, as they traditionally reach a very large population and have a low threshold. This role of gateway was explained in policy documents of the city of Antwerp:

> " *From the infant consultation schemes, families are guided to other services in the House. Up to 97% of the families, living in the neighbourhood, are welcomed in the infant consultation schemes. A small proportion of these families uses services from preventive family social work. By bringing together these services in one house, a smooth transition of the perinatal services and services for families with children from 0–3 years is ensured. (City of Antwerp, 2014, own translation)*

The Houses of the Child are houses of partners, and all interviewees unanimously agree that the Houses of the Child entailed a closer and more intensive cooperation between partners. They concurred that in everyday practice, the central function of *Kind & Gezin* was clear. *Kind & Gezin* was confirmed as a crucial gateway to the variety of services in the Houses of the Child, not only in policy documents but also in everyday practice. Members of the different *Inloopteams* confirmed this role of *Kind & Gezin* as gatekeepers:

> " *I think that Kind & Gezin is an important partner of the Houses of the Child, because parents all know them. At first, most of the time, they get to know the Houses through Kind & Gezin, because they come to an infant consultation. From there, they are connected to other services in the Houses, such as the meeting places. (Inloopteam, Case 2, own translation)*

The preventive health nurses and parent support workers have contact with many families. Subsequently, they are assigned the role of guides to the different services in the House, and they also serve as a dispatcher. In that role, they are expected to know which family is to be sent into what direction, which may be in conflict with the concept of PU. The tension appears in the interviews when the play groups for parents and children or drop-in was discussed with the preventive health nurses and the parent support workers. The social workers of the *Inloopteams* emphasised that these play groups should be universal services, where all parents are welcomed. They aim to reach a mix of families from the neighbourhood, as this has multiple positive outcomes for the families and the communities. Not all interviewees shared this point of view about the play groups or meeting places. The employees of the *Inloopteams* unanimously agreed that this mix of families is what they strive for as, in their view, the meeting places are universal services. Some preventive health nurses, in contrast, only referred to vulnerable parents, who they considered as socially isolated to these meeting places. They perceive this service as *"not for all families"* Vulnerability is, in their view, narrowed down to social isolation:

> " *Average families who have a rich social life, who have a good home situation, and a sufficient social network, well, you do not easily send to the play groups. (Kind & Gezin, Case 3, own translation)*

7.5   Discussion

We observed that in the implementation of PU in the case of integrated centres such as the Houses of the Child, a shift took place from varying the dosage of service to the integration of various services for various target groups, defined along ethnic, gender, and socio-economic lines. In doing so, service users may

be stigmatised along these lines and may be unintendedly denied access to some services. Moreover, there is the risk that these services actually reinforce existing social segregation. The concept of PU was derived from the field of health care. When implemented in child and family social work, it may benefit from reconceptualisation and reflection. One question raised by this reflection is how to move beyond the predefinition of target groups with their prestructured specific services. However, it seems that a minimalist interpretation of the concept of PU prevails in practice. This interpretation means that in the Houses of the Child, universal and selective services exist side by side and that the target audience for each service is predefined. The coexistence of a universal service, such as the infant consultation scheme, and a targeted service, such as the mothers peer groups, does not necessarily mean that each family receives the service that it needs, in a vision of PU. A more maximalistic interpretation could move beyond these predefinitions, meaning to bypass the prestructuration of services and taking universal services as a starting point. Differentiation could then start from these universal services and be based on the individual needs of families, rather than their membership in predefined target groups. Doing so also requires changes to the physical space according to the framework of PU. It means that a general welcoming space should be accessible to all families, regardless of the type of service they use, as a condition for the accessibility of specific services to all families who need them. Considering the trend towards integrated services, it is our understanding that it may be time to critically rethink the concept of target groups, used in social policy and practices in the domain of preventive health care and parent support. Previous studies have shown that demands and expectations of families regarding preventive health care may substantially vary, yet they may not necessarily vary along these traditional lines of socio-economic or migration status (Bradt et al, 2015). Considering the historicity of segregated services with target audiences (and the groups for mothers in precarious living conditions in particular), it is not surprising that some partners in the Houses of the Child still see the services organised by the initiators of the mother groups as selective services for a vulnerable target group, despite the universal services they are now supposed to be offering. The play groups or drop-ins are meant to be meeting places for all parents and children, aiming at social support in a diverse urban context (Vandenbroeck, Boonaert, Van der Mespel, & De Brabandere, 2009), combining bonding and bridging functions (Patulny & Haase Svendsen, 2007). However, they are still perceived as something for needy families and, as a result, the Houses of the Child tend to be perceived as places for problems rather than a universal service any parent is entitled to. Accessibility for all is a fundamental condition of PU. Services that

pursue to work according to this principle need to take this into account whenever they make decisions on the arrangement of services, on communication, on housing, on the choice of partners and many more. The image and conceptualisation of services plays an important role in their accessibility. This perception of the Houses of the Child as being *"problem Houses of the Child"* may be detrimental to the principle of PU. As a result, parents from diverse socio-economic and migrant backgrounds may all experience thresholds. In sum, the Children's House is a typical example of an integrated social service, a house of many partners who try to find new ways of cooperation and attunement when working together. Some partners, in doing so, take a leading position in this endeavour. *Kind & Gezin* is such a leading partner and is described as the gateway to the House of the Child. Yet, in practice, their professionals also seem to function as gatekeepers, dispatching families to specific services according to their group characteristics, rather than the demands of the parents. It is, eventually, the social workers that make PU real, rather than structures or buildings, despite their importance. Recognizing this position of the social worker is a condition to make optimal use of their central function. These professionals need time to adjust to their new roles, and also systemic support, including physical adjustments to the design.

7.6   References

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CHAPTER 8

GENERAL CONCLUSION

8.1 Introduction

The purpose and overall objective of this doctoral dissertation were to disentangle how social cohesion is conceptualised in child and family social work, and to contribute to the theorisation and conceptualisation of social cohesion in relation to child and family social work. Social cohesion, likened to the adhesive holding society together, has gained prominence in both research and policymaking during periods of societal upheaval and rapid change. Scholars and policymakers perceived social cohesion as essential for the societal functioning of a community. Initiatives to foster social cohesion strived to balance individual rights with collective well-being in the face of globalisation, competitive social policies, and increasing diversities. The renewed interest in social cohesion extended beyond academia and policymaking, manifesting in various fields, including social work. In this field, promoting social cohesion has been an objective since 2014, according to the International Federation of Social Work (IFSW). In this vein, social work practices emphasise principles of social justice, human rights, and respect for diversity while promoting social cohesion. Within child and family social work, integrated child and family social work practices have been prioritised by international bodies to foster social cohesion, with a focus on both individual and community-oriented outcomes. Since 2013, initiatives like the House of the Child in Flanders (Belgium) exemplify efforts to address societal segregation and (re)build social cohesion. The resurgence of interest in social cohesion within this field reflects an understanding of its importance to complex social issues such as poverty and inequality. This recognition has urged collaborative, multi-disciplinary approaches which involved working in an integrated manner with various stakeholders to create supportive environments for children and families, underscoring the collective effort needed to promote social cohesion and address interconnected challenges. Despite the obvious growing emphasis on social cohesion in child and family social work, there exist a significant conceptual confusion and a lack of theoretical foundations guiding child and family social work. The implementation of collaborative and multi-disciplinary approaches, particularly through the implementation of the Decree on Preventive Family Support which resulted in the establishment of Houses of the Child in Flanders (Belgium), aims to address these individual and community-level needs. However, the conceptualisation of social cohesion in child and family social work remains under-theorised, leading to theoretical ambiguity and contradicting expectations for child and family social work. The quasi-conceptual nature of social cohesion,

as described by Bernard (1999), adds to the challenge, making it adaptable and broad, on the one hand, but difficult to define, on the other hand. Based on these statements, there is a need for a comprehensive theoretical framework of social cohesion and conceptual clarity to support child and family social work in effectively addressing social cohesion and aligning policy expectations with the practical implementation of promoting social cohesion. The central objective of this dissertation was to untangle the various conceptualisations of social cohesion within the realm of child and family social work, and to contribute to its theoretical framework. Contributing to the theorisation and conceptualisation of social cohesion by means of this doctoral dissertation involved exploring multiple perspectives without the need to obtain a single definitive definition of social cohesion. The central research question, addressing the conceptualisation and theorisation of social cohesion concerning child and family social work in contexts of increased diversity, unfolded into several related research questions:

RQ1: What could be theoretical conceptualisations of social cohesion which are scientifically valid?

RQ 2: How is social cohesion interpreted by policymakers?

RQ3: What is going on in child and family social work regarding the promotion of social cohesion?

RQ 4: How do (child and family) social workers give meaning to the concept of social cohesion and their responsibility in achieving this political mission?

RQ 5: How is the concept of proportionate universalism operationalised in child and family social work?

Based on these research questions, the research project employed a qualitative research design to capture the perspectives of various stakeholders across different levels, including academic scholars, policymakers, and practitioners, as well as variations in settings and contexts within Flanders, Belgium. The methodological framework facilitated an in-depth analysis of the research questions' multifaceted aspects. To start, a mapping of social cohesion was conducted by delving into literature from the fields of sociology, political science, urban studies, philosophy, community psychology, and (child and family) social work. Various interpretations of social cohesion were considered, as scholars have proposed frameworks of social cohesion on a micro, meso, and macro level, distinguishing individual, community-based, and societal perspectives. A

recent literature review (Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017) aimed to redefine social cohesion to accommodate the diversity of values and cultures in contemporary societies. On the basis of this literature review, efforts have been made to structure the evolving meanings of social cohesion and achieve consensus through a theoretical framework, namely the social cohesion radar (Dragolov et al., 2016), which emphasises dimensions such as resilient social relations, emotional connectedness, and a focus on the common good within cohesive societies. Throughout the studies, this theoretical framework of the social cohesion radar was central in the analyses, because of the comprehensiveness of the framework and the deliberate exclusion of some elements, such as shared values and norms. Social cohesion, according to the social cohesion radar, is defined as:

> *The quality of social cooperation and togetherness of a collective, defined in geopolitical terms, that is expressed in the attitudes and behaviors of its members. A cohesive society is characterized by resilient social relations, a positive emotional connectedness between its members and the community, and a pronounced focus on the common good. (Delhey et al., 2018, p. 430; Dragolov et al., 2016, p. 6)*

Based on this definition, the dimensions of the social cohesion radar entail three core aspects (Figure 10), each of which unfolds in three related subdomains.
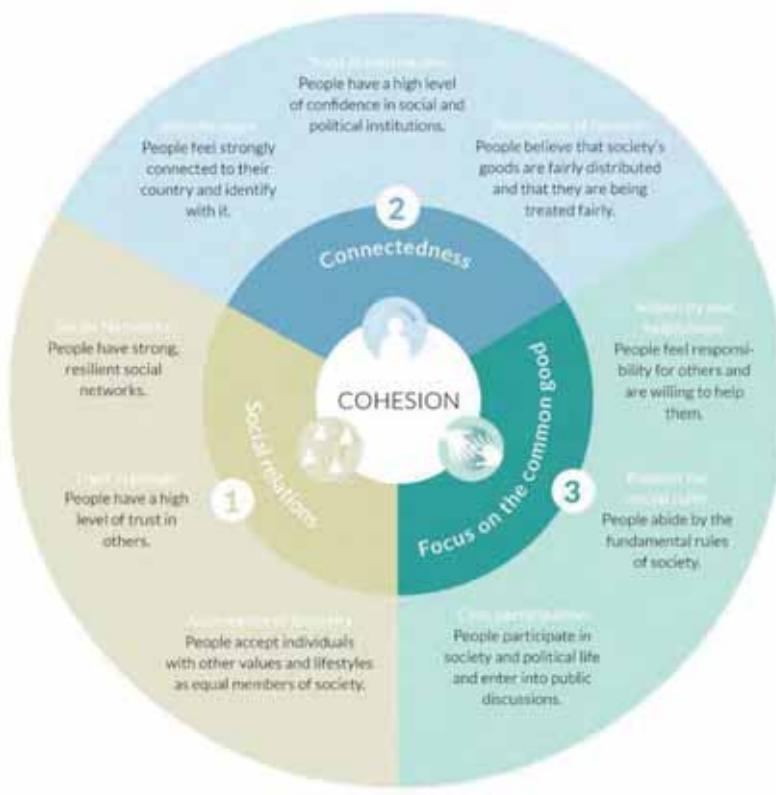
Figure 10: Social cohesion radar (Dragolov et al., 2016)

The first aspect is *'social relations'* and includes social networks, trust in people, and acceptance of diversity. The social cohesion radar identifies the social networks subdimension as having strong and resilient social networks, the trust subdimension as having a high degree of confidence in others, and the acceptance of diversity subdimension means that individuals with different lifestyles and values are regarded as equals in society (Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017). The second aspect is *'focus on the common good'* and consists of solidarity and helpfulness, respect for social rules, and civic participation. Solidarity and helpfulness refer to people's sense of responsibility for each other and their willingness to help each other, respect for social rules implies that people abide by the fundamental rules of society, and civic participation is related to the participation of people in social and political life, as well as their taking part in public discussions (Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017). The third aspect is *'connectedness'*, and unfolds in identification, trust in institutions, and perception

of fairness. Identification is interpreted as the (strong) connection which people feel with their country and which leads them to identify with it, trust in institutions includes people's (profound) trust in social and political institutions, and perception of fairness comprises people's belief that goods in society are distributed fairly and that they are treated fairly as individuals (Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017). The first study in our research (cf. chapter 3) confirmed the comprehensiveness of the social cohesion radar as a theoretical framework. Therefore, we referred to this comprehensive conceptualisation of social cohesion as the theoretical framework in the general conclusions which follow this introduction.

8.2   Limitations

By conducting the specified studies, we responded to the scarcity of research on social cohesion in child and family social work. The research objective was to disentangle how social cohesion is conceptualised in child and family social work, and to contribute to the theorisation and conceptualisation of social cohesion in relation to child and family social work. Nevertheless, the various studies have some limitations which should be acknowledged in the following sections. First, attention is paid to the research context and different qualitative research methods. Subsequently, the limitations of the samples are addressed and discussed.

8.2.1   Limitations of the research context and qualitative research methods

Qualitative research, with its emphasis on exploring the depth and nuances of human experiences, plays a crucial role in understanding social phenomena. However, this methodological approach, while providing valuable insights, is not without limitations.

8.2.1.1 The Flemish context of the Houses of the Child

The research unfolded within specific contexts and settings, limiting the generalisability of the findings (Merriam, 2009). The exploration of political standpoints, of professional perspectives, and of everyday practices is obviously constrained by the contexts in which they are studied. Contextual constraint refers to the limitation imposed by the specific context in which research is conducted (Merriam, 2009). This constraint limits the transferability of research findings to other settings or populations. To address this limitation, the cases

have been carefully chosen. These cases approach the diversity of practices and they are in no way atypical for the Houses of the Child in Flanders. However, the Houses of the Child themselves, and thus the way child and family social work is organised in Flanders, are not necessarily typical of what happens in Western Europe within the field of child and family social work. Nevertheless, they are an interesting area of study, precisely because of their proportional universalistic ambitions.

In the context of this research, we should emphasise that researching social cohesion in the Houses of the Child in Flanders requires acknowledging our point of view, which underlies the way we explored this concept (Vandenbroeck, 2007). The essence of the analyses was based on Flemish policy documents, and interviews with policymakers and practitioners on both a Flemish and local level, leading to a Flemish point of view on social cohesion which is consequently Eurocentric. Therefore, social cohesion was examined through a Western European lens. Research in this field can inadvertently perpetuate biases, overlooking diverse perspectives and hindering the development of a truly global understanding. Eurocentrism tends to prioritizes Western cultural norms and values, leading to a neglect of other cultural perspectives (Joseph, Reddy & Searle-Chatterjee, 1990). This bias can result in a limited understanding of social cohesion, as it may not adequately account for the diversity of social structures and values present beyond Western Europe. In the future, encouraging collaboration among researchers from various cultural backgrounds can help overcome these Eurocentric biases (Joseph, Reddy & Searle-Chatterjee, 1990). Although this local context does pose certain limitations, it is nevertheless important to study social cohesion from local perspectives.

Finally, the descriptions made in this dissertation provide a snapshot of reality at a specific moment in history and subject to the continuous evolution of child and family social work, research, and policies. Especially in policy and practices, this was very visible and tangible throughout the research. At the moment of writing the final part of this doctoral research, a new policy proposal is under construction, presenting a possible new Decree for preventive family support. However, change was also constant in practices. Different practitioners underwent staff changes during the observations, and today, a significant number of practitioners are no longer employed. Additionally, informal conversations about the observations and my presence itself led to changes. For instance, some of the toys were relocated to one of the waiting areas of the infant consultation scheme, and one of the playgroups began working on rearranging the space to, for example, allow parents to sit lower, i.e., at the children's level,

during the activities, and so forth.

8.2.1.2 Limitations of the Critical Incident Technique (CIT)

The Critical Incident Technique (CIT) is a qualitative research method which aims to capture specific events, behaviours, or incidents which are deemed critical to understanding a particular phenomenon (Flanagan, 1954). While the CIT has its merits in providing rich and detailed insights, it also comes with inherent limitations which researchers must consider when employing this method (Sharoff, 2008). One of the primary limitations of the CIT is its susceptibility to subjectivity and bias (Sharoff, 2008). The data collected through this method heavily rely on the perceptions and interpretations of individuals who report the incidents. Respondents may unintentionally inject their own biases or emotions into their descriptions, leading to a potential distortion of the data. The focus of the CIT on these critical incidents may result in a skewed representation of the studied phenomenon. Routine or everyday behaviours which do not fall under the category of critical incidents may be overlooked. This limitation can hinder a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter, as it neglects the more commonplace aspects of the participants' experiences. The accuracy of the information collected through the CIT heavily depends on the participants' ability to recall and articulate specific incidents. Memory lapses or distortions can compromise the reliability of the data, making it challenging for researchers to draw accurate conclusions from the reported incidents. The matter of reflection in the CIT has elicited both favourable and unfavourable opinions. This aspect can be seen as a constraint, as it relies on participants' capability to furnish a precise narrative of an incident. Although researchers ought to trust in participants' ability to narrate their experiences accurately, there remains a risk of embellishment creeping in (FitzGerald, Seale, Kerins & McElvaney, 2008).

Additionally, the CIT, used during the interviews, described a procedure for collecting observed incidents of relevance to social cohesion. The CIT had the advantage of providing narratives which shed light on the meaning which practitioners give to their work. Still, it did not document a process, as it described single moments or incidents (Flanagan, 1954). The CIT method itself does not transcend the person. To partially accommodate this throughout the interviews, the incidents were further questioned to gain more context and insight, and to visualise the process which some families went through during their participation in the child and family social work practices. In addition, a focus on the inter-individual aspect may be partly explained by the methodology of the CIT. When asked about a successful experience in promoting social cohesion, practitioners

rapidly move to this microlevel because this is where these successes are often the most visible. Recognizing the limitations associated with the CIT, it was decided to combine the interviews with observations in the various cases and child and family social work practices.

8.2.2 Sample limitations

8.2.2.1 Exclusively literature from Web of Science

In the first study, where we performed a systematic narrative literature review, the selected literature on social cohesion was restricted by the time, language, and consulted electronic database. All the articles were selected from the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI), using the Web of science. The coverage of the SSCI across (non-English speaking) countries is not guaranteed (Archambault et al., 2006). In line with this limitation, Archambault et al. (2006, p. 333) point out that non-English-speaking researchers "*publish more often in their mother tongue and in journals with a more limited distribution*", as concepts in social sciences are often locally oriented and the context impacts the meaning of the concept. Above that, it is possible that the minority of qualitative research methods, as presented in the findings, is limited because large-scale, quantitative studies are more easily published in journals available in the SSCI. Furthermore, the *file drawer problem* (Salkind, 2010) or publication bias can occur. This makes it possible that nonsignificant results which expect but not demonstrate effects of social cohesion stay in the so-called file drawers of researchers and remain unpublished in the SSCI (Salkind 2010). As a consequence, generalisation of the selection of literature should be handled with care.

8.2.2.2 The voices of parents and children

Throughout this research, it is important to acknowledge whose voices are heard and whose voices are silenced. The theorisation of social cohesion in child and family social work is a complex endeavour which necessitates a comprehensive understanding. One significant limitation in this field arises when the voices of parents are not actively and adequately listened to. Oftentimes, the perspectives and experiences of parents are overshadowed or omitted, hindering the development of a holistic and nuanced understanding of social cohesion. One crucial aspect impacted by this limitation is the potential misalignment between theoretical frameworks and the practical realities faced by parents and families. The absence of parental voices in the theorising process can lead to a skewed perspective, as the intricate and context-specific challenges faced by families

are not adequately represented. Child and family social work may inadvertently formulate interventions or policies which fail to promote social cohesion. Moreover, neglecting the voice of parents may perpetuate power imbalances within the child and family social work domain. By excluding parents, there is a risk of reinforcing paternalistic approaches which undermine the agency and autonomy of parents. This can contribute to a sense of disenfranchisement among parents, hindering their willingness to engage with child and family social work. In addition, the lack of parental input also jeopardises the cultural competence of child and family social work. Failing to incorporate the perspectives of parents in the theorising process may result in culturally insensitive approaches. Adding to this is the limited cultural diversity among the practitioners and volunteers, which also restricted the voices represented during the interviews.

In conclusion, the limitations of not gathering the voices of parents when theorising social cohesion in child and family social work are multifaceted and impactful. To enhance this in further research, it is imperative to actively seek and integrate the perspectives of parents into the theoretical frameworks which guide child and family social work practices. By doing so, practitioners can cultivate a more accurate, culturally competent, and parent-centred approach which truly fosters social cohesion within diverse contexts.

8.3   Main findings

With these limitations in mind, the results of the various studies are summarised. We start by focusing on the differences and similarities which we observed both within and across the cases. Then, we delve into the key findings from the research across the three cases. Rather than formulating the main findings by chapter, the findings are clustered into three central themes, which became evident throughout the studies, namely social cohesion as a relational construct (1), social cohesion as a socio-political construct (2), and proportionate universalism and the road to diversity (3). Following the social cohesion radar, social cohesion is presented as a multidimensional concept.

8.3.1   Differences and commonalities in the three cases

Based on the multiple case study which we performed, differences and commonalities in the three cases became apparent. In this part of the conclusion,

we focus on these differences and similarities and relate them to the described research context (see 2.2.4).

8.3.1.1 Dynamics of diversity in child and family social work practices

One notable difference which emerged was the diversity of parents and families present in the child and family social work practices, which may or may not reflect the diversity within the neighbourhood. This could vary significantly depending on the type of service. In case A, it became evident that the diversity of the neighbourhood in which the House of the Child was located was not always reflected by the background of the parents who made use of the services provided by the House of the Child, as practitioners themselves indicated.

> *There is very little diversity in our groups, I think. We really want to focus much more on this this year, but it's not so straightforward. (Interview 1, Case A)*

The limited diversity mentioned in the interviews was evident during the observations in case A. A large group of Moroccan mothers was seen across various practices and often constituted a vast majority of participants in activities such as playful learning or playgroups. Given that a significant number of people living in this neighbourhood were from Moroccan descent, their presence in the House of the Child was not surprising.

> *Here, it's primarily Moroccan women. Yes, Arabic-speaking, but I think mainly Moroccan women. (Interview 18, Case A)*

However, it is noteworthy that, while the neighbourhood was also characterised by an increasing number of parents of Eastern European descent, these parents were much less present, not to say absent, in the House of the Child. Furthermore, middle-class white parents were very limited in presence and were only noticed during the observations in the consultation schemes. In addition to this homogeneous group in terms of origin, it was also notable that mainly mothers attended the House of the Child, which is a trend across the cases.

In case B, there was a clear focus on vulnerable families. Social cohesion in case B was mainly defined by working with families with a migration background.

Consequently, these were also the families which case B reached, according to the practitioners.

> " *That's also somewhat characteristic of our organisation. It's not that we say families without a migration background aren't welcome here, but that's just the neighbourhood we're in. Actually, hardly any Flemish families come here. 99% of the families have a migration background. (Interview 13, Case B)*

When it comes to promoting social cohesion, examples from practitioners almost exclusively involved families with (recent) migration experiences. Besides the specific focus on families with a migration background, there is a significant ethnocultural diversity in this organisation, surpassing the characteristic diversity of the neighbourhood. Especially during activities such as the Dutch language practice opportunities, but also during playgroups, parents from different neighbourhoods join the activities. Parents from Indonesia, Morocco, Afghanistan, Albania, Syria, and Russia, for example, came together here. Despite case B's the focus on families with a migration background, once again, the consultation scheme was the place where an even greater diversity of families gathered, reflecting the diversity of the neighbourhood.

In case C, it was much more difficult to draw comparisons with the chosen neighbourhood and to determine to what extent the characteristics of this neighbourhood were reflected in the child and family social work practices. This is partly due to the presence of just one House of the Child within the entire city at a central location and the *inloopteam* not being physically integrated at this location. However, what was noticeable, was that the services provided in the chosen neighbourhood, which is known for the white middle-class population which lives there, seem to be primarily intended for families from an adjacent, more diverse and vulnerable neighbourhood, rather than the middle-class parents characteristic of the chosen case. In the following example, the references made to 'the neighbourhood', refer to this adjacent vulnerable area, and the specified 'community centre' is located approximately on the border between these two distinct neighbourhoods.

> " *Due to changes in the neighbourhood, the inloopteam saw an opportunity to establish a playgroup at the community centre. The advertising for this new offering was extensive, reaching far beyond the neighbourhood. As a result, primarily middle-class families from various parts of the city were attending their activities. The challenge to enter a community centre proved to be significant for many families with a diverse ethnocultural background. After numerous contacts with schools, childcare centres, and other organisations, the more diverse and vulnerable families did not attend, and they decided to stop the service. Several months later, they combined the playgroup with a new project, Foodsavers, with the aim of primarily reaching people from the neighbourhood. Foodsavers involves distributing fruit and vegetable packages to families with children from the area. This was combined with the playgroup. The practitioners noted that in this way, they can reach vulnerable parents from the neighbourhood and encourage them to enter the community centre. However, the connection with the playgroup remains a challenge. Parents with children often came specifically for material support and left immediately after this need is fulfilled. On the other hand, after stopping the regular playgroup, without the Foodsaver project, the 'less vulnerable' parents didn't return. (Interview 11, Case C)*

In line with this, mainly vulnerable familieswere reached by the *inloopteams,* despite the claimed universality of the playgroups. This contrasted with a very large group of middle-class white families who were present in the consultation scheme of the House of the Child in the city centre of case C.

In conclusion, it can be said that, for the observed cases, the consultation schemes have an enormous potential to bring together a very diverse group of families, while for other services there are various, sometimes structural, elements preventing a diversity of parents from accessing the services. In this chapter, we will further address the opportunities of these consultation schemes, particularly the missed ones.

8.3.1.2 Local contexts of child and family social work practices

Throughout the paragraphs above, it became clear that the implementation of the Houses of the Child influenced various dimensions central to this research. Having one integrated child and family social work practice as a tangible place where people can go to has many advantages for facilitating referral and creating connections. In case A, where there was an integration in a House of the Child located in a specific neighbourhood, we saw successful referrals of a variety of families, for example to the playgroups. The playgroup often served as an alternative waiting area for the reception or consultation scheme, but the result was that parents became familiar with the playgroup and spent some time there. In this case, there was also a strong focus on thoughtful scheduling of services to facilitate these connections. In case C, their position within the House of the Child, both on paper and in practice, was more exploratory, not yet concrete. Partly because of this, referrals of families were much more limited, and primarily vulnerable families were referred, despite the aim of making various services available for all families. In case B, a child and family social work practice which is deeply rooted in the neighbourhood was chosen. The organisation has a longstanding tradition and is well-known among more vulnerable and migrant families. Families found their way to this practice, partially because of this case's strong focus on material support. This proved to be an important gateway for reaching these families.

In all three cases, *inloopteams* were present, but these teams and the associated playgroups were characterised by important differences. Firstly, the team in case C is smaller, but this team is also characterised by its relatively stable composition. This contrasted with case B, in which, even throughout the interviews and observations, there was a high turnover in practitioners. In case A, the largest team of the three cases was established, and it was in this case that the strongest shared vision emerged through the interviews and observations. The services had a clear structure and underlying visions and theoretical frameworks were explained during the interviews, independent of the practitioner. In contrast, the practitioners in case B had developed an individual style in shaping the playgroups and were solely responsible for a specific playgroup. This led to variation within one organisation as to how the playgroups were organised and implemented. For example, one practitioner wrote a report and kept detailed records, while another only recorded more quantitative data such as numbers. Additionally, there were differences in how they offered fruit, provided (or not) parenting support, and consciously left families alone. Moreover, a difference in the number of practitioners, from one practitioner in

case B up to sometimes three practitioners in case C, led to differences in the playgroups. Lastly, the diversity of the team also played a significant role. In all three selected cases, the diversity among the practitioners was more limited than the diversity which characterised the neighbourhood and services.

In addition to the differences, common threads and strong similarities became visible in the three cases. A description of these similarities can be found in the following sections of these general conclusions, which are divided into three themes, namely social cohesion as a relational construct (1), social cohesion as a socio-political construct (2), and proportionate universalism and the road to diversity (3).

8.3.2   Social cohesion as a relational construct

The different dimensions of social cohesion can be grouped under a continuum which can be observed across the different conceptualisations, namely social cohesion as a relational construct and as a socio-political construct (see 2.2). Social cohesion as a relational construct is consistent with a minimal interpretation, in terms of which social cohesion is mainly defined at a micro and meso level which only construct the relationships among individuals and groups (Chan & Chan, 2006). Referring to the social cohesion radar, this involves dimensions such as commitment to the social network, trust between people, and solidarity and helpfulness (Dragolov et al, 2016). This interpretation emerged throughout various studies, with a focus on social cohesion as social capital being unavoidable. For instance, practitioner narratives primarily depicted moments during which social cohesion was promoted and parents connected with one another, aiming to establish social bonds. This clearly emerged as a recurring theme across all the interviews (Chapter 6). These interactions, situated in different contexts, varied in duration, ranging from brief one-off encounters to frequent and repeated meetings, particularly within parent groups convening biweekly. Common ground for these exchanges often stemmed from shared experiences, such as parenthood or having children present in the services. Moreover, there was a deliberate effort to engage parents and their family members in designated activities, such as crafting sessions or joint fruit breaks, fostering opportunities for interaction between parents and their children.

> *If children are playing and we install this fruit moment, there will naturally be 'my child is 15 months and doesn't eat yet', 'my child is 13 months and he doesn't want to drink milk anymore, he only wants to eat plain food'. And then parents can talk about their experiences together. (Interview 3, Case B)*

In addition to fostering social networks, practitioners underscored the significance of cultivating trust and ensuring safety as part of this relational construct of social cohesion. Establishing trust and safety were deemed essential prerequisites for meaningful interactions between parents, between parents and children, or between parents and practitioners, as well as between children and practitioners. Participants acknowledged their pivotal role in nurturing this trust among parents and facilitating trust between parents and practitioners.

> *You do feel after a while that people do start to have a bit of confidence in you, so they do loosen up and dare to be themselves. If something is bothering them, they do come and tell us. And that's what we want, that there is trust. That when people have difficulties or there is something wrong, that they can come to us. We want people to have confidence in who we are and in what we do here. (Interview 11, Case C)*

By conceptualising social cohesion as a relational construct across the various perspectives considered in the research, we would like to further elaborate on two noteworthy elements which emerged from our study: the contested place of shared values and the importance of light encounters.

8.3.2.1 The contested place of shared values

When looking at the existing academic literature on social cohesion in child and family social work, it was noticeable that social cohesion is at risk of being overshadowed by a dominant view of social cohesion as social capital (Chapter 3). Many conceptualisations or questionnaires scaling social cohesion almost exclusively focus on social relationships, trust in people, and helping each other. The questionnaire below (Carter et al., 2013) illustrates this point (Figure 11).

APPENDIX 1

TABLE 5   Neighborhood social scale items

Scale	Response categories
Social cohesion	
Please tell me whether you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree about the following statement…	
1. If there is a problem around here, the neighbors get together to deal with it	Strongly agree = 1
2. There are adults in the neighborhood that children can look up to	Agree = 2
3. People around here are willing to help their neighbors	Disagree = 3
4. You can count on adults in this neighborhood to watch out that children are safe and do not get in trouble	Strongly disagree = 4
5. When I am away from home, I know that my neighbors will keep their eyes open for possible trouble	
Social disorder	
How much of a problem is the following in this neighbourhood…	
1. Litter, broken glass or garbage?	A big problem = 1
2. Selling or using drugs?	Somewhat of a problem = 2
3. Alcoholics and excessive drinking in public?	No problem = 3
4. Groups of young people who cause trouble?	

Figure 11: Questionnaire of social cohesion (Carter et al., 2013)

Along with this dominant, minimal interpretation, a focus on shared values and norms was observed in this conceptualisation. Shared values and norms as an objective to strive for in social cohesion is an aspect open to debate in the interpretation of social cohesion as a relational and inter-individual construct. As stated, the theoretical framework of the social cohesion radar (Dragolov et al., 2016) refrained from emphasising homogeneous values or seeking value consensus, a perspective we acknowledged as valuable. A model centred on homogeneity of values and norms does not seem preferable, given that contemporary societies thrive on diversity and mutual interdependence (Josefová, 2014). Most of the literature in our systematic narrative literature review (Chapter 3), which was mainly rooted in the field of community psychology, focused on these shared values and norms, the willingness to help people, trust, and the power of social relationships (Brisson et al., 2018; Frye, 2007; Zuberi & Teixeira, 2017). For example, social cohesion was comprised of five items and measured on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The items were specified as follows: *"I live in a close-knit neighborhood", "People in my neighborhood are willing to help their neighbors", "People in my neighborhood generally don't get along with each other", "People in my neighborhood do not share the same values", and "People*

in my neighborhood can be trusted" (Zuberi & Teixeira, 2017, p. 463). Similarly, other conceptualisations of social cohesion emphasise these shared values:

> *A society in which the members share common values which enable them to identify common aims and objectives, and share a common set of moral principles and codes of behavior through which to conduct their relations with one another. (Kearns & Forrest, 2000)*

> *The degree to which individuals and groups within a particular society are bound by common feelings of consensus, share common values and goals and relate to one another on a co-operative basis. (European Commission, 2001)*

Consistent with this, when we integrated the policy perspective (Chapter 4) into our research, there was a proposal to focus on creating a homogeneous, cohesive society with shared values and norms. The emphasis on shared values and norms yielded the assumption that designated groups in society need to be socialised in these shared values and norms.

> *What is important is this shared pedestal of values that are universal, […] fundamental values that we try to make our own as much as possible […]. Knowledge of language is important, activation is important, but also the shared values, though not the values from a bygone romanticism about one's own nation, instead a kind that binds us as human beings regardless of our origin — what should bind us. (Policymaker 3, Flemish level)*

In the interviews and documents, groups which allegedly did not share these values were framed, yet it remained unclear what these values were or who was competent to determine them. While promoting shared norms and values was often seen as a cornerstone for fostering social cohesion, according to the academic literature and policy analyses, an exclusive focus on this aspect can yield negative consequences. In line with this, social cohesion carries the risk of being instrumentalised to socialise families into the dominant values and norms of society. Emphasising shared norms and values may inadvertently exclude individuals or groups who deviate from the dominant cultural norms. In the past,

several social scientists chose to incorporate specific shared values as a central element for social cohesion (Berger-Schmitt, 2002; Forrest & Kearns, 2001; Jenson, 2010; Maxwell, 1996). However, recent scholarly works reflect a shift in perspective, driven by two interconnected factors. First, a 'loose' commitment to values, rather than a widespread consensus on values, could potentially promote social cohesion (Mann, 1970). Second, the association between values and social cohesion is characterised not as intrinsic, but rather as a relationship of cause and effect (Nowack & Schoderer, 2020). This means that values do not inherently lead to social cohesion, but rather, they have an impact on social cohesion because of their influence on individuals and societies. Despite the attention which shared values received in the first two parts of this doctoral research, it was striking that in the subsequent studies which introduced the perspective of practices, this focus was not visible. Throughout the observations and interviews in child and family social work (Chapter 5 and 6), this need for shared norms and values is not addressed. From the absence of this dimension, we concluded that in the practices, endorsing the same values and norms is not a requirement for or component of how social cohesion is implemented.

8.3.2.2 The importance of light encounters

On the basis of the relational focus which is evident throughout the research, we uncovered a variety of emphases placed on social cohesion in the academic and policy analysis (Chapter 3 and 4), where a central one was the focus on creating encounters and social capital: *"as a government, you want to encourage these encounters, and above all, you want to look at what we are going to fund in order to achieve social cohesion."* (Policymaker 4, Flemish level). Similarly, practitioners in the three different cases of Antwerp, Ghent, and Mechelen reported mainly the inter-individual components of social cohesion with a clear focus on social relations (Chapter 6) when describing moments where social cohesion is promoted.

> " *It starts with that little chat, people just get to know each other on a very approachable level, not too deep. But I think social cohesion goes much further. Knowing that you can indeed count on each other for a number of things, that you can strengthen each other in that respect. So, I think that social cohesion goes further and beyond what we do here. That if it extends beyond our activities, that they find each other outside our services for encounters, activities in the neighbourhood, help and so on, then you can talk about social cohesion. (Interview 18, Case A)*

A pivotal role during these moments when parents connect is assumed by and for practitioners who foster these social relationships. Additionally, the interviews and observations revealed that an added value to the promotion of social cohesion resides in the light encounters which parents have with each other, frequently without a practitioner's intervention (Chapter 5). Light encounters refer to the fleeting, and often overlooked social interactions which occur in (semi-)public spaces. They may involve gestures like a nod, a smile, or a brief conversation between parents, contributing to a collective consciousness, breaking down social barriers, and promoting a sense of belonging. The encounters are characterised by their brevity, the involvement of strangers, and a lack of deep engagement (Soenen, 2006). However, these light encounters can play a crucial role in shaping social dynamics in the child and family social work as observed.

> " *A child hands a little book to a dad from another family. The dad interacts with the child and says thank you. The child walks back and forth between the one dad and his own mom. The child's mom laughs and tells the other dad that now he'll have to play along the whole time. (Observation 31, Case A)*

The predominant theme across almost all observations revolved around fostering these brief interactions, leading to the establishment of social connections at both individual and familial levels. Whether in the waiting room of the infant consultation scheme or at playgroups, this often entailed brief encounters and exchanges among parents, which can be termed as light encounters. These interactions were so fleeting that verbal communication

wasn't always required. It could be something as simple as a friendly smile or a nod of acknowledgment exchanged between parents faced with the challenge of dressing a toddler. *"While dressing, there is contact between mothers G6 and G8. G8 smiles at G6 once because dressing is not going smoothly all the time"* (Observation 1, Case B). These light encounters between parents (who sometimes do know each other) were very often initiated by the children.

> " *The infant consultation scheme feels like a meeting place. The three mothers are sitting by the playmat, and the three children play, mainly by themselves. The mothers do not have much contact with each other. […] While the parents sit around the playing children, some conversations start, all about the children: age, motor skills, what they are doing, what they like to play with, whether they are already talking... (Observation 17, Case B)*

Likewise, in the policy analysis (Chapter 4), the importance of these light encounters is mentioned:

> " *I think that the child and family social work should be a bit like the old-fashioned baker's or greengrocer's shop in the village. […] I agree that they should be architectural, pleasant and good spaces, which is not always the case. According to their function, they should be places where people can meet fleetingly. Short encounters should be possible. (Policymaker 7, Case A)*

Recorded elements which may facilitate these light encounters were, for example, the furniture and setting in the waiting area and the 'scripts' followed in practices during child and family social work, such as listing a child's name and age in a visible place. These small interventions in the rooms, or set routines, named *scripted practices*, ensured that conversations were triggered by parents facing each other or having children of almost the same age, making them ask some sort of question about, for instance, the child's physical development within a short period of time. These elements were also the ones which practitioners used when they wanted to foster connections between parents.

8.3.3 Social cohesion as a socio-political construct

The second interpretation which we can identify alongside social cohesion as a relational construct is social cohesion as a socio-political construct. Social cohesion as a socio-political construct involves a more maximalist interpretation which requires a certain transferability and takes a social (or communitarian) rather than an individual perspective. Here, conceptualisations which constructed the relationships between individuals or groups and the society as a whole (Chan & Chan, 2006; Dragolov et al., 2016) were identified. While the interpretation of social cohesion as an interindividual construct focuses solely on the micro and meso level, the interpretation of social cohesion as a socio-political construct broadens this focus to the macro level. The socio-political interpretation of social cohesion as presented in the subdimensions of the social cohesion radar, such as civic participation, perception of fairness, and trust in institutions, were much less present in the different studies. When social cohesion is conceptualised as a socio-political construct, it becomes evident that this requires academic literature, policymakers, as well as child and family social work and practitioners, to go beyond the individual perspective.

8.3.3.1 Beyond the individual perspective

Throughout the various sub-studies, it was evident that efforts were made to broaden the concept of social cohesion from merely an individual characteristic to one which encompasses the community, or at least recognises the importance of this community and the connections with parents it entails.

> " *Ensuring that people are actually surrounded by the right network, guided towards the right things, so that they can actually participate in society as much as possible and encounter as few barriers as possible, that's what it ultimately comes down to. [...] For me, it's about ensuring that you achieve such cohesion at different levels, such connections that you can actually function as optimally as possible within your own capabilities in society. (Interview 9, Case C)*

In the first study (Chapter 3), it was remarkable that articles were mainly from journals with a focus on social policy as opposed to articles from (community) psychology. The articles with a focus on social policy broadened the concept from a focus on social relations, what can be located on a micro and meso level,

to the macro level, were trust in institutions, for example, is included. Despite some of these articles transcending the individual level, these conceptualisations remain very scarce. Other dimensions identified in the social cohesion radar (Dragolov et al., 2016) which go beyond this individual level are also overlooked in the existing literature, such as civic participation or respect for diversity. This is counterintuitive, as the articles suggest that challenges to social cohesion often stem from issues such as the lack of acceptance of diversity and concerns about increasing diversity within society (Kallio & Kouvo, 2015). Throughout the policy analysis on a Flemish and local level (Chapter 4), the idea that child and family social work contributed to social cohesion was never questioned. There was, however, a difference in the interpretation of this role, related to the emphasis placed on the conceptualisations of social cohesion. These ranged from a narrower focus on *social relations,* as described above, to a broader view, considering *the common good* and *connectedness*, in which a more holistic conceptualisation of social cohesion was noticeable.

> " *I think that if I look back a while, the first concepts were social networks rather than social cohesion, where you very quickly see the importance of social networks, informal networks. […] When I reflect on social cohesion, I find that I do see a broadening of scope, which actually has an enormous holistic vision, more so than the network. (Policymaker 4, Flemish level)*

Social cohesion was then framed by policy makers as a sort of community building, in which the participation and involvement of citizens were central and fundamental, and social rights were included as a way of *"realizing fundamental social rights through social cohesion"* (Policymaker 11, Case B). Besides bonding and bridging social capital, it was in this construct of social cohesion where linking social capital was promoted. Linking social capital includes "vertical" power relations inherent in the situation and interactions with institutions, such as government agencies, non-governmental organisations, and social work practices (Agger & Jensen, 2015; Woolcock, 2001; Szreter and Woolcock, 2004). Practitioners and volunteers (Chapter 4 and 5) took on a linking role in relation to these other organisations. The organisations could be in the same building, because of the partnership with the House of the Child or because they organised weekly consultation hours, as became clear in the following observation:

> *A mother has a question about paying an invoice. The practitioner refers her to the Digipunt-colleague, who can teach her how to pay invoices online. The practitioner walks along with the mother to the room where the Digipunt-colleague has their office hours each week, in another room, but still in the same building. (Observation 18, Case B)*

In child and family social work, parents supported each other and were supported and referred to other organisations by practitioners, often to enable the parent and family to participate in the wider community or society.

> *The volunteer sees on the list that the family is here for the 15-month consultation, which means they will receive a Bookstart package. The volunteer takes the Bookstart package and approaches the family. She takes out the book from the package, shows it to the mom, and guides her to the library by providing information about the library as well as the activities they offer there. (Observation 10, Case 1)*

In reception services, similar issues frequently arised when parents required support from a practitioner. These included concerns and inquiries about payment installment plans for invoices, scheduling appointments with other organisations, completing questionnaires (for school), providing material support, and many more, as the example below illustrates:

> " *A male interpreter accompanies a Ukrainian family to the reception of the House of the Child. The family consists of a mother and a 14-year-old child. The practitioner begins by explaining the Flemish school system for Ukrainian teenagers (secondary school). The mother asks if there is another place to quickly learn Dutch. The practitioner provides options for the mother, such as Dutch courses, but for the boy, she recommends school. The family is disappointed that they do not know when the son can start school, but they are glad that it will be as soon as possible. The practitioner notes down all the details and arranges for the boy's enrollment. From now on, the school will contact the family. (Observation 24, Case C)*

Practitioners also attempted to include a societal aspect in the services, for example when public discussions were allowed to be commented throughout the activities. When practitioners described moments of promoting social cohesion (Chapter 6), the macro level was included, most commonly to indicate that there is an inequality in society and that there are barriers for vulnerable families which undermine the promotion of social cohesion. Also, during the observations (Chapter 5), a more socio-political conceptualisation of social cohesion could be noticed in the Dutch practice opportunities, where the living and housing conditions were a central topic. Here, parents talked about their situation and participated in an activity which consisted of creating paper bricks with wishes, housing experiences, and challenges on them, which would then be presented on the day of poverty.

> " *For the day of poverty, the minister of housing is coming to Ghent. They want to display a whole square full of paper bricks with many Ghentian families' experiences related to living, looking for housing, and others. The assignment is quite difficult and at first the parents do not really understand what to do. The volunteer explains the assignment again. They may write everything down in their own language, they can draw, and they can help each other. The volunteer gives bricks and markers to the parents. The parents start writing and drawing. Then, they share what they have written or drawn on the bricks. […] M5, when it is her turn, tells the group about her living situation. There are four of them living in a small flat, with only one bedroom. M4 also says that it is very expensive to live in Ghent. The conversation about the difficulties, which they clearly experience, goes on for some time. They compare rents, say how much the other costs are, and indicate that some housing is also not healthy because of humidity problems, for example. (Observation 22, Case B)*

Challenges which parents and families face to participate in society were mentioned, but practitioners (Chapter 6) did not narrate incidents in which they took up a role to counter these challenges and barriers.

> " *You can strengthen and empower families here. But you cannot change or adjust everything in the outside world. And we do see what those families collide with, the barriers they experience. These range from waiting lists at organisations, to phone calls during which people do not take into account that they have to be done a bit slower or without much vocabulary. Undocumented people who do not have access to regular Dutch classes, but would like to learn Dutch. [...] Yes, in order to participate in society, there are a lot of things that families do come up against. (Interview 14, Case C)*

Many families clearly encountered barriers to fully participate in society. Language was one of these, but often they also did not know how certain

systems work. The explanation of these systems, but also often referral to other organisations, was therefore given an important role. Child and family social work focused on creating (individual) prerequisites to enable this civic participation.

> " *We are a place where people can come and practice, because out there, it is sometimes very difficult, and they face a lot of prejudices. Sometimes barriers are very high for our families. This is a good place to practice so that people become more prepared to participate in the outside world. (Interview 2, Case C)*

Despite the normative and political foundations inherent in social work, there was a notable absence of incidents where practitioners actively addressed structural barriers or engaged in practices which contribute to public disagreement about societal organisation. This absence throughout the research of an interpretation of social cohesion as a socio-political construct contrasts with the politicising function which social work and consequently child and family social work are supposed to fulfill (International Federation of Social Work, 2014). Politicising, in its most comprehensive meaning, is defined by De Corte, Hermans, Raeymaeckers, and Bouchaute (2022, p. 33) as "practices that contribute to the public disagreement about how we organize our society. This disagreement is inextricably linked to underlying power relations." To effectively contribute to social cohesion, practitioners must actively work on inter-individual and socio-political dimensions. To conclude, this advocates for a broader understanding of the role of child and family social work, encouraging practitioners and organisations to consider the socio-political context and actively contribute to creating the basic conditions required for strengthening family social cohesion in diverse and unequal contexts. A broader understanding of the role of social work acknowledges that parents and families are influenced by larger social structures, including economic inequalities and political systems. This emphasises the importance of understanding the broader societal forces which shape the lives of parents and families. Factors such as poverty, discrimination, lack of access to education and healthcare, and systemic injustices can have a significant impact. Rather than simply reacting to crises within families, social workers need to be encouraged by policy and their organisations to actively engage in efforts to address the root causes of these social problems.

8.3.4 Proportional universalism and the road to diversity

Diversity has been a central element in this doctoral dissertation from the historical insight to the subsequent research design. By understanding the historical roots of social cohesion, we can critically reflect on the increasing importance which social cohesion is accorded because of, among other things, an increased diversity. Throughout the research, it became evident that diversity encompasses various interpretations and occupies highly variable positions. Diversity can be interpreted as very narrow, limiting it to a unique focus on ethnic diversity. However, when it concerns social cohesion and the associated dimension from the social cohesion radar, respect for diversity, it involves diversity in its broadest form and should therefore include differences in socio-economic status, culture, religion, gender, age, and many others as well. Adding to that, diversity can be seen as both a challenge and an opportunity. In this final part of the main findings, we discuss the role of diversity. Consequently, we conclude that diversity, and thus heterogeneity, can serve as a lever for social cohesion and we consider proportional universalism as a guiding principle for child and family social work which can contribute to achieving this diversity. But before this can be achieved, various challenges which must be acknowledged arise.

8.3.4.1 Heterogeneity as a lever for social cohesion

Respect for diversity was considered as part of the domain of social relations regarding the articles which specifically focus on child and family social work in our literature review (Chapter 3). The concept of diversity, or as Urban (2015) terms it, hyper-diversity, holds a central position in research concerning social cohesion within child and family social work. Respecting diversity, as emphasised by the Social Cohesion Radar (2016), is imperative for fostering social cohesion. However, only two articles explicitly addressed the acknowledgment of diversity as a pivotal aspect of social cohesion. These articles advocated for an anti-essentialist approach to diversity (Geens, Roets, & Vandenbroeck, 2015), which views diverse and evolving norms, values, family structures, lifestyles, circumstances, as well as varied socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds of children and parents as conducive to social cohesion (Geens et al., 2015, p. 532). This perspective regards diversity and heterogeneity as valuable assets for enhancing social cohesion. Following this first study, policymakers and practitioners (Chapter 4 and 6) likewise considered diversity. They viewed diversity as an opportunity and as a challenge, which resulted in

continuing alternation between these two perspectives, as the following section from a policy document illustrated: *"We consider the diversity of our city to be an asset and a challenge, and choose an open and supportive urban community."* (Administrative Agreement, City of Antwerp, 2019). When diversity was considered as challenging for the social fabric of the community, the focus was particularly concentrated on ethnic-cultural diversity, while abandoning its multi-layered essence. In addition, under the heading of harmonious coexistence in diversity referring to the challenge of migration and integration, policymakers referred to peoples' own responsibility and to active citizenship or civic participation as the way towards social cohesion.

> *Diversity in Flemish society can be an added value, but it also presents us with challenges. That is why we resolutely choose a new approach. An approach in which we ask for more effort from those who enter our society, but at the same time we also step-up efforts to live more 'with' and less 'next to' each other. Newcomers who successfully integrate are given every opportunity in our society. Everyone has equal rights, but also equal duties. (Coalition agreement, Vlaamse Overheid, 2019)*

The central focus on diversity unfolds in another dichotomy concerning the connection between parents. A distinction between bonding and bridging social capital emerges in the research related to the current diversity in child and family social work. The bonding type of social capital refers to internally directed social capital which reinforces the exclusive identity and affiliation of homogeneous groups (Putnam, 2000). Additionally, there is bridging social capital, which is anticipated to establish connections between individuals across differences. Bridging social capital pertains to externally directed networks which encompass people from various social classes (Putnam, 2000). From the various studies, it became evident that there is a difference in expectations from policymakers towards child and family social work regarding the utilisation of either bonding or bridging social capital.

> *In fact, child and family social work should also be organised in this way, but we no longer dare to, for example, hold an African mother evening. (Policymaker 7, Case B)*

> ❝ *Traditionally, within child and family social work, we have some forms of services aimed at specific target groups. This could jeopardise social cohesion and it means that we cannot fully exploit the potential of social cohesion. That is also a threat to proportional universalism, so I think we have some challenges there. (Policymaker 6, Flemish level)*

This inevitably brings us to a central principle which can guide child and family social work in transcending this exclusive focus on bonding social capital, which is consequently desirable, namely proportionate universalism

8.3.4.2 Proportionate universalism as a third way

Child and family social work, accessible to all (future) families and based on the principle of proportionate universalism, is expected to create connections between people across differences. This is consistent with the idea of bridging social capital.

> ❝ *The objective to create cohesion or cohesion between families beyond socio-economic and ethno-cultural boundaries. This, in turn, implies that each early childhood service should profile itself in such a way that it is clear to all families, regardless of socio-economic and ethnic cultural background, that the offer is there for each of them. (Memorandum to the Act of Parliament on Preventive Family Support, 2013)*

Proportionate universalism (PU) acknowledges that interventions should be accessible to everyone, but that they should be scaled according to the level of need, guaranteeing that individuals with greater needs receive more significant support (Dierckx et al., 2020). Furthermore, PU underlies the idea that more effort is needed to focus on accessibility for everyone. Integrating this PU framework into child and family social work can play a crucial role in promoting inclusive and cohesive societies. Contradictory to the above principle of proportional universalism, policy documents and makers described child and family social work as being for specific target groups (for example, vulnerable families) and thus possibly reduced the opportunities for connection across differences. In addition, during target group-oriented services, it became

apparent that the socio-economic and ethnic diversity is often more limited than in other child and family social work (Chapter 5). Because of the limited diversity, people quickly shift to the promotion of bonding social capital, which means that opportunities for bridging social capital are not created. However, in the interviews with policymakers, it was precisely such bridging connections which were mentioned as empowering for individuals, offering them opportunities.

> *So, it is a bit on both sides that efforts are being made, both to strengthen networks internally, within communities, within groups, as well as to bridge with other communities. […] You can do that by supporting people in their emancipation, providing frameworks, ensuring that people can build up a personal network. (Policymaker 11, Case B)*

When diversity among parents is evident in practices, it becomes clear that enabling social cohesion requires respecting diversity and providing space for this diversity to unfold within the services. Examples of how diversity and multilingualism are given a place were observed (Chapter 5). For instance, different native languages were given a place in playgroups because parents were allowed to speak these different languages and practitioners actively supported parents in translating their statements when they wanted to enter conversations with parents who spoke a different native language.

> *During the game, parents often ask what the correct Dutch term is for the object that the children are sorting. The term is provided by a parent or volunteer, and a conversation ensues among parents about what the object is in French, Spanish, and Arabic. (Observation 2, Case A)*

Unfortunately, respect for diversity was sometimes missing when comments from practitioners and volunteers compromised the acceptance of diversity, and created practices and situations which were not conducive to respecting diversity.

> " *One of the practitioners is the first to ask, when she sits at the table with a mother wearing a headscarf and her two children, whether the mother has been in Belgium for a long time. The mother responds somewhat surprised and quickly responded that she was born in Belgium. (Observation 4, Case A)*

As mentioned above, in the academic literature (Chapter 3), but also during the interviews with practitioners (Chapter 6), attention to (respect for) diversity was limited. Respect for diversity as an element was never mentioned during the interviews. Only in the context of the final question on the conceptualisation of social cohesion, this subdimension appeared to a limited extent. This is counter-intuitive, as it often is precisely the lack of acceptance of diversity and the worries about increasing diversity in a society which challenge social cohesion, and create an urgent need for redefining social cohesion and ways of living together (Dewinter, Rutten, & Bradt, 2019).

As a result of these challenges created by a growing diversity, many social cohesion studies focused on specific target groups, such as single mothers, and socio-economically disadvantaged families. Also, in child and family social work (Chapter 5 and 6), we see the presence of target group-oriented organisations, which organise universal services. Shaping services from the perspective of target group thinking or by organisations which are historically established for specific target groups (*inloopteam*) has limited diversity in certain child and family social work practices. Despite the conviction that the promotion of social cohesion starts from a non-stigmatising approach (Winkworth, McArthur, Layton, & Thompson, 2010), the focus of being problem- and target-oriented, is in tension with this. It is in this regard that proportional universalism (Chapter 7) can be a possible way to move beyond this target group thinking and to depart from a strong base of universal services, which is already present in the Houses of the Child in the form of the consultation schemes. In this way, it can be ensured that all families have universal access to basic child and family social work, such as affordable and quality childcare, health care, and parenting support. This universal acces can help to establish a common ground and in turn promote social cohesion. Above that, from these universal services, a diversity of families reflecting the diversity of the neighbourhood can find its way to child and family social work, and this heterogeneity can be used to promote social cohesion.

Finally, a clear need and challenge regarding the diversity in child and family

social work practices became visible. When it is necessary to reach a diversity of families, this likewise implies that practitioners have the knowledge and know-how to approach and deal with diversity issues while working with these diverse families (Chapter 3, 5 and 6). A prominent question which arises here is how practitioners can play a role in supporting social cohesion. This question which will be further addressed in the following discussion.

8.4 New narratives for social cohesion in child and family social work

From these main findings, two central discussions which are considered important for research, policy, and practice emerged. The research highlighted a discrepancy between research, policy, and practice in how social cohesion is conceptualised and what is expected from child and family social work with regards to promoting social cohesion based on this conceptualisation. It is evident that what literature, policymakers, and practitioners themselves consider to be the mission of child and family social work largely depends on the conceptualisation social cohesion receives. Therefore, the first part of this discussion will focus on the theorisation of social cohesion. In the second part, building on the insights and discussion, we will explore, based on this understanding, the possible services of child and family social work which can be a lever to promote social cohesion.

8.4.1 New narratives for theory

The story about social cohesion is not new. Already in the introduction of this research, it became clear that social cohesion, with its historical roots in sociology, remains a widely discussed concept to this day (Fonseca, Lukosch, & Brazier, 2019). This widespread discussion and attention to social cohesion across various disciplines have resulted in a multitude and, consequently, a vagueness of conceptualisations of social cohesion (Botterman, 2015). Through our research on the conceptualisations of social cohesion in child and family social work at an academic, policy, and practice level, an important continuum emerged where diverse conceptualisations of social cohesion could find a place. This continuum ranged from social cohesion as a relational construct to a socio-political construct. In the following discussion, we argue that an understanding of social cohesion as a socio-political construct is not only desirable but also necessary in child and family social work. Commitment to social cohesion must go beyond individual family support and empowerment. Therefore, it is crucial to

reconsider how child and family social work contributes to social cohesion. Expanding this contribution means actively addressing the socio-political dimension, in addition to the inter-individual dimensions, to contribute to the essential conditions required for strengthening family social cohesion in diverse and unequal contexts within both families and society.

8.4.1.1 Revisiting the theoretical framework

Based on the social cohesion radar (Dragolov et al., 2016) and insights from our research, we propose a modified interpretation and conceptualisation of social cohesion. In this way, social cohesion becomes a construct which incorporates both the relational and socio-political dimensions, deliberately excludes certain dimensions such as shared values and norms, and identification, and lastly, emphasizes the significance of light encounters and multiple identities.

This insight is further extrapolated from the contested ground of shared values and norms, as described in the results, and shared norms and values are not incorporated into the conceptualisation of social cohesion in child and family social work. This aligns with the social cohesion radar (Dragolov et al., 2016), which also deliberately excluded this dimension. The exclusion of shared values from the conceptualisation of social cohesion is justified on multiple fronts. Firstly, the ambiguity surrounding which values ought to be shared for cohesion to be ensured underscores the inadequacy of this criterion. Additionally, the assertion that cohesion necessitates value homogeneity (Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017) in modern societies is challenged. Traditional models predicated on either population or value homogeneity fail to encapsulate the realities of contemporary diverse societies. The deliberate exclusion of shared norms and values is therefore based on the idea that shared values, norms, and traditions can either foster inclusivity or contribute to exclusionary practices. Imposing a dominant cultural narrative may marginalise minority groups, leading to social fragmentation rather than cohesion. The emphasis on shared values and norms assumes that designated groups in society need to be assimilated in these shared values and norms. There is, however, no clarity on what these values should be or who is competent to determine them. In such cases, social cohesion becomes a tool for maintaining the status quo, reinforcing the perspectives and interests of the dominant group. The perceived need for homogeneity in contexts of increasing diversities urges us to reconsider the concept of social cohesion before pursuing it as an objective in policies and practices. This encourages a nuanced understanding of social cohesion in diverse societies. While shared values are crucial for fostering unity, aligning with the perspective that a diverse

society requires shared values for social cohesion, they should not be pursued to the extent of marginalising or excluding individuals with different beliefs or identities. For example, Anderson (1991) highlighted this perspective in his work about imagined communities and emphasised the importance of unity, inclusivity, and shared history. These values underpin the sense of belonging and solidarity which bind members of a nation together, contributing to the stability and coherence of society. However, the pursuit of consensus around specific values may not necessarily engender cohesion within the broader social fabric. Therefore, policies and practices aimed at promoting social cohesion should prioritise inclusivity, empathy, and dialogue across diverse communities, and, to end, abandon the idea of the necessity of shared values and norms.

The research also provided critical insights into the dimensions of the social cohesion radar itself, particularly into identification as part of connectedness and social networks as part of social relationships. Identification, defined by the social cohesion radar (Dragolov et al., 2016) as the strong connection which people feel with their country and which consequently causes them to identify with it, contradicts how parents are approached in child and family social work. They are welcomed from the perspective of not just one identity, and certainly not a sort of national identity. Parents in child and family social work are approached based on the multiple identities which they have, depending on the situation. Moreover, the strongest identification is not the connection with the country or neighbourhood in which parents live, but rather the commonality which parents have in child and family social work, namely being a parent (or becoming one). The shared identity which featured prominently in the incidents was the identity of 'being a parent'. This identity or role was central to the child and family social work, and was used by practitioners to, among other things, build connections between parents (Geens, 2016; Soenen, 2006). Practitioners also referred to the identification or connection parents had with their home country, their heritage culture, and language. This was done with the idea of exploring how this could be valued in the services. The absence of a shared identity – or rather the presence of a diversity of different identities – is what led to contacts between parents, for example when parents start translating for each other in a group conversation.

The relational interpretation of social cohesion is characterised by a focus on social relations and social capital. Child and family social work, with the bridging strength which the aspect of having children brings as a connecting factor between parents, places a significant emphasis on this dimension of social relations. However, it does not narrow down social cohesion solely to this

interpretation, and it avoids using social capital or social support as synonyms. Notably, in child and family social work, it is not just about having strong and resilient social networks as a component of social relations. Very brief and fleeting contacts also play a crucial role in this context. These are described as "light encounters" and refer to the fleeting, social interactions which occur as gestures like a nod, a smile, or a brief conversation between parents (Soenen, 2006). The importance of these light encounters became concrete when exploring how child and family social work can effectively promote social cohesion.

Lastly, social cohesion included respect for diversity as a sub-dimension of social relations, according to the social cohesion radar (Dragolov et al., 2016). From the conducted research, we found that treating respect for diversity as a sub-dimension undermined the importance of both respecting and accommodating diversity. When aiming to promote social cohesion in child and family social work, reaching a diversity of parents is more of a prerequisite than just a component of the conceptualisation. This is in line with the strategy of interculturalism. Interculturalism is presented as a potential strategy, a way of fostering a sense of belonging in a context where diversity is inherent (Loobuyck, 2012). The practical implications of this strategy highlight the need for a social mix in neighbourhoods, housing, schools, social services, and the formulation of policies, including active language policies beyond narrow nationalist perspectives (Loobuyck, 2012). This is where the principle of proportional universalism can demonstrate its added value. However, research has revealed that the implementation of proportional universalism faces some of the same challenges as social cohesion, in the sense that a significant gap exists between the theoretical assumption of proportional universalism and its practical implementation in child and family social work.

8.4.1.2 Social cohesion as a semi-sensitive construct

In conceptualising social cohesion in child and family social work, it is crucial to allow space for local context and interpretation. However, this does not mean that we want to present social cohesion as a sensitive concept. Sensitising concepts, as opposed to definitive concepts, according to Blumer, "merely suggest directions along which to look," whereas definitive concepts provide prescriptions of what to see (Blumer, 1954, p. 7). Approaching social cohesion as a sensitive concept has the advantage of allowing ambiguity and providing room for necessary contextual interpretation. On the other hand, under this interpretation of social cohesion, less desirable interpretations are also possible.

These give content to social cohesion in a way which we specifically do not want to move toward in this research. In this vein, social cohesion can also be misused. Especially today, leaving social cohesion open to any possible interpretation poses a possible danger. We live in an era with various ideologies which could potentially hijack social cohesion, leading to undesirable outcomes. This was evident in the historical introduction, when a focus on social cohesion was perceived from a nationalistic viewpoint. Anderson (1991) wrote in this regard about the imagined community, a very homogeneous one, in which people share one history, one culture, and one language. Social cohesion could also be seen as a backlash against multiculturalism, and the emphasis on social cohesion was considered a response to concerns about diverse values threatening national identity and aiming to control differences (Vasta, 2010). In this regard, the issue of social cohesion is often framed in relation to migration, with an *integration–citizenship–social cohesion nexus* emphasising a nation's cultural order (Lithman, 2010, p. 488-490). Additionally, it is essential to recognise that social cohesion is a political practice based on political choices. Social cohesion is, therefore, not neutral and normative. Cultural biases, among other factors, play a significant role in shaping social cohesion. Therefore, we advocate for presenting social cohesion as a kind of semi-sensitive construct where dimensions such as social relationships, solidarity, helpfulness, trust in people, organisations and institutions, civic participation, and perception of fairness are central, and serve as a kind of inspirational framework without pinpointing social cohesion on a definitive conceptualisation. By advancing social cohesion as a semi-sensitive construct, we acknowledge the risk that openness allows for interpretation, enabling values and norms to infiltrate the proposed dimensions. Based on our findings and previous arguments, we want to emphasise that the need for shared values and norms is not part of social cohesion as a semi-sensitive construct.

Promoting social cohesion requires considering sub-dimensions from both the relational and socio-political aspects, without imposing the obligation or expectation to incorporate all (sub)dimensions in every child and family social work practice. The room for local interpretation of this framework lies in prioritising specific dimensions based on the needs of the community, parents, or current situations which arise. In this vein, it is crucial to create a space for the voices of parents and not solely design top-down interventions focused on social cohesion. From a socio-pedagogical point of view, social cohesion could then imply that the diversity of society is given a place in the society as such. Hence, in that case, the semi-sensitive nature of social cohesion is not an issue, but rather an opportunity.

8.4.2 New narratives for child and family social work

From a conceptualisation of social cohesion based on the conducted research, the question arises of what child and family social work, and, more specifically, which practices in child and family social work can contribute to promoting social cohesion. The theoretical insights offer suggestions and possible frameworks for promoting social cohesion in practice. Firstly, this requires a (re-)politicisation of child and family social work. Secondly, attention is given to inspirational moments in child and family social work which can be used to promote social cohesion, and, more concretely, to foster social relations with a specific focus on light encounters. Thirdly, reaching and working with a diversity of parents and families demands culturally sensitive staff and volunteers who embrace this diversity and utilise it as a strength to promote social cohesion. Lastly, some challenges which become evident when solely looking at child and family social work in promoting social cohesion are framed, and some important policy implications are put forward as a possible way to go.

8.4.2.1 (Re-)politicisation of child and family social work

Promoting social cohesion as a relational but also socio-political construct requires the acknowledgment of social cohesion as a socio-political construct which extends beyond individual relations. Consequently, it incorporates dimensions such as civic participation, perception of fairness, and trust in institutions. In addition to this acknowledgment, practitioners must be motivated to actively engage with this socio-political context, addressing structural barriers and contributing to the public discourse. It involves a (re-)politicisation of child and family social work, where practitioners embrace their politicising role and give it concrete expression. Child and family social workers can advocate for social policies which promote equity and address social disparities. By working towards policies which provide support for vulnerable families, social workers contribute to creating a more just and cohesive society. This politicising function is inherently linked to social work due to the normative foundation which characterises social work (Debruyne & Bouchaute, 2021).

This means that promoting social cohesion cannot be something confined within the child and family social work sector. There must be an active focus on the linking role which practitioners can play by connecting families with external organisations and institutions to address these broader societal issues. The multidimensionality of social cohesion also calls for a multidisciplinary collaboration and approach. Some actors which can reinforce the politicising function of child and family social work by forming partnerships and pooling

resources include community development organisations, associations representing the interests of the economically disadvantaged, socio-cultural work, community health centers, youth work, and others. These organisations were relatively limited or absent in the selected cases, leaving room for further investment.

In addition to emphasising this politicising function and promoting collaborations among these various actors, there is another way to shape this politicising function which deserves attention, namely creating spaces of hope as a politicising strategy (Bogaerts, 2022). Under the heading of prefigurative work, pioneering, and experimenting, there is an opportunity to establish small-scale practices, or child and family social work based on these insights which promote social cohesion. Child and family social work must therefore continue asserting this vital role in politicisation and not merely become an implementer of government policies. To achieve this, these moments of reflection are necessary. Occasions where practitioners come together, work with these insights, think, and develop collaboratively. Politicised child and family work also involves considering the strategy through which one will engage in these politicised efforts. The different strategies can involve making something public, providing solid reasoning, presenting data, or engaging in discussions with policymakers. The only condition here is to start from the lived experiences of the people who you work with. And thus, again, create spaces where the voice of parents can be heard.

8.4.2.2 Inspirational moments to promote social cohesion

The research indicated that, in the context of child and family social work, it is important to highlight the significance of light encounters in promoting social relations, emphasising the role of practitioners in fostering these interactions. Following this insight, it is crucial to implement practices which facilitate light encounters in (semi-)public spaces, such as creating welcoming waiting areas and practices which encourage brief interactions among individuals. An analysis of actions in the research project had the potential to reveal how the everyday practices in child and family social work reflected and are embedded within broader social challenges. In what follows, several inspirational moments in child and family social work practices are brought to the floor. These moments can facilitate a sense of belonging, light encounters, and can in turn promote social relations as part of social cohesion. Additionally, the structural components which prevent parents from diverse socio-economic classes from meeting each other are considered. This is related to the accessibility of the available forms of

support and services. Furthermore, we observed that when a diversity of parents came together, this occurred in settings lacking structural elements to foster light encounters and connections between parents, and thus hinders the change to promote social cohesion.

Welcoming waiting areas

One of the moments to promote social cohesion occurs when parents are welcomed and take a seat in the waiting area of the consultation scheme. In numerous observations, this was a highly structured practice. Parents were expected to register their child with the '*kindboekje'*, were assigned a changing mat, and were called when it was their turn to approach the measurement and weighting table. Parents' deviation from this very structured practice resulted in steering, not always friendly comments from volunteers. However, these moments often created a sense of connection among other present parents. In these moments at the consultation scheme and the accompanying waiting area, we encountered a significant missed opportunity when it came to promoting social cohesion. This was due to a combination of various factors. One of these factors was the infrastructure of the waiting areas. Toys had been removed due to COVID-19 and were conveniently not reinstated for practical reasons. On top of that, despite being in a House of the Child, a homely atmosphere was lacking. The cleanliness and medical nature of the consultation scheme overshadowed the warm feeling of a kind of living room where families would prefer to be welcomed and wait. Additionally, the placement of changing facilities and chairs hindered parents from looking at each other and, consequently, engaging in short interactions. Moreover, the static positioning behind a table of a volunteer responsible for welcoming the families (i.e., asking about the *kindboekje*) certainly did not contribute to a warm welcome. This brings us to another element, namely the role of these volunteers and the expectations which one can have of them. Volunteers manage the waiting area and the consultation scheme, doing so in a very practical, structured manner, preferably in the way they have always done so and will continue to do so. Throughout my research, I repeatedly questioned why there must be a volunteer here, while in a playgroup, for example, multiple paid practitioners are employed. This, for me, indicates a kind of undervaluation of the potential and strength which lie within the consultation scheme and waiting area. The waiting area of a consultation scheme holds the potential to be a playgroup, but opportunities are being missed.

Playgroups

The playgroups are seen as locations where efforts are made to let parents meet and connect. Based on this belief, active efforts have been made in recent years to facilitate these encounters between parents through various conditions. Furniture is carefully chosen and arranged, attempts are made to create a cozy atmosphere, and amenities like coffee, tea, water, and often fruit are provided. As a parent, it becomes a welcoming place to spend some time, filled with as much informality as possible. This informality is reflected in the ability to come by when it suits you, speaking the language you prefer, choosing to engaging with other parents or not, and so on. In these practices, there are often one or two staff members present who ensure these conditions and actively try to establish connections between parents, and between parents and children throughout the activity. Additionally, there are small routines in the services which often encourage contacts between parents, such as writing the names and ages of the attending children, taking a photo of the child and sticking it on the attendance board, eating fruit together at an agreed-upon time, and cleaning up together at the end of the activity. These small interventions can be a significant incentive for the creation of light encounters between parents and provide the foundation for long-lasting, even sustainable connections. From this research, I advocate for preserving and further developing these playgroups, but not without critical reflection. The critical questions which need to be asked are: Who are we reaching, and is this a reflection of the neighbourhood? Why are we reaching these groups of families? Who are we not reaching, and what might be the possible reasons for this? How can we shape the playgroups not necessarily as a separate offering but integrate them with various other services in the Houses of the Child, such as the waiting area of the consultation scheme, the Dutch language learning opportunities, and many more?

In these moments and practices, it is clear that the diversity of parents and families is conditioned by the Houses of the Child, and child and family social work in general. Furthermore, based on these findings, the role of practitioners and volunteers is essential to emphasise. It is necessary to examine how services can best be organised as a scripted practice (Geens, 2016) and how, in this context, infrastructure can play a crucial role in promoting light encounters. Furthermore, for policy and organisations, this entails investing in a continuous learning process for professionals working in these child and family services (Urban, et al. 2011). This includes addressing skills and attitudes of professionals, such as how to deal with and respect diversity, adopting an open attitude, and promoting inclusion processes (Devlieghere, 2014).

8.4.2.3 Culturally competent practitioners

A clear need and challenge became visible regarding the diversity in child and family social work. It is necessary, following the strategy of interculturalism, to reach a diversity of families, reflecting the local context of where the practices are located. Reaching a diversity of families makes it possible to engage in bridging social capital in public spaces and can subsequently help to foster community resilience, social integration, greater levels of civic participation, and trust in people (Poortinga, 2012; Putnam, 2000). However, reaching a diverse population implies that practitioners have the knowledge and know-how to approach and deal with diversity issues (Urban, 2015). In this regard, the OECD states that:

> *there is a need for early childhood centres to respond to the changing social context […] Working with diversity in particular milieus is a feature of ECEC professional work, to which traditional teacher training has responded insufficiently. In the future, practitioners will be required to play an enhanced role in developing social cohesion, for which new skills and understandings about community and society will be critical (OECD, 2006, p. 167).*

From this necessity, it becomes clear that, first and foremost, heterogeneity should be recognised and promoted as a lever for social cohesion, emphasising the positive aspects of diversity. A broad understanding of diversity is crucial in this regard, encompassing not only ethnic diversity but also differences in socio-economic status, culture, religion, gender, and age. Implementing proportional universalism, as suggested by our research, can be a way to ensure that diverse families have access to universal services, promoting a common ground for social cohesion. However, this is not a given and requires culturally competent practitioners.

Culturally competent practitioners are culturally sensitive, implying a fundamental openness to every individual manifestation of belonging to one or more cultures (Van Crombrugge, 2016). Understanding and knowledge are crucial in this context, but perhaps even more important are the questions of how to constructively deal with this diversity. Throughout my observations, this distinction became very clear. While I am confident that staff and volunteers are very culturally sensitive, the skill to handle these differences and consequently

be culturally responsive often seemed lacking. A powerful aspect here is that daily encounters help unmask prejudices and foster respect for diversity. In line with this, it is not only important to focus on the parents as a reflection of the neighbourhood but also to consider practitioners and volunteers, ensuring that diversity finds a place among them. Based on this finding, there is a need to offer training and resources to practitioners to effectively address diversity issues and engage with families from various backgrounds.

8.4.2.4 Concluding reflections on the theorisation of social cohesion in child and family social work

In the final part of this discussion, I would like to take a step back and look from a distance at all the findings which this four-year doctoral research brought forth. What does this research mean for policy and practice?

How can this research contribute to the theorisation of social cohesion in child and family social work?

Despite the starting point being to theorise social cohesion for child and family social work, in this final part, I refrain from giving a new definition to social cohesion which would serve as the way to go for child and family social work. The social cohesion radar provided us with a lens to view social cohesion in child and family social work, and it became clear that some valuable adjustments could be made to this lens when it comes to social cohesion in this specific context. Think of adding the importance of light encounters and excluding the need for a shared national identity. Additionally, it is essential to continue excluding shared values and norms from the definition and to pay attention to both the relational dimension, which is usually very evident, and the socio-political dimension, in which there are still several challenges. However, this remains just one possible way of looking at social cohesion, and I believe that the role of (further) research is to question, deepen, and adapt this way of looking at social cohesion in child and family social work. In this regard, it is important to construct this way of looking in combination with policy, practice, and parents.

When we highlighted social cohesion as a construct with both relational, and socio-political dimensions, where creating space for diversity and respecting diversity is seen as a prerequisite, it is worth noting that there are practices in child and family social work which succeed in this endeavour and provide inspiring practices which can contribute to social cohesion. The question inevitably connected with this research is whether promoting social cohesion

should be a task undertaken by these facilities. My answer, supported by the findings of this research, is undoubtedly yes. Practices of child and family social work can have an important function for the community, which is consequently broader than just individual contributions to parents or families. Recognising this societal function is important, and by endorsing it in policy regulations under the pillar of social cohesion, this societal function became more tangible and provided a framework for consideration.

Of course, there are challenges for practices, and we see that it is not convenient for the socio-political function, inherently linked to social cohesion, to be incorporated. Often, practices in child and family social work start from the idea of social support. There is nothing wrong with this, but it is important to recognise that social support is a part of social cohesion and not its synonym. Additionally, despite the multitude of parents (read: mothers) coming to the Houses of the Child, there are still challenges in reaching, among others, fathers and parents from different socio-economic positions. This mainly concerns gathering a wide diversity of parents in the same practices, such as during playgroups. Therefore, thinking in the broad interpretation of the concept of diversity and, consequently, thinking about diversity in gender, socio-economic situations, and ethnic-cultural backgrounds is crucial. From this observation, it is necessary to actively question one's practices, look for opportunities to incorporate the socio-political function of social cohesion, and to focus on reaching a diverse group of parents and other caregivers. This can be done in many ways, and we do not want to establish a one-size-fits-all approach to adopt this societal function. However, this research aims to encourage practices to engage in this process of thought. This process should not be an individual responsibility of practices but should be a shared responsibility of policymakers, organisations, practitioners, and also families.

Ensuring attention to this societal function of child and family social work is essential and is a path which we must continue to tread, one which we must not simply discard. However, this path also raises the question of structural elements which are necessary for child and family social work to adopt this societal function. One of these structural elements necessary for this is the need for a competent system. In the discussion, we talked about culturally competent practitioners and the need to (re)politicise child and family social work. This can only be possible in a competent system which supports practitioners and volunteers, and allows them to develop capacities which can, in turn, shape pedagogical practices which focus on the societal function of child and family social work. If we want to continue and further invest in this powerful societal function, it is essential that this is considered in new policy development in this

field. It would be a missed opportunity if attention to social cohesion in new policies, such as today's *Vroeg en Nabij,* under which the Houses of the Child are placed, is not recognised and included.

8.5   A possible way to go

Focusing on social cohesion comes with challenges which can cast a shadow on the many good intentions and practices which exist and are being further developed. Perhaps these challenges are partly inherently linked to the domain of preventive family support and to how the Decree has set priorities. The Houses of the Child can only operate within a certain framework, dictated by the Decree. This means that, in my opinion, the responsibility for promoting social cohesion cannot rest solely on organisations and practices. Hereby, policy plays an essential role, involving actively promoting equal opportunities, and further integrating and fostering collaborations between different actors. It also requires going beyond the walls of the Houses of the Child, stepping outside, and creating opportunities for working parents and fathers to participate in the child and family social work. It is important not to let the challenges overshadow the motivation and actions to foster social cohesion in child and family social work. But how can we do that?

As a possible way to go, there are some recommendations for research, policy, and practice based on the research insights which we would like to share.

8.5.1   Directions for further research

To start, it is important that, in theorising social cohesion, the concept is recognised as a socio-political construct, encompassing both relational and socio-political dimensions. Social cohesion cannot be equated with encounters or social capital, as this would lead to a narrowing of the concept. Additionally, research has shown that the importance of diversity and inclusivity needs to be emphasised in conceptualising social cohesion, avoiding the imposition of shared values and norms. Lastly, the semi-sensitive nature of social cohesion must be ensured, allowing for local interpretation while safeguarding against potential misuse.

Based on the various limitations and insights from this doctoral research, we have already outlined some directions for further research in the above sections. In conclusion, we formulate these directions for further research below.

- Exploration of non-Western European perspectives: acknowledging the Western European lens through which social cohesion was examined, future research should strive to incorporate diverse cultural perspectives. This would help in overcoming biases and fostering a more inclusive understanding of social cohesion.

- Diversification: to overcome the limitations of relying exclusively on literature from Web of Science, future research can broaden its scope by including literature from diverse sources and languages. Besides that, research should also aim to include diverse practitioners and cases which reflect the socio-economic, demographic, and cultural diversity of the population served by child and family social work.

- Active Engagement of parents: future research should prioritise the active engagement of parents in the theorisation of social cohesion in child and family social work. Incorporating parental perspectives can provide valuable insights into the challenges, needs, and aspirations of families, leading to more culturally sensitive and effective interventions and policies.

- Validation of findings: to enhance the generalisability of the findings, future research should consider validating insights obtained from localised studies through larger-scale studies involving practitioners and parents from diverse backgrounds across different regions. This would help to confirm the robustness and applicability of the findings to a broader context.

- The integration of early childhood services and public spaces: a domain where fostering encounters and social cohesion is also important and involves working with young children and families is childcare. Further research could broaden the scope of services and integrate childcare into a research design focused on social cohesion for families with young children. Additionally, expanding the research to public spaces could add value, especially considering the significance of light encounters for social cohesion.

By addressing these recommendations, future research can build upon the existing doctoral research and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of social cohesion in child and family social work, ultimately leading to policies and practices which can foster social cohesion.

8.5.2   Policy recommendations

For policy, based on the research, we provide some general recommendations and also focus on the structural elements which pose a significant challenge to promoting encounters and social cohesion in the Houses of the Child, specifically the consultation schemes and waiting areas, as well as child and family social work in general.

- Implement policies which support proportional universalism, ensuring universal access to basic child and family social work while accommodating the diverse needs of families.

- Encourage practices which promote a variety of social interactions, recognising the importance of light encounters and avoiding the imposition of homogeneous values.

- Develop policies which recognise the benefits of a loose commitment to values, allowing for a more inclusive and diverse society.

- Encourage and incentivise interdisciplinary collaboration between child and family social workers, educators, healthcare providers, and community leaders. Develop policies which facilitate information-sharing and joint efforts to address the holistic needs of families.

When focusing on consultation schemes and their accompanying waiting areas, one may wish to consider the following recommendations and critical reflections. Research suggested that these consultation schemes and waiting areas could serve as the beating heart of these practices, yet their full potential remains untapped. This raises critical questions which must be addressed in new policies for child and family social work if we aim to continue fostering interactions among families and, ideally, social cohesion.

The strength of these consultation schemes lies in the fact that in many cases, over 90%, and sometimes even over 95% of families visit them at least once. This presents a rather unique context in child and family social work. However, despite the potential chances associated with these services, there are concerns regarding their organisation and implementation.

Firstly, it seems convenient that in places where parents of diverse backgrounds gather, they are welcomed by volunteers who are responsible for this service. This contrasts with the increasing professionalism observed in other services

such as playgroups and urges us to rethink the professionalisation in the consultation schemes. While the primary focus of consultation schemes may be placed on preventive healthcare, we must not overlook the opportunity to foster connections between parents, and between parents and the broader community within these services. Various tools are available to facilitate this, such as *Boekstart* packages, storybooks, toys, flyers from other organisations, and many more. However, a competent system is required to utilise these tools effectively and to support volunteers in creating these connections. Merely sitting at a table and chatting with another volunteer over coffee is not an example of fostering these connections. If consultation schemes and waiting areas aim to promote such connections, a critical examination of the volunteer teams staffing these centres is necessary. Promoting social cohesion requires a diverse and competent group of volunteers. It is the responsibility of policy and organisations to reach out to and support these volunteers in their work. Currently, support for these volunteers varies greatly and is fragmented. The organising boards of consultation schemes must take up a role in addressing this and cannot simply let things continue as they are. Change is necessary if we wish to revitalizes the role of child and family social work in promoting meaningful encounters and fostering social cohesion.

Addressing the structural elements which undermine the promotion of social cohesion requires a competent system which supports practitioners and volunteers in embracing the societal function of child and family social work. This cannot be achieved without integrating the importance of social cohesion into new policy developments, such as *Vroeg en Nabij.* While the responsibility does not solely rest on the shoulders of policy, the foundations laid by regulations must be examined and adjusted at this level before turning our attention to organisations and practices.

8.5.3   Recommendations and perspectives for child and family social work

From research and policy focusing on the consultation schemes and waiting areas, we ultimately shift our focus towards recommendations and perspectives for child and family social work practices. Parents (to-be) make use of child and family social work practices from a very strong commonality, namely, being a parent. In this commonality, many opportunities are inherent to promote social cohesion within both the relational and socio-political dimensions. Therefore, we highlight some recommendations for child and family social work practices.

To start, light encounters and informal interactions in child and family social work settings, which aim to foster social relations and community resilience, need to be prioritised. More concretely, this can be implemented by creating designated spaces, such as a communal area or a cozy corner, where families and children can engage in informal interactions. This space could be equipped with toys, books, and comfortable seating to facilitate relaxed conversations. Additionally, practitioners and volunteers can organise moments or events like coffee mornings, or story time sessions. Here, volunteers and practitioners need to participate actively in these moments, engaging in light conversations with families to build trust.

Ensure that the environment is welcoming and inclusive, and creates an atmosphere in which families from diverse backgrounds feel comfortable interacting.

Furthermore, cultural competence can be enhanced among practitioners to effectively engage with diverse families and communities. This can be implemented by integrating cultural competency training into the professional development curriculum for child and family social work practitioners. This training should cover topics such as understanding cultural differences, recognising biases, and practicing culturally sensitive communication. Practitioners also can be encouraged to reflect on their own cultural identities and biases. In addition, it can be valuable to foster partnerships with local community organisations and cultural groups to facilitate meaningful exchanges and learning opportunities.

To end, implement proportional universalism to ensure equitable access to services while embracing diversity. The first important step here is to introduce proportional universalism as a theoretical concept among practitioners and to equate various interpretations. Additionally, it is crucial to consistently perceive universal services as universal and actively refer all families toward these services. It is pivotal to critically examine who provides the services and the implications which this entails. For example, *inloopteams* have a great deal of knowledge and expertise in organising playgroups, but based on their history and mandate, we see that there may still be a challenge when it comes to reaching out to all families and broadening the playgroups as a universal child and family social work practice.

Overall, the recommendations emphasise a nuanced understanding of social cohesion which integrates both relational and socio-political dimensions, with a

focus on inclusivity, diversity, and community engagement. It calls for collaborative efforts among researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and communities to effectively promote social cohesion in child and family social work contexts. By integrating these recommendations into theory, policies, and practices, there is an opportunity for child and family social work to create a more inclusive, diverse, and socially cohesive society, fostering positive relationships among individuals, groups and organisations, and institutions at various levels.

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English summary

Social cohesion as a theoretical concept has attracted increasing interest in scholarly debates across various disciplines since the 1990s, including sociology (Van der Meer & Tolsma, 2014), political science (Putnam, 2007), social work, and social pedagogy (Markus & Kirpitchenko, 2007). The focus on social cohesion in research is influenced by a policy discourse where the emphasis on social cohesion can be seen as a political response to macro-economic and societal changes (Andrews, Downe, & Guarneros-Meza, 2014). Recent developments in society such as the information age, globalization, growing migration, and competitively oriented social policies (Kearns & Forrest, 2000) have led to a renewed interest in social cohesion as a significant policy issue. The central question then becomes what binds us together as a society and how we can live together in all our diversity (Berger-Schmitt, 2002; Novy, Swiatek, & Moulaert, 2012; Loobuyck, 2012). This specific and renewed interest in social cohesion is visible in family policy. Social work practices for families with young children are prioritized and tasked with promoting social cohesion in our society (European Commission, 2015; OECD, 2017; Skjesol Bulling & Berg, 2018). Despite policy attention, promoting social cohesion in social work practices for families with young children remains complex and underexplored.

Social cohesion is approached from different perspectives, resulting in a lack of integration and theoretical clarification. Over the years, conceptual confusion has arisen, and theoretical foundations supporting child and family social work in conceptualizing and promoting social cohesion are lacking. Social cohesion has become an umbrella term, characterized by conceptual ambiguity. This conceptual ambiguity makes the concept of social cohesion contextually adaptable, broad, and flexible but also makes it difficult to understand what the concept entails (Bottoni, 2018). The lack of theoretical insights and coherence undermines the comprehensive interpretation of social cohesion, both at an individual and societal level and hampers the translation of promoting social cohesion into practice. This explains the need for a conceptual framework of social cohesion in various academic disciplines, policies, and child and family social work (Berger-Schmitt, 2002a; Chan, To, & Chan, 2006; Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017).

A particular field of interest in understanding social cohesion in social work practices lies in child and family social work, where a shift towards integrated

services aiming to address both individual and societal needs can be observed. In Flanders, with the Decree on Preventive Family Support in 2013 (Vlaamse Overheid, 2014), this resulted in the establishment of *Huizen van het Kind* (Houses of the Child). These are partnerships between organisations focused on preventive family support, in collaboration with the local government. A House of the Child can be found in almost every municipality in Flanders. The Houses of the Child are mandated by law to promote social cohesion. Consequently, they are crucial for understanding the complexity of social cohesion and contributing to our theoretical knowledge. From the conceptual confusion of social cohesion, which is evident in the translation into practices of child and family social work, the aim of this dissertation emerged. This doctoral research aims to unravel how social cohesion is conceptualised by research, policy, and in child and family social work.

The central research question, regarding the conceptualisation and theorisation of social cohesion in child and family social work, unfolds into five different research questions. The quest for a theoretical framework of social cohesion, which can be used as a lens to view social cohesion, is the starting point of this doctoral research. The first two research questions focus on the academic and political approaches to social cohesion. While academic literature provides an international and predominantly theoretical dimension to the research, policymakers are important actors to consider as they shape policies and formalize where practices should focus on. The subsequent two research questions aim to provide insights into child and family social work practices that seek to promote social cohesion. Finally, the fifth and last research question focuses on implementing proportionate universalism (PU). The following overview (Table 11) provides an overview of the different sub-studies with their corresponding research questions and research methods.

Study	Research question(s)	Methodological approach	Level	Chapter
1	What could be a theoretical conceptualisation of social cohesion that is scientifically valid? *How does social work literature conceptualise social cohesion? How does child and family social work literature conceptualise social cohesion?*	Systematic narrative literature review of academic literature	Academic	3
2	How is social cohesion interpreted by policymakers? *What do they consider as challenges and opportunities for social cohesion? What role is assigned to early childhood services in contributing to social cohesion?*	Analysis of policy documents combined with semi-structured interviews with policy makers on the National, Flemish, and local level	Policy	4
3	What is going on in child and family social work regarding the promotion of social cohesion?	Observations in three selected cases of child and family social work	Practices	5
4	How do (child and family) social workers give meaning to the concept of social cohesion and their responsibility in achieving this political mission?	Interviews using the Critical Incident Technique with practitioners and volunteers in three selected cases of child and family social work	Practitioners	6
5	How is the concept of proportionate universalism operationalised in child and family social work?	Analysis of national and local policy documents combined with semi-structured interviews with practitioners and observations in three selected cases of child and family social work	Policy, practices and practitioners	7

Table 11: Overview of the studies of this doctoral dissertation

For this doctoral research, a qualitative research design was employed to capture perspectives at different levels (research, policy, and practice). Child and family social work practices are influenced by the socio-economic, cultural, and political context in which they are embedded. Based on this finding, it is important to provide insights into the context in which the research took place. The research was conducted in Flanders (Belgium), at both the Flemish and local levels. At the Flemish level, the Flemish government explicitly chose in 2013, with the Decree on Preventive Family Support, to highlight child and family social work as a potential driving force for promoting social cohesion. In line with the decree, a House of the Child encompasses at least three central pillars, namely promoting encounters and social cohesion, preventive healthcare, and parenting support (Vlaamse Overheid, 2013). Besides these pillars, various principles are proposed, of which proportionate universalism (PU) is one of them. PU in the Houses of the Child can be described as a third way, referring to a middle ground between a universal service of preventive family support and a selective service aimed at specific target groups such as vulnerable families. The Decree has a limited regulatory framework, allowing for local interpretation and implementation. Therefore, it is important to integrate both the Flemish and local contexts into this research.

For the research, three case studies were used. In selecting these cases, we aimed not for representativeness but for diversity. This means that we do not claim that each of these cases is typical in some way for social work practices for families with young children in Flanders. However, the selected cases are in no way atypical for the diversity of the Houses of the Child in Flanders. The research took place in three selected neighbourhoods in the cities of Antwerp, Ghent, and Mechelen. In Antwerp and Ghent, neighbourhoods with significant cultural diversity were chosen, characterised by specific socio-economic contexts. In Mechelen, a contrasting neighbourhood was selected, with more highly educated parents, less diversity, and a lower child poverty index. Another important difference between the three selected neighbourhoods was the implementation of the Houses of the Child. In Antwerp, it was decided to create 16 local Houses of the Child in different neighbourhoods. Currently, there is no physical location for the House of the Child in Ghent. In Mechelen, there is one physical location for the House of the Child, located in the city centre where all residents are welcome.

Based on an extensive literature review comparing and analysing conceptualisations of social cohesion, the *social cohesion radar* was considered the most comprehensive framework integrating different levels (micro, meso, and

macro) (Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017). The social cohesion radar consists of three domains, each unfolding into three sub-domains. The first domain is *social relations* and includes social networks, trust in people, and acceptance of diversity. The second domain *focuses on the common good* and consists of solidarity and helpfulness, respect for social rules, and civic participation. The third domain is *connectedness*, which unfolds into identification, trust in institutions, and perception of fairness (Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017). We refer to this *social cohesion radar* as the theoretical framework in the following chapters of this research.

The doctoral dissertation consists of eight chapters. The **first chapter** includes the introduction and starts with a general introduction to the research topic, the problem statement, and associated research questions. The **second chapter** provides insight into the methodological framework of the doctoral research by describing in detail the context, the qualitative research methods, and the analysis of this collected data. Understanding the unique context of preventive family support in Flanders is important for interpreting the subsequent results. After an extensive introduction the five sub-studies, that shape chapters three through seven of this doctoral dissertation, follow. Each chapter has distinctive research questions and a specific research design (see Table 11).

In **chapter three**, by conducting a systematic narrative literature review (N = 76) using the Social Science Citation Index, we explore what a theoretical conceptualisation of social cohesion could be that is scientifically valid. This study forms an important basis for further studies that strongly build on these initial insights. The first study concludes that social cohesion is overshadowed by a conceptualisation as social capital, which narrows the concept of social cohesion. Moreover, the focus on shared values and norms hampers the ability to consider the growing diversity in society. As a result of these findings, the literature on social cohesion would deny an important contemporary social challenge and consequently miss out on it.

Building further on the insights from the first sub-study, **chapter four** aims to analyse a diversity of interpretations of social cohesion by policymakers in Flanders. Through these interpretations, reflections can be made on the role of child and family social work practices. The study uses a thematic analysis of policy documents (N=44) combined with semi-structured interviews with policymakers at the Flemish and local levels (N=14). The results show that political interpretations of social cohesion can be placed on a continuum from minimal to maximal interpretation, with historical continuity being visible.

Reflecting on the possible role of child and family social work consequently leads to conflicting expectations from policymakers.

Following the perspectives of research and policy, **chapter five** shifts the focus to child and family social work. Chapter five comprises a sub-study aimed at analysing how child and family social work practices in Flanders promote social cohesion. An exploratory case study was conducted in three selected neighbourhoods in Antwerp, Ghent, and Mechelen, using (non-)participatory observations (N=40). The research concludes that in these practices, it is important to pay attention to the significance of *light encounters* (Soenen, 2006) as a possible way to promote social cohesion. Finally, a clear need and challenge regarding diversity in child and family social work became evident. It is necessary to reach a diversity of families, but this implies that professionals must have the knowledge and expertise to deal with diversity issues.

In **chapter six**, we aim to discover how practitioners give meaning to the concept of social cohesion and what their role is in promoting this societal goal. The research was conducted in the same neighbourhoods as the previous sub-study (chapter 4). The Critical Incident Technique was used during interviews with practitioners in the three cases (N=28) to understand how they conceptualise social cohesion and how they see their role in promoting it. The results indicate that practitioners mainly focus on the interpersonal and relational components of social cohesion rather than on the socio-political components, which contrasts with the politicising function that social work practices for families with young children are supposed to fulfil.

Chapter seven holds a separate position in this doctoral dissertation given the timing (before the actual doctoral research) and selected cases (three neighbourhoods in the city of Antwerp). The insights gained through the sub-studies of the doctoral research made it clear that this final sub-study can and should be included in this dissertation. The focus on diversity as an opportunity for social cohesion when reaching a variety of families, but also as a challenge when diversity makes it difficult to establish connections or tailor services to users' needs, raises the question of a possible new way of working in child and family social work. The final sub-study provides more insight into how the concept of proportionate universalism is operationalised in child and family social work practices and how proportionate universalism can be used to promote social cohesion. This final sub-study triangulated three perspectives, namely those of the policy level, the organisational level, and the individual level. The results indicate a difference between the theoretical assumption of proportionate

universalism and its practical implementation in child and family social work.

The findings of the different studies are brought together in **chapter eight**. In the final chapter of this doctoral research, the limitations of the sub-studies are addressed. Subsequently, differences and similarities between the selected cases are highlighted, and this chapter summarises the main findings of the research. Of importance here is the broad interpretation of social cohesion, both as a relational and a socio-political construct. Based on these findings, the role of shared values and norms as a prerequisite for social cohesion is critically examined. Additionally, a (re-)politicisation of child and family social work is advocated from this socio-political function. Finally, it becomes clear that working with a diversity of families requires culturally competent practitioners. The last chapter also reflects on what can be learned from the findings regarding the theorisation of social cohesion for research, policy, and child and family social work. In this regard, attention is paid to the inherent strength and opportunities that the consultation schemes characterise when it comes to promoting social cohesion, but where many missed opportunities became apparent due to structural barriers and the lack of a competent system. The recommendations for research, policy, and practice build further on these critical insights and formulate some inspiring possibilities to promote social cohesion in child and family social work.

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Nederlandstalige samenvatting

Sociale cohesie als theoretisch concept kent sinds de jaren '90 een toenemende interesse in wetenschappelijke debatten overheen verschillende disciplines, zoals de sociologie (Van der Meer & Tolsma, 2014), politieke wetenschappen (Putnam, 2007), het sociaal werk en de sociale pedagogiek (Markus & Kirpitchenko, 2007). Beïnvloed door een beleidsdiscours, waar de focus op sociale cohesie een politieke reactie op macro-economische en maatschappelijke veranderingen is, zien we een toenemende aandacht voor sociale cohesie in onderzoek (Andrews, Downe, & Guarneros-Meza, 2014). Recente ontwikkelingen in de samenleving zoals het informatietijdperk, globalisering, een groeiende migratie en een competitief georiënteerd sociaal beleid (Kearns & Forrest, 2000), hebben geleid tot een hernieuwde interesse in sociale cohesie als belangrijke beleidskwestie. De vraag komt daarbij centraal wat ons als samenleving verbindt en hoe we samen kunnen leven in al onze diversiteit (Berger-Schmitt, 2002; Novy, Swiatek, & Moulaert, 2012; Loobuyck, 2012). Deze specifieke en hernieuwde interesse in sociale cohesie is duidelijk zichtbaar in het gezinsbeleid. Sociaalwerkpraktijken voor gezinnen met jonge kinderen worden daarbij hoog op de agenda geplaatst en krijgen als maatschappelijke opdracht sociale cohesie in onze samenleving te bevorderen (Europese Commissie, 2015; OESO, 2017; Skjesol Bulling & Berg, 2018). Het bevorderen van sociale cohesie in sociaalwerkpraktijken voor gezinnen met jonge kinderen is ondanks de beleidsaandacht complex en onderbelicht in onderzoek.

Sociale cohesie wordt benaderd vanuit verschillende perspectieven, met een gebrek aan integratie en theoretische verduidelijking als gevolg. Doorheen de jaren is er een conceptuele verwarring ontstaan en ontbreken theoretische fundamenten die sociaalwerkpraktijken voor gezinnen met jonge kinderen kunnen ondersteunen in het conceptualiseren en bevorderen van sociale cohesie. Sociale cohesie is een parapluterm geworden, gekenmerkt door een conceptuele vaagheid. Deze conceptuele vaagheid maakt sociale cohesie contextueel aanpasbaar, breed en flexibel, maar maakt het eveneens moeilijk om te begrijpen wat met het concept wordt bedoeld (Bottoni, 2018). Het gebrek aan theoretische inzichten en samenhang ondermijnt de uitgebreide invulling van sociale cohesie, op een individueel en maatschappelijk niveau en belemmert de vertaling van het bevorderen van sociale cohesie in de praktijk. Dit leidt tot de vraag naar een conceptueel kader voor sociale cohesie in verschillende academische disciplines, beleid en sociaalwerkpraktijken voor gezinnen met jonge kinderen (Berger-Schmitt, 2002a; Chan, To, & Chan, 2006; Schiefer & van

der Noll, 2017).

Een bijzonder interessegebied om sociale cohesie in sociaalwerkpraktijken te begrijpen, is terug te vinden in de preventieve gezinsondersteuning, waar een verschuiving is op te merken naar geïntegreerde samenwerkingen met als doel zowel individuele als maatschappelijke noden aan te pakken. In Vlaanderen, met het Decreet Preventieve Gezinsondersteuning (PGO) in 2013 (Vlaamse Overheid, 2014), resulteerde dit in de Huizen van het Kind. Dit zijn partnerschappen tussen organisaties gericht op de preventieve gezinsondersteuning, in samenwerking met het lokale beleid. In bijna alle gemeenten in Vlaanderen kan je een Huis van het Kind terugvinden. De Huizen van het Kind hebben de decretale opdracht om sociale cohesie te bevorderen. Bijgevolg zijn de Huizen van het Kind van cruciaal belang om de complexiteit van sociale cohesie te begrijpen en bij te dragen aan onze theoretische kennis. Vanuit de conceptuele verwarring van sociale cohesie, die zich aftekent in de vertaling naar praktijken van de preventieve gezinsondersteuning kwam het onderzoeksdoel van dit proefschrift tot stand. Dit doctoraatsonderzoek heeft als doel te ontrafelen hoe sociale cohesie wordt ingevuld door onderzoek, beleid en in sociaalwerkpraktijken voor gezinnen met jonge kinderen.

De centrale onderzoeksvraag, met betrekking tot de conceptualisatie en theoretisering van sociale cohesie in sociaalwerkpraktijken voor gezinnen met jonge kinderen ontvouwt in vijf verschillende onderzoeksvragen. De zoektocht naar een theoretisch kader van sociale cohesie, dat kan worden gebruikt als een bril om naar sociale cohesie te kijken, is daarbij het startpunt van dit doctoraatsonderzoek. De eerste twee onderzoeksvragen richten zich dan ook op de academische en politieke benadering van sociale cohesie. Hoewel de academische literatuur het onderzoek voorziet van internationale en theoretische dimensies, met conceptuele verwarring tot gevolg, zijn beleidsmakers belangrijke actoren om in rekening te brengen omdat ze het beleid vormgeven en daarmee formaliseren waar praktijken moeten op inzetten. De daaropvolgende twee onderzoeksvragen beogen inzichten aan te reiken in de sociaalwerkpraktijken voor gezinnen met jonge kinderen die sociale cohesie trachten te bevorderen. Tot slot focust de vijfde en laatste onderzoeksvraag op de implementatie van proportioneel universalisme (PU). Onderstaand overzicht (Tabel 12) geeft een overzicht van de verschillende deelstudies met bijhorende onderzoeksvragen en onderzoeksmethoden.

Studie	Onderzoeksvraag	Methodologie	Level	Hoofd-stuk
1	Wat zou een theoretische conceptualisatie van sociale cohesie kunnen zijn? *Hoe conceptualiseert sociaal werk literatuur sociale cohesie?*	Systematische narratieve literatuurstudie van academische literatuur	Onderzoek	3
2	Hoe wordt sociale cohesie geïnterpreteerd door beleidsmakers? *Wat beschouwen beleidsmakers als uitdagingen en kansen voor sociale cohesie?* *Welke rol wordt toegekend aan sociaalwerkpraktijken in het bevorderen van sociale cohesie?*	Analyse van beleidsdocumenten gecombineerd met semigestructureerde interviews met beleidsmakers op nationaal, Vlaams en lokaal niveau.	Beleid	4
3	Wat gebeurt er in sociaalwerkpraktijken voor gezinnen met jonge kinderen wanneer zij inzetten op het bevorderen van sociale cohesie?	Observaties in drie geselecteerde cases van sociaalwerkpraktijken voor gezinnen met jonge kinderen	Praktijk	5
4	Hoe geven praktijkwerkers betekenis aan het concept sociale cohesie en hun verantwoordelijkheid bij het bereiken van deze maatschappelijke opdracht?	Interviews met de Critical Incident Technique met praktijkwerkers en vrijwilligers in drie geselecteerde cases van sociaalwerkpraktijken voor gezinnen met jonge kinderen	Praktijk-werkers	6
5	Hoe wordt het concept van proportioneel universalisme toegepast in sociaalwerkpraktijken voor gezinnen met jonge kinderen?	Analyse van nationale en lokale beleidsdocumenten gecombineerd met semi-gestructureerde interviews met praktijkwerkers en observaties in drie geselecteerde cases van sociaalwerkpraktijken voor gezinnen met jonge kinderen	Beleid, praktijk en praktijk-werkers	7

Tabel 12: Een overzicht van de verschillende deelstudies

Voor dit doctoraatsonderzoek werd een kwalitatieve onderzoeksopzet gehanteerd om perspectieven op verschillende niveaus (onderzoek, beleid en praktijk) te capteren. Sociaalwerkpraktijken voor gezinnen met jonge kinderen worden beïnvloed door de sociaaleconomische, culturele en politieke context waarin ze zijn ingebed. Op basis van deze bevinding is het belangrijk inzichten te bieden in de context waarin het onderzoek plaatsvond. Het onderzoek werd uitgevoerd in Vlaanderen (België), op Vlaams en stedelijk niveau. Op Vlaams niveau koos de Vlaamse overheid er in 2013 expliciet voor met het Decreet Preventieve Gezinsondersteuning (PGO) om sociaalwerkpraktijken voor gezinnen met jonge kinderen naar voren te schuiven als een potentiële drijvende kracht voor het bevorderen van sociale cohesie. In lijn met het decreet omvat een Huis van het Kind minimaal drie centrale pijlers, namelijk het bevorderen van ontmoetingen en sociale cohesie, preventieve gezondheidszorg en opvoedingsondersteuning (Vlaamse Overheid, 2013). Naast deze pijlers worden ook verschillende werkingsprincipes vooropgesteld waar het proportioneel universalisme (PU) deel van uitmaakt. PU in de Huizen van het Kind kan worden omschreven als een derde weg. Deze derde weg verwijst naar een middenweg tussen een universeel aanbod van preventieve gezinsondersteuning en een selectief aanbod gericht op specifieke doelgroepen zoals maatschappelijk kwetsbare gezinnen. Het decreet PGO heeft een beperkt regelgevend kader, wat lokale interpretatie en invulling mogelijk maakt. Het is daarom van belang om zowel de Vlaamse als stedelijke context te integreren in dit onderzoek.

Voor het onderzoek werd gebruik gemaakt van drie casestudies. Bij het selecteren van deze cases streefden we niet naar representativiteit, maar naar diversiteit. Dit betekent dat we niet beweren dat elk van deze cases op de een of andere manier typisch is voor sociaalwerkpraktijken voor gezinnen met jonge kinderen in Vlaanderen. Echter zijn de geselecteerde cases op geen enkele manier atypisch voor de diversiteit van de Huizen van het Kind in Vlaanderen. Het onderzoek vond plaats in drie geselecteerde buurten in de steden Antwerpen, Gent en Mechelen. In Antwerpen en Gent werden buurten met aanzienlijke culturele diversiteit gekozen, gekenmerkt door specifieke sociaaleconomische contexten. In Mechelen werd een contrasterende buurt geselecteerd, met meer hoogopgeleide ouders, minder diversiteit en een lagere kinderarmoedeindex (vergeleken met andere buurten in Mechelen, exclusief de deelgemeenten). Een ander belangrijk verschil tussen de drie geselecteerde buurten was de implementatie van de Huizen van het Kind. In Antwerpen werd besloten om 16 lokale Huizen van het Kind te creëren in verschillende buurten.

In Gent is er momenteel geen fysiek Huis van het Kind. In Mechelen is er één fysiek Huis van het Kind, gelegen in het stadscentrum waar alle inwoners welkom zijn.

Op basis van een uitgebreide literatuurstudie waarbij conceptualisaties van sociale cohesie werden vergeleken en geanalyseerd, werd de *social cohesion radar* beschouwd als het meest omvattende kader dat verschillende niveaus (micro, meso en macro) integreert (Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017). De *social cohesion radar* bestaat uit drie domeinen die elk ontvouwen in drie subdomeinen. Het eerste domein is *sociale relaties* en omvat sociale netwerken, vertrouwen in mensen en de acceptatie van diversiteit. Het tweede domein is *focus op het algemeen belang* en bestaat uit solidariteit en behulpzaamheid, respect voor sociale regels en burgerparticipatie. Het derde domein is *verbondenheid*, en ontvouwt zich in identificatie, vertrouwen in instellingen en perceptie van rechtvaardigheid (Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017). We verwijzen naar deze *social cohesion radar* als het theoretisch kader in de volgende hoofdstukken van dit onderzoek.

Het doctoraatsonderzoek en bijhorend proefschrift bestaat uit acht hoofdstukken. Het **eerste hoofdstuk** omvat de inleiding en start met een algemene introductie van het onderzoeksonderwerp, de probleemstelling en bijhorende onderzoeksvragen. Het **tweede hoofdstuk** geeft inzicht in het methodologische kader van het doctoraatsonderzoek door gedetailleerd de context, de kwalitatieve onderzoeksmethoden van dataverzameling en de analyse van deze verzamelde data te beschrijven. Inzicht verwerven in de unieke context van de preventieve gezinsondersteuning is van belang voor de interpretatie van de daaropvolgende resultaten. Na een uitgebreide inleiding volgen de vijf deelstudies die hoofdstuk drie tot en met zeven van dit proefschrift vormgeven. Elk hoofdstuk heeft onderscheidende onderzoeksvragen en een specifieke onderzoeksopzet (zie Tabel 12).

In **hoofdstuk drie** verkennen we met behulp van een systematische narratieve literatuurstudie (N = 76) via de Social Science Citation Index wat een theoretische conceptualisatie van sociale cohesie zou kunnen zijn die wetenschappelijk geldig is. Deze studie vormt een belangrijke basis voor de verdere studies die sterk voortbouwen op deze eerste inzichten. De eerste studie concludeert dat sociale cohesie wordt overschaduwd door een conceptualisatie als sociaal kapitaal, wat een verenging is van sociale cohesie. Bovendien belemmert de focus op gedeelde waarden en normen de mogelijkheid om rekening te kunnen houden met de groeiende diversiteit in de samenleving. Als

resultaat van deze bevindingen zou de literatuur over sociale cohesie een belangrijke hedendaagse sociale uitdaging ontkennen en bijgevolg mislopen.

Verder bouwend op de inzichten uit de eerste deelstudie en derde hoofdstuk, heeft **hoofdstuk vier** als doel een diversiteit aan interpretaties van sociale cohesie door beleidsmakers in Vlaanderen te analyseren. Aan de hand van deze interpretaties kan worden gereflecteerd op de rol van sociaalwerkpraktijken voor gezinnen met jonge kinderen. In de studie wordt gebruik gemaakt van een thematische analyse van beleidsdocumenten (N=44) in combinatie met semigestructureerde interviews met beleidsmakers op Vlaams en lokaal niveau (N=14). De resultaten tonen aan dat politieke interpretaties van sociale cohesie op een continuüm van een minimale tot een maximale interpretatie geplaats kunnen worden, waarbij historische continuïteit zichtbaar wordt. Het reflecteren op de mogelijke rol van sociaalwerkpraktijken voor gezinnen met jonge kinderen leidt bijgevolg tot tegenstrijdige verwachtingen van beleidsmakers.

Vanuit het onderzoeks- en beleidsperspectief verschuift het **vijfde hoofdstuk** de aandacht naar sociaalwerkpraktijken voor gezinnen met jonge kinderen. Hoofdstuk vijf omvat een deelonderzoek met als doel te analyseren hoe sociaalwerkpraktijken voor gezinnen met jonge kinderen in Vlaanderen sociale cohesie bevorderen. Een verkennende casestudie in drie geselecteerde buurten in Antwerpen, Gent en Mechelen werd uitgevoerd, gebruikmakend van (niet-)participerende observaties (N=40). Het onderzoek besluit dat het in sociaalwerkpraktijken voor gezinnen met jonge kinderen belangrijk is om aandacht te besteden aan de betekenis van het kleine ontmoeten (Soenen, 2006) als mogelijke manier om sociale cohesie te bevorderen. Tot slot werd een duidelijke behoefte en uitdaging zichtbaar met betrekking tot de diversiteit in sociaalwerkpraktijken voor gezinnen met jonge kinderen. Het is noodzakelijk om een diversiteit aan gezinnen te bereiken, maar dit houdt in dat professionals kennis en *knowhow* moeten hebben om met diversiteitskwesties om te gaan.

In **hoofdstuk zes** streven we ernaar te ontdekken hoe praktijkwerkers betekenis geven aan het concept van sociale cohesie en wat hun rol is bij het bevorderen van dit maatschappelijke doel. Dit onderzoek werd uitgevoerd in dezelfde buurten als de vorige deelstudie (hoofdstuk 4). De Critical Incident Technique werd gebruikt tijdens interviews met praktijkwerkers in de drie cases (N=28) om te begrijpen hoe zij sociale cohesie conceptualiseren en hoe zij hun rol zien bij het bevorderen hiervan. De resultaten geven aan dat praktijkwerkers zich vooral richten op de interpersoonlijke en relationele componenten van sociale cohesie in plaats van op de sociaal-politieke componenten, wat in contrast staat met de

politiserende functie die sociaalwerkpraktijken voor gezinnen met jonge kinderen worden verondersteld te vervullen.

Hoofdstuk zeven heeft een aparte positie in dit doctoraatsonderzoek gezien de timing (vooraf aan het eigenlijke doctoraatsonderzoek als masterproef) en geselecteerde cases (drie buurten in de stad Antwerpen). De eerder verworven inzichten doorheen de deelstudies van het doctoraatsonderzoek maakten duidelijk dat deze laatste deelstudie een plaats kan en moet krijgen in dit proefschrift. De focus op diversiteit als een kans voor sociale cohesie wanneer een verscheidenheid aan gezinnen wordt bereikt, maar ook als een uitdaging wanneer diversiteit het moeilijk maakt om verbindingen te leggen, of diensten af te stemmen op de behoeften van de gebruikers, stelt de vraag naar een mogelijk nieuwe manier van werken in sociaalwerkpraktijken voor gezinnen met jonge kinderen. Deze laatste studie biedt, verder bouwend op deze vraag, meer inzicht in hoe het concept van proportioneel universalisme wordt geoperationaliseerd in sociaalwerkpraktijken voor gezinnen met jonge kinderen en hoe proportioneel universalisme kan worden aangewend om sociale cohesie te bevorderen. Deze laatste deelstudie trianguleerde drie perspectieven, namelijk deze van het beleidsniveau, het organisatieniveau en het individuele niveau. De resultaten maken duidelijk dat er een verschil is tussen de theoretische veronderstelling van proportioneel universalisme en de praktische implementatie in sociaalwerkpraktijken voor gezinnen met jonge kinderen.

De bevindingen van de verschillende studies worden samengebracht in **hoofdstuk acht**. In het laatste hoofdstuk van dit doctoraatsonderzoek wordt bij aanvang stilgestaan bij de beperkingen van de deelstudies. Vervolgens worden verschillen en gelijkenissen tussen de geselecteerde cases uitgelicht en vat dit hoofdstuk de belangrijkste bevindingen van het onderzoek samen. Van belang is daarbij de brede invulling van sociale cohesie, zowel als een relationeel als een sociaal-politiek construct. Kritisch wordt vanuit deze bevindingen gekeken naar de rol van gedeelde waarden en normen als voorwaarde voor sociale cohesie. Toevoegend wordt een (re-)politisering van sociaalwerkpraktijken voor gezinnen met jonge kinderen vanuit deze sociaal-politieke functie naar voor geschoven. Als laatste wordt duidelijk dat het werken met een diversiteit aan gezinnen, cultuurcompetente praktijkwerkers vraagt. Tot slot biedt dit hoofdstuk een reflectie op wat kan worden geleerd uit de bevindingen met betrekking tot de theoretisering van sociale cohesie zowel voor onderzoek, beleid als voor sociaalwerkpaktijken voor gezinnen met jonge kinderen. Specifieke aandacht wordt hierbij besteed aan de inherente kracht en kansen die de consultatiebureaus kenmerken wanneer het gaat over het bevorderen van

sociale cohesie, maar waar vele gemiste kansen liggen door structurele drempels en het ontbreken van een competent systeem. De aanbevelingen voor onderzoek, beleid en praktijk bouwen verder op deze kritische inzichten en formuleren enkele inspirerende mogelijkheden om in te zetten op sociale cohesie in sociaalwerkpraktijken voor gezinnen met jonge kinderen.

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Overview of tables

Overview of figures

Data storage fact sheets

% Data Storage Fact Sheet 1

% Name/identifier study: Study 1/ The (ab)sense of a
conceptualisation of social cohesion in social work: a
systematic narrative literature review
% Author: Melissa Dierckx
% Date: 15 Februari 2024

1. Contact details
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Educational Sciences, Henri Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Ghent,
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The (ab)sense of a conceptualisation of social cohesion in
social work: a systematic narrative literature review.
Submitted for publication in Innovation: The European
Journal of Social Science Research

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% Name/identifier study: Study 2/ Policymakers on social
cohesion : contradictory expectations for child and family
social work
% Author: Melissa Dierckx
% Date: 15 Februari 2024

1. Contact details
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```

```
  - [X] research group file server
  - [X] other: external hard drive of the researcher

* Who has direct access to these other files (i.e.,
without intervention of another person)?
  - [X] main researcher
  - [X] responsible ZAP
  - [ ] all members of the research group
  - [ ] all members of UGent
  - [ ] other (specify): ...

4. Reproduction
========================================================
* Have the results been reproduced independently?: [ ] YES
/ [X] NO

* If yes, by whom (add if multiple):
   - name:
   - address:
   - affiliation:
   - e-mail:

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% Data Storage Fact Sheet 3

% Name/identifier study: Study 3/ Child and family social
work as a space for promoting social cohesion
% Author: Melissa Dierckx
% Date: 15 Februari 2024

1. Contact details
==

1a. Main researcher

- name: Melissa Dierckx
- address: Henri Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Gent
- e-mail: melissa.dierckx@ugent.be

1b. Responsible Staff Member (ZAP)

- name: Michel Vandenbroeck
- address: Henri Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Gent
- e-mail: michel.vandenbroek@ugent.be

If a response is not received when using the above contact
details, please send an email to data.pp@ugent.be or
contact Data Management, Faculty of Psychology and
Educational Sciences, Henri Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Ghent,
Belgium.

2. Information about the datasets to which this sheet
applies
==
* Reference of the publication in which the datasets are
reported: Dierckx, M., Devlieghere, J., & Vandenbroeck, M.
Child and family social work as a space for promoting
social cohesion. Submitted for publication in Child &
Family Social Work.

* Which datasets in that publication does this sheet apply
to?: This sheet applies to all data used in this
publication.

3. Information about the files that have been stored
==

3a. Raw data
----

* Have the raw data been stored by the main researcher?
[X] YES / [ ] NO
If NO, please justify:

* On which platform are the raw data stored?
  - [X] researcher PC
  - [X] research group file server
  - [X] other (specify): external hard drive of the
researcher

* Who has direct access to the raw data (i.e., without
intervention of another person)?
  - [X] main researcher
  - [X] responsible ZAP
  - [ ] all members of the research group
  - [ ] all members of UGent
  - [ ] other (specify): ...

3b. Other files
----

* Which other files have been stored?
  - [ ] file(s) describing the transition from raw data to
reported results. Specify: ...
  - [X] file(s) containing processed data. Specify:
Observational reports, the codes and the coding three are
stored on the PC of the researcher, both as word documents
and in NVivo files. Monographs as word documents and pdf.
  - [X] file(s) containing analyses. Specify: See finding
section in the article. Files with the outline of the
preliminary results are available on the PC of the
researcher as well as on the research group server.
  - [ ] files(s) containing information about informed
consent. Specify: Active oral consent was used in this
study.
  - [X] a file specifying legal and ethical provisions.
Specify: The documents that were submitted to the Ethical
Commission are stored on the PC of the researcher.
Approval of the Ethical Commission is stored on the PC of
the researcher.
  - [X] file(s) that describe the content of the stored
files and how this content should be interpreted. Specify:
A word document that contains the codes of the different
observations and cases is stored on the PC of the
researcher.
  - [ ] other files. Specify: ...

```
* On which platform are these other files stored?
  - [X] individual PC
  - [X] research group file server
  - [X] other: external hard drive of the researcher
* Who has direct access to these other files (i.e.,
without intervention of another person)?
  - [X] main researcher
  - [X] responsible ZAP
  - [ ] all members of the research group
  - [ ] all members of UGent
  - [ ] other (specify): ...

4. Reproduction
===========================================================
* Have the results been reproduced independently?: [ ] YES
/ [X] NO

* If yes, by whom (add if multiple):
   - name:
   - address:
   - affiliation:
   - e-mail:

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```
% Data Storage Fact Sheet 4

% Name/identifier study: Study 4/ The meaning of social
cohesion in preventive family support: a practitioners'
perspective
% Author: Melissa Dierckx
% Date: 15 Februari 2024

1. Contact details
===========================================================

1a. Main researcher
-----------------------------------------------------------
- name: Melissa Dierckx
- address: Henri Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Gent
- e-mail: melissa.dierckx@ugent.be

1b. Responsible Staff Member (ZAP)
-----------------------------------------------------------
- name: Michel Vandenbroeck
- address: Henri Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Gent
- e-mail: michel.vandenbroek@ugent.be

If a response is not received when using the above contact
details, please send an email to data.pp@ugent.be or
contact Data Management, Faculty of Psychology and
Educational Sciences, Henri Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Ghent,
Belgium.

2. Information about the datasets to which this sheet
applies
===========================================================
* Reference of the publication in which the datasets are
reported: Dierckx, M., Devlieghere, J., & Vandenbroeck, M.
The meaning of social cohesion in preventive family
support: a practitioners' perspective. Submitted for
publication in European Journal of Social Work.

* Which datasets in that publication does this sheet apply
to?: This sheet applies to all data used in this
publication.

3. Information about the files that have been stored
===========================================================

3a. Raw data
-----------------------------------------------------------
```

* Have the raw data been stored by the main researcher?
[X] YES / [ ] NO
If NO, please justify:

* On which platform are the raw data stored?
  - [X] researcher PC
  - [X] research group file server
  - [X] other (specify): external hard drive of the researcher

* Who has direct access to the raw data (i.e., without intervention of another person)?
  - [X] main researcher
  - [X] responsible ZAP
  - [ ] all members of the research group
  - [ ] all members of UGent
  - [ ] other (specify): ...

3b. Other files
----

* Which other files have been stored?
  - [ ] file(s) describing the transition from raw data to reported results. Specify: ...
  - [X] file(s) containing processed data. Specify: The transcriptions of interviews, the codes and the coding three are stored on the PC of the researcher, both as word documents and in NVivo files.
  - [X] file(s) containing analyses. Specify: See finding section in the article. Files with the outline of the preliminary results are available on the PC of the researcher as well as on the research group server.
  - [X] files(s) containing information about informed consent. Specify: A blank copy of the informed consent is saved on the PC of the researcher. All signed informed consents are stored on the PC of the researcher and external hard drive.
  - [X] a file specifying legal and ethical provisions. Specify: The documents that were submitted to the Ethical Commission are stored on the PC of the researcher. Approval of the Ethical Commission is stored on the PC of the researcher.
  - [X] file(s) that describe the content of the stored files and how this content should be interpreted. Specify: A word document that contains the codes of the different participants is stored on the PC of the researcher.
  - [ ] other files. Specify: ...

* On which platform are these other files stored?
  - [X] individual PC
  - [X] research group file server
  - [X] other: external hard drive of the researcher

* Who has direct access to these other files (i.e.,
without intervention of another person)?
  - [X] main researcher
  - [X] responsible ZAP
  - [ ] all members of the research group
  - [ ] all members of UGent
  - [ ] other (specify): ...

4. Reproduction
===
* Have the results been reproduced independently?: [ ] YES
/ [X] NO

* If yes, by whom (add if multiple):
  - name:
  - address:
  - affiliation:
  - e-mail:

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% Data Storage Fact Sheet 5

% Name/identifier study: Study 5/ Proportionate
universalism in child and family social work
% Author: Melissa Dierckx
% Date: 15 Februari 2024

1. Contact details
===

1a. Main researcher

- name: Melissa Dierckx
- address: Henri Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Gent
- e-mail: melissa.dierckx@ugent.be

1b. Responsible Staff Member (ZAP)

- name: Michel Vandenbroeck
- address: Henri Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Gent
- e-mail: michel.vandenbroek@ugent.be

If a response is not received when using the above contact
details, please send an email to data.pp@ugent.be or
contact Data Management, Faculty of Psychology and
Educational Sciences, Henri Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Ghent,
Belgium.

2. Information about the datasets to which this sheet
applies
===
* Reference of the publication in which the datasets are
reported: Dierckx, M., Devlieghere, J., & Vandenbroeck, M.
(2020). Proportionate universalism in child and family
social work. Child & family social work, 25(2), 337–344.
https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12689

* Which datasets in that publication does this sheet apply
to?: This sheet applies to all data used in this
publication.

3. Information about the files that have been stored
===

3a. Raw data
----

* Have the raw data been stored by the main researcher?
[X] YES / [ ] NO
If NO, please justify:

* On which platform are the raw data stored?
  - [X] researcher PC
  - [X] research group file server
  - [X] other (specify): external hard drive of the researcher

* Who has direct access to the raw data (i.e., without intervention of another person)?
  - [X] main researcher
  - [X] responsible ZAP
  - [ ] all members of the research group
  - [ ] all members of UGent
  - [ ] other (specify): ...

3b. Other files
----

* Which other files have been stored?
  - [ ] file(s) describing the transition from raw data to reported results. Specify: ...
  - [X] file(s) containing processed data. Specify: The policy document, transcriptions of interviews and observational reports, the codes and the coding three are stored on the PC of the researcher, both as word documents and in NVivo files.
  - [X] file(s) containing analyses. Specify: See finding section in the article. Files with the outline of the preliminary results are available on the PC of the researcher as well as on the research group server.
  - [X] files(s) containing information about informed consent. Specify: A blank copy of the informed consent is saved on the PC of the researcher.
  - [] a file specifying legal and ethical provisions.
  - [X] file(s) that describe the content of the stored files and how this content should be interpreted. Specify: A word document that contains the codes of the different participants, cases and observations is stored on the PC of the researcher.
  - [ ] other files. Specify: ...

* On which platform are these other files stored?
  - [X] individual PC
  - [X] research group file server

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   - [X] other: external hard drive of the researcher

* Who has direct access to these other files (i.e.,
without intervention of another person)?
   - [X] main researcher
   - [X] responsible ZAP
   - [ ] all members of the research group
   - [ ] all members of UGent
   - [ ] other (specify): ...

4. Reproduction
============================================================
* Have the results been reproduced independently?: [ ] YES
/ [X] NO

* If yes, by whom (add if multiple):
   - name:
   - address:
   - affiliation:
   - e-mail:

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Supervisors:
Prof. Dr. Michel Vandenbroeck
Dr. Jochen Devlieghere

A dissertation submitted to Ghent University in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Social Work and Social Welfare Studies

Academic year 2023-2024