Social support and social cohesion in services for young children: A study of interactions among parents and between parents and professionals

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1.1. Introduction

Informal networks of people are known to be an important source of support to *all* families (Broadhurst, 2007; Buysse, 2008; Fram, 2005; Jack, 2000), but it remains unclear how the transition to parenthood impacts this. People's tendency to prefer relations with those who are similar to them (Bidart & Lavenu, 2005; Buysse, 2008) is also in contrast with the increasingly diverse contexts (Duyvendak, 2011) in which many families live. Diversity is supposed to challenge processes of social support and social cohesion. Yet, as many perceive the informal network as a private affair, the possible roles of structural social services in the informal networks of families living in diverse contexts have only been questioned by a few researchers (Duncan & Te One, 2012; Fram, 2005; Walker & Riley, 2001).

Places that are frequented by young families are interesting sites though to investigate actual processes of social support and social cohesion between diverse people:

> early childhood education and care provides a crucial space, in any society, for the micro- and macro-politics to meet and constantly re-negotiate the relationship between the private and the public sphere. (Urban, Vandenbroeck, Van Laere, Lazzari & Peeters, 2012, p. 522)

In this dissertation, we turn our attention to the actual interactions among people frequenting early childhood care and education (ECEC) services that aim to reach a social mix of families which represent the diversity in the neighbourhood. We thereby focus on the experiences of parents[1] with young children who make use of traditional centre-based childcare and/or Centres for Children and Parents (CCP).

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[1] The term 'parents' is used throughout the study to refer to those adults who take care of the child. Besides mothers and fathers, this can cover other relatives or professionals in charge (e.g. nannies).

1.1.1. Sensitizing concepts

To start, we discuss the notions social support, social cohesion and diversity as *sensitizing concepts* (Blumer, 1954; Mortelmans, 2007) that gave direction to our research questions and methodological approach and which enriched our analysis. As will become clear in the following paragraphs, it is hard to draw distinct lines between these concepts, as they are strongly interrelated in research discussions. Further, it should be noted that these terms are commonly used in research discussions, yet had to be translated into ordinary language during the process of fieldwork. For example, the Dutch word *opvoedingsondersteuning* (literally translated as 'parent(ing) support'), was not used in the interviews or discussion groups with parents. But many examples of how this was put into practice arose in the narratives of the parents. It is illustrative of how difficult it is to affix meaning to catch-all terms. Rather than solving the lack of clarity in the concepts used, our study might actually point to the need for multivocality here as well, if we want to keep in touch with the 'messiness' of human life. In accordance with Blumer (1954) we noticed that

> at best they [the concepts] allow only rough identification, and in what is so roughly identified they do not permit a determination of what is covered by the concept and what not. Definitions which are provided to such terms are usually no clearer than the concepts which they seek to define […] if we are good teachers, we seek to give the sense of the concept by the use of a few apt illustrations […] it is such a sense and not precise specifications that guides us in our discipline in transactions with our empirical world. (p. 5)

Therefore, Blumer chose to approach important notions as sensitizing concepts (in contrast with definitive concepts): "whereas definitive concepts provide prescriptions of what to see, sensitizing concepts merely suggest directions along which to look" (p. 7). For that, we need to look at concrete everyday practices as it is "the concrete distinctiveness of the instance" (p. 8) that offers us more insight into social phenomena.

1.1.1.1. Diversity in urban contexts

In our current globalised world, marked by mobility of goods and people (Duyvendak, 2011), the homogeneity and sustainability of social networks and

communities are challenged. Through processes of suburbanisation in the 1960's, cities like Antwerp, Brussels and Ghent became increasingly heterogenic in terms of the socio-economic and ethnic-cultural backgrounds of their inhabitants as a result of middle-class families moving towards the greener suburbs and the influx of immigrants. But, "unlike other cities in Europe, these occurrences never led to ghettoisation-like processes as some less well-off and/or older Belgian families stayed in these neighbourhoods" (Soenen & Verlot, 2002, p. 99). After a period of policy disinterest, the influx of new young households with capital ('new urbanism') revitalised attention on the inner city as a place for social, economic and cultural activities. Despite an attempt to approach diversity positively, city policies are still underpinned by "existing and widely known scientific explanations, which use *a priori* conceptualisations of community life" (Soenen & Verlot, 2002, p. 108) that depart from homogeneous groups.

> As a result, policy planners as well as social workers generally define social life in categorical terms, with the city as a totality of different homogeneous communities, each with their own ethnic and cultural features. This echoes the micro-tendencies as shown in education and policy before. Social programmes in city renewal policy in Flanders have incorporated this categorical homogenistic view. They aim at strengthening the internal ties of these different ethnic communities on the one hand, and at enhancing the relations between these communities on the other hand. As such they reinforce the central antagonism between "diversity" and "community", where diversity is associated with segregation and alienation. (Soenen & Verlot, 2002, p. 105)

Diversity is often reduced to a selection of background criteria (ethnic-cultural origin being one of the most pressing ones), assuming that those sharing the same characteristic, *are* the same and thus different from those with a different background. Both Braidotti (2003) and Geldof (2006) argue that thinking in dualities should be left behind. It is believed that identity is inherently dynamic and people should not be pinned down on one aspect of their identity (Geldof, 2006; Neudt & Maly, 2010; Soenen, 2006; Vandenbroeck, 2007; Verstraete & Pinxten, 2002). Therefore, an anti-essentialist approach to diversity is followed in this study. Besides covering various ethnic-cultural backgrounds, diversity here entails social issues like:

diverse and changing norms and values; diverse and changing family compositions, lifestyles or situations; and diverse and changing biographical and socio-economic backgrounds of children and parents.

With this approach, we point at the multiple, nomadic and intersectional identities that people construct. As these multiple identities entail dynamic de- and reconstruction processes, it becomes possible to transcend certain aspects of identity in different settings (Neudt & Maly, 2010; Soenen, 2006; Vandenbroeck, Roets & Snoeck, 2009). Central in diversity issues is acknowledging the ambivalence that is present in the encounter with oneself and the Other. Following Soenen (2006), ambivalence is understood as "the simultaneous presence in a situation of two opposites […], this enlarges the interpretation possibilities and can unite contradictions and extremes" (p. 64, own translation). To do justice to the complexity of encounters between diverse people in everyday life (e.g. in what people bring to situations and what situations do to them and in competencies regarding diversity), attention should be directed to social dynamics as they take place between individuals in specific contexts (Soenen & Verlot, 2002).

1.1.1.2. Social support and diversity

There is a large consensus in current research on the value and benefits of social support for families, yet social support is a complex concept to study. Conceptualisations cover several types of support, such as informational support, emotional support or instrumental support (including material and or practical help). Subdivisions are also made regarding where the support comes from: formal support then, comes from professionals like teachers, social workers, doctors, and so on; informal support is considered help one receives from the partner, relatives, friends, neighbours, colleagues or acquaintances. Recently, besides other resources like books, virtual media are also the focus of research (Geinger, Vandenbroeck & Roets, 2013). Numerous studies making use of social support scales, have called social support a 'predictor', 'mediator', 'protective factor' or 'buffer' and linked it to better psychological well-being of parents, parenting behaviour, and (future) outcomes for children. Consequently, extensive research has been carried out on groups believed to be 'at risk'. As we discuss in chapter 2, this targeted

approach is problematic as it tends to individualise (social) problems. Parents are instrumentalised to reach goals, without including them in the construction of the problem(s) for which they are believed to be responsible (Hermanns, 2014; Weille, 2014). Nevertheless, the essence of this support is that parents *experience* it as supportive (Buysse, 2008). In that regard, several authors pointed at the primacy of the informal network as a source of support to *all* families (Broadhurst, 2007; Buysse, 2008; Jack, 2000). The individualising point of view in the dominant literature on social support does not pay attention to the reciprocity of interactions among parents and in the interactions between parents and professionals (Vandenbroeck, Roets & Snoeck, 2009). Likewise, how policy actions might influence the possibility of such interactions is kept out of sight.

Furthermore, the focus on homogeneous groups in current research (and practice) on social support in the context of parenting is in contradiction with contemporary contexts of diversity. As people tend to get along with people who are more similar (Bidart & Lavenu, 2005; Blokland & van Eijk, 2010; Buysse, 2008; Schuermans, Meeus & De Decker, 2014), many social support studies have focused on intimate relationships that are installed between homogeneous groups of people. Sarason and Sarason (2009) however, claim that:

> it needs to be recognised that support can come from many directions that include individuals with whom we have intimate relationships, those with whom we have a very limited range of regular social exchanges and occasional community contacts. All three play roles in social integration, although how and to what degree needs more study. (p. 117)

Besides offering more insight into the types of relationships, Sarason and Sarason (2009) also emphasise that we lack deeper understandings of the *why* and the *how* of social support processes. Indeed, little is known about the dynamic nature of *social* support as something relational and reciprocal, about the actual process of support-giving and receiving, especially in contexts of diversity (see literature review, chapter 2).

1.1.1.3. Social cohesion and diversity

Just as social support does, the concept of social cohesion covers a multiplicity of understandings and the only point authors perhaps agree on is its multidimensionality. In the conception of Kearns and Forrest (2000) and many followers, a place is perceived as cohesive when its residents are hanging closely together, it is characterised by consensus on a given set of norms and values, and by the absence of disruption. Several authors in policy and academic circles have observed that social cohesion is seen as a key ingredient for strong and healthy societies (Hipp & Perrin, 2006; Kearns & Forrest, 2000; Novy, Swiatek & Moulaert, 2012; Stigendal, 2010). The attention on social cohesion as a policy concern, can be understood as a reaction to the rapid changes in societies that we face today and a wish to restore the social fabric. Yet, in many of these discourses, social cohesion is functionalised and narrowed down to a focus on the socio-economic and political dimensions (more social control, less disorder and crime, etc.), somewhat neglecting the ethical and normative choices that go with it (Novy, Swiatek & Moulaert, 2012).

Furthermore, the grand narratives on social cohesion in heterogeneous contexts focus mainly on the perceptions of majority and minority groups towards one another, leaving the actual and ephemeral encounters in everyday life out of question (Soenen, 2009). But what then could (research on) social cohesion be about in these contexts marked by an increasing diversity? According to Soenen (2009) the concept of 'community' as the close-knit unit and consisting of long-lasting relations should be broadened to include temporal and hybrid versions, which she terms *light* communities. Rather than a goal to reach, Stigendal (2010) perceives social cohesion as a range of questions and challenges. Novy *et al.* (2012) state that "the challenge of social cohesion implies cultural change capable of overcoming adherence to a single-language, mono-ethnic norm and facilitating diversity, equality as well as multi-identity exchange" (p. 1884). Or to put it another way, the question at stake is if and how people can be "allowed to be different and yet able to live together" (Stigendal, 2010, p. 35).

While the idea of social mixing is getting much attention, the proximity of diversity generated for example by housing policies, appears to be an important condition but does not guarantee social exchange between diverse people (Amin, 2002; Blokland & van Eijk, 2010; Lofland, 2009; Schuermans *et al.*, 2014; Valentine, 2008). Taking into account the perspectives and practices regarding diversity of privileged people, Schuermans *et al.* (2014) found that segregation was also taking place in diverse neighbourhoods, yet on a smaller scale, as people "carve out imaginary spaces of Flemish middleclassness" (p. 13), which Amin referred to as the existence of 'parallel lives'. Blokland & van Eijk confirmed that even those people attracted by diversity, known as 'diversity-seekers', and those living in diversified neighbourhoods, ended up having homogeneous networks (with respect to class, ethnicity and level of education), which Valentine identified as the paradoxical gap between *values* concerning diversity and actual *practices*. It could be the case that this persistence of homogeneity of social networks is only true apropos the intimate relations people have. Therefore, attention to the numerous light encounters that people have with strangers on the bus, on the street, in public services, and so on, is needed if we wish to capture what is happening among people from different backgrounds. These light encounters point to the existence of a broad array of relationships of which those between intimates is only a part. These light encounters refer to various *person-to-person connections*: from *fleeting relationships* between unknown people, to *routinised relationships* among categorically known others (like seller–buyer), and even *quasi-primary relationships* as temporal, emotionally loaded, connections between unknown or categorically known others. Lofland (2009) also stressed the dynamic character of relations: a fleeting relationship can fold into a quasi-primary relationship and back. For an extensive account of these types of relationships, we refer the reader to Lofland (2009) and Soenen (2006, 2009).

Diversity has been celebrated in some urban discourses, but we lack a deeper understanding of how this is put into practice in everyday encounters on a micro-scale (Valentine, 2008). Therefore, Oosterlynck, Loopmans, Schuermans, Vandenabeele and Zemni (2015) plead for more qualitative and ethnographic research on the "relationally constituted places where diversity is encountered and negotiated" (p. 12). This is in line with a focus on social

cohesion as dynamic and relational. In this regard, Stigendal (2010) considers "the existing order as something created and temporal" (p. 20). Also Amin (2002) prefers to speak about social cohesion as something that unfolds in the process of meeting the Other, rather than an achievement of community or consensus. These authors have approached social cohesion as something that happens in the interaction between people, rather than a stable collective identity that should be strived for:

> Taking relationality as a starting point therefore opens up perspectives for solidarity amongst heterogeneous populations who do not have anything in common apart from the place they share. […] Such solidarities do not necessarily presuppose assimilation into a pre-given set of shared norms and values, nor the necessity of historical time to build up social capital between diverse citizens, but require a willingness to negotiate the diversity of people and the practices they are engaged in here and now. (Oosterlynck et al., 2015, p. 15)

Likewise Soenen (2009) and Schuermans *et al.* (2014) advocated for more research "on the seemingly banal discourses and practices" (p. 15) of the everyday life: as people live in the here and now, we should not neglect the interactions between diverse (unknown) people, regardless of how small or ephemeral they seem to be. According to Amin (2002), one should look at sites or practices where 'cultural questioning or transgression' takes place in the shared activity among strangers (e.g. in schools, at work, or in other public spaces). For example, schools, when frequented by a social mix, are seen as "crucial agents of local development processes", yet this is barely investigated (Stigendal, 2010, p. 14).

1.1.1.4. Attention for light encounters

Whereas Henderson already directed our attention towards casual contacts in 1977 (in Sarason & Sarason, 2009), light encounters are rarely documented in current research on social support. In the same vein, Soenen (2009) noticed a similar disinterest in studying the broad array of relations between intimae, acquaintances, and strangers in everyday life, despite the attention given to ephemeral relations in Lofland's *World of Strangers* published back in 1973 (in Soenen, 2009). While "Goffman [in his work published in 1959, 1963, 1971]

demonstrated eloquently and persuasively that what occurs between two strangers passing on the street is as thoroughly social as what occurs in a conversation between two lovers" (Lofland, 2009, p. 4), current notions of community are still centred upon close-knit units, consisting of long-lasting relationships. Social cohesion then becomes problematic; not only because of the increasing mobility and diversity which puts homogeneous communities under pressure, but also because cohesion on one level (e.g. the neighbourhood) is seen as a threat to cohesion on another level (e.g. the city) (Hipp & Perrin, 2006). Consequently, this has led to frequent research on in- and exclusion, but a profound analysis of everyday practices of living together remains absent (Soenen, 2009). Yet, it is in these daily social practices, at a given time in a given place, where people temporarily share a moment that social cohesion—and in the same vein, social support—may be shaped. These temporal and hybrid versions that Soenen (2009) calls light communities, are marked by ambivalence, and by continuous processes of *stitch* and *split* (on these particular moments, the distinction between 'we' and 'them' becomes negligible). The *splitting* (disjunction) that she points to, becomes as equally relevant in cohesive processes as the *stitching* (connection).

Inspired by Lofland's (2009) analysis of interactions, divided in the public-relational sphere with unknown persons, the private-relational sphere with intimate people and the parochial sphere with acquaintances, Soenen (2006) developed a useful approach to unravel interactions in social space, with attention to diversity. She split the interactions into three groups based on:

a) **Homogeneity**: people should get opportunities for intimate relationships with others who are similar to them, as these are often experienced as supportive. Yet, the establishment of homogeneous networks is part of a dynamic process in which the two other types are also relevant.

b) **Recognisability**: people tend to look for familiarity with their surroundings, which enhances quality of life in settings marked by diversity. Via small talk unknown others can become more familiar without the cost that intensive relations carry with them.

c) **Ambivalence**: the possibility to take up multiple roles and to plug into various relations with strangers, creates light forms of

> belonging. Spaces marked by ambivalence, in which both recognisability and anonymity are present at the same time, offer the possibility to interact as well as to disconnect or avoid the other. From there on, different forms of living together can be activated.

In line with Soenen (2009), we study these forms of social cohesion (which she terms community building) in their actualised forms, yet in services oriented towards families with young children. This level of interaction in a (semi)public space is especially interesting when studying diversity issues, or as Amin (2002) put it:

> ultimately, coming to terms with difference is a matter of everyday practices and strategies of cultural contact and exchange with others who are different from us. For such interchange to be effective and lasting, it needs to be inculcated as a habit of practice (not just copresence) in mixed sites of everyday contact such as schools, the workplace, and other public spaces. (p. 976)

1.2. Research contexts

1.2.1. Socio-historical background

Today's view on early childhood education and care (ECEC) is influenced by the socio-historical context in which it is embedded. In the Flemish community of Belgium (further labelled as Flanders) ECEC is split into child care (for children 0-3 years), kindergarten (for children 3-6 years) and parent support. Different authorities are responsible for their respective regulation and funding (Eurydice, 2014). First, we describe some historical developments in centre-based child care (hereafter shortened to child care) that are relevant to clarify the context and underpinnings of this study which is based on the work of Vandenbroeck (2004) and Peeters (2008). For an extensive analysis, their respective doctoral theses on the history of child care and the professionalisation of the child care workforce can be consulted. Then, we discuss the emergence of new forms of ECEC: Centres for Children and Parents

(CCP), which were recently established in Flanders and differ from traditional child care.

1.2.1.1. Child care in Flanders

Child care has undergone important changes over time, considering the (de)professionalisation processes of childcare workers (Peeters, 2008), the families targeted (from a necessary evil for the working class towards a service to sustain the middle class' life-work balance) and the position of parents in the centres (Vandenbroeck, 2004). Vandenbroeck (2004) argued that despite the changes in discourse (from the medical, to the psychological, to the managerial discourse) and their benefits, these discourses have also led to the absence of critical reflection on the reciprocal relations between parents, the (local) community and the professional workforce.

In the nineteenth century, dominated by the medical discourse and its attempts to reduce child mortality, a physical gap between families and child care existed; parents were seen as 'outsiders', they were not allowed in the rooms, the relation with them was rather impersonal, and they were kept out of discussions about the roles and concepts of child care. Those working in child care had to 'substitute' the mother and needed only technical skills to fulfil the caring tasks. After World War II, and influenced by developmental psychology, a metaphoric gap between families and childcare was initiated. Cooperation between both childcare workers and parents was deemed important, yet remained unidirectional; rather than a reciprocal dialogue, parents were still seen as incompetent and thus in need of instruction by experts calling upon scientific knowledge. Professionalisation of the workforce was headed towards more technical skills such as carrying out observations of the children. Yet, in line with the ideology of motherhood, the home-based care expanded towards the end of the twentieth century, which hindered further professionalisation of the workforce. In 2000, a shift was made in policy texts from *kinderverzorgster* (as 'women caring for children') to *kinderbegeleider* (a more neutral term for those accompanying children). In the current managerial discourse, along with the increased involvement of childcare workers themselves, parents can for the first time take part in discussions about quality in child care. A real ethical debate about quality,

however, remains absent as parents are reduced to the status of clients/consumers of a commodity. Still, it is believed that another kind of professional is required—one that is able to reflect on its practice and to instil reciprocal bonds. Consequently, attention to professionalisation recurred and has led to a bachelor's degree training program in Flanders for those working with young children. The adjustment in focus from physical hygiene, to psychological well-being, to the matter of quality, did change some practices, but did not necessarily fundamentally influence the position of families, professionals or child care as a whole (Vandenbroeck, 2004; Peeters, 2008).

1.2.1.2. An economic, educative and social function

Nonetheless child care is considered to have an economic, educative *and* social function, attention has been directed disproportionally to the economic function (e.g. European Parliament, 2002; Plantenga & Siegel, 2005) and the educative function (e.g. Heckman, 2006; Leseman, 2002; Penn, 2009; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2004). Only since the 21st century has the exclusive link with maternal employment partly been dropped, has attention to the social function of child care risen and have issues of social exclusion been put on the policy agenda. Broadly defined, the social function entails efforts made to contribute to a more just society, or more particularly, to principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities (IFSW, 2014). Yet, the social function is often interpreted differently according to the group it serves. In governmental texts, child care is often constructed as facilitating employment for highly educated women and as a compensation for children from lower class families (Vandenbroeck, 2004). While there is much to say for a differentiation in approach, making this distinction here discards the essence of the social function: no room is left for a reciprocal dialogue since parents are considered to be incompetent and in need of scientific expertise (see above). As a consequence of this reductionist approach of the social function, research has focused on the accessibility of day care centres, assuming that an increased accessibility contributes to equal opportunities (Vandenbroeck, De Visscher, Van Nuffel & Ferla, 2008; Wall & Jose, 2004). Yet, inequality of use has been acknowledged both before entering the system of child care as well as once in it. The ongoing non-intentional exclusion of disadvantaged groups

by subscription policies (like first come, first served) has been documented (Vandenbroeck *et al.*, 2008) as has the positive impact of specific policy measures and coaching on the availability and accessibility of child care for diverse families (Vandenbroeck, Geens & Berten, 2014). It was also observed that once families make use of child care, informal networks are not equally at one's disposal. The use of child care leads to larger networks for those who already have large networks, but not (or less) for those who have more limited networks (Segaert, 2007; Vandenbroeck, Boonaert, Van der Mespel & De Brabandere, 2009). Why this is the case, has barely been investigated. A possible explanation resides in the reproduction of the societal gap because of the premises on which the social services act (Coussée, Roets & Bouverne-De Bie, 2009).

Flanders is considered to be fairly average as regards child care coverage (Eurydice, 2014; Unicef Innocenti Research Centre, 2008) and the number of funded provisions. In total, 63% of children up to 3 years of age are regularly (at least once a week) cared for by a non-relative; 73% of them attend formal care (Kind en Gezin, 2011). In contrast to the US and the UK, funded child care in Flanders is not a targeted provision, but aimed at the general population. Nevertheless, children from more affluent families are over-represented, compared with families from lower income families (Van Lancker, 2014). The services offer day care facilities for children zero to three years old. Funded child care can be municipally or privately organised, or set up by the state. In all three cases of funded care, costs including salaries and operating costs are funded in full and parents pay a fixed contribution according to their income. As the central funding authorities regulate parental contributions, the cost to parents does not vary across funded centres. Regulations on quality in funded childcare centres are also centralised. Consequently, legal requirements are strict (regarding, e.g. adult–child ratio, group size, staff qualifications, infrastructure and quality assurance systems), regardless of the neighbourhood or families they reach, and the centres are inspected regularly (Vandenbroeck *et al.*, 2014).

1.2.1.3. New forms of ECEC

In this dissertation, we use a broad definition of the social function of ECEC, as the contribution child care makes to the principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities (IFSW, 2014). This entails efforts regarding equal accessibility, and also those supporting families and communities, and installing reciprocity with and between families and local communities (Vandenbroeck, 2004). Besides child care, other forms of ECEC share this commitment. Over the last decade, Centres for Children and Parents (CCP) have emerged which have focused on the social function and made it the heart of their work. The CCP cover a wide range of practices (in Flanders as well as worldwide), regarding the people they target and their conceptual grounding, yet they show several commonalities as well (see Hoshi-Watanabe, Musatti, Rayna & Vandenbroeck (2015) for a comparative analysis on CCP in France, Italy, Japan and Flanders):

> The functions that are ascribed to these centres can vary according to the cultural and political framework in which they are created. However, they all share a main feature – the attendance of children and parents together – that contradicts the basic custodial function of all other early childhood services, which combine the care and education of children according to different recipes (Cameron & Moss 2007) but always in the absence of their parents. (Hoshi-Watanabe et al., 2015, p. 62)

In contrast with traditional child care, CCP services that parents and young children can attend together are only recently being established in Flanders. The initiatives are characterised by a more informal course than traditional child care. The CCP are open only several half days a week; there are no obligations related to regularity of attendance, enrolment or subscription. Rather than experts in parenting/educational matters, the professionals are facilitators of encounters as they aim to create a stimulating environment for children and informal support opportunities for parents. Parents or educators (e.g. grandparents or nannies) attend the centre with their child(ren) aged zero to four or five years old. The presence of the families varies continuously, thus creating moments in which families do not know each other yet, and also moments when they re-encounter one another or attend with friends.

Compared with other countries (like France, Italy, the United Kingdom, Japan, Australia, etc.) where CCP are more structurally embedded in the ECEC system, consideration to provide encounters and activities that offer informal social support opportunities was only recently included in a regulative framework in Flanders, yet remains separate from traditional child care. The first CCP, inspired by the French *maison verte*, was set up as an autonomous organisation in Antwerp in 1995 (Vandenborre, 2014; Van der Mespel, 2011)*.* Only a decade later, other NGOs active in the field of family support, set up similar initiatives. Located in rather deprived areas, they started to organise meeting opportunities as part of their broader activities supporting disadvantaged families. Up till then, these initiatives had no link with traditional child care. In 2009, the first CCP was set up in Brussels that had structural connections with traditional childcare services operating in the same area (Hoshi-Watanabe *et al.*, 2015). Before ratification of the decree concerning the organisation of preventive family support in 2013 (Vlaams Parlement, 2013), a regulative framework was lacking and structural funding was not foreseen. Now, activities that facilitate encounters and social cohesion are included in official legislation as one of the three main pillars, besides preventive health care and parenting support, in the decree concerning the organisation of preventive family support (Blondeel, De Schuymer, Strynckx & Travers, 2013), yet appropriate funding is lacking. In the organisation of the *Huizen van het Kind* (inspired by the international model of family centres) that put these three pillars into practice, child care can be involved, yet this is not imperative at all. Child care remains regulated by a different, also recently renewed decree that became effective from 2015 onwards (Vlaamse Regering, 2014). In so doing, services where parents stay with their child are still conceived as different from child care where parents entrust the care of their child to professionals when absent.

There are several reasons that make traditional child care as well as the CCP of particular interest as research settings. In both services, formal and informal supportive relations can occur as a diverse range of people (if efforts are made to reach a social mix) come across during a demanding period of their life (i.e., when having young children). As we know that (parental) networks are very important in families' lives, yet not equally at everyone's disposal, both ECEC services might be important places for families to extend their supportive

relations. They differ however in their accessibility (e.g. not every family finds a place in child care) and the frequency with which families can re-encounter one another (e.g. regular daily/weekly use in child care, while more irregular in CCP). Also, in child care, both parents and professionals are strongly involved in the care of the child, which is not the case in the CCP. Furthermore, both ECEC services are places in which the private, public and parochial spheres can occur simultaneously such as moments of intimate interaction, casual contact or small-talk with unknown others. Last but not least, these ECEC services are subject to different policies both on the institutional level and on higher levels that can enable and/or obstruct potential encounters among families.

1.2.2. Research questions

In our work, we explore how processes of social support and social cohesion are put into practice in "relationally constituted places where diversity is encountered and negotiated" (Oosterlynck *et al.*, 2015, p. 12). We conducted our research in CCP and child care services that reach diverse families.

Table 1. Overview of the research questions and the methodological approach

Study	Research questions	Methodological approach
1	How is the notion of social support in relation to parenting understood in literature? What is known about parents' experiences of social support? What roles do scholars in academic literature ascribe to social work services regarding social support in contexts of diversity?	Literature review
2	Is it feasible to organise informal encounters in formal services where a social mix of users is present? If interactions actually occur between parents from diverse backgrounds, how are they facilitated? How do the staff in a CCP give meaning to the interactions in relation to social support in the daily reports?	Analysis of attendance registrations and daily reports on the interactions held by the staff; and questionnaires filled in by parents in a CCP

Study	Research questions	Methodological approach
3	How do parents experience their visits to a Centre for Children and Parents? What kind of policy practices are considered supportive by parents? What does this mean for services intending to support diverse parents (and communities)?	Focus groups and group interviews with parents making use of a CCP
4	What kind of interactions do parents frequenting child care in urban contexts marked by diversity perceive as supportive in their lives? (Where) do parents find these interactions?	Interviews with parents making use of child care
5	What kinds of interactions take place in child care and between whom? How are policy practices regarding social support and social cohesion shaped? What roles do parents ascribe to child care regarding social support and social cohesion in contexts of diversity?	Multiple case study with observations in 2 childcare centres, document analysis, (field) interviews with parents and professionals
6	Do ECEC services intervene in processes of social support and social cohesion, and if so, how? What is (or can be) the rationale for intervention in informal social networks?	Cross-analysis of the fieldwork in both settings, CCP and child care

In what follows, we describe the different studies and relevant methodological considerations. We elaborate on how the fieldwork and analyses were put into practice since methodological issues are only briefly considered in the chapters that were published as journal articles.

1.3. Methodological approach

1.3.1. An ethnographic stance

Much of our approach was inspired by the work of Soenen (2006, 2009). Although her research was deeply ethnographic and anthropological, she broke with traditional conceptions of anthropology (e.g. her focus on 'the world at home', on urban and moving spaces in contrast with a traditional interest in rural areas, far away from the world we know).

> While there is a clear vision of ethnography as making sense of the culture of the 'other', the use of ethnography in practical and policy-making contexts by practitioners – particularly in educational, health and social care settings – has given rise to a different conceptualization of ethnography. Here, the aims are *to render the familiar strange*. […] Ethnographic research can be embraced as a methodology that aims *to look again at the cultures we may feel we already know so well*. In this sense, ethnography is about turning a critical eye onto practices, dynamics, policies and meaning making within familiar cultures. (Goodley, Lawthom, Clough & Moore, 2006, p. 57)

Considering our submergence into the social world under study "in order to make sense of public and private, overt and elusive cultural meanings" (Goodley *et al.*, 2006, p. 56), from the rich data and the thick descriptions they generated, we can say we were *doing ethnography* (Geertz, 1973).

As our study consisted of several layers of fieldwork, linking the different analyses (Howitt, 2010) was an important and enriching part of our work. By confronting different practices in different countries with one another, Tobin (2005) challenged taken-for-granted assumptions about what constitutes good practice. The element of 'difference' was brought in our research on several levels: the difference in standpoints (interviewing parents and professionals), the difference in settings (child care and CCP), and the difference in contexts (a child care service in Ghent and one in Brussels; CCPs in Brussels and Antwerp). Studying both CCP and childcare services resulted in the observation of varying rationales behind these practices and various experiences of those involved. Asking parents similar questions without

expecting similar answers allowed us to analyse diverse findings within a shared framework. The cases were thus not selected for comparative reasons, but conceived as free standing, yet related cases. Rather than for the sake of comparison, the inclusion of both settings was interesting as the confrontation made the familiar a bit more strange.

An important advantage to our multi-layered approach was the possibility of generating an in-depth understanding of how concepts are taking place in a specific practice thanks to the differences just described. For example, both childcare services used the word 'neighbourhood-oriented' in describing themselves, which could make us assume that they have similar practices in that regard. The observations and interviews however, yielded a different picture. In centre A, being neighbourhood-oriented meant, among other things, a cooperation with neighbours and organizations active in the same region. In contrast, in centre B 'neighbourhood-oriented' mainly referred to the priority that was given to families living in the neighbourhood. Whereas this is a rather simple example which could be found from a sole interview with both coordinators, in other cases (see especially chapters 6 and 7) it was precisely the blending of different sources, the diving into the social practices, and the writing of thick descriptions that made it possible to grasp the 'complex specificness' and 'circumstantiality' of local phenomena (Geertz, 1973). In that regard, both Geertz (1973) and Soenen (2009) talked about ethnographic analysis as constructing a reading of social phenomena. The study of local meanings that are embedded in a certain context (e.g. the work of Tobin, 2005) has the potential to offer inspiration to refine ongoing debates and to generate different views on the own practice-in-context. Geertz (1973) even goes one step further, arguing that:

> if anthropological interpretation is constructing a reading of what happens, then to divorce it from what happens – from what, in this time or that place, specific people say, what they do, what is done to them, from the whole vast business of the world – is to divorce it from its applications and render it vacant. (p. 18)

The findings generated by doing ethnography are thus characterized by particularity, yet thanks to the thick descriptions, offering "very densely textured facts'" (Geertz, 1973, p. 28), it is possible to understand something

without knowing everything. By touching upon the layered-ness and even ambiguity of concepts/ideas/acts in the field under study, we attempted to accurately depict the complexity of reality. Thick descriptions offered the possibility of seeing the act of pouring coffee (see chapter 7) as much more than the coffee or the pouring, but as doing certain things in certain ways (Geertz, 1973).

As a result of the choice of an ethnographic and multi-layered approach, the process of data analysis could not entirely be separated from the phase of data collection. In between focus groups, interviews or case studies, time was taken to read and re-read the material intensively. While our analysis bore close resemblance to the directed content analysis as elucidated by Hsieh and Shannon (2005), the process of deriving themes from the mass of data was circular and interactional, and thus more chaotic than often presented. In several studies participative data-analysis facilitated more profound analyses. For example, the preliminary results of study 3 (presented in chapter 4) were summarised in an individual report for each CCP. These reports were discussed with the coordinators of the CCP. Also a global report was written and discussed with the research team of 5 researchers, which resulted in a new ordering of the results based on key citations of parents and with the professionals' role in creating supportive experiences as the leading thread. Furthermore, our analysis was deepened in a way that no coding tree could have done through the writing of academic articles based on the results together with colleagues, through discussing research papers within our research unit as well as with international researchers, through presenting the results to different international audiences, and through writing short articles aimed at practitioners. Also peer reviews on submitted articles eventually helped to bring our analysis and reporting of results to a higher level. Finally, even the periods of time that passed when the work was at a standstill, due to parental leave and sickness leave, might have been crucial in the development of thoughts on the subject (not to speak about my own experience of becoming a mother during my research, see below). It is through this process of discussing the results, re-reading the original recordings, the act of writing and thus re-weaving the materials that the insights presented here came about. These are interpretive in nature. Rather than presenting them as facts, they should be seen "as sources of understanding" (Booth, 1999, p. 249) that,

as we hope, will generate further reflection and debate on these and related topics (Roets, Roose & Bouverne-De Bie, 2013).

1.3.2. Study 1 – A review of the literature

To gain a better understanding of the concept of social support and how it was studied in relation to parenting, we conducted a review of the academic literature. This review was based on 171 articles published between January 2000 and November 2011 in international peer-reviewed journals available on the Social Sciences Citation Index. Our analysis consisted of a horizontal and vertical layer. First, the titles and abstracts of all 171 articles were analysed to determine the main rationale for studying social support (horizontal layer). Secondly, an in-depth analysis was carried out on two sets of these 171 articles; namely, the 10 articles most cited, as an illustration of an often repeated rationale for studying social support, and the 26 articles located in the social work category, as an exploration of a social work perspective on social support (vertical layer). Finally, we enriched our systematic analysis with broader social work literature. For detailed methodological choices, such as inclusion and exclusion criteria, we refer to chapter 2 as these are consistently mentioned there.

Regarding the notion of the encounter with the Other, our work was mainly inspired by that of Soenen (2006, 2009) and Lofland (2009) who offered the theoretical frameworks presented above. Further, the work of fellow researchers on diversity and social cohesion in urban contexts (e.g. the research platform DieGem and Social Polis) was taken as a starting point to explore these and related notions (such as identity, solidarity, belonging, etc.). Examining the reference lists of interesting articles as well as attending international meetings with co-researchers, contributed to the underpinnings of this study.

1.3.3. Study 2 – Encounters crossing borders in Baboes, a CCP in Brussels

In study 2, it was questioned whether it is feasible for an ECEC service to reach a social mix of families. And if so, how interactions across differences are facilitated. Therefore, we focused on one case—Baboes, a CCP in Brussels.

Three types of data were analysed (for a detailed description and results, we refer to chapter 3). The attendance registrations by the staff and 31 questionnaires completed by parents visiting Baboes, gave us an indication of the actual presence of cultural and socio-economic diversity in this non-targeted service. Thirdly, we analysed the daily reports and memos held by the staff, which captured a selection of micro-events taking place in Baboes. This provided us with insights into what actually went on in this meeting place, and illustrated free confrontation and interactions across languages. As our analysis was only tentative and provisional, we argued for more research on early childhood services' role in encounters between diverse families. Further, we noticed that more research on interactions among parents and their meaning was necessary.

1.3.4. Study 3 – Discussion groups with parents visiting a CCP

To gain a better understanding of the meanings of social support for a diverse range of parents, we organised discussion groups with parents visiting a CCP in Antwerp or Brussels. Listening to parents who visit a CCP offered us the opportunity to include parents' perspectives on other types of relationships than those traditionally studied. As there are no regulations regarding regularity or subscription to come to a CCP, the presence of the families varies continuously and is unpredictable. This creates moments in which families do not know each other yet, thus making the CCP more of a public space, and also moments when they re-encounter one another or attend with friends, thus making the CCP a parochial or even a private space.

We organised 6 discussion groups with 33 parents (comprised of 1 nanny, 3 fathers and 29 mothers). Purposive sampling (Mortelmans, 2007) was used by asking the professionals who work in the CCP to invite a social mix of parents to participate in the study. The parents who joined the discussion groups, originated from 13 different countries (European and non-European). Their age varied from 23 to 53 years. Poorly as well as highly educated parents were included—mothers and fathers at work, housewives/family men and parents looking for a job (see chapter 4 for an extended profile of the participants). To instil a sense of homogeneity between the participants (Acocella, 2011), we

expressed at the start of each discussion that they all shared the experience of visiting the same CCP and having young children.

The recruitment of participants however, did not take place without any resistance from the staff of the CCP. As the staff viewed the non-judgmental and non-prescriptive nature of the CCP as essential, this was felt as being in conflict with inviting the parents to a discussion group for research purposes. Initially, an invitation letter (in Dutch, French and English) was placed in the centre. As this generated little reaction, we asked the professionals to invite parents personally, by word of mouth. In three CCP, this resulted in 8 (group 1), 12 (group 2) and 5 (group 3) parents willing to participate. In a fourth CCP, only 1 parent subscribed before the outset. Consequently, as researchers (we were two, one moderator and one timekeeper), we got permission to invite other parents personally the day of the discussion (as the discussion group was planned during an opening moment of the centre and taking place in an adjacent room). All six parents who were invited, agreed to join. One of them dropped out immediately after the start as her daughter had a toileting accident. Group 4 thus ended up with 5 parents. As these parents actually came for a play visit with their child, the discussion group took place in the presence of 6 children, which influenced the normal proceedings, both in a positive and negative sense. The parents and the researchers were distracted from time to time because of something the children did, yet this provided significant on-the-spot illustrations of what the parents were trying to tell us. As parents spoke directly into the recorder, they waited their turn to react, but from time to time it resembled more of a group interview than a group discussion when several parents were distracted by the tumult of the children. In the fifth CCP, there was also only one participant. Therefore, the meeting was changed from a weekday to a Saturday, which resulted in three participants, yet only two showed up (Group 5). As the initial date had already changed, and these two parents had made the effort to come, the researcher (only one researcher went because of the small group) decided to allow the discussion group to take place. Likewise, the discussion group in the last CCP (group 6) turned out to be a one-to-one interview (in the presence of one researcher): from the five registered participants, two parents cancelled right before the start and two parents did not show up.

Focus group discussions were preferred to collect our data, as the interactions allowed us to elaborate on shared meanings and to substantiate points of view (Mortelmans, 2007). Except for groups 5 and 6, two researchers were present of whom one moderated the discussion. The second researcher did act as timekeeper, but also as an observer. Both researchers asked questions: the moderator mainly kept the questions in mind, and the assistant researcher was often focused on non-verbal reaction (nodding, smiling, etc.) and asking for clarification. Time was provided for translation by one of the researchers (in the case of English or French) or by another parent (in the case of Berber or Arabic). Attention was paid to non-verbal language also, in order to involve non-natives equally and to ask other parents for full translation. However, it cannot be ignored that some non-native parents seemed less likely to express their opinions.

A pre-structured guideline was developed and slightly adapted after the first focus group. The protocol was based on the format proposed by Mortelmans (2007). It started with a short welcome, followed by why are we here today and how will we do it? Parents then filled in a drop-off (a half page questionnaire to collect background information from every parent) and permission to audiotape the conversation was obtained. We verbally explained their voluntary involvement and confidentiality of the information and parents signed the informed consent papers. After that, parents and researchers briefly introduced themselves, stating their name, how many children they had and for how long they had been frequenting the CCP. As a way of introducing them into the theme, we asked parents how they got to know about the CCP. By asking parents about their concrete experiences ('how was the first time you came?', 'Do you/your child have a favourite spot in the centre?') we brought the conversation to our key questions regarding parents' first visit and their motivations to return; families' interactions with other children, parents and professionals; their perception of the role of the professionals; and parents' contacts with other people living in the neighbourhood. For each of these questions, we prepared some sub questions, in case no answers were offered, for clarification, or to redirect the discussion if needed. Both, in a direct and indirect way, parents were invited to elaborate on what they were telling us and to give as many concrete details about their experience as possible. We regularly paraphrased what we

thought were the main statements and ended by asking the parents if there was anything left that they wanted to tell us.

Right after each discussion group, we wrote a 3-page report, containing information about how we experienced the practical arrangements, the location, the course of the discussion and the questions. Further, we noted details about the diversity of the participants and if and how there had been translation of responses. Last but not least, we wrote down what we remembered as being the core themes and reactions. All recordings were transcribed in full by two students and read over again by myself. Further, my co-researcher collected central citations under each question in our pre-structured guideline. This offered a first glimpse into the produced meanings, but an in-depth analysis of each whole conversation was needed to unravel the 'meaning-in-context' (Mortelmans, 2007).

We analysed the data as group data, coming from a group *discussion* rather than a group *interview* (despite group 5). In so doing, we took the context in which things were said into account, as well as the intensity of expressions, the terms used and changes in perspectives or vocabulary. A focus on these data as group data, had the potential "to reveal the "public self" (Krueger, 1994, p. 8), that is, the collective and public dimension of opinions" (Acocella, 2011, p. 1128).

1.3.5. Study 4 – Interviews with parents using child care

The parents in study 3 testified that they experience their informal contacts in a CCP as supportive and cohesive, and that this experience contrasted with public areas, where no mediating figures were around, but also with the private sphere, which lacked diversity. Consequently, we conducted an ethnographic study in two day care centres for children 0-3 to capture important characteristics of the complex social reality in which supportive and cohesive interactions can occur in diverse settings. In study 4 we explored whether the social interactions of parents were experienced as cohesive and supportive, while including a consideration of light encounters and communities. Our ethnographic endeavour in the field generated relevant field knowledge and enabled the researcher to build rapport with the families involved. Further, it allowed careful sample selection, based on a combination

of background criteria (gender, origin, marital status, mother tongue, family size, length of use of the service) and observational information on the nature of parents' interactions in the centre. Explicit attention was given to include fathers' voices: 8 fathers and 10 mothers were included. Three other fathers who were also invited, eventually did not take part in the study (one father could not take time off from work; and two fathers cancelled due to illness). One mother passed the invitation to her husband; in three instances, only one parent was invited, but both parents showed up for the interview. Another double interview took place with two Bulgarian mothers which facilitated translation.

At the start of the conversation, I told parents that we were interested in how they experienced living with young children in a diverse urban context. Parents were informed how long it would take and that they could interrupt the conversation whenever they wished to stop. Permission was asked to audio-tape everything and I explained that I would use their narratives in my research. Whereas I further promised that their information would be treated with respect and remain confidential as alternative names would be used, it was emphasised that complete anonymity for insiders could not be guaranteed. For example, as the professionals knew them and their child quite well, it was possible that they would be recognised in the stories presented. All parents agreed verbally to participate and to audiotape the conversation. Parents signed an informed consent letter, yet in some cases it was not deemed appropriate or constructive to have them sign a document from the university (e.g. for those unlettered). During our talk, attention was paid to non-verbal communication to see if parents continued to feel comfortable. When parents hesitated to share something freely, I proposed to switch off the recording for a moment (which happened twice). Interviews took place in Dutch, French or English, depending on the language in which parents could express themselves. In one case, translation from and into Bulgarian was possible during a duo-interview with two Bulgarian mothers.

As we wished to re-explore the notions of social support and social cohesion in people's everyday experiences, parents' narratives were taken as a starting point. Nonetheless, a short list of questions was prepared in advance (Mortelmans, 2007; Stevens, 2013). Most of the time, this topic list was only

consulted near the end of the conversation to check if all themes were touched upon. The parents were invited to talk about their interactions with other parents and the professionals in the service, as well as their social relations outside the centre and the meaning of these contacts for their parenting. In preparation of each interview, the observational reports were scanned to collect *markers* (Neuman, 2011) for further discussion (e.g. examples of interactions they had with other parents, something they said about their daily experiences, etc.). Notwithstanding the consistency in preparation, each conversation had its own course dependent upon the themes and examples parents brought in (Soenen, 2009). Respecting every talk's dynamic contributed to the authenticity of how things were said. In this rather convivial atmosphere, parents appreciated being able to (re)construct their story and to (re)consider their thoughts and experiences (see below).

A short report was written right after each interview, capturing issues like the reason for invitation, place and circumstances of the interview, and remarkable themes that were touched upon. All interviews were transcribed in full, including moments of silence, of laughter, etc. Whilst transcribing during the period of data collection, I reflected on the manner of formulating questions by writing alternative possibilities in the margin for use in the future (Stevens, 2013).

1.3.6. Study 5 – A multiple case study in child care

A multiple case study is a qualitative research method which makes use of various but complementary research strategies to generate rich answers on the research questions (Latzko-Toth, 2009). In what comes next, we describe how we studied the practices of two childcare centres in their intentions as well as in their actions, by analysing (policy) documents, listening to what professionals said about their work and observing the daily micro-interactions among families and between families and the professionals. In this manner, we capture important characteristics of the complex social reality in which supportive and cohesive interactions can occur among diverse users of child care.

1.3.6.1. Extensive monographs of four field sites

Consulting several actors working in the field of ECEC in Flanders, 6 childcare centres were initially selected that were assumed to offer high quality child care for a diverse range of families, yet differed in their approach. After a first phone call, two services declined the invitation for further cooperation because of participation in another research project, renovation issues and work overload.

A document analysis was carried out for each of the four remaining centres to gain relevant information about the different practices. Policy documents of the service, vision and mission statements, pedagogical principles, annual reports, centres' websites, as well as sources reporting on the neighbourhood, such as social policy strategies, facts and figures, news, etc. were consulted. Then each centre was visited for a full operational day. Informal talks with different staff members made it not only possible to clarify and extend the information gained through the document analysis, but also to enrich it with live experiences. The scribing of the observations of the social climate and physical surroundings was guided by the Erato methodological guide (EADAP, 2011).

Based on these observational reports and the document analysis, a monograph was written of each setting that offered a more finely tuned sketch of the different practices and how they were historically and geographically situated. Describing the (hi)story of the development of each service, helped to understand current practices. Further, neighbourhood characteristics, as well as a description of the architecture was included. The social climate was given full account by sketching a rough outline of the daily routine, enriched by extensive descriptions of what people (children, parents, professionals and others) did and said. Last but not least, attention was paid to the various ways in which each centre collaborated with families and how diversity had a place in this. The staff of the respective centres read these monographs and their comments were included. This kind of member validation (Neuman, 2011) took place during several stages of the research process (see below). Subsequently, a cross-analysis of the four possible cases was carried out based on these monographs, which revealed important

differences in their practice with families and the neighbourhood. The monographs written about centres A and B, formed the groundwork for the thick descriptions in chapter 6. Nonetheless, variation in field sites was deemed necessary to look at our research questions from diverse perspectives and realities. The two remaining centres were not included as they were known to conduct pioneering work and could bias our results.

1.3.6.2. Carrying out observations and field interviews

Informing parents and professionals

In both centres, earlier talks with the coordinator took place in order to discuss the research plans, the timing and my presence as a researcher in the centre. I explained the study at the outset of the observations to each staff member individually. I invited them to ask me any question if they wished more information and to signal when my presence was in one way or another obstructing their work. An informed consent for the centre's participation in our study was signed by the coordinator at the start, yet a continuous informed consent was enacted through regular informal talks with all staff members involved. In consultation with the staff, the parents were informed by a letter in Dutch, French and English in centre B, and also Bulgarian in centre A. Later on, this letter was adapted based on feedback from the parents about misinterpretations. Since some parents did not understand the letter as intended, I presented myself to at least one parent of each child and asked them if they had any questions about the study.

Observing and being observed

We opted to carry out non-participant observations in order to capture as much as possible from what was taking place and to influence the interactions as little as possible. Nonetheless, it is impossible not to participate in a setting like a childcare centre. The first days, all parties involved—children, parents and professionals—had to get accustomed to my unusual presence. Generally speaking, I experienced a great openness and curiosity, directly expressed by some of the children, and more indirectly by adults. Nonetheless, doing a field study, carrying out many days of observations, writing down every movement and all these seemingly banal conversations, created an intensive situation for those under study. The moments of small talk and informal talks (or field

interviews, see below) with the staff before, during and after the observations, as well as insight in an excerpt of the observational reports, generated a feeling of trust that contributed to the ecological validity (Neuman, 2011), or as one of the childcare workers stated afterwards, *'after a while, you became one of us, with your notebook and writing everything down, we got used to it'*. Thanks to this becoming a part of the *'décor'*, there were various moments that parents and professionals seemed temporarily unaware of my presence as an observer.

It should be noted that "a field researcher not only observes and investigates members in the field but is observed and investigated by members as well" (Neuman, 2011, p. 435). From time to time, parents expressed their awareness of me observing, especially when I was observing in the hall. For example, one mother asked me *'are you watching how tired the mothers are?'* and another remarked *'she's not looking to the children but to the parents'*. Humour often helped to make such situations more casual, but it was used as an act of resistance as well:

> *Ilia is having a hard time. Marie picks him up and looks around to see where she will place him. He ends up on my lap. Eric (father) puts his son on my lap too. Marie takes my pen and notebook and while laughing with Eric, she says: 'voilà, now she can't write anymore'. (Field notes, Ghent, 07/11/2013)*

Whereas I label this as an act of resistance, it is at the same time an example of the convivial relation that was developed over time with professionals and parents.

When, where and why?

We carried out 75 hours of observation in the centres between October 2013 and September 2014. Observation took place in the morning when parents brought their child and in the evening when they came to pick them up, and on occasional gatherings. In the observations I focused on what people actually did: where did they sit, stand, how did they walk, did they use (non)verbal communication, how did they position themselves and were they positioned by others, and in which context did events such as supportive and cohesive encounters occur? Central questions were concentrated on the

durability or fleetingness of interactions, on facilitating and breaking elements, on the impact of policy practices (attitude of the staff, the use of the physical surroundings, etc.), and with attention to how the children (re)acted in this social space.

Table 2. Observations

Observations	Centre A, Ghent	Centre B, Brussels
Period	21/10/2013 – 31/01/2014	04/08/2014 – 29/08/2014
Observed moments	10 mornings (bringing) 7 evenings (picking up) 1 settling in visit 7 gatherings/festivities (farewell and birthday parties, pancake party, New Years' breakfast)	5 mornings (bringing) 5 evenings (picking up) 1 walk with the children in the neighbourhood 1 garden party (informal attendance of a New Years' reception, January 2014)
Hours of real observation	52	24
Hours of presence in the field	Approx. 140	Approx. 75

During the observations, field notes were made using symbols to write more efficiently. This made it possible to capture as much exact information as possible about what people did and said (like complete sentences of a conversation). When I got involved in an interaction, I stopped writing for a moment and wrote it down right afterwards and included what I said and how people reacted on my presence. All field notes were transcribed into observational reports right after each observation, which demanded good planning and high level of discipline. When it was not possible to complete it on the day itself, observational reports were written down the next day. This was avoided as much as possible as it had a notable impact on the recall of the situation.

Although one tries as a researcher to be as descriptive as possible, the making of interpretations is, in my opinion, intrinsically part of observing human life. In that regard, it was not possible to keep 'descriptions' and 'interpretations' completely separate, as Howitt (2010) has suggested. According to Geertz

(1973), "that what we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to" (p. 9). Further, he claims that our idea of observing, recording and analysing as separate actions, might be false. The only thing a researcher does then, is writing. Therefore, questions or possible themes that arose out the observations made, were included in the observations, yet in a different typographic style.

Several mapping strategies were used during data collection and analysis. In the mornings and evenings, the time at which parents entered and left the space (temporal mapping) was noted. This made it possible, for example, to notice that much interaction can take place in relatively small period of time. Spatial mapping was applied when observing gatherings to capture the multitude of movements through space, where these took place, and with whom people interacted (following all the conversations was impossible when more than 5 parents were present). Social mapping, or *sociograms* as Howitt (2010) calls them, was employed during the observations on a small scale, by capturing who is (not) talking to whom. Even during data analysis, social maps of the interactions among all parents and across observations were sketched out to make clear which kind of interactions (e.g. personal exchanges, nodding, eye-contact, helping with the door, etc.) occurred between whom (e.g. people sharing a common language or not, people who were already friends or not, etc.).

1.3.6.3. Dialogical research

In addition to short field interviews, several parents were invited for an in-depth conversation about their experiences using child care when living with young children in a diverse urban context. Their narratives were included in the analysis of what was taking place in the childcare services. How the conversations with parents worked out, is explained above (see study 4).

Several parents and professionals acted as *key informants* (Howitt, 2010; Neuman, 2011) who could provide me with necessary contextual information (e.g. regarding what went on before a particular situation, or what would be organized soon, or about interactions and networks, etc.). Consequently, field interviews took place with the professionals and provided relevant

information for our study. In addition, planned time for discussion was organised for all staff members. In centre A, a focus group (Mortelmans, 2007) of two hours was organised three weeks after finishing the observations with nine out of ten childcare workers and one out of two logistic support workers (the two remaining staff members were not able to attend). Two weeks later, a final three-hour interview was held with the coordinator. In centre B, we chose a different approach to give a more equal voice to each professional (whether it be a childcare worker, logistic support or coordinator), as advised by the guiding committee. All six childcare workers and one logistic support who were present during the observations were interviewed individually right after the period of observations for approximately one hour (one childcare worker who started working in the centre and was quasi not observed, was not interviewed and neither were the two logistic supports who were not at work during the observations). After the analysis of the material, a two-hour interview took place with the coordinator of centre B.

The interviews started by thanking each professional for their openness in letting me observe their actions. I informed them about the purpose of our conversation, asked permission to audiotape it and explained the issue of confidentiality as had been done with parents (see above). All professionals signed the informed consent letter and filled in a drop-off form in order for us to collect efficiently some background information (Mortelmans, 2007).

The topics of the discussion group in centre A were prepared in advance and a co-researcher was mobilised to ensure a smooth discussion. He mainly acted as a timekeeper, observer and someone with whom a dialogue about the course of the discussion could occur both before and afterwards. Questions were centred on their perspective on their work with families and the neighbourhood, as well as concrete attempts and experiences in that regard. It was also asked what the key elements were in fostering a good policy to work with families and the neighbourhood. In the end, they had the opportunity to add anything that they wanted to share with us.

The individual interviews with the staff members in centre B were approached in slightly different ways. After an introductory question—what do you (dis)like about your job?—concrete questions were posed, for example, about

the role of the diary in their relation with parents, their use of space and segregation between playrooms and the hall, the presence of parents in the children's groups, the different relations they had with different parents, how they experienced gatherings such as the garden party, the role of the service in interactions among parents and how they perceived the neighbourhood they were working in. To conclude, they could add anything that they wanted to share.

The interviews with the coordinators were well-prepared, as they offered the opportunity to ask for extra information or clarification where needed. Based on a preliminary analysis of the data, a long list of specific questions, as well as more generic questions that were posed to the other team members, was prepared. In these conversations in which the extensive list of questions was at hand, and although I checked to ensure all subjects were treated accurately, the sequence of themes and the course of the conversation were set by the coordinators.

After each conversation I wrote down how the conversation evolved, including remarkable elements that professionals brought in. All recordings were transcribed and personal names were changed to pseudonyms. Some pseudonyms were chosen by the parents and professionals themselves, others by myself. In all cases, an alternative name was chosen that reflected a similar origin (e.g. replaced by another Bulgarian or French name) or choice (e.g. less popular/alternatives names were replaced by other less popular/alternative names). All transcriptions made in this research represent literally what people said. Hesitations like 'uh', the use of dialect, interruptions in the sentences, wrong conjugation of verbs, etc. were included. There is discussion about whether one should 'clean up' citations for reasons of respect and readability, or leave them in the exact words used by the respondent, also as a sign of respect. I prefer to keep citations as close as possible to what people said, and to include all interruptions, as they also give an impression of *how* things were said. At the same time, I agree with Booth (1999) that "the spoken word does not always transfer easily to the printed page" (p. 250). Yet, as almost all citations had to be translated into English, this inevitably led to a 'cleaning up' and adaptation of what was said. My main

concern was then not to translate every word literally, but to "preserve the message those words convey[ed]" (Booth, 1999, p. 251).

1.4. Reflections on the act of doing research

1.4.1. Research as an intervention in the field

In contrast to some research, such as action research, our project was not explicitly aimed at intervening in a current practice in order to realise change. However, doing field research is never free from intervening in the field under study. The mere act of showing scientific interest in a certain theme—such as relations among parents in ECEC—is not neutral. The coordinators of the two childcare centres in study 5 (chapter 6) had their own reasons to offer insight into their daily practice—they wished to renew their attention to working with families and to a lesser extent the neighbourhood as well. They expressed their hopes that an outsider's perspective would make changes possible that were harder to attain from inside. For example, discussing excerpts of the observational reports with the team members was intended to instil trust and be transparent about the work done; nonetheless, writing actions and spoken words literally on paper, acted as a mirror for professionals to reflect on their own practices. What is more, preliminary results were integrated (in)directly in their daily activities.

Let us for instance consider the following example of how research inevitably influences practice, especially when the research is conducted in transparent, participative ways. As will appear in chapter 6, the small gate in centre B served as a gatekeeper to keep children in and also parents out. Whereas this was the situation during the observation period (August–September 2014), some important changes took place in the following months. During the interview with the coordinator in June 2015, three fathers entered the playroom, and one was coming along with a childcare worker to the bathroom where the child could show his personal box. The coordinator commented as follows:

> *Coordinator: Well, I think that should be possible. Yet, one father will do that (coming in) because he has the guts to do it, while another father wants to*

enter but doesn't dare to, so he will stay behind the gate. Perhaps, I could add to that. Now, I tell them (the parents) right at the start—They (the childcare workers) have asked me 'stress a bit more to the parents-' […] 'Look, there is a gate, that gate is there to prevent the children from running away, but if you want to enter, you can enter' […] That's something I emphasise more now. […] We questioned our policy regarding the process of settling in then, I think right after the summer. And I think it was also induced by your visit because they had questions about it (their policy), you drew their attention to it.

Researcher: I showed them small excerpts of the observational report, indeed.

Coordinator: Then they uttered 'yeah but it isn't possible anyway, we can't leave the gate open etcetera'. And then, some, they knew—Marleen is attending intervision meetings and [she brought in that] in other day care services parents have to put on blue overshoes; that I find another barrier. And it's been cleaned here every day. Well, you know. That's how it actually came about. (Interview coordinator, Brussels, 1/06/2015)

This change is illustrative of the highly dynamic character of daily practices. The descriptions made in this dissertation are a mere snapshot of reality, already outdated at the moment of analysis as both centres keep evolving continuously. Moreover, what becomes apparent is that change does not come from one direction or can be causally explained (e.g. new policy introduced by the coordinator *or* intervision opportunities for childcare workers *or* a new colleague *or* this study, etc.). It is rather through the confluence of events that important changes could take place.

1.4.2. Flexibility in field roles

While doing observations in the field, several roles were adopted over time, of which two were most prominent from the beginning—the field researcher role and the social role. Most of the time I acted as a researcher, for example, observing while sitting or standing at the side-line, taking notes, and asking questions. Yet, this practice of not jumping in to help spontaneously or not joining into small talk required some extra effort. From time to time, I did act by holding a child on my lap, comforting a crying baby, opening a door for a parent coming in with a stroller, etc. and I did respond to social talks such as making a joke when my presence was remarked upon. By adopting a more social role in the field, moments were created that often felt very informal in

nature and in which a closer bond was created with those involved (Roets, Roose & Bouverne-De Bie, 2013).

Over time, a third field role, that of a mother, became more prominent. In the course of the doctoral project, I had two children. As my first child would start in the school next door to centre A, I decided to relocate my youngest child to this childcare centre shortly after I finished the field work there. So, as I would return to the service some months later as a mother, and parents would thus re-encounter me, I systematically mentioned this to the parents I interviewed. In my opinion, it turned out that this information of me being a parent as well, and not only a student, made them share certain experiences and doubts with me. Yet, from time to time it was assumed that I understood them as I experienced parenthood myself, but then I asked them to explicate their experience, as it could be completely different from mine (taking in an *attitude of strangeness*, Neuman, 2011). Several parents started to ask me questions like *'is your child acting the same way?'* or did I know in which school more children speak Dutch, or *'are you changing schools* [after moving]*?'*. Whereas I tried to keep my role as a researcher clear for parents, this became blurred in moments that they addressed me as a mother. Yet, these moments provided me with interesting insights into the occurrence of social support and social cohesion in child care as well.

Strikingly, out of almost all the interviews with the parents, came a kind of gratitude for the attention, for the creation of an opportunity for story-telling, and to reflect on their experiences and even to feel supported. Parents thanked me for the conversation whereas I expected it to be the other way round: *'thank you for this nice chat'* (Dochka), *'I'm becoming aware effectively uh- a bit like a psychoanalysis actually (laughs) I will pay you for the consultation (laughs)'* (Bastien), *'you're welcome, I loved it myself, you see we're talking'* (Soraya). Some seemed to want our conversation not to end, like Mehtap who stayed seated after we finished our talk, Zoran who started showing me his photo albums and invited me for lunch, or Aleksandra who suggested *'maybe you could move from Ghent?'*. While I did not notice it that clearly at the time, it was illustrative of how isolated some parents felt and how important it is to be seen and heard, to be able to share one's story.

Sometimes, supportive or cohesive interactions occurred in front of my eyes or I was directly involved in them. In the conversation I held with two Bulgarian mothers, of which Dochka translated for Petya, Dochka encouraged Petya to take up Dutch lessons, again by sharing her own experiences. It made me also see two different sides of Petya, who was very timid on the one hand and more open and laughing when talking in her native language with another mother. It illustrated again the importance of finding a point of connection for people to flourish. At the same time, a shared language as in this example was not always enough. For example, the Turkish single mother of Elena did not get in touch with any other Turkish parent during the daily bringing or in festivities. Yet, when she noticed that we both became mothers at quite a young age, she started to talk. Perhaps, there were other things than that shared element which made it possible for her to come out with her story. She might have seen me, just like some others, as connected to the service—not a professional, but not a parent either, but rather somewhere in-between, as someone you greet in a friendly fashion as they greet you (see chapter 6). This made me more familiar than other parents in addition to sharing motherhood. This blending of different field roles enriched our analysis in multiple ways.

1.4.2.1. A note on serendipity

My motherhood influenced the research process profoundly, also in other, rather unexpected ways. As a consequence of my second pregnancy, the fieldwork (observations) in centre A was interrupted right after the start. Changes were made (or had to been made) and flexibility became an important virtue. My cooperation on that moment in a project focused on the CCP commissioned by the King-Baudouin Foundation that initially was taken up as a side-line, became an intensive part of my research activities. It had the advantage of not having to be present in the centre-based care, as this was not possible being pregnant. As a result, I could not follow the initial plan of doing field work in three childcare centres. However, eventually, this side-line enriched our study in unexpected but very useful ways. It made it possible to observe different scripts operating in different practices (child care and CCP) and to reflect on the conceptualisation of the professional role in these ECEC services.

1.5. Content

To conclude this introduction, we provide a short overview of the coming chapters, summarising the research questions and methodologies used, and their publication status.

1.5.1. Chapter 2

The (ab)sense of a concept of social support in parenting research: a social work perspective

In our systematic literature review, co-authored by Michel Vandenbroeck and published as an article in *Child & Family Social Work*, we explore how the notion of social support in relation to parenting is described in the predominant literature. We look carefully at what is known about parents' experiences of social support and what roles scholars in academic literature ascribe to social work services regarding social support in contexts of diversity.

1.5.2. Chapter 3

Early childhood education and care as a space for social support in urban contexts of diversity

By analysing the attendance registrations and daily reports on the interactions held by the staff, as well as questionnaires filled in by parents, we pronounce if and how interactions across a social mix of users can take place. The results were presented in an article together with Michel Vandenbroeck and published in the *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*.

1.5.3. Chapter 4

Informal social support in contexts of diversity: shaping the relationship between the public and the private sphere

How parents experience their interactions in a CCP and what kind of policy practices they find supportive, is talked over in six discussion groups with parents. Together with Griet Roets and Michel Vandenbroeck, an in-depth

analysis of the results, thereby discussing what our findings mean for services intending to support diverse parents and communities, was published in *Health & Social Care in the Community*.

1.5.4. Chapter 5

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

By listening to parents with young children, we get a picture of what kind of interactions they perceive as supportive in their lives in urban contexts marked by diversity, as well as if and where they find these interactions. This chapter, co-authored by Griet Roets and Michel Vandenbroeck, has been submitted to the *European Journal of Social Work* and is awaiting revision.

1.5.5. Chapter 6

A case study in two childcare centres: interactions among parents and between parents and professionals

To investigate what kind of interactions actually take place in child care and between whom, observations were held in 2 childcare centres. Via document analysis, (field) interviews with parents and professionals, we examined how policy practices are made concrete in daily interactions among parents and between parents and professionals in these centres.

1.5.6. Chapter 7

ECEC centres as sites of social support and social cohesion: it's (not at) all about the coffee

In our last chapter, we summarise the main findings and reflect upon what can be learned from the different ECEC practices (CCP and child care) regarding the possible role(s) of social work in processes of social support and social cohesion.

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Chapter 2
The (ab)sense of a concept of social support in parenting research: a social work perspective[2]

Abstract

Social support, as a complex, dynamic and multidimensional concept, has been studied extensively. However, a review of research publications on social support and parenting reveals that social work perspectives on social support are underdeveloped in the Social Sciences Citation Index. Social support is predominantly studied in relation to parental health, considering social support as a buffer against potential negative outcomes for children. This, in turn, legitimates extensive research on parents 'at risk'. Specific target groups have been questioned abundantly using social support measures, mainly consisting of self-reports. We conclude that social support is studied as a predefined concept, lacking conceptualizations that encompass the actual enacted support in relation to the perspectives of both givers and receivers of support. Moreover, the focus on targeted groups ignores the experience of social support in more diverse populations in general services and in everyday life. Issues of reciprocity, diversity and multivocality are central to our appeal for social work perspectives truly encompassing the relational aspect of social support. The question whether, and to what extent, social workers (including practitioners, policymakers and researchers) should give attention to this relational aspect is discussed.

2.1. Introduction

Despite the large body of research on social support in the context of parenting, some important gaps in the research literature can be noticed. While there is a large consensus on the value and benefits of formal and informal social relations for families, there seems to be less coherence in the conceptualizations of social support. Several notions are used and the same concepts often cover different meanings across studies. As a consequence, possible roles of social work in (in)formal social support for families remains unclear. In this paper, we explore if and how social support can be conceptualised, inspired by our analysis of a part of the research literature. Drawing on social work literature, we subsequently attempt to sketch some ways forward in reconceptualising the relations between social support and social work.

Doing this is important as we strive today to create a more democratic partnership between parents and professionals in social work (Roose *et al.*, 2013). This appears far from being evident in daily social work practices (Healy *et al.*, 2012), so we need to broaden our understanding of the "experiences of the parents in using formal family support services, including aspects of service delivery that were helpful or unhelpful" (Hardy & Darlington, 2008, p. 252). Some authors claim that the informal network of parents is the first place to turn to and these experiences should thus be taken into consideration too when researching social support (Jack, 2000; Ow *et al.*, 2004). In what follows, we consider formal and informal sources of support.

2.2. Background

As a possible source of support, social networks can have a direct value for those included and an indirect value for bystanders (Putnam, 2007), because "well-developed social connections can generate trust in other people, tolerance of diversity and norms of reciprocity as well as facilitating exchanges of information and collective action" (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2011, p. 170). This value is also named 'social capital'. Whereas Castillo and Fenzl-Crossman (2010) use social capital, social

network and social support interchangeably, Domínguez and Watkins (2003) subdivide social capital into *social support*, as the help one gets from close relationships to 'get by', to survive, on the one hand and *social leverage*, as the weaker connections one has with others to 'get ahead' in life, on the other. Both, respectively bonding and bridging types of social capital, are seen as interdependent and originating from social networks or connections. As the OECD citation suggests, not only might all parents benefit from social support, but also local communities and the society as a whole. Yet other authors frame the social workers' responsibility in more targeted ways. For example, Jack (2000, p. 703) states that "the identification, development and protection of sources of informal social support, available to families living in impoverished circumstances, are identified as key tasks for social workers and other welfare professionals".

In contrast to this social standpoint, there is an abundance of research on social support from a more individual standpoint. In general, it is argued that social and emotional support can be beneficial for health (Reblin & Uchino 2008), that a person's well-being is influenced by the availability and quality of social connections (OECD 2011), and that social support can act as a buffer against stress (Weiss, 2002; Orth-Gomer, 2009). Research suggests that social support has a protective role in psychological functioning (Hoekstra-Weebers *et al.* 2001), but that it is often unavailable or inadequate in challenging life situations (Sheppard, 2004; Tischler *et al.*, 2007). Rafaeli and Gleason (2009, p. 20) stipulate that "the availability of support tends to reduce distress, but its actual receipt is often unhelpful and at times engenders feelings of inadequacy, indebtedness, and inequity". Despite the many benefits of social support, it is thus not in every case 'positive'. Vangelisti (2009) agrees that networks can either be supportive or stressful, but according to Buysse (2008) there exists no consensus on whether a situation is a source of stress or enrichment.

Anyway, the notion of social support seems to cover very distinct realities and it appears to be conceptualised – or rather operationalised – in almost as many instances as there are studies regarding social support. Gottlieb and Bergen (2010) stress that social support, social network and social integration are not interchangeable and that the use of such concepts and the distinctions

between them are not always clear. The complexity of the construct of social support in parenting contexts has also been discussed by Sarason and Sarason (2009), who call it a "multidimensional construct", and Vangelisti (2009), who speaks about the challenging task of conceptualizing it. Barrera (1986), well known for his extensive contribution to the measurement of social support, argues that social support cannot be studied as a whole because several aspects of it are related to but distinct from one another. This is in line with the findings of Williams *et al.* (in Pedro *et al.*, 2008), who claim that it is impossible to have one concept of social support that is applicable in all contexts. Findler (2000), in turn, advocates a multidimensional assessment, taking into account several aspects of the social support construct (e.g. the structural and functional dimension).

In sum, several authors have suggested that social support may have important functions, but also that some confusion in the conceptualization of social support in research may be noticed, which makes it hard to use it in future research. It is therefore useful to analyse in more depth how social support in parenting contexts appears in the literature, which aspects of social support have been studied and what the state of the art is in this respect.

Based on our literature review, we argue that social work perspectives on social support are scarce. Minimal attention is given to the *relational* aspect of social support, taking into account the many possible interactions between a diversity of people as a relevant source of support in the everyday parenting process. The concept of *relational* often refers to the engagement of social workers with their clients (see for example Connolly & Harms, 2012). In this paper, we extend the meaning of relational as contrary to *individual*: we argue that social support exists *in the relation* between a support-giver (be it a professional or a parent) and a support–receiver. We will argue that in the dominant research literature social support is individualised and subsequently instrumentalised and thus minimal attention is given to the relational aspect. The question is whether, and to what extent, social work should give attention to this relational aspect. Implications for further conceptualisations and investigations of social support are discussed.

2.3. A review of the literature

This study looked at research articles concerning social support in relation to parenting published in international peer-reviewed journals. Considering the overwhelming and increasing amount of literature, we limited our selection to the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI), as it covers all research fields, is readily accessible and includes journals with a relevant number of citations which "is considered as evidence of the usefulness, quality and/or impact" (Archambault *et al.*, 2006, p. 331). We selected articles between January 2000 and November 2011. The analysis included studies that were categorized as 'articles', ranging from empirical studies to more conceptual and theoretical reflections. Book reviews and proceedings papers were not included. All articles containing *social support** AND *parent** OR *mother** OR *father** in the title and articles containing *social network** AND *parent** OR *mother** OR *father** in the title were included in this study.[3] This generated 225 unique articles on which a screening was conducted to see whether they related to the topic of interest. Fifty-four articles were excluded, mainly because the studies were focusing on a) social support from parents, peers and others as experienced by (childless) adolescents and b) social support between parents and their adult children. The remaining 171 articles were included in this literature review to gain a better understanding of how social support was used as an object of study. We acknowledge that limiting our review to the SSCI may entail a biased view, and will discuss these limitations in more depth. Despite these limitations, the critical analysis of this literature, informed by social work literature, allows to reflect upon the meaning of social support for social work and vice versa.

2.3.1. Some general trends

Based on a recording of the journal in which the article appeared, the year of publication, the names of the authors and the country of the first corresponding author, we observe that half of the articles were published after the year 2008. Social support is a notion used by a wide group of

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[3] The asterisks were put against the word to include derivatives like parent*hood*, mother*ing*, father*s* etc. in the search engine.

researchers (no scholar has authored or co-authored more than four articles) from 26 different countries and published in more than 100 different journals. In addition, when looking at the number of citations in the SSCI, these citations also seem scattered: while ten articles are cited quite often (ranging from 41 to 91 times), half of the articles were cited three times or less. Despite this scattered plot, some tendencies can be noted. Considering the country of the first corresponding author, we observe that the majority of the scholarly work comes from English-speaking countries: USA (51%), UK (12%), Canada (7%) and Australia (5%). Further, the first three subject categories as mentioned on the SSCI were noted to see in which disciplines the discussion about social support takes place. Regarding these subject categories, the research on social support is predominantly located in medical and paramedical sciences, including public health, nursing, rehabilitation, paediatrics, obstetrics, neurosciences, biomedical science and endocrinology (n = 84), and in psychology and psychiatry (n = 75). Only 28 articles were located in family studies and another 26 in social work, 13 in education and 9 in sociology.

2.3.2. Parental health as the main rationale for studying social support

The main rationale for studying social support was derived from the abstract, assuming that what the authors identify as the core of the study is included in here. Social support is predominantly studied in relation to parental health. Several researchers consider social support as a buffer or a means to prevent or reduce the harmful risks of depression, stress, anxiety and other mental illnesses on the parenting process (e.g. Osborne & Rhodes, 2001). Besides being a protective factor, social support is sometimes seen as a promotive element in parenting: for example, by increasing the sense of mastery (Green & Rodgers, 2001) or by creating opportunities for (ex-)offender fathers to continue their parenting (Walker, 2010), but also as a threatening factor generating conflicts or unwanted support (e.g. McLeod *et al.*, 2006).

A more in-depth content analysis was carried out on two sets of these 171 articles, namely the ten articles most cited, as an illustration of an often repeated rationale for studying social support; and the 26 articles located in

the social work category, as an exploration of a social work perspective on social support. Half of the ten most cited articles turned out to focus on the psychological functioning of parents (Hoekstra-Weebers *et al.*, 2001; Horton & Wallander, 2001; Weiss 2002, Cairney *et al.*, 2003; Bromley *et al.*, 2004) and one on the physical health of mothers (Brown *et al.*, 2001). Some studies placed social support explicitly in a more ecological framework, like, for example, Ceballo and McLoyd (2002), who stated that the relation between social support and parenting behaviour is influenced by stressful environments. In addition, Pinderhughes *et al.* (2001, p. 950) argue that "factors such as neighbourhood danger and parent education may exert a somewhat universal effect on parental behaviours in high-risk communities". Domínguez and Watkins (2003) look at social support and social leverage as separate but interdependent constructs that generate social capital respectively for survival and mobility, while Horvat *et al.* (2003) corroborate that research on social ties and social capital cannot exclude a recognition of inequality: the quantity and quality of resources and how they are used can vary enormously according to socio-economic class.

Looking at the social work articles, we see three main motivations for studying social support. First of all, social support is applied for its buffering or promoting value in challenging situations: it can enhance well-being and parenting practices and is therefore important to the development of children (e.g. Oravecz *et al.*, 2011), to parental involvement with one's children (e.g. Castillo & Fenzl-Crossman, 2010) or to prevent child neglect and maltreatment (e.g. Coohey, 2007). A second motivation for studying social support is exploring networks (e.g. Crowley & Curenton, 2011), and thirdly, a main concern is a critical reflection on the role of social work in social support provision (e.g. Curran, 2003; De Mey *et al.*, 2009). Despite the findings that "social networking events" or "socializing support" are highly relevant to the families and often minimal attention is given to these forms of social support by social services, this relational aspect remains underestimated by these studies. The mere focus on individual families seems unquestioned.

2.3.3. A focus on risk groups is risky

The main perspective on social support – as a protective mechanism against negative influences on family functioning – legitimates extensive research on so-called at-risk groups of parents. Parents of a child with a disability or illness are frequently studied (e.g. Horton & Wallander, 2001; Ow *et al.*, 2004), but also teenage parents (e.g. McLeod *et al.*, 2006), low-income parents (e.g. Green & Rodgers, 2001; Castillo & Fenzl-Crossman, 2010), single parents (e.g. Winkworth *et al.*, 2010), ethnic minorities (e.g. Crowley & Curenton 2011) or a combination of these (e.g. Oravecz *et al.*, 2011) are targets of interest, besides other groups such as homeless parents (e.g. Tischler *et al.*, 2007) or parents with a mental illness (e.g. Sheppard, 2004). Nearly all the most cited articles and the social work articles employed a targeted approach in their research design, except for two studies that apparently did not start from a targeted approach but still ended up with a homogeneous group of participants. Walker and Riley (2001) sampled parents receiving a monthly newsletter, but eliminated the six questionnaires completed by fathers, because of the low response rate and the newsletter being directed towards mothers. The 457 participating mothers appeared to be primarily white and from dual-parent families. Brown *et al.* (2001) focused solely on mothers but from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Yet this was based on the mothers' use of a day care centre in high or low socio-economic areas, which does not ensure that these mothers themselves have respectively low and high socio-economic backgrounds. None of the studies reached a diverse group of parents regarding gender, socio-economic *and* cultural background. Two studies compared at-risk groups with comparison groups (Findler, 2000; Weiss, 2002), and one study checked for class-specific differences in social capital between groups (Horvat *et al.*, 2003).

The problem with this targeted approach is threefold. First, the concern that these groups face more challenges in their parenting, and thus are in danger of failing in their parenting 'task', is problematic, especially when no attention is given to the context in which they (have to) nurture their child(ren) or when this context is problematised and "middle-class values and norms are decontextualised and naturalised, and consequently perceived as universally

'good for children' [and their parents]" (Vandenbroeck & Bouverne-De Bie, 2006, p. 138).

When implications for practice are discussed, the focus is primarily on services directed at individual families at risk, thus neglecting the possible role of structural services, like schools, provided to all parents and sticking to the traditional one-to-one service delivery (McLeod *et al.*, 2006). Walker and Riley (2001, p. 192) form the most explicit exception on this critique, by focusing on a more general population of mothers and by saying that "for parenting programs in general, there may be ways to design them for delivery to parental networks rather than to individual parents or individual families".

Moreover, this focus on homogeneous groups is in contradiction with contemporary contexts of diversity, especially in urban regions, as a consequence of migration, urbanization and growing economic disparities between people. Parenting groups aiming at social support might benefit from this diversity as De Mey *et al.* (2009, p. 304) reported: "parents, especially those of ethnic minority origin or from lower socio-economic groups, found it particularly important that the parent group was explicitly heterogeneous as regards to ethnicity as well as to employment status". There is no reason to stick to a focus on homogeneity, especially not from a social capital perspective. Novy *et al.* (2012) reason that "cultural change [implies] overcoming adherence to a single-language, mono-ethnic norm, and accommodating diversity, equality as well as multi-identity exchange. Within this context, cities [and their social services] can become places of belonging." One could argue that neither homogeneous groups nor heterogeneous groups exist, but that although everybody is a unique being, carrying his/her own history with him/her, there is always something that one has in common with 'the other', for example bringing up young children. As identities are multiple and dynamic, this commonality can form the basis for further interaction and social cohesion (Geens & Vandenbroeck, 2013), or as Putnam (2007, p. 165) states: "bonding social capital can thus be a prelude to bridging social capital".

2.3.4. Social support as a predefined concept

Besides our remarks on the targeted approach when studying social support, we found that evidence regarding social support is largely based on

quantitative data. Seven out of the ten most cited articles limited the assessment of social support to standardized social support scales. Brown *et al.* (2001) used discussion groups, which is a more open-ended method. Domínguez and Watkins (2003) used a longitudinal design including participant observations and ethnographic interviews; likewise Horvat *et al.* (2003) carried out extensive ethnographic research. Both studies operated more on the concept of social capital rather than social support, although the concepts are closely related. Equally, more than half of the 26 articles listed in the 'social work' category approached social support by solely employing standardized scales or structured questionnaires (e.g. Findler, 2000; Green & Rodgers, 2001; Ow *et al.*, 2004). Yet some authors look at social work as an actor in the provision of social support (e.g. Curran, 2003; De Mey *et al.*, 2009), introducing a different approach to studying social support. In the remaining 135 studies, more than 20 different social support scales were mentioned several times, suggesting that the majority of research included in this analysis relies on quantitative data gathered from standardized social support scales, mainly consisting of self-reports. This is not surprising as these measures make it feasible 1) to question large groups in a relatively short period of time; 2) to compare the results with previous research; and 3) to handle social support – as a complex construct – more easily. These scales can be of particular value and they are often tested and validated by several studies and in most cases preceded by qualitative studies. Yet it implies that social support is predominantly studied as a predefined construct that – albeit once validated – can be out of date or not context-sensitive. It is possible that the results from these questionnaires obscure a variety of meanings and situations in which social support can occur: what about strangers, others that parents meet in (semi-)public spaces, weak ties or virtual media as sources of support? These sources are seldom included.

Self-reports tend to (over)emphasize the perceived support or the effects of support (McConnell *et al.*, 2012), and even when asking parents about the actual support they receive, they tend to measure the perceived received support (Haber *et al.*, 2007). Although the relevance of perceived support has been repeated, using other sources of information can be crucial to inspire social work practices. Haber *et al.* (2007) state that social support could best be studied when taking into account the context in which the support-

giving/receiving process occurs. This means looking at what precedes and comes after the 'support moment' too (Vangelisti 2009), from the belief that the experience is dependent on this context. For example, using observational data can generate insights into the actual opportunities for families in their contact with social services (Healy *et al.*, 2012).

De Mey *et al.* (2009, p. 303) call "for a debate about what evidence social science is measuring, as well as how the evidence will be used". We conclude that specific subgroups of parents are frequently interviewed concerning their experience with social support, but we still lack a conceptualization of social support which encompasses the actual enacted support in relation to the perspectives of both givers and receivers, and we lack a discussion about the possible roles of social work in these processes.

2.4. Limitations

We analysed social support literature since 2000, restricting our selection to the SSCI, so it should be noted that this sample can be biased for several reasons: first, the "file drawer problem" (Rosenthal, 1979; Easterbrook *et al.*, 1991) makes it probable that studies expecting, but not demonstrating, beneficial effects of social support remain unpublished in the SSCI. Moreover, it may be the case that quantitative, large-scale studies are more easily published in these journals than smaller-scale qualitative studies. Thirdly, as we found in our literature review, coverage of the SSCI across countries (non-native English speaking) is questionable (Archambault *et al.*, 2006). In addition, when we refer to 'most cited' articles, it needs to be realised that more recent articles have less chance of being included. Last but not least, as concepts in the social sciences are often locally oriented and carry a different meaning according to context, researchers "publish more often in their mother tongue and in journals with a more limited distribution" (Archambault *et al.,* 2006, p. 333). As a consequence, it is not possible to make generalizations from this selection; rather the selection serves as a potential indicator of possible gaps in the dominant literature that may suggest pathways for future research.

Concerning the choice of the keywords for selection of the articles, it needs to be noted that using other keywords (e.g. family support) may have yielded different results. Yet, the combination of varied keyword possibilities inevitably generated more articles than could be analysed within the scope of this project. Nevertheless, some general trends and gaps have been identified that may call for further elaboration of possible social work perspectives that acknowledge reciprocity, diversity and multivocality in future research.

2.5. A social work perspective: a plea for reciprocity, diversity and multivocality

Gottlieb and Bergen (2010) explain that social support and social networks are not synonymous: *social networks* consist of individual ties and have a structural (number, density and interconnectedness of ties) and functional (e.g. instrumental, emotional or informational support) dimension, while *social support* covers the relational dimension and includes reciprocity. Our analysis of the literature concerning social support in relation to parenting revealed that researchers examined social support predominantly as an individual quality. Using the explanation of Gottlieb and Bergen, one could say that the majority of studies actually investigated social networks rather than social support. In so doing, they tend to neglect the reciprocity of relationships (Vandenbroeck *et al.*, 2009). Domínguez and Watkins (2003) add to our understanding of reciprocity by adding "on one's own terms" to it. They argue that, in so doing, it is possible for mothers to reciprocate even on formal support provided by social services, which is often perceived as more unidirectional.

The restricted emphasis on psychological functioning reflects and influences a wider tendency to individualise social problems to parenting problems and to reduce structural inequalities to an individual responsibility. Connolly and Harms (2012, p. 3) say that "limiting social work to processes of individual change, whether mediated through the mechanism of a relationship or not, can slip into practice that is deficit focused and blames people for the very predicaments in which they find themselves" and Gillies (2005) elucidated how in the UK a recognition of the need (or right) of *all* parents for support

actually covered a wish to incorporate them into the dominant moral order, neglecting the impoverished circumstances in which some families are living.

Instead of acknowledging the shared responsibility in parenting matters between state and citizens and *among* citizens, the value of informal relations for parenting and living together seems marginalised in research. This is reflected in and influenced by current social work policy and practice concerning parent support. Stimulating social encounters is marginalised in favour of evidence-based practices of educational advice in one-to-one settings (McLeod *et al.*, 2006; van de Luitgaarden, 2009). The main target is then *curing* individual deficiencies rather than *taking care* of families and the context in which they live. From the latter point of view, social support is not solely about parent education or a question of giving the right advice. It is also about providing the necessary conditions for parents to make their parenting feasible (Gillies, 2005) and acknowledging the value of social networks, especially the informal relations that people build on. According to Castillo and Fenzl-Crossman (2010, p. 73), "fathers' informal networks [should be included] in the supportive process, [so that] fathers may come to identify multiple resources available to them, which may help them in alleviating or eliminating the environmental stressors affecting their involvement with their children". This resonates with a more critical ecological perspective on social support (Hardy & Darlington, 2008). This requires social workers to actively consider existing formal and informal providers of support with families (Coohey, 2007) or even the wider community (Walker & Riley, 2001).

Rullo and Musatti (2005) claim that parents' demands for social interaction are not coming from social isolation, nor from an imagined perspective on their children's future, but that these are a result of the mothers' wishes to have more social contacts, to share their experiences and to stimulate their children's development in the here and now. Maclean (2002, in Gillies, 2005, p. 77) says that all too often "the family [is approached] as a vehicle of social cohesion and public order". We argue that the family should not be seen as a vehicle, but as a driving force in creating a sense of belonging to the wider community, here, today. As an illustration, children can be of particular value as brokers of relations (Soenen, 2006) and can "facilitate knowing and trusting one's neighbors" (Ravanera, 2007, p. 365). As "social work intervenes at the

points where people interact with their environments" (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2000), and human relationships are of central meaning, it is disturbing that the relational aspect is so scarcely developed in current social support research concerning the upbringing of children.

We conclude that possible social work perspectives on social support are underdeveloped: minimal attention is given to the relational aspect of social support, taking into account the many possible interactions among a diversity of people as a relevant source of support in the parenting process. The question is whether, and to what extent, social workers (including practitioners, policymakers and researchers) should give attention to this relational aspect.

2.6. Possible roles of social work in informal support

Several authors have pointed at the primacy of the informal support network (Jack, 2000; Ow *et al.*, 2004) and its value in good times (Vangelisti, 2009), for example for building on social capital. Fram (2005, p. 515) argues that "the value of social support for individual families depends on the diversity within their networks of social ties", because encounters, including weak ties, create bridging opportunities or social leverage. Yet Domínguez and Watkins (2003, p. 128) state that "social support networks can both provide and hinder better opportunities". Besides, social leverage means not only the wealthy ones helping the wretched, but also that confrontation with difference and heterogeneity can foster learning processes for everyone (Geens & Vandenbroeck, 2013) and create space for multivocality (Nealon, 1997). Contacts with professionals or other parents with different backgrounds create bridging opportunities because new knowledge and perspectives are at one's fingertips. Stigendal (2010) appeals for a space where we can look beyond our striving for consensus, where confrontation with diversity is not seen as threatening, but intercultural competence can lead to building bridges and overcoming stereotypical thinking. This can be linked to the ambivalent character that Soenen (2006) ascribes to the daily living in urban contexts

where contradictions can coexist and this is seen as an enrichment (rather than as a threat).

Given that people's networks often consist of strong ties based on similarity, and that similarity *and* difference are important in supportive interactions (Rullo & Musatti, 2005; Buysse, 2008), there might be a significant role for social work in creating those bridging opportunities. Integrating informal supportive interactions into formal support settings seems to be a key task in social work interventions, but little is known about the actual process of support giving and receiving in contexts of diversity. It would help to overcome the gap between the primacy of the informal support and the necessary provision of formal support in situations where the adequacy of informal support is no longer guaranteed. Hardy and Darlington (2008) point to the fact that some parents have limited informal networks or access to adequate support. Formal support can be valuable here if a democratic partnership is taken as a starting point, which implies a view on parenting as a shared responsibility (Roose *et al.*, 2013). From a critical ecological perspective,

> address[ing] structural issues of poverty and inequality, and […] provid[ing] universal access to basic services and supports such as health, education, housing and family support […] recognizes that on their own, strategies based on services for individual families in crisis are insufficient and can perpetuate the conditions that contribute to multiple stressors over which parents have little or no control. (Hardy & Darlington, 2008, p. 259)

According to Stigendal (2010, p. 20), this more structural approach moves away from blaming the individual for not fitting into the existing (natural) order, which generates opportunities for "a new approach […] that treats the existing order as something created and temporal". Social work can fulfil a facilitating role towards helping diverse families to encounter other people, to learn and to live together.

Sheppard (2004) perceives social work as both an indirect source of support, by activating formal resources, and as a direct provider of support. Another option, still underestimated by social workers, is using the informal network. Fram (2005, p. 512) describes how in family support centres "not just staff but

also the wide range of participants were able to step into the breach as resources with and for each other". Tischler *et al.* (2007) and Winkworth *et al.* (2010) also address the importance of promoting the use and extension of informal supportive resources, while McLeod *et al.* (2006) found that socializing support was lacking in the provision of formal support and question the role of social services in fostering supportive interactions with others. However, Curran (2003) points at the possible harm residing in social work policy and practices aiming at supporting families by regulating interpersonal support (in the form of child support orders). Especially when the implicit assumptions, for example about fatherhood, are not critically examined by practitioners, policymakers and researchers in the social work discipline and beyond.

Since social work cannot be separated from the context in which it intervenes, Fram (2005, p. 516) proposes that "attention to social support in planning family services makes space for thinking about how programs can shape, rather than simply respond to, the social terrain in which some families struggle while others may easily thrive". Social work becomes then not only re-actor, but also actor, in the social support process.

2.7. Conclusion

Social support is an important but complex concept. Many researchers have illuminated the numerous positive effects, but also the possible harm residing in social support relations. However, current research relies predominantly on self-reports, capturing the social support experience of specific groups of parents who are believed to be at risk. This individualised approach may reinforce the emphasis on the individual responsibility of parents. Moreover, focusing on at-risk groups implicitly assumes that homogeneity is a condition for parent groups, ignoring the actual diversity as well as the multiple belongings of parents.

We have therefore argued that social work perspectives are missing in the conceptualization of social support in relation to parenting in current research. The meaning and occurrence of supportive interactions is a highly complex matter and thus should be studied more in context, including the

interrelation with the meso and macro levels. In current society, the diversities in urban areas cannot be ignored: people do interact with others who are both similar *and* different. When parenting is seen as a shared responsibility, between state and citizens and *among* citizens, reciprocity and multivocality can come to the forefront. More research is needed into social work practices that take this complexity, diversity, reciprocity and multivocality in daily micro interactions into account. This includes research in areas of social work that aim at stimulating parent encounters or social support, but should not be limited to such places and should also include provisions where parents de facto meet, such as preschools and schools.

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Chapter 3

Early childhood education and care as a space for social support in urban contexts of diversity[4]

Abstract

The present study illustrates that social support in ECEC settings can take place across several socio-economic and cultural borders. The presence of children as brokers of relations plays a fundamental role in the creation of social networks, in the processes of parenting support and community building. "Free confrontations" between parents and children can foster daily learning processes, despite/thanks to the contradictions and tensions that occur. This suggests that a meeting place can be a space where the experiment of democracy sporadically can emerge. In this experiment, parents, children and professionals are actors in the construction processes of parenting and community building. In so doing, parenting and living together, the pedagogical and the social, coincide.

3.1. Introduction

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is a social service with an economic, educative and social function (European Commission 2011). The economic function (European Parliament, 2002; Plantenga & Siegel, 2005) and the educative function (Heckman, 2006; Leseman, 2002; Penn, 2009; Sylva *et al.*, 2004) are widely documented, but attention has only recently been given to its social function (Vandenbroeck 2009). This social function focuses on social justice issues and therefore is also concerned with parental support and social cohesion. A recent study of curricula in 15 European countries reveals that competence profiles mainly focus on children and the educational function, while they largely neglect relationships with (and especially among) parents and the social function (Urban *et al.*, 2011).

The focus on parents in early childhood education is also not free from implicit assumptions about what constitutes good parenting. Parenting is not a neutral fact: it happens in specific contexts, with particular norms and values, described as *parenting in context*. As Gillies (2004) stated, it is equally important to "challenge the notion that parenting can be separated from its socio-economic context and […] show how the experience of living class is integral to the day-to-day process of raising children" (p. 836). Indeed, the *context of parenting* (the circumstances that influence the possibilities parents have to realise their educational projects) can differ widely. The interrelations of the context of parenting and parenting in context makes parental support a highly complex issue.

Over the last decade or so, new forms of ECEC have emerged, focussing on this social function: meeting places for parents and their children. This has been documented in England (Needham, 2009), Australia (Dadich, 2008), Japan (Hoshi-Watanabe *et al.*, 2009), Italy (Musatti, 2007), France (Scheu & Fraioli, 2010), Norway (Alvestad, 2009) and Belgium (Vandenbroeck *et al.*, 2009). These meeting places cover a wide range of practices, regarding the people they target as well as their conceptual grounding. Some places focus on specific 'at risk' groups of parents, such as the supported playgroups in England and Australia (e.g. Dadich, 2008; Jackson, 2009; Nys, 2008). In these

cases, they are grounded in a prevention paradigm and often consider the professionals working in the meeting place as educational experts. Other places do not legitimate their work in terms of groups at risk or educational expertise. They ground their work in the social needs of parents and local communities, not assuming that parents need expert advice, but rather that they may benefit from social exchanges and encounters with peers (e.g. Rullo & Musatti, 2005; Scheu & Fraioli, 2010). Despite these differences, most meeting places for parents and children share a commitment towards social support and social cohesion.

Social support is one of the more salient forms of parental support. Its relevance has been widely recognised in scientific literature (see chapter 2), for both direct effects on parents' well-being as indirect buffering effects against stress (Armstrong, Birnie-Lefcovitch & Ungar, 2005; Haber *et al.*, 2007; Kim, Sherman & Taylor, 2008; Reblin & Uchino, 2008) and as a bidirectional process (Sarason & Sarason, 2009). Research shows that parents primarily turn to their informal social networks with questions due to a shared experience of raising children (Attree, 2004; Jack, 1999; Vandenbroeck *et al.*, 2009). Hence, the promotion of informal social networks has gained momentum in policy and research (Broadhurst, 2007; Hermanns, 2009), albeit policy initiatives predominantly stick to parental support by experts giving advice to parents. Too little attention is paid to informal sources and practices of support between parents, whereas interactions between parents can be one of the most important sources of parenting support (Jack, 1999; Sarason, Sarason & Pierce, 1990).

An important limitation of current research on social support is that it mainly focuses on 'at risk' families: single mothers (e.g. Crosier, Butterworth & Rodgers, 2007), stepfamilies (e.g. Harknett & Knab, 2007), teenage mothers (e.g. Gee & Rhodes, 2007) or families in poverty (e.g. Hashima & Amato, 1994). In doing so, research is often limited to specific categories of families, while several authors claim that social support is meaningful to *all* families (Broadhurst, 2007), including those in positive situations/periods (Buysse, 2008; Rullo & Musatti, 2005; Vangelisti, 2009). The narrow focus on homogeneous 'at risk' groups means that *diversity* is all too often ignored. Yet, diversity may very well be a crucial element in informal social support as it

confronts parents with diverging parenting styles and values or *parental ethnotheories* (Bruner, 1996) and may also foster social cohesion. Through confrontation "little by little, the formal and most problematic narrative gives way to the manifold examples, anecdotes and events […] yet there is no new narrative or coherence but at least the old ones are tumbling down" (Wullers, 2007, p. 5). Musatti (2007) agrees that it is productive when codified practices disappear. Ambivalence and contradiction are welcomed (Geldof, 2006; Soenen, 2006) for their potential of opening up the "possibility for creative encounters and productive changes" (Braidotti, 2006, p. 251). ECEC services can be places where *free confrontation* takes place: *free* because parents themselves decide what to do with it, but *not without engagement* because it makes them reflect about their way of acting anyway (Musatti, 2007). Dialogue across differences opens a perspective on the messiness of human life rather than seeking, in the first instance, to resolve it (Urban, 2008).

Yet, research on interactions between diverse populations frequenting ECEC services in urban settings is limited. It is often implicitly assumed that homogeneity might be a condition for effective social support. Subsequently encounters across socio-economic and cultural bounders remain out of sight, neglecting that both similarity *and* difference might be important (Buysse, 2008; Geens 2010; Rullo & Musatti, 2005; Vandenbroeck *et al.*, 2009). It is also often assumed that only durable contacts, such as between intimate (or more homogeneous groups) are important in social life, and that support is conditional upon the development of relationships of trust within stable communities (e.g. Thesing Winks, 2006), thus neglecting the potential of small talk and brief contacts between 'strangers' as sources of social support and as generators of belonging (Soenen, 2006). Research on informal support in ECEC is still very scarce, as parents are predominantly viewed through the lens of their child, despite the fact that some rare studies show that informal support in ECEC may be far more responsive to parents' needs than formal support (Thesing Winks, 2006). In contexts outside of ECEC, Soenen (2006) provided some interesting theoretical insights, based on observations of *light* encounters. She points among others at the importance of ambivalence in encounters between strangers as well as at how these interactions take place in what she calls the "parochial bubble": even when a homelike atmosphere is

created, the environment consists of strangers. Statements in this bubble can therefore also be considered as statements under the public gaze.

In conclusion, research on the social function of ECEC is underdeveloped, especially in relation to informal social support practices in urban settings marked by diversity. In this article we study the interactions in one meeting place for parents and children in order to uncover the feasibilities of informal social support beyond different backgrounds.

3.2. Context and methods

Baboes is a recently established meeting place for parents and children, situated in the centre of Brussels and aiming at social support in a diverse urban context (see Vandenbroeck *et al.*, 2009). This means that parents (or educators, since grandparents, nannies and other people bearing responsibility over the child are also welcomed) attend the centre with their child(ren) aged zero to five. The centre is open four half days a week and two hosts welcome the parents. Their task is explicitly not to give any educational advice, but rather to facilitate encounters. The centre is situated half way between a wealthy and a poorer area of Brussels' inner city, in what can be considered to be a 'border-area' between two very different neighbourhoods. It does not aim at any specific target group, nor at any 'indication', although much attention is given to let the centre be known by all different socio-economic and cultural groups living in the area (e.g. through contacts with diverse social services and ECEC provisions, multilingual communication, visual presence in the street, etc.). It is an initiative of both the child care and parent support sectors, funded by the Flemish Community in Brussels. It is a place where *parenting in context* occurs and thanks to the diversity of *contexts of parenting*, has a potential for free confrontations. The objectives of this meeting place are to offer: (1) the possibility of informal parental networks; (2) a stimulating environment for children; and (3) the promotion of social cohesion. The focus of this study was on the analysis of the daily interactions, as micro-events.

We analysed three types of data. The first set consisted of attendance registrations by the staff. Each day the staff noted the names of the child, the

child's relationship with the accompanying adult and the language spoken between them. This data allowed us to look at the diversity of the families reached.

The second series of data consisted of daily reports and memos by the staff, noted in semi-structured diaries, containing open questions regarding the child-child interactions, parent-child interactions and parent-parent interactions as micro-processes. The first author, selecting core themes and emblematic situations, illustrating each theme, conducted a thematic analysis of the diaries. In this thematic analysis, specific attention was given to examples of encounters crossing borders, elements of recognition, disapproval, distance and proximity, etc. The themes were subsequently checked against the diaries by the second author. Then the selected themes and the emblematic situations were discussed with the team, in order to conduct a more phenomenological analysis as a democratic process in which the staff was involved. In this process names and recognisable features of the selected vignettes where slightly altered in accordance with the team in order to ensure confidentiality. The period in which these two series of data was analysed (May–December 2009) covers 125 opening days, and therefore also 125 documents.

A third set of data consisted of 31 questionnaires, filled in by parents visiting Baboes during summer 2010, offering additional information on the socio-economic backgrounds of the users. Considering a response rate of 44% and the absence of data on the entire population, it was not possible to check this sample for representativity.

The combination of the three sources of data allows us to tell a 'story' about the possible meanings of a meeting place for parents and children in a diverse urban context. We should bear in mind, however, that the writing of such a story can be seen as a method of discovery (Richardson, 1998), yet "no permanent telling of a story can be given" (Denzin, 1998, p. 326). Rather, "in telling a story, [we attempted] to weave a text that re-creates for the reader the real world that was studied" (Denzin, 1998, p. 328).

3.3. Results

3.3.1. Attendance

From May until December 2009, 221 children from 196 families attended Baboes, with an average of 28 new children per month and 7.7 children present per opening moment, speaking 25 different languages. Approximately half of the children spoke Dutch during their first visit, 22.6% spoke French and 29.4% communicated in another language with the accompanying adult. The largest part of the visiting children was between one and two years old (54% of all the visits). Yet, toddlers between three and five years of age also visited Baboes during school hours. Some of them were kept home out of medical precaution; others were not enrolled in kindergarten.

Children were predominantly accompanied by their mother (73.4%), although in 18.8% of the visits the father joined the child (with or without another adult). Unsurprisingly fathers came more frequently on Saturdays (32.7%). In 2.5% of the cases, a grandparent came to the meeting place and in 5.3% there was another educator looking after the child.

Figure 1. Carer and language background at the first visit (%)
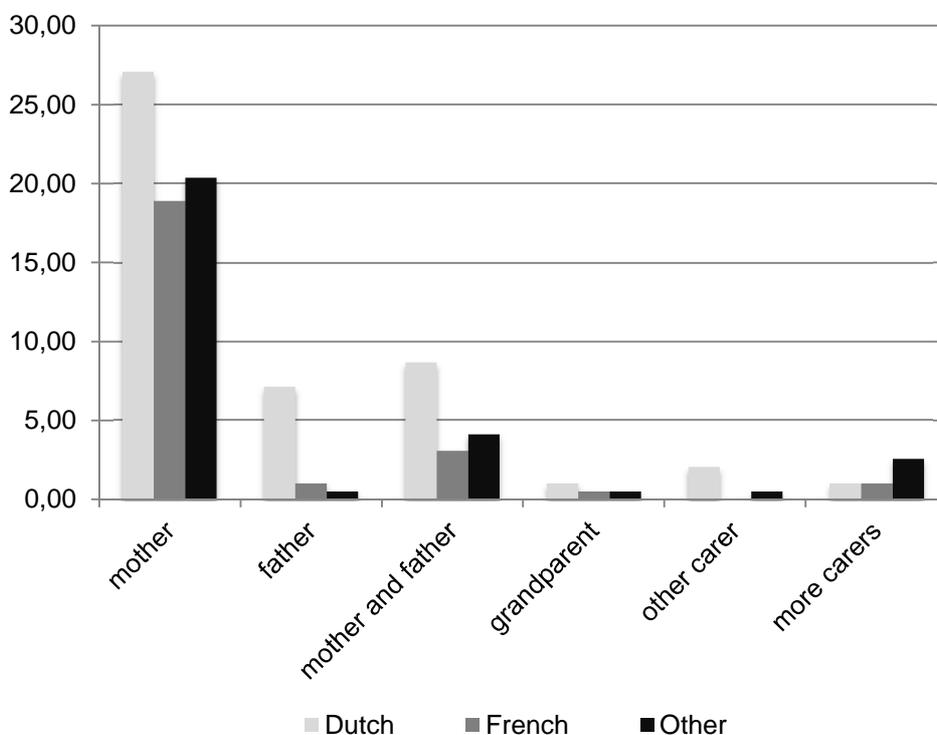
The results of the questionnaire offered some additional information about the range of socio-economic diversity. Ten parents (out of 31), worked full-time and three of them also had a full-time working partner, while half of the respondents were not working (unemployed, parental leave, housewife/man, pensioner). Eight respondents belonged to low income groups (with four of them clearly below the poverty threshold), while two users belonged to the highest income groups. Remarkably, both the poorest and the richest users belonged to one-income families, with non-working mothers. As said before, we cannot assert that this is a representative sample of the users of Baboes, yet the sample does give an indication of its socio-economic diversity, just as the attendance data inform us about its linguistic and therefore cultural diversity. Obviously, this does not suffice to say that intercultural interactions take place or that these may be significant. Therefore a more qualitative analysis is necessary.

3.3.2. Free confrontation crossing borders

The analysis of the daily reports provided us with some insights into what actually went on in this meeting place, as they gave many illustrations of free confrontation and interactions across languages:

> *Mother of Sam [30 months, sign language] communicates with the mother of Victor [4 months, Dutch] by writing things down and with sign language. She says she has a sister in Hungary. The mother of Victor tells about his father who did a moonlight flit, back to Spain.*

In the meeting place, parents talk to each other in a shared language, via notes, making use of gestures or with a third person as 'instant-translator'. A shared experience or the possibility to share an experience, urges people to bridge the language gap. This kind of communication goes beyond daily exchanges and stories are shared. What starts with small talk often evolves into more in-depth discussions, creating a sense of belonging. Children are not infrequently the brokers of the contacts between parents.

The confrontation with different ways of acting can foster reflection on a person's own way of upbringing. Also observing one's own child in a different environment, can generate new insights:

> *A mother, who always kept her child out of day care, doubts her decision when seeing him interact with other children. She says: 'I think Tuur [17 months, Dutch] should go to a day care centre'.*

It is not so important what the mother finally decided, but the opening up of discussion – and thus the acceptance of contradiction – may be supportive.

Gender constructions, as another aspect of diversity, were confirmed and contested in the daily interaction in Baboes:

> *Professional: 'That is men's work'. Mother with headscarf [reacts] laughing: 'That's not always true. Sometimes, women can do this better.'*

> *Professional says to the mother of Rahim [52 months, Arabic]: 'maybe he will be cooking a meal for you in some years'. Mother answers 'no'. She tells that men [in her native country] are being served.*

Adults were not alone in discussing gender issues, children also played it in their games. Some parents stimulated their children to play with specific toys, while others did not accept that their child took part in a 'gendered' game:

> *Father of Samir [30 months, Arabic], Arabic speaking man, approximately 50 years old, stimulates his son to play in the kitchenette. After 10 minutes, Samir plays in the kitchenette until closing time. His father joins him in his game – very nice! At a certain moment, everybody gathers at the ball pit. Samir does not turn away from the kitchenette and continues his play. On parting, Samir gave Lander [26 months, Dutch] a hand, and one minute later two kisses (after Samir's father said something to him) [previous to that, there was a small conflict between the two boys].*

> *'That's for girls, dad does not allow this', father of Robbe [20 months, Dutch] reacts to his son when he started pushing a buggy.*

The observations suggest that contradictions are possible and that they do not necessarily lead to conflicts. ECEC can be considered as broadening the educational space: both parents and children come into contact with other/new roles. How they experience this contact (as a confirmation, enrichment, contradiction) is diverse and variable.

3.3.3. Space and the Other

In the daily reports, we read illustrations of how physical boundaries were crossed and people or stories were symbolically brought into the meeting place, even when they were living on the other side of the world:

> *Samir [29 months, Arabic] on the phone. The professional asks who he is talking to. He says 'Mami'. His mother explains that it is his grandmother. Samir says: 'Mami, I am at Baboes, you have to come'. 'Samir likes his grandmother very much', adds his mother.*

> *Mother of Omar [24 months, Urdu] points at her native region on the globe and explains that she moved from there to Belgium 10 years ago as a result of*

her marriage. Her family is still living in her native country. It is the first time (after many visits) that she directly addresses the staff.

The telephone conversation is not just a game, it is Samir's way of expressing himself about Baboes. It is a meaningful action, an invitation from Samir to a person who is probably very precious to him. Samir also wants to share his experience with persons who are not physically present. The design of the meeting place is an important mediator to support or obstruct this, depending on its tempting character and most importantly, due to the presence of a listener, of a –for children sometimes imaginary– public to tell their story to. The presence of other persons in the meeting place makes it possible for the mother of Omar to share her story. It is a sensitive topic and the globe functions as an available mediator. The meeting place offers the possibility to be present in different ways, in different roles and to shift from one role to another.

The other in the meeting place can be a listener, but also a 'commentator'. The intention of the comments made by one person and the interpretation of it by the other, can vary widely: they can be read in many ways. The following quote from a diary illustrates this:

> *Fabio [54 months, Italian] remarks on a boy, named Lars [29 months, Dutch], who is extremely silent and never communicates with other children. He says: 'In my class, there is also a Lars, but he speaks for real'.*

Fabio's remark on the quietness of Lars can be considered as disapproval, but on the other hand it can be seen as recognition of Lars being in the meeting place, by naming him. This is also an example of free confrontation between children (and possibly parents watching them). It suggests that free confrontation is not exclusively for adult interaction.

Parents often remark on their child's behaviour. Their statements can be viewed as reflections on reality, but also as something acted out in public or for a certain listener.

> *Lars [28 months, Dutch] is playing with the cars. Bo [18 months, Dutch] also takes one. Lars holds out his hands to regain the car. Lars' mother says that he has to share, that the toys are for all the children.*

The reaction of the mother to her son reflects her idea about 'good parenting', or what she is expected to say as 'a good mother' in the gaze of the others. This suggests that the meeting place is not a private place like the home, but a public (or parochial for that matter) place of socialisation. The meeting place is a social space where interaction takes place in the presence of (unknown) others. There are several examples where parents legitimated their own behaviour or that of their child, being very conscious about the presence of the Other:

> *'Before anyone gets wrong thoughts: I am the father, and she is the grandmother.'*

> *Anouk [17 months, Dutch] is crying because another child is playing with something she wants to play with. She finds it difficult to share things. Her mother says that she is tired.*

> *A grandmother is reading a book about chocolate to her grandchild Lotte [24 months, Dutch]. She adds to the story that chocolate gives you a sore stomach. Then she looks up and says 'I cannot resist making it educative'*

The last fragment is a striking example of how the grandmother became aware of her own norms and values, realising that others were watching her. By hearing her own words, she realised that others interpret how she looks at chocolate and children's learning. This understanding made her apologise, as if she believed that someone could blame her for this. From a concern that someone could misunderstand one's actions, parents try to intervene actively by explicit communication. In some cases, this 'gaze of the other' was used as pressure to regulate the behaviour of the child:

> *'[The professional] will not be proud of you', says the mother of Bo [22 months, Dutch] to her when she did not want to sit in the buggy. [The professional] is frustrated because he did not react.*

'Everybody will look at you!' Mother of Lars [29 months, Dutch] and Ilona [3 months] to her son after he is crying because they have to go home. Yet, Lars has difficulties with being watched. [Only the two professionals are still in the meeting place].

3.3.4. Multiple identities: a dynamic construction

All parents visiting Baboes, share the parenting experience. They are all a parent (or educator) but also Italian or Japanese, workman or housewife, brother or daughter and so on. Individuals have multiple identities, the unique composition of the life story of a person, entails encounters, based on sameness *and* difference. Identities are dynamic: one moment a person can talk as a single parent to another single parent, the next moment the person can direct a child in their native language, subsequently that person can make a telephone call with a colleague. These multiple identities make it possible to transcend aspects of identity (like ethnic background). Parents frequenting Baboes can approach each other based on a common identity of being a father, a parent, or an inhabitant of Brussels. Moreover, this interaction based on commonality can form the pre-set of addressing the other as Flemish, French or Moroccan. On the one hand, recognition can be a first step for further contact, from the assumption that someone with a similar characteristic shares the same kind of experience:

'Yes, it's a baby like you', says the father of Clement [13 months, French] when Clement is looking for contact with another 'coloured' child. Clement was adopted.

A Portuguese and a Japanese mother are having a conversation about what it is like to follow a beloved person to Belgium. The mother of Kai [19 month, Japanese] would like him to learn the German language (which he does not speak) because he has German – and only German – nationality.

'I heard that twins of the same gender are more often jealous', mother of Lien [19 months, Dutch] and Sara [19 months] to the mother of Taamir [52 months, Urdu], Rashid [52 months] and Farah [28 months].

Seemingly obvious thoughts are being questioned in the contact with other people, traditions, habits, perspectives and so on. This offers the possibility to

look at oneself in different ways, or to confirm present opinions about oneself and the child:

> *'I do not see my child this happy at home', a mother tells about her child's tantrums and declares that she finds it difficult to cope with.*

> *'They have this in the childcare centre too, but I did not see her playing with it before', mother of Marie [24 months, Dutch] about the kitchenette.*

> *'I am very happy', mother of Misaki [22 months, Japanese] is touched when she sees her daughter asking to be taken up by the mother of Anouk [19 months, Dutch]. She never did this before and used to be afraid of other adults.*

> *'He's getting taller', mother of Aran [16 months, Thai] realises that the table becomes a potential danger, now her son is getting taller. Some time ago, Aran was too little to hit the corners of the table.*

3.3.5. Parenting as a shared responsibility

To intervene in interactions of other parents is a delicate issue. However, when the safety of a child is in danger, other parents can feel urged to act. In a way, this concern justifies the intervention a priori.

> *When the mother of Victor [2 months, French] wants to leave and takes her baby carrier, she leaves Victor alone on the sofa. The mother of Floor [3 months, Dutch] is worried and gets up to keep an eye on Victor. When his mother returns, she says: 'This is dangerous'. The mother of Victor says that he is not moving yet. The mother of Floor replies that this can suddenly happen and she gives an example about her son.*

The remark that the mother of Floor made about the behaviour of the mother of Victor, can be interpreted in a negative way, but at the same time, she was worried about Victor's safety. This is not only an example of contradiction, but also of the social aspects of parenting. As a parent, it is almost impossible (and undesirable) to watch every step of one's own child(ren) and simultaneously each parent sees other children acting.

Each interaction consists also of a learning component, for example: a parent who considers the own way of acting as correct, but is confronted with a remark on this acting (in this case from a safety point of view), may take this along in further action. On the other side, the parent who made the remark could be inclined to reconsider their perspective. These are illustrations of free confrontation: free indeed, but not without engagement. It is not only the behaviour of others that activates reactions, also verbal disagreement arises, not necessarily linked with behaviour in the meeting place.

> *A conversation between two fathers: about living in Brussels (and the differences with Amsterdam) and about the age that children go to school. For example, the father of Chiara [23 months, Dutch] finds it important that children can play for a long period and can discover things (like in the Netherlands where toddlers go to school at the age of four; and in the native country of his wife at the age of five). The father of Anouk [18 months, Dutch] prefers the system in Belgium, where it is possible to start school from the age of 2.5. He argues: the younger they can learn, the better.*

This kind of contradiction is not exclusive to conversations in a meeting place; it can also take place at the school gate or in the living room. But, the richness of interactions in the meeting place resides in the possibility to meet and talk to people other than those of people's own social network, the latter consisting more often of a homogeneous group. The input from persons with very diverse backgrounds and experiences is not always self-evident, but enhances 'disagreement' and therefore confrontation and reflection.

3.4. Discussion

Given that the social function of ECEC is still underdeveloped, the daily interactions in the Baboes meeting place were studied as micro-events (Vandenbroeck *et al.*, 2009) in order to uncover the feasibilities of informal social support practices across different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. The attendance data show that it is feasible to serve a cultural and socio-economic diverse group of parents and children.

The qualitative data revealed that these diverse groups interacted, crossing several borders. The (inter)actions can be situated between appreciation and disapproval; differences and similarities; distance and proximity. Confrontations occurred both in verbal and non-verbal ways and were often mediated by the children. The presence of children as brokers of relations plays a fundamental role in the creation of social networks, in the processes of parent support and in social cohesion, as also noted by Soenen (2006).

Rourou *et al.* (2006) state that multicultural child centres can offer good opportunities for young children from diverse cultural backgrounds to learn to play together and to solve their conflicts in constructive ways, yet mutual understanding between parents does not develop automatically. The meeting place is a space where children, parents and staff learn from the interaction: in meeting others, we learn to know ourselves (or we are urged to look at ourselves more carefully). Nealon (1997) points out that space for multivocality is important. The presence of professionals as facilitators of encounters and of diversity in the meeting place, plays a significant role in the occurrence of *free confrontation*. The meeting place is a social sphere where norms and values are negotiated in the daily interactions between parents, children and professionals. In the free confrontation, participants are free to (re)act, but taken-for-granted assumptions are inevitably questioned through daily micro-interactions. It may foster daily learning processes, despite/thanks to the contradictions that occur. In an open, unconstrained environment, contradictions may very well be supportive (Vandenbroeck *et al.*, 2009), as parents construct themselves in the mirror of sameness and difference.

Meeting places can be spaces where democratic moments emerge (Biesta, 2011), depending upon the open character of the meeting place, on the presence of a diversity of perspectives, on the openness to speak and be listened to. Noens and Ramaekers (2011) underline that the meeting place should be unconditional and a place where there is room for the everyday aspects of parenting. Parents should remain the first owner of their parenting project and not be reduced to spectators of their own situation, weighed down by the dominant discourse about what good parenting is (Bouverne-De Bie, 2005). According to Biesta (2011) democracy is not about following or incorporating a set of norms and values, but goes beyond this order,

constructing something new over and over again. He calls this "subjectification". In this sense, parent support is not informing parents about 'the good ways of parenting', but creating space (as a quality of atmosphere) for parents to reflect with each other about their practices and what they find important to offer their children in their education project. According to Biesta it is an engagement in the experiment of democracy. In this experiment, parents, children and professionals are actors in the construction of parenting as well as of social cohesion. This may mean that parenting and living together –the pedagogical and the social– meet.

We acknowledge that this study is a description of only one meeting place, and as stated before, meeting places can substantially differ regarding their users and their goals. Further, our study is largely based on observations by the staff, rather than by the researchers. Therefore, this analysis is only tentative and provisional. Nevertheless, it illustrates that social exchange in ECEC settings across socio-economic and cultural borders, is feasible, yet not self-evident. Childcare centres are also services where diverse parents meet. In affluent countries, today the majority of parents will make use of some form of out-of-home childcare (UNICEF, 2008). This offers unique opportunities for a large population of diverse families to encounter, if the social function of ECEC is seriously taken into account and efforts are made to open the doors to all families.

We cannot take for granted that productive meetings will occur and are experienced as supportive. Indeed, motivations and contexts of parents using day care centres or kindergarten may differ from those of parents in meeting places. Consequently, further research on interactions between parents and their meaning is necessary, as this area of research is only beginning to be explored (Thesing Winks, 2006). For such research, it may be important to take into account the lessons learned from meeting places, without formalising this concept into a method, since it is exactly its unconditional atmosphere, the openness for dis-order that generates opportunities for exchange.

We argue for a broad perspective on childcare as a social service, that integrates the economic, educative *and* social function. Among other things, it should create a space for encounters between a diversity of families.

3.5. Acknowledgements

3.6. References

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Chapter 4

Informal social support in contexts of diversity: shaping the relationship between the public and the private sphere[5]

Abstract

This paper aims to re-examine the *social* dimension of social support as the shared responsibility of social work and families in shaping social support rather than pressuring parents' *individual* responsibilities, as this has been a significantly under-theorised issue in social work research.

In our qualitative study, we discuss parents' experiences of informal social support in Centres for Children and Parents (CCP) in two cities in Belgium. During 2012, six discussion groups were held with 29 mothers, three fathers and one nanny who visited one of the CCP included in the project. A broad topic list was used, investigating parents' first visit and motivations to return; their encounters with other children, parents and the professionals; and the actual role of the professional. Data were interpreted repeatedly using qualitative content-analysis.

The CCP focus on engaging with a wide diversity of parents of young children, not framed as 'at risk', reflecting the contemporary contexts of diversity in which these practices unfold. Our research shows that departing from an anti-essentialist approach to diversity and heterogeneity may be productive for the promotion of both social support and social cohesion as it captures social issues such as diverse and changing norms and values, diverse and changing family compositions, lifestyles and situations, diverse and changing biographical, socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds of children and parents. As the CCP offer the opportunity of a confrontation between private issues and public concerns, social encounters between a diverse mix of families are experienced as supportive.

While embracing parents' perspectives regarding equity, reciprocity, agency and social cohesion, it becomes clear that these processes of interaction require facilitation by a specific professional. In this article, we attempt to unravel and discuss the possible role(s) of social work in generating informal social support.

4.1. Introduction

The notion of social support is used widely in research, for example in the context of parenting (Ortega 2002, Manji *et al.* 2005, McLeod *et al.* 2006, Coohey 2007, Ochieng 2011, Spiers *et al.* 2011) and as related to social capital (Dominguez & Watkins 2003, Horvat *et al.* 2003, Gillies 2004, Winkworth *et al.* 2010), yet its conceptualisation is often unclear and varies across studies and disciplines.

Our recent review of the existing body of international peer-reviewed literature concerning social support in relation to parenting (see Geens & Vandenbroeck 2014) revealed a strong research focus on specific target groups of parents who are believed to be 'at risk' or 'hard to reach', such as parents of a child with a disability or illness, parents with a disability, teenage parents, single parents, low-income parents and ethnic minorities. In this wealth of research literature, social support is predominantly examined as a buffer against potential negative outcomes for children. This targeted approach to social support mirrors the underlying assumption that 'at risk' parents are in danger of failing and therefore, their parenting task is perceived primarily as an individual responsibility (Gillies 2005). Moreover, the existing research studies focus predominantly on formal services directed at individual families, sticking to a rather traditional notion of one-to-one service delivery by professionals (McLeod *et al.* 2006).

Such an individual and rather deficit-oriented approach to social support risks neglecting the shared responsibility in parenting matters between families and the welfare state (Richter & Andresen 2012). Informal support between families and the possible roles of professionals working in structural services, like schools, herein, are less often considered (Sheppard 2004, McLeod *et al.* 2006).

This paper aims to re-examine the *social* dimension of social support as the shared responsibility of social work and families in shaping social support rather than pressuring parents' *individual* responsibilities, as this has been a significantly under-theorised issue in social work research (Geens & Vandenbroeck 2014).

4.2. Theoretical framework

Sheppard (2004) perceives social work as a direct provider of support and as an indirect source of support, by activating formal resources. Another option, he states, which is still underestimated by social workers, is using the informal network. This informal network is mostly perceived as a private affair but some researchers question the possible role(s) of social services in supportive interactions between families (Fram 2005, McLeod *et al.* 2006, Geens & Vandenbroeck 2013, 2014). To explore the place of informal social support in social work practices, we draw on the work of Lofland on the private and public sphere.

According to Lofland (2009) the private sphere consists of contacts between intimates, while the public sphere is characterised by a world of strangers. Rather than *physical* environments, Lofland argues that the private as well as the public realm are *social* spaces or spheres. Social relations thus influence whether a space is private, public or somewhere in between (parochial), regardless of the predefined function of that place. Each space also carries its own norms and values, created and sustained by a complex web of internal relationships (Lofland 2009).

It is often assumed that giving and receiving support only occurs between intimates (such as family or close friends) and that homogeneity is a necessary condition to experience support. However, Soenen (2006) and Oosterlynck *et al.* (2015) recognise light social encounters and temporary relationships between strangers are increasingly important in social life, certainly given today's context of (super)diversity, yet it's not given attention to in the available body of social support research.

We approach diversity here in an anti-essentialist way: besides covering various ethnic-cultural backgrounds, it captures social issues like diverse and changing norms, values, family compositions, lifestyles, situations, biographical and socio-economic backgrounds of children and parents. In so doing, we point at the multiple, nomadic and intersectional identities that people have (Vandenbroeck *et al.* 2009b).

In what follows, we discuss parents' perspectives and experiences of social support, visiting a Centre for Children and Parents (CCP) in two Belgian cities. According to Lofland (2009), cities are important sites for a growing tolerance towards diversity, yet this does not naturally occur. The question she raises is 'if [cities] do sometimes manage to create civility in the face of heterogeneity, how do they do it?' (237). To look for answers to this question, we study everyday place-based practices or micro-events (Oosterlynck *et al.*, 2015, Vandenbroeck *et al.,* 2009a).

4.3. Methodology

4.3.1. Research settings

In the last decades, CCP emerged worldwide, covering a wide range of practices regarding the people they target as well as their conceptual grounding, including parent toddler groups in England (Needham 2009) and playgroups in Australia (Jackson 2013), *kosodate-shien sente* in Japan, *spazio insieme* in Italy and *Maisons Vertes* in France (see Hoshi-Watanabe *et al.* 2012). Despite the differences, many CCP share a commitment towards social support and social cohesion (Geens & Vandenbroeck 2013).

CCP are places where families meet while professionals aim to create a stimulating environment for children and informal support opportunities for parents (Hoshi-Watanabe *et al.* 2012). Rather than experts in parenting/educational matters, these professionals are facilitators of encounters in promoting social cohesion (Needham & Jackson 2012). As the CCP in our study do not target specific groups nor focus on any 'indication' of (alleged future) problems, they can be seen as an alternative form of parent support in Belgium in contrast with provisions targeted at certain 'at risk' or 'hard to reach' groups. Being located in Brussels and Antwerp, cities marked by substantial diversity, much attention is given to the accessibility of the service for a wide social mix of families.

Parents or educators (e.g. grandparents or nannies) attend the centre with their child(ren) aged zero to four or five years old. The CCP are open several

half days a week, there are no obligations related to regularity or subscription. In the CCP in our study, no activities are organised. The presence of the families varies continuously, creating moments in which families do not know each other (yet) (making the CCP more of a public space), but also moments when they re-encounter one another or attend with friends (making the CCP a parochial or even private space).

4.3.2. Data collection and analysis

During 2012, six discussion groups were held with parents who visited the CCP. Focus-group discussions were preferred in order to collect data, as the interactions allowed researchers to elaborate on shared meanings and to substantiate points of view (Mortelmans 2007). Purposive sampling (Mortelmans 2007) was used by asking the professionals from six CCP involved in a project on accessibility of social support to invite a social mix of parents. As the purpose of the study was to explore diverse experiences, the focus was on the diversity of the sample, rather than on generalisability (Goodwin & Goodwin 1994). All parents were informed, agreed to participate voluntarily and signed an informed consent document. The Ethical Commission of the Faculty of Psychology and Education (Ghent University) approved the study.

The discussions took place in the CCP or in an adjacent room. In one case, only one parent showed up, and in another case two parents were present. These discussions took the form of (group) interviews in the presence of one researcher. The other four groups were organised by two researchers and had eight, twelve, and, on two occasions, five participants, resulting in 33 respondents (29 mothers, three fathers and one nanny). Table 1 gives an overview of the respondents.

Table 3. Profile of the participants

		Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5	Group 6	Total
Relation to the child	Mother	8	10	5	3	2	1	29
	Father		2		1			3
	Nanny				1			1
Birth country		Belgium (2) Morocco (5) Tunisia (1)	Afghanistan (1) Belgium (1) Chili (1) Morocco (4) Nigeria (2) Sahara (1) Turkey (1) Unknown (1)	Aruba (1) Belgium (2) United Kingdom (1) Unknown (1)	Belgium (1) Czech Republic (1) Italy (1) the Netherlands (2)	Belgium (2)	Belgium (1)	Afghanistan (1) Aruba (1) Belgium (9) Chili (1) Czech Republic (1) Italy (1) Morocco (9) Nigeria (2) The Netherlands (2) Sahara (1) Tunisia (1) Turkey (1) United Kingdom (1) Unknown (2)
Mother tongue		Arabic (4) Berber (3) Dutch (1)	Arabic (4) Berber (1) Dutch (2) English (2) Farsi (1) Kurdish (1) Unknown (1)	Arabic (1) Dutch (2) Dutch / English (1) Papiamento (1)	Czech (1) Dutch (3) English / Italian (1)	Dutch (1) French (1)	Berber (1)	Arabic (9) Berber (5) Dutch (9) Czech (1) English (4) Farsi (1) French (1) Kurdish (1) Papiamento (1) Unknown (1)

Category	Subcategory	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5	Group 6	Total
Number of children		1 (3) 2 (1) 3 (3) 4 (1)	2 (3) 3 (5) 4 (3) 7 (1)	1 (4) 3 (1)	1 (3) 2 (2)	2 (1) 3 (1)	3 (1)	1 (10) 2 (7) 3 (11) 4 (4) 7 (1)
Family composition	Two parent family	7	11	4	4	1	1	28
	Single parent			1	1	1	1	3
	Unknown	1	1					2
Education	Less than secondary	2	1	2		1		4
	Secondary	2	7	2	2	1	1	14
	Post-secondary	1		1	3	1		7
	Unknown	3	4	1				8
Employment	Employed	3	1	2	3			6
	Unemployed	4	3	1		1	1	9
	Housewife / man	1	3	1	1	1		9
	Unknown		5	1	1	1		9
Family employment	Two-earner household	4	1	1	2	1	1	4
	Single wage-earner	1	3	2	3	1	1	14
	Both at home	3	3	1				6
	Unknown		5	1				9

The researchers used a broad topic list, including parents' first visit and motivations to return; their encounters with other children, parents and the professionals; and the actual role of the professional. The main language was Dutch, but translation into French and English was provided when necessary by a moderator, and into Arabic or Berber by another parent.

All conversations were audiotaped, transcribed and a qualitative content analysis was performed (Hsieh & Shannon 2005). After the first phase of open coding, a coding tree was defined and used during the second coding of the materials. The analyses and interpretations were summarised in a global report and presented to the coordinators of the CCP. The results and interpretations were also discussed repeatedly within the research team, enriching interpretations.

4.4. Findings

In what follows, we discuss the central themes, illustrated by key citations of parents (M stands for mother and R for researcher).

4.4.1. Equity: a contrast to the public sphere

The researchers never asked parents to compare the CCP to public places, yet this is what parents spontaneously did when explaining its meaning:

> *Mother: I can only say that the staff mostly creates the atmosphere. I see a clear difference between here and the public park: children are equal here. (Group 4)*

While both the public park and the CCP often consist of strangers, the presence of the professional as a host and warrantor of certain norms and values in the centre made the difference. The parents were not necessarily looking for equality, in the sense of homogeneity, but for recognition and acceptance. Equality seems not to be a precondition for social support to occur, but equity is:

> *Mother: For me it's important; I have a child with a disability. I was afraid but I was taken care of very well and my child as well; he plays here with the children, learns while playing and from the mothers. (Group 2)*

The CCP can be a place to talk about the children and everything involved in child rearing. According to the parents, this is not always accepted in public space, especially when they want to share concerns:

> *Mother: To share it and just when you feel tired for a moment – you can tell this or you can share your doubts or your problems if they don't eat well – stupid things mostly but it is nice anyway. You don't get the feeling that you're nagging because if you would tell that to someone at the bakery – you're not supposed to do that actually. (Group 3)*

> *Mother: Here I think, yeah, I can be fairly open about it; I just can be who I am. While outside, in society, sometimes you need to hide it a bit, yeah. (Group 5)*

These citations illustrate that parents are aware that a specific norm exists regarding how one should be (have) in the public sphere: 'you're not supposed to do that' (Group 3), 'sometimes you need to hide it a bit' (Group 5), or being afraid of reactions when having a child with a disability. These assumptions may obstruct the possibility to experience social encounters as supportive. Moreover, parents were well aware that they themselves behave differently in the CCP, compared to the public space:

> *Mother: I never pass judgments on something. Of course I see differences, but you accept them, these differences. What I want to say – [silence] it's a bizarre feeling. From my point of view, I look, I see, but I do not judge. Here, I'm talking about the CCP eh! In other places, yes I do judge. But here in the CCP? No. (Group 5)*

Apparently, the CCP is experienced as a place where specific norms and values and a social atmosphere prevail. Parents do not feel they (their private lives) are being judged, neither do they feel the need to judge others. Parents attributed this to the presence of the professionals who are considered to be the warrantors of these norms and values.

4.4.2. Social cohesion: a contrast to the private sphere

In contrast to more public areas, where no mediating figures are around, but also in contrast with the private sphere, lacking diversity, the professionals mediate in situations of exclusion:

> *Mother: Sometimes, when I come quite early, and they're sitting there and talking only Arabic, then I find it difficult to enter. Then I think: 'Oh I am alone here', because you don't… understand it. […] Then I hide myself. […] Then it is very nice that there is staff because they come to say hello. Because otherwise you would feel completely uncomfortable, I guess […] And also, you have some routine of taking a cup of tea and there is still your child [to turn to], right, so it's not that you're completely lost. Then I often take a seat, quietly, not entirely apart but a bit further away. (Group 3)*

Apparently, away from the home, parents not only provided a safe haven while their children explored, the reverse is also true: the child gave its parent a reason to be there, someone to focus on when he/she felt a bit uncomfortable. What is more, the actions of the children were often an ideal occasion to start a conversation with unknown others.

Another mother reports how the professional helped her to enter a conversation between a group of Berber mothers, by saying: *'there is someone new here now, we cannot only speak Berb*er'. It made this mother realise how immigrants are experiencing this feeling of being excluded on a daily basis and she explains the value of the professionals' role in fostering social cohesion:

> *Mother: But there's a difference between organising a chat over a cup of coffee and creating a feeling of belonging. That's not the same.*
>
> *Researcher: What makes the difference for you?*
>
> *Mother: Well, let me think. It is a kind of feeling. It is hard to express. A chat over a cup of coffee is, according to me, then it is really hard for me to get in, to find my place in the group. If things are translated, or everybody is searching for a common ground, then it is easier for me. Because, they reach out to everybody. Do you understand? It is really an emotional thing. (Group 1)*

For some parents, this meant that they dared to come out of the private sphere of their house again and (re-)discovered their broader society:

> *Mother: But I think – I have 7 children, I've been home all the time, I don't have any friends. Since that, I go out, take the bus myself, come here with the kid, meet other mothers, yeah… I became more social. I also dare to go out of my house more often. (Group 2)*

Others started to connect spontaneously with people who differ from them in some respect, not only in the CCP, but also in the outside world:

> *Mother: For me, it implies contact with local people. […] To get in touch with the people from the neighbourhood. Because – how should I say it? When I'm at the school gate with my children, sometimes I don't know 'which moms speak Dutch and which don't?' And, by coming here, I have contact with mothers at the school gate too. (Group 1)*

4.4.3. Where private and public meet

In all discussion groups, parents pointed at the social dimension of their visit: the CPP offers the possibility to be away from the private sphere of their homes, and to go to a place where they are welcomed with their young child(ren) without any need for justification. The continuous presence of two professionals in each CCP, who among other things prepare the coffee and equip the rooms, made parents feel 'expected' and therefore welcomed. Parents compared their position as being 'a friend' or described them 'like family' in the way they open the door for them, welcome them and share a cup of coffee. This illustrates how the CCP from time to time is experienced as a parochial sphere.

The presence of a welcoming atmosphere, the possibility to share their experiences and emotions with other caregivers, made parents feel relieved and relaxed, so that, 'when they are all day long with the children, [they] don't get so crazy'. The playful environment for the children, the extra pair of eyes watching over the safety of the children and the idea that someone listens, gave them energy. They experienced this change in their mood as valuable for themselves and their children: one mother told how her older son remarked

'Oh, mommy you are so happy' when she picked him up after visiting the CCP with her younger child.

It is to be noticed that parents are very well aware that this is not just a private space, but a space with a public gaze. When explaining the meaning of their visit, they mention what it means to their child as well as to themselves, here and now. They enjoyed getting attention, sharing concrete moments of pleasure, thought and interaction with their child and others. In short they described the meaning in terms of private or at least parochial encounters. However, it is striking that the use of vocabulary and intonation shifted completely when the words of a policymaker (virtually) entered the discussion:

> *Mother 5: […] the staff has been told it is 'a chat over a cup of tea for woman' […] but I think that's a real insult, I found that completely mistaken.*

> *Mother 4: They don't see the relevance of it, isn't it?*

> *Researcher: How would you explain the relevance to this policymaker?*

> *Mother 4: It's also a way of getting to know each other, we learn a bit from their culture, they learn to integrate, our children play together, it is the next generation after all.*

> *Mother 5: You constantly receive lessons about parenting and who knows this better than another mother?*

> *Researcher: Lessons in a spontaneous manner?*

> *Mother 5: Yes!*

> *Mother 1: Here you can get it off your chest and they always state that for society – that it costs a lot of money, all those depressions.*

> *Mother 5: That as well!*

> *Mother 1: But I think, if mothers just get the chance to share their experiences, and relax for a moment – because their children enjoy it so than they enjoy it too. Simply being here for a while, it's a kind of medicine against depression or not seeing the way out for a moment.*

> *Mother 5: Yes definitely! (Group 3)*

At the very moment the public domain (personified by the reference to the policymaker) intervened in the enunciations of their private lives, words like 'culture', 'integration', 'next generation' and 'depression' entered the discussion. These mothers immediately changed perspectives, adopting a social investment language, formulating possible societal gains, talking in terms of learning and of saving future costs. This fragment is interspersed with big concepts, yet combined with descriptions in small terms that put things in perspective. For example: 'depression' is linked to the (im)possibility to 'share one's experiences', 'to see the way out for a moment' and 'simply being here for a while'. Although these parents would protest if others would label them as at risk of becoming depressed, they used this vocabulary to express how they would explain the meaning of a CCP to policymakers. Interestingly, the language they use is in direct opposition with how the CCP positions itself as not targeted to risk prevention. In so doing, these mothers express their awareness of the fact that the CCP is deviant from mainstream parent support conceptions in the public domain and thus, may need extra legitimation. While parents acknowledged that the encounters were enriching for their private relation with their child and were convinced of the meaning of small-talk in their everyday lives, they still felt that these informal exchanges were often underappreciated at the public policy level.

4.4.4. Reciprocity as a necessary condition

One of the reasons to visit the CCP was that *all* parents with young children were welcomed and no specific question or problem was supposed to enter the service. However, it was clear that if the centre did have an explicit aim to solve problems, this would represent a strong threshold to come:

> *Mother: I got to know the CCP when observing a poster at the infant consultation scheme, and I thought 'well, I'll go there'. But then they told me that it was for children with problems. Yes, Child & Family said that. And I thought 'no way, it's put differently on the poster' so I just followed that information. (Group 1)*

Discussing these issues, feelings sometimes ran high. When professionals problematised their child or their parenting, parents got really upset and did not experience the service help as supportive. In contrast to these

experiences, a non-judgmental atmosphere in the CCP was an important condition for coming, as the parents did not consider themselves to have problems that they could not deal with themselves.

The respondents claimed that observing other families and the exchanges about their children often (re)strengthened their self-confidence as a parent, even when they were not looking for answers. They regularly criticised formal parent support services, provided by expert professionals in educational matters, for being one-directional, rather than reciprocal. When a professional told them what to do, they felt even more insecure about their parenting. Not only the spoken word, but also the feeling of being observed from a normative point of view or entering a place that 'breathes' a certain climate of how to raise children, discouraged parents to return:

> *Mother 1: I've heard before that the parenting shop [Centre for Parent Support], I've never been there myself, but that it is stricter.*
>
> *Mother 5: Yeah that's true, it was 'entering, intake, …' you know that's already –*
>
> *Mother 1: It's Child & Family-like [Child & Family is a preventive health service, provided by expert professionals], not that this is totally negative but it's… completely different.*
>
> *[…]*
>
> *Mother 3: Then she said 'we'll make an appointment at the CKG [Centre for Intensive Parent Support], there they will go deeper into it', and then I felt bad completely. But then I heard other mothers, or I see other children… it's not that bad at all. I am worried because it is my first child and a child is not a robot. I don't like that, at Child & Family there is only one right way. […] Now I feel dubious, yes, I'm afraid that something will go wrong, that I'm not a good parent to my child.*
>
> *Mother 5: Yeah, they can give you the feeling that if you fail, you'll get into trouble with them.*
>
> *Mother 3: Yes, everything must stay within certain boundaries.*
>
> *Researcher: That's your experience with Child & Family?*
>
> *Mothers: Yes!*

> *Mother 1: Actually – sometimes they're too – I find it foolish, they're all very conservative.*
>
> *Mother 5: Yeah, that's true!*
>
> *Mother 1: That's the proper word, just conservative. (Group 3)*

These parents felt that 'good parenting' was determined in advance, according to a golden standard and therefore considered that they and their child were not taken seriously, but were instead compared to a fixed norm. The parents in our study preferred openness for multiple perspectives, acceptance of different ways of acting and the freedom to choose, or at least to be an actor in this process of continuous searching. At times, they said, it is sufficient to hear or to see that other parents struggle with similar issues. Encountering other families in the CCP was therefore supportive to them. In CCP where professionals were experienced as having an expert gaze, the parent was reluctant to return:

> *Mother: They work with psychologists there, people who are so-called experts, and sometimes they're quite imposing and I had some difficulty with that. Also, they observe a lot, it's like they're controlling that you don't do anything wrong. (Group 5)*

In contrast with what is often assumed (that clear advice helps families resolve their doubts), the experience of seeing that there is not one right way is considered supportive.

4.5. Concluding reflections

Many parent support services focus on the meaning of formal social support, targeted towards parents 'at risk' or 'hard to reach'. In contrast, our research examines practices open to a diversity of families in the field of early childhood education and care, in which informal social support is facilitated by social work professionals. This enabled us to study perspectives on social support that differ from the prevailing literature. Nevertheless, our selection may have biased the findings (e.g. only a few fathers participated in the study). Further, parents may use the service in various ways (more or less frequently) and may show different levels of loyalty to the service they use.

However, as they also formulated critiques on certain aspects of other services, we do believe that the discussion groups provided a safe environment enabling them to be open about their actual experiences. It is also important to note that most parents, in the first instance, enter the CCP for their child and later on also return for themselves. Contrary to how it may seem from this paper, the CCP are not set up for parents but for families, in which children take an important place. The focus of our study on parents' perspectives may blur the focus on children.

Despite these limitations, our study represents some unique *strengths*. It shows that informal social support, perceived as light social encounters, can be very supportive. Parents appreciate being welcomed, and a sense of belonging and connectedness emerges, even when this was not their initial need. Prominent in parents' stories is how they value this sense of belonging as an important motivation for returning to the CCP. The potential for an informal exploration of similarities as well as differences in these social encounters might be essential, both for children and parents (Rullo & Musatti 2005, Buysse 2008, Vandenbroeck *et al.* 2009a, Geens & Vandenbroeck 2013). In contrast to the prevailing literature on social support, our findings suggest that diversity and heterogeneity may be productive for the promotion of both social support and social cohesion, offering the opportunity for a confrontation between private needs and public concerns (Biesta 2011).

Our findings suggest that while the CCP contain elements of both the private and public sphere, it is neither exactly one or the other. It differs from the public sphere regarding a particular set of norms and values that enables encounters to happen in non-judgemental ways and with a concern for equity. It also differs from the private sphere where people prefer closed conversations with intimates, as diversity is omnipresent and parents are invited to include those who are unfamiliar. Keeping the CCP intermediary, places of transition between the home and society, is exactly the role that professionals fulfil. Instead of experts in educational matters, they become experts in creating a space where specific values and a social atmosphere prevail regarding how to interact with the Other. The resulting openness and respect for multiple perspectives helped these parents share, question and transform their private troubles into public issues (Mills 1959).

Interestingly, our findings show a moment when parents disagree on the fact that the staff were being told that the CCP only organises 'a chat over a cup of tea for women', reflecting on how the relevance of social encounters in these practices for policymakers could be legitimised. At that point, the parents start to speak in terms of prevention and social investment. Public concerns and current social policy discourse increasingly aim at guaranteeing the life chances of children who are constructed as 'at risk' by setting up targeted provisions of social support for parents. Parents, however, seem to capture quite well that these public issues play a vital role and were prepared to label themselves as 'at risk' (although they resisted being labelled as such by others).

These CCP did not implement civilisation strategies to socialise parents 'at risk' and integrate them in the existing social order. Rather, private responsibilities and child rearing issues from a diverse number of parents were confronted with public concerns (Richter & Andresen 2012). Democratic moments are created as an interruption of the existing order that results in a reconfiguration of this order so that new ways of being and acting come into play (Biesta 2011). As Moss (2007) argues, democracy creates the possibility for diversity to flourish. Here, we find that diversity creates a context where democracy can flourish. The non-judgemental social atmosphere, warranted by the professionals, seems crucial in reviving the democratic potential of processes of living together. As Jackson (2013: 88) states for the Australian CCP, the 'support was directly related to the critical role that the facilitators played in creating accepting and responsive spaces for families'. Vandenbroeck *et al.* (2009b) believe that, for social work, it is a matter of welcoming, respecting and embracing without fully understanding the Other. As such, by facilitating social encounters in the CCP, social work professionals can support democratic and contextualised discussions on the tension between private needs and public concerns from a perspective of social justice (Mollenhauer 1983), and project this diversity of concerns into the public forum of political debate to the extent to which there can be resistance to social injustice (Marston & McDonald 2012).

4.6. Acknowledgments

4.7. References

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Chapter 5
Parents' perspectives on social support and social cohesion in urban contexts of diversity[6]

Abstract

Although provisions for young children are increasingly considered as ideal places to foster an inclusive society by embracing issues of social support and social cohesion, there is no in-depth understanding of the role these provisions can play in enabling supportive and cohesive encounters in contexts of diversity. Even more striking is the absence of parents' voice in this discussion. Based on an analysis of qualitative interviews with 18 parents who use child care services in diverse urban contexts, our findings show that having young children has an impact on parents' sociability while at the same time separating them from and integrating them into social contexts. Parents are in search of both light encounters with strangers and stronger relations with intimates, but neither bonding nor bridging contacts appear as self-evident in urban contexts of diversity. Several parents expressed feelings of loneliness, despite their childcare use. Coming across other parents in the centre did not automatically lead to supportive and cohesive encounters. The findings indicate that a place where various people meet others is not necessarily a meeting place. The results presented in this paper support the idea that parents' experiences are dependent upon how practitioners take their needs into account and how social services are conceptualised.

5.1. Introduction

Over the last decades, early childhood education and care (ECEC) services have gained more significance for social policy makers who are concerned with issues of (in)equality (Melhuish, 2011; Morabito, Vandenbroeck & Roose, 2013; Schiettecat, Roets & Vandenbroeck, 2014; Schmidt, 2015). These services have also increasingly been considered by international organisations as ideal places to foster inclusive societies (European Commission, 2015). This refers to the social function of ECEC as social work practices, broadly defined as the efforts made to contribute to a more just society (IFSW, 2014). In this regard, the OECD (2006) indicated that ECEC services need to embrace issues of social support and social cohesion and emphasized that

> working with diversity in particular milieus is a feature of ECEC professional work […] 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. (p. 167)

Nevertheless, until now conceptualisations of social support and social cohesion in contexts of increasing diversity remain largely under-theorized. Although there seems to be a consensus in the existing body of research on the value and vital benefits of social support for children and parents, the possible roles of social services like ECEC in the interactions leading to social support and social cohesion have only been examined by a few researchers (see Geens & Vandenbroeck, 2014 for an extensive literature review). However Sharmahd (2009) stressed its relevance, addressing that "for an ever growing number of families, childcare initiatives become the first real meeting-place, the first exchange context in which different types of parenting come together" (p. 58). In this article, we discuss a research project about childcare services in urban contexts of diversity, in which parents' experiences of social support and social cohesion are explored as users of these childcare services.

In the existing body of research about social support, the majority of studies focused on lasting relationships between intimates, that are mainly

established on the basis of homogeneity (cf. bonding-type relationships) (Geens & Vandenbroeck, 2014). Equally so, several authors have stressed the importance of social cohesion: a cohesive society is believed to be characterised by consensus on a given set of norms and values, and by the absence of disruption (e.g. Kearns & Forrest, 2000). It is predominantly asserted that the mobility of goods and people in our globalised world (Schrooten, Geldof & Withaeckx, 2015) challenges the homogeneity and durability of social systems (social networks as well as communities).

However, social support and social cohesion might require different interpretations in contexts of diversity. Concerning social support, some authors argued that ephemeral relations with strangers are relevant too (Soenen, 2006a, 2006b). As Fram (2005) asserted, it is exactly "the blending, or overlapping, of bonding and bridging relationships" (p. 514) that is meaningful to parents. Also Buysse (2008) stated that parent support initiatives should offer the possibility to meet like-minded people *and* bring them in touch with 'other' narratives to fill the gap between diverse families. In that sense, Sarason and Sarason (2009) suggested that "acceptance and a sense of belongingness engendered by seemingly weak or superficial ties might play more important roles in schemas of oneself and others than one might initially think possible" (p. 117-118). When it comes to social cohesion, some authors argued that, despite an attempt to approach diversity positively, policy makers are often using "*a priori* conceptualisations of community life" (Soenen and Verlot, 2002, p. 108), thereby not questioning "the normalization power of discourses informing the mind-set and practices regarding diversity" (Ghorashi & Ponzoni, 2014, p. 171).

The actual encounters in which processes of social support and social cohesion take place, are neglected (see chapter 1; Soenen, 2006a), especially when diversity is put into practice in everyday encounters on a micro-scale (Valentine, 2008). Interestingly, Soenen (2006a) developed a useful approach to unravel whether interactions can be experienced as supportive and cohesive with attention to diversity. Soenen (2006a, 2006b) argued that ephemeral encounters can create so-called light communities, offering opportunities for relations between people from diverse backgrounds. She was inspired by Lofland's (2009) analysis of interactions, divided in the public-

relational sphere with unknown persons, the private-relational sphere with intimate people and the parochial sphere with acquaintances. Soenen (2006a), in turn, observed interactions based on homogeneity (among intimates), recognisability (familiarity via small talk) and ambivalence (light forms of belonging that allow to connect and disconnect). While applying this frame of reference, previous research in Centres for Children and Parents (CCP) in Flanders showed that the occurrence of meaningful exchanges among families is *not* dependent upon durability and homogeneity of relationships. Supportive encounters among diverse families who didn't know each other seemed feasible in these services, notwithstanding a social mix of users being present. These encounters offered the possibility of contradictions and confrontations that did not lead to conflicts (Geens & Vandenbroeck, 2013; Geens, Roets & Vandenbroeck, 2015).

In what follows, we discuss the findings of our research project. Based on an ethnographic study, we tried to grasp the complex social reality of two childcare services in which supportive and cohesive interactions can occur. During this ethnographic study, we explored whether the social interactions of parents were experienced as cohesive and supportive, while including a consideration of light encounters and communities.

5.2. Methodological approach

5.2.1. Research settings

We selected two childcare services offering high quality care to a diverse range of families (regarding income, marital status, and ethnicity), located in highly diverse neighbourhoods in Ghent and Brussels. Both services were certified and funded by the Flemish government, meaning that parents paid a contribution according to their income. The families making use of the centres lived in the direct neighbourhood.

The city of Ghent is marked by rejuvenation and the number of children born in disadvantaged families is rising (from 10% in 2002 to 15% in 2009). The ethnic-cultural diversity in the city is expanding: 19% belongs to an ethnic

minority group (Stad Gent, 2013). The childcare centre is located in a less well-off area, currently undergoing urban renewal processes. The neighbourhood is marked by a high density (9,611 inhabitants/km²) and growth; a high proportion of families with children (29%) and single-parent families (10%); high unemployment rates (17%, twice the Ghent average); high proportions of ethnic minority families (51%); low incomes (2/3 of median and mean net incomes in Ghent) and only half of the households having a car at their disposal (51%) (Wijkmonitor, 2015).

Brussels is even more characterised by rejuvenation than Ghent (BISA, 2015); 18% of the children live in single-parent families (ADSEI, 2009b) and almost a quarter of the children grow up in a family with no income from employment (Grouwels, 2010). It is estimated that over 40% of new-borns belong to ethnic minority families (ADSEI, 2009a). The childcare centre is located in a town on a border-area with the inner municipality of Brussels and two other districts. The district is characterised by economic, cultural and social activity and diversity: more than 130 nationalities live close to one another (19,954 inhabitants/km², BISA, 2014). Whilst 73% of men and 59% of women are employed, it is one of the poorest municipalities in Brussels (and in Belgium), with an average yearly income 29% below the national average income (ADSEI, 2009a).

In both locations, diverse and even opposing trends (e.g. gentrification and impoverishment) can be found in close proximity, which makes the neighbourhoods interesting settings to study the role of child care regarding social support and social cohesion in contexts marked by diversity.

5.2.2. Data collection and participants

During our ethnographic research, 75 hours of observation were done in the childcare centres (between October 2013 and September 2014), mostly in the morning when parents brought their child, in the evening when they came to pick them up, and on occasional gatherings. The Ethical Commission of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences (Authors' University) approved the study. Our ethnographic endeavour in the field generated relevant field knowledge and enabled the researcher to build rapport with the families involved. This ethnographic involvement allowed a careful sample selection

for the qualitative interviewing as the main method of data collection, based on a combination of background criteria (gender, origin, marital status, mother tongue, family size, length of use of the service) and observational information on the nature of parents' interactions in the centre.

A purposive sampling approach (Mortelmans, 2007) was used to select and recruit parents that could offer a broad spectrum of perspectives. The construction of a topic list for the semi-structured interviews was inspired by our theoretical framework and by the observational reports, that were scanned to collect markers for further discussion (e.g. examples of interactions they had with other parents, something parents said about their daily experiences, etc.). All parents were informed verbally. Eventually, we interviewed 8 fathers and 10 mothers, who agreed to the interview being audiotaped and who participated on a voluntary basis. Three other fathers were invited but did not take part in the study (one father could not take time off from work; and two fathers cancelled due to illness). One mother passed the invitation to her husband; in three instances, only one parent was invited, but both parents showed up for the interview. Another double interview took place with two Bulgarian mothers which facilitated translation. The conversations lasted between one and nearly three hours and were conducted in a private room in the centre (10), at the parent's home (3), or in a coffee bar (1). The names of the research participants were changed to increase confidentiality.

Table 4. Profile of the parents

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	N° of children	Use of the centre	Origin	Marital status	Professional status
Dochka	mother	30-40	2	7 months	Bulgarian	Bulgarian partner	in training
Petya	mother	<30	1	8 months	Bulgarian	Bulgarian partner	unemployed
Zoran	father	30-40	2	15 months	Kurdish	Kurdish partner	unemployed
Soraya	mother	30-40	4	15 months	Turkish	Single	employed
Koen	father	30-40	2	23 months	Belgian	Partner of Louise	in training
Louise	mother	<30	1	23 months	Belgian	Partner of Koen	employed
Mehtap	mother	<30	2	13 months	Turkish	Turkish partner	unemployed
Eric	father	30-40	2	30 months	Belgian	Partner of Kathy	employed
Kathy	mother	30-40	2	30 months	Belgian	Partner of Eric	employed
Peter	father	30-40	1	13 months	Belgian	Belgian partner	employed
Fatima	mother	40-50	6	20 years (incl. interval)	Turkish	Turkish partner	employed
Hanne	mother	30-40	1	8 months	Belgian	Single	employed
Raymond	father	>50	4	12 months	Belgian	Chilian partner	employed
Bernard	father	30-40	2	24 months	Belgian	Partner of Monique	employed
Monique	mother	30-40	2	24 months	Belgian	Partner of Bernard	unemployed
Bastien	father	30-40	1	12 months	Belgian	German partner	employed
Tom	father	30-40	2	22 months	Belgian	Single	employed
Aleksandra	mother	30-40	2	23 months	Serbian	Dutch partner	employed

5.2.3. Data analysis

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

5.3. Results

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

5.3.1. Relation brokers and breakers

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

one's home was often experienced as *'turbulent'* (Aleksandra, Soraya, Dochka, Fatima), leaving not much room for a relaxed talk.

> *Soraya: But I do[n't] like to go visiting people just like that, I have three children, you know. Aysun is very active. Why? If I go visiting with Aysun, I'm ashamed. It's better to go outside, to a shop or something. Aysun is then a bit quieter because there are other people she doesn't know. If we go to friends, she runs around, destroys things, makes the carpet dirty, and I don't like [that], I get stressed. She's my daughter, you know, I start to clean and put things away. She doesn't stay calm for two hours. […] And it's about six months now, actually it's more than 6 months, since I stopped visiting my friends.*

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

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

> *Bastien: Remi didn't sleep a night before one year old. […] A social life, at that moment, is just impossible. […] Now he's been sleeping properly for some months, it did us good, actually we have the impression of reviving.*

> *Aleksandra: Yes, I think, having a child is already something that kind of puts you in a category that's not– you simply aren't that social. […] I think you feel a bit lonely in situations. […] In April this year, three of my close contacts here, not like close but– […] they all moved out. […] And you feel sometimes like you stay behind or– Even though I really like it. […] I think it's okay for us here. But like, you need some stable elements in life. And people are kind of just moving.*

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

> *Peter: And it's only since Mike, that we are more obliged to engage in uh social contexts that are more mixed than before. Previously, we just went out to have fun, in the gym or the cinema or all kind of trips, but never with the intention "oh now we will expand our circle of friends" or so. While now, it happens spontaneously because we are more involved in a social context of searching for a school, child care, parents of children, just playgrounds where other children play. […] You become more in touch automatically.*

> *Aleksandra: It's nostalgic when I go to the hospital where I gave birth in that neighbourhood, you know. I say, "Dimitri, you were born here." […] all these nice moments that happened here, for me it adds something. And I think also because of them, because of Maud and Dimitri [children], I feel like I have to [get to] know better the– you know, the system here. And I really mean the system, like– even if you want to stay out of, […] say, "Belgian culture", and you don't want to, not assimilate but, yeah, integrate, I think it's very difficult when you have kids and– […] all these things really make you learn things better. And of course there's this emotional side […] because I think they are Belgians. Belgian, I mean, Dimitri will grow up here and he will have an identity […] Just like I was formed in my home country. […] in that way, it will be– he will be like a local I guess.*

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

more well-known. There was a wish to see others, and maybe even more, to be seen by others as well. Such encounters could be facilitated by children.

> *Monique: There are many people living in their own world, they– they don't want to say good morning, they go directly to their homes […]. But with– with uh the children it is easy. When uh [there are] two children [one says]: "Yes", "Oh hallo".*

> *Peter: Yeah it's pleasant because it means that, while you don't necessarily get to know the neighbourhood, you have a kind of integrated feeling then. So, you have the feeling that you're getting a good connection with people that you don't necessarily know but that probably live in the neighbourhood too. […] You kind of get the feeling that you have become part of this neighbourhood and that people appreciate you being around too.*

5.3.2. Every family for itself?

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

> *Eric: Yeah, you cannot burden everyone else with that, as in the end, it was your own choice somehow. Of course, you never choose to work that much […] And also practical, the mother of Kathy had surgery on her knee and she could not lift anything– just practical you know. It's not a gift waking up every two hours. You don't drop them off at someone's– you're not supposed to do that you know.*

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

> *Aleksandra: Here, everyone is an individual and [in Serbia] it's still the group. Let's say, not a group but we rely on other people so uh– I think it would be different if I had that here. […] I find it a bit sad. I see that my husband [coming from the Netherlands]– For him privacy is more important, like your time for yourself, free time for you. And for us, I mean, our family, that's very important. […] I like this concept in some countries where you– [where] people simply hang out more together and uh– When I was a child, people were popping in all the time and somebody came for a cup of coffee, without any announcement. And I'm quite social and I like that and I mean– I see that Dimitri is quite open as well, but I think here it is really different. I mean different because you have to plan a bit and uh– so, yeah.*

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

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

Raymond doubted that strong bonds with other parents would be formed where he lives now (*'I'm not convinced that it will be like that here as well'*) as he experienced an inscrutable diversity (in ethnic-cultural terms), an unpleasant aggressiveness in the interactions on the streets as well as hostility towards local residents by municipal services.

5.3.3. De-coding the context and the Other

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

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

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

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

Bernard lived in a town before, where *'you always say hello when seeing someone and most of the time you know them'*. Moving to Brussels, he found

it *'strange'* that one doesn't know one's neighbours and that one doesn't greet them. It was the hardest thing for him to accept. Knowing how to relate to diverse others, in the street for example, was a learning process and influenced future encounters.

> *Bernard: I think she [African mother of Nimsat] is sympathetic, but what hinders me with her is that I don't know exactly her stance towards religion, her stance towards men and woman. I see that it's always she who brings Nimsat. So, automatically in my head, I place her in a position of a traditional family: the husband works, the wife looks after the children. And immediately I associate that it might be a problem if I initiate casual contact too readily with her. But, it's unconscious, I think that by myself, I realise this just now. […] I'm afraid to go against traditions of people, that's really one of the blocking elements you know.*
>
> *Researcher: Is it different to you?*
>
> *Monique: For me, I feel– with the mother it's always sympa– I don't feel it that way.*
>
> *Bernard: Yes, no, because you're a women, but how about the men of the neighbourhood?*
>
> *Monique: Ah yes. No, no, but the men of the neighbourhood, they don't look at me at all.*
>
> *[…]*
>
> *Bernard: It's out of respect for me, that they don't talk to her.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5.3.4. A place for everyone(?)

Previous citations illustrate that some perceived diversity as a threshold and others as an opportunity. The "multi-ness" of Brussels is what made it attractive to some parents. After several years of travelling abroad, Hanne made an explicit choice to move to Brussels from West-Flanders, even when, as a single mother, she left her existing networks behind: *'I feel at ease with the multicultural character of Brussels, I kind of need that, yes'*. Also

Aleksandra and her husband found a place in Brussels, as it does not belong to one in particular.

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

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

> *Bernard: The church used to be important to everyone. […] Since we're not seeing each other anymore at Sunday mass, we lack– except maybe for the World Cup [laughter], but we lack things that regroup people. And I think that there have been strong, strong changes in society and that we're increasingly heading towards a model of society […] where everyone lives for himself. And we notice this strongly with the Portuguese, in our neighbourhood, the Portuguese rule. They own all the bars and when you enter a Portuguese bar, you don't feel welcome. Not because they don't like you, but because they feel just fine among themselves. There's also a Spanish bar, and as there aren't many Spaniards here, they seek clients, so there you'll find Moroccans that come to drink their coffee, young yuppies from a bit further away that come to drink their beers, … And there you'll find a real mix.*

Bernard pointed to a wish to matter as part of the society in which he lives, to be noticed, heard or recognised. He urged the necessity to regroup diverse people and talked about *'a policy of welcoming'*, that could enable a mix of people to connect in one way or another. He questioned leaving this *'search for the other'* up to individual responsibility. When it comes to social cohesion,

he pondered that the school is our last hope. Yet, even there separate groups have formed and it is up to the engagement of the parents to interact. In the end, Bernard and Monique felt left by themselves to feel connected to people in their neighbourhood.

> *Bernard: The school is the number one driving force for social cohesion. It's the most important means for social cohesion. It's the only common thing left. […]*
>
> *Researcher: Is it only for the children or also for the families? [silence]*
>
> *Monique: Well, it also depends on the way parents want to engage in the school. Because there are parents who simply wish to bring their child and then leave. So, do you want to engage or not, do you want to meet? Because you're not obliged to meet other parents. So it's really, every parent decides for them self. But yeah, in the end it is always easier to talk, when sitting next to someone you don't know, if both children are in the same class, then you can start to talk.*

We argue that parents need strong relationships, which they can rely on, as well as ephemeral contacts that generate familiarity with and recognition in one's neighbourhood or give space to the "multi-ness". However neither of these appeared to be self-evident for various reasons explained above.

5.4. What matters: *'connections, time, and care'*

This duality also became apparent when Aleksandra spoke about one of her first encounters after arriving in Belgium, six years ago. She ran into one of the visitors she met in the hostel where she worked in Belgrade, just a couple of weeks before: *'I felt like I knew some people, but I only know this one friend (an acquaintance of her partner), but actually I didn't know anyone'*. All parents looked for supportive and cohesive relations and they found it particularly worrying when these were absent. Yet, for both, light and strong connections, time (and thus investment) seems crucial. In terms of time, Fatima wasn't the only one who thought that it's a pity that *'everybody works and is in a hurry and has no time'*.

> *Aleksandra: People really work a lot. And there's no free– simply, there's no time. I hate that, but it's a fact. […] and you have to find time for this new girl from Serbia who speaks some broken Flemish, and you should go for a drink and– so maybe– I mean, it's not always so uh, easy you know.*

Remembering her earlier experience staying for a while in the childcare centre with her firstborn, Kathy realised that she liked making more time. Those mothers who stayed a while in the childcare centre when bringing their child, all had the impression that *'other parents have no time, they want to go straight away'* (Mehtap) and that *'it is actually only [them]'* (Kathy, Louisa, Mehtap) who stayed for a moment. They expressed that taking time, created space to talk about other things than solely the care of their child. Yet, the majority of parents perceived child care as a service where relations are expected to be focused on the child: *'The crèche is more a place where you bring and pick up your child. In that moment I'm focusing on Rafaël to hear if everything went well'* (Hanne). An inherent focus on *child* care might prevent parents from perceiving it as a place where they too can find supportive and cohesive interactions.

> *Hanne: Maybe I'd have known more people by now if I had been more open and a bit more social. Anyway, sometimes I'm like that, but sometimes– I think I have so many things on my head, that if I– you know, about my work and Rafaël and his dad and stuff, there are some problems, let's say difficulties. So, then I kind of cocoon myself. And if I go out to a public place, to the library or somewhere, then I stay in this cocoon with Rafaël. And I don't initiate contacts that much. Just because now I don't have– it's not that I don't feel the need as I kind of do, I notice, I do need it. But I just lack the energy to socialise or uh– yes. [silence] Whereas I think now, that I'm starting to miss that actually.*

Hanne enjoyed the strong bond with her son, yet her feeling of being somewhat overwhelmed by the care of her child and the worries that went with it, did not leave much space for coming out. In the end, she missed more sociability with others. Although all the parents in this study made use of child care, and thus de facto met other parents there, a lack of connections was felt. For some, the childcare centre was the only place where they might encounter *'locals'*: *'I met these two women nowhere else but here'*

(Aleksandra). Several parents said they really wanted to meet others, mainly for the social dimension, but some also for practicing Dutch. Surprisingly these parents did not mention child care as a place for fostering social support or social cohesion. Also, the need for meeting other parents was often not picked up by the childcare staff.

> *Researcher: Don't they say anything about the other kids?*
>
> *Aleksandra: No, no. I think I asked once, but I think also they didn't re– I was like "Robin, is the–?" And they were like "yeah, Robin is the boy with the long hair." But it was also the end of the day, so. But I think for them it wasn't some kind of sign that I'm interested in Robin's parents. [laughs]*

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

> *Zoran: In the day care centre, it is not good maybe to talk a lot, it is not a café. […] And, we should respect everyone. Just two minutes "Hello, how are you? Everything okay?" But not "Hello, how are you and do you know what happened in Palestine?" That's not right, you should talk outside.*
>
> *Researcher: And do you do that? Go outside and talk a bit more, or– ?*
>
> *Zoran: Yes, but, I mean, I have two children. When it is cold, I don't want them to stay here […] But if the weather is nice, it's okay. While walking, maybe 3 or 5 minutes talking, that's good. […] Because, most of the time, I'm alone. When I see someone, I love to talk and talk [laughs]. I'm sorry, that's not good.*
>
> *Researcher: Yeah, it's good for me.*
>
> *Zoran: And also to improve my Dutch. And I'm very social. I want to talk to many people. I don't want silence all the time. Making a joke with people. Back in Iraq, they know me this way. […] I told the civil servant "look for a place where I can talk. You say that I don't have work, but I want to talk to people. I'll pay a little bit for it, just let me talk".*

5.5. Discussion

The purpose of our study was to explore diverse experiences of parents as users of childcare services in contexts marked by diversity. This allows us to reflect on the social function of ECEC services for young families, with reference to the ways in which these services embrace issues of social support and social cohesion, as recommended by the OECD (2006).

Although children are known to be brokers of relations as they generate familiarity (Soenen, 2006a), our results show that they can be 'breakers' as well: having young children impacted parents' sociability, at the same time separating them from and integrating them into social contexts. The importance of informal supportive relations (Buysse, 2008) was confirmed, yet, most parents expressed a lack of social support, due to mobility and restrictions felt to enact support. Parenting was predominantly experienced as an individual responsibility, while social work is encouraged to contribute to solidarity by mobilising informal resources in civil society (de Jong *et al.*, 2015).

Our conclusion that parents were in search of both light encounters with strangers *and* stronger relations with family, friends, and acquaintances can be understood as a crucial addition to the dominant focus on durability and homogeneity in mainstream social support and social cohesion research. Of course, stronger ties, labelled as *bonding* ties (Fram, 2005) in which homogeneity in *'code'*, language, background or perspective plays a role, remain important. Yet, living in contexts of increased diversity, parents pointed at ongoing processes of decoding the Other. Several parents emphasized the relevance of ephemeral contacts with diverse people that could offer *bridging* opportunities. Bridging is to be understood not only in terms of social leverage, but also of social connectedness: to familiarise within diversity. In our analysis diversity was perceived as a threshold to encounter the Other (and parents felt left by themselves to connect with neighbours) as well as an opportunity to find one's place in the "multi-ness". However, neither bonding nor bridging contacts appeared self-evident in urban contexts of diversity: a place where various people meet others, sometimes bearing different *'codes'*, is not necessarily a meeting place.

Although the parents in our study expressed their need for social support and social cohesion rather straightforwardly, ambiguity arose regarding the responsibilities, or rather roles, oneself and services had in this. Several parents stated that they felt left to their own devices to cross differences that are not easily crossed. In this regard, Ghorashi and Ponzoni (2014) claimed that "resisting dominant discourses and providing new alternative discourses is not an easy task. It is not one that can be accomplished solely at the individual level" (p. 168). Whereas social services are known to offer bridging opportunities to families as professionals have access to resources, their possible roles in stimulating informal support (e.g. among families) is still underestimated (Sheppard, 2004; Geens & Vandenbroeck, 2014). Though, it is necessary to further explore the possible roles of social work in "visible and invisible, local and global networks", as if how these are locally enacted (Schrooten, Geldof and Withaeckx, 2015, p. 8), with attention to reciprocity (de Jong *et al.*, 2015).

Duncan and Te One (2012) considered public services, like early childhood services and schools, as crucial sites for providing links between families with their community and thus for social support and social cohesion. It requires however a rethinking of the traditional child-centred philosophies with an openness to diverse people to enable interaction for confrontation and consensus-building anchored in local contexts. The results presented in this paper support the idea that parents' experiences are dependent upon how ECEC staff takes their needs into account and how ECEC services are conceptualised. Social work practices such as ECEC can play an important role in generating equity (as discussed in Geens, Roets & Vandenbroeck, 2015) among the different normative frameworks that people bring to situations by creating an empty space-in-between (cf. Ghorashi & Ponzoni, 2014). According to Soenen (2006a), it's exactly the light and temporal communities, marked by ambivalence, that are the prerequisite for social cohesion grounded on homogeneity and recognizability to flourish.

> The attractiveness of light community lies in its ambiguous nature. The ephemeral relationships are not only important to the individual but the continuous succession of these small interactions contributes to the social

atmosphere in urban space. They have a collective effect on the personality of the city. (Soenen, 2006b)

As suggested by the OECD (2006) "new skills and understandings about community and society will be critical" (p. 167). This can, among other things, be oriented at facilitating "temporarily emptied interspace that enables unexpected new connections of perspectives" (Ghorashi & Ponzoni, 2014, p. 168). Future professionals need to be prepared to work with groups of not only children, but families and even the broader community as well. However, more research is needed into ECEC discourses, practices and assumptions that may be the very cause of the lack of social support and social cohesion experienced in ECEC services in order to sustain further professionalization, both nationally and internationally.

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Chapter 6
A case study in two childcare centres: interactions among parents and between parents and professionals

6.1. Introduction

In this chapter, we illustrate how different policy practices of two childcare centres influence the experience of social support and social cohesion in daily interactions among parents and between parents and professionals. We first describe the two cases separately, portraying the socio-historical roots of both childcare centres, their locations in diverse neighbourhoods, the socio-organisational climate and their efforts towards working with parents and the neighbourhood. Our analysis of the (policy) documents, the professionals' perspectives and the observations, offer insight in this context, as well as into the centres' intentions and actions driving their daily practice. For an extensive account of the methodological approach, we refer to chapter 1. The ground plan of each childcare service might help to visualise the observations.

Next we describe the actual encounters among parents and between parents and professionals in both centres simultaneously. Our analysis of the observations of the daily micro-interactions and the use of the physical space, as well as the narratives of parents and professionals, unveil certain *scripted practices* and their continuation.

Then we analyse the extent to which encounters are the result of a policy that is well thought out versus occurring by chance. We discuss child care as a service for working families and the role it may (not) play in informal support, taking into account the architectural space. We argue that investing a lot in working with families and the neighbourhood proves to be worthwhile and coincides with a democratic culture in each layer of the work.

Finally, we reflect on the strengths and challenges of both (policy) practices, raising the question of which roles childcare centres can play in social support and social cohesion, and thus if and how opportunities for informal support should or could paradoxically be formalised. We point to the need for sustainable support as well as discretion to work in highly diverse and unpredictable settings.

6.2. A tale of two childcare centres

For this multiple case study, we selected two day care centres that were certified and funded by the Flemish government, which means that parents paid a fixed contribution according to their income. Both services were known to offer good quality care for children and were neighbourhood-oriented, reaching a diverse range of families in terms of their income, marital status and ethnicity. Yet the social mix in the centres differed according to the priorities that were applied. The different histories and approaches of these services strongly influenced how they perceived their mandate and whether they gave special attention to the inclusion of certain families and for which reasons.

6.2.1. Centre A, located in Ghent

6.2.1.1. The context

Ghent is marked by rejuvenation; in particular, people from 20 to 39 years old and 0 to 4 years old are overrepresented compared to Flanders as a whole. With that, the number of children born into disadvantaged families is growing (from 10% in 2002 to 15% in 2009). Because of the influx of immigrants (with Bulgarians becoming more numerous than Turks) the ethnic-cultural diversity in Ghent has expanded: 12% of the population does not have Belgian nationality and 19% belongs to an ethnic-cultural minority group (Stad Gent, 2013).

Centre A is located in a rather deprived neighbourhood of Ghent, undergoing urban renewal processes. For many years, the neighbourhood was characterised by labourers' cottages and social apartments. At the time of our study, destruction and re-construction was going on, aiming to upgrade the overall living quality with better houses, more recreation areas and more attractive economic activities. The neighbourhood is characterised by a high unemployment rate (17%, twice the Ghent average) and low income (two-thirds of the median and mean net income in Ghent). Moreover, only half of the households had a car at their disposal (51%). Other conditions of note include the low quality of housing (64% was built before 1930 and 39% of the houses have little or no comfort level) and poor health conditions of the

citizens. The area is marked by high density (9,611 inhabitants/km²) and growth, as well as a high proportion of families with children (29%) and single-parent families (10%). Lastly, half of the citizens belong to an ethnic minority group (51%) and 28% of the population is non-Belgian.[7] In this highly diverse and dense context, living together is challenging. According to Stad Gent (2006), it is a very diverse area where many cultures live closely to one another in a restricted space: young families as well as elderly people, natives, non-natives, asylum seekers and illegal persons make use of the restricted public space and public services in the area as a result of the lack of private outdoor space—which generates 'liveliness' in the area, but, not surprising, also sometimes creates tensions (p. 56). The childcare service is located in a previous kindergarten, a ground-floor building with a large garden, situated among several 7-storey social housing towers. According to the coordinator of the centre, families living in the neighbourhood are often left to their own devices and many people experience loneliness.

6.2.1.2. Local governance

In Ghent, there is a strong history of delivering pedagogical support to the municipal childcare services regarding social themes. The *Dienst Kinderopvang* (Diko, an overarching service for municipal childcare) in cooperation with the *Pedagogische Begeleidingsdienst* (PBD, an advice and training centre) invested a great deal in this. According to Peeters and Vandenbroeck (2010), "Ghent is the only city in Flanders where the childcare sector is supported by both direction and middle management on an administrative level and with pedagogical counselling within a Pedagogical Centre on an educational system" (p. 16). The municipal childcare services are seen as places of transition: via cooperation with the neighbourhood, local organisations, schools and care services, they (municipal childcare) help children and parents to find their place in the bigger world (De Buysscher *et al.*, n.d., p. 9). Thanks to the Tinkelbel procedure (that equalises opportunities by offering central enrolment), "the population of the municipal childcare centres is today a

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[7] The *Wijkmonitor* (a tool offering statistics on the neighbourhood level) was consulted the 8th of May 2015 (http://gent.buurtmonitor.be/quickstep/qsreport.aspx?report=wijkmonzt&geolev el=wijk&geoitem=7). Data go back to 31/12/2014 (except for having a car and the comfort level of housing: facts date from 2001; for income, facts date from 2012).

correct representation of the Ghent population regarding income, working situation, origins, family composition, etc." (Peeters & Vandenbroeck, 2010, p. 17).

In the 1990's, the PBD set up an experimental project "to transform the traditional day care centre (operating rather isolated from its neighbourhood) into community-based child care with a strong emphasis on accessibility and parent participation as well as on respect for diversity and social inclusion" (Peeters & Vandenbroeck, 2010, p. 16). The decision to set up centre A in 2010 as a neighbourhood-oriented service in the area under study was part of a wider urban renewal policy and the societal aims pursued with it, including strengthening the social fabric in certain areas of Ghent. A positive attitude towards diversity and close collaboration with parents *and* the neighbourhood, made the service rather exceptional and innovative for the national context.

Being under the umbrella of Diko brings with it a durable framework, including a strong mission and a shared staff management and bookkeeping section. Furthermore, it creates an important network for reflection opportunities. Reflection on the concept of community-oriented childcare in a peer group of colleague-coordinators has helped the coordinator of the childcare centre to *'clarify the vision'* and put the mission statement into practice. In this peer group, concrete barriers experienced by families are discussed, tools for team development and leadership considered, inspiring practices of working with parents exchanged and common worries signalled to higher policy levels. The coordinator often spoke about *'we, the community-oriented ones'*, indicating that belonging to that pioneering peer group is an important aspect of the identity of the centre and something to be proud of (interview with coordinator, March 4, 2014). The role of the PBD and Diko in creating such strong engagement might easily get overlooked. The coordinator of the centre considers the community-oriented practice as self-evident, illustrating her ownership of the mission statement. Previous studies in Ghent have shown that this ownership is the result of the sustained investments in in-service training and support by both Diko and the PBD (Peeters, De Kimpe & Brandt, in press). These investments include (yet are not limited to) the every ten week meetings of the coordinators of a community-oriented service as well as

regular possibilities for intervision and supervision in the monthly *regioteams*, group meetings of coordinators working in the same district, guided by a *regiocoordinator* and a staff member of the PBD. Furthermore, the centre regularly participated in pioneering projects, such as 'Wanda', an experimental project on pedagogical documentation and reflection. The bimonthly Wanda meetings nowadays alternate with the general team meetings. They take place in the evening in the presence of the whole team (the coordinator and childcare workers). Since 2013, the Wanda meetings are organised in collaboration with a second neighbourhood-oriented service working in the same district. Lastly, the coordinator of centre A gathers every month with the childcare workers of each (vertical) child group (3 *deelteams*).

6.2.1.3. The mission of the centre

Centre A was set up as a community-based service, which includes a focus on the social function of childcare, respect for diversity, inclusion of disadvantaged families, and supporting sustainable employment and social networks. To put the mission statement into practice, it needs to be supported by the whole team, said the coordinator: *'this vision, I really think, it should be every day, and if it fades a bit I want to refresh it again—it should be there all the time'* (interview with coordinator, Ghent, March 4, 2014).

Respect for diversity

When the centre began as a new service in 2010, the coordinator could select a whole new team from the workforce of the existing municipal day care centres. During the selection process, she gave special attention to each candidate's perspective on diversity, and strove for diversity within the team as well. Right at the start, an intensive training week was set up for the whole team (the content was prepared by the coordinator with the PBD and the implementation was mainly done by the coordinator). During this week, the new team members could get to know one another; prepare practical arrangements; get acquainted with the mission and perspective on diversity (cf. DECET principles, Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training); and reflect upon their policy towards children, parents and the neighbourhood. This week provided the basis for writing the quality manual.

A competent team that values diversity and that has the opportunity to develop its competences via team meetings, mutual understanding and open communication, was deemed necessary to be accessible for a wide range of families. This openness towards diverse families was found reflected in the focus group with the team.

> *And also that the crèche is accessible for the parents, what I mean is that there is a great deal of tolerance from our side, acknowledgement, acceptance in fact. A parent should feel that he and his child are accepted, just because of whom they are. (focus group team, Ghent, February 20, 2014)*

Inclusion of all (including disadvantaged) families

During the observation period (October 2013 – January 2014), 65 children were attending the centre (the centre offers 42 child places). Priority was given to children living in the direct environment (54%) or the extended neighbourhood (18%). Half of the children came from a low-income family (52%) and/or a family in which one or both parents had not obtained higher education (49%). Three children were admitted because of a crisis situation and 15 children entered the service late (which means they filled up places that became vacant unexpectedly). Twenty-two percent of the children lived in a single parent family, and half of the children did not speak Dutch as their mother tongue (48%). Regarding language, multiple languages in verbal and written communication were actively used, and communication was supported with symbols, photo and video material.

This social mix was a result of a well-considered subscription policy, striving towards a minimum of half the places for families living in the direct neighbourhood and a well-balanced composition regarding the socio-cultural and economical background of the families. A systematic follow-up of subscriptions sustained this balance.

According to the shared mission statement, the team aims to approach parents as active partners on four levels: to inform one another, live together, act together and think together. For example, the team takes advantage of the large garden to cooperate with families and local residents, involving them in the design and use of the garden. As will become clear in our analysis, at

the time of our observations, the notion of 'together' was mainly understood as the centre and each family, rather than as supporting social networks between families.

Supporting sustainable employment

Supporting sustainable employment is encouraged at different levels: by offering parents the possibility of late enrolment of their child (e.g. when suddenly finding a job); by offering childcare to parents at work, in training and in search of a job; but also by keeping one place in the team for a childcare worker in training and offering opportunities for volunteer work in the centre to local residents.

A community-based service

The community-based orientation is established through formal and informal channels. Every two months, a diverse range of actors in the area (including social, cultural, civil, police services as well as important public figures like the priest) meets to exchange information about their service, challenges in the neighbourhood, upcoming initiatives, and important themes (such as working with Roma families). In addition, they highlight pressing issues on which actions are jointly set up. Daily informal contacts with local residents are also an important part of embedding the service in the community. Neighbours jump in to ask or report something, or to get spontaneously involved—like Magdalena, also known as *'de madam van de konijnen'* (the rabbit-lady). Rather than a structured policy, her involvement was the result of a spontaneous attitude to request others' involvement.

> *'Isn't there anyone of you that feels like taking care of the rabbits in here?'*
> *'Oh, I do!' […] And yeah, that's how Magdalena got involved. (Interview with coordinator, March 4, 2014)*

Magdalena has come to feed the animals for years now; she's a well-known figure for the team, the children and the parents. Likewise, Neema, who started as a volunteer in the centre's library (thanks to the strong collaboration of the centre with several organisations working in the same area, including social assistance services), felt useful as she could take part.

> *Also Neema, the volunteer, stated that: 'I don't have a network. I like to come here as I can say something here, I can ask something here, the people ask me things, I count here.' (Interview with coordinator, March 4, 2014)*

Since February 2015, the centre has organised soup meetings (*soep op de stoep*) every two weeks in collaboration with parents, local residents, community-oriented services and out-of-school care. The gatherings take place outside in front of the childcare centre with the goal of stimulating solidarity among neighbours. The story of Pierre is illustrative of the role the childcare service fulfils as a public service operating in and with the community.

> *Pierre attends the soup-meetings; he's 80 years old and walks more than a kilometre to join. The coordinator notices this and remarks that he's 'walking that far for a bowl of soup', on which the old man reacts 'it's not about the soup at all, it's just, here I can talk to people, otherwise I'm alone all the time'. (informal talk with coordinator when picking up my child, May 2015)*

At the time of the observations, this outreach in the community was seen by the childcare workers as *'more the coordinator's task as she attends the meetings regarding the neighbourhood. We cannot do that as we are working here [in the children's group]'* (focus group team, February 20, 2014). This changed gradually afterwards as, for example, the soup-meetings bring this neighbourhood a bit closer to their daily work. By broadening their focus from the family to the neighbourhood as well, the team constantly makes choices that (can) promote processes of living together. Yet when the garden was used by neighbours after closing time to let their dogs run free, the coordinator had to intervene.

> *Coordinator: It became a run area for dogs here. Nice, yes. And then there was someone here, another neighbour, who was not really happy with that. Maybe because she was not allowed to join. And she said [to me], 'It should stop because there are always dogs running here, do you know that actually?' So then I gathered with Mark from the community work service to examine how we could arrange the neighbourhood, to create more run areas for the dogs. In fact they [the neighbours] can't—they can come and sit here, but without dogs. I organised a meeting for the local residents here.*
>
> *Researcher: Here in [the childcare centre]?*

Coordinator: Yes. […] And it was really frustrating to hear that this group of people was that racist. […] And uh, we just let them speak. Then I said, 'Yes but look, it is not allowed by Child & Family that dogs run around in here, and considering our location, I find that all people should get access then. But that demands that we take a deeper look at how to organise, as it becomes a meeting place for the neighbourhood, yet it means there has to be a check on dumped trash, and to keep everything in order'. (Interview with coordinator, March 4, 2014)

This example demonstrates that processes of social cohesion are not taking place without struggle. Installing equity is not a self-evident practice. Yet, mediating figures like the coordinator of the day care centre or the professionals focusing on community building (*samenlevingsopbouw*) can (together) play a crucial role in generating respect for diversity.

6.2.1.4. The staff and the socio-organisational climate

Since the beginning, some childcare workers switched jobs, but at the end of 2013 the team was still diverse regarding age (3 younger than 30, 6 being in the age group 30–50, 2 older than 50), mother tongue and roots (3 childcare workers have roots outside Europe). Most of the professionals did not live in the direct environment of the centre (2 within 5km, 4 within 5–10km, 5 more than 10km), yet some had previous experience with working in the area. The staff had different educational backgrounds and trajectories; also, one place was kept for a childcare worker in training. One childcare worker was in a bachelor training (*Pedagogie van het Jonge Kind*, new bachelor training since 2011 for pedagogical coaches) while working and several professionals had previous experience with working with deprived families. In contrast with the coordinator's ability to select the team members when the centre was established, new childcare workers were subsequently allocated without the coordinator having much say in their appointment (cf. the shared staff management organised by Diko). Filling a vacant position or replacing a colleague temporarily was decided without involvement of the centre itself.

On the one hand, you're allowed to compose your team yourself when starting up as a new childcare centre. A team of which you think, 'They want to put our mission into reality'. On the other hand, through time, they put in a lot of people who didn't choose for this, that you need to send in the same

> *direction. That's not logical. That's just not logical, but yeah. And people that would like to come here, cannot enter here. […] I do proposals like, 'This [person] fits well in the whole', but then I don't get them. […] Yes, it's just dispatching, like, 'We have this [person] left, we put her there'. That's very sober, down-to-earth, yes, looking, 'Where do we have a place left?' And considering, 'Is she working part-time? Okay, she will fit in there'. Like that. It's like solving a puzzle. I think they can't take people's motivation into account. (Interview with coordinator, Ghent, March 4, 2014)*

According to the coordinator, being able to make up one's team is extremely important in contexts that demand a huge openness and flexibility from the staff to deal with unknown, uncertain and unpredictable situations. Creating and sustaining a strong basis for the mission and evaluating the engagement and potential of the team are high on the coordinator's agenda. She stated that the bimonthly Wanda meetings (for some years guided by an external pedagogical coach, afterwards organised together with another childcare service operating in the same neighbourhood), as well as a culture of mutual support in daily practice, was important to grow as professionals (and persons) and to keep the openness alive.

> *What is important too, is that they support one another and that they can reflect on each other['s work]. There are people here that are skilled well in that and others that need to learn a bit more to say, 'Shall we try it once another way?' Like that. Having the guts to take charge. (Interview with coordinator, Ghent, March 4, 2014)*

A supportive leadership in terms of mission implementation was felt by the team of centre A. The team appreciated getting a pat on the back and named the—contagious—enthusiasm that was present. According to Belle, one of the logistic support members, the experience of equity is very important but not self-evident in more hierarchical structures: *'Yeah but I think there are bosses that say 'you (are) there, I (am) here'*, which points at her perception of clear distinctions that are made elsewhere. According to Belle, the positive climate (*'I think that there is one harmony here'*) had to do with leadership: she described the coordinator as a '*Duracell'* that *'never runs down'* when it comes to enthusiasm and commitment. The childcare workers agreed upon this by adding that such a coordinator *'generates a positive dynamic'*. One also

emphasized the strength of the mission they all strive for, whereas someone else stated that *'it's much about your own (attitude) too'*. Again, the ownership of positive changes becomes apparent, this time on the level of the team.

Groundplan Centre A, Ghent

large garden

staff room

playroom

toilets

children's library

chicken coop

multifunctional room
> playroom
> hall
> ...

playroom

playroom

entrance

coordinator room

kitchen

stroller room

street

Legend
— wall
— glass wall / window
◠ door
••••• low safety gate
▨ sleeping room
⊠ bathroom / kitchen furniture
||||| stairs
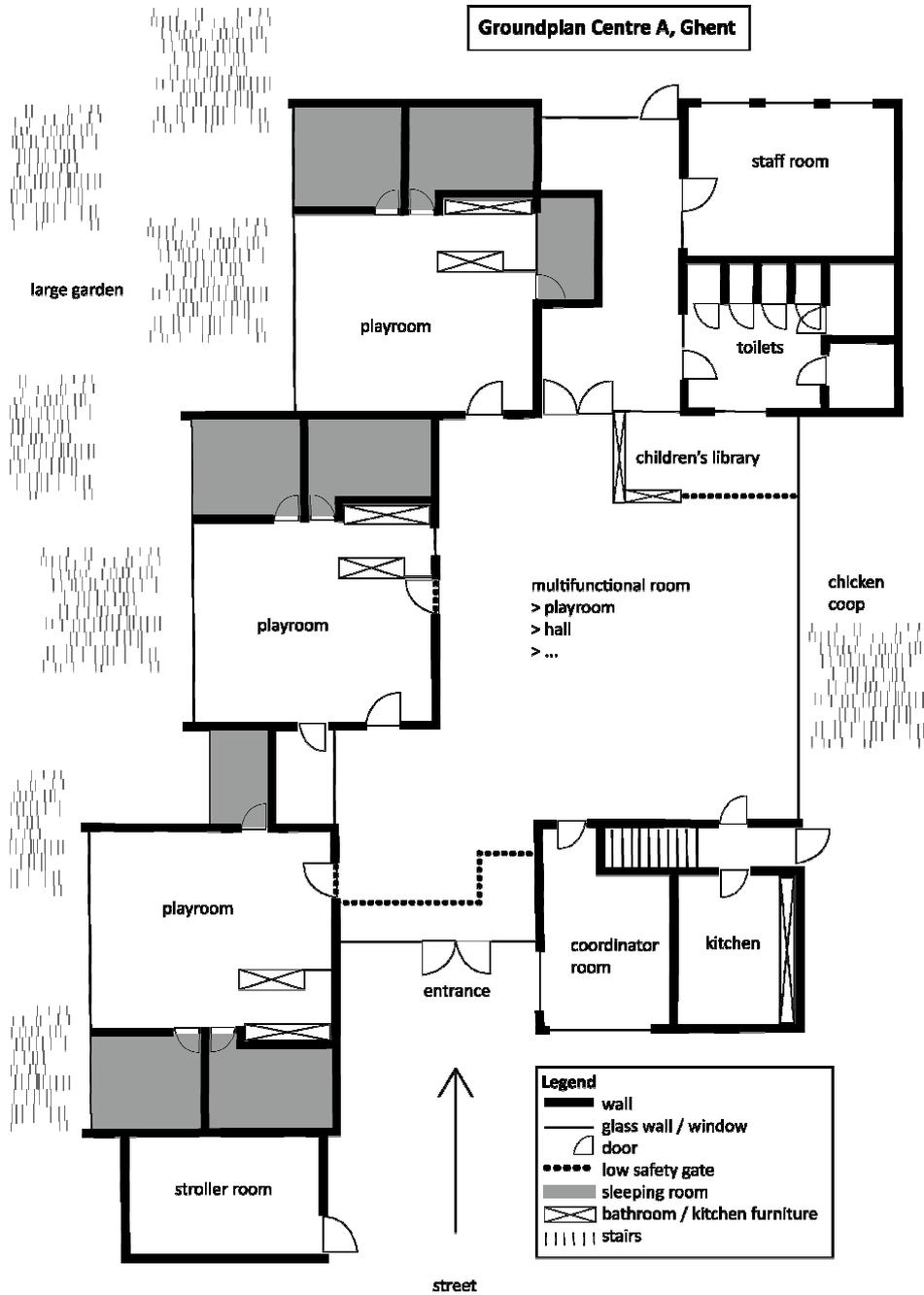
6.2.2. Centre B, located in Brussels

6.2.2.1. The context

Brussels is even more characterised by rejuvenation than Ghent: young children under 10 years of age are especially overrepresented, as well as people from 25 to 44 years of age (BISA, 2015). In total, 18% of the children live in a single-parent family (ADSEI, 2009b) and almost a quarter of the children grow up in a family without earned income (Grouwels, 2010). One-third of the entire population of Brussels does not have Belgian nationality and diversification of nationalities is growing (BISA, 2015).

The centre is located on a border-area of the inner town of Brussels and two other districts. It's a 5-minute walk from one of the three main railway stations. In the 1990s, the price of real estate rose significantly, but thanks to the municipal housing policy, gentrification was limited and lower income groups remain represented. The neighbourhood is characterised by economic, cultural and social activity and diversity; e.g. more than 130 nationalities live very close to one another (19,954 inhabitants/km², BISA, 2014). Of the population in the neighbourhood, 73% of men and 59% of women work (ADSEI, 2009a), yet it is one of the poorest municipalities in Brussels (and Belgium), with an average yearly income per capita of nearly €11,500 (29% under the national average income) (ADSEI, 2014).

The centre switched locations in 2010 from a 4-storey mansion to a ground floor renovated part of an old factory site a couple of streets away. The new location at the time of the study was part of a bigger renovation project aimed at revaluing the area. In the factory site, other (French-speaking) social services also reside. The centre shares its garden with a French-speaking day care centre. Yet despite several attempts to cooperate, there is hardly any exchange and the garden is mainly used by the Flemish centre. As the building is not visible from the street, it is less well known, and the newly renovated infrastructure and the garden attract more middle-class families. Also the focus on the Dutch language (a majority of places are reserved for families in which at least one parent has a basic knowledge of Dutch) impacts the social mix, which is experienced as more balanced, compared to previous years

when middle-class families were less frequenting the centre. The coordinator of the centre Also claimed that fewer families from African origin are using the centre (at the time of our study) than in previous years, as a result of the renewed enrolment procedure.

6.2.2.2. Local governance

Centre B is located in Brussels and subsidized by the Flemish authorities (*Kind & Gezin*, Child & Family) as well as through the *Vlaamse Gemeenschaps-commissie* (VGC), the responsible administrative organisation in Brussels, working on behalf of the Dutch-speaking community of Belgium. Several of the central aims of the VGC in the *Beleidsplan Gezin* (policy document regarding family issues) are relevant to this study. One is the aim to actively inform families about the Dutch-speaking offerings and to generate maximal accessibility (a *lokaal loket* [centralised enrolment] was created in the past two years). Another is the aim to invest in a well-qualified workforce (e.g. in-service training, courses, team trajectories and intervision are organised; special attention goes to the link between child care and parent support) (Grouwels, 2010).

Strong support by the VGC is felt on an infrastructural level and in training opportunities for the staff. The coordinator stressed that the centre is well staffed: there is enough time for support of parents and to coach (individual) team members, and the absence of a childcare worker is easily dealt with. Despite the fact that the coordinator joins in several peer groups with other coordinators (and gains from them useful tips and information about their work in Brussels), reflection opportunities are rather limited. According to the coordinator, the monthly intervision meetings (*intervisiegroep competentie-beleid*), are often focused on specific issues of a limited group of coordinators, which does not leave much room for issues that concern the whole group of coordinators attending the meetings. One childcare worker also attends cross-service intervision meetings (six times a year).

6.2.2.3. The mission of the centre

Centre B aims for high quality childcare for working parents living in the neighbourhood, offering a Dutch-speaking environment for children and their

families. In that regard, exchanging daily information with parents is considered very important. Recently, the perspective on the relationship with parents was undergoing important changes.

High quality child care for working parents

The childcare service in Brussels was set up in 1981 and focused on organising high quality day care for children whose parents were working. In 2014, the executive board decided to (re)prioritise families who need childcare for employment reasons. In line with this, priority was given to single-parent families: in August 2014, 35 children attended the centre, of which 8 lived in a single-parent family (23%). Several parents were also in search of a job. Most children's parents had obtained higher education (3 out of 4), but the families varied according to their incomes: a quarter of the families earned less than €15,000 (yearly income per household), and a quarter earned more than €46,200 (yearly income per household).

Children living in the neighbourhood

The coordinator of centre B expressed the choice to be neighbourhood-oriented, which meant prioritising families living nearby (and not offering places to families living elsewhere that work in the area). At the time of our study, all parents were living in the municipality or just across the border with the adjacent municipalities at the time of entering the service.

As described above, cooperation with adjacent (French-speaking) services is limited. Furthermore, the coordinator participates in the quarterly meetings of the *Brede School* (community school project), yet these meetings are judged as having little significance according to the coordinator, as most topics concerned only (families with) older children.

Every week, a group of children goes for a walk in the neighbourhood, guided by some childcare workers and (most of the time) a couple of elderly volunteers from the neighbourhood. During these walks, the group receives much attention from passengers, men working in the street, and (ex-)parents stopping by, among others. For the childcare workers it is *'a way to get to know the neighbourhood a bit better'* (field notes, August 7, 2014) as they

pass services (such as the local hospital and infant consultation scheme) and places that the parents mention from time to time.

A Dutch-speaking environment for children and their families

The multilingual context of Brussels is reflected in the composition of the children's group: 3 out of 10 children spoke only Dutch at home; the other children were multilingual (44% spoke Dutch plus other language(s); 26% spoke no Dutch at home). As the service is subsidized by the VGC, explicit attention is devoted to the use of the Dutch language. Yet a switch in responsibilities was observed in our study. A couple of years ago, the team followed an intensive training on the work floor focusing on easy Dutch language use. In that period, it was noticed that *'parents do not always meet up'* to the language requirements (like greeting professionals in Dutch), and a request for clarification of written communication (in Dutch) was left up to the parents' initiative (see evaluation of the 'Policy towards parents, diversity and language' in 2009 in the service's quality manual). In 2015, the coordinator testified that the emphasis on speaking only Dutch with parents is less rigid and that written communication is still in Dutch but she reaches out to those parents for whom she knows it is difficult to understand the message (interview with coordinator, June 1, 2015). Even so, whilst comprehension for non-native speakers was rather absent during the observation period, it seemed to change with the presence of a new childcare worker. Whereas an African woman reading a story for the children was discounted based on her language (*'she wasn't able to speak Dutch well'*, field interview with childcare worker, August 8, 2014), the coordinator gave an example of a different practice. Recently, a foreign mother was invited to come and read for the children. As the mother uttered that it would be in her mother tongue, the new childcare worker responded, *'That's okay, the children will hear the sounds'*. Completing her story, the coordinator stated:

> *Coordinator: So that's possible by now.*
>
> *Researcher: For whom? The team members?*
>
> *Coordinator: For the team members. Previously, this was not done. And that's, yeah, that just came little by little. I can't say that I did—that's*

something that they have to—it's something that developed—' (Interview with coordinator, June 1, 2015)

A growing openness towards parents

Over time, the relationship with parents in the centre evolved. In 2008, the quality manual of the service stated that "the child is handed over, we leave parents as minimum as possible in the children's area for reasons of hygiene. Usually, it is also rather busy/noisy in the presence of the large number of people in a restricted space". Yet in 2015 there was more openness towards parents:

> *Especially the new parents, in the beginning [at the start of the care for their child], more and more they sit in the playgroup, also for a longer time. If there is no trust yet, you see them more often staying in the playgroup. […] I think I do subtly push the childcare workers to open up their space. [pauses] But not from one day to the next, since it's not working that way. (Interview with coordinator, June 1, 2015)*

In the past, the centre did not have a policy about the length of the settling-in period (*wenprocedure*), as the team was not convinced of the value of a more extensive period of adjustment. When parents could easily leave their child in the centre, the childcare workers perceived this as a sign of trust in their role as professionals. As of 2015, parents are invited and accepted to stay with their child in the group as long as they wish. The standard procedure (as advised top-down) to reserve some time for settling down, had its result in daily practice.

> *Nowadays, I say, 'It is in the regulations [huishoudelijk reglement], that's what we recommend to you. If you want to make two weeks out of it, then you make two'. And previously, parents were not offered the possibility to come two weeks. Anyway, not all [parents] wish [to do that] […] but there are [parents] who feel the need for it. At times, they [the childcare workers] say to me, 'Gee', but afterwards these are sometimes the best parents you know. (Interview with coordinator, June 1, 2015)*

Some change also took place in the perception of and motivation for the activities with parents. In the previous location, all parents brought and picked

up their child on the third floor. As a result *'people ran across more regularly'*, said a childcare worker. A shift has also been made from organising get-togethers because *'we were obliged to do that'* towards a more intrinsic motivation *'that's part of it [the job] and should happen'* (interview with childcare worker, September 4, 2014).

> *Researcher: And if you organised a breakfast or a party, what was the motivation for that? What was the reason to do it?*
>
> *Professional: In fact, yes—in the first place because we were obliged to do that.*
>
> *Researcher: By—?*
>
> *Professional: By superior—yes. We had to do one activity bringing people together.*
>
> *Researcher: And who imposed that?*
>
> *Professional: Pfff, yes, who did say that? Yeah, the coordinator at that time—it had to, it had to happen.*
>
> *Researcher: She said that it had to happen?*
>
> *Professional: Yes. And then, that was mostly kind of—a breakfast or something for Father's Day or Mother's Day. And then you had also the feast of St Nicholas. But uh—actually, it was meant that the people—to make contact. And parents requested this a lot, especially the Dutch-speaking for [the subscription in] schools' […]*
>
> *Researcher: And here [current location], if you organise a garden party or New Year's reception, is that also because it has to? Or are there other—?*
>
> *Professional: Now it more became a kind of habit, you know. It's something that—that's part of it [the job] and should happen. (Interview with childcare worker, September 4, 2014)*

Several times a year (e.g. the annual New Year's reception and the garden party), all parents are invited to join a social gathering in the centre. Besides all families currently enrolled at the centre, the two volunteer neighbours, the pastor, the professionals of the French-speaking organisation on the site (who loan them chairs) and local policymakers are invited. In reality, only the

volunteers and some members of the executive board joined these gatherings.

6.2.2.4. The staff and the socio-organisational climate

The small scale of the service (offering 26 child places) was mentioned as an advantage by the coordinator, regarding the personal relationship with each family and the possibility of responding flexibly to situations with children, parents and the team, for example. Yet as the coordinator compared her position to large-scale centres where multiple coordinators work together, she mentioned standing alone in her job. However, she viewed the executive board as very engaged, providing important back-up for the coordinator. The quarterly meetings and the small weekly reports she sends the board are relevant to discuss and reflect on her work.

In the day care centre, monthly meetings are organised (if possible) with all the childcare workers for one hour during daytime. As this offers restricted time for discussion and reflection opportunities, these gatherings are well planned—by sharing the agenda beforehand, for example, and leaving the childcare workers the possibility of adding topics and thinking about the issues in advance. Because of the small scale, it is possible to discuss many things with team members individually. As such, pressing issues are not postponed but dealt with immediately.

The working climate, however, in which open communication and responsibility are highly regarded, is something that was installed gradually and not without strains. As the service had several coordinators switching jobs, the team was *'used going their own way'* and convinced that they *'didn't need a coordinator'* (interview with coordinator, June 1, 2015).

> *Uh, but they did it the way they wanted to do it. And in the beginning, I really had to take charge to take back [self-]acquired rights, to bring everything again—and I know that, I was a tough one, a dominating one. I know that, that's the way they saw me and that resulted in a large barrier between coordinator and staff, but gradually I could loosen the reins or how do you say that, and things went more smoothly. (Interview with coordinator, June 1, 2015)*

Regarding the team, most professionals graduated as childcare workers, yet some had other work experiences (e.g. in restaurants or shops). Except for one new young childcare worker, all of them were 30 years old or older (4 between 30 and 50, 3 older) and had long experience in childcare. One of them had worked for 20 years in the centre, the others 10 years or less. Right before the observations, one team member left the team as she chose to study again. She was replaced by a new team member (during the observation period), who was in turn replaced after half a year by another young staff member (coming from the elderly sector). At the time of the interview with the coordinator, another team member was also temporary absent and substituted. All team members commuted from outside Brussels (10–40km) and most were not well acquainted with the neighbourhood.

> *Brussels, for me it was kind of abroad actually. We never came to Brussels. Nonetheless, my father was born and bred here, he knows his way around here. But for me it was like, 'Brussels, um?' Also, all people of different origin, a different language, a different way of living too, [compared] to where I come from. And that was very strange in fact, but yeah. You start to work here and you notice that it is actually the same as with us, only on a large scale. (Interview with childcare worker, September 4, 2014)*

All staff members had Belgian roots, yet two of the three logistic support members had non-Belgian roots (one Turkish, one Ecuadorian) and lived nearby. Despite the wish of the coordinator to bring more (ethnic-cultural) diversity in the team, this was not realised, as one needed to speak Dutch fluently to become a childcare worker in the centre and so far no ethnic minority workers had been found to match that language criterion. The coordinator, however, thought that ethnic minority candidates should be given a fair chance, considering that these candidates graduated from the Dutch-language education system, but she felt restricted from choosing them as many parents stressed the importance of a good Dutch level in the service, raising their child in multilingual contexts.

Groundplan Centre B, Brussels

French-speaking
child care centre

playroom
baby's

bathroom

hall

playroom
toddlers

garden

pedestrian
zone

arrival
room

bathroom

kitchen

entrance

hall

stroller
room

coordinator
room

staff room

Legend

▬▬	wall
——	glass wall / window
◜	door (grey ones are not used)
••••	low safety gate
▓	sleeping room
⊠	bathroom / kitchen furniture
▤	stairs
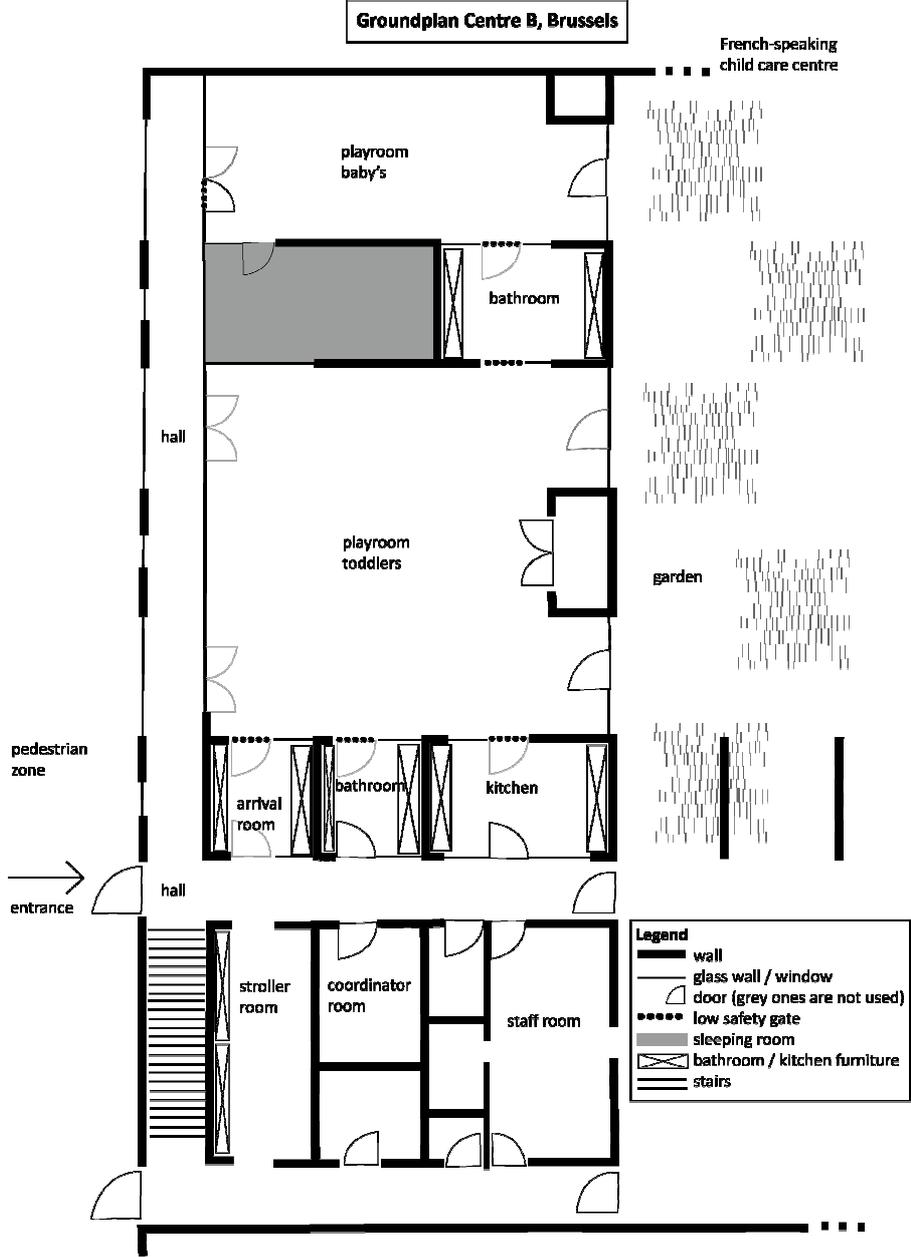
6.3. Scripted practices

In the methodological section (chapter 1), we emphasized that the analysis of the case studies are to be considered a snapshot of reality. As practices keep evolving, the analyses made here are already outdated at the moment of publication. Nevertheless, they offer insight in the complex realities in which daily micro-interactions, professional roles and broader policy structures coincide. Or as Geertz (1973) put it:

> the ethnographer 'inscribes' social discourse; he writes it down. In so doing, he turns it from a passing event, which exists only in its own moment of occurrence, into an account, which exists in its inscriptions and can be reconsulted. (p. 19)

It is through this writing down of the reality as observed, that certain *scripted practices* operating in the centres were unravelled. Whereas our use of this notion of a *script* (and derivatives) in our analysis was not induced by existing theories, some interesting insights from existing literature can help to clarify what is meant.

It is assumed that the material world (like places or objects) is socially (relationally) and historically constructed (Bernstein, 2009; Cresswell, 1996). Similarly, Vuorisalo, Rutanen and Raittila (2015) have written:

> The day care context is not, however, fixed, but continuously negotiated, re-constructed, and re-organised. It includes both nonverbal and verbal negotiations among the participants about 'what is going on here', about the rules and limits that maintain the pedagogical space and institution. (p. 68)

Bernstein (2009) labels the fact that material culture influences and directs human action as *scripting*. Of course, this is not to say that scripts univocally determine practices, as people have agency as well: "as in any discourse, code does not determine conduct, and what was actually said need not have been" (Geertz, 1973, p. 18). People read their environment and their actions "are interpretations of the text of a place" (Cresswell, 1996, p. 157). When trying to capture these relationally constructed realities, several authors also referred to Bourdieu's concepts of *habitus* or *doxa*.

> For Bourdieu, the social space is a 'field' that follows its 'natural' practice, called doxa. […] Instead of explicit orders, doxa describes how participants in the social space follow its rules as an implicit and shared social habit. Thus, doxa gives structural balance to social space, but at the same time its essence as taken-for-granted rules means that it embraces power; some ways of acting are more expected than others. (Vuorisalo *et al.*, 2015, p. 69)

> People in their actions simply act as they think they are supposed to. In so doing they reinforce the basis of these actions. […] *habitus* concentrates on the importance of practical knowledge—the savoir faire—as opposed to the formal delineation of discursive knowledge. (Cresswell, 1996, p. 156)

Vuorisalo *et al.* argued that "the organisation and construction of the physical environment and the social meanings and rules attached to a space reflect certain expectations regarding how the space is used and who is using it" (p. 68) and that this can only become apparent when studying actions in context. Those who are more familiar with acting and/or 'skilled' to act as expected in these spaces, also have more power to "actively re-define the situation in terms that were beneficial to them" (p. 76). An analysis of actions in context has the potential to reveal how the everyday practices in child care reflect and are embedded within broader social struggles. In what follows, several scripted practices are brought to the floor. The two childcare centres are discussed simultaneously, emphasising points of resemblance and difference in practice.

6.3.1. Civil inattention and kindly greeting

Both in the morning and in the afternoon, multiple parents came across each other when dropping of or picking up their child. Sometimes, parents took a quick glance at one another, nodded, or held the door open, yet these observed interactions were remarkably scarce. Except for parents who knew each other outside the centre, parents mostly sidestepped one another.

> *Mother walks with Mike on her arm through the hall [towards the exit door]. Several parents are standing outside, just about to enter. Mother goes to watch the info board and says something like, 'It's nice' to Mike. In the meantime, the father of Bas clocks out to open the door, right behind him, the father of Aysun enters while making a phone call, as well as the grandmother*

> *of Elena, using her walking stick. There is no visible contact. After everybody entered, mother goes outside with Mike. (Field notes, Ghent, November 4, 2013)*

This civil inattention was observed earlier by Lofland (2009) and Soenen (2006) in public places. Rather than out of disinterest in the Other, this avoiding is to be considered as a form of *social* behaviour. It makes it possible to move through public space without being overwhelmed by all possible interactions. Sometimes it is also a sign of knowing a bit about the others' habits and respecting them (like Bernard and Monique avoiding cross-gender contact in the streets with those adhering different (religious) values; see chapter 5).

What was perceived as appropriate social behaviour, however, turned out to be different according to the relationship one had with the other. In the childcare services, it was apparent that professionals (P) (and after a while me too) were greeted quite systematically.

> *17h, a van arrives. The father of Rayan is there. When he passes us, he greets Sabrina (P) and me as we sit in the hall. He walks to the playgroup (of his son) and enters. 17h03 The African father of Jasper arrives. He passes the father of Rayan who's leaving again. When the two fathers cross each other, one looks at the wall, the other stares at the floor. The father of Rayan greets us again with 'Good evening'. Rayan throws a hand-kiss to Sabrina. One minute later, when the father of Jasper comes out again, he too greets us. […] While leaving, he comes across a befriended mother, he starts a conversation with her. (Field notes, Ghent, November 4, 2013)*

Greeting the professionals might be easier as they practice a 'public role'. Besides, addressing the professionals is something parents get used to as they and their child are mostly greeted personally by the professionals and invited to enter the playroom (however, in centre B, at the time of the observations, only the children are supposed to come in; see below).

The team of the centre in Ghent acknowledged in the focus group that they experienced stress during mornings when parents bring their child, as they have to make time for the children and the parents as well. The team also noted that several parents are in a hurry (as they have to go to work, for

example) and want a quick information exchange in the morning, but that parents have more time when they pick up their child. In the evenings, however, the childcare workers felt restricted in time as they have to prepare all the children to go home (e.g. changing diapers) before they can go home themselves. During my observations, I never felt that the childcare workers had stress. In one way or another they managed to make time for every child and every parent.

As the parents knew that each of them would receive individual attention, they often waited for their turn when bringing or picking up their child. Parents not only waited their turn, they also yielded the floor to those waiting after them. I observed parents making room for other parents by ending their conversation with the childcare worker and leaving the playroom.

> *8h47 Selim arrives with his mother. Frankline (P): 'Good morning! How are you doing?' Mother: 'Good, he ate 150cc at 8 o'clock, so at eleven—' (mother tries really hard to talk in Dutch). Frankline: 'How are his eyes?' Mother: 'Sometimes better'. Then she starts speaking in French and tells that she went to the doctor, that Selim did not gain sufficient weight […] (the conversation in French goes fluently, Frankline as well as the mother bring in topics and confirm one another). 8h51 Soraya, mother of Aysun, enters like a whirlwind, saying 'Good morning!' She talks about the new shoes her daughter has, that it is cold outside, and she talks to the other children. Mother of Selim bids Frankline farewell and leaves (8h52) (Field notes, Ghent, November 5, 2013)*

Soraya is one of those parents who did not 'obey' the script of waiting her turn. She felt at ease in the centre, stayed often for a moment in the children's group, talking to the playing children, the childcare worker and other children (and parents) entering. However, in this case, her entering interrupted the ongoing conversation between Frankline and Selim's mother. Mostly, Selim's mother appeared a bit timid, but this time she seemed to open up and to enjoy her talk with Frankline, the childcare worker. However, physically and metaphorically speaking, she made space for Soraya by leaving the room, knowing that each parent gets his or her share of attention.

Furthermore, the kind of sphere that was created when childcare workers talked with a parent, might have influenced encounters with others. These

talks could take the appearance of a private conversation, at times with muffled voice, while taking place in a semi-public place (Soenen, 2006, calls this the parochial bubble). It also happened that the childcare worker and parent knew each other for a long time, making it more of an amicable chat. Whereas the possibility to experience such kind of relation of trust in places where people frequently come is of huge relevance, it is harder to get or feel involved as an outsider then. In this light, Lofland (2009) stated that "realms are social rather than physical environments" as social relations determine to a large extent whether a place is private, parochial or public, irrespective of the postulated function or the physical construction of that particular place (p. 51).

6.3.2. Prescribing the use

During peak hours, several parents were simultaneously in the centre. Depending on the architectural space, the waiting then happened using the entire playroom in centre A or in more queue-like ways in centre B as in the latter the arrival room (an intermediary bathroom) overlooking the toddler's room is rather small.

> *The parents of Léonor leave a bit later, outside they pass mother of Frederic (no contact), who is able to open the door before it falls to lock. [In the arrival room] the mother of Remi puts him on the dressing table. Behind her, mother of Frederic leans down at the small gate. Father of Jacques arrives, he enters the arrival room and stands next to the mother of Frederic. Mother of Eve arrives as well, she crouches next to the door of the arrival room to catch a glimpse of her daughter between the legs of the other parents. It's crowded on the two square meters. There is no contact between the parents, except that they have to pass one another. Father of Jacques observes but does not make contact. (Field notes, Brussels, August 19, 2014)*

In the doorway, between the arrival room and the playroom for the children, a low safety gate is placed. The safety gate serves as a gate-keeper for children to stay in, but also as a border for parents (to stay out). The practice of professionals opening the safety gate for children and closing it behind their back, together with simultaneously phrasing their action, scripted if and how parents could be present.

Mother brings Lena. Tina (P): 'Right on time, we are going to paint'. Lena hands over her daily journal. Tina reacts: 'Thank you my darling.'–'I will open the gate so that you can enter.'–'Big kiss for mum.' – 'There you are.' [Tina opens the small gate and then closes it again] Then she addresses the mother, 'It's again [that we ask it], but are you sure she will start school in November?' (Field notes, Brussels, August 18, 2014)

Mother takes Lasse (her son) up and puts one foot in the playgroup. [Tina (P) opened the gate for Lasse to enter]. Isabel (P) takes Lasse from the mother and tries to distract him. Mother takes a step backwards and Tina closes the gate. Then Tina asks, 'And everything okay?' Mother tells […] (Field notes, Brussels, August 18, 2014)

Closing the safety gate, did not necessarily mean closing the conversation. Often, the closing of the gate was followed by an explicit question or invitation to interact. Almost all parents in Centre B were *used to* staying in the arrival room (bathroom). Although some parents preferred a barrier to keep the room safe and clean for the children, or saw it as a symbolic attribute for them and their child (*'There it stops for me'*, Toon, Fatima), it might have been an internalised rule as well.

The wish of the professionals in centre B that parents do not enter the play area was made clear to the parents by the use of the safety gate and their corresponding language. But also by asking parents in the beginning to keep farewell with their child rather short.

Professional: Well, it is allowed. Those that climb automatically over the gate, yeah, they are in. Then we will not say 'go back'.

Researcher: Hey there! [laughing]

Professional: But uh—in fact I prefer [them] not [to enter].

Researcher: And how do you make that clear to the parents? Is that something that is discussed with them during the settling in period or—?

Professional: Actually, it's uh—no. No, actually not. […] What we do say is that if they bring their child, to keep farewell as short as possible. Because, the longer it takes—because as they grow up, it becomes more difficult. And if it takes too long— […] they (the children) are annoyed because it took too

> *long. [...] And that's something we say, to keep it (farewell) as short as possible.*
>
> *Researcher: And what do you mean by the farewell? [...]*
>
> *Professional: No, it's really bringing the child, you say some words and then—[you leave]. (Interview with childcare worker, Brussels, September 4, 2014)*

The above analysis is illustrative of what Bernstein (2009) stated: "things, but not objects, script actions [...] The difference between objects and things, then, is not essential but situational and subjective" (p. 69). The safety gate mostly appeared as an object opened and closed by parents and professionals in centre A, whereas it became more of a *thing*, scripting if and how parents could be present in centre B.

6.3.3. Parents acting differently

> A 'scriptive thing', like a play script, broadly structures a performance while simultaneously allowing for resistance and unleashing original, live variations that may not be individually predictable. (Bernstein, 2009, p. 69)

Describing the existence of certain scripted practices (like greeting professionals, avoiding other parents, and waiting one's turn to receive individual attention from a childcare worker, as well as the use of the safety gate by the professionals), does not mean that all parents abided by these scripts automatically. Parents were co-actors in these processes, be it by maintaining or breaking through existing structures. In studying these scripted practices, those situations in which parents did not follow the implicit rules, but acted differently, were interesting to note. In some cases, this was because they were not accustomed to the centre, like Raymond (the father of Lena) who stepped over the safety gate. Yet, there were some parents who frequently (or almost daily) came in the centre, but did not subscribe to this 'rule' of civil inattention towards other parents. In centre A, three parents' actions stood out remarkably from the other parents observed. Almost systematically, they broke the rule of civil inattention towards other families they were not accustomed with. Just like children are named brokers of relations as they provoke contact spontaneously, these parents can be seen as brokers of relations as well. Pascale was acting like a host herself at the

birthday party of another child, asking if they would sing a song for him and offering cake to anyone entering the room (whether it was a childcare worker, a logistic support member or another parent). Soraya in turn, repeatedly greeted other parents indirectly by remarking or asking something about their children when they entered. And Egied observed other families quite a lot, and he couldn't help making some humorous remarks or lending a hand when the opportunity presented itself.

> *First brother, then sister and also mother of Denzel enter via door 2. Egied, father of Lena, enters via the same door. If he sees the older children, he asks Fadila (P) / the mother if Denzel has two brothers and one sister. Fadila answers that he has one brother and one sister, Denzel being the youngest. Egied expresses his respect, 'Wow, three children', adding that for him two is already enough. Mother of Denzel laughs (like she always does) and says that 3 (children) is very nice and that they should go 'for another one'. Egied laughs now and puts his son at the table where I sit. […] Alexandra arrives and brings her son Samir. When standing at the coat hooks, she says 'Good morning' (probable towards Fadila), and Egied, standing there too, answers 'Good morning!' (Field notes, Ghent, December 14, 2013)*

Although many parents 'admitted' their own part in initiating contacts, the desired connections were not self-evidently taking place. Or as Hanne put it, *'Maybe it's also just me? I am not that kind of person that steps up straight towards another parent. Of course, I could actually do it myself'* (interview with parent, Brussels, August 25, 2014). Also Kathy, who was of the opinion that contacts between parents should occur spontaneously, felt some hesitation to serve herself some coffee: *'Oh no, that's arriving and [one asking] 'Kathy coffee?' So it's really offering, not that I will make one myself'*. Despite thinking that contacts between parents *'should occur spontaneously'*, Kathy and Eric still expressed that it was difficult to start a conversation with migrant parents as *'they are more distant'* (see also chapter 5) (interview with parents, Ghent, January 22, 2014).

What we see is that without special attention for facilitating such encounters, interactions remain absent or happen by chance. In the case of Hanne, another father acted as broker of relations when she stood a bit apart at the garden party.

> *Mother of Rafaël passes the table. Father of Lydia remarks to her, 'They are in the same class, isn't it?' Then he presents his wife to her, 'That's Amélie' (and probably also himself, but I can't hear it). Mother of Rafaël responds, 'I am Hanne'. Rita (P) is at the table too, taking part in the ongoing conversations. (Field notes, Brussels, August 29, 2014)*

In the interview with Hanne some days before, she expressed a clear wish to get to know some other parents for practical and emotional support. This was also known by Rita, the childcare worker.

> *But that man (father of Lydia) said, 'But why is that mother standing alone there with her little one?' We were sitting at the table and she was at the bench at the back. 'Well, who is she?' he asked me. I said, 'That's Rafaël, a child from Lydia's group'. 'Ah', he said, [then turning to Hanne and her son], 'are you also in Lydia's class? Well, madam, what's your name?' Was it Hannelore that she named, I don't remember. 'Take a seat, take a seat', he was pulling everybody to that table, you know. And this mother of Rafaël was really happy. Yes, she's on her own. She liked it. In fact, she was already a bit in search of—I think she's working in the social business and she has difficult hours, also in the evening. And she has troubles sometimes, coming too late here and—and she wants to get in touch so that Rafaël might go along with someone or— (Interview with childcare worker, Brussels, September 4, 2014)*

Although Rita, one of the childcare workers was well aware of Hanne's situation as a single mother working full-time, it was not thanks to her that Hanne finally got involved but thanks to another father, who was not familiar with the centre and the other parents at all. Entering the garden party, I heard him asking his wife, *'Do you know any people here?'*. This is not to blame the childcare staff, as the perceptions of parents might also prevent them from finding the support they need. Such was the case with Zoran, the Kurdish father who did not perceive the childcare service as a place where he could find the connections he was intensely looking for. He was convinced that this was not the place for sociability, as the childcare workers had other duties (see chapter 5). Yet it shows that valuable opportunities to connect people are left aside.

6.3.4. Different settings, different scripts

In line with Soja (1996), Vuorisalo *et al.* found that how the physical space is interpreted varies throughout the day and according to how each moment is defined (as cited in Vuorisalo *et al.*, 2015). Changing the context or setting also changed the scripted practices operating. This was the case, for example, when children were playing in the garden at centre B. Parents could open the safety gate themselves and come to the garden then. However, seeing some parents doubting if they could enter and struggling to open the child-proof system revealed that they were not quite used to it. During our interview, the coordinator said that she opened the safety gate now a bit when the children are playing outside (and a wooden board prevents them from leaving the garden) to make it more easy for parents to get in.

In the same vein, a different picture appeared (than the one of civil inattention) during more festive occasions organised by the centre. Despite the fact that the daily interactions between parents were rather rare, parents then exchanged quite a lot (often via or thanks to the children).

> *Father of Felix goes to stand next to two mothers talking about the children, 'That's Etienne', 'Where is Luke?' Mother of Felix asks Remi, seated on the arm of his father with a cold towel against his mouth, 'Hello there, what happened to you?' Father of Remi answers that he felt down. (Field notes garden party, Brussels, August 29, 2014)*

Still, for some parents it seemed rather difficult to enter conversations. It might be the case that some parents preferred not to interact, as perhaps the mother of Frederic (whom I tried to interview, but who referred me to her (ex-)husband). However, others might be excluded from the sociability they were actually looking for (like the parents of Basil).

> *Mother and father of Yonah get in touch with father of Felix in the garden. A bit further away, mother of Frederic stands alone while Frederic plays, she takes her cell phone (to keep herself busy?). […] Mother of Felix wants to roll a ball towards Frederic, mother Frederic is watching. […] The parents of Basil are seated on a chair against the wall. Their son is playing next to them. They observe what's happening. Mother of Etienne and mother of Simone are having a conversation. Mother of Arthur, mother of Josse and father of*

Remko are talking. Father of Remi and mother Remko have a short contact via the children, telling them in French that they can throw the ball. (Field notes garden party, Brussels, August 29, 2014)

At most get-togethers, parents switched seats, walked around to get some food, or were 'mobilised' by their children. In that context of changing positions, it was acceptable to start listening to an ongoing conversation and join it. Whereas it sometimes felt like being an eavesdropper if I observed parents during these talks, in the fragment below I could more easily record the conversation as I was part of it at the start and withdrew shortly after to take some notes.

I ask Dochka (mother of Lora) when she has her exams and how things are going. Bert (father of Mats) who is sitting next to her, hears us talking and asks what she's studying for. Dochka says she's not studying but following a training. Bert asks further questions and Dochka reports […] Bert asks where she comes from ('What is your country of origin?') and the conversation gets focused on Bulgaria: that Bulgarians are portrayed not that positive in the news, that there exists a fear that they would suddenly all come to Belgium (since Bulgaria joined the European Union). Bert asks Dochka if she thinks that really that much Bulgarians moved to here since January. Dochka says that she doesn't know really and by joking she remarks that her whole family is still in Bulgaria. She tells why she thinks Bulgarians are coming here, about the very low wages in Bulgaria (€200) and that life is relatively expensive there too (almost as in Belgium). Bert notices that it is indeed extremely hard with €200 a month. During the conversation Bert expresses his respect for her as she's studying while having two children ('Do you manage to study while having two children?'–'That's hard, I guess?'). A bit later, Bert and Dochka are again sitting next to each other at the table. Bert returns to the matter that her diploma is only valid for 75% and asks Dochka which education she followed in Bulgaria. Dochka tells that she was a childcare worker and wishes to practice her job here as well. Bert and Dochka also speak about transportation issues in the city. Dochka testifies that she obtained her driver's licence, yet that she had to sell her car because of the financial crisis and that she takes the bus and tramway now. Bert remarks that they go everywhere by bike, on which Dochka reacts that it is not that easy for her with two children. (Field notes New Year's Breakfast, Ghent, January 14, 2014)

In a conversation like this one between Bert and Dochka, broader topics such as migration, education, employment and transport were touched upon. The 'personalised' story offered the opportunity to question common stereotypes about the influx of Bulgarians, for example. Such get-togethers carry with them a huge potential for these kind of ephemeral but meaningful contacts to occur and for developing more durable relationships as well.

That these convivial exchanges between parents were an exception to the rule (namely, the scripted practice of civil inattention towards other parents), was indirectly stressed by a mother who expressed the difference in practicing sociability on weekdays.

> *She's very pleased with [the centre] where Yasmina comes. She refers to the ongoing party and adds that this didn't take place in the other services she used. She also mentions that the team knows what they are doing, that they organise many activities with the children. For her, that's also a reason not to look for contact with other parents outside the centre (as it is not necessary to unite because everything goes well). She lives in [another municipality] and the distance, together with daily bringing and picking up three children and their full-time jobs, are the reasons why she's mostly in a hurry. [...] She thinks the party is a nice initiative and says that parents will be 'satisfied' again, and that the day after it will be the same routine of 2 minutes bringing and picking up. (Field interview garden party, Brussels, August 29, 2014)*

6.3.5. Conclusion

Describing the existence of certain scripted practices as we did above, does not mean that all parents abided by these scripts unconsciously. Parents were co-actors in these processes, either by maintaining or breaking through existing structures. Nevertheless, the scripted practices that limited encounters among families appeared persistent: neither the situations in which parents 'broke the rule' systematically (e.g. Soraya, Pascale and Egied), nor the situations where childcare workers were well informed about parents' experience of loneliness and search for sociability (e.g. the stories of Hanne and Zoran), changed the scripted practices in the childcare services.

As mentioned, the perceptions of parents might prevent them from finding the support they need, like Zoran who was convinced that he should not stay

for a while in the centre (also described in chapter 5). Furthermore, the civil inattention towards other families in the centre is understandable when compared to interaction patterns operating in other more public areas. However, it is questionable to which extent this was also a side effect of the strong emphasis on the partnership between the professionals and each individual family. In what follows, this will be discussed in depth.

6.4. Policy put into practice

6.4.1. The meaning of *child care*

The two childcare services differed in some respect regarding their vision of what their own role in facilitating encounters between families should be. In centre B, established in 1981 as a service offering high-quality childcare for working parents, a strong emphasis remained on taking care of children when parents are absent.

> *There are no birthday or farewell parties: occasionally a parent brings a cake, but 'we limit that they come as well. For the majority of the parents that's not possible either as they are at work, that's why their child is here' (Field interview with childcare worker, Brussels, June 10, 2014)*

The idea that day care is actually a service for working parents is still manifested in many services and felt by parents. After our conversation, Aleksandra uttered, *'I'll have to disappoint them'*, referring to the childcare workers and her perception that she ought to take her children with her right away.

> *When she left, one of the childcare workers asks me some questions about this mother, like if she's employed or not. Then she remarks that she doesn't understand why this mother isn't taking her children with her now that she is free (as she just had the conversation with me). I answer that she had something else to do first. The childcare worker comments that 'she is one of those parents who will not soon, but rather late, pick up her children'. (Field notes, Brussels, September 17, 2014)*

Earlier, during the interview, Aleksandra showed being well aware about other expectations as she forgot to write in the daily journal where staff and parents can exchange information.

> *Mother: I think it's good. But I think we're kind of bad, because this morning we didn't write in it. Not the day before also. But I think it's a very good idea.*
>
> *Researcher: So you think you are bad parents now?*
>
> *Mother: Uh [laughs] I think they think. (Interview with parent, Brussels, September 17, 2014)*

The use is not without engagement indeed.

> *Actually, it is a 'back and forth' journal, but in fact it's only us who write in it mostly. At times, you think: 'Why the hell are we still doing this?' (Interview with childcare worker, Brussels, September 1, 2014)*

Several parents enjoyed the diary or saw it as supporting the communication with the service, yet Aleksandra experienced rather a lack of communication. This became apparent as she referred to parents she knows using another service: *'they have even less contact'*. Aleksandra missed the opportunity to socialise with other people. The short contacts she had in the service, were with the professionals and centred around her child: *'you only talk about Dimitri, that's pretty much it'*. Nevertheless, she was happy she was informed a little.

> *Because I thought it [the daily journal] was kind of a standard thing. I still think it's good. Even, let's say, they copy paste every sentence like- 'Dimitri was having a great day, and Maud had a great day and Tim had a great day'. So, but I still think they—it's kind of, you feel like you know a bit. (Interview with parent, Brussels, September 17, 2014)*

Out of these and other examples, it appeared that there are 'good' parents and others 'failing' to meet the (implicit) expectations. These expectations are often felt by parents, even without them being expressed directly, yet parents remain very loyal to the service. Thanks to the reflective culture in centre A, implicit assumptions about what parents should or shouldn't do were frequently discussed.

6.4.2. A role to play in informal support?

Asking the coordinator of centre B about evolution in the role of the service as a place where parents can meet, she answered that *'it's not more than before'*. The coordinator stated that in her opinion two or three activities for all parents are sufficient.

> *Sometimes single parents, actual single parents, they like it, but then it's more about getting in touch with other parents, yet I'm afraid that if I would organise it more frequently—it is a success now because it's only two times a year and right now it's already written in their diary, so to say. (Interview with coordinator, Brussels, June 1, 2015)*

Furthermore, just as parents often recalled that interactions occur spontaneously, the coordinator said about contacts between parents that *'it goes naturally'* and a childcare worker uttered, *'I think it's not up to me to intervene in that'* (Brussels, September 4, 2014). Another childcare worker perceived her role as *'a passive role indeed, we are here and they all come in'* (Brussels, September 4, 2014). However, as was apparent from the observations and the parents' stories, running across one another did not mean that people also came to meet each other.

The attendance and atmosphere during festivities also differed depending on the families attending the centre. The coordinator mentioned a gay couple that used to chat to all other parents, bringing different people together, which created a nice atmosphere. This couple acted as brokers of relations. The professionals perceived their role on get-togethers as accommodating, creating the conditions for families to come and enjoy, like a good host should do (yet the atmosphere is seen dependent upon the families).

> *What I try during such a party, is being a good host, when it comes to bringing that [person] in touch with that [person], at times it works, sometimes not. But to truly say that it's part of—I find it kind of normal if you're a host that the people are all a bit—. (Interview with coordinator, Brussels, June 1, 2015)*

The coordinators of both day care centres were looking for ways they could offer the right facilities for families to meet. This required reflection, for

example, about how the (physical) space should be organised, such as consciously arranging the tables.

> *The coordinator thinks out loud if they should put another table outside. The mother of Felix reacts (indirectly towards the team) that they (as parents) will stand. Finally, the coordinator let them (the team) put another table outside. When it is placed a bit apart, she asks them to place it directly at the long table, 'otherwise they are sitting there separately'. (Field notes garden party, Brussels, August 29, 2014)*

At the time of the observations, there was no strict division of tasks on such get-togethers in centre B (as I questioned in the interviews with the childcare workers), but this changed afterwards. The coordinator clarified that there is now someone who opens the door for parents, welcomes them and introduces them into what is going on; some who offer everybody something to drink; others who look after the children without parents; and some who clean up and do the dishes. The coordinator herself always gives a speech and tries to talk individually with every parent during the party. She mentioned no explicit action for bridging contacts between families that do not know each other.

Whereas it is indeed right that many parents easily connect and start conversations spontaneously, the observations revealed that several parents were not able to get in touch with others besides professionals, or only in the end got involved thanks to some other parents. Moreover, it became apparent each time again that when people were left to their own devices, they sought out those most familiar. In one instance, the rain made it impossible to continue the garden party outside, and groups spontaneously split up in two play areas.

> *In one children's room, all African people gathered, in another children's room it was a mishmash of all kind of people but no Africans. They were all in one group, it was really—and they were all dressed up, wearing those beautiful colourful things and it was—and Pascale, she's married to an African man, she said [to the coordinator], 'Well, look what's happening, all the Africans are gathering together. Isn't that striking?' (Interview with coordinator, Ghent, March 4, 2014)*

Unless actions are consciously taken, as for example, organising the party in the multifunctional room which is much bigger (as the coordinator reflected afterwards), existing network characteristics are repeated within the service. Yet putting a social mix of parents together in one room does not automatically lead to interactions either. More privileged families easily encounter like-minded people. Parents who belong to a similar group tend to find each other: Spanish-speaking people end up having a conversation in their native language, pregnant women congratulate one another and exchange experiences, African people gather in one room, and so on. As appeared in the parents' stories (see chapter 5), a shared *code* facilitated interactions. This code goes beyond common categories of white/black or native/non-native, for instance. Moreover, 'being the same' can differ from one situation to another. Besides being both Turkish, the shared quality of being more talkative can connect people.

> *Mother: I don't know. I don't have much contact, it's not difficult but I don't have much contact. Yes, we speak like 'Hello' and 'How are you?' and stuff. Maybe it's because she [mother of Kasim] is living nearby that I saw her a lot, or something. She also talks a lot, like I do [laughs]. We are the same [laughs].*
>
> *Researcher: Yes, she also likes to talk.*
>
> *Mother: Yes, talking, she's the same. Maybe that's why, I don't know.*
>
> *Researcher: She's Turkish too?*
>
> *Mother: Yes, she's Turkish.*
>
> *Researcher: Yes. And the mother of Farah is also Turkish?*
>
> *Mother: Yes. We did drink some coffee together [in the centre]. This mother doesn't speak a lot. She's a bit of a quiet person. She's friendly, but a bit quiet. (Interview with parent, Ghent, December 26, 2013)*

Personal barriers (as being more introverted or not mastering the language) and certain ideas or stereotypes about the unknown other, the stranger, made it harder to get in touch for several parents. More intervention is needed then to facilitate encounters that are experienced as supportive and cohesive by families.

6.4.3. *Together* as 'each family and the centre'

The mission of centre A, to 'live together, do things together and think together', was strongly fulfilled in daily practice. However, at the time of the observations '*together'* was still mostly interpreted as 'the family and the centre' and less as 'among families' or 'between families and the centre'. When connections among families were installed, this was often 'on demand'. As the team knew each family quite well, parents could find support with them and the professionals acted from time to time as *'bridge builder'* (interview with coordinator, Brussels, June 1, 2015) or mediator between parents.

> *Maryam: Ah, yeah, in our group we are at times mediator if parents need something, in their private life. For example, there was a mother who wanted a rental subsidy and she didn't know where and how to get one and we knew another mother who was working in a housing-service [woonwinkel] and we asked her—.*
>
> *Fadila: Could you do something?*
>
> *Maryam: And that's how they got in touch and she helped her. So, sometimes we are a bit of a mediating person.*
>
> *Researcher: As you know every individual parent and know—.*
>
> *Maryam: Yes, know better—.*
>
> *Fadila: We are Facebook, social network [laughing]. (focus group team, Ghent, February 20, 2014)*

This kind of social networking offers bridging opportunities and social leverage (see chapter 2). What we noticed is that bringing parents together was up to then mostly for instrumental reasons (serving a higher function) or as a side-effect of certain choices. In centre A, the three groups had a lot autonomy in organising their daily work and activities with families. As a result, out of a concern for parents each family was invited individually for a birthday or goodbye party in one group, whereas in another group, such parties were clustered merely for practical reasons.

> *Fadila: We group one day a month for all children that in that month—[…]*

Sabrina: We prefer to organise it separately. That way parents do not see, 'Oh, that parent brought that kind of stuff—'

Frankline: Big pie.

Sabrina: '—and we don't have that', so that they don't feel uncomfortable.

Researcher: Yes, and why do you organise it together?

Fadila: Because it is the easiest way for us as we don't have child-free moments during the day, you know. (focus group team, Ghent, February 20, 2014)

Notwithstanding the strong emphasis on connecting families in the mission statement of centre A, this motivation did not come up here. The reason to bring parents together was in this example not a concern about social connection but out of practicalities. In turn, a concern for individual parents who might feel uneasy when other parents bring a bigger cake prevented the childcare workers of the other group to bring parents together.

In centre A, efforts were daily made to *'make parents feel at home, so that they do not perceive it as a social service but they call it 'a warm home for my child and for myself'* (interview with coordinator, Ghent, March 4, 2014). The team put this into practice by opening the safety gate and inviting families to *'come in'*; addressing parents by their first name instead of 'mama' or 'daddy'; asking parents to stay for a moment (*'Get seated, we're not allowed to ask an attendance fee'* (childcare worker, field notes, farewell and birthday party, Ghent, January 31, 2014); and familiarising parents with the children's living places and telling them they *'are at home here'*. In centre B, one of the logistic staff members took up a similar role. She said that when she's cleaning the hall and parents arrive, she opens the door for them *'so that parents also feel that there is someone who receives them very well and with a smile, things like that'* (interview with logistic staff member, Brussels, September 4, 2014). When I asked the childcare workers in centre B about their perspective on the presence of parents in the rooms, it appeared that parents were welcome: *'If they [parents] want to come in, they may come in you know. Anyway, the rule is that they can come in when they want to'* (interview with childcare worker, Brussels, September 1, 2014). Yet they actually preferred that parents stayed outside and perceived this as a sign of trust. A mere change in the phrasing of

perspectives (written in the service's policy documents or declaring to me that parents are welcome), did not automatically correspond to the actual lived reality at the time of the observations (for example, the use of the safety gate that served as a border for parents to stay out).

The situation in centre A was different, as parents were offered the opportunity to stay over for a moment in the group right from the start.

> *It is told during the first talk with new parents [settling in], like, 'You're free to come. There you have the coffee, there are cups, just take, we are not waitresses, we are childcare workers/educators'. I say it like this, and they find it amusing that way. But we make clear, 'You can do it yourself, you're at home here, don't mind'. (focus group team, Ghent, February 20, 2014)*

Interesting in this case is the connotation that was added to *being waitresses* versus *being childcare workers*. As stressed by the childcare workers during the focus group, individual contacts with families, reporting on the daily life of the children and building up a relationship of trust were seen as important elements in their job. This was in line with our observations: the contacts of the childcare workers with individual parents received much attention and maintained certain scripted practices. Whilst the civil inattention towards other families in the centre is common in more public areas, it is questionable to which extent this was a side-effect of the strong emphasis on the partnership between the professionals and each individual family, which gave them a professional identity. In contrast, *being waitresses*, small-talk with several families, having a chat over a cup of tea or coffee seems of less value, or not professional enough.

Anyway, besides practical and individual concerns, both teams felt challenged by the presence of parents in the centre. Childcare workers of both teams remarked that the presence of parents influences the behaviour of the children negatively. Also, that *'parents come that close'* demands from them to be confident about their practice and at the same time it requires continuous reflection on their practice (interview with coordinator, Ghent, March 4, 2014). In addition, several childcare workers were afraid that negative experiences would circulate more easily when parents come together; there was a fear of parents uniting against the service. Besides that,

there was a desire to keep everything surveyable. Being an open house means that the team does not know who will come, when, for how long, what people will talk about and which preparations should be made. The attention for individual families might indirectly be a means to control the uncontrollable. Paradoxically, it is exactly the presence of parents that often gave them extra confidence in their work.

> *I think it's the parents that made them stronger because there are many parents who compliment them. And if they do their work well, they receive compliments, and if a parent comes then and happens to be a bit annoying, they are empowered and they will swallow it thinking by themselves 'well then'. (Interview with coordinator, Brussels, June 1, 2015)*

Leaving space for the unpredictable to happen, proved to give rise to meaningful moments regarding social support and social cohesion—like the conversation between Bert and Dochka in which broader topics such as migration, education, employment and transport were touched upon. Making processes of social support and social cohesion possible does not always reside in the organisation of extra activities. It can be described better as extra attention for what happens if parents are present. The subscription period for a school is one example of something that connects parents, which can be picked up in the centre. Inviting all the parents that pick up their child to join a birthday or farewell party taking place is another example: there is often plenty of cake available and no extra work to make invitations, yet it requires great flexibility to be such an open house. Also accepting an offer of a parent to read or to sing at the annual garden party meant joining in a story of which the end was unknown.

> *'But I can sing as well', she [Russian mother] said. And we [responded], 'Okay, that's good, you can come'. I thought, 'Let's hope that it will be—that this person will not be laughed at', because I was afraid of that happening, but yeah. So, I took care of a stereo and a microphone. And she starts to sing, in the afternoon she came to practice, and she starts to sing, there were only a few children. And then suddenly they all came out of their apartments [adjacent social housing flats have outside hallways on each level] to look, it was just a nightingale. Really beautiful the way she sang, pure, we actually got goose flesh from it. Fabulous. (Interview with coordinator, Ghent, March 4, 2014)*

Observations of get-togethers showed a huge potential regarding informal exchanges and the influence of (sometimes very small) interventions from the professionals that can facilitate or obstruct possible encounters among a social mix of families.

> *The coordinator sits between two mothers on her own heels, holding a child on her lap, talking to one mother (mother of Farid), then to the other (mother of Mats). […] (A bit later) When Mats passes her, mother of Farid asks his mother: 'he's your son?' The mother of Mats nods. Mother Farid adds: 'He has beautiful eyes', pointing at his eyes. A bit later, mother Farid change places to the other corner of the table as Farid gets seated over there. (Field notes pancake party, Ghent, December 10, 2013)*

This is a nice illustration of how an encounter between two parents was facilitated by a professional, yet this ephemeral contact was also interrupted unconsciously by a professional moving a child. It might be interesting to use such small interventions to re-mix families and to give rise to new connections. In line with this are the findings of Buysse (2008), which indicate that ways should be found to bring a heterogeneity of stories to the floor, to stimulate more balanced judgements about the unknown other.

6.4.4. Towards a more democratic climate

The coordinator of centre B uttered that no changes were made in the role of the service to act as a place where parents can meet other parents; nonetheless, she mentioned changes that took place in the relationship between professionals and parents.

> *Whereas previously it was more like, 'Look, childcare is that and that', now it's, 'What do you think as parents that it should be?' If possible, it's still a group, you try to take that [parents' opinion] into account. There is also more openness, according to me. (Interview with coordinator, Brussels, June 1, 2015)*

Likewise, the coordinator of centre A admired how the childcare workers dare to share difficult messages about the child with the parent. They do this in a non-judgemental way, often by making humoristic remarks like *'we have known that he was here'* (field notes farewell party, Ghent, October 29, 2013),

to acknowledge that for them too (as professionals) it is hard from time to time to care for a certain child. Taking in such a subjective stance is seen by Peeters (2010) as a sign of engagement and taking up one's responsibility.

Besides this growing openness in the relationship between parents and professionals, changes took place in the style of leadership of the coordinator of centre B. In her opinion, she evolved from a more directive (commanding) stance six years ago towards coming up with supportive ideas, leaving space nowadays for the team to make it their own.

> *If she [coordinator] used to have an idea, she told her team, 'We're going to do it that way, first that step, then that, then…'. Now she's doing things differently, mentioning for example, 'I've heard a fine idea'. She tells them how others do something and then she asks her team, 'Think about it and let's discuss it next meeting'. She indicates that it's better if results are achieved only after half a year, but the team being motivated, that it becomes their initiative, rather than her imposing something. She emphasizes that time is needed to adjust to new ideas. (Interview with coordinator and field notes after ending recording, Brussels, June 1, 2015)*

This kind of cooperative practice and the practice of team meetings has not always been the case. One of the childcare workers looked back at her arrival at centre B twenty years ago and reflected on the difference in team cooperation.

> *According to me, if there are no [team] meetings, then a lot is being—she's saying something, she's saying something. I find then, it has to be thrown out to the group and that way you can book new results. Or there has to be a discussion from time to time, to say 'look', to improve things. If you let things drift like that, it stays monotonous and—. (Interview with childcare worker, Brussels, November 4, 2014)*

What we noticed in our study is that a greater openness towards parents coincided with a more democratic climate on the level of the team. Still, we found different levels of practicing a non-judgemental atmosphere.

> *The activities with parents that we organised have always been—mostly were a success. So it shows that they [parents] are involved sufficiently and that*

they are willing to make an extra effort to—[meet/get acquainted with] other parents. […] Of course, there are always exceptions, people that, yeah, left early or didn't—and yeah, then you see who was not there. Then you know also, yeah, they didn't find it that important. Or maybe they really couldn't make it. […] Mostly, it's the French-speaking parents that do not come, you know. In the past it was mainly those that, of whom you said, 'They should come once to hear the speech and the rules'. Because mostly it's those who do not stick to the rules or so. Or that it's more difficult—or that financially not—it's those who do not come on such moments. While they should come in particular. And yeah, mostly they are Moroccans, or strangers that are not—not there. (Interview with childcare worker, Brussels, September 1, 2014)

We should warn against instrumentalising the attention for parents and the neighbourhood. When the attention for possible encounters between various people serves 'more important aims' (often defined without involvement of those included), the actual space for an encounter (*voor ont-moeten*) vanishes and the supportive and cohesive experience is jeopardized.

6.4.5. Conclusion

The description of the historical backgrounds and the mission statements of the two centres as well as their practice suggest that centre A in Ghent played an important role in supporting social cohesion in the neighbourhood, whereas this was less the case for centre B in Brussels. The analysis of our data additionally suggests that both centres had only limited attention for their role in processes of social support. Professionals as well as parents considered childcare in the first place as a service towards children.

This is not to say that the teams did not set up actions with the aim of supporting informal exchanges among parents. Both centres offered diverse opportunities for families to meet one another by organising periodical, convivial get-togethers (like a garden party, New Year's reception or breakfast). In doing so, the coordinators also showed they were attentive to, for example, the impact of the physical space (e.g. the placing of the tables) on possible encounters among families. However, the childcare workers perceived their role in these encounters as limited to organising the

practicalities and offering the occasion to meet, while the initiative to get in touch and the atmosphere was left to the parents.

Putting a social mix of parents together in one room does not automatically lead to supportive and cohesive interactions. In contrast with the widespread idea that informal exchanges between families (should) then occur spontaneously, the observations revealed a somewhat problematic picture. Regarding social support, we found that several parents were not able to find the sociability they wished for but remained isolated. Regarding social cohesion, it became apparent that people seek out those most familiar, at the same time segregating from other families who are or seem different.

Just as the strong emphasis on the partnership between the professionals and each individual family might influence the civil inattention towards other parents when bringing or picking up the child each day, the perception of the own professional role might hinder experimentation with different roles (e.g. the non-instrumental focus on small-talk with and among parents was associated with *'being waitresses'* and was not in accordance with their professional identity of *'being childcare workers'*). As we will discuss in the last section, the professional role is formed on different levels: besides the individual level, perceptions and intentions of the team as well as the organisational and broader societal levels play a role in how the profession of childcare workers is conceptualised. This systemic aspect may be illustrated by the fact that a growing openness towards families coincided with a more democratic climate within the team.

6.5. Reconceptualising the professionals' role

Oberhuemer (2005) questioned which roles we attribute to childcare professionals: are they transmitters of the dominant discourse, partners in co-construction processes, critical thinkers or even networking partners in the community? She hopes that future conceptualisations of their professional role will encompass the social, cultural, educational and political significance of their practice.

Sure enough, all childcare workers in this study agreed upon their role in caring for children. Yet less evident was childcare's role in facilitating social support for families as well as generating processes of social cohesion. What made it possible that centre A took up a significant role regarding social cohesion, while this was less the case in centre B? And why was the intention of the team of centre A to offer a space for families to 'be together' not enough to reconceptualise their professional role (and the scripted practices that go with it) towards facilitating social support and social cohesion? As will become clear, realising these (and perhaps other) roles requires a competent system (Urban, Vandenbroeck, Lazzari, Peeters & Van Laere, 2011).

Often, staff members recalled personal characteristics as important: the professional practice was then perceived as a matter of personal/professional growth, or *'maturity'* (interview with coordinator, Brussels, June 1, 2015) or as something naturally given: *'I think it's also my personality', 'They are social people by nature'* (interview with coordinator, Ghent, March 4, 2014), and *'That's who I am', 'It's also much about your own'* (focus group team, Ghent, February 20, 2014). Likewise, Devlieghere (2014) found that the professionals working in Centres for Children and Parents (CCP) became so familiar with their role that they perceived their professionalism as a natural phenomenon, which was assumed hard to teach. It might be right that it is difficult to teach in the classic way as only preparatory training. The CoRe (Competent Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care) research suggested that "becoming a competent practitioner is the result of a continuous learning process: a process through which one's own practices and beliefs are constantly questioned in relation to changing contexts" (Urban *et al.*, 2011, p. 35).

While perceived as natural, the reflective culture in centre A did not occur automatically at all. The coordinator talked about *'we, the community-oriented ones'* as if it were the accomplishment of the peer group of coordinators, which in fact covers years of investment of the PBD and Diko in Ghent to transform traditional childcare into community-based services that put the social function into reality. Paradoxically, the fact that these professionals internalised these accomplishments as 'theirs', is exactly what the investments were up to. These investments (that include but are not

limited to regular reflection opportunities) made individual professionals co-constructors of their professionalization process (Peeters, 2008) and influenced the forms of ownership as we observed them.

The CoRe project stressed that reflective practice, rather than a matter of causality, is the result of a competent system: an interplay between the professional, organisational and inter-institutional levels as well as the level of governance. In our study, we noticed that a greater openness towards parents coincided with a more democratic climate at the team level. Historically, as Peeters (1993) described, there was a lack of democratic structure in child care. For example, only in the 1980s did team meetings begin to be organised (thanks to top-down policy measures), and there has long been (and still is) a very parent-hostile atmosphere: "parents participation remains the Achilles heel of the Flemish childcare" (p. 68). As mentioned in the previous text, some important changes took place in centre B. The growing openness towards families coincided with, among other things, the replacement of one of the childcare workers, with a change in leadership towards a more democratic stance, with the introduction of a policy about the length of the settling in period, and with my research in the centre (which is also an intervention, see chapter 1). The coordinator testified that it goes beyond her (*'And that's, yeah, that just came little by little. I can't say that I did—that's something that they have to—it's something that developed—'*, interview with coordinator, Brussels, June 1, 2015), which is exemplary for the non-linear character of changes in a competent system.

Whereas being able to switch (or even merge) roles is not a matter of individual attitude alone, it does require individual competencies. To be an actor of change, one needs to have an open attitude towards the unknown other and should be able to take the confrontation of perspectives as a starting point, willing to build up knowledge together with all those involved, acting towards social change (Peeters, 2008). Rather than an exchange of perspectives with those involved, it's all about a transformation process, the final result of which is unpredictable (Peeters, 2010).

> Related to the knowledge base which informs professional action, democratic professionalism presupposes an awareness of 'multiple ways of knowing', an

understanding that knowledge is in fact contestable. It requires a willingness and ability to reflect on one's own taken-for-granted beliefs. It implicates the professional skill to sensitively discuss pedagogical and ethical viewpoints against a background of increasing cultural, social and economic diversity, to recognize and examine both personal and publicly endorsed assumptions. (Oberhuemer, 2005, p. 14)

Ellen, the new childcare worker in centre B, seemed to bring in a lot in terms of working with diverse populations and multiple languages (see also the example above of the non-native mother who was allowed to come read to the children).

> *Then you have Ellen, she would, I jumped out of my skin, handle diversity. But how exactly she—she has to—I don't know yet. She hasn't worked here that long. […] She was very enthusiast about it. She's the kind of person that, uh, reads books and, yeah, figures things out. She may lack experience maybe, but yeah, it amazes me. And because of that, since she's doing those things, she incites the others, as she comes with ideas, she incites the others to do such things themselves. Because that's something, reading books and stuff, that's for some one step too far. But yeah, she's a young one, just throwing this into the group. (Interview with coordinator, Brussels, June 1, 2015)*

Again, the possibility of Ellen as an actor of change can only flourish in the current climate in centre B, which is becoming more democratic on several levels. Ellen's inquisitive stance that can generate important processes of change is one of the elements of *democratic professionalism* (Oberhuemer, 2005; Peeters, 2010). Democratic professionalism "is a concept based on participatory relationships and alliances. It foregrounds collaborative, cooperative action between professional colleagues and other stakeholders. It emphasises engaging and networking with the local community" (Oberhuemer, 2005, p. 13). For this kind of professionalism to occur, the confrontation with the Other (children, parents, colleagues, neighbours, …) is necessary. Such confrontation took place, for example, with the neighbours using the garden of centre A to take their dogs out. It was also observed between colleagues, where the reflective approach (cf. Wanda meetings) was practiced in the daily work as well.

7h28 Frankline (P) arrives. She talks to Marie (P) […] (Marie tells) about Elias having breakfast that early, which means that he has to get another nursing bottle. Frankline: 'Children should have had breakfast (before they enter)', Marie: 'Well though, he had his breakfast, at 5h30'. (Field notes, Ghent, November 7, 2013)

6.5.1. Support and space for innovative practices

The possibility of making decisions about one's own practice is a necessary condition to work in diverse and constantly changing contexts that demand flexibility. The pilot project of community-based childcare in Ghent revealed

> that local experimentation can bear fruit. The Pedagogical Centre, for instance, convinced the municipal authorities to refuse the funding of Kind & Gezin for one or two years, and rather fund the pilot centres themselves, in order to have the freedom of experimentation without having to take numerous administrative regulations into account which might jeopardize accessibility. (Peeters & Vandenbroeck, 2010, p. 16–17)

In the same vein, the coordinator of centre A argued that a certain degree of autonomy on the institutional level is necessary to discover alternative routes and to jump on (external) opportunities. Being part of a larger whole as a municipal initiative brings with it pre-structured systems and texts (thanks to Diko) that are an important source of support to substantiate the daily practice (cf. the overarching mission statement, opportunities for intervision and supervision, a shared administration and bookkeeping, and so on). At times, however, it obstructed this practice as the specific context was not always taken into account. Sufficient authority was lacking in decision-making processes, such as the right to decide on personnel recruitment (see above) and self-government regarding financial matters (e.g. to spend project money gained from external funds). To work in highly unpredictable settings demands the possibility of going over the line when deemed valuable, even if mainstream policy or procedures are put into question.

One could say that the emergence of supportive, cohesive (and democratic) moments involving children, families and local residents are conditional upon the democratic and supportive climate within the childcare service, which is in turn conditional upon democratic overarching structures, being focused on

providing good working conditions and a strong framework whilst at the same time giving responsibility and trust to institutions to respond to the local context.

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Chapter 7

ECEC centres as sites of social support and social cohesion: it's (not at) all about the coffee

> There are no conclusions to be reported; there is merely a discussion to be
> sustained. (Geertz, 1973, p. 29)

7.1. Introduction

In the introductory chapter of this dissertation, we elaborated on the three functions of early childhood education and care (ECEC), emphasising that attention given to the social function has been too little and too restricted. Regarding the social function, research and policy debates were all too often centred solely upon accessibility. In this dissertation, we chose a broad definition of the social function as the contribution ECEC makes to the principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities (IFSW, 2014). This entails efforts regarding equal accessibility, but also supporting families and communities, as well as installing reciprocity with and between families and local communities (Vandenbroeck, 2004).

Previous studies showed that informal networks are important to *all* families with children when they look for support, but also that families' networks are unequally at their disposal. Moreover, the use of ECEC may widen the gap as it leads to larger networks for those families who already have large networks, but not (or less) for those who have more limited networks (Segaert, 2007; Vandenbroeck, Boonaert, Van der Mespel & De Brabandere, 2009). It was also found that people are selective in favour of those who are similar (Bidart & Lavenu, 2005; Buysse, 2008). However, in our current globalised world, marked by mobility of goods and people (Duyvendak, 2011), the durability and homogeneity of social systems (social networks as well as communities) are challenged. This raises questions about the roles ECEC can have in supporting and complementing families and in its social function. In the Starting Strong II report it has been recognised that

> pragmatic results are often sought from parental involvement, such as, to ensure home support for the child's learning. [However] the democratic dimension is also important, that is, the exercise by parents of their basic right to be involved in the education of their children. In neighbourhoods with diverse populations—the majority in many of the major cities—it is helpful to conceptualise the early childhood centre As a space for

> participation and inter-culturalism, where young children and their families can experience a welcoming, democratic and tolerant environment. (OECD, 2006, p. 219)

Soenen and Verlot (2002) argued that to do justice to the complexity of encounters between diverse people in everyday life (e.g. in what people bring to situations, in what situations do to them, and in competencies regarding diversity), attention should be directed to social dynamics as they take place among individuals in specific contexts. To date, research concerning the questions of *if* and *how* ECEC services act as possible sites of social support and social cohesion is scarce. The actual daily interactions between diverse people in and with social services have long been neglected, and furthermore, notions of social support and social cohesion are all too often defined without involving the families and communities at stake. In this dissertation, we sought to depart from what parents experience as supportive and cohesive, thereby capturing policy practices in ECEC, i.e. child care and centres for children and parents (CCP), that contributed to this experience or obstructed it.

7.2. Summary of the chapters

The findings of our studies should be interpreted in light of the contexts in which they were studied. While some insights seem crystal-clear, writing a discussion that summarizes the essence, capturing the multi-layered-ness and ambivalence of reality, is a rigorous task. However, it is necessary as the study of local meanings, which are embedded in certain contexts, has the potential to offer inspiration to refine ongoing debates and to generate different views on one's own practice-in-context. In this light, we give a short, yet inevitably incomplete, overview of the main findings.

Reviewing a selection of literature on the meaning and occurrence of social interactions among parents revealed that the conceptualization—or should we say operationalization—of the notion of social support was defined in various ways, yet with a rather limited focus. As reported in chapter 2, we found that social support is predominantly studied in relation to parents' (mental) health, considered as a buffer against potential negative outcomes

for children. Consequently, this legitimated extensive research on parents who are believed to be 'at risk'. Specific target groups have been questioned abundantly using social support measures. In so doing, social support is mainly studied as a predefined concept in which social support is treated as a mere 'characteristic' of individual families. We argued that the results from these questionnaires might obscure a variety of meanings and situations in which social support can occur. We concluded that, so far, minimal attention was given to the relational aspect of social support, taking into account the many possible interactions between a diversity of people as a relevant source of support in everyday parenting processes. Moreover, we observed a lack of discussion about the possible roles of social work services in these processes which we deem indispensable as "attention to social support in planning family services makes space for thinking about how programs can shape, rather than simply respond to, the social terrain in which some families struggle while others may easily thrive" (Fram, 2005, p. 516).

Questioning if encounters are actually feasible in services in which a social mix of users is present, we analysed the attendance registrations and daily reports held by the staff of Baboes, a CCP in Brussels. Multiple interactions across several socio-economic and cultural borders were recorded in chapter 3. Not seldom, children acted in the CCP as brokers of relations (Soenen, 2006), thereby initiating processes of potential support and cohesion. According to our analysis, the presence of professionals as facilitators of encounters and of diversity in the centre (not only diversity regarding the families' backgrounds, but also diversity in perspectives, ideas, habits and ways of being present, among others) made it possible for *free confrontation* to occur. In this free confrontation, families were free to (re)act, but assumptions taken for granted were inevitably questioned. We concluded that in such a social sphere daily learning processes may be fostered despite—or thanks to—the contradictions that occur, as we all construct ourselves in the mirror of sameness and difference. As such, ECEC can offer a space for democratic moments to emerge (Biesta, 2011) in which children, parents and professionals are involved in a discussion about what it means to live together and to take care of young children in the city.

To understand if and when the interactions taking place in a CCP are experienced as supportive, we organised six discussion groups with 33 parents who visited a CCP in either Brussels or Antwerp. Based on our analysis, we explored the role of ECEC as places of transition between the home and society in chapter 4. The majority of the parents attributed their positive experience of social support and social cohesion to the presence of the professionals. Whereas the value of a CCP was questioned as being a mere *'chat over a cup of tea for women'*, the mothers contested this view and parents gave many examples of the value of their visit, for both them and their child. The professionals were perceived as experts in creating a welcoming space where diversity was omnipresent, and specific values and a social atmosphere prevailed regarding how to interact with others. Not equality, in the sense of homogeneity, but equity appeared to be a precondition for social support to occur. A non-judgemental approach with a concern for equity seemed crucial in generating reciprocal support and reviving the democratic potential for processes of living together. This experience contrasted with public areas, where no mediating figures were around, but also with the private sphere, which lacked diversity. In the CCP, the professionals mediated in situations of inclusion and exclusion, hereby inviting families to accept what was unfamiliar to them.

In chapter 5, parents' perspectives on life with young children in an urban context were analysed. Based on the observations that we held in two childcare centres as part of a broader ethnographic endeavour, we selected and interviewed 18 parents who differed in their use of and sociability in the centre. Many parents shared feelings of isolation or being alone in caring for their child(ren). They pointed to the intense care that young children demand, and the resulting lack of proper sleep and thus energy. Further, these parents emphasised an increased mobility: people (including their relationships) frequently moved to or from a more distant place within Belgium or abroad. Both elements, the intense care and mobility, highly impacted the availability of their social networks and their feeling of connectedness to their place of living. Whereas some experienced the diversity in their neighbourhoods as a threshold to meet 'the other' (due to language barriers, differences in 'codes', and so on), others perceived this diversity as an opportunity to find their place in the 'multi-ness'. We found that parents expressed a need for having a series

of ephemeral contacts that could generate familiarity with and recognition in their everyday surroundings as well as for meeting intimate others on whom they could rely (and all kind of relationships in between). Yet, neither of those appeared to be self-evident. Running into other families—living close by—at the service did not automatically lead to the possibility of an encounter, and was therefore not sufficient to experience social support or social cohesion. Spaces where bonds, time and attention are valued and re-grouping processes are realised seem highly desired but scarce. Bernard, one of the fathers, called for *'the school as our last hope'*, and this led to a discussion about the ambiguity regarding parents' and services' roles in informal encounters.

Chapter 6 reported on the extensive case study of two childcare centres, both situated in diverse neighbourhoods in the urban contexts of Ghent and Brussels. We studied the practices of both centres in their intentions as well as in their actions, by analysing how the work was presented in (policy) documents, by observing the daily micro-interactions and by listening to what professionals and parents had to say about their experiences. Our analysis revealed certain *scripted practices* and their continuation through time and space, even in the presence of parents (willing to) 'disobey' the script. The focus on child care as a service for children in the absence of parents (and thus *'not a café'*) and the strong emphasis on the relationship with each individual family, together with the undervaluation of small talk and informal encounters (*'we are not waitresses, we are childcare workers'*), limited the space in which professionals could experiment with different roles. That space was not only to be found with regard to individual professionals, but also tightly linked with perceptions and actions on the team level in the organisation as well as with broader frameworks about the role(s) of child care in society.

7.3. It's (not at) all about the coffee

Recognising the specificity of child care on the one hand, and CCP on the other hand, it is exactly the confrontation of both (rather than the comparison) that challenges the 'evidence' of what enabling practices may be. In that confrontation, in which both ECEC practices are similar and different in some

respects (see the description of the research contexts in chapter 1), the 'common' is becoming less evident, or it makes the familiar a bit more strange (Goodley, Lawthom, Clough & Moore, 2006)—and thus more hybrid versions become thinkable.

Considering what parents frequenting a CCP and/or child care told us, we can conclude that they wanted similar things, yet sometimes in different ways. Talking about their parenthood, all parents emphasised the value of social support and social cohesion (whether inside or outside a service) in the *here and now*. Although they varied in the amount wished for, all parents expressed a need to share experiences with others, without being judged, problematised or instrumentalised. Those not yet experiencing it wished also to feel connected to their living environment in some ways. Of course, parents did differ in the size of their networks, in their wish to be presented to other parents or not and in whether they liked to be in a group or not, among other ways. Yet the point we want to make here is that all parents emphasised their search for the *social* dimension and whether they experienced it. This is concomitant with the *social* often being neglected in the scholarly literature, in research designs and thus in results.

Such a focus on the social seems in contrast with traditional notions of child care. During the observations we noticed that the childcare worker's relationship with each individual family was emphasised as an important part of their professional task. In line with this, Sharmahd (2009), who reflected on the differences in practice between Italian and Belgian childcare initiatives, found that "a service is considered to be "of quality" in Belgium when the focus is on the individual relationship with the child and the parent, and tries to meet the specific needs of each one" (p. 54). It illustrates the ambiguity of ECEC practice, "which is continuously focused on finding a balance between the *resources* of diversity and the *fragmentation* that diversity may bring" (Sharmahd, 2009, p. 49). 'Dealing' with diversity is realised by meeting individual needs rather than seeking out the confrontation and what it can bring to individuals, teams, organisations and society as a whole. Diversity then, is not something that characterizes 'the other', but is an essential part of the human experience and the key to innovative practice. However, "a particular sense of the social seems to be lost in current understandings, i.e.

an understanding of the social that goes beyond the one-to-one relationship between parent and child, an understanding in which childrearing is (also) conceived of as introducing children into a common world, or as having a public dimension" (Ramaekers & Suissa, 2012, p. 13–14). Although that is what the staff in the CCP try to do, it is commonly believed that attention for the individual *and* the group do not easily go hand in hand. According to Sharmahd, "the more or less common idea seems to be that the decision to focus on the collective dimension surely takes away value from the individual one and vice versa" (2009, p. 57). Our study of CCPs, however, shows that a different story is possible, yet this requires alternative conceptualisations of the professional work. And that's where the coffee comes in.

Metaphorically speaking, we could say *it's all about the coffee*. The coffee, or rather the pouring or drinking of it, conveys multiple, sometimes contradictory meanings. For several parents—some attending childcare centre A and many frequenting a CCP—coffee was a sign that they were welcome, '*just to be [t]here for a while*', in a hospitable environment. Many parents expressed their wish to be taken into account, even if they preferred just to sit and observe. The possibility of taking some coffee also gave parents in the CCP a kind of routine, something to hold on in the presence of unknown others. Yet in childcare centre A, a mother stated that she would never take coffee herself, and a father stressed that, despite his search for some social talk, '*the crèche is no café*'.

Whereas parents expressed often that coming to the CCP (and in some cases frequenting centre A) felt like coming '*home*', knocking on '*a friends' door*', or talking to '*family*', it is fundamentally different. It points to the need for authenticity, but it is not a private affair. It is *society* that offers time and space to belong somewhere, to take a moment of rest. In the current context, marked by high mobility and where everything is in a state of flux, such (semi-)public spaces are experienced as exceptional. Above all, parents were well aware that a service like the CCP deviated from mainstream conceptions of parental support and thus might need extra legitimation (note that a childcare service that tries to offer a similarly hospitable space for families is partly hindered from reaching this by the mainstream conception of child care as well). While parents visiting a CCP acknowledged that the encounters were

enriching for their private relationship with their child and were convinced of the value of small talk in their everyday lives, they felt that these informal exchanges were often underappreciated at policy level. Defending the value of a CCP as more than *'a chat over a cup of tea [or coffee] for women'*, the mothers showed that they were well aware of such a service being extraordinary. Notwithstanding their *ordinary* experience, they switched their vocabulary into terms denoting the (economic) benefits for society, even labelling themselves as 'at risk' (although they resisted being labelled as such by others).

That the pouring and drinking of coffee is discarded is understandable as it is, of course, *not at all about the coffee*. While the cup of coffee is central in the parents' and professionals' narratives, it is essential (carrying a symbolic value) but not the essence.

> *Pff, that coffee has nothing to do with it, it's just the attitude of the people like 'I'm in my home here, come, I invite you, take a seat and—.' That way you know […] Whether that's in the morning, at noon or in the evening, it doesn't matter. Also, having fun with the parents—. (Interview coordinator, childcare centre A in Ghent, March 4, 2014)*

Parents testified that it's about much more: about connecting, belonging to a space, being heard, seeing others and being seen by them, as well as about processes of social support and social cohesion taking place. It is, after all, about the relational, the *social*. The coffee symbolises a social happening: what takes place between people. As Pierre, the old man who attended the soup meetings in front of childcare centre A, stated: *'it's not about the soup at all, it's just, here I can talk to people, otherwise I'm alone all the time'*. This example is illustrative of Moss's (2012) image of ECEC services as basically public:

> […] the early childhood centre As a public responsibility and a public institution; as a public space or forum where citizens of all ages meet; and as a collaborative laboratory or workshop, acting for the common good. (p. xiv)

Moss's perspective is inspired by Italian examples:

> The early childhood services of Reggio Emilia insist on the importance of viewing public services as a collective responsibility and offer us an understanding of the school as first and foremost a public space and as a site for ethical and political practice—a place of encounter, interaction and connections among citizens in a community, a place where relationships combine a profound respect for otherness and difference with a deep sense of responsibility for the other, a place of profound interdependency. (Dahlberg & Moss, 2006, p. 8)

Whereas hospitality to this otherness and difference "in itself requires a statement of *ownership* that perhaps counteracts the possibility of an authentic welcome" (Lee, 2012, p. 128), Derrida (1997) strove for unconditional encounters that remain open to the unpredictable to happen. Lee (2012) distinguished *hospitality as hosting*, about generating a warm and welcoming atmosphere (see the coffee in the examples above), from *hospitality as curriculum*, that acknowledges the learning potential of difference. In the latter case, ECEC practitioners actively question inclusion and exclusion processes, challenge assumptions taken for granted and take care of every family, honouring their dignity. Or as one mother, visiting a CCP, tried to explain: it is a search for one another.

> *Mother: But there's a difference between organising a chat over a cup of coffee and creating a feeling of belonging. That's not the same.*
>
> *Researcher: What makes the difference for you?*
>
> *Mother: Well, let me think. It is a kind of feeling. It is hard to express. A chat over a cup of coffee is, according to me—then it is really hard for me to get in, to find my place in the group. If things are translated, or everybody is searching for a common ground, then it is easier for me. Because, they reach out to everybody. Do you understand? It is really an emotional thing. (discussion group with parents visiting a CCP, Antwerp, November 26, 2012)*

Besides the mainstream conception of child care as a place for children in the absence of parents, the professionals' conceptualisation of their own role obstructed encounters among families. One childcare worker stated *'we are not waitresses, we are childcare workers'*, thereby expressing her perception

of pouring coffee and having some small-talk as not professional enough. Yet as the mother explained above, it is about pouring attention to individuals, but also distributing attention to the group: How are group dynamics evolving? Who is getting included or excluded? How can we be together, diverse and similar as we are? What can this diversity bring to us? Whereas the scripted practices we observed in child care unconsciously hindered or interrupted encounters, professionals working in a CCP actively engaged with those scripts as they tried to install a space where specific values and a social atmosphere prevailed regarding how to live together and interact with others with respect for diversity. As we examined in chapter 4, the professional working in a CCP acted as a host and warrantor of certain norms and values in the centre, which made these places different from more public places (e.g. in the sense that parents experienced equity in the CCP they visited). Despite what is often assumed, a CCP is not a place where everyone has to be/think/act equally or a place that lacks rules. Derrida (1997), Moss (2012) and Vandenborre (2014) agree that minimal framing is necessary, yet it should leave space for surprising, unexpected, challenging or even disturbing events to take place and become topics of debate. As *ont-moeting*, or en-counter, literally means 'beginning to come across', it also entails that one bumps into something (Vandenborre, 2014). In that regard, confrontation is inherently part of encountering 'the other'. Whether we can speak of a *free confrontation* depends on the social climate that is shaped and re-shaped again each time.

7.4. Encountering the Other: feasible but not self-evident

Our venture into researching actual processes of social support and social cohesion in contexts marked by diversity illuminated that encountering the Other is meaningful and feasible yet not self-evident. Whereas several sub-themes emerged throughout this work, three of them are presented here for further discussion. We challenge the widespread assumption that informal social contacts should and do occur spontaneously; we point to professionals' wish to work 'professionally' and to control the uncontrollable; and we argue

that the strong focus on child care as a service for individual families can be reconceptualised.

7.4.1. Formalising the informal?

The widespread assumption that people connect easily and spontaneously with one another if they want to do so, previously contested by Joanou, Holiday and Swadener (2012), was also challenged by our observations and conversations with parents. We noticed a tendency to withdraw from intervening in interpersonal relationships. Although parents expressed the idea of individual responsibility in constructing social networks, they also admitted that they felt reluctant to interact for various reasons. As a result, they experienced isolation or observed that their contacts were limited to like-minded people. It is true that spontaneity and creativity in the encounter could and should not be manipulated (especially not to reach a 'higher aim' or goals that have not been negotiated with parents). Nonetheless, we agree with Vandenborre (2014) that it can be facilitated by shaping the space and the intersubjective web (or social fabric) within which encounters *could* (but not should!) take place. More attention could be paid to how the architectural space and the use of objects *script* certain practices while obstructing others. Duncan, Te One and Thomas (2012) offered an example of how the mapping of movements and interactions of adults in an ECEC service encouraged professionals' reflection on the use of space. Changes that were made afterwards redirected—or even re-scripted—the everyday practice. Regarding the social fabric, the occurrence of micro-interactions is influenced by how decisions are made in the service, who is involved, the level of trust within the team, tensions that underlie practice and so on. The influence of the organizational climate cannot be underestimated. Furthermore, when efforts are made to take up a role in processes of social support and social cohesion, ECEC services—but also in the same vein other services like schools—should be attentive of not introducing a new norm, an ideal of how a 'good parent' should (inter)act. The essence of *play* and *childrearing*, as well as the *encounter*, is that it is shaped in concrete relations in the here and now with an unpredictable outcome. Thus, instrumentalising these to reach predefined goals ignores the very essence of these activities (Ramaekers & Suissa, 2012; Vandenborre, 2014). Ramaekers and Suissa argued that it can be functional,

but only if the debate is open to moral reasoning (carrying meanings and values) and thus to ambiguity and uncertainty.

7.4.2. An expert in not being the expert

Aiming to offer parent(ing) support can paradoxically take away the supportive element. In many instances, parents know quite well when they are in need of support, but cannot find the support they look for as formal support is mostly problem-oriented or carries with it such a connotation. We can wonder where parents have the possibility to raise their questions, doubts, frustrations, wanderings, and so on, without being offered one (strategic) solution. Although it is not considered 'professional', small-talk with and among families should not be underestimated. Duncan, Bowden and Smith (2006) stated that "supporting staff and families to 'gossip' and 'yack' in their [early childhood] centres offers real meaningful opportunities for support to be offered" (p. 12), which benefits children, families and the wider community as well. This is not to say that professionals have to distance themselves from *doing pedagogy*, when they no longer function as experts (or not solely as such) in giving educational advice. Our study shows that different conceptions of the professional role are possible and desirable. We referred to one of them as democratic professionalism in chapter 6 (Oberhuemer, 2005; Peeters, 2008). Professionals can act as warrantors of respect for diversity, in the sense that *tegenspraak* (contradiction or dissensus) is safeguarded (Vandenbroeck *et al.*, 2009). Rather than a scientific job, it is a moral undertaking (Ramaekers & Suissa, 2012).

Soenen (2006) already emphasised the importance of semi-public places (like public transport, parks, stores or passage points where a social mix comes across) where multiple roles and relations can alternate and co-exist. Rather than 'neutral' (which denies that they are actually an expression of the dominant discourse), Duyvendak (2011) stated that "the public sphere has to be plural". In a democratic and diverse society, the 'home' of the public sphere is necessarily *hybrid*; neither a haven nor a heaven, but a place one has to share with many others" (p. 121). In this regard, Ghorashi (2010) pleaded for "emptiness", in the sense that "in-between-spaces" are kept free from judgments about the present variety, which is necessary for a moment of

connection to occur. Likewise Vandenborre (2014) refers to *"ontruimde ruimte"* (a "cleared space") as a necessary condition for bringing up children, which amounts to practicing living together, in the here and now.

That professionals in this space do not 'answer' the question of parents in a straight way is not to say that they do not intervene. They do so, for example by listening to the parents' story and taking it seriously, by involving other parents in the debate, by saying something to the child, and so on. It requires a high level of professional development to leave space for the unpredictable to happen, to give voice to the group, and thus to withdraw from intervening in some respect—while at the same time being constantly focused on safeguarding reciprocity with and among diverse families and actively intervening when deemed necessary. Whereas the scripted practices we observed in child care unconsciously hindered or interrupted encounters, professionals working in a CCP actively engaged with those scripts as explained above. The presence of such a script made it possible to experience equity in the (light) encounters with people from diverse backgrounds. The experience of equity (which is not at all self-evident) in turn, appeared to be a precondition to experience social support and social cohesion.

Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that, while professionals working in a CCP can act as experts in not being *the* experts, childcare workers, bearing responsibility for children in the absence of their parents, need to develop expertise in working with a group of children and have to make choices constantly about what they think is good practice with and for children. Democratic professionalism then will be interpreted and practiced differently in child care compared to CCPs. Nonetheless, in both settings outreach to families and communities in constructing good practice is important as is "the professional skill to sensitively discuss pedagogical and ethical viewpoints against a background of increasing cultural, social and economic diversity, to recognize and examine both personal and publicly endorsed assumptions" (Oberhuemer, 2005, p. 14).

Anyway, generating thorough reflection upon their work in highly diverse contexts, becoming aware of scripted practices and possible interventions in

this requires decent working conditions and in-service training. In this regard, Weille (2014) pleaded for

> consultation, peer-supervision, and a place to be able to say how upset, powerless, irritated or alienated we feel in our work. We need to be able to make sense of these feelings in light of what they tell us about the clients, ourselves, and the systems in which we work. (p. 33)

Our case-study in chapter 6 illuminated that a different approach to sustain a reflective culture in the centre yielded significant results, but also that a whole competent system is needed to reconceptualise the roles of ECEC.

7.4.3. Reconceptualising ECEC

Having young children has a tremendous effect on parent's life, at the same time separating them from and integrating them into social contexts. Whereas a service like child care can offer many opportunities for families to extend their social life, this was not self-evidently taking place. Professionals and parents considered child care in the first place as a service for children. Consequently, a strong emphasis on the partnership between the professionals and each individual family was noted that might have influenced the civil inattention among parents when daily dropping off or picking up their child. We argued further that the perception of one's own professional role can hinder experimentation with different roles. Although it is understandable that many childcare workers hold onto a mere technical approach of their professionalism given their precarious professional position throughout history (Peeters, 2008), we follow Oberhuemer (2005) in believing that future conceptualisations should encompass the social, cultural, educational and political significance of their practice. Stigendal (2010) and Duncan and Te One (2012) considered public services like early childhood services and schools crucial sites for providing links between families and their community—and thus for social support and social cohesion. It requires a rethinking of the traditional child-centred philosophies with an openness to diverse people to enable interaction for confrontation and consensus-building anchored in local contexts. It is in these micro-practices that parenting and living together are shaped.

> Innovative forms of solidarity in diversity can emerge from concrete interpersonal practices. These practices do not only generate feelings of togetherness and belonging, but allow culturally diverse subjects to make issues of recognition, representation and redistribution visible and public. Such practices are located in relationally constituted places that become sites for everyday negotiation and agonism. As such, solidarity in diversity is dependent on subjectivating practices where learning is not triggered by claims of commonality or sameness, but can result from being exposed to the otherness of others and their voicing of issues of recognition, representation and redistribution (Oosterlynck, Loopmans, Schuermans, Vandenabeele & Zemni, 2015, p. 16)

Families' lives are far more complex and ambivalent than often acknowledged in service-providing. They are highly relational, and thus unpredictable; take place in certain (non-)favourable contexts; and are interspersed with (clashes of) norms and values. Only if services (and social policy with them) start to re-value the reciprocal bonds that are formed in the here and now among diverse people consisting of a range of intimate to more ephemeral interactions, can the supportive and cohesive potential flourish. Whereas documentation of democratic moments taking place is worth a great deal, we should recognize our inability to grasp or even measure 'the social' in its full sense.

> One should not row against the rippling stream of ephemeral relations to reach a higher purpose. The inherent ambiguity cannot be solved but prompts us to be modest and resists a scientific over-determination of the everyday experience. […] They are whimsical, precocious, unpredictable, and crabby. Letting go of control and going along with this stream of ephemeral relations is the only way to be introduced into the magic of it. (Soenen, 2009, p. 216)

7.5. Reflections on the act of doing research

7.5.1. Limitations of the study

As described in chapter 1 and discussed above, family-related choices profoundly influenced our research track. Also research-related choices made

us follow certain paths and not others. An important limitation of the research at hand is the limited focus on children's voices and the community perspectives. Neither were chosen as the primary focus of our analysis and thus were only indirectly included. Our strong effort to focus on parents' stories was prompted by (an indignation over) the finding that parents are repeatedly instrumentalised for children's well-being and learning outcomes (and thus the future welfare of the nation):

> One problem is […] that most programmes do not depart from the questions, problems and needs that are formulated or felt by parents themselves. One could say that parents often are used as gateways that give access to the behaviour and development of the child but are not supported by their own right. (Hermanns, 2014, p. 17–18)

Therefore, we emphasised diverse parental experiences, as parents should have a say in discussions about their child, instead of being evaluated "against one or another standard of what children need" (Weille, 2014, p. 30). Asking parents what they find supportive does not mean that we assume parents should be 'delivered' everything they ask for, yet it is an appeal to engage in a reciprocal dialogue with the families (and communities) and to take up the discussion with them right from the start, wherever in time that may be. It is important to foster debate about what it means to take care of children in contexts marked by an increasing diversity and mobility of people, both of which are seen as challenging social support and social cohesion (Duyvendak, 2011). In the same vein, we notice that CCP are Centres *for* Children and Parents. One could argue for more ownership by families and thus for other prepositions. Yet, this *for* emphasizes an engagement of society towards families instead of making them solely responsible for taking in the space and support they need; it symbolises an engagement to reflect upon perspectives *on* families, expectations *towards* families and relations *with* parents in social work practices as public services.

Another limitation of our research is that no observations were carried out in the CCPs. Therefore, we relied on parents' accounts of the course of an opening moment to argue that the professionals working in the CCP install a certain script. It was only thanks to our field work in the childcare centres that we came about the existence of scripted practices, and thus could identify

different scripts operating in a CCP. Moreover, we stated that the CCP reach a diverse mix of families. Yet there is an important group of people, namely fathers, that are underrepresented in these services and consequently in our focus groups (which only three fathers joined). A huge potential resides in child care since many fathers are bringing in and picking up their child (based on our observations, we would say as much as mothers are).

Regarding our interviews with parents making use of child care, the results considering the negative impact of mobility on families' social networks might have been over-emphasised due to our choice of neighbourhoods, as both areas are marked by a high mobility of its residents. Nevertheless, we believe it is necessary to investigate the social dynamics in such transient contexts, as many families inhabit them in a crucial period of their lives. Furthermore, the majority of the focus groups and interviews were held in the service parents frequented, as these were well-known and easily accessible places. Yet this might have influenced their willingness to speak critically about the practices going on and the professionals working there. Whereas we opted to leave the choice of location for the individual interviews up to the parents, reflection on the impact of the space needs to guide future research.

Personally, doing academic research was not a matter of course from the beginning. Although I have to admit that the past five years were enriching in various ways, I have wondered multiple times if the insights and subsequent questions this dissertation would generate wouldn't be too *banal* at all—that simple that they might be waved aside as *common sense*, just like the crumbs are swept off the table, while these crumbs carry the essence in them as much as the whole bread. Looking back, I believe that the themes discussed in this dissertation should be considered as a necessary re-discovery of what has become somewhat forgotten: the magic and messiness of everyday human life. In the current climate, dominated by a desire to measure social life as if it were physics, and marked by a belief that we can predict and consequently prevent future outcomes, *scientific* research that 'captures' the banalities of social life—such as drinking and pouring coffee—that appear to be not that banal after all, seems needed in order to influence policy and practice.

But what constitutes scientific research? Is what I did an academic approach? How am I (allowed) to be involved personally in this venture? As my research process appeared to be an unpredictable journey, influenced by methodological (re)directions on the road and family-related issues crossing it, it is questionable if someone could carry out the *same* research and if he/she would emphasize similar points. In my view, doing fieldwork and engaging in data analysis is inevitably a process of *being touched* by particularities, and consequently engaging in a search for possible understandings from a non-judgemental perspective. The dialogical approach I've lived up to, interviewing parents about the observations made, (re-)consulting the practitioners involved and discussing the results with co-researchers, strengthened the reliability of the insights gained, but the research was undoubtedly influenced by my own experience.

7.5.2. Research and personal life *in tandem*

As discussed above, research-related choices made us follow certain paths and not others. Yet, as described in chapter 1, my research track has intersected with personal life. Doing research on a topic that was closely connected to my life history (the synchronicity of the topic of my research and my personal life cannot be denied: I gave birth twice during my research period) was both advantageous and challenging. My field role as a mother allowed me to gain an insider's perspective (see also De Graeve, 2012 for an extensive account on this). Having young children myself, I experienced a lack of sleep and issues regarding children and social support (besides that, I also moved several times during my research). The shared experience of parenting generated an important ground for mutual understanding with the parents I interviewed and enacted supportive feelings on both sides: for the parents interviewed (see also chapter 1) and for myself. At the same time, it challenged me to take up an *attitude of strangeness* (Neuman, 2011), not assuming that similar experiences meant similar understandings. Further, as I brought my second child to childcare centre A after finishing the data collection there, I experienced an increase in my own (light) encounters as a user of that service, which I didn't experience in the previous day care centre I used. As such, several research and life events have influenced my perspective on the themes at hand. While there is much to say for an outsider perspective,

I sensed that I had to learn some lessons in life before I could discuss some results more in depth. To give just one example: a mother participating in the focus groups with parents visiting a CCP, emphasised the value of *'simply being here for a while'*. While I included her expression already from the very beginning in the analysis, it was only later that I came to an understanding of the essential meaning of addressing life as it unfolds in the here and now. I, as a researcher, as a woman living in the 21st century, living in Ghent, mother of two children, daughter of a newly-composed family—and so on—had to re-discover these themes as well. Having internalised bits and pieces of dominant ways of thinking, setting myself certain goals to reach and externally defined expectations to live up to, I almost forgot to live in the here and now.

Throughout the process, I have asked myself if the results I'd come with would not merely be a confirmation of what I was looking for (e.g. ECEC as spaces for social support and social cohesion, the value of diversity for the upbringing and living together, etc.). Looking back at the person I was when I began this research five years ago, and the person I have become, I can say that doing this research—listening and talking to parents and professionals, observing what is taking place, reading literature—highly influenced my way of thinking and thus was mutually influential. Just as we emphasised that social support and social cohesion are intrinsically *social*, research and practice are inevitably processes of co-construction and thus relationally constituted. To come back to the notion of science, let us say *social* science, the question is not whether the results I presented here are the one and only 'truth' and can be extracted from reality as observable facts, but rather if the results generated, contribute to an increased understanding of current practices and offer the possibility for well-grounded reflection on the matters at stake.

7.6. Implications for policy and practice

This dissertation addresses important unquestioned and accepted notions of social support, social cohesion and diversity and unveils certain scripts that reinforce prevailing ECEC discourses and practices, assumptions that may be the very causes of the lack of social support and social cohesion experienced in ECEC services. We're not the first though to point out that ECEC needs to be

reconsidered as a public service. According to Moss (2012) ECEC holds multiple roles, just like schools (should) do. Likewise, other researchers claimed that

> it is time to transcend the traditional discourses that view early childhood centres as support for working parents, as compensatory programs for children with additional needs (disadvantaged children) and as programs for developing school readiness. By changing attitudes and policies early childhood services can be reformulated to assume the critical task of developing and facilitating social relationships, networks and interagency collaborations—and take a central role in building communities and civil society. (Hayden & MacDonald, 2000, as cited in Duncan & Te One, 2012, p. 4)

Policy discourses already took up this need for a change in focus, e.g. in the ET 2020 framework (European Commission, 2015) and in the Starting Strong II report (OECD, 2006). The latter addressed attention for ECEC services as possible sites of social support and social cohesion stating that

> there is a need for early childhood centres to respond to the changing social context—to high levels of child poverty in the English-speaking world, to the far greater diversity in families and child-rearing; to the large numbers of children and families in need of social and psychological support, to the needs and expectations of working parents, etc. 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)

However, six years later, in the Starting Strong III report entitled *A Quality Toolbox for Early Childhood Education and Care*, this attention was translated as follows:

> Community engagement is also increasingly seen as an important policy lever. It can act as a "connector" between families and ECEC services as well as other services for children; a "social network" to support parents in reducing stress and making smart choices, especially for disadvantaged families; an "environment" to promote social cohesion and public order; and

> a "source of resources". Similar challenges are reported for community engagement as for parents, such as lack of awareness and motivation on the community's side as well as communication among communities and with ECEC services. (OECD, 2012, p. 12)

The instrumentalisation of parent and community engagement for 'higher' purposes like reducing stress and promoting public order goes hand in hand with a targeted approach, and problematises the parents and communities at stake. It illustrates the pitfall of *incorporating* an idea—in this case, that ECEC is a life space and that "the state can become the guarantor of democratic discussion and experimentation at local level" (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005, as cited in OECD, 2006, p. 10), without re-thinking the whole *corpus*, i.e. the whole system.

All too often, social support and social cohesion are perceived *either* as separate policy aims, requiring distinct services (e.g. the parent support sector and community work), *or* regular services are instrumentalised 'to reach' a predefined conception of a supportive and cohesive society. In so doing, the social dynamics as they take place between heterogeneous people in specific contexts, consisting of a range of ephemeral to more intimate interactions, are neglected, as is the key role services play in processes of social support and social cohesion when a social mix is present. The *social* function of all public services, has to be seriously taken into account if we wish not to reinforce existing inequalities but to shape "the social terrain in which some families struggle while others may easily thrive" (Fram, 2005, p. 516).

In Flanders, the recently renewed regulatory framework on the organisation of preventive family support that leads to the development of *Huizen van het Kind* (Family Centres) includes attention for social support, facilitating encounters and social cohesion (Blondeel, De Schuymer, Strynckx & Travers, 2013). Also, the recently developed pedagogical framework for child care in Flanders states that child care has the task to recognize and contribute to solidarity among parents and to promote inclusion and social cohesion (MeMoQ, 2014). These legislative developments are necessary to sustain innovative practice but are not sufficient. The whole ECEC system (including the *Huizen van het Kind*) needs to be reconsidered in light of ECEC's contribution to the principles of social justice, human rights, collective

responsibility and respect for diversities. Instead of places where families and communities are introduced into the existing socio-political order, ECEC services could be thought of as places where professionals create space (as a quality of atmosphere) for families and communities to reflect with each other about what it means to live together. ECEC services, then, are sites where one can engage in the experiment of democracy, going beyond existing identities—that is, an ongoing and unpredictable process (Biesta, 2011).

To date, resistance is felt from within the childcare work field to have to fulfil yet 'another task', for which they do not feel prepared. Initiatives like the CCP that are oriented towards stimulating play and meeting opportunities for children and their parents, and thus put the social function at the heart of their work, have (long had) a marginal position in Flanders but are challenged to introduce their practice-based knowledge—and with that, position themselves—into the wider field of ECEC. Among other things, it can bear fruit to locate CCPs in settings where families naturally come across. Furthermore, CCP professionals' knowledge can be included in pre- and in-service trainings. For that, engaging in pedagogical documentation that makes their practices more visible can be enriching for those directly involved, as well as those interested in facilitating encounters among diverse people. Exchange of staff in child care and CCP can be another incentive, as it offers the possibility to circulate childcare workers' educational expertise in working with (groups of) children and CCP professionals' expertise in engaging with parents (both individually and socially) (see for instance the Italian practice, Di Giandomenico & Picchio, 2014). Taking into account the lessons learned from CCP and child care in this dissertation, a focus on informal encounters among diverse people should not lead to formalising this into a method since it is exactly the unconditional atmosphere, the openness for dis-order that generates opportunities for exchange.

Therefore, rather than including attention to the social function as a separate subject to teach, the whole curriculum of pre-service training (to become a childcare worker, nursery school teacher, pedagogical coach, etc.) needs to depart from ECEC's contribution to the principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities. Future professionals need to be prepared to work with groups of not only children but families, and

even the broader community as well. As urged by the OECD (2006) "new skills and understandings about community and society will be critical" (p. 167). Professionals will play a crucial role in inclusion and exclusion processes and how diversity is approached. Perhaps, a shift in perception towards diversity as *a resource* (Sharmahd, 2009) is needed throughout the whole curriculum, to allow diverse youngsters to find their place in childcare education programmes as well. As is the case in the Bachelor training programme for the pedagogical coaches, pre-service training should engage students in reflective practice (see Peeters, 2008 and the CoRe research for further suggestions on this part). Besides reflection on personal and professional normative frameworks of reference, the intervision meetings should include attention for how actual interactions are shaped in daily practice, the verbal and non-verbal phrasing supporting these actions and the use of physical space guiding the professionals' practice. Teams have to become aware of the scripts operating in the service to change them according to the service's actual mission.

That brings us to the need for intervision and ongoing in-service training within and/or across teams. Non-contact hours for staff to reflect upon their work and to be supported in broadening their perspectives should be available to every practitioner, taking place in the presence of the entire team of childcare workers, coordinator, pedagogical coach and logistic support (it seems almost too obvious to say, but adequate public investments, good staff/child ratio, decent working conditions, increasing the proportion of staff with Bachelor degrees and continuity of staff are of course necessary [Urban, Vandenbroeck, Van Laere, Lazzari & Peeters, 2012], as well as satisfactory indoor and outdoor space). Monthly team meetings of 2–4 hours, in which time is allotted for practical as well as reflective concerns, are a minimum. Tools like Wanda, used in childcare centre A, can support reflection during such meetings and generate a reflective culture in the long term. It can be an important mechanism to enhance democratic professionalism that "presupposes an awareness of 'multiple ways of knowing', an understanding that knowledge is in fact contestable" (Oberhuemer, 2005, p. 14). This goes back to our plea above for experts not being *the* experts.

The same suggestions concern the construction of the *Huizen van het Kind*. If these sites do not want to suffer from the same flaw as the 'OECD switch' from 2006 to 2012, and thus instrumentalise social support and social cohesion, the whole system (consisting of structures and people) that contributes to it, needs to 'breath' the social function. Therefore, existing normative frames that take educational expertise as a starting point to support families and that underpin certain scripted practices need to be examined and reconsidered in light of the new aims included in the recent legislative frameworks. Probably, it will require a well-considered (change in) personnel policy and thorough coaching on working in diverse settings to avoid adverse effects, leading to even less support and cohesion. Although we call for revaluing the *social* in social work practices as sites of social support and social cohesion, modesty is called for. Our research raises questions about the measurability of the social in social practices, but does illustrate that listening, observing and documenting the social, in dialogue with those involved, making space for free confrontation, is a crucial activity in evaluating the quality of a service.

7.8. References

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Nederlandstalige samenvatting

Sociale steun en sociale cohesie in voorzieningen voor jonge kinderen: een onderzoek naar interacties tussen ouders en tussen ouders en professionelen.

Uit voorgaand onderzoek is gebleken dat steun uit informele sociale netwerken (met name de relaties die men aangaat met familie, vrienden, kennissen, collega's, buren, etc.) voor *alle* gezinnen van cruciaal belang is (Buysse, 2008; Fram, 2005; Jack, 2000). Hoe het ouderschap de reeds bestaande sociale netwerken beïnvloedt, is echter niet eenduidig. Sommige onderzoekers stelden vast dat deze netwerken gelijk bleven (Belsky & Rovine, 1984; Bost, Cox, Burchinal & Payne, 2002); anderen observeerden een vermindering in het sociale leven van ouders (Bidart & Lavenu, 2005; Fram, 2005) of een verandering in het voordeel van meer contacten met mensen die nabij wonen (Kalmijn, 2012). Vlaams onderzoek wees er op dat kansen voor uitbreiding van netwerken echter ongelijk verdeeld zijn: zo leidt het gebruik van kinderopvang tot grotere netwerken voor wie al grotere netwerken heeft, maar niet (of minder) voor wie kleinere netwerken heeft (Segaert, 2007; Vandenbroeck, Boonaert, Van der Mespel & De Brabandere, 2009).

Veel onderzoek is reeds verricht naar het belang van hechte, intieme, duurzame relaties, bijvoorbeeld in het opvoeden van jonge kinderen. Over het algemeen blijken mensen nu eenmaal geneigd om duurzame relaties aan te gaan met anderen waar ze veel mee gemeenschappelijk hebben (Bidart & Lavenu, 2005; Buysse, 2008). Dergelijke duurzame netwerken worden beschouwd als een belangrijke bron van sociale steun (*social support* genaamd in de Engelstalige literatuur) omdat het een buffer kan vormen tegen stress, depressie en andere psychologische problemen bij ouders (zie bv. Osborne & Rhodes, 2001). Sociale steun zou het welzijn van ouders en bijgevolg ook hoe ouders hun kinderen opvoeden, bevorderen (zie bv. Castillo & Fenzl-Crossman, 2010; Oravecz, Osteen, Sharpe & Randolph, 2011) en negatief gedrag ten aanzien van de kinderen voorkomen (zie bv. Coohey, 2007). Als een gevolg van deze bevindingen, is er veelvuldig onderzoek gedaan naar de aan-/afwezigheid van sociale steun bij 'risico-groepen', zoals eenoudergezinnen (zie bv. Winkworth, McArthur, Layton & Thompson, 2010), tienerouders (zie bv. McLeod, Baker & Black, 2006), gezinnen met een laag inkomen (zie bv. Green & Rodgers, 2001), etnische minderheden (zie bv.

Crowley & Curenton, 2011), enzovoort. Men lijkt er van uit te gaan dat deze ouders zullen falen in hun ouderlijke verantwoordelijkheden, zonder de context waarin veel van deze gezinnen met jonge kinderen (over)leven in rekening te brengen. Een sterke gerichtheid vanuit de hulpverlening op het werken met individuele gezinnen, versterkt deze tendens.

Uit ons literatuuronderzoek (zie hoofdstuk 2) blijkt dat de notie *social support* bijna altijd vooraf en extern aan de betrokkenen gedefinieerd wordt: aan de hand van bestaande kwantitatieve vragenlijsten die ouders invullen, tracht men de mate van sociale steun te 'meten'. Heel wat mogelijke betekenissen en contextuele informatie die cruciaal is om processen van sociale steun te begrijpen, komen hierdoor niet aan bod. Zo wordt bijvoorbeeld zelden of niet gepeild naar de betekenis van kortstondige contacten met mensen die men niet kent maar wel tegenkomt op (semi-)publieke plaatsen. Sarason & Sarason (2009) stellen dat schijnbaar oppervlakkige contacten die ons een gevoel geven van aanvaard worden, van ergens bij horen, echter veel belangrijker kunnen zijn in het beeld van onszelf en de ander dan dat we voor mogelijk houden.

Daar komt nog bij dat de huidige focus op duurzame relaties tussen gelijkgestemden, in contrast staat met de feitelijke realiteit waarin veel gezinnen vandaag leven. Die context is, zeker in de steden, steeds diverser te noemen en wordt gekenmerkt door veelvuldige verhuisbewegingen, zowel binnen als over de landsgrenzen heen (Duyvendak, 2009).

Net zoals sociale steun – dominant ingevuld als het kunnen beroep doen op een netwerk van duurzame relaties – belangrijk wordt gezien voor het functioneren van het gezin; zo ook wordt sociale cohesie – meestal ingevuld als het bestaan van een hechte gemeenschap dat het eens is over centrale waarden en normen – noodzakelijk beschouwd voor een sterke en gezonde samenleving (Hipp & Perrin, 2006; Kearns & Forrest, 2000). De toegenomen aandacht voor sociale cohesie op de beleidsagenda, zowel nationaal als internationaal, kan begrepen worden als een reactie op de snelle veranderingen waar we mee geconfronteerd worden en als een wens om het sociale weefsel te herstellen. Veelal wordt sociale cohesie, zowel in het wetenschappelijke als het beleidsdiscours, echter geïnstrumentaliseerd (in

functie van een 'hoger' te bereiken doel, niet zelden economisch van aard) en verengd tot een focus op socio-economische en politieke belangen (meer sociale controle, minder wanorde en criminaliteit, etc.). De ethische (en normatieve) vragen en keuzes die ermee gepaard gaan, verdwijnen al te vaak uit beeld (Novy, Swiatek & Moulaert, 2012). De grote verhalen met betrekking tot sociale cohesie schenken bovendien vooral aandacht aan de percepties van meerderheids- en minderheidsgroepen ten aanzien van elkaar. Wat er feitelijk gebeurt in het alledaagse kleine ontmoeten, komt zelden ter sprake (Soenen, 2006, 2009).

De toegenomen diversiteit, vaak verengd tot etnisch-culturele en socio-economische verschillen, wordt zowel in wetenschappelijke literatuur, als beleidsdiscours en populaire media voorgesteld en gezien als een bedreiging voor de gangbare invulling van sociale steun en sociale cohesie. Daarbij leeft de veronderstelling dat wie een bepaald kenmerk deelt (zoals een bepaalde origine), ook hetzelfde *is* en dat men verschilt van degenen met een andere origine. In dit doctoraatsonderzoek vertrekken we vanuit een meervoudige en dynamische kijk op identiteit (Geldof, 2006; Neudt & Maly, 2010; Vandenbroeck, 2007; Verstraete & Pinxten, 2002), wat onder meer inhoudt dat mensen verschillende rollen aannemen in verschillende contexten (of zelfs meerdere rollen binnen één en dezelfde context, bijvoorbeeld in een kinderdagverblijf kan iemand zowel vader, Spaanstalig als Brusselaar zijn en daarop aangesproken worden). Een anti-essentialistische opvatting van diversiteit, laat een bredere interpretatie van verschil en gelijkenis toe, evenals het gelijktijdig aanwezig zijn ervan.

Tot op heden was er in het huidig onderzoek en beleid slechts beperkt aandacht voor de vele mogelijke betekenisconstructies van het kleine ontmoeten tussen diverse mensen als belangrijk onderdeel van het samen-leven (Soenen, 2006). De mogelijke rol(len) die publieke en semi-publieke plaatsen daarin vervullen, is evenzeer vrijwel ongekend. Voorschoolse voorzieningen, als transitieruimtes tussen het private en het publieke, vormen een interessant onderzoeksterrein. Temeer omdat we deze voorzieningen, naast een economische en pedagogische functie, ook een sociale functie toeschrijven. Die sociale functie, als het leveren van een bijdrage aan een meer rechtvaardige samenleving, wordt al te vaak verengd tot een kwestie

van toegankelijkheid voor kwetsbare groepen (Vandenbroeck, De Visscher, Van Nuffel & Ferla, 2008). Echter, voorschoolse voorzieningen bieden een uitstekend terrein om de relatie tussen het private en het publieke, tussen micro- en macro-praktijken, onderwerp van continu debat te maken (Urban, Vandenbroeck, Van Laere, Lazzari & Peeters, 2012). Het zijn dus evengoed plaatsen waar kinderen, ouders en andere volwassenen in relatie kunnen treden tot de ander, waar momenten van sociale steun en sociale cohesie kunnen plaatsvinden.

In dit onderzoek richten we ons op de feitelijke interacties die zich al dan niet afspelen in dergelijke voorzieningen waar diverse mensen elkaar tegenkomen, de betekenisconstructies die hiermee gepaard gaan en het beleid dat daar al dan niet op gevoerd wordt (of anders gezegd: de beleidspraktijken die bepaalde ontmoetingen wel en andere niet mogelijk maken). Daarbij is het belangrijk om processen van sociale steun en sociale cohesie in concrete praktijken te onderzoeken, waarbij de context waarin interacties plaatsvinden, meegenomen wordt. Bovendien is het cruciaal om de betrokkenen, in dit geval de ouders, zelf aan het woord te laten: wat is voor hen ondersteunend in hun leven met jonge kinderen in een diverse stad? En welke rol speelt een plek als de kinderopvang of een spel- en ontmoetingsplaats daarin?

Dit doctoraat bestaat uit 7 hoofdstukken. In het inleidend hoofdstuk worden de bovengenoemde concepten sociale steun, sociale cohesie en diversiteit uitvoerig besproken in relatie tot de sociale functie van de kinderopvang. De onderzoeksvragen en de piste van onderzoek wordt uiteengezet, evenals een aantal methodologische kwesties. In de 5 daaropvolgende hoofdstukken, komen de verschillende onderzoeksvragen aan bod. Het geheel wordt afgerond in hoofdstuk 7 met een uitvoerige discussie.

Hoofdstuk	Onderzoeksvragen	Methodologisch opzet
2	Welke invulling krijgt sociale steun (*social* support) in relatie tot het ouderschap in de literatuur? Wat weten we over ouders hun ervaring m.b.t. sociale steun? Welke rollen schrijven onderzoekers toe aan sociaal-werkpraktijken betreffende sociale steun in contexten gekenmerkt door diversiteit?	Literatuuronderzoek
3	Is het mogelijk om informele ontmoetingen te organiseren in voorzieningen waar een sociale mix aanwezig is? Als interacties feitelijk plaatsvinden tussen ouders van diverse achtergronden, hoe worden deze gefaciliteerd? Hoe geeft het team van de spel- en ontmoetingsplaats in de dagelijkse verslagen betekenis aan de interacties in relatie tot sociale steun?	Analyse van de registratiegegevens en de dagelijkse verslagen m.b.t. de interacties zoals bijgehouden door het team; analyse van de vragenlijsten ingevuld door ouders die Baboes bezoeken
4	Hoe ervaren ouders hun bezoeken aan een spel- en ontmoetingsplaats? Welke beleidspraktijken ervaren ouders als ondersteunend? Wat betekent dit voor de voorzieningen die diverse ouders (en gemeenschappen) wensen te ondersteunen?	Focusgroepen met ouders over hun ervaringen in een spel- en ontmoetingsplaats
5	Welk soort interacties beschouwen ouders als ondersteunend in hun leven met jonge kinderen in diverse stedelijke contexten? (Waar) vinden ouders dergelijke contacten?	Gesprekken met ouders
6	Welke interacties vinden plaats in kinderopvang en tussen wie? Hoe worden beleidspraktijken	Casestudy bestaande uit observaties in twee kinderdagverblijven,

Hoofdstuk	Onderzoeksvragen	Methodologisch opzet
	betreffende sociale steun en sociale cohesie vorm gegeven? Welke rollen schrijven ouders toe aan kinderopvang betreffende sociale steun en sociale cohesie in contexten gekenmerkt door diversiteit?	documentanalyse, (veld)interviews met ouders en professionelen
7	Interveniëren voorzieningen voor jonge kinderen in processen van sociale steun en sociale cohesie, en zo ja, hoe? Wat is (of zou) de grondreden om te interveniëren in informele sociale netwerken (kunnen zijn)?	Cross-analyse van het veldwerk in de twee contexten, met name kinderopvang en spel- en ontmoetingsplaatsen

Na het literatuuronderzoek in hoofdstuk 2, waar we hierboven reeds op ingingen, belichten we in hoofdstuk 3 informele ontmoetingen tussen diverse ouders in een voorziening in Brussel, met name Baboes, een spel- en ontmoetingsplaats voor kinderen en ouders. Op basis van de registratiegegevens en dagelijkse verslagen met betrekking tot de interacties, bijgehouden door het team, stelden we veelvuldige interacties vast tussen gezinnen van zogenaamde diverse socio-economische en etnisch-culturele groepen. Niet zelden treden kinderen op als belangrijke 'brokers van relaties' (Soenen, 2006): zij zijn frequent de aanleiding voor een eerste contact, waarna het gesprek al dan niet verder evolueert en bredere maatschappelijke thema's raakt. De aanwezigheid van de kinderen bleek in dit deel van het onderzoek de uitbreiding van sociale netwerken te bevorderen, evenals processen van steun en samenleven. De aanwezigheid van professionelen leek bovendien cruciaal in het faciliteren van ontmoetingen en het openhouden van de ruimte, niet alleen voor een diversiteit aan gezinnen, maar evenzeer voor een diversiteit aan opvattingen, betekenissen, gebruiken, manieren van aanwezig zijn, etc. Die ruimte voor diversiteit en ont-moeting, wat zoveel betekent als het 'beginnen tegenkomen', het 'botsen op iets anders' (Vandenborre, 2014) maakte vrije confrontatie mogelijk, ondanks/dankzij de tegenstellingen die er tegelijkertijd plaatsvonden (wat Soenen ambivalentie noemt, 2006, 2009). Terwijl gezinnen vrij waren in wat ze met die confrontatie deden, was het geenszins een vrijblijvende kwestie: vanzelfsprekendheden

werden op dat moment hoe dan ook in vraag gesteld. We besloten dat in een dergelijke sociale ruimte het democratisch experiment (Biesta, 2011) kan beoefend worden: kinderen, ouders en professionelen zijn dan allen actoren in de discussie wat het betekent om samen te leven en zorg te dragen voor jonge kinderen.

Om te begrijpen of en wanneer de interacties in spel- en ontmoetingsplaatsen door ouders als ondersteunend worden ervaren, organiseerden we 6 focusgroepen. In totaal namen 29 moeders, 3 vaders en 1 nanny deel die een spel- en ontmoetingsplaats in Brussel of Antwerpen bezochten. In hoofdstuk 4 gaan we dieper in op de rol die dergelijke voorschoolse voorzieningen, als transitieruimtes tussen het private en het publieke, spelen in het leven van gezinnen. Voor het overgrote merendeel van de ouders bleek de aanwezigheid van een professional in de ruimte het verschil te maken met andere meer publieke of meer private plaatsen. De ervaring van gelijkwaardigheid, eerder dan gelijkheid of gemeenschappelijkheid, is een belangrijke voorwaarde om van sociale steun te kunnen spreken. Die gelijkwaardigheid en mogelijkheid tot wederkerigheid werd volgens de ouders geïnitieerd door de professionelen die bedreven zijn in het creëren van een gast-vrije ruimte, waar diversiteit alomtegenwoordig is en mag zijn. Binnen die openheid, zorgde de professionele omkadering echter voor een sociaal klimaat waarbinnen bepaalde regels gelden over hoe men met elkaar in die diversiteit kan samen-leven. In contrast met meer publieke ruimtes, waar meestal geen mediërende figuren aanwezig zijn; maar ook in contrast met het private leven, waar diversiteit vaak ver te zoeken is; grijpen de professionelen in de betrokken spel- en ontmoetingsplaatsen in wanneer uitsluiting dreigt en nodigen ze gezinnen uit om het onbekende deel van het gebeuren te laten zijn.

In hoofdstuk 5 analyseren we de getuigenissen van ouders over hun leven met jonge kinderen in een stedelijke context. Op basis van de observaties in 2 kinderdagverblijven die werden uitgevoerd als onderdeel van de casestudy, spraken we met 18 ouders (8 vaders, 10 moeders) die verschilden op vlak van hun sociale aanwezigheid in het kinderdagverblijf en een aantal achtergrondkenmerken (gender, origine, moedertaal, burgerlijke staat, gezinsgrootte en periode in kinderdagverblijf). Opmerkelijk veel ouders

deelden een ervaring van isolement, van op zichzelf aangewezen zijn. Ze benoemden de intensieve zorgen die jonge kinderen vragen met een gebrek aan goede nachtrust en bijgevolg energie. Verder benadrukten velen onder hen de toegenomen migratie, zowel verhuisbewegingen naar de stad van elders in het land, als van en naar het buitenland. Beide elementen zetten hun sociale netwerken ernstig onder druk, evenals hun gevoel van verbondenheid met de plek waar ze wonen. Terwijl sommigen de aanwezige diversiteit in de buurt als een drempel ervoeren om de ander te ontmoeten, zagen anderen het net als een kans om in die veel-heid zelf een plek te vinden. We stelden vast dat ouders zowel op zoek zijn naar kortstondige contacten met onbekenden in hun leefomgeving, als behoefte hebben aan duurzame relaties met familie, vrienden, kennissen (en de vele vormen daar tussenin). Echter, het bleek niet evident in de stedelijke contexten waar ze woonden, gekenmerkt door een grote mate van diversiteit en veel mobiliteit, om dergelijke contacten te ervaren. Ook al kwamen de ouders dagelijks andere ouders – uit de buurt! – tegen in het kinderdagverblijf, toch voelden verschillende onder hen zich op dit moment in hun leven sterk geïsoleerd. Plaatsen waar ouders anderen de facto tegenkomen, bleken dus niet automatisch ook ontmoetings-plaatsen of plekken van sociale steun en sociale cohesie te zijn. Verschillende ouders misten een plek waar men nog werkelijk tijd en aandacht maakt voor elkaar en waar nieuwe verbindingen kunnen ontstaan tussen bestaande groepen. In welke mate de verantwoordelijkheid hiervoor bij ouders ligt, dan wel (voor)schoolse voorzieningen daarin een rol moeten / zouden / kunnen vervullen, wordt besproken.

Hoofdstuk 6 behelst de uitgebreide casestudy van twee kinderdagverblijven, elk gelegen in een diverse buurt in een (groot)stedelijke context. Om de beleidspraktijken in kaart te brengen, keken we zowel naar hoe de twee kinderdagverblijven hun werk voorstellen (documentanalyse), als wat professionelen en ouders feitelijk doen (observaties) en wat men vertelt over dit handelen (gesprekken). We stelden vast dat verschillende *scripts* de dagelijkse werking doorkruisen. Zo is het beleefd als ouder om de kinderbegeleiders te groeten maar andere ouders net te vermijden; wordt er door het team sterk ingezet op de relatie met elk gezin individueel; of wordt bepaald gedrag impliciet voorgeschreven (bijvoorbeeld of je als ouder al dan niet de leefgroep betreedt). Niettegenstaande dat ouders co-actor waren in

deze processen, dat verschillende ouders graag andere ouders zouden ontmoeten en enkele ouders systematisch braken met deze impliciete scripts, bleken de klemtonen die gelegd werden vanuit beide kinderdagverblijven sterk te bepalen in welke mate en wanneer ontmoetingen tussen ouders mogelijk waren. Naast een sterke gerichtheid op de individuele relatie met elk gezin, bleek ook een sterke nadruk op *kinder*opvang als het zorgen voor kinderen in afwezigheid van de ouders, dit te beïnvloeden. Bovendien, bepaalt het perspectief op de eigen professionele rol als kinderbegeleider mee de ruimte waarin kan geëxperimenteerd worden met verschillende rollen. Die ruimte ligt niet alleen bij de kinderbegeleiders in hun groep, maar hangt samen met percepties en intenties op teamniveau in de organisatie, evenals met bredere opvattingen in de gemeenschap over welke rollen kinderopvang kan spelen. Meer openheid naar ouders toe, ging dan ook gepaard met een sterker democratisch klimaat binnen het team, wat het systemische aspect illustreert.

In het afsluitende hoofdstuk worden de inzichten verworven doorheen de verschillende deelstudies samengebracht. De eigenheid van zowel kinderopvang als spel- en ontmoetingsplaatsen erkennend, is het toch net de confrontatie (en dus niet zozeer de vergelijking) tussen beide, die de vanzelfsprekendheden over wat een goede praktijk behelst, in vraag stelt. In die confrontatie, waarbij men zowel zaken deelt als verschillend is, wordt het gewone net iets minder evident en het ongewone wat meer gewoon. Een belangrijk verschil tussen deze praktijken is de gerichtheid op het *sociale* gebeuren in de ruimte, als oog hebben voor wat zich afspeelt tussen diverse gezinnen en hier al dan niet bewust in tussenkomen (vaak via zeer subtiele ingrepen). We gebruikten de metafoor van de koffie om de aandacht voor dit sociale te illustreren: het gaat om koffie schenken aan individuen, aan de groep en het onvoorspelbare dat daarin besloten ligt de kans geven om de (eigen kijk op de) werkelijkheid te veranderen. De koffie is uiteraard slechts een symbool voor de wederkerige zoekprocessen die mogelijk gemaakt worden door de aanwezigheid van professionelen zoals de medewerkers in een spel- en ontmoetingsplaats. Eerder dan experts in opvoedkundige zaken, trachten deze professionelen gezinnen kansen te bieden om zich er welkom te voelen door een plek te creëren waar men mag verschillen en hiervoor niet veroordeeld wordt. Ze doen dit door respect voor diversiteit in al haar

facetten een centrale plek te geven in hun dagelijks handelen en de ruimte steeds weer te ont-ruimen zoals Vandenborre (2014) het benoemt. Dat betekent tegelijk dat ze in zekere zin aangeven wat er in die (tijdelijk) gedeelde ruimte kan en wat niet kan. Verder stellen we de opvatting dat informele ontmoetingen spontaan moeten gebeuren en een verantwoordelijkheid zijn van ieder individu, ter discussie. We pleiten ervoor om de rol van (voor)schoolse voorzieningen breder te zien dan de economische en pedagogische functie die ze vervullen. Aandacht voor de sociale functie, betekent een positionering als *publieke* voorziening, waar het pedagogische en het sociale, het opgroeien en het samenleven (beiden onderhevig aan ethische en politieke keuzes), onderwerp van onderhandeling zijn. We erkennen daarbij de meerwaarde van een diversiteit aan stemmen en tegenspraak. Tot slot reflecteren we op de rol van wetenschappelijk onderzoek en de plaats van de onderzoeker hierin en komen we tot een aantal implicaties voor beleid en praktijk. We waarschuwen voor enkele valkuilen met betrekking tot de huidige aandacht voor het faciliteren van ontmoetingen, en het opnemen van een rol in processen van sociale steun en sociale cohesie.

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Data Storage Fact Sheets

```
% Data Storage Fact Sheet

% Name/identifier study: Social support and social cohesion in
services for young children: a study of interactions among
parents and between parents and professionals.
% Author: Naomi Geens
% Date: 27/08/2015


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

1a. Main researcher
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Geens, N. & Vandenbroeck, M. (2014). The (ab)sense of a concept
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10 articles most cited and the 26 articles located in the social
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3a. Raw data
-------------------------------------------------------------

* Have the raw data been stored by the main researcher? [ ] YES /
[x] NO
If NO, please justify: The data were collected by Michel
Vandenbroeck

* On which platform are the raw data stored?
  - [ ] researcher PC
  - [ ] research group file server
  - [x] other (specify): filled in questionnaires on paper are
stored by responsible ZAP

* Who has direct access to the raw data (i.e., without
intervention of another person)?
  - [ ] 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: ...
  - [ ] file(s) containing processed data. Specify:
  - [ ] file(s) containing analyses. Specify:
  - [ ] files(s) containing information about informed consent
  - [ ] a file specifying legal and ethical provisions
  - [ ] file(s) that describe the content of the stored files and
how this content should be interpreted. Specify: ...
  - [ ] other files. Specify: ...


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

* Who has direct access to these other files (i.e., without
intervention of another person)?
  - [ ] main researcher
  - [ ] 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:


v0.2
```

```
% Data Storage Fact Sheet

% Name/identifier study: Social support and social cohesion in
services for young children: a study of interactions among
parents and between parents and professionals.
% Author: Naomi Geens
% Date: 27/08/2015


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

1a. Main researcher
------------------------------------------------------------
- name: Naomi Geens
- address: Henri Dunantlaan 2, B-9000 Ghent
- e-mail: naomi.geens@ugent.be (or naomi.geens@hotmail.be)

1b. Responsible Staff Member (ZAP)
------------------------------------------------------------
- name: Michel Vandenbroeck
- address: Henri Dunantlaan 2, B-9000 Ghent
- e-mail: michel.vandenbroeck@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:

Geens, N. (2015). Social support and social cohesion in services
for young children: a study of interactions among parents and
between parents and professionals. (Doctoral dissertation)

Geens, N., Roets, G. & Vandenbroeck, M. (2013). Informal social
support in contexts of diversity: shaping the relationship
between the public and the private sphere. Health and Social Care
in the community, 23(5), 532-540. doi: 10.1111/hsc.12161.

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

The discussion groups with parents


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): a part of the research was done in
cooperation with a master student and two professionals working
at VBJK. They have/had some files on their PC as well. For
example the student has also the audio-files of the focus groups
and the transcripts we worked on; the professionals have the
transcripts and documents containing (preliminary) analysis.
However, only the student and I have access to the names of the
parents involved.

* 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
  - [x] other (specify): Server administrator of the departement
and as specified above, Jochen Devlieghere (UGent), Hester Hulpia
and Veerle Vervaet (both VBJK) might have stored particular sets
of the raw data


```
3b. Other files
---------------------------------------------------------
```

Transcripts of recordings and Analysis

* 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: Transcripts
of recordings
  - [x] file(s) containing analyses. Specify: Files reporting
results
  - [x] files(s) containing information about informed consent
  - [ ] a file specifying legal and ethical provisions
  - [ ] file(s) that describe the content of the stored files and
how this content should be interpreted. Specify: ...
  - [ ] other files. Specify: ...

* On which platform are these other files stored?
  - [x] individual PC
  - [x] research group file server
  - [x] other: PC of colleague researchers

```
* 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
  - [x] other (specify): Server administrator of the departement
and colleague researchers


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

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


v0.2
```

% Data Storage Fact Sheet

% Name/identifier study: Social support and social cohesion in
services for young children: a study of interactions among
parents and between parents and professionals.
% Author: Naomi Geens
% Date: 27/08/2015

1. Contact details
===

1a. Main researcher

- name: Naomi Geens
- address: Henri Dunantlaan 2, B-9000 Ghent
- e-mail: naomi.geens@ugent.be (or naomi.geens@hotmail.be)

1b. Responsible Staff Member (ZAP)

- name: Michel Vandenbroeck
- address: Henri Dunantlaan 2, B-9000 Ghent
- e-mail: michel.vandenbroeck@ugent.be

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Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Ghent, Belgium.

2. Information about the datasets to which this sheet applies
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* Reference of the publication in which the datasets are
reported:

Geens, N. (2015). Social support and social cohesion in services
for young children: a study of interactions among parents and
between parents and professionals. (Doctoral dissertation)

Geens, N. & Vandenbroeck, M. (in review). Families' perspectives
on social support and social cohesion in urban contexts of
diversity. Submitted to the Journal of Family Relations

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

The interviews with parents

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
  - [ ] other (specify): ...

* 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
  - [x] other (specify): Server administrator of the departement

3b. Other files
----

* Which other files have been stored?
  - [x] file(s) describing the transition from raw data to
reported results. Specify: the coding tree is included at the
beginning of the document containing all the transcripts (<KB
Gesprekken met Ouders> en <TT Gesprekken met ouders>)
  - [x] file(s) containing processed data. Specify: Transcripts
of recordings
  - [x] file(s) containing analyses. Specify: Files reporting
preliminary results for discussion (<Intern Verslag van het
onderzoek in Tierlantuin>)
  - [x] files(s) containing information about informed consent
  - [ ] a file specifying legal and ethical provisions
  - [ ] file(s) that describe the content of the stored files and
how this content should be interpreted. Specify: ...
  - [ ] other files. Specify: ...

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

* 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
  - [x] other (specify): Server administrator of the departement

4. Reproduction
===

```
* Have the results been reproduced independently?: [ ] YES / [x]
NO

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


v0.2
```

```
% Data Storage Fact Sheet

% Name/identifier study: Social support and social cohesion in
services for young children: a study of interactions among
parents and between parents and professionals.
% Author: Naomi Geens
% Date: 27/08/2015


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

1a. Main researcher
----------------------------------------------------------
- name: Naomi Geens
- address: Henri Dunantlaan 2, B-9000 Ghent
- e-mail: naomi.geens@ugent.be (or naomi.geens@hotmail.be)

1b. Responsible Staff Member (ZAP)
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- name: Michel Vandenbroeck
- address: Henri Dunantlaan 2, B-9000 Ghent
- e-mail: michel.vandenbroeck@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
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Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Ghent, Belgium.


2. Information about the datasets to which this sheet applies
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* Reference of the publication in which the datasets are
reported:

Geens, N. (2015). Social support and social cohesion in services
for young children: a study of interactions among parents and
between parents and professionals. (Doctoral dissertation)

Geens, N. (2015). A case-study in two childcare centres:
interactions among parents and between parents and professionals

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

Document analysis


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
  - [ ] other (specify): ...

* 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
  - [x] other (specify): Server administrator of the departement


3b. Other files
-----------------------------------------------------------

* Which other files have been stored?
  - [ ] file(s) describing the transition from raw data to
reported results. Specify: ...
  - [ ] file(s) containing processed data. Specify: ...
  - [x] file(s) containing analyses. Specify: Monographs
  - [x] files(s) containing information about informed consent
  - [ ] a file specifying legal and ethical provisions
  - [ ] file(s) that describe the content of the stored files and
how this content should be interpreted. Specify: ...
  - [ ] other files. Specify: ...

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

* 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
  - [x] other (specify): Server administrator of the departement


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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v0.2
```

```
% Data Storage Fact Sheet

% Name/identifier study: Social support and social cohesion in
services for young children: a study of interactions among
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% Author: Naomi Geens
% Date: 27/08/2015


1. Contact details
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1a. Main researcher
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- name: Naomi Geens
- address: Henri Dunantlaan 2, B-9000 Ghent
- e-mail: naomi.geens@ugent.be (or naomi.geens@hotmail.be)

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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:

Geens, N. (2015). Social support and social cohesion in services
for young children: a study of interactions among parents and
between parents and professionals. (Doctoral dissertation)

Geens, N. (2015). A case-study in two childcare centres:
interactions among parents and between parents and professionals

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

The observations held in two child care services


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
  - [ ] other (specify): ...

* 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
  - [x] other (specify): Server administrator of the departement

3b. Other files
----

* Which other files have been stored?
  - [x] file(s) describing the transition from raw data to
reported results. Specify: this is included at the beginning of
the observational reports
  - [x] file(s) containing processed data. Specify: Transcription
of field notes into observational reports
  - [x] file(s) containing analyses. Specify: Coded observations;
files containing preliminary results; written social maps
  - [x] files(s) containing information about informed consent
  - [ ] a file specifying legal and ethical provisions
  - [ ] file(s) that describe the content of the stored files and
how this content should be interpreted. Specify: ...
  - [ ] other files. Specify: ...

* On which platform are these other files stored?
  - [x] individual PC
  - [x] research group file server
  - [x] other: the written social maps are stored in a folder

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

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

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


v0.2
```

```
% Data Storage Fact Sheet

% Name/identifier study: Social support and social cohesion in
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parents and between parents and professionals.
% Author: Naomi Geens
% Date: 27/08/2015


1. Contact details
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- address: Henri Dunantlaan 2, B-9000 Ghent
- e-mail: naomi.geens@ugent.be (or naomi.geens@hotmail.be)

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- e-mail: michel.vandenbroeck@ugent.be

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Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Ghent, Belgium.


2. Information about the datasets to which this sheet applies
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* Reference of the publication in which the datasets are
reported:

Geens, N. (2015). Social support and social cohesion in services
for young children: a study of interactions among parents and
between parents and professionals. (Doctoral dissertation)

Geens, N. (2015). A case-study in two childcare centres:
interactions among parents and between parents and professionals

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

The focusgroup and interviews with professionals working in the
two child care services


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
  - [ ] other (specify): ...

* 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
  - [x] other (specify): Server administrator of the departement

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: Transcription
of recordings
  - [x] file(s) containing analyses. Specify: Coded transcripts
and files containing preliminary results
  - [x] files(s) containing information about informed consent
  - [ ] a file specifying legal and ethical provisions
  - [ ] file(s) that describe the content of the stored files and
how this content should be interpreted. Specify: ...
  - [ ] other files. Specify: ...

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

* 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
  - [x] other (specify): Server administrator of the departement

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

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

```
v0.2
```