

## New developments in Belgian childcare policy and practice

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### Introduction

Belgium has a long history of a split system between education and care. From the very origins of day care, in the second half of the 19th century, the care sector for infants and toddlers evolved quite separately from the education in kindergarten. While kindergarten in Belgium, as in France, was gradually considered as an educational environment that may benefit all children (e.g., Luc 1997), until the 1960s childcare for children below three years of age remained predominantly a charity for the poor, with a strong medical and hygienic emphasis (Vandebroek 2006; Humblet and Vandebroek 2007). Due to growing female employment since the 1970s, childcare gradually also became an economic instrument for equal opportunities for men and women in the labour market. However, early childhood care and education remained a split system: childcare for children below three years of age being under the competence of the Ministries of Welfare, while children from three years on were enrolled in kindergarten (*kleuterschool* or *école maternelle*), as a part of the educational system. Compulsory schooling started at the age of six. In this sense, Belgium shows some typical features of such a 'split system', as described by Bennett (2003): while all

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Table 1. Numbers of childcare places in Belgium (2007).

		Flemish Comm.	French Comm.	Total
Funded and accredited	Centre-based care	15.438	14.630	30.068
	Family Day Care	30.713	9.681	40.394
<i>Total funded</i>		<i>46.151</i>	<i>24.311</i>	<i>70.462</i>
Non-funded	Centre-based care	24.137	6.188	30.325
	Family Day Care	7.068	2.330	9.398
<i>Total non-funded</i>		<i>31.205</i>	<i>8.518</i>	<i>39.723</i>
Grand total		77.356	32.829	110.185

Source: Kind en Gezin, 2008 for the Flemish community; ONE, 2008 for the French speaking community.

kindergarten staff has a bachelor degree, childcare workers have a vocational training to secondary school levels. In addition, while access to kindergarten is universal, there are shortages and waiting lists in childcare, and public spending is far more important in kindergarten than in childcare.

In this article, we focus mainly on recent developments regarding the youngest children (zero to three). As Belgium has decentralised many aspects of governance, since the 1980s, the communities are responsible for all matters regarding education, welfare and culture. This implies that childcare is under the auspices of the Flemish community (approx six million inhabitants), the French community (approximately four million inhabitants) and the (small) German community (approximately 70.000 inhabitants) of Belgium and, consequently, policy evolutions in these autonomous communities may be divergent. Childcare coverage in Flanders has reached the Barcelona targets for some years: there are approximately 35 places per 100 children from zero to three. In the French-speaking community, coverage is approximately 29%.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, almost 100% of the children in both communities are enrolled in kindergarten from three years on. It needs to be noted that the childcare sector in both communities is rather disparate and includes centre-based care as well as family day care. In both types of care, governmentally funded and accredited care coexists with non-funded, market-oriented provisions. Table 1 gives an overview of the number of childcare places in different types of care in both communities in 2007. It is clear that the different types of care have a significantly different proportion in both communities, as a result of two decades of different policies. As Table 1 shows, the differences in coverage between the communities are predominantly caused by the presence of more family day care and more non-funded day care in Flanders.

### Three societal functions

In both the French and the Flemish speaking communities, a growing consensus can be noted among policy makers and leading administrators about the societal functions of childcare. It is generally agreed that childcare should combine three main functions in society. Obviously childcare has an *economic* function that has prevailed for a long time, enabling both men and women to reconcile their parental responsibilities with activities in the labour market.

In recent decades, there has also been more attention to a second function: the *pedagogical* function that is central in the recent Unicef Report Card 8 (Unicef

Innocenti Research Centre 2008). For a growing number of children, childcare is an important socialising milieu, where essential competencies are developed in the foundational stage.

Last, the *social* function of childcare looks at issues of social justice and equal opportunities, and therefore also at issues of accessibility, desirability and parental involvement. Considering the autonomy of the different communities, we separately address new developments in the Flemish and French-speaking community, focusing on changes since the new millennium. Regarding the former, we draw attention to evolutions in policy and practice that concern the *social* function of childcare. Regarding the latter, we focus on evolutions that concern its *pedagogical* functions. These differences reflect both differences in policy focus within the communities and different interests from the authors. This is of course not to say that the Flemish community is not concerned with pedagogical issues or the French-speaking community with social matters. Space however compels us to limit ourselves to those policy aspects that have received most attention in the last decade, and we will focus on the issue of accessibility in Flanders and only shortly touch upon some new developments regarding the pedagogical quality. Inversely we will focus on policy measures regarding pedagogical quality in the French-speaking community and only shortly touch upon some aspects of accessibility. A common conclusion for both communities is that these evolutions present particular challenges to the professionalisation of the workforce. We address these challenges in a common concluding chapter.

### **The social function in the Flemish community**

Regarding the pedagogical quality, the governmental agency Kind en Gezin implemented a self-observation instrument, monitoring wellbeing and involvement and developed by Laevers from the University of Leuven (Laevers et al. 2006). In a very short period of time, in the spring of 2005, over 1500 professionals were sensitised and trained in the use of this self-evaluation system. Since then, all funded and accredited childcare provisions regularly use the system to monitor and discuss their pedagogical quality, while some of the private, non-funded childcare provisions also make use of it.

Notwithstanding the importance of this instrument and its wide implementation, in this article we focus on a more novel development. Since the turn of the millennium, there is a growing attention amongst policy makers, administrators and practitioners towards the accessibility of childcare. Despite the fact that Flanders has for many years reached the Barcelona targets, different studies have showed that places in childcare are not only far too scarce, but that accessibility is unequal. Figures from the governmental agency Kind en Gezin (Van Keer, Bettens and Buysse 2004) show that while 63% of Belgian families regularly make use of childcare provisions, only 24% of ethnic minority families and 22% of poor families use childcare services. There are approximately 11% of children at risk of poverty in Flanders. A more detailed study in Brussels argued that these unequal figures cannot be interpreted as a result of parental choice but rather need to be viewed as being influenced by environmental constraints such as the unequal distribution of places (more places in more affluent neighbourhoods) and the priority criteria set by the management of individual provisions, favouring double-income majority families (Vandenbroeck, De Visscher, Van Nuffel and Ferla 2008). Finally, a large-scale study in 16 Flemish cities, commissioned by the Minister of Welfare, showed that some 10% of families failed in finding

a childcare place and another 10% settled with a place that did not meet their demands. Single-parent families, ethnic minority families and low-income families are overrepresented in those groups that cannot find a suitable place (Market Analysis and Synthesis, 2007). This study also confirmed the results of previous studies, stating that priorities set by managements are to a large extent responsible for this social gap. In short, there has been a growing political awareness that the organisation of Flemish childcare may contribute to existing social inequalities and may be one of the pathways through which poverty is reproduced.

As a first attempt to overcome this early educational gap, the Flemish government agreed that *Kind en Gezin* would fund, from 2004 onwards, small and flexible community-based childcare centres in impoverished neighbourhoods. These community-based childcare centres focus on enrolling children who were predominantly excluded in mainstream provisions. By 2006, 18 of these centres were established (Depoorter 2006) and they succeeded in reaching the targeted populations (Seaux 2006). However, they did not succeed in influencing the access policies of mainstream provisions as policy makers expected, and in some cases even contributed to widening the educational gap by legitimating mainstream managements' decisions not to alter their policies:

In response to the observation that accessibility cannot solely be addressed on the level of individual provisions, an experiment started in 16 pilot regions in 2007. In each of these regions different childcare provisions worked together to develop a common social policy, and a more transparent access policy aimed at taking into account the needs of various populations, similar to (and partially inspired by) the French childcare decree of 2000 (Ministère de l'Emploi et de la Solidarité – CNAF 2000). However, in contrast to the French approach, the Flemish pilot projects were based on voluntary participation and lacked investment in a central leadership, despite the fact that literature shows the crucial role of this leadership to enhance the integration of services (Bertram et al. 2001). After two years of experimenting, the structural effects on accessibility for marginalised families were still very weak. Finally, early 2009, the Flemish government decided to take structural measures. Since then, all funded childcare centres are compelled to reserve 20% of their capacity for single-parent families and families living in poverty and crisis situations. It is of course too early to evaluate to what extent these structural measures will influence enrolment figures.

Paradoxically, the growing attention for the social function of childcare in Flanders is contingent with a rapidly growing privatisation of the field. From 2000 to 2008, the capacity of funded centre-based care grew with 16% (from 13,652 to 15,864 places). Yet, in the same period, the capacity of the non-funded, private (market-oriented) childcare centres grew by 250% (from 11,215 to 28,112 places). In the Flemish case, there are two major differences between funded and market provisions. Funded provisions have strict regulations regarding the required training for all childcare staff, while market-oriented provisions have no requirements for staff qualifications. In funded provisions, parents pay according to their income, while market provisions set their own (fixed) price, since they have to operate commercially via parents' contributions. In early 2009, the Flemish government decided to invest €52 million in the private, market-oriented provisions in order to enable them to adopt parental fees that are similar to those in the funded provisions. The objective is to enable the market-oriented provisions to take up a social function. However, the government failed in taking accompanying measures to ensure similar qualifications and working conditions in these two sectors. Considering the rapid marketisation of the childcare field in

Flanders, the biggest challenge for the next decade lies in how to bridge the gap between funded and non-funded provisions and, in so doing, how to combine the social function with overall minimal standards, regarding the pedagogical function, including the professionalisation of the childcare workforce.

### **The pedagogical function in the French-speaking community**

The social function is also a major challenge in the French-speaking community. Legislation compels provisions to use the time of subscription as a major priority criterion, which has been shown to favour already favoured families (Vandenbroeck et al. 2008). However, this legislation also has provisions to allow providers to develop other priorities for 10% of their capacity. Since 2004, a major plan has been developed, aimed at creating 10,000 new places (both funded and non-funded) up to 2010. For the funded places, priority is given to regions with lower coverage and to regions with more families at risk of poverty. The effect of this policy on actual enrolment and accessibility need to be further studied.

In the new millennium, the pedagogical quality has received most political attention in the French-speaking community of Belgium, as is apparent in new legislation, the reorganisation of the administration organisation – the Office de la Naissance et de l'Enfance (ONE) – and the development of projects in the field. Again however, this evolution has had little influence on the professionalisation of the workforce. The governmental decision of April 3, 1999 (revised in 2004) demands that each childcare provision (public or private, including family day care providers) develops a pedagogical programme together with the families, in which are defined the core pedagogical guidelines (Thirion 2004). This legislation goes beyond additional inspection criteria, as it aims to establish a different relationship to what quality criteria are, labelled as *désubstantialisée* (De Munck 1997), meaning that plural participation in face-to-face relationships is necessary to define what quality is, rather than focusing on quantitative norms. Indeed, the legislative frameworks only define very large objectives that remain to be interpreted locally. Contingent with this new legislation, since 2001 the functions of those responsible for controlling the centres profoundly changed, with a new mission for staff development and *accompagnement* (guidance) on pedagogical matters.

In the middle-management of ONE, the traditional functions, reserved for medical branches (e.g., gynaecology or paediatrics) have seen the introduction of pedagogical counsellors, signifying a historical shift. New questions are being asked, such as how to reconcile control, evaluation and guidance. The focus on the pedagogical function of childcare is contingent with the valorisation of pedagogical counselling asking for fewer bureaucratic control systems. According to one of the leading administrators of ONE, the valorisation of the *accompagnement* does not mean that norms or basic quality criteria would matter less. However, when control and *accompagnement* are combined, the comprehension of these norms and their meaning seems to be more salient, and control is less hierarchical since it becomes part of the dynamics of meaning making (Sommer and VanvareMBERGHE 2002). The focus on the pedagogical mission has become apparent through multiple publications, such as a psychopedagogical manual developed by the University of Liège with the participation of many practitioners. This states that pedagogical practices are reflected choices that are nourished by knowledge of different disciplines and have both individual and social objectives (Manni 1999). The manual served as a source of inspiration for a

series of practical reflection documents produced by the pedagogical counsellors of the central administration ONE (ONE 2004) and aimed at supporting practitioners in the development of their educational curriculum and their own meaning making. The dissemination of these publications was decentralised and the most important challenge was to go from a manual, established by a small group of experts to the implementation of a reflection process with input from local practitioners as well as taking into account knowledge and values of families (Pirard 2009):

Finally, from 2005 to 2007, a second manual, focusing on school-age childcare for three- to twelve-year-olds was produced in a similar context (Camus and Marchal 2007). This time, the production of the manual was directly managed by the pedagogical counsellors, ensuring a participative approach. The process included academic scholars, trainers, employers and unions as well as other agencies. Implementation of this manual is ongoing. These policy evolutions have been accompanied by emerging dynamics in practice. At first, the construction of pedagogical projects was perceived as a legalistic framework, but a growing number of practitioners are now beginning to comprehend the meaning of documenting practices and of discussing these practices with colleagues, families and other stakeholders (e.g. schools and other educational partners) and, in so doing, of transforming practices. In the childcare provisions, a regulatory function is beginning to emerge, based on the valorisation of 'the dynamics of instable norms' (Vial 2001), enabling not only to conform with established norms but also to invent new possibilities for the organisation of the work. In this sense, regulating pedagogical practices cannot be considered to be synonymous with their regularisation, as the aim is not conformity to predefined outcomes. Regulating practices is rather a matter of analysing practices and their effects in order to construct new criteria and continuously adapt these criteria to new situations and contexts.

This calls for individual as well as collective reflexive activities, in an alteration of time to act, time to reflect *in* action and time to reflect *on* action. Consequently, professional competences cannot be framed in terms of knowledge about care work, but in reflexive competences and competences of oral and written, individual and collective communication:

The new demands on professionalism, in line with this emerging focus on the pedagogical function of childcare, have given rise to different tensions and paradoxes. A first tension regards the emergence of pedagogical functions within all early childhood professions (coordinators, management and staff), while their basic education is either framed in a medical or in a social paradigm. Second, when the value of external norms diminishes to the profit of the co-construction of shared meanings and reflections, one could expect that initial training of the childcare workers would be enhanced, considering that in the case of Belgium this initial training is lagging behind compared to many other European countries. This is, however not the case, despite much public debate. As a result, all too often in-service training and counselling needs to compensate for lack of training rather than focusing on analysis of practice. One example is that working with families and involving parents in the daily work is an aspect of the work that is seldom developed in the French-speaking community, despite the abundance of literature showing how important this is. In addition, the lack of formal training goes hand in hand with low status and questionable working conditions, as is often the case in split systems (Bennett 2003), resulting in lack of time to document, meet with colleagues and reflect. Finally, it needs to be carefully observed that the valorisation of pedagogy within childcare lead to new objectives of professionalisation rather than to new objectives of standardisation (Barbier 2005).

### **Professionalisation: the weakest link**

Considering the separate evolutions in the two Belgian communities, it seems obvious that both communities may benefit from exchanges between them. In the complex

political situation of Belgium, this, unfortunately, is seldom the case, despite common challenges. The growing attention towards the social functions of childcare in Flanders and towards its pedagogical functions in the French-speaking community raises questions of professionalisation of the childcare workforce. Yet, it is well known that the workforce in Belgium is lagging behind, according to both European and Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) standards (OECD 2006; Peeters 2008a). There are two main problems with this professionalisation that are common to both communities: the low qualifications for nursery nurses (or childcare staff), and the fact that training for the management of childcare centres is hardly preparing them for this field. In addition and specific for the Flemish community, a third and growing concern is the increasing number of unskilled workforce in childcare. We will shortly comment on each of these challenges.

Childcare workers in Belgium receive training at secondary vocational level. This initial training is embedded in a long history of hygienic and technical professionalism and is adapted to the considerations about the pedagogical and social missions of childcare (OECD 2006). In addition, Belgium is one of the only European countries where no bachelor degree in early childhood education exists. In both Belgian communities, managers of these centres, as well as family day care schemes, are required to have a bachelor's degree. However, considering the total absence of bachelor-level courses in Belgium that specifically prepare people to work in this field, managers are also ill-prepared to provide leadership and support to their team members in the reflexive work that is needed to construct the pedagogical or social projects that may be expected from them.

As we write this report, political discussions have started, so as to organise such a bachelor-level in Flanders. This has been inspired by recent studies documenting the need for such a degree (Peeters 2008a, 2008b) and by the growing stream of scholarly literature documenting the link between staff qualifications and quality of care (e.g., Fukkink and Lont 2007). Two main options are now discussed.

The first option is to embed such a bachelor-level course to train students in social work. The French example of *Educateur Jeunes Enfants* is a good example of how this may lead to reflexive practitioners, valuing the social functions of childcare without jeopardising its pedagogical mission (Peeters 2008a). The other option is to embed the bachelor-level course within the existing bachelors course in early childhood education, traditionally limited to the *kleuterschool* or *école maternelle* (ECE for three- to six-year-olds). It remains to be seen if and how these emerging political discussions will result in the creation of new initiatives in pre-service trainings.

In contrast with this hopeful development, childcare in Flanders faces a particular problem that may be framed as the paradox of deprofessionalisation (Peeters 2008b). We have documented earlier the rapid growth of market-oriented private childcare provisions, in which staff qualifications are not mandatory. Moreover, there are hardly any regions in the world where family day care providers have such a large part in the coverage of childcare. As in most countries, family day care providers in Flanders have traditionally been recruited from women in 'at risk' groups in the labour market, meaning less educated women. The 'home as heaven' ideology legitimised this economic choice, as it allowed for a lack of investment in the professionalisation of the workforce (Mooney and Statham 2003). These two evolutions (growing marketisation and domestication of childcare) have led to the astonishing result that for only one in four childcare places in Flanders are any staff qualifications required.

Addressing these issues will remain one of the biggest challenges for the many years to come, since failing to do so will inevitably undermine all efforts of creating high-quality provisions that combine their economic functions with genuine pedagogical and social missions.

## Note

1. Coverage is calculated as the ratio of childcare places per 100 children. This does not indicate the percentage of children enrolled in childcare, since one childcare place may be used by more than one child.

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