

WORKING PAPERS IN

Early Childhood Development

38

*Globalisation and privatisation:*

*The impact on childcare policy and practice*

by Michel Vandebroek



## About the paper

This paper concentrates on the impact of globalisation on childcare since the late 1970s, particularly in the last two decades. It looks at how our views about children, parents and public services have changed as a result. In particular, the paper examines the case in Belgium, where the consequences of globalisation are also analysed in terms of quality and accessibility of services and the shifting power relations between the state, childcare providers, parents and experts in the field of early childhood education.

In order to understand our present-day views on the services provided to young children and their families, it is necessary to have some historical context. The paper therefore also investigates how childcare institutions have emerged over the history of western Europe, with special emphasis on Belgium, before examining their evolution in a more international context, looking at recent research from different countries.

The paper concludes by distilling the situation into three apparently contradictory situations, and asking if they can be resolved.

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By Michel Vandebroeck

VBJK – Department of Social Welfare Studies,  
Ghent University.

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## Preface

This working paper is based on a study of the social functions of childcare in modern western post-industrialised societies in a context of growing diversity. The research was conducted at the Department of Social Welfare Studies at Ghent University, Belgium, and was funded by the Bernard van Leer Foundation. It focuses on Belgium as a typical, but also a particular, case of a social democratic welfare state, with a long tradition of state-funded childcare provision, undergoing the specific influences of globalisation. The paper is also informed by sociologists such as Ulrich Beck (1994, 1997), philosophers such as Michel Foucault (1990, 1993, 2001) and other contemporary scholars who are analysing trends in present day societies.

Thanks to Rita Swinnen in particular from the Bernard van Leer Foundation and to Prof. Maria Bouverne-De Bie who supervised the original research. The full study has been published in Dutch (Vandenbroeck, M. 2004. *In verzekerde bewaring: Honderdvijftig jaar kinderen, ouders en opvang*. SWP: Amsterdam). An English translation is currently being produced. I also wish to acknowledge the inspiring and encouraging conversations with Mimi Bloch from the Education Department at Madison-Wisconsin.





## Globalisation and privatisation: The impact on childcare policy and practice

### *Childcare in Belgium*

As in the majority of western European states, Belgium separates education from care for children of preschool age (below 6 years old). Education generally starts at 2.5 years of age, when children have a right to daily kindergarten. In Belgium, 98% of all children in the 3 to 6-year-old age group attend kindergarten regularly. These kindergartens are part of the educational system and are the responsibility of the education departments of the Flemish-speaking, French-speaking and German-speaking communities. All kindergartens are entirely state funded and free of charge for parents, even though many of them are privately organised by denominational groups (the Christian umbrella organisations being the largest). Kindergarten teachers are educated to bachelor's degree-level and their salaries are the same as those for primary and secondary school teachers.

In contrast, childcare for the under-threes falls under the remit of the social welfare departments of the various communities. In Flanders (the Flemish-speaking area) the coverage of childcare provision for the under-threes is more than 33%, one of the highest rates in Europe after the Scandinavian countries. Under-threes are cared for either in special childcare centres or at the home of a family daycare provider. In both cases provision can be funded either by the state or privately and can be organised by

the municipality or by private denominational groups (again, the Christian umbrella organisations is the largest group in this area). As in all other countries with a divided system, conditions for those working in childcare services are quite different from those working in preschool education, while daycare providers have different conditions again. Staff in state-funded childcare centres need a three-year vocational qualification, which they can start working for at age 16. Management staff need a bachelor's degree either in nursery or social work. However, no qualifications are required for providers of family daycare or private childcare, and salaries and work conditions are much poorer than in the publicly funded kindergartens. Belgium is not alone: it appears that the relative neglect of childcare versus preschool education is a feature of all the western European countries that have a separate system of education and care (OECD 2001, 2002; Benett 2003).

Focusing on Belgium should help to further our understanding of the changing nature of government support and policies regarding the welfare of families and children. Belgium provides a good example of the rise of the social state in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries – which culminated in the 'welfare state' after the Second World War – followed by the movement towards globalisation that started at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During

this period Belgium developed a particular system of social welfare policy where the boundaries of state administration and private responsibility became blurred; this has been labelled ‘subsidised liberty’ (*liberté subsidiée*) meaning a particular form of public–private partnership (Franklin et al. 2003). This can be viewed as a certain style of government that, over the course of a century, has promoted the devolution of authority, decentralisation of decision-making and increased involvement of non-governmental groups and agencies, which are features of present day partnerships (Franklin et al. 2003). Analysing the Belgian example reveals that this form of government does not automatically lead to more freedom or inclusion for its citizens, but rather constructs a specific form of freedom that can exclude as much as it includes.

### ***First childcare initiatives: industrialisation and moral welfare***

In Belgium and most other western European countries, provisions such as childcare centres and infant consultations first appeared in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as part of the general trend towards urbanisation and industrialisation. Families fled from poverty in rural areas to settle in cities and work in the new factories. However, a family with a number of children could barely survive on the father’s income alone, and many women

went to work in the factories as well. In the Ghent textile factories, for instance, half of the working population were female. Children were often kept by neighbours, living in the same precarious conditions as their own families. The long working hours, extremely low wages and poor housing that were common at that time made living difficult and eventually led to social uproar such as the first general strike in 1886 in the district of Liège. Because of this, the dominant social classes came to perceive the labouring classes as a threat: the Belgian expression ‘*classes laborieuses, classes dangereuses*’ (working classes, dangerous classes) expresses this very well. It was generally accepted in those days that the state could not intervene in private matters such as the raising of children or the employee/employer relationship. General welfare initiatives (such as sick leave, unemployment benefits, pension funds, etc.) were non-existent.

There was, however, growing concern about the extremely high child mortality rate. Analysing the reports on child death from that time reveals what these days appears to be a surprising conclusion: that infant mortality was never attributed to the precarious living conditions of the working class but was on the contrary explained by the ‘neglect’ or ‘ignorance’ of working class mothers. In the thinking of the time (which was strongly influenced by eugenics<sup>2</sup>) children were seen as the nation’s future; the state had to help build a strong race

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<sup>2</sup> *Eugenics is “the science of improving a population by controlled breeding to increase the occurrence of desirable heritable characteristics. Developed largely by Francis Galton as a method of improving the human race, it fell into disfavour only after the perversion of its doctrines by the Nazis”. (New Oxford Dictionary 2001)*

in order to establish a strong nation. It was in this context that new childcare initiatives emerged.

The establishment of childcare centres and provision of infant consultations were a first intrusion of private bourgeois organisations into family autonomy. At the same time, juvenile protection laws enabled the legal system to intervene in family affairs. Indeed, as part of the consultation schemes young mothers received more than simply advice: nurses were sent to family homes to check on them. If it was perceived that they were not following the advice of the doctors, then their child was denied a place in childcare.

This first function of childcare was closely related to the second: the education of the masses. Since child mortality was mainly attributed to mothers' ignorance or neglect, it was believed that educating the poor would be the most efficient means of prevention. Historical research indicates that this philosophy can be understood as the upper class striving to civilise the working class (Cunningham 1995; Hendrick 1997). Thus, the first social initiatives also had the function of protecting the social order by keeping the 'dangerous classes' within bourgeois norms. One could say that the general attitude was: "If they could only become more like us, it would be better for them – and for us".

From examination of the correspondence between the women who organised them, it is

clear that these initiatives also served a third function: it gave the upper-class women something to do. In the bourgeois ethic it was inconceivable that women would take up jobs outside the home or play a substantial role in society. The dominant ideology was of a bourgeois household consisting of a nuclear family with the husband as breadwinner and the mother taking care of all household matters including childrearing. Households that consisted of larger networks and extended families are described in governmental reports in these days as "promiscuous"; and female labour was only acceptable for widows or for women married to a handicapped husband (Vandenbroeck 2003). However, organising and managing charitable bodies to pursue 'good works' was socially acceptable and provided the opportunity to combat boredom and take a public role without challenging the patriarchal norm.

From a eugenics perspective, mothers had a dual responsibility to care for their child and to prepare them to be a fitting next generation; child mortality, therefore, was an offence against both the child and society. The abolition of child labour in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century reinforced this idea. Children were no longer seen as a source of income but as an investment in the future (of the nation) and a source of expenses (for the family). In most western European countries it is clear that the identification of childhood as an area for state intervention was accompanied and to some extent caused by a declining confidence in the role of the family (Cunningham 1995).

### ***The post war consensus in social welfare***

Not until after the Second World War did child mortality decline to a generally acceptable level for all western European societies. Although this was largely thanks to better living conditions, the decrease in child mortality was actually attributed to the work of the charities, which were still private although now benefiting from state funding. In the 1950s, child mortality became less of a public concern and the legitimacy of these charities was at risk.

It was work by the World Health Organization (WHO) that brought about a new justification for their work and for state funding of infant consultation clinics. On behalf of WHO, John Bowlby published his major work on attachment. The basic idea was that a close emotional bond grows between mother and child and that this secure attachment influences the child's further development. In other words, motherly love is as indispensable to the young child as vitamins. This led WHO to enlarge the previous concept of health as being purely a physical state to include mental health and well-being. This provided a new legitimacy for the education of the masses in general and young mothers in particular. Attachment theory reinforced the dual responsibility of the mother (towards her child and society) and added to the developing notion of the 'fragile child' or the 'child in need'.

### ***The impact of developmental psychology***

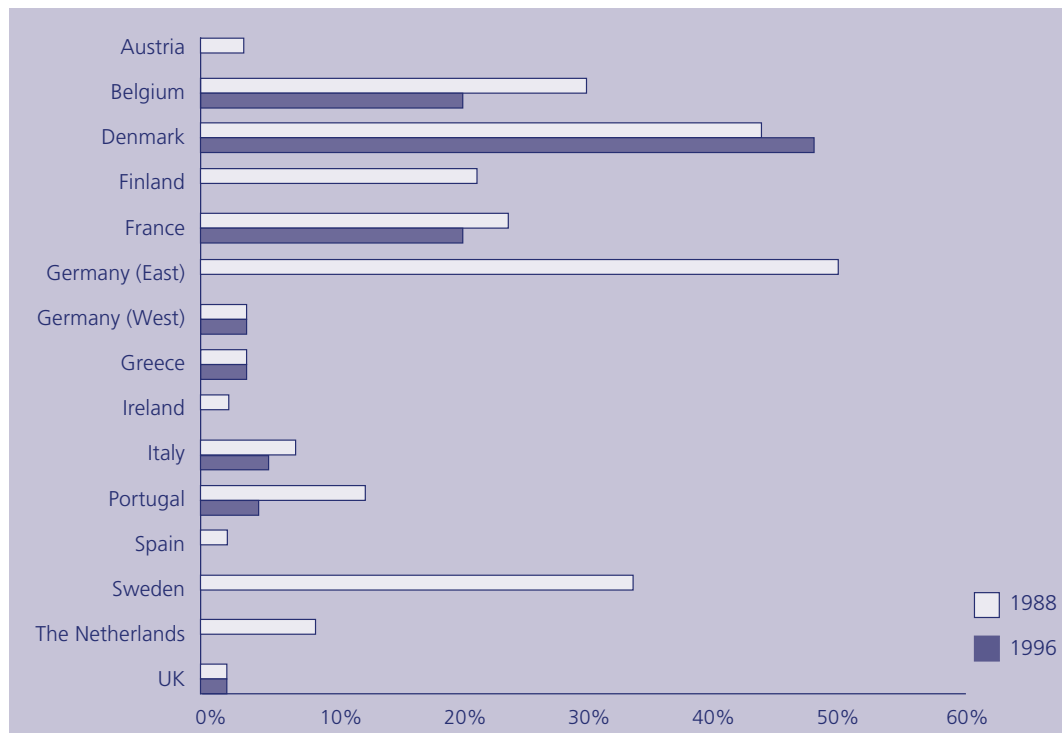
Developmental psychology, with its concept of sequential developmental stages and focus on early childhood as a determinant of later development, reinforced the idea that the 'natural duty' of the mother is to ensure sound development of her offspring and prevent adolescent delinquency. Feminist researchers such as Singer (1993), Burman (1994) and Canella (1997) have shown how these new ideas about child rearing imprisoned women in their maternal role. They pointed out the remarkable coincidence that the discourse on mothers' psychological responsibility came at a time when women were not needed in the heavy post-war industries; on the contrary, it was their reproductive role that was viewed as being vital to securing the nation's future after the severe loss of life in the Second World War. In turn this brought about massive investment to train staff in developmental psychology and the detection of retarded development in children, and led to the professionalisation of the advice given to young mothers regarding the socio-emotional development of their children and their duties towards them. This theoretical perspective of childcare implied that rather than helping, institutions were actually in danger of damaging the fragile attachment between mother and child. Much of the scientific research of this period looked for quantitative proof of this damage (Singer 1993). In addition,

the popularisation of developmental testing based on psychological theory meant the fragile child soon became the 'public child', and education and child development became domains of public discourse and concern.

By the 1960s the welfare state had been introduced in many European countries. It included measures such as enhanced family allowances, unemployment benefits and general pension funds, some of which were based on the increasingly outdated model of a patriarchal family with a single male income. In the 1970s and 1980s, European states started to diverge in their childcare policies. Some countries, including the United Kingdom, the Netherlands

and West Germany, looked at care for young children as being a private matter for the family and not an area of state policy. This resulted in a very low percentage of state-funded initiatives, few general quality regulations, and the growth of childcare systems that were mostly private and operating in the market economy where parents could theoretically negotiate places and fees. On the other hand, since the 1970s some countries, including Belgium and France, regarded childcare as a mixed public-private responsibility, resulting in higher coverage, higher state funding, central quality regulations and fixed parental fees. Figure 1 shows how this mix of public and private responsibility for day-care lasted into the 1990s (Moss 1988, 1996).

**Figure 1. Percentage of childcare provisions (for children aged 0–3) funded by the state in the European Union.**



Source: Moss 1998; 1996

### ***The growth of globalisation***

In the 1970s and 1980s, the debate in western Europe on the ‘appropriate mix’ between public and private financing of daycare was further affected by economic crises: rising oil prices; decline of traditional industries, particularly coal and steel; growing unemployment rates; and consequently lower state income. Many European countries faced serious budgetary problems and any expenditure by the welfare state was questioned. The trouble was that while unemployment was a major political concern and the economy ranked highly on the political agenda, these were less amenable to control by the nation states. Increasingly, major economic decisions were being made outside of the traditional system by multinational companies, and were being influenced by global trends beyond the reach of the nation states (Rose 2000). The rising criticisms of state expenditure on welfare coincided with calls for a withdrawal of state intervention in social concerns. Paradoxically, despite the difficult times, economic policies became more central in public debate, including those on childcare.

This rise of globalisation marks a profound change in the publicly perceived role of the individual, both in general and in the relationship between families and the state. For instance, people today are less influenced by traditions in their daily life than they were in the past. Decisions such as whether to marry or not, whether to develop partnerships with a person from the same or the opposite sex, whether to have children or not, whether to adopt, etc.

are these days based less on traditional and historic ‘rules’ and are instead ‘negotiated’ by individuals within their present context. In our current western European way of life, an individual’s values are of their own making. People construct their own value framework from various influences, including their traditional religious, ethnic and socio-economic reference groups. This process is referred to in this paper as ‘individualisation’ – indicating the greater responsibility and rights of the individual to define his or her own beliefs and values. From this perspective, individualisation and globalisation can be seen as two sides of the same process (Beck 1994).

However, this does not necessarily imply growing freedom for the individual. As Beck and Beck (1995) noted, individuals freed from traditional constraints discover that there are other forces influencing their actions, including labour markets, training requirements, social welfare regulations and benefits, public transport policies, availability of nursery places, opening times, student grants and retirement plans. To that end, Beck and Beck concluded that the problems that families face nowadays are in fact individualised versions of contradictory trends within industrial society. In this social, economical and cultural context, we observe many changes in state policy regarding early childhood care and education. One of the first trends is the neo-liberalisation of services (where there are fewer statutory constraints but market forces exert a stronger influence); a second is the focus on negotiation as the educational norm.

### ***Neo-liberalism across the world***

Many researchers have documented changes in state policy regarding early childcare and education as a result of globalisation. What follows is an overview of some of them. Then the paper will describe the effects these changes have had on Belgium. Finally, some conclusions will be drawn in a wider international context.

Bloch and Blessing (2000) studied changes in 1990s central European childhood policy and practice in countries such as Poland, Hungary and Bulgaria. During this time, these countries consulted with economic experts from Harvard University, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the European Union (EU), all of which had a major influence on the terms and concepts they used to describe early childhood care and education. Notions such as privatisation, efficiency, freedom, autonomy and individualisation were introduced into public discourse. For instance, in the context of growing unemployment, the model of the 'professional mother' was born, which emphasised the positive value of motherhood in cases where women choose to give up their jobs in order to educate their children. These new concepts set the stage for the idea of 'freedom of choice for parents', allowing profound changes in policy such as cutting the budget for state-funded early childhood services. Thus the privatisation of services had a legitimate motive. One of the bigger organisers of services had been the Catholic church, although its networks of kindergartens were open for educational purposes. However, when restored

to the church, the kindergartens became non-state funded, private and based on a sectarian approach; they were no longer universally accessible. The justification for this shift from universal welfare was market efficiency.

Dahlberg (2000) found a similar trend when she studied the transformation of the traditional Swedish *Folkhemmet* (people's houses) to the more market-oriented preschool centres. However, the effects of globalisation were different in Senegal. According to Bloch (2003), assimilationist French policy treated rural African families as abnormal. The colonial system ignored indigenous ethnic languages and customs that preceded French and Muslim influence and which formed the background for a complex and hybrid system of cultural reasoning about childrearing. To be cultured in Senegal became linked with 'acting French', and Senegal to this day has kept strong ties with France. In the 1980s, international organisations such as the IMF and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) became influential. Senegal used bank loans to modernise its industry, build schools and organise training in agriculture, industry and bureaucracy. However, international pressures stressed neo-liberal rationales of governing, and in order to repay the international loans the country needed new policies of structural adjustment, privileging the private over the public and the autonomous individual over the collective. Among other things, this led to increases in school fees and decreased access to social services.

Swadener and Wachira (2003) studied a similar evolution in Kenya. Although Kenya cannot be described as a welfare state, a number of governmental programmes were initially designed to promote the well-being of the population including child and maternal health, malaria treatment, family planning and education in nutrition and agriculture. Government programmes also included a centralised system of public education, providing school supplies and covering the costs of examinations and other fees. As in Senegal, neo-liberal global policies and the accompanying ‘austerity measures’ of the structural adjustment programmes have severely affected these food, health and education programmes, passing many of the costs on to families. This in turn has led to a decline in school enrolments.

Franklin et al. (2003) describe how, in the West, globalisation is linked to a renewed government interest in public–private partnerships for education. Governments view such partnerships as promoting devolution of authority and decentralising decision-making. They are built on reciprocity: no rights without responsibilities. In other words, social provisions, particularly unemployment benefits, welfare payments, health services and education, are no longer seen as simple entitlements. Rather they entail personal responsibility and self-sufficiency on the part of the individual in a life-long process that will maintain and strengthen their economic viability. Moss (2003) showed, for instance, how in the 1980s and 1990s in England, liberalism

brought about a shift in the educational focus from interdependency to autonomy, which links with the altered vision of childcare as a private matter rather than a public responsibility.

This shift is documented across the globe. In their 1989 study, Tobin et al. described how Chinese preschool teachers focused on discipline and group activities, emphasising a sense of belonging within the 1–2–4 family structure (one child, two parents, four grandparents). In the recent follow-up study, Hsueh and Tobin (2003) found that the focus in preschool education in China’s major cities is now much more on individual development and autonomy. Welfare is now considered to be a reciprocal arrangement, and there is increasing pressure put on individuals to be autonomous, which in turn places responsibility onto parents to guarantee the educational success of their children. Hsueh and Tobin relate this to China’s new, more market-oriented economy and to the growing influence of American textbooks in teacher education. Similar trends have been well documented by Popkewitz (2003) and Macfarlane (2003) in the USA and Australia.

A good example of this increasing emphasis on the pedagogical role of parents is the Mother Child Education Foundation (MOCEF) project in Ghent, Belgium. The programme, inspired by a Turkish project at Istanbul University, aims to train Turkish–Belgian mothers to support their 3 to 6-year-olds in preschool. The ultimate goal is that through this parental support, children will perform better at school. In order to achieve this goal, mothers have regular group



sessions where they learn to work with educative tools. The programme is most often described as a parent support programme aiming at empowering the Turkish community (Ottoy 2004). However, it can also be seen as a way of making parents and individuals responsible for the inequalities in Belgian preschooling, and puts pressure on them to increase the success of their children in school. Similar examples can be found in a variety of locations across western Europe in migrant and low-income communities, where interventions justified as being empowering are actually a means of benevolent state control similar to the charitable interventions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

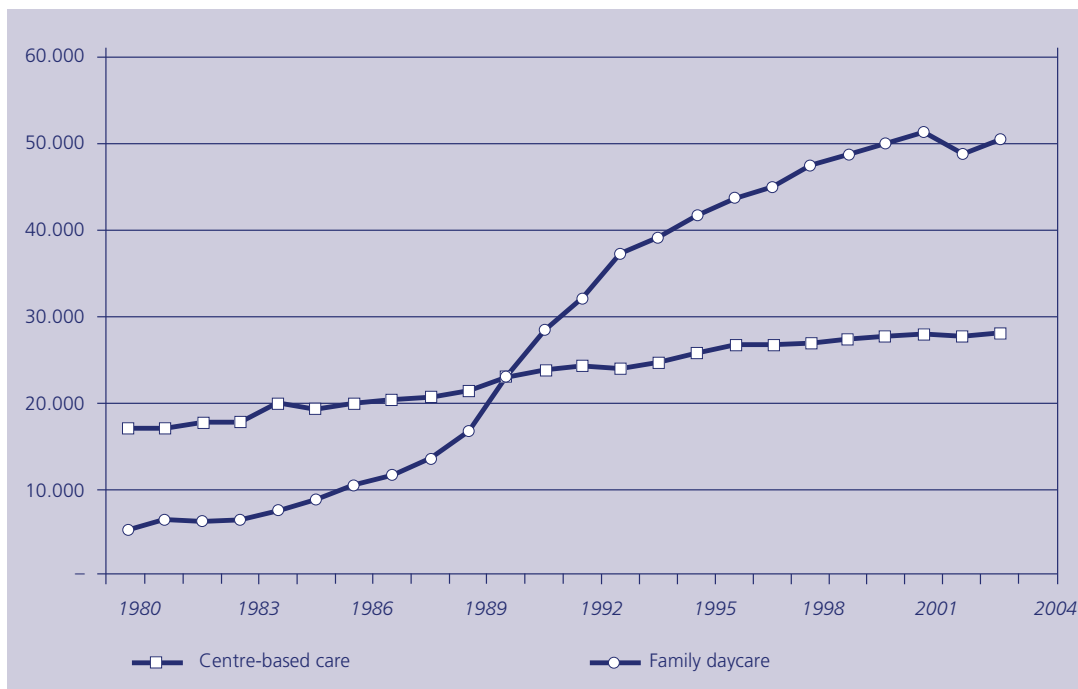
### ***Neo-liberalism in Belgium***

As in most European countries, the 1980s in Belgium was a decade of economic crisis, rising unemployment and budget cuts. However, at the same time the state was also being urged to increase childcare provision, which was viewed as being an important measure to enhance the equality of women in the labour market. Thus it was essentially the economic function of childcare that justified an increase in public expenditure. Consequently, in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the number of Flemish childcare places significantly increased. The first wave of increases in the 1980s was the result of massive investment in family daycare. The formal argument in favour of family daycare was that it was 'just like home', but there are also two economic arguments. First, that daycare is a cheaper form of childcare than formal centres, and secondly, family

daycare predominantly recruits unemployed women with little formal education – a high risk group for unemployment. However, according to Moss (1988) the first argument is unsubstantiated: the cost of family daycare varies considerably according to the conditions and level of support offered. For example, in the UK, the cost of a place in family daycare was only a third of the cost of centre-based care, whereas in some Parisian municipalities it was up to 80%. The trouble with the second argument – that daycare provides employment for poorly educated women (Mooney and Statham 2003) – was that it legitimated the recruitment of large groups of women with no qualifications other than being a mother. This created a culture of low fees, kept the mothers' formal training to a minimum and did nothing to enhance their poor working conditions. Despite this, investment in family daycare was spectacular, and in the case of Flanders it led to the highest percentage of such care services in Europe (figure 2).

For Flanders and for other countries that invested in family daycare in this first wave, two things are clear: a) a substantial part of early childhood care has been provided by an unqualified workforce; and b) the systems do not appear to be very sustainable. Indeed, in all European countries except the UK, the number of family daycare providers is now decreasing. In Belgium, better working conditions (such as unemployment benefits and social security) temporarily stopped the decrease in 2003, but it is generally expected to continue to fall. Investment in family daycare can be viewed as

Figure 2. Number of children in family day-care and centre-based care in Flanders from 1980 onwards.



Source: ONE-NWK-reports in: Vandebroek 2004.

a sign that economic reasoning triumphed over educational and social concerns to influence early childhood policy in the 1980s.

The second wave of increase in Belgian childcare provisions came in the 1990s with the rapid expansion in private (often small-scale) self-employed and non-funded care initiatives. In 1990 the government introduced a registration system for such private centres. As is evident from reports at the time, registration requirements were minimal and certification was virtually always granted. Since that time, government reports have combined the funded and non-funded centres together to show considerable 'growth' in available national

childcare capacity. In 1996 this aggregation became more systematic; private centres were no longer negatively labelled as non-funded but were described positively as 'certificated centres'. In 2000, another change of vocabulary occurred: government reports began to speak positively about the private sector as a whole, favouring the 'diversity of types of care provision'. In 2001, on the advice of communications specialists, a new official name for these private centres was launched – the more positive-sounding 'independent childcare centres'. From then on the centres received a small fee from the government and were the subject of a publicity campaign promoting their services in the main media. Their growth in numbers was quite

spectacular: within a decade they took care of almost as many children as the funded centres (figure 3).

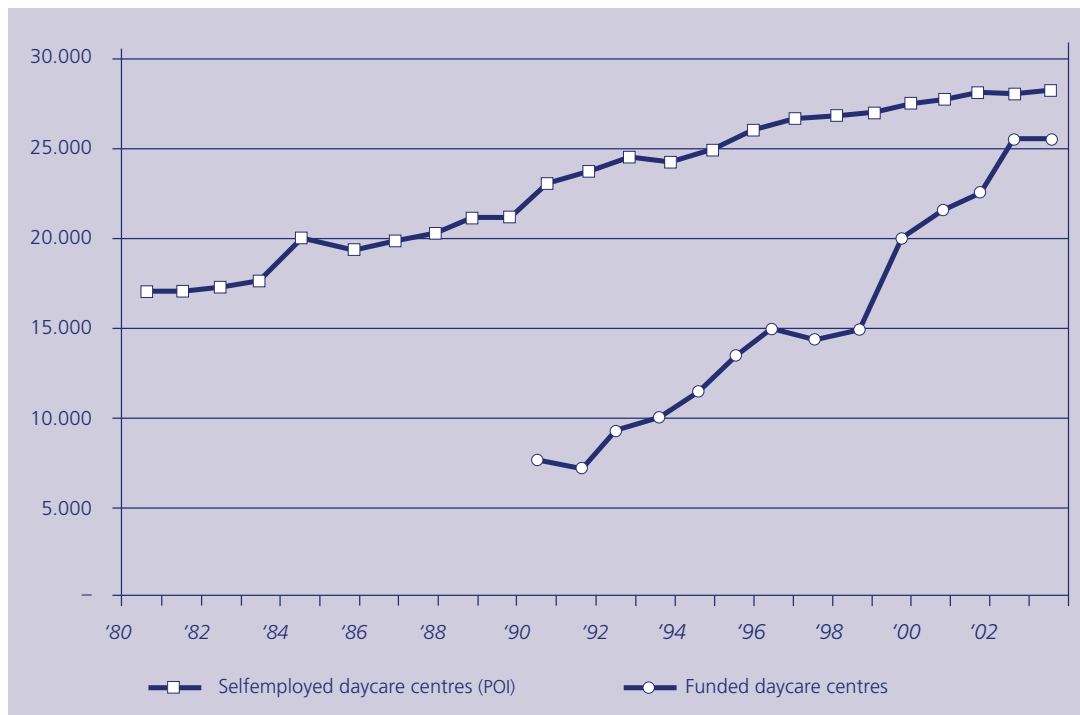
Just as with family daycare providers in the 1980s, the independent non-funded childcare centres provide cheap childcare capacity, but at the price of a lower level of professionalism and less sustainability. For although the growth of the figures appear strong, they mask a turbulent situation. For instance, in 2003, 65 small-scale private childcare centres started, but 42 ceased activities (Kind en Gezin 2004). Furthermore, recent research shows that these centres cannot survive with parental fees as their sole income

(Hedebouw 2004), hence access is restricted to high-earning dual-income families. In Flanders, this means that a third of all childcare capacity has become inaccessible to disadvantaged groups.

### **Autonomy and negotiation as educational norms**

The historian Cunningham (1995) states that in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, adults portrayed the world outside the home as being full of danger and sought to protect their children by denying them independence. At the same time, adults' confidence in their own authority was weakened by a variety of factors – commercial, legal,

*Figure 3. Number of children in non-funded and funded childcare schemes in Flanders from 1980 onwards.*



Source: ONE-NWK-reports in: Vandenbroeck 2004.

psychological – which made it difficult to provide the protection they wished to give. The result was that, to a much greater extent than in previous centuries, child-rearing became a matter of negotiation between parents and children. Publicly acceptable ideas about childhood acted as a framework within which adults and children could work out ways of living together. This process is closely followed by the state and its various agencies. For instance, in the early 1990s, Du Bois-Reymond et al. (1992) studied negotiation in families for a Dutch governmental organisation. Similar ethnographic research was undertaken in the same period in several Scandinavian countries, again for government purposes (Langsted and Haavind 1993). In 1999, the Flemish (Belgian) governmental organisation responsible for children and families produced a large survey of families on this topic, concluding that negotiation is the generally accepted, normal child-rearing strategy. The vast majority of children live in families where the parents say that they favour the child's autonomy and that decisions are primarily taken in consultation with them (Kind en Gezin 2002).

It is outside the scope of this paper to examine whether the majority of Flemish families indeed do negotiate with their children; the important thing to note is that they perceive negotiation to be the educational norm for them as parents. Recently, the Flemish Children's Rights Commissioner ordered a large-scale study on negotiation within the family, interviewing children as well as their parents. In the public dissemination of this research, the Commissioner

clearly depicts negotiation within the family as the desirable norm that needs to be stimulated, as it is embedded in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Vandekerkhove 2003). The studies concluded that parents have certain difficulties and hesitations about their role as child-rearers and propose that they are in need of parental support programmes (De Rijcke 2003). It is not clear if the parents themselves identified this as an issue.

However, accepting negotiation as the educational norm highlights three problems. The first is that while negotiation is heavily dependent on a particular situation, much of the advice given to parents comes from experts who are ignorant about the social, economic and cultural context of the family. In much of the literature about negotiation, this is made explicit by the use of parental labels such as authoritarian (that bears overly negative connotations) versus the more positive sounding authoritative (Du Bois-Reymond et al. 1992). The negotiation message is driven home by explicitly linking it to the child's development (Du Bois-Reymond et al. 1992; De Rijcke 2003) and even to developmental outcomes in adulthood such as wellbeing and autonomy (De Rijcke 2003). However, negotiation as a child-rearing strategy assumes that children have the verbal competency to show their individuality. Cross-cultural research has shown that other forms of interaction, for instance vocalising feelings through variations in intonation and the use of swearing, can be more effective in specific socio-cultural contexts (Tobin 1995). This and

other research, including about how children deal with peer conflict (Göncü and Canella 1996), indicate that dominant ideas about negotiation as the educational norm are purely cultural constructions. Furthermore, to be a good negotiator one needs qualities such as openness and honesty (Beck and Beck 1995), and therefore self-awareness is a key attribute. This self-examination of the lay person (parent) calls for the advice of an expert, who is perceived as having the authority to comment on the role of parents solely because of their professional status, which may or may not imply any expertise in that role. We should be aware of the fact that the focus on negotiation, self-expression and verbalisation are white, western, middle-class norms. It is a norm taught in middle-class educational settings, more familiar and attractive to some children than to others. This makes Tobin (1995) conclude that the pedagogy of self-expression works to privilege an already privileged group of children. In this sense, one can observe a continuity of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, namely that middle-class values and norms are perceived to be universally ‘good for children’.

The second problem with negotiation is concerned with unrealistic expectations. “The identification of childhood as an area for state policy was accompanied and to some extent caused by a declining confidence in the family,” said Cunningham (1995, 152) when discussing policy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Yet, looking at how today’s adults are evaluated and then suspected of failing to appreciate the child’s autonomy,

we observe many similarities. As far back as the 1970s, there were a growing number of publications advocating an interest-based negotiation between parents and children and yet, at the same time, expecting parents to fail in this task. Some of the most well-read examples are the books in which Thomas Gordon popularised his “parents’ effectiveness training”. The Dutch language version of his book *Listening to Children* was first published in 1976. By 1980 it was already in its sixth edition; it was re-edited for the twentieth time in 1998 and today is still the object of many lectures and parent training classes (Wubs 2004). On its back cover it states that “parents unavoidably make mistakes”. The key to salvation is “our willingness to learn from our mistakes” (Gordon 1976) but with professional intervention of course.

The third issue with negotiation as the norm relates to how we understand childhood and parenthood within the wider political and social context. I have argued how the focus on individuality – and consequently on negotiation as the educational norm – is closely intertwined with globalisation, neo-liberalisation and emerging concepts of the welfare state in which social problems are blamed on the individual. Interest-based negotiation is therefore perceived to be a preparation for the adult’s life in a modern democracy, as the research from the Flemish Children’s Rights Commissioner explicitly states (De Rijcke 2003), favouring individual autonomy over interdependency.

### ***Conclusion: A global and a local perspective***

Early childhood and family support services cannot be studied in isolation from society as a whole. It is a matter of debate whether the factors that have the most impact on child development are economic, demographic or political (Cunningham 1995). Nevertheless it is clear that globalisation has had a major effect on policies surrounding early childcare, its practice and even its daily vocabulary. In many post-industrial countries, globalisation seems to go hand in hand with neo-liberalisation, entailing privatisation of services that makes it difficult for disadvantaged groups in society to gain equal access.

Globalisation also affects how we perceive and understand early childhood institutions. Initially they were a means to combat child mortality, but since then they have evolved to primarily fulfil an economic role, promoting female employment. In Belgium, most research over the last few years on early childcare provision has focused on this economic function, using terms such as cost–benefit analysis, supply and demand, etc. Much of this research assumes that demand for early childcare can be deduced simply by estimating how many women are in the labour market as well as the birth rate, as if female employment is the only legitimate reason to seek childcare. The studies also use language that evokes the notion of childcare as a ‘necessary evil’. Furthermore, this economic approach relates only to female labour: it does not take male labour issues into account, thus

reinforcing gender stereotype roles within the family and society. It also hides other rationales for demanding early childhood services, such as parents wishing their children to have early socialisation opportunities or ethnic minority parents seeking a dominant language environment for their young child.

Globalisation often goes hand in hand with decentralisation of government. Governments in countries across Europe are deregulating industries, leaving certain issues to be determined at the local level, by single providers or according to people’s views. A clear example is the new law on childcare in the Netherlands, which deregulates quality issues (Schreuder 2004). This implies that in some cases globalisation actually means a state withdrawal from welfare issues. Such decentralisation in the early childcare sector is inextricably linked with the debate on the responsibility of the citizen in general and of the parent in particular. A person is expected to be a rational individual, capable of making the best choices for his or her child; this expectation is justified by placing the emphasis on individual autonomy and freedom of choice. In the Flemish case this has paved the way for the massive deployment of different forms of childcare with poor quality standards – such as family daycare and private, self-owned initiatives – using the argument that parents will eventually choose what is best for them. This ‘privatisation of responsibilities’ also leads to an inappropriate focus on the role of parents as teachers (Macfarlane 2003; Popkewitz 2003). In other words, just as child mortality in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was essentially a social

problem, issues such as school failure or equal opportunities for women become decontextualised and made the responsibility of individuals, absolving the state from making investments in education.

It should be noted that this devolution is not a unilateral initiative of the state towards the family or the childcare sector. Unlike the 19<sup>th</sup> century and earlier, power is not confined to governments. Rather, this situation is a reciprocal change in governance. In the 1980s childcare providers themselves acknowledged the role of the state, using essentially economic arguments in the face of the threat of budget cuts. It is also the childcare sector that advocates participatory management and decentralisation, bringing decision-making to the local level. This is why decentralisation and individual responsibility are to be understood as ‘discursive regimes’: ways of thinking that penetrate all levels of society and are so taken for granted that they no longer require discussion. Discursive regimes are the result of an equal combination of science, government policy and public opinion, and are linked with ‘travelling discourses’ – which in this case are ideas and ways of understanding childhood, parenthood and early childhood policy that ‘travel’ across the globe, through international organisations such as IMF, UNESCO and others, and the scientific community. Travelling discourses are not new; in 1857 for instance a European conference debated the accessibility of childcare provision and decided that “in all cases, the admission of children is subject to the ascertained impossibility of the mother’s

custody and care of the children”. This criterion was then applied in all Belgian and French crèches (Vandenbroeck 2003). Another example is the rapid expansion of Bowlby’s attachment theory since the 1950s through the popular publications of WHO. What is new is the scope and velocity by which these discourses travel through international conferences and organisations.

So far we have described how globalisation has stimulated decentralisation and privatisation of childcare services, emphasised the market value of the benefits of childcare, and placed the burden of responsibility on parents. However, there is another element in the effects of globalisation that has not yet been described: the emergence of a range of childcare solutions at the local level.

Furthermore, while the examples above show general trends in European early childhood service provision, it is important to note that there are also counter-examples. For instance, there is the recent massive investment in childcare by the British government (Moss 2004), which takes into account accessibility of services for disadvantaged groups. This apparently contradicts the general trend of state withdrawal and increased stress on the cost–benefit ratio. Another example is the initiative of the Flemish governmental organisation Kind en Gezin to fund community organisations in some deprived areas, which aims to bring a social and educational focus to childcare instead of using an economic rationale. These examples indicate that we should be careful when discussing the

‘effects of globalisation’, since, above all, early childhood policy needs to be understood in the particular historical, cultural, political and social context of each country or region. Thus there is a need to stimulate cross-national research on policy and practice in early childhood services in order to take such analysis further.

### ***The quality debate***

In this paper we have tried to analyse changes in policy and practice in the provision of early childhood care and education, both from a particular national (Belgian) perspective and a wider, western–industrial perspective, illustrated by examples from wider international settings. However, many crucial questions remain unanswered, which challenge policy makers as well as practitioners and researchers. One of the central questions in this regard is “What about quality?”. The Belgian situation provides an interesting example that has two possible interpretations. Since 2001, publicly funded day-care has been regulated by a new quality decree. State-funded providers are expected to have their own mission statement and vision, constructed in a participative way to include the views of staff, parents and, where possible, children. With that in hand, they are expected to define targets and goals and describe how these will be realised. They are also expected to do an annual self-evaluation on whether they have achieved their goals. In short, government inspection will focus to a lesser extent on central quality criteria and will instead check whether centres ‘say what they do, and do what they say’. We may view this quality

decree as a significant step forwards, because it builds on local dynamics and enables (indeed compels) providers to work in a participatory way, taking all stakeholders’ views into account when defining quality. However, we may also view this as a withdrawal of the state from the ethical debate and from social issues, especially regarding questions such as “Who is the childcare for?”. From this perspective the quality decree can be regarded as an example of decentralisation and increased individualisation. It is not easy to know which view to take: they may be both ‘true’, even when the two views appear to be opposed to each other.

Therefore the question of quality in early childhood services can be distilled into three dilemmas or thought of as a balancing act between three opposing concepts: governmental responsibility versus autonomy; standardisation versus diversity; and inclusion versus exclusion.

### ***Government responsibility versus autonomy***

Central as well as local governments have a responsibility for monitoring the quality of childcare. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child gives governments a mission and mandate to do so, regardless of whether provisions are state-funded or not. Children are entitled to expect that the provision of care and education is monitored and that minimum quality levels are guaranteed. The UN Convention clearly gives this responsibility to nation states; quality can therefore never be regarded as solely the responsibility of the parents, it should be considered to be a shared task. Moreover, as far as state-funded provision



is concerned, local or central governments have to guarantee the best use of public money, which also entails monitoring quality. However, governments do not wish to be perceived as being bureaucratic, too strict or over-regulating. Thus the general trend seems to be in the direction of self-evaluation rather than control; deregulation rather than regulation; and administrative simplification rather than more paperwork. Citizens also seem to expect this from their policy makers. Every policy on quality will inevitably have to deal with this dilemma and finds its position in this debate.

#### ***Standardisation versus diversity***

Central and even local monitoring demands a standardisation of quality criteria. Questions need to be answered, such as “What is the best use of public money?” and “What are the minimum quality standards every child is entitled to?” Paradoxically, decentralising power and decision-making actually raises the need for standards of quality that are independent of local dynamics. Highly standardised quality measurement tools such as ITERS and ECERS<sup>3</sup> have been successful from both a scientific and commercial perspective, illustrating the need for good criteria. In times of globalisation – but also localisation – they allow comparisons within and between countries and regions, as well as over time, enabling professionals for instance to evaluate the impact of policy decisions on the field of childcare. For similar

reasons it is useful to measure the results of different forms of childcare, which would necessarily entail a different set of standards.

On the other hand, to achieve true global diversity, the various local and cultural views of what is good for children also need to be taken into account. Cross-cultural research in this field has clearly shown that what is ‘good for children’ may in fact vary significantly across different cultural and historical contexts. Therefore, developmental psychology theories and the definition of the universal needs of children should be challenged (Woodhead 1987; Burman 1994; Canella 1997). Respect for diversity in this sense means a move away from standardisation. It also means that quality can no longer be defined solely by ‘experts’ but that parents and local communities need to be involved in the process, leading inevitably to complex and diverse definitions. Again, every quality policy will have to take equality issues into account and therefore will have to seek a position in this spectrum.

#### ***Inclusion versus exclusion***

The third dilemma is central to social justice and addresses the question “Who are these provisions for?”. In other words, who do the services address and how is the accessibility of these services guaranteed? Different scholars have shown in their research that inclusion without exclusion is quite impossible (Bloch

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<sup>3</sup> *ITERS is the Infant and Toddlers Environment Rating Scale. ECERS is the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale. They are the most internationally used rating scales for quality measurement, focusing on material environment as well as curriculum and learning activities.*

et al. 2003; Popkewitz 2003). In Flanders, for instance, focusing on the economic function of childcare has led to the exclusion of deprived families. Therefore the government decided to fund community childcare services that address the needs of this population. In the Netherlands, the government has compensated for the same inequitable, economic thinking by establishing a large network of *peuterspeelzalen* (toddler playgroups) that support deprived families in general and ethnic minorities in particular, with the aim of preventing future school failure. There are many other examples of similar schemes worldwide, which are often justified by their aim of preventing school failure or providing adult support. However, these compensatory programmes run the risk of creating a dual system and stigmatising specific groups in society by labelling them as ‘in need’, thereby perpetuating a deficit model of family functioning. On the other hand it is quite clear that general services, addressing the entire population, may not take into account the social, economical and cultural diversity of this population and therefore do not guarantee equal access. The discussion on quality of services in a diverse society will also have to deal with this difficult issue.

### ***Reconceptualising quality***

It is clear that there are no easy ways out of these dilemmas. Should we abandon the entire concept of quality as being too relativist? At the very least, these analyses force us to rethink the concept and to be more explicit about the

assumptions we make. We need to acknowledge that quality can only be defined when we have clear and explicit ideas on the societal functions of early-years provision. I identify three distinct, but interrelated societal functions: economic, educational and social.

#### ***The economic function***

This function is quite clear; childcare enables mothers and fathers to balance the requirements of employment with family responsibilities. Investments in public provision are necessary to avoid this balancing act being the sole responsibility of families, and to ensure that it is a shared responsibility between parents and the state. Furthermore, providing care and education in the early childhood years can also be profitable in terms of the life-long education of citizens, to make them attractive to employers. The economic function is not an issue. What may be problematic is the historical burden that was placed on childcare systems in the 1980s and 1990s, when it was all too often reduced to a matter of economics.

#### ***The educational function***

This is less obvious. For too long childcare has been regarded as a necessary evil, and mothers at home have been idealised as providing the best care for their child. This resulted in superficial quality discussions and use of slogans such as “just like home” or “a home away from home”. On the contrary, it would be more useful to define the educational value of childcare as complementary to that provided by the family and therefore emphasise where it

differs from home, rather than where it imitates an idealised picture of the family. This means, among other things, that educational quality can only be defined for a particular community to acknowledge families' diverse perspectives. In inner city areas, an outdoor play area may be crucial, while in other contexts the focus may be on language acquisition or community education. In all cases, especially in post-industrial societies where birth rates tend to be very low and informal networks of parents and children are often weak, childcare provides space and time for children – and sometimes parents – to socialise. This means that childcare can have a special educational function in community building, in establishing networks and in supporting children and parents to live in a diverse society. The DECET-network (Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training; [www.decet.org](http://www.decet.org); see also Vandebroek 2004b) is an organisation that seeks to address such issues in a range of contexts.

### ***The social function***

In this sense, early years provision can contribute to a better society from a social justice perspective. This inevitably raises questions about accessibility of services and the inclusion/exclusion paradigm.

It may be a step forward in the discussion to redefine quality as the degree to which childcare provisions succeed in combining these three societal functions. This means that some general standards are to be established, which can be done on the micro-level of individual provision. A very good example are the 40 'quality targets in services for young children' elaborated by the European Commission Network (1996). In addition, exactly how these general targets will be brought into practice will be a matter of negotiation among experts, professionals, parents and the local community.

More general standards could also be established on the macro-level of national or regional policy. This would be useful in advocacy work and to help grass-roots organisations make long-term strategic plans. To help this process, new research is needed at this level, including cross-national policy analyses. This would help us to better understand the complex dualities of globalisation/regionalisation and to learn how, in different cases, policy can be positioned in the dilemmas of responsibility/autonomy, standardisation/diversity and inclusion/exclusion.



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The Bernard van Leer Foundation, established in 1949, is based in the Netherlands. We actively engage in supporting early childhood development activities in around 40 countries. Our income is derived from the bequest of Bernard van Leer, a Dutch industrialist and philanthropist, who lived from 1883 to 1958.

Our mission is to improve opportunities for vulnerable children younger than eight years old, growing up in socially and economically difficult circumstances. The objective is to enable young children to develop their innate potential to the full. Early childhood development is crucial to creating opportunities for children and to shaping the prospects of society as a whole.

We fulfil our mission through two interdependent strategies:

- Making grants and supporting programmes for culturally and contextually appropriate approaches to early childhood development;
- Sharing knowledge and expertise in early childhood development, with the aim of informing and influencing policy and practice.

The Foundation currently supports about 150 major projects for young children in both developing and industrialised countries. Projects are implemented by local actors which may be public, private or

community-based organisations. Documenting, learning and communicating are integral to all that we do. We are committed to systematically sharing the rich variety of knowledge, know-how and lessons learned that emerge from the projects and networks we support. We facilitate and create a variety of products for different audiences about work in the field of early childhood development.

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