



**The (in)convenience of care in preschool education:  
examining staff views on educare**

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## The (in)convenience of care in preschool education: examining staff views on *educare*

It is generally accepted that Early Childhood Education and Care should adopt a holistic view on education, in which education and care are inseparable concepts. Perspectives of staff members themselves are however often absent in these *educare* debates. We conducted six video-elicited focus groups with various preschool staff members (n=69) in Flanders (Belgium), which is well-known for its split system in which children between two and a half and four years old are confronted with the pivotal transition from an informal or formal caring environment (home or childcare service) to a formal learning environment (preschool). With Maurice Hamington's theory of embodied and performative care as theoretical lens for this empiric study, we propose a new direction for pre- and in-service training in which the use of emotions, embodied exchange and social responsibility have a central place.

Keywords: *educare*; professionals; embodied care; preschool; ethics of care

### Introduction

It is generally accepted that Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) should adopt a holistic view on education, in which education and care are inseparable concepts (Cameron and Moss 2011; European Commission 2011; Kaga, Bennett, and Moss 2010). In countries with an integrated ECEC system, or with a social pedagogical tradition like the Nordic countries and Germany, this conceptual integration (*educare*) is more prevalent than in countries with a split system with separate childcare services and preschools (Kaga, Bennett, and Moss 2010). Several scholars have argued that the holistic concept of *educare* is challenged by an international context of *schoolification*, in which ECEC is increasingly understood as preparation for compulsory schooling (Moss 2013, OECD 2006). Based on Cartesian rationalism, the 'person to be educated' is seen as an autonomous and rational being who is to be prepared for economic, political and cultural life in the public sphere, somewhat neglecting his or her relational life as an interdependent, caring and other-centred human

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3 being (Lynch, Baker, and Lyons 2009; Noddings 1984). Recent studies, both of split and of  
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5 integrated ECEC systems, claim that the care dimension is at risk of disappearing because of  
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7 ECEC curricula that focuses less on emotion, love and solidarity (Garnier 2011; Löfdahl and  
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9 Folke-Fichtelius 2015; Löfgren 2015; Lynch, Baker, and Lyons 2009). Yet, this is in conflict  
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11 with international policy and research reports, which are likeminded in their pleas for  
12  
13 competent systems where preschool staffs conjoin care and education (Author's own 2012). It  
14  
15 should be noted that perspectives of staff members themselves are often absent in educare  
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17 debates. As a matter of fact, it is particularly interesting to study the views on educare of  
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19 professionals in countries with a split ECEC system, in which children between two and a half  
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21 and four years old are confronted with the pivotal transition from an informal or formal caring  
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23 environment (home or childcare service) to a formal learning environment (preschool)  
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25 (Garnier et al. 2016). For this reason, we conducted six video-elicited focus groups with  
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27 various staff members (n=69) working with children starting preschool in Flanders, which is  
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29 well-known for its split system.  
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35 The concept of educare, ontologically and epistemologically, presupposes that the  
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37 mind and body are inseparable entities. Maurice Hamington's (2004, 2014) theory of  
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39 embodied and performative care can therefore be considered the theoretical backbone for the  
40  
41 conceptualisation of educare. Hamington's theory forms a sound basis for empirical research  
42  
43 on the meaning making of staff, as his work is inspired by Merleau-Ponty's (1945, 1964)  
44  
45 deconstruction of the Cartesian dualistic tradition that values the mind over the body.  
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### 49 ***Hamington's theory of embodied and performative care***

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51 For Hamington, care, when seen as its embodied aspects, permeates the human condition.  
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53 Care is about who we fundamentally are as human beings. Therefore, care is more than just a  
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55 normative ethical perspective: it also encompasses ontological and epistemological aspects  
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3 (Hamington 2004, 2012, 2015b, 2016).  
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5 On an ontological level, Hamington (2012, 2015b, 2016) argues that human beings are  
6 fundamentally relational and embodied beings. The latter is based on the work of Merleau-  
7 Ponty (1945, 1964), a French philosopher of the first half of the twentieth century, who  
8 strongly opposed the Cartesian mind-body dualism dating back to Socrates and Plato.  
9 Merleau-Ponty disagreed that human beings consist of a material physical body and a non-  
10 material mental substance. Instead, he argued that humans experience themselves through  
11 their bodies and engage in various projects in relation to the environment in which they find  
12 themselves (Hamington 2004). In valorising the body, Merleau-Ponty does not marginalise  
13 the mind but instead reconceptualises it as inextricably intertwined with the body; we perceive  
14 the world through our bodies. In addition to Merleau-Ponty's claim that our bodies are built  
15 for perception, Hamington (2004) emphasised that our bodies are also built to care. From that  
16 perspective, Hamington articulated that education is not simply a matter of shaping the mind.  
17 Rather, it is an 'embodied exchange'. When adults teach a child to ride a bicycle, embodied  
18 aspects of care are always inherently present.  
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36 On an epistemological level, Hamington (2015b, 2016) pointed out that caring and  
37 knowing exist in a dynamic relationship. The more knowledge we have about another person,  
38 the more we have the potential to care. Vice versa, the more we care for another, the more we  
39 like to learn from that person, which in turn can ameliorate the quality of care (Hamington  
40 2012). The knowledge that affects care is more than a collection of articulated data: it  
41 includes a web of entangled feelings and subtle perceptions understood through the caring  
42 habits of the body, as stated in the corporeal or body-centred epistemology of Merleau-Ponty  
43 (1945, 1964). Caring knowledge of the other person is necessary but, due to low expectations  
44 on the feasibility of care in a certain context, it is not always sufficient to enable care  
45 (Hamington 2004, 2010). When one lacks knowledge of another it is still possible to  
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3 transcend the social and physical disconnection if the person is stimulated to use *caring*  
4  
5 *imagination*, which promotes empathy, critical reflection and understanding of another's  
6  
7 context (Hamington 2004, 2010).  
8

9  
10 On an ethical level, people are confronted with moral choices to be made in order to  
11  
12 'do the right things'. Rather than prescribed caring behaviours, the normative caring response  
13  
14 is a product of openness and attentiveness to the needs that emerge in a particular relationship,  
15  
16 in a specific context (Hamington 2016).  
17

18  
19 In sum, Hamington suggests that care affects who we are, what we know, and our  
20  
21 moral behaviour. Care aims at contributing to the prosperity and personal growth of  
22  
23 individuals, while acknowledging their interconnectedness and interdependence. As  
24  
25 Hamington understands the personal as the political, he uses, for example, the work of Jane  
26  
27 Addams to demonstrate that care has a radical political potential for building a solidary and  
28  
29 inclusive community and for developing corresponding social policy (Hamington 2004,  
30  
31 2015a, 2015b). Within these processes, caregivers develop a notion of caring *identity*, built on  
32  
33 iterations of conscious and unconscious habits of care. Hamington calls this the *performativity*  
34  
35 *of care*, as care as a performance is both a mental disposition and an activity that can be  
36  
37 witnessed in time and space (Hamington 2010, 2015a). It should be noted that caring  
38  
39 performances are dictated and often restrained by social and political norms and practices;  
40  
41 however, people can resist these forces as performativity operates in the space between  
42  
43 absolute individual agency and social or natural determinism (Hamington 2015b).  
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## 48 49 **Research Context**

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51 Historically, ECEC in the Flemish community of Belgium is built on two traditions: childcare  
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53 services for children from zero to three years of age, and preschools for children from two and  
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55 a half to six years of age (Oberhuemer, Schreyer, and Neuman 2010). These two types of  
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3 institutions are under the auspices of different ministries and have distinct curricula,  
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5 professional profiles and child-staff ratios. Preschools enjoy a high degree of autonomy,  
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7 which allows each school to develop its own educational policies, as well as to appoint its  
8  
9 own staff and decide the child-staff ratio (OECD 2011). In many preschools, entry classes  
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11 (*instapklassen*) or reception classes (*onthaalklassen*) are organised for children who are  
12  
13 between two and a half and three years of age. In other preschools, the youngest children  
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15 attend the first grade class of preschool, which comprises children from two and a half to four  
16  
17 years of age.  
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20  
21 A preschool class typically consists of 20–25 children with one preschool teacher  
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23 (Hulpia, Peeters, and Van Landeghem 2014; Author's own 2011). Preschool teachers often  
24  
25 have additional support from a teacher's assistant for a few hours per week, depending on the  
26  
27 number of toddlers. Teacher's assistants are typically responsible for caring tasks for the  
28  
29 youngest children (e.g., potty training, meals and snack time) while preschool teachers are  
30  
31 responsible for the learning activities. All preschool teachers hold a bachelor's degree in pre-  
32  
33 primary education and teacher's assistants usually have a secondary vocational degree in  
34  
35 childcare (Author's own 2012). Many preschools collaborate with the after school care  
36  
37 services either within or outside of the school building. After school care workers organise the  
38  
39 leisure time of children after school and may also supervise between educational activities and  
40  
41 during the lunch break. They have a minimum of three months of training and many hold a  
42  
43 secondary vocational degree in childcare. Some preschools have staff members who act as a  
44  
45 'bridge' between the school and parents, with a focus on disadvantaged families. Although  
46  
47 some of these bridging persons may have a teaching background, this is not a requirement, as  
48  
49 their selection is based on social, communication, and organisational skills as well as their  
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51 experience within the local communities (Agirdag and Van Houtte 2011). Every school has a  
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53 care coordinator who is responsible to develop a 'care' policy with the aim of increasing the  
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3 educational opportunities of all children. Care coordinators who mostly do pupil guidance  
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5 consist of teachers, speech therapists, special needs educators or other persons with a social or  
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7 educational bachelor degree (Blommaert 2011).  
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## 10 **Methods**

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12 We organised six focus groups with 69 staff members (preschool teachers, teacher's  
13  
14 assistants, after school care workers, bridging persons, care coordinators) working in  
15  
16 preschools with the youngest children in the cities of Ghent and Brussels. Although three  
17  
18 different focus groups with school directors were planned in Ghent, Brussels and Antwerp,  
19  
20 they had to be cancelled because the school directors claimed to not have time to participate  
21  
22 in a focus group regarding conceptualisations of educare. All respondents agreed to  
23  
24 participate in this study by giving written informed consent. The ethical commission of the  
25  
26 authors' faculty approved the procedure. Respondents were recruited through different  
27  
28 educational umbrella networks, as shown in Table 1.  
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34 [Table 1 near here]  
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38 Discussions and reflections among the focus group participants were stimulated with a  
39  
40 20-minute movie showing a typical day in a preschool entry class (Tobin 1992; Tobin,  
41  
42 Arzubiaga, and Adair 2013). The movie shows how 19 children, with and without migrant  
43  
44 backgrounds, experienced a half or full day at preschool. The scenes include parents bringing  
45  
46 and fetching their children, teacher-guided and free activities in class, free time at the outdoor  
47  
48 playground, toileting, snack time and lunchtime. During the day, several incidents happen,  
49  
50 such as a bicycle conflict between toddlers on the playground and a girl crying regularly  
51  
52 during the morning activities. Respondents were invited to interrupt the movie and discuss it.  
53  
54 They were also asked whether they found the movie to be typical. While discussing its  
55  
56 typicality, participants' underlying understandings and concepts of education and care became  
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3 apparent (Tobin, 1992). No additional pre-structured questions concerning education, care or  
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5 educare were asked. The focus group sessions lasted between one and a half and three and a  
6  
7 half hours. All focus group sessions were audio-taped and transcribed. In a first thematic  
8  
9 analysis (Howitt 2011) we identified several themes, such as the divide between learning and  
10  
11 care; care as shared versus divided responsibility; and professional versus mother-like  
12  
13 conceptualisations of care. Then we conducted a directed content analysis (Hsieh and  
14  
15 Shannon 2005) guided by the theoretical framework of Hamington, in which five themes of a  
16  
17 higher order were identified: embodied potential to care; mind-body dualism; professional  
18  
19 identities; hierarchy between education and care; and educare as social justice. Secondary  
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21 coding then related these meta-themes to the first thematic analysis.  
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## 26 **Results**

### 27 *Embodied potential to care*

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32 Different views were encountered regarding educare and the relation between care and  
33  
34 learning. Whereas some staff members addressed the importance of care, others stressed the  
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36 difficulties and hindrances of caring for young children in preschool education. Irrespective of  
37  
38 their views and practices, the majority of the staff members noticed and identified the  
39  
40 emotional and physical care needs of children, which is in accordance with the ontological  
41  
42 statement of Hamington (2004) that human bodies are built to care, thus having the potential  
43  
44 to care due to the conscious and unconscious caring knowledge and habits situated in and  
45  
46 maintained by our bodies. The respondents were empathic to the perspective of the crying  
47  
48 toddler shown in the movie and perceived her to be sad and lonely. One care coordinator  
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50 associated the scene with her own attempts to answer the care needs of a child in the  
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52 classroom:  
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Care coordinator: We have a toddler who started preschool 10 months ago and still cries daily. I have noticed how this crying drives the preschool teacher crazy. When I visit the class, the child runs immediately to me and embraces me. Each time that I comfort her, the teacher takes the child away while stating that 'we should not give in to this'. In those moments my heart really breaks.

(FG 6)

This quote, and especially the phrase 'we should not give in to this' shows that staff members are aware of certain care needs of children, but that some may have developed strategies to restrain caring responses, not fully utilising their embodied potential to care. On an epistemological level, Hamington (2015b, 2016) underlines that the more concrete knowledge we have about a person the more we are able to care, as some staff members have experienced:

After school care worker 1: I have learned to identify when children are in need of rest, even when they cannot tell it to me.

After school care worker 2: You can see it or they show it to you. I give them the possibility to go to bed and sleep or rest.

After school care worker 1: Yes, I do the same or I ask the child if they want to be left alone in peace.

(FG 4)

The unconscious and conscious caring knowledge that these respondents have been building is derived from the feelings and attitudes expressed by the children and from reading the body language of the children. Other staff members, like bridging persons, teacher's assistants and some preschool teachers, pointed out that parents are valuable sources for gathering concrete knowledge in order to better care for children in preschool education.

Researcher: Why do you like it when parents come in the classroom?

Preschool teacher: It is easy to quickly ask something or receive information from the parents. Like 'yesterday she didn't sleep well', or 'something happened yesterday on the outdoor playground and she is afraid now'. These are small things that give you a lot of

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3 information to take into account when teaching.  
4 (FG 3)  
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### 7 *Mind-body dualism*

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10 We identified a dominant tendency for caring and learning to be considered separate entities.  
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13 Preschool teacher: I already have to invest a lot of teaching time in caring tasks. If I also  
14 have to start caring for children individually, that is too much.  
15 (FG 1)  
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18  
19 Caring actions and learning activities were considered to take place independently from each  
20 other and, in this citation, the preschool teacher expresses the difficulty of one person having  
21 to care and educate simultaneously. Accordingly, the teacher's assistants claimed that they  
22 took up caring tasks (i.e., fostering the well-being and self-confidence of the children and  
23 supporting potty training and eating) to allow teachers to focus on the learning activities.  
24 However, some assistants and preschool teachers also claimed that caring for children is  
25 equally as important as organising learning activities.  
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29 Preschool teacher: When you qualify as a preschool teacher, you have the idea that you  
30 are a good preschool teacher when you organise activities in which children can learn all  
31 kinds of things. After a few years of working I learned to focus less on learning activities  
32 in favour of seeing to it that children are happy. If there is time left, I will do a planned  
33 teacher-directed learning activity as we were trained to do in college. This doesn't mean  
34 that you never have to do something of course. But the well-being of the children is more  
35 important than the success of a learning activity.  
36 (FG 3)  
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39  
40 Even though the teacher articulates that she wants to answer the caring needs of the children,  
41 caring and learning still exist as separate and incompatible. In her perspective, caring – as  
42 fostering the well-being of children and taking care of their physical needs – needs to happen  
43 prior to learning activities that shape the mind.  
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### *Professional identities*

In Hamington's theory of performative care, care as a performance is both a mental disposition and an activity that can be witnessed in time and space by others and by the caregiver (Hamington 2010, 2015a). Performances of care constitute caring identity, including the ability to respond to emergent needs (Hamington 2015b, 2016). Most respondents, except the teacher's assistants who have formal caring mandates, did not identify that caring for the emotional and physical needs of children is part of their professional duty. Some allocated care to the private familial sphere, in which parents – and foremost mothers – are responsible for care.

Preschool teacher: When you work with the young ones, it is like people expect you to hug the children. I don't think this is my task. They already have a mother. I am not the mother.

(FG 1)

Yet respondents were aware of the care needs of children. Some respondents dealt with this tension by envisaging their caring identity as distinct from their professional identity. For them, it is impossible not to care in preschool and they conceptualise and justify their caring identity in relation to their personality:

Preschool teacher: But I'm a cuddly person and the children know this and are used to this.

(FG 3)

As discussed in a focus group of after school care workers, framing themselves as having 'a caring personality' may also be a way of resisting professional preschool norms while still adhering to the separation of care and education.

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3 After school care worker 1: She works from the heart. I'm also a bit like this but in your  
4 work you have to think from here [*respondent points at her head*]. But some of us think a  
5 lot from the heart.  
6

7 Researcher: So in the job you have to think from the mind?  
8

9 After school care worker 1: Normally I work like that

10 After school care worker 2: But you need a good balance between the heart and the mind.  
11

12 (FG 4)  
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15 In this quote, after school care workers expressed the desire to think and act more from the  
16 body and the heart, but they perceive the prevailing norm to be focused on the mind. Other  
17 staff members framed their caring identity in relation to their being a mother, rather than a  
18 professional, rather than a  
19 professional:  
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25 Researcher: You just told us that you have become a mother of two children. Why do you  
26 share this information with us?  
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28 Preschool teacher: I started as a teacher when I didn't have children. By having children  
29 now, I realise the importance of giving time and supporting the children individually so  
30 they can be at ease while, for example, eating their fruit. Before becoming a mother, I  
31 was more in a hurry because I had a lot of children and I needed to do many learning  
32 activities with them.  
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35 (FG 1)  
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38 This preschool teacher attributed her caring knowledge and habits to her embodied maternal  
39 experience. This separation of care (as motherly) and education (as professionalism) was also  
40 illustrated by this teacher:  
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46 Preschool teacher: I always explain to other people that I'm more a mother than a teacher  
47 in working with the young children in preschool.  
48

49 (FG 1)  
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52 Teacher's assistants, with a formal caring mandate, considered care to be part of their  
53 professional role and identity, while few teachers did so. Yet, the assistants also framed this in  
54 a mother-like way.  
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3 Teacher's assistant 1: Irrespective of their age, a child likes to be 'mothered' in preschool.

4 Researcher: What do you mean by 'mothering'?

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6 Teacher's assistant 1: Love them and give them attention. When needed, we comfort  
7 them.

8  
9 Teacher's assistant 2: So the children feel that they matter in preschool.

10  
11 (FG 2)

### 12 13 *The hierarchy between education and care*

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16 Several respondents expressed that they refrain from caring as it is inconvenient or a nuisance,  
17  
18 or because they feel uneasiness or doubt when confronted with caring tasks:  
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22 After school care worker: I used to go to the playground and all children would come to  
23 me to receive a hug. I was happy and excited towards the children and would interact  
24 with the children at eye level. The problem was that every time the children would  
25 literally pull me over because they were so many. Now I stopped doing this and I limit  
26 the hugs and interactions. When everybody wants to give me a hand, I'm not able to  
27 make a train to go upstairs with the children. Teaching structure to children is also  
28 important.  
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32 (FG 4)

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35 This quote illustrates how caring performances and caring identity are influenced by  
36  
37 institutional logics. The after school care worker felt she had to adjust her caring actions and  
38  
39 attitudes because she was overwhelmed by the multiple care needs of the children on the  
40  
41 outdoor playground. It illustrates that caring dispositions should not just be seen on an  
42  
43 individual level, but also need to be examined at the institutional level. Many respondents  
44  
45 claimed that they are not able to meet all of the children's care needs with the present adult-  
46  
47 child ratio. Teachers questioned how they often work alone with a class of 25 children who  
48  
49 are two and a half to three and a half years of age. Yet, it is not so much the feasibility of care  
50  
51 that we are interested in, in this study, but rather its conceptualisation in relation to education.  
52  
53 One after school care worker also expressed having to restrain her caring responses because  
54  
55 she felt she should focus on teaching children structure, as that was what was expected from  
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3 her in a preschool context. This again demonstrates a dualism between mind and body, where  
4  
5 the body needs to be disciplined and where learning and caring are distinct. In preschool  
6  
7 contexts, learning is considered more important than caring; caring is subordinate to learning  
8  
9 and may – at most – be a precondition to what really matters: learning.  
10

11  
12 This hierarchy is also reflected in the relations and division of labour in preschool  
13  
14 workforces. Many teacher's assistants underlined that they would like to be able to care more  
15  
16 and that learning and caring should coexist; however, because of their lower position in the  
17  
18 staff hierarchy (e.g., lower initial qualification and lower salaries compared to preschool  
19  
20 teachers) they understand that they depend heavily on the permission of the teacher to apply  
21  
22 their educational beliefs. This is especially evident when the teacher has a different  
23  
24 understanding of education to them, thus creating problems. This issue is explained by a  
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26 teacher's assistant:  
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31 Teacher's assistant: What I find difficult is that the teacher has a certain view on  
32  
33 education which doesn't always comply with my view on education. Often I see how the  
34  
35 well-being of the children is jeopardised. I find it difficult to address this since I do not  
36  
37 want to undermine the authority of the teacher. Going to the director is also not an option  
38  
39 since I would also not appreciate it if teachers went to the director behind my back.  
40  
41 (FG 2)

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43 Moreover, it turns out that teacher's assistants are more focused on acquiring concrete  
44  
45 knowledge from the child about whether they respond well to the given care, which according  
46  
47 to Hamington (2015b, 2016) enhances the potential for care, and thus the quality of care.  
48  
49 Similarly, bridging persons claimed to have easy access to parents' concrete knowledge about  
50  
51 whether the caring needs of their children were met.  
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54 Bridging person 1: I have noticed that many children who start preschool do not eat  
55  
56 properly.

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58 Bridging person 2: This is indeed a huge problem. Many parents come to me and  
59  
60 complain that their child doesn't eat well. Often they find full lunchboxes in the

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2  
3 schoolbag of their child at the end of the day. I have discussed this with the care  
4 coordinator and the preschool teachers. They told me that this is normal for children who  
5 start preschool because they experience difficulties adapting to the new school context.  
6  
7 (FG 5)  
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10 Although bridging persons have valuable information for enhancing the quality of care in  
11 preschool education, they stated that they do not have the mandate to ensure that preschool  
12 teachers take this caring knowledge into account. In contrast, many preschool teachers did not  
13 consider the parents as potential valuable resources and partners in the education of the child.  
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20 Preschool teacher: Parents expect you to talk with them every day about the most silly  
21 things like 'did they sleep and eat well?', yesterday she was a bit sick'. I don't think this is  
22 added value because the children are just standing there and I can't do anything with  
23 them.  
24  
25 (FG 1)  
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### 29 *Educare as social justice*

30  
31 Hamington (2004, 2015a, 2015b) claimed that thinking about care has radical political  
32 potential. Indeed, one care coordinator and a few teachers' assistants questioned the hierarchy  
33 between learning and caring, as it contributes to confirming the existing social inequalities  
34 between children. In the following example a care coordinator brought a controversial  
35 standpoint to a discussion dominated by the idea that children should be potty trained before  
36 they enter preschool.  
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46 Care Coordinator: Last year they asked me to send a letter to parents whose child was not  
47 potty trained yet. I had to ask them to keep their children at home. I refused to do this.  
48 First of all, this is illegal according to the law. Second, by denying extra support and care  
49 for potty training, we endorse that parents keep their children at home. Especially for  
50 children who do not have Dutch as their first language, this is a problem. They will not  
51 receive the opportunity to learn Dutch. If they are not potty trained within the next six  
52 months, they will stay at home even longer. So I strongly disagree that children who are  
53 not potty trained at the age of two and a half years should be excluded from learning in  
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3 preschool.  
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7 This care coordinator used her caring imagination in order to better understand the situation  
8 facing children and parents and to critically reflect upon the possible effects of taking such  
9 measures in preschool and in society. The idea that children could be excluded from learning  
10 due to their natural care needs and the absence of available care in preschool conflicted with  
11 her caring performance and caring identity. This caused her to resist the request from the  
12 director and other preschool teachers. As caring performances are dictated and often  
13 restrained by social and political norms and practices, this care coordinator resisted the social  
14 forces within the institution, reminding her colleagues of the legal framework, in which  
15 preschools are not allowed to refuse children who are not potty trained. The caring identity of  
16 this care coordinator is inherently moral and political, as she negotiated social forces and a  
17 practice seeking to constrain behaviour; if she had executed what was expected of her, she  
18 would not have been caring for the children and some of the children would have been  
19 excluded from preschool and exposed to discrimination and social exclusion. This example  
20 may illustrate Hamington's statement that thinking about care is fundamentally, and  
21 inevitably, political.  
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## 42 Discussion

43 There are, of course, limitations to our study, including the absence of the perceptions of  
44 school directors, who are responsible for the overall coordination of educational policies in  
45 preschools. Also missing is the voice of policy-makers. Another limitation is obviously the  
46 small number of participants; an inherent problem of qualitative studies. However, the results  
47 of the study may bring new insight into educare debates.  
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55 In contrast with the internationally proclaimed importance of a holistic view on  
56 preschool education, the viewpoints of professionals are often absent in educare debates.  
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3 Understanding and encompassing their perspectives is, however, crucial to understanding  
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5 educare in countries with a historical divide between childcare and preschool. This may also  
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7 be relevant for countries with an integrated ECEC system, as there is increasing concern that  
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9 the conceptual integration of caring and learning is under pressure due to international  
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11 schoolification tendencies (Löfdahl and Folke-Fichtelius 2015; Löfgren 2015).  
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14 We organised focus groups comprised of various preschool staff working with  
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16 children in the pivotal age group of two and a half to four years. The narratives of the  
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18 participants were analysed, making use of Hamington's theoretical framework, as we consider  
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20 that a genuine holistic view of children and the adoption of an educare perspective assumes  
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22 the integration of mind and body. In contrast with this assumption, we found that preschool  
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24 staff members explicitly refer to a divide between learning and caring and a hierarchy in  
25  
26 which caring is subordinate to learning. This divide and hierarchy stems from an underlying  
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28 mind-body dualism, which is also reflected in the division of labour and tasks of the different  
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30 professional groups. Whereas the preschool teachers in our study predominantly focus on  
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32 'shaping' the minds of children by organising learning activities, the teacher's assistants and  
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34 after school care workers focus on taking care of the children's bodies and their physical and  
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36 emotional needs. Some preschool teachers claimed to engage in this as well, but when they  
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38 did so, they constructed a carer identity which was separate from their professional teacher  
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40 identity. Since teacher's assistants and after school care workers have lower professional  
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42 qualifications and lower salaries compared with preschool teachers, care seems to be  
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44 attributed to the staff members who have the least leverage to influence the educational  
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46 approach to preschool children. Sociologists like Wolkowitz (2006) and Hochschild (2003)  
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48 have problematised how care consisting of 'dirty body work' (e.g., potty training) and  
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50 'emotional labour' (e.g., comforting and hugging children) is considered inferior and is  
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52 mostly done by the 'lowest of the pecking order'. Moreover, teachers' assistants explained  
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3 their professional caring role as being surrogate mothers to children, which implies that care is  
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5 understood as a private matter instead of a public, professional and educational one. Feminist  
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7 and ethics of care scholars have rightly criticised that specific care-related tasks and  
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9 responsibilities remain locked in the private sphere and are therefore too often absent from  
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11 public discussions on human rights and social justice (Aslanian 2015; Hughes et al. 2005;  
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13 Taggart 2011). Instead, authors such as Joan Tronto (1993) have made strong pleas for care to  
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15 be placed at the centre of our political, public and moral lives. Taking into account the  
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17 interdependency of human beings, Tronto (1993) advocates that the structures and values of  
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19 political and social institutions (e.g., preschools) should become fundamentally more caring,  
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21 and thus aim for greater solidarity, democracy and social justice (Taggart 2011; Tronto 2013).  
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23 By refusing to write a letter to parents about potty training, claiming that exclusion  
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25 mechanisms would occur when splitting education from care, a care coordinator in this study  
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27 demonstrated the social and political potential of merging care and education.  
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32 Although learning was appointed a higher status than caring, many preschool teachers  
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34 were aware of the emotional and physical caring needs of children because of their embodied  
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36 potential, as human beings, to care (Hamington 2004). Yet, this often caused feelings of  
37  
38 inconvenience, uneasiness, doubt, and even nuisance. As they had a narrow understanding of  
39  
40 teaching as having the primary goal of enhancing the learning of children, many respondents  
41  
42 did not want to 'give in' to their urges to care. Instead, they suppressed and constrained these  
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44 urges as they do not consider caring to be professional. Due to this hierarchy between  
45  
46 education and care, preschool teachers construct a rather technical and distant  
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48 conceptualisation of ECEC professionalism. In the context of a diverse society, a purely  
49  
50 distant and technical concept of professionalism has been severely criticised for several  
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52 reasons, including the potential exclusion of children who are not socialised in this narrow  
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54 definition of education and the lack of democratically debated meanings of preschool (Colley  
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3 2006; Dahlberg and Moss 2005; Peeters 2008). ECEC is in need of a more normative  
4 professionalism, in which the use of emotions and value-bound elements of professional  
5 actions, such as personal involvement and social responsibility, have a central place (Colley  
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7 2006; Kunneman 2005; Osgood 2010; Peeters 2008). In compliance with Taggart (2011,  
8  
9 2014) and Goldstein (1998) we underline the importance of developing an ethics of care  
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11 framework for ECEC professionalism based on educare, in which the care focus involves  
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13 more than simply offering some hugs and kisses as a surrogate mother. By addressing care in  
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15 education as deeply experiential, ethical, philosophical and political, and deconstructing  
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17 discourses of maternalism, the ability to meet the care needs of a diversity of children may  
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19 significantly increase (Aslanian 2015; Goldstein 1998).  
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25 As preschool staff may suppress the caring responses they feel, we recommend that  
26  
27 pre-service and in-service training focuses on developing a professional reflective language  
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29 on educare that enables staff to utilize their embodied potential to care. Rather than simply  
30  
31 ‘introducing’ care into what previously seemed to be low-care situations like for example  
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33 preschools in ECEC split systems, we underline that care is pervasive and can be enriched by  
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35 stimulating staff’s caring imagination (Haminton, 2014). For integrated ECEC systems the  
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37 challenge due to schoolification tendencies, is to remain explicitly recognizing and valuing  
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39 care as inherent to education. In so doing, caring and learning in both split and integrated  
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41 systems can be equally valued and linked with aims of inclusion and social justice. Tronto  
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43 (1993, 2013) focuses on the attentiveness, responsibility, competence, responsiveness and  
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45 solidarity of care as moral qualities. This framework is useful for analysing and  
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47 conceptualising educare not only on an individual level, but also on an institutional and  
48  
49 political level. Based on her framework and the plea of Lynch and colleagues (2009) to better  
50  
51 recognise and support bodily and emotional work, we recommend that preschool policies not  
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53 only emphasise taking care of children and families but also taking care of preschool staff  
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members by, for example, ensuring reflective, co-constructive and supportive spaces and installing supportive child-staff ratios. By valuing genuine educare in professional development strategies and staff policies, staff members may feel more competent and motivated to both educate and care for all children.

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For Peer Review Only

Table 1 Respondents Focus Groups

	Staff Profiles	#	♀	♂	Experience ≤ 10 years	Experience > 10 years	Invited through	Region
FG 1	preschool teachers	8	8	0	4	4	pedagogical guidance center of private NGO schools (Catholic)	Ghent
FG 2	teacher 's assistants	13	13	0	5	8	pedagogical guidance center of private NGO schools (Catholic)	Region Dender
FG 3	preschool teachers and teacher 's assistants	12	12	0	10	2	local network of private NGO schools (Catholic), municipal schools and state schools	Brussels
FG 4	after school care workers	9	8	1	9	0	network of all after school care services associated with private NGO schools (Catholic), municipal schools and state schools	Brussels
FG 5	bridging persons	11	11	0	6	5	network of all bridge figures associated with private NGO schools (Catholic), municipal schools and state schools	Ghent
FG 6	care coordinators	16	16	0	5	11	network of state schools	Ghent
<b>Total</b>		<b>69</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>30</b>		