

## **The Education and Care Divide: the role of the early childhood workforce in 15 European countries**

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### **Introduction**

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) has recently gained acknowledgement in the European public and political sphere. Whereas political discussions regarding ECEC have traditionally focused on quantity, growing interest has been evidenced on the part of policy-makers in the quality of provision at both local and international levels (European Commission, 2011; OECD, 2001, 2006, 2012; Penn, 2009). Although conceptualisations of quality vary considerably across countries, research and international policy reports show a clear consensus. Quality in ECEC should encompass a broad, holistic view on learning, caring, upbringing and social support for children. Quality services thus require both 'care' and 'education' as inseparable concepts (European Commission, 2011; Eurydice, 2009; UNESCO, 2010). In these debates, the workforce is seen as a critical factor (Oberhuemer, 2005; Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2002). Several international policy and academic reports have helped to better understand ECEC workforce profiles in European and other OECD countries since the 2000s (Cameron & Moss, 2007; Oberhuemer *et al.*, 2010). Most, however, consider the staff profiles of core practitioners without focusing on the profiles of 'assistants' or 'auxiliary staff'. Assistants support higher-qualified core practitioners in working with children and their families. In this article, we examine their profiles in 15 European countries and relate them to the ongoing quality debate in ECEC. What is the role of assistants in quality ECEC based on a holistic conceptualisation of education and care? To analyse this question, we frame it within the context of the increasing schoolification of the early years. On the basis of academic discussions of the concept of schoolification, we argue that it can lead to an education and care divide which may be reinforced by the divided roles between assistants and core practitioners. The methodology and results of a thematic analysis are presented, followed by a discussion on the implications for practice and policy. The findings in this article are part of a European research project entitled 'Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care' (CoRe), conducted by the University of East London and the University of Ghent and funded by the European Commission (Urban *et al.*, 2011; see article in this issue).

### **Schoolifying the Early Years**

Early years policies and practices take place in an international context of 'schoolification' where ECEC is increasingly conceptualised as preparation for compulsory schooling and the didactics of compulsory schooling therefore tend to determine ECEC programmes. Children are expected to acquire (pre-)literacy, (pre-)numeracy and (pre-)scientific skills from a young age (OECD, 2006, 2012). To ensure this, more formalised approaches have been adopted, goals and standards being distinctly formulated and indicators used to measure children's achievements (Cameron & Moss, 2011). In this vein, pre-schools and primary

schools strive for a closer relation so that children experience smoother transitions. This approach has been criticised by researchers and some international organisations, including UNESCO (2010) and OECD (2006). The different standpoints were most obvious when countries like Denmark, Sweden, Norway, France and the UK introduced early years programmes, partially influenced by the results of the triennial PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) studies. A growing criticism of this trend towards schoolification can be observed.

A primary criticism is about the children's learning process, which tends to be decontextualised with the development of predefined standards and individualised learning goals. Since the main focus is on cognitive and language learning, there is a risk that children's natural learning strategies — play, exploration, freedom of movement, relations and discussions with other children — are less encouraged (Broström, 2006, 2009; Hjort, 2006). Moreover, the interpretation of learning as a preparation for compulsory schooling tends to limit the attention given to the caring dimension of education (Alvestad, 2009; Forrester, 2005; Kyriacou *et al.*, 2009). For example, according to Garnier (2009, 2011), since the French government introduced an official school programme for the *école maternelle* initiated by 'readiness for school' ideas, the care function seems to have disappeared from official texts. The programme emphasises cognitive and language competence rather than children's social and affective development. Moss and Cameron (2011) and Smith and Whyte (2008) agree that schoolification results in a narrow view of education and contributes to the separation of 'education' and 'care' in ECEC services. This can hinder early year practitioners and pre-schools in creating an educational context that adopts a holistic viewpoint on children's needs and takes into account the multiple identities of children and their families. Parents are given a more instrumental role in the learning process of their children in the sense that they can help them to achieve the learning outcomes that the school or government has set. Hence, they are less involved in discussions on the kind of education they want for their child (Garnier, 2010b; OECD, 2006; Vandenbroeck *et al.*, forthcoming). Schoolifying the early years risks educational practices becoming merely places for 'adjustment' instead of places where children and parents can participate in democratic educational practices (Broström, 2006).

A second series of criticisms deals with the more technical conceptualisation of professionalism and the focus on prescribed learning goals and curricula (Oberhuemer, 2005). Practitioners are seen as technical experts teaching specific subjects that prepare young children to enter primary school. Their professional development includes mastering different subjects, using didactics based on evidence of 'what works' and applying prescribed school programmes (Jensen *et al.*, 2010; Samuelssona & Sheridan, 2010). Oberhuemer *et al.* (2010) and Dahlberg and Moss (2005) question this conceptualisation, since working on pedagogical quality should encompass an ethical and philosophical dimension. Essentially, the argument states that working and dialoguing with children, families and local communities from diverse backgrounds are uncertain, value-bound practices which go beyond applying prescribed teaching methods (Kunneman, 2005). A normative conceptualisation which is based on a *broad and integrated understanding of care, well-being, learning and pedagogy which values reciprocal relationships and an element of not-knowing* (Oberhuemer *et al.*, 2010, p. 496) is proposed in this debate. Considering the uncertain nature of social practices, professional development should include time to document educational practices and reflect on these with

colleagues and families (Peeters, 2008; Urban, 2008). Emotions should be given an important place in work with children and their parents (Colley, 2006; Osgood, 2006; Taggart, 2008). Caring and learning are thus approached equally. Kyriacou and colleagues (2009) concur that, within a technical conceptualisation of professionalism, the caring role of the teacher has been continually marginalised.

### Assisting Core Practitioners

Several international policy and academic reports have analysed working profiles of core practitioners. They are paid to work in ECEC services and are responsible for the care and education of a group of children and families. Oberhuemer and colleagues (2010) identified a variety of recurrent profiles of core practitioners in European countries. Most have a teaching profile, a minority a social-pedagogical one. In split systems, where ECEC is divided into childcare for the youngest (birth to three) and pre-school for toddlers (3–6-year-olds), core practitioners predominantly have a caring or health profile. In Europe, those with a teaching or social-pedagogical profile are more highly qualified (bachelor, master) than those with a caring profile who are mostly low- or non-qualified (lower or upper secondary level) (Oberhuemer *et al.*, 2010). There is also staff that is paid to ‘assist’ core practitioners. Although Chartier and Geneix (2006) estimate their numbers to be high, there is very little research on their role, status, position and identity. Studies on the tasks of assistants in the French *écoles maternelles*, in the UK and in the US are scarce, contexts that are all characterised by a clear schoolification tendency in the early years. In these countries, assistants have either no qualification or a lower qualification than core practitioners. In the UK and the US, they mainly contribute to better academic achievements of children and help with their learning processes (Farrell *et al.*, 2010; Ratcliff *et al.*, 2011; Thomas *et al.*, 2004). They have a clear *teaching* role. Yet the substantial increase in the number of assistants in recent years in the UK and in the US has not led to the expected improved learning outcomes and pro-social behaviour of children (Blatchford *et al.*, 2007, 2009; Finn & Pannozzo, 2004; Gerber *et al.*, 2001; Hughes & Westgate, 1997; Sosinsky & Gilliam, 2011). Some assistants or ‘paraprofessionals’ in the US also fulfil a *bridging* role. They need to raise educational attainment, especially in Afro-American children, by serving as role models and bridging the gap between schools and families and communities (Abbate-Vaughn & Paugh, 2009; Manz *et al.*, 2010; Villegas & Clewell, 1998). Both these roles are often intertwined.

A third role — the caring role — can be observed in countries such as France. The assistants in preschools are responsible for children’s hygiene, protection and emotional well-being so that the teacher can focus on the learning processes (Garnier, 2009, 2010a, 2011; Vasse, 2008). Compared to the learning and bridging role, the caring role of assistants is addressed far less in research. Barkham (2008), Dyer (1996) and Garnier (2010a) relate this role to the gendered nature of the job. According to Barkham (2008, p. 851), assistants are ‘those whose perceived primary role is that of “housewife and mother” and who subordinate their needs to those of the children and class teachers’. Their caring role is closely intertwined with their role as a mother. Qualitative research shows that assistants, as well as parents and children, consider the caring role as crucial. Garnier (2010a) shows that assistants believe it fundamental to care for and ‘love’ children. As assistant Louise, working in an English school, testifies: ‘*One of the most important parts of my*

*work is being good at making connections between pupils, the teacher and myself. Connections are part of a relationship and are usually emotional* (Fenlon, 2001, pp. 13–14). Barkham (2008) states that some fear that their caring role will be neglected because of professional development initiatives that are solely based on professionalising the learning roles. From the parents' perspective, the assistants' caring role is indispensable; the teacher prepares the children for primary school, while the assistant takes care of their emotional needs. They help to ensure that children 'learn to like the school' (Garnier, 2010a). '*As a child said of assistant Deborah: she really cares*' (Barkham, 2008, p. 852).

In sum, the scarce literature on assistants addresses three different roles: a learning role, a bridging role and a caring role. The learning and bridging roles are often emphasised, as assistants are expected to raise the (pre-) academic achievements of children, an idea which fits in with the schoolifying of ECEC. The caring role is addressed less, despite its importance, as shown in qualitative research.

### **Integrating Caring and Learning**

Notwithstanding the focus on ECEC as a preparation for compulsory schooling, international reports emphasise the importance of a holistic view of education that equally balances children's learning, caring, upbringing and social support (UNESCO, 2010). The *Starting Strong 2* report stressed that the task of practitioners, whatever their profile, should be geared towards this holistic approach (OECD, 2006). Hence, 'unitary' ECEC systems where care and educational services are integrated at institutional level are often preferred (Children in Europe, 2008; European Commission, 2011). 'Split' systems prevail in Europe, however. For historical reasons, some national and regional policies on care and education have developed separately, leading to separate services under the responsibility of different ministries (Bennett, 2003). It should be noted, however, that schoolification also occurs in unitary systems (OECD, 2006). By collecting data on the workforce profiles of assistants in relation to core practitioners in 15 European countries, we examined to what extent the potential division between education and care was reinforced by workforce profiles.

### **Methodology**

#### *Data Sample*

To study the assistants' role in the early years in relation to core practitioners, we conducted a cross-national survey in 15 countries as one phase of the CoRe project. The countries were Belgium (Flemish- and French-speaking communities), Croatia, Denmark, France, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and the UK (England and Wales).

#### *Collecting Data*

Twenty local ECEC experts from 15 EU countries provided data on competence requirements for assistants according to official regulations. These experts were selected for their long-standing expertise in the field, their previous contribution to three key European networks (Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training, International Step by Step Association, Children in Europe), and their knowledge of both legislation and practice. A semi-structured questionnaire was

sent to these experts. It contained questions about competence requirements for all ECEC staff and their working conditions (adult/child ratio, professional support system, salaries and unions). The open-ended questions related to competence requirements in official regulations and national/regional policy documents. Local policies (at the municipal level, for instance) were not included. 'Core practitioners' were defined along the lines of the SEEPRO study (Oberhuemer *et al.*, 2010) as early years workers with a group or centre responsibility. We used two criteria to define 'assistants':

- (1) the assistants work directly with children and their families;
- (2) the assistant's main job is to assist the core practitioner, who has the responsibility for a group of children and families. The assistant has no final responsibility, yet supports a practitioner with a final responsibility.

The local experts were also asked to analyse Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT), including personal opinions about the effects of the implementation of formal regulations in day-to-day practice. Hence, the data are a combination of factual information and subjective, informed interpretations by the ECEC experts who decided autonomously how to collect the data (in collaboration with experts from the local field, through focus groups, etc.).

### *Analysing Data*

The country reports produced by the experts served as raw data for this study. A preliminary analysis showed that their nature varied widely. Some contained more extensive contextual information than others. In order to contextualise some of the data, concepts needed to be negotiated for a full understanding of the meaning through consultation via email and individual interviews via Internet telephony (Skype®) (Fontana & Frey, 2008). Key issues and fields of tension were identified in a thematic analysis. They were discussed in a focus group with 15 of the 20 local experts and five international ECEC experts. One of these tensions concerned the role of the assistants. We used the typology of their learning, bridge and caring roles as a conceptual framework to analyse these data. The local experts were asked to verify the thematic analysis. Space precludes an overview of all the results in this article. We will therefore focus on the assistants' roles and how they relate to the conceptualisation of care and education.

### **Findings**

Table I includes the official title of assistants in the original languages, their numbers, whether or not they have a formal job and/or training competence profile, the role(s) they take up, and whether or not they have formal professional development opportunities.

In 13 of the 15 countries, assistants work to support core practitioners (in Croatia and Italy, 'assistants' as defined in this study do not exist). Official accounts of their numbers were unavailable. Hence, our analysis is based predominantly on estimations. Although in some countries (e.g. the Netherlands, Poland) their numbers are limited, in many (e.g. France, Sweden, Slovenia, Lithuania, Denmark), they make up as much as half the workforce.

It should be noted that the responsibility of assistants is rarely covered by policy documents or official regulations, unlike that of core practitioners. Assistants have far fewer job or training profiles. Moreover, they are poorly qualified or

TABLE I. Assistants<sup>1</sup>

Country	Assistant title	%	Job profile	Training Profile (ISCED)	Role	PD
<b>Belgium (FI/Fe)</b>	<i>Begeleider kinderopvang (2,5-6)</i>	9,42	/	X (3B)	Caring	/
	<i>Doelgroepverkenner (0-3)</i>	0,08	/	X (in training for 3B)	Caring/Bridging	/
<b>Denmark</b>	<i>Pædagog (2,5-6)</i>	N.A.	X	X (3B)	Caring	/
	<i>Assistent aux instituteurs préscolaire (2,5-6)</i>	N.A.	X	/	Caring	/
<b>France</b>	<i>Pædagogmedhjælper (0-6)</i>	+/- 40	/	/	Caring/Learning	/
	<i>Aide-auxiliaire (CAP petite enfance) (0-3)</i>	N.A.	X	X (3)	Caring	X
<b>Greece</b>	<i>ATSEM Agent territorial spécialisé des écoles maternelles (2,5-6)</i>	+/- 50	X	X (3)	Caring	X
	<i>Υόθηος νηπιοεργαστηρίου / νοήθος παιδαγωγού (0-6)</i>	N.A.	/	/	Caring/Learning	/
<b>Ireland</b>	<i>Basic practitioner in early childhood education/care (0-5)</i>	N.A.	/	/	Caring/Learning	/
	<i>Community Worker -Employment Scheme (0-5)</i>	N.A.	/	/	Caring/Learning	/
<b>Lithuania</b>	<i>Auklėtojas padėjėja (1-6)</i>	+/- 50	/	/	Caring	/
	<i>Onderwijsondersteuner (4-12)</i>	2,76	X	X (4)	Learning	X
<b>The Netherlands</b>	<i>Klassenassistent (4-12, special education)</i>	N.A.	X	/	Caring/Learning	N.A.
	<i>Groepshulp (0-4)</i>	N.A.	/	/	Caring	/
<b>Poland</b>	<i>Pomoc nauczyciela (3-6)</i>	+/- 2	/	/	Caring	/
<b>Romania</b>	<i>Ingrititoare (0-7)</i>	+/- 28	/	/	Caring	/
	<i>Pomočnik vzgojitelja (0-7)</i>	+/- 50	X	X (4A)	Caring/Learning/Bridging	X
<b>Spain</b>	<i>Técnico/técnica Educador o Asistente en educación infantil (0-6)</i>	N.A.	/	/	Caring	/
<b>Sweden</b>	<i>Barnsöskare (1-7)</i>	+/- 50	/	/	Caring/Learning	/
	<i>Nursery assistants (0-5)</i>	presence has doubled over the last 10 year	/	/	Caring/Learning	/
<b>UK (England and Wales)</b>	<i>Teaching assistants (0-5)</i>	presence has doubled over the last 10 years: +/- 50	/	/	Learning/Caring	/

<sup>1</sup> N.A. = not available; X=present in official documents; / = not addressed in official documents.

unqualified, unlike core practitioners, who have a wide range of qualification levels: from upper secondary to Master's level. Only Belgium (for 2.5–6-year-olds), France, the Netherlands (4–12-year-olds), Slovenia, Sweden and the UK have specific training requirements for assistants. Slovenia and Sweden are the only countries that require a three- to four-year upper secondary vocational qualification.

Core practitioners working in unitary systems and in schools for the oldest children (3–6-year-olds) in split systems have a clear educational or pedagogical job and/or training profile. Those working with the under-threes in split systems have a caring or paramedical profile. Most countries seem to have assistants who play a predominantly *caring* role. Where descriptions are available, they are often framed in technical 'caring' tasks. In Lithuania, the *Auklėtojos padėjėja* are described as technical workers who are in charge of cleaning the facilities, feeding children and other 'routine' chores. Other tasks include supervising children, scheduling nap time, assisting with their hygiene routine, dressing children to go outside, helping with discipline, etc. Care in many countries is seen as offering practical help and satisfying the physical needs of children, especially the youngest, in ECEC services. In Belgium (Flemish- and French-speaking communities), assistants (*Begeleider kinderopvang*, *Puéricultrice*, *Assistant aux instituteurs préscolaires*) help pre-school teachers (*Kleuterleid(st)er*, *Instituteur/ Institutrice préscolaire*) by taking over the caring duties for the youngest children in pre-school to ensure that the core professional can focus on 'education'. Only in a few countries such as Spain are assistants (*Técnico/técnica o Asistente en educación infantil*) also responsible for the children's well-being and satisfaction of their emotional and physical needs. In the UK, France, Ireland, and The Netherlands, they also adopt a *learning* role according to the data. They have a supporting role in the learning process of individual children (including those with special learning needs), whereas the core practitioners have a teaching responsibility for the whole group. In Scandinavian countries, core practitioners have a social pedagogical role which encompasses learning and caring dimensions. Danish and Swedish assistants have a social-pedagogical role under the supervision of core practitioners.

The bridging role of assistants, as described in the introduction, is mentioned less frequently by the local experts (only in Belgium (Fl), and Slovenia). These assistants come mostly from local poor communities or ethnic minority communities. They are employed to introduce the institutions to families and local communities and enhance the accessibility of services for vulnerable families. In Slovenia, Roma teaching assistants, who are separate from other teaching assistants, are also employed to raise the educational attainment of Roma children. In these cases, the bridging role is closely linked to the learning role of assistants.

Assistants have far fewer opportunities to engage in professional development activities. In Denmark, whereas some local governments provide core practitioners (*Pædagog*) with non-contact time for planning and pedagogical documentation, this is less usual for assistants (*Pædagogmedhjælper*), although they have the same schedule and work with the same children and families. This trend can be seen in most countries, yet there are notable exceptions. In The Netherlands and France, all ECEC practitioners, irrespective of their profile, have the same opportunities and obligations regarding professional development. In Slovenia, teacher assistants must participate in five days of training per year. Moreover, assistants and teachers are entitled to extra time to jointly prepare, plan and evaluate activities. Regarding the assistants' working conditions, it was difficult to find

statistics on the salaries in the different countries. Trade unions for assistants are quite rare. They only exist in Slovenia, Sweden and Denmark. In Sweden and Denmark, the assistants are represented by the union for nursery staff. In Slovenia, by the same trade union as the core practitioner.

### **Discussion**

There are several limitations in this study and conclusions need to be drawn with some caution. First, the data are constructed from official national and regional policy documents. For a full understanding of the role of assistants, the local policy dynamics need to be understood. Sometimes local governments have greater responsibility for providing ECEC (Italy and Denmark) than regional and national governments. Unfortunately, this study does not cover local policy documents owing to budget and time constraints. Second, since many policy documents did not cover the role of assistants, the local ECEC experts presented extra data on the assistant's role, based on their own experience. These data are interpretative. Finally, there are considerable variations in the organisation of ECEC both within and across countries and regions in terms of historical, social, and political contexts. Analysing workforce profiles in different countries is a complex matter, and it is difficult to identify trends and common fields of tensions without decontextualising national/regional policies and practices. Despite these limitations, by analysing policy documents and local ECEC experts' opinions in 15 European countries, we gained more insight into the role of assistants in ECEC.

### *Caring Matters*

Although academic research focuses on the learning and bridging roles of assistants and less on their caring role, the latter prevails in most EU countries. In some countries, assistants also have a learning and/or bridging role. We identified a divide in the tasks between core practitioners and assistants. Whereas the core practitioner's role is more educational (teaching or pedagogy), the assistants assume a more caring role. This divide seems to be apparent in pre-schools for children from three to six in split systems, but also in some unitary systems, despite notable exceptions. In Denmark, Sweden, and Slovenia, which are unitary systems, both core practitioners and assistants have a social pedagogical role which includes caring and learning. In services for the under-threes in split systems, there is less of a division, since the core practitioners, mostly women, share a caring profile with their assistants.

One could argue that this division of tasks does not necessarily jeopardise a holistic view of education where both caring and learning are addressed. An essential question, however, is whether holistic education needs to be embodied in one person or whether it can be assumed by different people with different roles. When holistic education is embodied in practitioners with complementary tasks, it is of crucial importance to make sure that the caring and learning functions are equally valued. In the current situation, this can be challenging since assistants and core practitioners have unequal professional statuses. The core practitioners are covered by official regulations, whereas in many countries assistants are not. They have professional competence profiles and training requirements, higher salaries and more opportunities to participate in professional development activities than assistants. The invisibility of assistants in most policy documents suggests a fragile position and denies both the value of their work and their professional prospects.

*From a Divide to a Hierarchy*

Questions arise on the relation between education and care. There seems to be a hierarchy between education and care, embodied in the different professional statuses of core practitioners. The concept of 'education' seems to be narrowed down to learning, and 'care' is subordinate or even 'inferior' to learning. This hinders a holistic conceptualisation of education in its broadest sense, as advocated by many international reports. The hierarchy between education and care fits in a European context of increasing schoolification. A focus on the children's cognitive and language development means that social and emotional development are addressed to a lesser degree. The caring dimension is overlooked. This is especially true in pre-schools (for 3–6-year-olds) that are increasingly perceived as preparing for learning in compulsory schooling.

In this hierarchy, the assistants' job is seen as satisfying physical and emotional needs, addressing learning needs of children who differ from the 'average' (children with special needs or ethnic minority children), and connecting with parents. The idea that these are tasks that hinder education is reinforced. One could also hypothesise that core practitioners do not feel competent to deal with these aspects. This is supported by two small-scale studies on assistants with a bridging role. Depoorter (2006) and Mihajlović and Trikić (forthcoming) showed that, although *Doelgroepwerknemers* and *Roma teaching assistants* were hired because of the problems that core practitioners encountered in communicating with ethnic minority families and families living in poverty, they paradoxically tend to reinforce or maintain this perceived deficiency. When hiring 'assistants' from ethnic minorities and/or poor backgrounds, programmes may paradoxically reproduce the very communication gaps they wish to eliminate (Depoorter, 2006). Hence, the presence of assistants may devalue the competences of the core practitioners.

*Conceptualisations of Care*

The analysis of policy documents and opinions of ECEC experts suggests that care is often seen as addressing the physical needs of children. This has multiple interpretations. First, an underlying duality, as expressed by the Roman poet Juvenal's 'mens sana in corpore sano' ('a healthy mind in a healthy body'), suggests that physical and emotional needs, as connected with the body, are fundamentally different from intellectual needs, in line with the division of body and soul that has prevailed since early Christendom (Foucault, 1984). Children's physical needs need to be taken care of so that their minds are free for learning. Hence, caring may be perceived as a necessary evil. Second, when care is defined as addressing children's physical needs, it becomes an age-related concept. The results of our study suggest that assistants are responsible for the youngest children in ECEC. Even in countries with a socially pedagogical vision which includes care and education for all children, assistants mostly work with the youngest children, whereas qualified pre-school educators mostly work with the older children (Oberhuemer & Ulich, 1997). The implication is that, as children become older, they require less 'care'. This reinforces the hierarchical position in which children gradually 'grow out' of a more primitive stage of physical care to enter the more 'human' world of learning. Third, caring is often analysed from a deficit perspective. According to Cameron and Moss (2007), this is especially true in English- and German-rooted languages. Children lack something and need help and

practitioners must 'worry' about them. In this sense, care is associated with children in need, meaning children who differ from the white, middle-class, able norms. Finally, 'care' is seen as a simple matter and can be provided by low-qualified or unqualified practitioners, mostly women. It is what 'women naturally do' and does not require specific training or professional development. Important interactions such as feeding, putting children to bed, going to the toilet are stripped of their educational value. These interpretations not only allude to a narrow view of care, but also narrow the view of education, as they reduce education to cognitive development, leading to lack of continuity in the child's care and education.

The scarce qualitative research suggests that assistants and parents find the caring dimension of education very important. Yet, as stated in the Introduction, they describe care in terms of emotional 'labour' rather than of executing a technical job. Some scholars, along with assistants, relate this conceptualisation to the gendered nature of the job. It has to do with 'loving' children, ensuring good relations between teachers, children and parents and that children like their school, and supporting children's self-esteem. Assistant Deborah, who works with 5–6-year-old children in an English school, describes her engagement as follows: '*One of my personal concerns is the lack of opportunity for the child to express him/herself within the school day. The constraints of a timetable do not allow for listening to the voice of the child*' (Skuse, 2001, p. 58) She advocates for the children's agency so they can express themselves and be respected in their identity. Care goes beyond a physical dimension and encompasses an emotional, societal and political dimension. In this context, it is seen as an important element of both democratic practice and citizenship (Pols, 2006; Tronto, 1993). Since democratic practice takes place in the present, care seems to be more oriented towards current experiences of children and parents. In the trend towards schoolification, learning focuses on the children's future. If assistants and parents find it important to ensure warm and loving interactions with children, what does this say about the role of the core practitioner? Does this need of parents and assistants imply that core practitioners have more distant interactions with children since they focus on their cognitive and language learning processes? This type of professional fits with the technical conceptualisation of professionalism, which is typically endorsed by schoolification and is meeting increasing criticism.

### **European Policies**

Many reports plead for unitary systems where care and education meet at an institutional level. Yet our study suggests that, even in unitary systems, a hierarchy between care and education can exist, embodied in the relationship between core practitioners and assistants. Early childhood policy-makers should be critical about what drives their policy and how their choices may be moulded by and contribute to social constructions of 'care', 'education', 'professionalism', 'quality', etc. As many reports emphasise a holistic view of education in the early years, policy should be geared towards this. From a systemic perspective, the integration of care and education needs policy interventions at macro, meso and micro levels alike. Integrating care and education at an institutional and regional or national level is an important pathway, yet clearly not sufficient. The implementation of a holistic view of education should be negotiated with all stakeholders (practitioners, parents, local communities, schools, training institutions, local, regional, and national governments, European policy-makers . . .)

and be addressed in general frameworks on ECEC curricula, initial training and other professional development initiatives. Parents are thereby respected and invited to co-construct educational practices. This signals that we insist that explicit caring tasks such as feeding or putting to bed are educational in nature, just like play, that we consider learning as relational and to be about developing cognitive, motor, emotional, social, creative and other aspects of the child, that supporting learning requires a caring attitude and that families and local communities are partners in education. Garnier (2010a) states that a democratic collaboration between core practitioners and assistants is impossible when their working conditions differ significantly. The deployment of assistants should go beyond their 'usefulness' and truly value their role as part of an educational community. The strongest working relationships are developed when core practitioners involve assistants in planning, when they meet regularly, when schools offer professional development opportunities for all staff, and when opportunities are provided for sharing and reflecting on practices (Groom, 2006; Urban *et al.*, 2011).

Qualitative studies on how the conceptualisations of care and education are related to assistants and core professionals remain all too scarce and the voice of assistants and parents is often overlooked. Future research should address these issues from multiple perspectives, including analysing how the conceptualisations play out in daily practice. How do assistants perceive their role(s) in a context of increasing schoolification? What significant roles do assistants develop in the early education of children? The perspectives of the core practitioners, the parents, children and local communities are also lacking. Encountering these perspectives may help to reconceptualise workforce profiles in order to enhance a holistic view of early childhood education.

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