GAP ANALYSIS

OF SOCIAL DEMANDS

Detected needs of the target group by former feasibility studies and interviews of the target group.

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CONTENT

Content 2
PACE 4
GAP analysis 4
PART 1 4
Introduction 4
Introduction 5
Abstract 5
Introduction 5
CONTEXT 7
Childcare: what is (provided) and what is needed 7
The PACE childcare offer in an European context 7
Childcare, Employment, and the quest for more social equality 8
Barriers to childcare 8
The three functions of childcare 10
Employment 16
Reference List 20
Methodology 21
Approach 21
Micro meso macro 21
Whose Gap? 22
Reference List 23
Research Methods 23
Survey 23
Literature 23
Study visits 23
Interviews with the target group 23
PACE 26
GAP analysis 26
PART 2 26
Employment 26
Part 2 introduction 27
Barriers as indicated by the partner organisations 27
MICRO Level 27
MESO Level 30

MACRO Level 34
Reference list 37
Parents' perspectives on employment 39
Dreams and aspirations: Many parents want to work 39
Getting back to work: why not? 40
Parents' barriers to employment 41
Benefits of working: for me, for my family, for the future, … 44
Parents needs with regard to entering the route to employment 45
Conclusion: parents are trapped in Paradoxes 46
References 47
PACE 48
GAP analysis 48
PART 3 48
Childcare 48
Part 3 Childcare 49
Introduction 49
MICRO Level 49
MESO Level 51
MACRO Level 57
Reference List 60
Parents' perspectives on childcare 62
Why would parents use childcare? 62
Why not use childcare? 63
How well can parents afford to use childcare? (Affordability) 64
Can parents find the right childcare for their needs? (Availability) 65
Can parents get access to childcare easily? (Accessibility) 66
Conclusion: a steeplechase to childcare 66
References 67
PACE 68
GAP analysis 68
PART 4 68
Discussion 68

PACE
GAP ANALYSIS

PART 1
INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

ABSTRACT

This report is part of the INTERREG 2-Seas Project Providing Access to Childcare and Employment (PACE). The goal of PACE is to increase childcare access for vulnerable parents and to use childcare as a gateway to increase access to employment. During the first project year, barriers to childcare and employment for parents were identified through (1) an analysis of the context of the PACE project organisations; and (2) interviews with parents from the target group on the needs and barriers they experience regarding childcare and employment. In this report, we describe the childcare and employment context in the four PACE countries (Belgium, the Netherlands, France and UK). Next, we discuss the gaps for parents that arise from an analysis of the context of PACE and from interviews with parents. In conclusion, we further discuss these barriers, with attention to the interrelationship between gaps to childcare and work. This analysis will be used to further build an approach that addresses parents' barriers and needs.

INTRODUCTION

Since its so-called "turn to social investment" in the late nineties, the EU combines economic and social objectives in the same agenda (Morel, Palier and Palme, 2012). The idea behind this paradigm is that social policy is productive, in the sense that social investments "pay off": they result in more social equity and in more economic productivity (Morel et al., 2012). More social equity means that more people are able to take care of themselves and to seize opportunities in the labour market, and thus, that there will be less people depending on benefits (Van Lancker, 2013).

One of the main goals spearheaded by the EU is to raise labour market participation by women and disadvantaged groups. This is where childcare appears on stage: childcare enables women (mothers) and parents in vulnerable situations to work, but is also seen as a way to close the welfare gap in education. Childcare thus comes with a double benefit: it helps parents to grab labour market opportunities by taking care of their children and it has positive outcomes on the long-term as children (from disadvantaged families) benefit from attending good quality early education and care.

According to the 2017 Joint Employment Report (JER) published by the European Commission, both employment rates and the social situation in Europe is slightly improving, although there are large differences between member state and poverty rates remain high. The European Commission is also aware of the fact that many barriers to employment remain:

> *"Many Member States have implemented important reform agendas in recent years, with positive effects on job creation. Still, more efforts are needed to promote the creation of quality jobs and increase the inclusiveness of labour markets, by removing barriers to labour market participation, tackling labour market segmentation and ensuring that social protection systems provide adequate income support and enabling services to all while encouraging transitions into employment and making work pay. This would also help address rising levels of in-work poverty in some Member States." (JER, 2017, p. 3)*

At the same time, the JER reports that social welfare institutions and the employment sector do not fully succeed in tackling social inequalities:

> *"The design of education, labour market and social security institutions in some Member States does not adequately support their function as an investment in human capital, promoting fairness of outcome; thus it does not remedy the unequal opportunities and in turn contributes to persistent and ever higher income inequalities. …." (JER, 2017, p. 2)*

The PACE project has been instituted to track and overcome barriers to employment and inequalities in the use of childcare at once. The lack of affordable childcare has been identified as a major barrier to employment (e.g. Resolution Foundation, 2014). By increasing access to childcare for disadvantaged families and using childcare as a gateway to employment, this project aims to improve incomes and enhance participation in society by these families. At the same time, childcare could positively impact on the development of the children from these families. PACE gathers ten organisations in four countries from the European 2-Seas region (Belgium, the Netherlands, France and UK). All ten organisations are determined to enhance access to childcare and employment for disadvantaged families in their working area. Each PACE organisation decides which families to prioritize within the project. Overall, PACE's 'priority' families are vulnerable, low-income families with one or two unemployed parents and young children experiencing difficult or no access to formal childcare. These families will later be referred to as vulnerable parents, but what we actually mean is that they are *parents in situations that make them vulnerable* (cf. Riederer, Philipov & Rengs, 2017). These are families who are socially excluded or who are threatened to become socially excluded. It's about families with poor access to highly rated goods such as employment, income, housing, school and health care. These are several important domains we encounter when talking about poverty. In migrant families one must consider two additional aspects that increase the risk of exclusion, namely the language gap and the cultural gap (Riederer et al., 2017).

One of the main assumptions of the PACE project is that vulnerable families are often not working and not using childcare services. They are caught in a vicious circle of not being able to work because of the lack childcare adapted to the trajectory required in finding employment (e.g. attending job interviews). The inaccessibility of the childcare is reinforced by intercultural difference and lack of soft skills (also a barrier to work). Both childcare services providers and providers of trajectories towards work that aim to increase participating of these vulnerable families but do not succeed. To initially reach parents from the target group, the PACE (childcare) organisations will set up and consolidate a network of several collaborating social services. Thereafter, parental involvement in childcare and voluntary engagement of parents will be used to retaining parents in childcare and as a lever to employment.

The demands and the needs of the families from this vulnerable target group are the starting point of this engagement framework. What are the barriers they experience towards childcare and employment? To what extent are childcare and employment 'each other's' barriers? What are the needs of the target group that might help closing the gap to childcare and employment?

In this gap analysis, we map the needs of the target families. To this aim, the policy and organizational context of the PACE organizations and countries are studied. In addition, families from the target group will be interviewed in all four PACE countries.

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CONTEXT

CHILDCARE: WHAT IS (PROVIDED) AND WHAT IS NEEDED

THE PACE CHILDCARE OFFER IN AN EUROPEAN CONTEXT

Childcare is a broad term, covering both formal and informal forms of care, including services such as child-care centres, childminders at home, after school care, and (pre)school education systems. The main focus of the PACE project is preschool care, including both centre-based and home-based facilities.

Seven out of the nine PACE organisations (excluding the knowledge institutions and considering City of Mechelen and Mechelen Social House as one organisation) offer pre-school centre-based childcare under own management (see Table 1). Some of these organisations provide other forms of formal childcare as well (e.g., out-of-school care, childminders). Kent County Council (UK) and Centre Social Jean Ferrat (FR) do not offer childcare in-house. So how are they linked to childcare? The Kent County Council works together with over 700 ECEC providers across the county. They are responsible for ensuring adequate ECEC provision for all eligible children in the county. The county council has an advisory function. In addition, there are more than 90 children's centres within the county, offering a wide range of support and services for families with young children, focussing mainly on engaging vulnerable families. Within the PACE project, Kent County Council will work closely together with several children's centres and private providers of childcare in the Gravesham area. Centre Social Jean Ferrat is a key player in the Arques local community. The centre social does not offer childcare, but operates within a network of local organisations including providers of centre-based childcare and childminders.

(TABLE 1: overview of pre-school childcare in nine PACE organisations)

The four "PACE countries" (Belgium, France, the Netherlands, UK) vary widely in different dimensions of the childcare system (see also Table 2). There are differences in how childcare is organised (e.g. within social support system, educational system or care system), the extent to which childcare is integrated in the educational system (i.e. split system or unitary system with different levels of integration; Eurofound, 2015) and the funding of child care, with mainly private childcare provision systems in the UK and the Netherlands, and more mixture between public and private provision in France and Belgium (Akgündüz, Ünver, Platenga & Nicaise, 2015). In addition, there are differences in the uptake of childcare and in the social (in)equality of this uptake.

(TABLE 2: overview of childcare use and characteristics in the four PACE countries)

All four PACE countries have reached more or less the "Barcelona targets" that were set in 2002, aiming to provide formal childcare (i.e. all kinds of care organised and/or controlled by a structure) for 90% of children between three years old and the mandatory school age, and 33% of children between 0 and 3 years of age (Barcelona European Council 2002, 12). The target for the children under 3 has been reached by all four countries, although the intensity of care use for this group of children differs greatly. The full-time equivalent measure of child care use, that shows us what the use of child care would be if all existing care would be full time (Meagher and Szebehely, 2012; Rauch, 2007) is 0,50 for France (meaning that the mean level of child care use a week for French children under 3 is 15h per week), 0,37 for Belgium, 0,40 for the Netherlands and only 0,17 for the UK. For children from 3 to mandatory school age, only the Netherlands has not reached – but is close to – the 90% target (Reiter, 2015). This means that the countries in which the project takes place have a relatively high use of formal childcare, with a clear tendency to more part-time use (less than 30h per week) in the UK and the Netherlands (European Parliament, 2013).

In all four PACE countries, childcare use has been shown to be stratified by social status. Recent work by Van Lancker and Ghysels (2016) indicates that formal childcare use for under 3-year olds is much higher for children with higher levels of education than for children with mothers with lower levels of education, with up to 76% more use by highly educated mothers than by lower educated mothers (UK) (see Table 2 for level of inequality in childcare uptake in all PACE countries).

These high levels of inequality are paradoxical as childcare is regarded as a main tool to combat social inequality and to give all children 'the best start for the world of tomorrow' (European Commission, 2011). Childcare is still a European policy priority, seen as key to higher levels of employment and productivity through (1) giving parents in disadvantaged circumstances the possibility to continue education and to get into sustainable employment; and (2) improving school readiness in children from disadvantaged families, through immersing them in a stimulating and supportive environment, which will in turn decrease the possibility that they will become disadvantaged (unemployed) parents themselves (Van Lancker, 2013).

But is childcare really an effective lever to increase social equality and parental (mainly maternal) employment? Let us have a closer look at the two tenets mentioned above.

CHILDCARE, EMPLOYMENT, AND THE QUEST FOR MORE SOCIAL EQUALITY

Over the last decades, employment rates in the EU have increased, mainly due to more labour market participation of women. This has led to an increased use of pre-school childcare services. Still, accessible and available childcare remains a priority and a challenge. There is ample research showing social inequality in childcare use, with less children from vulnerable families and ethnic minorities using childcare (Vandenbroeck & Lazzari, 2013; Van Lancker & Ghysels, 2016). It is also known that merely increasing childcare provision does not mitigate social inequality, as newly created childcare places are often taken again by children from highly educated mothers (e.g. Havnes & Mogstad, 2011). One reason for this is that childcare is not an isolated world on its own. For instance, the uptake of childcare is related to the parental leave systems, of which the use is often socially stratified as well (e.g. Van Lancker & Ghysels, 2013). For instance, when mothers receive a financial incentive to stay at home after birth (e.g. in Finland and in France), while also having the possibility to use (affordable) childcare, the numbers show that mainly low-educated mothers, mothers with low-paid work will decide to stay at home. If European countries really want to encourage childcare for *all* children, there is need for more coherent policy (Van Lancker, 2013).

You might ask why mainly low-educated mothers make the choice to stay at home with their children. You might also ask why, and here we refer to another social inequality in childcare use, the uptake of formal childcare remains lower for mothers in elementary/blue-collar jobs than for mothers in professional and white-collar jobs, even while there is no difference in informal care between these groups (Van Lancker, 2013).

Several studies have shown that the childcare system is characterized by a set of barriers for parents. These barriers include structural and policy factors regarding the affordability, availability and accessibility of childcare (*before the gate*), but also barriers in the way childcare is organised and in the interaction between childcare (staff) and parents (*after the gate*) (Brants, 2007).

BARRIERS TO CHILDCARE

The PACE organisations recognise the above-mentioned barriers. In a questionnaire completed by all organisations in December 2016/January 2017 we asked to indicate what the PACE organisations considered to be the main barrier to child care. The Belgian partners indicate that **availability** is a main problem: demand is often higher than supply, definitely regarding occasional child care, and intake procedures are complicated especially from people from non-Belgian origin. Procedures are in Dutch and require parents to reserve a place long before they need it.

"*Fixed procedures and timings with all accompanying and "linguistic" paperwork are making things very difficult for families speaking another language (i.e. other than Dutch)" (*quote from the questionnaire, city of Ghent)

The French partners underline the importance of **good relationships with staff**. A lot of families from the target group, if not in employment, feel guilty to 'leave their child'. Also, mothers are often expected to and/or feel obliged to stay at home with their children. But even when they do know about the childcare offer, parents often do not seem to be at ease with and in child care. Vice versa, also the child care staff has some difficulties in working with these parents. Another barrier mentioned is **accessibility**: the public transport offer is poor, and many parents do not have a driver's license and/or do not own a car.

In community centre De Mussen, the main barriers to regular child care (i.e. De Mussen itself provides 'kinderwerk', which is informal childcare that is almost free of charge), are **affordability and accommodation**: childcare (hours) not adapted to the needs of parents.

The UK partners identify **availability** (long waiting lists and **lack of affordable flexible child care** to match parents' working hours) and accessibility as important barriers. In UK, accessibility and affordability are also closely linked to each other: childcare is very expensive in UK (27% of family income; Mehlhuish et al., 2015). Parents do get access to so called 'free hours' of child care, for which they do not have to pay. For 2-year-old children, parents get 15 hours free child care. For 3 and 4-year olds, this gets up to 30 hours. However, parents can only use these 30 hours on the condition that they work minimum 16 hours a week. If they do not work, they cannot access free childcare and childcare becomes unaffordable.

"*We have a high take-up of parents accessing free childcare for 2-year olds, but unemployment is a barrier to them being eligible for the 30 hours free childcare for 3 and 4-year olds. To qualify for the 30 hours free childcare, both parents (if a two-parent household) must be working and earning the equivalent of 16 hours per week on National Minimum Wage*." (quote from Brighton & Hove City Council)

Regarding **availability**, all PACE organisations point out that there is a lack of flexible childcare (flexible opening hours matching the needs of working parents – parents from the PACE target group often working in shifts or having irregular working hours) and a need for more occasional childcare (e.g. to make sure parents can follow trainings, do job interviews, …).

How to tackle these challenges in the (unequal) access of childcare? In their 2013 paper on accessibility of childcare, Lazzari and Vandenbroeck outline 13 different factors that should diminish social inequality in the uptake of childcare. On a **policy level**, they indicate that public funding, legal entitlement for all children and an integration of education and care, among other things, will lead to more equality. On **level of provision**, flexible opening hours matching diverse social needs, diverse workforce and inter-agency cooperation are amongst the conditions they outline. On the **level of parents**, they state that parental involvement and providing parents with meaningful and accessible information is crucial (see Table 3 for a complete overview of the 13 factors identified by Vandenbroeck & Lazzari).

(TABLE 3: factors leading to more equality – based on Vandenbroeck & Lazzari)

The PACE project explicitly targets some of the conditions mentioned by Vandenbroeck and Lazzari (2013), such as inter-agency cooperation, parental involvement and outreaching to families who are difficult to reach. When looking at the table listing these factors, the PACE organisations will tackle conditions for equal access on the level of provision and on the level of parents in the first place. However, all PACE organisations acknowledge that a sustainable approach for equal access, that can be upscaled to other organisations (outside the PACE organisations), requires changes in policy as well (see the first column of Vandenbroeck & Lazzari's table). As far as possible, the PACE organisations will 'experiment' on this policy within the space that is available to them, often only at a local level, to guarantee legal entitlement for all children within their

city/region, and to support parents in accessing and paying for childcare. This will include, amongst others, looking for new ways to help parents funding the first months of childcare (FR, Centre Social Eclaté) and adapting or bypassing completed intake procedures (BE, Ghent).

THE THREE FUNCTIONS OF CHILDCARE

We indicated that Europe's focus on childcare is driven not only by the wish for more employment (of vulnerable families), but also because good quality childcare is supposed to increase children's chances of success in later life. However, whether targeting children and children's education is sufficient to mitigate poverty and social inequality is debatable. Numerous studies point out that high-quality (early) childhood education and care increases the chance of success in later life, especially for children from disadvantaged families (e.g. Heckman & Masterov, 2007). On the other hand, many of these studies must be situated in a US context of early intervention programs for disadvantaged families and it is unclear to what extent their results and conclusions can be transferred to the diverse European early years context (Lazzari & Vandenbroeck, 2013). Furthermore, the expectation that focussing on child outcomes only to solve major societal challenges such as unemployment, poverty, social inequality is misleading and incorrect. A recent and very thorough review by Melhuish et al. (2015) confirms that good quality childcare education and care from three years onwards has benefits for children from disadvantaged groups. Still, the evidence for the benefits of childcare for children under three is much less straightforward. There are even studies reporting negative effects. In addition, the effect of child care should not be overestimated. The authors point out that the effect of childcare experiences on the child's life is influenced by a set of background factors, such as deprivation, parental sensitivity, the child's temperament, …which also interact with each other. The effect size of child care is about half of the effect sizes for family factors.

So: good quality childcare in itself is not enough. There are a lot of other factors defining children's chances in life. As Melhuish and his colleagues (2015) indicate, child care and family life are not, or do not have to be, separate worlds. In the best possible scenario, there is a positive vicious circle in which childcare and family life influence each other and the family and child's life in a positive manner. Melhuish et al. (2015) write about the way in which childcare and family factors can mutually influence children's self-regulation, which is in turn a predictor of better school outcomes etc. Within PACE, we hope to install **positive vicious circles** of this kind, taking into account not only child factors such as self-regulation but also in a 'broader' way, forwarding children, families and communities. Concretely, we hope that our integrated approach in which we target both childcare and employment will lead to better outcomes for children, families and communities: a broader social network for families, more self-confidence for parents, more meaningful relationships between parents and between parents and professionals, higher quality of life thanks to parents being able to achieve their own personal goals (e.g. following a training or education that suits them) and to get a comfortable family income, …

To achieve this, we believe that it is mandatory for child care to target not only 'good quality care [and education] for children' (**pedagogical/educational function**) but to combine this with an **economic function** and a **social function**. We feel many papers, policy documents, etc., when writing on childcare and what they want to obtain through childcare, focus on either the economic function (get parents to work) and/or the pedagogical function, which is often at the same time seen as a lever for the economic function (educate all children, give them more equal opportunities and you will get more productive citizens). This approach is understandable, but it entails the risk of making choices in the parents' place (i.e. it becomes 'irresponsible', definitely for disadvantaged parents, not to make use of childcare – given the good outcomes child care leads to …) and it encourages the sector to stay focused on pedagogy/education, while looking at the economic function in a very pragmatic way (we offer childcare, so parents can go the work).

Throughout the first stage of the PACE project, in which the knowledge partners visited each of the nine PACE organisations described above (see Table 1), it became clear that the pedagogical, social and economic function

of childcare are very closely intertwined. They are, in a sense, 'preconditions for each other'. We find that this is especially the case for the target group of the project, which can be described as parents with young children that are unemployed and have difficulties to access childcare.

Some examples might clarify what we mean by this 'intertwining'. For instance, some parents tend to live in very isolated communities or families. Starting to look for employment means going outside of the house, starting to build a network. Childcare, or an organisation that is linked to childcare (e.g. community centres in France) can play an important role in creating meeting opportunities for parents and building trust (social function), before parents will even consider thinking about the way to employment (economic function) or leaving their child under the care of a professional (precondition for realising the pedagogical function). Another example: working on the social function from within childcare, which could mean that parents are involved, experience that their voices are heard and valued, and experience that they are worthy and important in the lives of others, might and often will be a precondition for them to collaborate and exchange with childcare staff, which will contribute to the pedagogical function. We found that childcare staff sometimes focuses a lot on the pedagogical/educational function and approaches parents from that role, thereby often 'losing the parents', and also the child … (e.g. parent is in need of occasional childcare on the short term to be able to go to a job interview, child care staff responds considering the child's wellbeing, concluding it is not possible for a child to come to day-care without an adjustment period). Also, we see that the employment (economic function) is often a precondition to get access to and gain from the other functions. In Belgium and France, employment is one of the criteria to allocate childcare places when demand is higher than the supply (which is often the case). Also, childcare is often simply not affordable for unemployed parents, or for parents in low-paid employment.

As mentioned above, we believe that it is very important that the **three functions of childcare** are balanced and that the providers realise that these functions are interdependent. Also, we believe that reaching out to parents and **collaborating with other services** is key to realising the social, but also the economic function of childcare. This collaboration is crucial both in reaching out to families and guiding them to other social services and employment from within childcare. Furthermore, we assessed during our study visits that childcare has become a highly regulated sector with little flexibility, often with a children-centred approach. This lack of flexibility and abundance of rules and regulations makes it very difficult for parents, and childcare staff, to reconcile childcare with the search for employment.

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Organisation	Childcare under own management	Number of childcare places offered	Sector	Minimal-Maximum cost for a fulltime day of childcare (preschool)	Number of children per childminder for children under three
City of Mechelen (BE)	Yes	224	Public	1,59-27 euro	7
City of Ghent (BE)	Yes	1,094	Public	1,59-27 euro	8
City of Turnhout (BE)	Yes	264	Public	0,60-2 euro (**per hour**)	8
ASCW (FR)	Yes	47	Non-profit	3,85 euro	1/5 – 1/8 (when children start to walk)
CS Jean Ferrat (FR)	No	N/A	Non-profit	0,40 - 12,80 euro	N/A
CS Eclaté (FR)	Yes	50	Non-profit	0,40-2,92 euro	1/5 – 1/8 (when children start to walk)
De Mussen (NE)	Yes	64	Mix of private (non-profit) and public	0,00 – 20 euro (**per month**) In regular childcare (not De Mussen): 7.19 euro per hour	1/8 (but only children aged 3 or older)
Brighton & Hove City council (UK)	Yes	1000	Public	48-52 pounds	1/3
Kent County Council (UK)	No	N/A	Public	35-40 pounds	N/A

Table 1. Overview of preschool childcare in the nine PACE organisations
ASCW: Association des Centres Sociaux de Wattrelos (ACSW); CS Jean Ferrat: Centre Social Jean Ferrat (Arques) ; CS Elcaté : Centre Social Eclaté (Saint-Martin-Boulogne) ; De Mussen = Community Center De Mussen (Den Haag).

Country	Unitary or split system + *ministry/department*	Age of legal entitlement* to Early Childhood education and Care (ECEC)	Age of start (pre)primary education [ministry of education]	Type of provision	Inequality in FTE childcare use	Government expenditure on childcare services for children under school age (OECD average 0.7%)
Belgium	Split system - *Welfare*	3 years	2,5 years (pre-primary)	Public and private providers by local communities, non-profit and for-profit organisations	33%**	0.70% of GDP
France	Split system – *Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Health, the Family, and Handicapped Persons*	3 years	2 years (pre-primary school)	Mostly non-profit collective childcare and childminders	55%	1.30% of GDP
The Netherlands	Split system – *Social Affairs and Employment*	4 years	4 years (primary school)	Private for-profit and non-profit provision only	44%	0.93% of GDP
UK	Unitary, but not fully integrated - *Education*	3 years	Primary schools (5 years); nursery schools (3 years)	Market provision, no public provision	76%	0.80% of GDP

Table 2. Preschool childcare in the four "PACE countries"

**Note*. Legal entitlement: means that a place is guaranteed for each child whose parents need and demand it. Children are not obliged to use the place they are entitled to. Childcare places under legal entitlement are not free of provision, but have to be subsidized and affordable (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2014)
Main sources: European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice (2014); Eurofound (2015); and Akgündüz et al. (2015) – report from within the CARE project
FTE: full-time equivalent (source: Van Lancker & Ghysels, 2016); **33% means that FTE childcare use of children with lowly educated mothers is 66 percent lower than that of children whose mothers are highly educated.
GDP: gross domestic product. Source for data on government expenditure: Van Lancker & Ghysels, 2016

Policy	Provision	Parental
Public funding	Democratic decision making	Parental involvement
Integration of education and care	Priority criteria	Accessible and meaningful information
Entitlement (population-based), possibly with geographical targets	Outreach	
Regulations on costs (fees) – *according to income of parents*	Flexible opening hours	
Quality monitoring	Diverse workforce	
	Inter-agency cooperation	

Table 3. A framework for the implementation of structural conditions promoting successful inclusive practices – taken from Vandenbroeck & Lazzari (2013)
All text in italic has been added by the author of this paper.

EMPLOYMENT

OVERALL SOCIAL SITUATION

The European employment and social situation is improving in that there is a moderate economic recovery an employment rate is overall rising. However, the labour market recovery remains incomplete; unemployment is still high(er) for certain vulnerable groups and also there is the structural problematic long-term unemployment.

These carry the risk of exacerbating social exclusion, particularly for vulnerable people. Also, divergences among Member States remain significant. The risk of poverty or social exclusion has even increased in some Member States, amongst them PACE partners the Netherlands and the UK.

Chart out of Employment and Social Developments in Europe. Annual Review (European Commission, 2017, p. 43)

ACTIVATION

At the heart of the European social model is the idea that all citizens must be able to share in the wealth that is created and hence can participate fully in society. According to this view, having a job is, for most citizens, a prerequisite to full participation, and a key factor in moving in and out of poverty (European Commission, 2017; Eurofound, 2002).

The challenge to give vulnerable groups with weak labour market attachment the opportunity to access sustainable employment is common to all countries involved in this project, although the (extent of these) barriers faced may differ across region, as do policy options. But in all countries the importance of activation

policies is understood, in line with EU policy. Activation policy -where this PACE project is an example of- have been implemented everywhere in Europe.

> *Activation should seek to support and incentivize job search and job finding; as well as productive participation in society and self-sufficiency by reducing dependency on public support. (OECD, 2013, p.5)*

Activation policy can take different forms: in pursuit of the same goals, policy makers can draw on a range of tools including (conditional) income support, financial incentives and active labour market programmes. In the UK a new 'financial incentive' has to be taken into account when addressing barriers to employment, more specific the introduction of the Universal Credit- Benefit Cap. The Benefit Cap is a limit to the total amount of benefits that working-age people can receive, even if their full entitlement would otherwise be higher. If someone is claiming Universal Credit and is not earning at least the amount one would get for 16 hours a week at national minimum wage, the total benefit of that person will be limited. For the first time parents are going to lose a lot of money, and the UK partners Kent and Brighton expect that this measure will 'motivate' parents into work.

IS EVERYBODY TO BE ACTIVATED? DO WE EXPECT EVERYBODY TO WORK OR DO WE MAKE EXCEPTIONS?

Does being a carer for a small child, say under 3-4 years of age, exempt a person from having to be available for work (if this parent is entitled to some kind of income support). We see that there exist marked differences in norms and traditions concerning the role of mothers, and thus in the treatment of young unemployed mothers as well. In the UK e.g. lead carers don't have to be available for work when caring for children until the youngest child is 5 years old . When this child is between ages 1 and 5 the lead carer will be asked however to take active steps to prepare for work. When the children are older (from 5 up to 12 years of age), carers have to be available for work that is in line with their caring responsibilities, for example during the child's school hours (DWP, 2017)

In the Netherlands, although a lot has changed since the Participatiewet, the view still remains that mothers stay home for the care of small children, or work part-time. In that respect it belongs to the authority of the municipality to grant exemption from the availability condition to work.

In France and Belgium no exceptions are made: every person that applies for an unemployment benefit or social assistance support has to work (full-time availability is demanded), even when there is a small infant to be cared for. In Belgium it is even made explicit that the care for children can never be an argument for not having to accept an employment, although the broader context, the complexity of one's situation can be considered.

THE GOAL IS NOT JUST WORK BUT SUSTAINABLE EMPLOYMENT?

Is finding a temporary job with a duration of 1 week enough, enough to pull a vulnerable person out of poverty ? In this context sustainable employment will be a condition, to give people a real perspective (essential for Mechelen & Turnhout) and to avert the risk of a setback and further marginalisation

Is sustainable employment primarily a matter of long term employment? Although this is an important aspect, it's not the only one. The right to qualitative employment is an important aspect as well. It is not just about having a job but also for a qualitative employment that involves a better quality of life for the person and his

family. Quality of work is classically related to job conditions, job content, job environment, industrial relations (participation) (Sannen, Castermans, Van Regenmortel & Lamberts ,2011)

Sustainable employment refers to:

- Sustainability in time: Getting work is not enough. Keeping the job is the intention. A job that provides perspective, security in the long haul, but also a job that meets a number criterion, making vulnerable people endure the work.
- An improvement in the living situation: this involves both a financial component (ensuring that work has a stable financial basis) as an organizational component (e.g. a viable work- family balance) but also a social component (e.g. a good working environment) and a psychological component (e.g. through the employment, the person feels better in his skin). This is related to the following aspect;
- Quality of work: Sustainable employment aims at a quality job that ensures a higher quality of life (4 A's);
- Work on empowerment and employability: by enhancing the strength and employability of people in poverty, they become stronger in the labour market

BUT WHAT DOES THE LABOUR MARKET REALITY TELL US?

What is the demand? What are the possibilities?

Unemployment really has decreased and general unemployment rates are quite 'acceptable' today : 4,8% in the UK, 4,8% in Flanders (Belgium 7,8%), 6% in the Netherlands and 10,1% in France (average 2016 – Eurostat Data).

When we look at the unemployment rates more in detail we see that some groups are more vulnerable, despite of the changed labour market situation. Labour market structure and opportunities can be expected to be quite different according to the region in which the project partner is active.

		Total	Youth	Long term	Foreign born (2015)
Belgium		7,8	20,1	51,6	17,0
	Flanders	4,8	14,1	41,3	
	Antwerp	6,1	18,5	45,6	
	Vlaams Brabant	4,8	15,2	44,4	
	Oost- Vlaanderen	4,2	15,1	35,0	
France		10,01	24,7	45,6	17,3
	Nord- Pas de Calais	13,3	30,7	49,9	
The Netherlands		6	10,8	41,5	12,1
	Zuid Holland	7,1	13,2	42,4	
UK		4,8	13	27,1	6,4
	Kent	4,5	14,6	21,6	
	Brighton	3,6	10,2	17,6	

Table average unemployment rates per region 2016, based on (Eurostat Newsrelease, 2017)

The numbers in red, are unemployment rates that reflect a situated that worsened in comparison to the year before. In other words, the employment situation for that particular group in that region has gotten worse.

Specific local conditions worsen the prospects of labour market positions of vulnerable groups.

For example, Arques in Nord-Pas de Calais was known for the large factory Cristal d'Arques which employed at one time 12.000 workers, and where everyone could find work. Since the enterprise closed down, the immediate region is struck by a high unemployment (and a relative high suicide) rate.

Also in recent years we see changes in terms of the structure of employment on the labour market, a change away from sustainable employment and in the direction of 'precarious employment', such as : part-time work, marginal part-time work (<20 hours/week), fixed-term contracts, temporary agency work, (ostensible) self-employment, zero hours contracts, internships ….

An engagement in this kind of work often means (Scheele, 2002) :

- short-term employment or a high risk of losing the job;
- no opportunity for employees to control working conditions, wages etc;
- less protection and social security coverage provided by law or collective agreement;
- less training opportunities;
- a low income, which is linked to poverty; and
- a low level of social integration.

Moreover, the likelihood of working in a precarious job increases when you are a woman, young (up to 35) and in low-skilled work, so the perspectives for our target group are rather poor in obtaining a sustainable job.

Evidence from European statistics shows that there is wide variation regarding risk of precarious working by Member State; there are a wide variety of patterns, depending on country (Broughton et. al., 2016a; Broughton et al.,2016b).

- Marginal part-time work is increasing. It is particularly high in the Netherlands (22% workforce), also in the UK (13% workforce). In the Netherlands, part-time and marginal part-time sums up to about 40 % of total employment (22 + 18) and thus plays the dominant role among all types of contract in the Dutch labour market.
- Fixed-term contracts are quite widespread in France (8% workforce = about EU average). Short-term contracts (up to three months) are predominant in Belgium, while a duration on average of 6m to a year is more predominant in France, UK and the Netherlands. Only in the UK fixed term contracts often serve as a stepping stone to a 'permanent' job.
- Undeclared work is a major issue in the Netherlands.
- Zero hours contracts are specific to a few Member States, such as the UK (5% of the workforce!), the Netherlands (which have increased from 164,000 in 2010 to 228,000 in 2014), where they are concentrated in sectors such as retail and hospitality. As zero hours contracts have no guaranteed minimum hours of work the risk of precariousness for can be high for some individuals if they are in need of guaranteed hours of work and income levels.
- The main type of employment relationship in the EU is full-time permanent contracts, with 59 % of the share of employment, down from 62 % in 2003. Logically, if this trend continues, standard contracts might become at the longer term a minority form of contracting, and it could be argued that this is already so in the case of young people and in some sectors.

Underemployment is also a phenomenon which is increasing. Underemployment happens when people that would like to (re)start to work, have given up looking for a job. There can be many different underlying causes, but a lot of them hem to do with barriers that vulnerable people are confronted with when they are looking for a job. When their distance to work is too big, discouragement and frustration can become so that they withdraw from the labour market altogether.

IS THERE WORK FOR EVERYBODY?

Low skilled jobs are more and more taken up by higher educated people. In Brighton (UK), for instance, a lot of higher educated people stay in Brighton/are moving into Brighton from London (because of the housing prices there) (46% have degrees). Because there are not enough jobs for people with higher levels of educations, they take other jobs (requiring less skills). A s a result, there are "a lot of highly educated baristas" in Brighton (quote from Brighton and Hove City Council staff member). At the same time, many low skilled workers are displaced out of their jobs.

There are not enough jobs and not enough good jobs for our target group which is mostly mow skilled and who we can find concentrated in sectors of employment such as security, care and hospitality, cleaning and retail. Those are traditionally sectors with a lot (and more and more) part-time, zero hours, and a lot of shift work and atypical hours. Precarious indeed (OECD, 2017)

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METHODOLOGY

APPROACH

In this section we describe the approach we used in the research we conducted into barriers to childcare and employment. First, we introduce the framework we used to discuss the barriers that were identified in the study of the organizational context of the PACE actors. Second, we explicitly chose to include the perspective of the service users (parents) in this research. You will find an introduction to this approach in the second part called “whose gap?”.

MICRO MESO MACRO

Many kinds of barriers exist, as to work as to childcare. Barriers to work are not limited to lack of confidence, lack of education … in focusing at the individual jobseeker. Barriers to childcare do not only consist in thresholds at the level of the organisation and ‘the mindset’ of the potential client.

‘Personal choice’ is often induced by structural conditions (or constraints) which deserve to be mapped as such. A good understanding of those different kind of barriers, and the way they interfere with each other is a condition for a good understanding of this issue and for the further approach of the project.

We have organised those barriers into a framework -on ‘Perspectives Social Exclusion & Poverty’ developed (and refined) by Vranken & Dierckx (Vranken, 2014)

Poverty, social exclusion is viewed from different perspectives. In its original form we can discern 4 perspectives : two 'blame based models' and two accident models', each with one personal and one social version. This breakdown is based on two criteria: the level of the cause of poverty (the person or society) and whether the cause is internal ("blame") or external ("accident") (Vranken, 2014).

This typology was extended to six models (Vranken 2014) by the introduction of a third level ; the ‘sociological’ Meso level of the groups, the communities, the institutions, in between the ‘individual’ Micro level and the ‘societal’ Macro level. The consideration that, for the study of social reality, the meso level is crucial led to the insertion of this meso level and here again the criterion of internal ("blame") or external ("accident") cause applies.

The final six perspectives are: the individual blame of victim, the individual accident perspective, the institutional accident perspective, the institutional debt perspective, the social accident perspective (or the cyclical perspective) and the social debt perspective (or structural perspective) (Driessens & Geldof, 2009).

	Blame based – Internal causes	Accident based – External causes
Micro Level The individual/The family	(un) Deserving Parent / Responsible for his own fate/ working on skills & motivation	Deserving parent/ barriers due to (temporary) 'setbacks' (e.g. divorce, accident, …)
Meso Level Groups & Institutions	Family/cultural values Social pressure Institutions or organizations can also create or uphold barriers. Needs a structural approach.	Processes that occur to parents (staff) and to which they respond ('reality', prejudice, experiences, stories…). General provisions are usually tailored to a middle-class culture.
Macro Level Society	Structural barriers caused by the organisation of our society itself	Barriers caused by (global) crisis situation

If we apply the six perspectives to this report on the barriers vulnerable parents are confronted with in their search of Childcare and/or employment, we see that one perspective does not necessarily exclude another. Thus, structural barriers will be enhanced by cyclical factors and translated into daily life by factors at the institutional level. For example, vulnerable parents will be confronted with additional thresholds when they rely on all kinds of services (child care, health care, employment, social assistance ….) and there is a stigma on some services specifically designed for them.

WHOSE GAP?

Analysing barriers is one thing, a problem is that these barriers are mostly defined by policymakers and by professional services. Therefore, it is also necessary to **integrate the perspective of the people** who should benefit from the programmes and services. It has for instance been well documented that a users' perspective brings important and new insights to problem analyses.

The novelty of these insights can be found on 2 levels.

The first one is the fact that expectations of parents and/or service users do not always coincide with the expectations of professionals. For instance, service users sometimes feel best supported when a professional helps them with practical issues, whereas professionals often refrain from precisely these practical issues.

Service users most often point to the **importance of relational qualities** of social workers and childcare staff, but also to the need to be dealt with 'just as human beings'. About this last point, service users point to the basic competence of professionals that they are polite, for instance that they would give notice when they are late.

Secondly, service users and parents make abstract notions more concrete (Schiettecat, 2013). We can learn a lot about what 'affordability' exactly means in a certain setting. That it is for childcare not only about the price or the extra cost, but also the psychological cost of dealing with childcare staff that judges your lifestyle (see interviews with parents).

Integrating the perspectives of the 'users' takes time. If we really want to integrate their perspectives, longer processes are needed to analyse the problem together with the people involved. One-moment questionnaires are often not enough, as they simply reflect the needs and framework of service providers.

Research with service users (in care settings) and with parents in childcare shows that they do not have a grip on the goals and intended outcomes of these services. Decisions are made for them. Integrating the

perspectives of the people involved might mean that goals for the project or for local programme deliveries are constructed in collaboration with the parents whom PACE intends to serve.

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RESEARCH METHODS

SURVEY

In a questionnaire completed by all organisations in December 2016/January 2017 we asked to indicate what the PACE organisations considered to be the main barriers to child care and employment. The answers given by (mostly) Childcare coordinators and pace -officers, we have processed in the chapters of Part 2 and Part 3 Barriers indicated by the organisations.

LITERATURE

– Feasibility studies, statistics, literature, … see reference lists following each chapter

STUDY VISITS

Between March 1st 2017 and End of May 2017 the researchers of the knowledge institutes involved in the PACE project Karel de Grote Hogeschool and Arteveldehogeschool visited all partner settings in the UK (Kent County Council, Brighton City Council), in France Nord-Pas de Calais (the social community centres of Arques, Wattrelos and Saint-Martin-Boulogne), the Netherlands (het Buurtcentrum De Mussen in Den Haag) and the public childcare services in Flanders (City of Ghent, City of Mechelen-Sociaal Huis Mechelen and City of Turnhout). There we had the opportunity to talk to a variety of actors in the childcare and employment services which gave us an in-depth view of the local specifics. We had interviews and meetings with coordinators, caregivers, social workers, volunteers, parents, … and we visited a variety of facilities. Of those visits we wrote up detailed reports, and a reflection can be found in in the various chapters of this gap analysis.

A Topic list was developed for the practice partners in the project. This topic list could be used as a preparation for the study visits. It formulated the topics that could be addressed during the study visits. However, the topics should not be dealt with extensively, because every situation, every context is different. We wanted to address the broad topics, but not every detail question. In addition, the researchers worked with a Framework for Reporting, in which a structure was provided linked to the topic list. This way, we made sure we talked about the same questions and problems, notwithstanding the differences (setting, researchers).

INTERVIEWS WITH THE TARGET GROUP

Insights from the target group were deemed necessary for a rich and deep understanding of this gap analysis. Moreover, contacts with the target group had to be established in order to start working with and for parents.

INTERVIEWS WITH PARENTS: APPROACH AND PROCESS

Vulnerable parents are often not easy to reach, not by social services, not by administrations, nor by researchers. This has been well documented and can in fact quite easily be understood. Often these people live in precarious conditions, and they are and feel like they are under (more or less) intense scrutiny of formal institutions. The contacts with these formal institutions are not always positive, and parents are fearful of interventions in their families.

As this is precisely the target group for the PACE project, it is crucial to form a rich understanding of their views on the central themes of the project. However, there are 4 countries and 12 partners involved, 10 of which are practice partners[1] and 2 knowledge partners. It is important to identify common topics across countries, in order to develop cross border solutions. But it is equally important to value the diversity among partners in this project.

PROJECT APPROACH: 1 GUIDELINE

A guideline was developed for the practice partners in the project. Every partner was expected to conduct the interviews and to report about the interviews.

The guideline offered directions about the following topics:

- Identification of the target group
- Number of interviews
- Practical suggestions for interviewing the target group
- Ethical suggestions for interviewing the target group
- Topics for the interview
- Report

End of March 2017 this guideline was sent to the partners, who were asked to send in the reports by the end of June 2017, leaving the partners with 3 months to complete the interviews with parents.

PROCESS: 9 PRACTICES

Between April and July 2017, the partners organised their own research process, with the different steps that needed to be taken: defining the target group for the interviews, contacting the parents, conducting the interviews, and writing up the report.

This approach meant to strengthen project partners in 2 ways:

1) Partners could learn more about parents' perspectives on the central topics of the project.
2) And partners could experiment with contacting members from the target group, should there be a problem of connecting with the target group.

The table below shows some basic numbers of the interviews with parents. Even though we do not know the same data for every partner, in total 157 vulnerable parents were reached throughout the interview process. The majority of these parents were women, which fits other research data of interviewing vulnerable families.

[1] 2 of these partners are in Mechelen, so these project partners have 1 report together.

Project partner		Number of interviews	Age range of parents	Number of children	Ethnicity of parents	Women	Men
PP 1	Mechelen	12	25 – 36	2 – 5	Mostly Moroccan	12	0
PP 2	Wattrelos	18	20 – 49	1 – 5	-	18	0
PP 3	Arques	15	25 – 40		-	14	1
PP 6	Saint-Martin Boulogne	22	16 – 49	1-3/more	-	22	-
PP 7	Den Haag	17		2 – 4	-	-	-
PP 8	Gent	15		-	Different nationalities, none Belgian		-
PP 9	Brighton & Hove	30	20 – 39	-	Mostly white British	24	6
PP 10	Kent	20		-		19	1
PP 11	Turnhout	8		-	People with different nationalities	8	-
TOTAL PACE		**157**					

Table 1: Interview data gap analysis

PACE
GAP ANALYSIS

PART 2
EMPLOYMENT

PART 2 INTRODUCTION

Vulnerable people who take the step to the labour market are not only confronted with all kind off barriers finding a job, but also encounter problems keeping a job. In the context of this project we will focus however on the barriers encountered on the way to work.

A life in poverty or social exclusion is characterized by a network of visible and invisible problems, which have a bearing on the functioning of vulnerable people in the workplace. We will constantly have to keep in mind this multi-problem context of most of our parents.

BARRIERS AS INDICATED BY THE PARTNER ORGANISATIONS

MICRO LEVEL

When we consider barriers on a micro level, the focus is laid on attitude, motivation and responsibility. Is a parent in some way 'to blame' for his own situation? Can the parent take action in a way as to change his/her own prospects on employment? Does he/she take every possible opportunity to change this situation? Is he/she deserving?

Also, vulnerable parents are known to have different individual 'setbacks', crisis situations … without being responsible for those situations themselves, and in a way we can help them to overcome those setbacks by way of training, language courses …

PSYCOLOGICAL FACTORS

Poverty also has an impact on 'the inside' of people. Possible features include low self-esteem, inferiority, insecurity, suspicion, anger, ... This can also affect future relations with colleagues and employer (risk of bullying, sexual harassment….)

We regularly hear the lack of self-confidence coming back. Most PACE partners mentioned this as a barrier in answering the survey and during the study visits, especially the French, English and Dutch. People have often experienced all sorts of negative experiences (failures, rejection, bullying, ...) that have undermined a great deal of self-confidence. However, having confidence and the ability to appoint competencies and talents to the employer are decisive factors during the job application phase (as mentioned by Pace partner Kent)

The many rejections make vulnerable people scared to fail again and often they lack self- awareness, the feeling that 'they can'. Low confidence and low self-esteem are barriers for many. Practitioners noted that the many vulnerable people they deal with 'think they are good for nothing' due to family circumstances, prior educational experiences and their ability to participate in the labour market contributing to this mind set. According to Brighton the 'confidence problem' results from a cocktail of never having worked, very low skills, anxiety to fail, low self-esteem, …

Pace partner Arques is convinced of the fact that psychological reasons like lack of self-confidence and fear are also often also hidden behind other reasons people give for not working yet.

This explosive mix demands an approach that can lead to small successes for the unemployed parent, successes from where to build up from. Indeed, support needs to be delivered in a way that it is not too challenging for disadvantaged people and does not knock their self-confidence any further. If not, they could face further damage to their self-confidence and ability to take-up employment (or training) if they do not receive tailored support, to help address their complex barriers to engagement, and thus making their distance to work even bigger (Buzzeo, Marvell, Everett & Newton,2016).

When a job applicant comes in for a first interview, he/she sometimes gives the impression not to be very motivated. This lack of motivation is not just a matter of will or willpower of people in poverty but is an essential symptom of being 'hurt' in multiple ways, another way of coping with the daily problems that people experiencing poverty face.

VULNERABLE LABOUR MARKET POSITION.

Factors such as low education, low work experience, limited language proficiency, limited mobility, ... determine to a large extent the labour market position of employees.

DIPLOMA & EXPERIENCE

Although employers emphasised 'soft skills' like self-motivation and communication, there was evidence of formal qualifications being used to screen job applications. Many people in poverty cannot submit or degrees and as a result, after the first selection, they are no longer considered for employment. Access to the labour market is therefore limited to many people in poverty (Russell, Thompson & Simmons, 2014)

Pace partner Kent mentions the extra barrier of childcare for parents who wish to study, and whose study takes longer because of financial barriers and other (mobility, ….) involved…

Another problem is the non-validation of degrees obtained in the country of origin. Newcomers and refugees sometimes enter our countries highly educated, but their qualifications can only -perhaps- be recognized in our country after an administrative procedure that takes time and money.

Many are unable to find work due to lack of experience. They find themselves in a catch-22 situation because they cannot acquire the experience they need without first getting a job.

LANGUAGE

Especially for newcomers, language proficiency is a major obstacle. Many employers represent the native language (level) as a recruitment criterion, while this is not necessarily necessary for the proper execution of the job. This was mentioned as an important barrier by all partners in Belgium, The Netherlands, and UK. The French partners didn't mention this because in their immediate region they have no (perceived problems concerning) ethnic diversity in their target group.

Pace partner Mechelen mentions digital literacy to be more and more a requirement today, which poses a problem both financially and in terms of skills/proficiency to our target group. What should be the focus? The (institutional) requirement, or the individual that can't meet the requirement ?

MOBILITY

The area in which vulnerable parents are looking for work, willing to accept a job is quite limited to their own (extended) neighbourhood. Many vulnerable parents don't have a driver's license or a car. Pace partner Wattrelos estimates their share at about ¼ of their target group. The partners in France also refer to the dominant idea with the parents that it is out of the question to drive more than 30 km to work. In their minds this is "impossible".

> *In earlier times, people used to live and work on the same place, with a 'patron' and 'les usines' offering a lot of job opportunities (e.g. textile industry). This might be still in people's minds and expectations? People are often not very mobile or not willing to commute to work.*

Of course, a car is very expensive an being depend on public transportations would be a solution if this was a worthy alternative. In the region of the French partners however the offer of public transport is insufficient,

where in the UK it remains too expensive for vulnerable parents. Organisation and cost of public transport, again, transcend the micro level.

LACK OF EMPLOYABILITY – SOFT SKILLS

Vulnerable people can also be unaware of the expectations of employers, for instance, with regards to how they present themselves, attendance, and punctuality. Pace partners mentioned in this respect lack of time consciousness (Mechelen), respect of rule, social codes, appointments, working together, 'dress to empress' (Den Haag)… . Pace partner Den Haag believes soft skills are what make vulnerable parents "Sustainable to Work: know what you can do, know how to do it, get contacts to get work, know the social codes of Dutch work situation. Being able to get a job yourself".

LACK OF A SOCIAL NETWORK

The more people know that you are looking for work, the greater the chance that someone will know an interesting job or possibly even have a job for you. Being able to rely on an extended social network is an important asset when you are looking for a job. Especially the partners in Den Haag and the French partners thought this important to mention.

This would appear to be easy, except vulnerable parents do not tend occasions where they can meet (new) contacts easily, like parties, at the sports club, through social media… because there are also barriers (financial, shame, health, ….) at play when it comes to spending leisure time.

Keeping in touch with your many contacts implies being active on social media nowadays, which implies digital literacy and an internet at your fingertips. New barriers arise.

Vulnerable people don't have much of a social network, or when they have one, odds are it will be a vulnerable one.

And, contrary to what is often assumed, going to work can also create a feeling of isolation, especially among singles. The social network one had before disappeared due to lack of time, e.g. because the social network came together during the day, ... Through employment, new people get acquainted, but the existing social network cannot be replaced by 'colleagues'.

Family is of course (a special) part of our social network, and a very import factor in making the combination work-family possible. While we see weak social networks on the one hand, there is on the other hand quite strong family solidarity at work where grandparents take care of children, and thus make employment possible. This is very predominant in Den Haag and Kent.

MULTI-PROBLEMS

Vulnerable parents are parents at risk of poverty or social exclusion, and -according to Prof. Jan Vranken- poverty consists of a network of social exclusions that extends across multiple areas of individual and collective existence. It separates the poor from the generally accepted lifestyles of society. This gap cannot be bridged by themselves. " Poverty and social exclusion can be both the cause and the result of insufficient access to income, employment, education, health, housing, social participation. Problems in these various domains will add to each other. No wonder that most PACE partners mention the multiple problems their target group is faced with as a major barrier to employment.

(Mental) health, Debt, instable family relations, trauma(of war), financial problems, housing (costs/quality), addiction … problems which make work and looking for work difficult, impossible, even non-essential or irrelevant, and most certainly when those issues have to be tackled at the same time (Sirovátka & Sol 2013; Vlaams Netwerk van verenigingen waar armen het woord nemen vzw, 2007). Pace partner Brighton is

particularly worried because of recent trends in housing cost combined with the expected fall in income for the parents at risk (low wages and/or effect of the Benefit Cap)

Pace partner Den Haag believes that the parents "must be 'ready for the labour market' so there is a chance of success. If the multi-problems with which the vulnerable parent is struggling are to prominent, the chance of success is non-existent, and the result can only be demotivation, leaving the parent even further than at the beginning of the course. The distance to work will then only be bigger". Pace partner Ghent refers to the Housing First experiment in Belgium, where the underlying assumption is that housing stability is needed before a work trajectory can be started.

Because multi-problems have such an adverse effect on employability, Den Haag made the choice to offer their trajectory to work only to a 'less vulnerable' target group that can be mediated into work, where they will first refer others with more multifaceted problems to their network of collaborative services.

OTHERS

Turnhout mentioned also insufficient available childcare, work-life balance, religion (not wanting to work in kitchen with pork meat, serve alcohol) and the poverty gap as barriers on the level of the individual. Kent mentioned the history of unemployment with the wider family.

MESO LEVEL

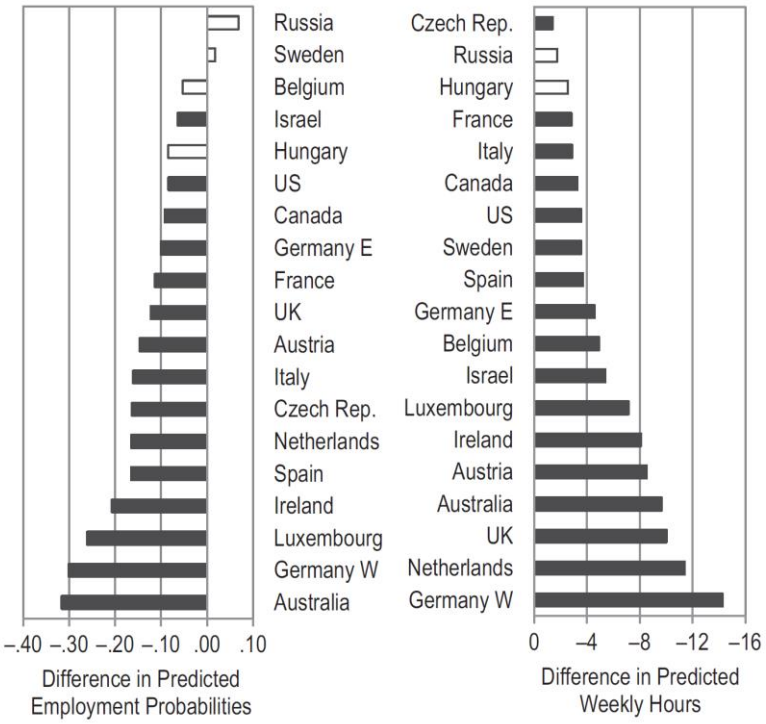
FOCUS ON CULTURAL VALUES

Why is there a difference in the treatment of lead carers ….? Why do a lot of young mothers feel guilty when they go to work, or get the feeling they should … ? Why do mothers in Belgium work more than in the UK? Why do young Mothers in the Netherlands work mostly part-time? ….

Institutional explanations may not fully explain those variation in women's employment outcomes. Kremer (2007) suggests that welfare states promote certain "ideals of care," which define both what good care is and who provides it; and these ideals are also embedded in welfare-state policies.

There is this thing that is called a 'Motherhood Gap'

Figure 2. Difference in predicted employment probabilities between mothers and childless women, controlling for individual and household characteristics



Note: Significant differences ($p < .05$) are represented by solid bars.

Chart from Boeckmann, Joya, & Budig,2015, p 1317

Note: Significant differences (p < .05) are represented by solid bars

People's behaviour is shaped by the constraints and opportunities of specific social policies. First women started to work and then welfare states acted upon care-related demands, and that some welfare states were more responsive then others.

Broader cultural values regarding (maternal) employment matter as well. Work-family policies and cultural contexts are thus interrelated.

Where "ideals of care" (Kremer 2007) emphasize the importance of maternal care, engagement in paid work may be perceived as in conflict with "good motherhood," and this perception will decrease the likelihood of being hired, of getting a promotion, of getting the same pay …. On the other hand, a higher acceptance of maternal employment may weaken the perceived (by employers) problematic combination of being a mother and an employee, a 'good worker'.

Greater acceptance of mothers' (full-time) employment will result in smaller motherhood gaps in employment probabilities and working hours. Cultural support for maternal employment may possibly curb work-family conflict for mothers, especially if accessible public provisions are in place at the same time.

Decision making by parents is not exclusively reached based on the affordability and availability of childcare provisions nor on the financial (dis)incentives embedded within tax and benefit policies. 'To work or to care' stays also a moral predicament.

According to our French partners in their region there is still the tradition of mothers staying home to care for their children themselves. The low skilled work they could get (if any) holds too little perspective in return. Also, changing roles could put pressure on the relation, e.g. a housewife working outside has less time to care at home. It happens quite often that husbands refuse to do anything in the household and for the children. A

woman who wants to study, work, is frequently opposed by her husband in this (childcare costs or care for children ...). Also, in case of family conflict or divorce additional barriers arise according to Arques: women will become less available: they are not only lone parents, but conflict resolving demands a lot of energy and time.

The English partners mention a change in mindset, however we don't think it not so much a cultural change, as well a change in policy that might force women into labour. The change in mindset would come through the introduction of the Benefit Cap, so that mothers will have to find a job within the first year if they don't want to be affected by it.

Kent and Ghent also mention the family values that come with ethnic diversity, where the idea remains that when you are a caring for small children you look after them yourself, with the consequence that employment is impossible. When working, it is the extended family that is taking on the job of childminder.

Pace partner De Haag believes that people are emancipating, changing. To be working as a parent is deemed important for the children. What people believe is mainly dependent on their background, and most people in the Schilderswijk are from migrant origin, where social pressure is very big, especially from the mother-in-law.

INSTITUTIONS OR ORGANIZATIONS CAN ALSO CREATE OR MAINTAIN BARRIERS

An important factor of success is the availability of guidance or support (in the job). However, once vulnerable people find a job, any form of structural support or training is gone most of the time. Usually the guidance is focused on the execution of the work. Items that are appreciated in the workplace guidance are.?

Continuing support during work placements is important for young people, but the roles of employers and support services need to be agreed on a clearly communicated (Russell, et al.,2014)

In Turnhout we find example where social assistance beneficiaries are activated to work, but support stops when there training comes to an end and they have to register with the labour mediation services (VDAB). Aftercare is needed, especially since we find that all too often parents are in and out short-term jobs and employers see them too often as an inexpensive workforce, and are not committed to them as a person

Support during work in other areas than employment is less common, also because vulnerable parents are not inclined to state those problems to their employer. However, attention to welfare-related issues is important in order to maintain the work.

Finally, people in poverty emphasize the importance of tailored work. Some can do more (and should get that opportunity without it becoming too much for them). Others should be able to do less, something they can handle.

Pace partner Mechelen and Turnhout remark that employers' demand for immediate employability, which gives not much opportunities for the target groups, while people actually need guidance on the work floor. They also want to work more strongly with learning at the workplace.

Focus on adaption strategies, stigma, prejudice, labelling , …

processes which parents as well as employers respond to. Perception and Participation are the magic words here.

Access to the labour market for people in poverty is often limited. When they do get invited to attend a job interview, they don't always dare to speak openly about their expectations, which in its turn can lead to misunderstandings. Also, they do not always ask for an explanation if an employer says something they don't fully grasp.

French partners insist that an atmosphere of security and openness is created by the employer during the job interview, where the employer looks beyond the prejudices and possible shortcomings of jobseekers, but looking for the competencies of the job applicant (rather than formal qualifications) and giving him/her a chance on the basis of these.

Pace partner Den Haag draws our attention to the fact that diversity in the workplace is an added value for an organization. It offers new insights and opportunities for employers. We must call on the uptake of social responsibility of the employers.

In this respect Den Haag referred to a research project from the City Den Haag to create acceptance and impact on business http://www.denhaaginclusief.nl/ amongst others to tackle discrimination jobseekers encounter. In the box you can find some highlights of the campaign.

The Hague Includes:

Dynamics of exclusion in the labor market

- Implicit exclusion -> what you don't know, you don't like
- Perception of groups that have an effect on individuals of that group
- Migrants: building social networks and improving soft skills

ACTIVATION IS A MANDATORY TRAJECTORY

In addition, many people in poverty are in an activation program. They must be available for (full time) work and apply for jobs if they want to be entitled to a benefit. The obligations often push jobseekers towards jobs that are too demanding or for which they won't qualify, but If the jobseeker doesn't respond he/she may be suspended and without an income.

The will to do a particular job and the belief that the job can be a powerful instrument. It's important to consider the wishes and job expectations of the parents. When they feel that they did not have control or participation in it and are being "led" to a job, that has a negative impact on their final employment (sustainable?) Also, the employment must offer a perspective on improvement of their situation.(Turnhout)

Wattrelos feels that "expectations of (local) governments are changing in relation to 'employment'. It is not enough anymore to increase opportunities for people or bring them closer to employment. At this point there is more time pressure or people/institutions expect results."

EMPLOYER/SUPERVISOR/MENTOR/VOLUNTEER

Poverty and all the problems associated with it are not solved simply when starting. Moreover, employment is not an instant solution to poverty. Vulnerable parents will be more absent from work due to their risk at being confronted with multi-problems because they possibly have to keep appointments with a variety of services to address their own private problems. Many services are not open outside office hours, so this puts pressure on the newfound job. In some situations, employment even initially creates more problems than answers. For example, creditors who suddenly show up , the relationship that is under pressure due to employment, childcare problems and the care of the children, ... These situations can constitute real breakpoints for employment if the employer is not aware of them.

Many people in poverty are single and have children. Often their network on whom they can fall back to take up some of the care tasks at home is very small. This means that, for example, in children's illness it is difficult to find solutions. This may also mean that the experience expert may be less flexible in terms of leave arrangements, completion of working hours, performance of evening and weekend work.

People in poverty often have the feeling they cannot meet what the employer requires from them, which makes them feel guilty. Open communication can help to avoid frustrations around both the employer and the employee, but this is difficult.

The life of a person in poverty sometimes differs in such a way that it is difficult to find a connection with someone else, a staff member, a mentor, a volunteer …. The lack of insight also sometimes causes lack of empathy.

MACRO LEVEL

MOBILITY (LACK OR TOO EXPENSIVE PUBLIC TRANSPORT)

As said above the offer of public transport is insufficient. In Nord-Pas de Calais Journeys take too long, not every workplace is accessible by public transport, the travel time is limited In the UK public transport remains too expensive for vulnerable parents. The expense of commuting outside the city for work is a real problem

POVERTY TRAP

The basic idea is that by working people should acquire financial stability and thus a humane acceptable way of living. Financial security is an aspect of what it means to have a ‘sustainable jobs’.

Vulnerable people can get mainly low-paid jobs (low skilled, low qualification level), a lot of times without any extra-legal benefits (insurance, pension fund, travel costs, meal vouchers …), which isn’t very motivating to start with.

In addition, working entails new costs in itself. To work a parent has to make travel costs, childcare costs, perhaps dress to impress costs, internet access, …

At the same time, other social benefits they had when unemployed, will disappear. We think of social fares for public transportations, reduction on cultural passes, food packages, but also higher child benefits, housing benefits, repayment of health costs, …

Debt is a common problem with people in poverty, and when debt is a serious problem it is possibly not interesting to start to work. A creditor might take the money that is owed directly from the wages by the use of an ‘an attachment of earnings order’ (loonbeslag). In the UK a collection of debt in this way is not possible if a person is unemployed or self-employed!

Taken everything into account, work will not always lead to an increase in available income, and sometimes people would really have to be mad to start to work. But what if working is an obligation? What in case of part-time work (income)?

This poverty gap was experienced with all partners, most in Flanders, Den Haag and the UK.

In the UK the Benefit Cap will probably change this by lowering the equation in favour of (low) pay, but our partner in Brighton foresees new problems that will arise. Especially since housing costs are only on the rise in Brighton, which will put people in poverty in an even more impossible situation.

The Benefit Cap

The benefit cap is a limit of 20.000 £ a year for a household with children on the total amount of benefits that most people aged 16 to 64 can get.

The total amount of benefit a household gets might go down to make sure you don't get more than the cap limit. Childcare costs are protected.

You will not be affected by the cap if you or your partner:

1 You are claiming Universal Credit and you (and your partner) earn at least the amount you would get for 16 hours per week on national minimum wage (depending on your age, e.g. 25+ at least £115.20 per week or £499.20 per month)

2 You are claiming Housing Benefit and you (and your partner) work enough hours to qualify for Working Tax Credit. As A lone parent, you have to work 16 hours per week. As a couple with children, you and your partner have to work a total of 24 hours per week and one of you must work at least 16 hours per week.

DEMANDS OF THE LABOURMARKET (FLEX, JOB OPPORTUNITIES)

Is there work for everybody? All partners conclude that there are not enough jobs for short-skilled persons. In the northern French regions, a lot of low-skilled jobs disappeared, in Brighton we already gave the example of the overqualified barista's, so a lot of low skilled jobs are taken up by higher educated people. In Gravesham (Kent) a lot of fields of employment died out and there are not many employment opportunities, so poverty rates are high, and it can be considered as a disadvantaged area.

The next question is whether the jobs that are available could be sustainable jobs? Partners view recent trends on the labour market very pessimistically, since especially low skilled jobs are getting a more and more precarious and flexible.

Partners emphasise the importance of a 'sustainable job', a job that gives financial stability, peace of mind, perspective, good working conditions …. This implies a long-term (open-end) contract, or at least the perspective on it. However, in reality the partners see different scenarios, which are confirmed by the trends we depicted in Part 1 Context. Many people are in poverty are in certain types of employment that are precarious (short term, zero hours contract, marginal part-time, temporary agency work, …) and give them no perspective whatsoever, a low pay, no training or support on the job, no equal access to facilities …. The uncertainty and unpredictability associated with it creates extra cost and is demotivating.

Houseman (2014) argues that in some cases, temporary agency work may act as a stepping stone to some specific parts of the labour market, although these instances are limited to groups such as immigrants, giving them an opportunity to demonstrate their ability (but only then).

Outsourcing is common in cleaning and construction, where cheaper(low skilled) labour can be sourced from other organisations, often through employing migrant labour, often by way of temporary agency work. (Broughton A. et al. 2016).

Partners Brighton, Den Haag and Mechelen in particular are most concerned with this evolution, and they also point out that vulnerable low skilled people have the most job opportunities in job sectors that require a lot of flexible working hours (hospitality, care, security, cleaning, …), shift work, evening work, weekend work, ... This way of working entails obstacles, especially for single parents and those who depend on public transport. Much depends on the employer (his flexibility to e.g. consider the work family balance of the employee or the travel times).

Vulnerable parents are in risk of being quick in an out of (un)employment, of having to work on call, be available on all hours, for a smaller wage and a lot of trouble?

CHILDCARE AS A BARRIER TO (LOW SKILLED) WORK

In the context of precarious and/or flexible work childcare will certainly become a barrier.

A lot of workers have grandmothers who act as childminders, but as Pace partner Kent points out, informal care comes under pressure due to the fact that grandmothers are more and more working girls as well and that they (have to) work longer because of the changes in (early) pension schemes.

On the other hand, in the formal childcare can be so expensive sometimes, that stopping to work, or work less is a better alternative (as a mother or as a granny). Childcare in the UK is certainly too costly for children under the age of 2, when no free hours are granted.

Precarious and flexible work demand a childcare system in which you can arrange childcare on (very) short notice (zero-hour contract, short term contract, variable hours …) Long waiting lists that exist in childcare make this impossible. Occasional Childcare is an important provision in this respect, because it can help parents to find care in case of short term employment. Also, it supports parents that are unemployed if they want to follow a training or have to be present at a job interview. Nevertheless, we see that the organization of Occasional childcare is virtually impossible with a lot of partners, either because regulation doesn't not allow it or makes it particularly difficult by posing impossible conditions. Objectives of learning and development in childcare (and other quality conditions) are here given precedence over the economic function. This is certainly the case in the UK, but also in The Netherlands the organization of occasional childcare is forbidden in principle.

Flexible work, work in shifts demand a childcare provision with flexible hours, but again this is not the case, on the contrary. Some examples are known of provisions with broader opening hours e.g. until 7 PM, and the City of Ghent took the initiative of providing childcare at Saturday on one location, exclusively for parents that have to work or follow a training. In the Netherlands, if this exists it is very expensive ('Uurtje- Factuurtje' they call it in Den Haag).

Pace partner Brighton believes that it is important that vulnerable parents take on the right job at the right moment, this is a job that consists of enough hours to avoid the benefits cap and be able to pick them up at school, and in the immediate environment. Making a sensible choice is important. This view is possible in the UK, where the availability of work of (lead)carers is seen in a different light than e.g. in Belgium where Social Assistance doesn't take the burden of care over little children into account.

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PARENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON EMPLOYMENT

We performed a thematic analysis to identify broad themes from the parent interview reports (Mortelmans, 2007). The main themes were: (1) the aspiration of getting back to employment; (2) why parents do/would not want to enter employment; (3) barriers to employment, with balancing between working and being a parent as one as the most prominent subthemes; (4) benefits of working according to parents; (5) parents' needs when entering employment.

The following report is based on summaries of parent interviews provided by the nine PACE organisations. However, we try to tell the parents story as much as possible, by using quotes and staying as close as possible to the parent's language. When we do refer to interpretations of the authors of the reports, we will explicitly mention this.

DREAMS AND ASPIRATIONS: MANY PARENTS WANT TO WORK

The large majority of the parents who were interviewed were mothers with one or more children, who have decided to stay at home with their children. Most of them have no or limited previous work experience. Many of the interviewed parents (two third up to all parents interviewed by one PACE practice, except for one case) wanted to get to work and even indicated that they wanted to start working as soon as possible. Some parents explicitly stated that they want to get back to work only when the children were older (*we think they often refer to start of pre-primary or primary school*).

"I would be looking to return to work after my youngest had started school, probably 2-3 years' time." (Parent from Kent, UK, age 45).

"I want to work when my child will start to school" (parent from Arques, FR)

Although many parents wish and dream of returning or getting to work, a number parents also indicated that they could not clearly picture themselves working or that they had no idea where to start looking for a job. Some parents mentioned this themselves. In other cases, the interviewers noticed that parents saw no concrete job ideas or opportunities.

"Would like to be more involved in the beauty business but cannot see a way to do this." (parent from Brighton, UK)

"I would like to work but how do I start?" (parent from Mechelen, BE)

"I will find a vocational training. I don't know which one yet, but it will bring me back to work." (parent from Wattrelos, France)

When parents do have previous work experience, or when they have specific vocational or academic skills, they often have a clearer picture of what they want to do in the future.

"I was a waitress for 3+ years and thoroughly enjoyed it. I would like to work in the restaurant or catering industry with the hope that one day I will be able to start my own business." (parent from Brighton, UK)

"I have a Master's degree in Maths, so I wanted to be a teacher. My first step is to become a Teaching Assistant." (Parent from Kent, UK, age 35)

With regard to working conditions, parents who were questioned about this (mainly UK parents) often wish to work part-time and within school/day-care hours. In other reports we also find parents expressing their wish to work part-time.

"I want to work but only a few hours" (parent from Arques, FR)

In one interview report (Ghent), it is mentioned that parents themselves seem to experience (talk about) part-time work as a full-time job. The authors of the report tentatively conclude that perhaps fulltime work is not feasible for the parents who they interviewed. We will later address some of the reasons why fulltime work is far from obvious for parents.

Many parents are interested in working within the health/social care sector or in education, specifically with children.

"I like working with children" (parent from The Hague, NL)

"I will receive a childcare degree and I will be employed as childcare assistant. I will work with families. I will help parents to develop their parenting skills." (a parent from Wattrelos, FR on her employment dream)

" I would like to work in a childcare centre or primary school, but I lack the language skills" (parent from The Hague, NL)

Some of the authors suggest that the familiarity with this kind of work could be the reason parents are interested in the ECEC or social sector. Other sectors that are attractive to parents are retail/sales, administration/office work, and catering/tourism/hospitality. These sectors often do match with the jobs that are available locally.

Several parents mention that they would like to start their own business. Authors of the reports link this to the fact that this gives parents more flexibility and the opportunity to combine work with taking care of children. It is not clear how parents themselves perceive this.

"I was a waitress for 3+ years and thoroughly enjoyed it. I would like to work in the restaurant or catering industry with the hope that one day I will be able to start my own business." (parent from Brighton, UK)

To conclude, we find that the majority of parents wants to enter employment. Most of these parents want to get to work as soon as possible. The authors of some of the reports suggest that parents are not always clear what they mean when they talk about 'looking for work' and 'wanting to work'. It is implied that parents mention that they want to work because of social pressure, because they feel this is the 'right answer' to the questions of the interviewer, or because they are ashamed to be unemployed. In one report, half of the parent group is described as 'looking for a job'. Later on, in the description of the interviews, it is mentioned that only a fraction of the parents is *actively* looking for a job and that the majority of parents is not motivated to get into employment. In another report, the authors mention that parents are hesitant in answering questions about employment and try to avoid these questions.

GETTING BACK TO WORK: WHY NOT?

Some parents are not interested in returning to employment. Only one PACE practice explicitly questioned parents on why they were not interested in working. However, in other reports reasons for parents not looking for work (anymore) are mentioned.

Several parents argue that working is not worth the effort: as soon as you start working, you lose certain benefits and you have additional costs (e.g., childcare). If parents assess that they cannot earn enough to make it worthwhile, they are discouraged.

"Working is more money but also more bills" (parent from Ghent, BE)

Other parents prefer to stay with their children. However, it is not always clear to what extent they really want this themselves, or rather it is expected from them by their community or their husbands. Other reasons for not working are language barriers, preferring not to work over precarious working conditions, lack of good quality support in finding a job and lack of jobs that are combinable with child care and school hours. Several parents discuss these reasons for not taking a job, but they are most prominent in single parents (UK) and in communities where mothers are expected to stay at home with their children (FR).

"I benefit from follow-up with RSA (Revenue de Solidarité Active) but there is not any accompaniment through employment."(parent from Arques, FR)

"I don't want to work because of my child." (parent from Arques, FR)

PARENTS' BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT

Also, the parents who are eager to start working, or looking for a job, identify barriers to employment. Many different barriers are mentioned. In all reports, parents refer to the **challenging combination of employment and being a parent**. Parents point out that "taking care of children takes time". Sometimes, parents refer to their own experiences of being a child of working parents:

"I want my children to have a better youth than I had, I was very lonely" (parent from The Hague, NL)

Several mothers report that they do not necessarily want to, but are expected to stay at home with the children. We see this mainly in the report of the Belgian PACE practices. The mothers who were questioned in Belgium, were mostly from ethnic minorities. However, in many cases, parents just want to spend time with their children.

"I love taking care of my children" (parent from Arques, FR)

A "barrier to employment" aspect of being a parent that is mentioned in almost all reports is childcare. In some instances, parents refer to the costs associated with childcare. These costs differ from country to country. In UK and the Netherlands, for instance, childcare gets very expensive once you have more children. In these cases, parents are discouraged to start working when they realize their income might be less when they work than when they do not work.

"I have had children and haven't worked for 18 years. I can't earn enough to pay for childcare."

"It's pointless to work because you would pay more in childcare than you earn."

(parents from Brighton, UK)

In France, parents mention that they would have difficulties to pay for the first month (which has to be paid in advance). Belgian parents refer to the fact that childcare costs rise significantly once you start working.

"For one child, I can pay. For two children, I have to stop, I cannot pay" (parent from Ghent, BE)

Many parents point out that it is difficult to find a job with hours matching day-care hours.

"Having access to a day-care centre adapted to working hours would help a lot. Employers also expect long work experience, they are quite demanding and the competition on tough." (parent from Wattrelos, France)

Others talk about the difficulties to simply organise childcare for their children: "*For finding a job, it is necessary to find 2 nannies for my 4 children: impossible mission.*" *(parent from Arques, FR)*

Childcare is definitely a barrier for single parents, but is also mentioned by parents who are in a couple but do not have a partner that is able to take care of the children.

Another barrier that is related to being a parent is the lack the time and the energy parents are often confronted with. This further complicates the lives of parents who already have a lot of challenges and difficulties to manage on a daily basis. In several reports, this barrier is more broadly mentioned by the authors as parents living from day-to-day, having multiple problems, having difficulties to get their lives structured and to think ahead. It is, however, not always clear to what extent this is an interpretation of the interviewers/authors, based on the type of answers parents gave them, or whether parents indicate this themselves.

"Haven't had the time to look for a job that I would want to do due to a lack of sleep and energy."(parent from Brighton, UK)

In some instances, parents say that simply being a parent is a threshold: employers might prefer people without children (or with older children). Parents with a child that has special needs struggle with this most of all.

"I have 4 children. The risk is that the employer would hire someone with less parental responsibilities." (parent from Wattrelos, FR)

Many parents mention barriers that relate to personal factors**: a lack of skills and experience, little or no qualifications, and lack of self-confidence**. Parents fear that they "will not be able to cope with the structure and rhythm" (parent from Mechelen, BE). The reports learn us that parents are afraid of doing something wrong, of new things, and of failing. Some parents seem to interpret the fact that they have little experience and qualifications as *a sign or even proof of their own incompetence* (this is an interpretation by the author of the report from CS Eclaté). Parents also assume that employers will look at them in this way. It is remarkable that parents look at their skills and competences in a rather narrow way: they relate it purely to work experience and often do not mention or realize that they might and probably do possess all kinds of skills and competences, even without having any job experience. An example from one of the interviews from Turnhout (BE) illustrates this:

> *I (interviewer): What are you good at?*
> *P (parent): MMMMMM, [she laughs] mmmmm it's difficult. Like what, do you mean good at work?*
> *I: for example: I can draw very well or my cooking is great, I can sing or dance very well*

P: hmmmm, for me, sometimes (she points at her head)
I: for your hair?
P: yes
I: do you get other women their hair done?
P: yes, sometimes
I: so, you' re kind of a hairdresser?
P: yes, but I don't put in fake hair, I only work with real hair.
She shows pictures on her portable with hairstyles of African women, specially interlaced. She seems to be very proud of it.
I : did you do that? It's gorgeous.
P: Yes, I did that without any fake hair, all natural hair.

In some cases, parents do have qualifications and diplomas, but these are not validated in the country they currently live in (mentioned in the report from Ghent, BE).

The lack of a social network, and not knowing how to start looking for a job, is often mentioned by parents. However, there are not any quotes on this barrier to find on the interview reports. It is unclear whether this means that parents were seldom questioned more deeply on this matter, or that this is a pure coincidence.

Not many parents mention this explicitly, but in some interview reports parents talk about the fact that there are not a lot of job offers for them and that the available jobs are not suitable because they do not match school/childcare hours or because the work circumstances are not good enough (temporary work, short-term contracts, only a few hours a week, …).

Other barriers that are mentioned are more specifically tied to the local context. For instance, the barrier '**mobility**' is mentioned in the French interview reports and by parents from Turnhout (BE). In these context, there is a poor offer of public transport. In addition, many of the parents from the French target group do not have a driver's license or do not own a car. In Turnhout, the interviewed mothers are newcomers (refugees), who often do not know how to ride a bike and do not have a driver's license. In combination with a limited public transport offer, this poses a barrier especially for those parents living outside of the city centre. In Mechelen and Ghent (also in Belgium), this is less a problem because there is a better public transport offer.

A barrier that is most explicitly mentioned in the reports from the Belgian PACE practices, is **language**. This can be explained by the fact that the majority of the Belgian interviewees were mothers from migrant families, often refugees. In addition, Belgian employers expect a relatively high level of Dutch: you cannot start working before taking a language test and often language courses. Also, the Belgian government keeps emphasizing that language is a crucial step in the integration process. Language barriers are mentioned in other reports to, but most prominently in the Belgian context.

"Dutch is the key to everything: to education, work and a good upbringing for the children. Without knowing Dutch, I won't get far." (parent from Turnhout, BE)

Also, **cultural barriers** are only explicitly mentioned in the Belgian reports. This can again be related to the composition of the Belgian group of interviewees (mainly migrant families). For instance, Muslim parents mention that working with non-halal food, alcohol, without being able to pray five times a day poses a challenge for them. Women in particular mention that working without a headscarf, or together with men, is not obvious.

In conclusion, a wide range of barriers is mentioned by parents. Most parents identify barriers that relate to their being a parent. These barriers include both 'formal' aspects of parenting (e.g. the need to look for

childcare when you work as a parent), and more 'informal' or even 'emotional' aspects such as the decision to spend less time with the children and the tiredness and lack of sleep and energy that come along with parenthood. Parents also experience a lack of skills, work experience and competencies. Many parents consider themselves as low-skilled and do not see that they do have skills and experience which they built outside of the work environment. At last, we see that the local context of parents influences the barriers they mention (e.g., mobility and language barriers only in specific contexts), but also the way in which they talk about barriers.

A barrier that is not often mentioned is health. Some parents refer to the fact that working is more difficult when you have a child with special needs, but parents generally do not refer to their own health issues. Some parents refer to the stress of daily life and parenting that is a barrier for them to start looking for work.

BENEFITS OF WORKING: FOR ME, FOR MY FAMILY, FOR THE FUTURE, …

Employment means **"more money for the family"**. The majority of the reports mentions this benefit of employment. In the UK, where 50 parents were interviewed, 80% of the parents (same percentage in Brighton and Kent) mentions this as a benefit of working.

As mentioned above, 'more money' is often not a short-term result of getting into employment as working means increasing costs (e.g. childcare) and less benefits. Therefore, some parents refer to building a good pension when talking about the financial benefit of working. The meaning of the financial benefit also depends on the current financial situation of parents. Some parents (mainly single parents) have to work to survive or to acquire decent living conditions, "*I will have to work*" a parent from France said. Most of the interviewed parents were on low incomes or struggling to make ends meet.

"I'd like to be supporting my family and not struggling. I would like to be bettering myself for the sake of my children."(parent from Brighton, UK)

For parents who are in couple and already have an income, getting into employment means more comfort and (mentioned by women) the possibility to have some money of their own, to decide themselves how and where to spend it. For these parents, working means a form of emancipation.

Parents often talk about how working would improve their **self-esteem and skills** and would give them a **sense of purpose**. The skills parents mention are dependent on the context (e.g. learning the language is only mentioned in Belgium). In the UK, learning and developing is mentioned as a benefit by 60% (Brighton) and 65% (Kent) of the interviewed parents and building self-confidence by more or less 55% of parents in both contexts.

Parents also see **social benefits** to employment: it means they can go out of the house more often and build a social network. A parent from Arques in France mentions that "*A job that can let me to build new social relationships*" is what she is looking for.

At last, parents also refer to being a role model for their children.

"The most obvious reason is that there will be more money for the family. Another reason is that we want our adopted child to see that both parents are working and hopefully she can envisage the work culture to help her when she becomes an adult. This bears from our experience of growing up with working parents." (Parent from Kent, UK, age 33)

"I want my child to see me with a good work ethic." (parent from Brighton, UK)

In sum, parents agree that employment means more financial comfort although for some parents this is a long-term goal (welfare trap). Many parents would like to have more money for the family, for their children. Besides that, they see the development of new skills, learning new things as a benefit of working. Many parents also refer to the fact that working would give them a sense of purpose and more self-confidence. Social benefits, like building a social network, were not mentioned in all contexts. The type of benefits that parents identify definitely depend on the context, but we do not have enough information from the individual interviews with parents to draw conclusions on this.

PARENTS NEEDS WITH REGARD TO ENTERING THE ROUTE TO EMPLOYMENT

Explicit questioning on their needs in starting the route to employment took place only in one context, but in many interview reports it is mentioned alongside through the answers parents give on other questions. In both reports from UK, for instance, parents are asked what the PACE project should take care of when they want to accompany parents towards employment. Some of the parents' answers also refer directly or indirectly to needs in the search for employment.

One of the things parents mentioned as a need is **childcare adapted to working hours** (i.e. more flexible childcare). Parents also mention that they would like to have **help with writing CVs and motivation letters**. In the reports from UK, parents provide some ideas on how this support should be taken care of: use plain English, not jargon; help parents to prepare interviews and offer help with expenses such as travel costs; offer drop-in and advice sessions; ask questions that can be easily answered by parents; look for venues that are accessible for parents. Clearly, parents care a lot about how support is given. Several parents, mainly from the French contexts, refer to the lack of accompaniment in their search for employment, also by formal (governmental) organisations.

Parents also mention that they **still want to stay in their children's life** and that they want this to be taken into account when they are in a route towards employment.

Parents also want support in coping with stress and building up self-confidence.

"I missed appointments because I am afraid, I do not know how to act, if I am lovable or not, sometimes I do not dare." (parent from Arques, FR)

Factors that are mentioned very little by parents as needed or things they want help with, although they turn up as barriers, are digital and vocational skills.

One factor that is mentioned by one of the French practices, is that parents might need support that does not make them feel like passive recipients (again). The authors of the report argue that parents are used to this 'passive role' (are sometimes pushed into it?) and that this impedes them from actively starting a trajectory towards employment. This would mean that it is important not to let parents 'undergo' a program or trajectory but let them be the actor.

"I would love if someone would help me on my path, someone that pushes me a little bit." (parent from Arques, FR)

One of the factors that could help or support parents implemented in the PACE project is volunteer work. It is notable that not one of the parents mentions volunteer work as a step towards employment spontaneously. Still, of the parents who were questioned on volunteering (not in all PACE practices), most parents indicate that they would be interested in volunteering. The main benefits they see in volunteer work are practicing skills, gaining experience and getting a sense of purpose, besides the ability to build a network and social contacts.

"Currently volunteering to build up my skills, as I have been out of work, bringing up 4 children for the past 10 years*". (Parent from Kent, UK, age 36).*

Some parents mention that they do not enter volunteer work themselves although they would want to because they don't know how, feel insecure and are afraid to do something wrong. In some context, some parents already were doing volunteer work. This was most often the case in the English practices (40% in Brighton, 70% in Kent), which has something to do with the way parents were recruited for the interviews.

CONCLUSION: PARENTS ARE TRAPPED IN PARADOXES

One of the paradoxes that comes out of the results is that parents always balance the (economic and personal) need for employment against the needs of their children and their parenthood.

*"There is pros and cons to working. Pros:- working for your money to better your children's life. Con:- missing out on your childre*n *and not seeing their first steps, words etc". (Parent from Kent, UK, age 20)*

"They grow up so fast, I want to be home with her, I want to see her grow up" (parent from Ghent, BE)

Parents know that going to work has a lot of benefits, that it opens the door towards more financial comfort, but also to more opportunities in life, for themselves as well as for their children. On the other hand, choosing to work implies that parents can spend less time with their children, that they are less available for them. Whether parents choose the route towards employment or decide to stay at home with and for their children, they all look for a way to be a good parent.

Another paradox is that some the benefits of working, which are often situated on the longer term (e.g. being a good role model for children, a good pension, a good social network, …) are barriers on the short term. For instance, going to work means less revenues for some parents, and the financial benefit can seem far away, certainly when parents start with education or unpaid volunteer work. Going into work means, for some parents, to leave their habitat and sometimes also to go against the opinion of their family or friends. This barrier has to be weighed against the future benefit of building a social network at work (of which parents are not sure it will be successful). Being a good role model for your children, hoping that they will, when they are adults, inherit your 'work ethic' (as a parent from Brighton framed it) and have less difficulties to find employment, means also to spend less time at home and maybe not being able to fulfil your children's needs in other domains. Getting into employment is a 'long route' for many of the interviewed parents, anyway. Many steps have to be taken and when parents do not know where and how to start, one could say they have to be very motivated and strong to overcome all the barriers they feel and identify certainly given the fact that many of the parents who were interviewed are living day-by-day and encounter multiple problems on a daily basis.

Parents clearly feel that it is expected of them to work. They feel that saying that they want to work is the 'good answer' to the interviewer's question. **It is remarkable that a society, which expects and motivates parents to work, on the other hand does not succeed in helping people to get through the first steps towards employment.** Several parents indicate that they hesitate to enter employment, because they fear that there will be no one to accompany them appropriately, or because they fear to do things wrong, not to be able to cope with the rhythm, … It seems that some of the barriers that are most prominent to parents, such as child care, do not receive enough attention yet by policy makers, or perhaps the fact that 'mere childcare' and even affordable and available childcare is not enough for parents to be able to enter employment that often means working flexible hours. Another possible explanation is that the existing support programs treat parents too much as a 'passive recipient': they undergo procedures and trajectories, answer questions, follow along or

leave, but they are not the ones in charge of the journey. Making parents active agents and giving them the opportunity to build a route from within their life, needs and context, might be worth a try.

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PACE
GAP ANALYSIS

PART 3
CHILDCARE

PART 3 CHILDCARE

INTRODUCTION

Explanations for the unequal use of childcare can be found in the context of various inclusion and exclusion mechanisms. These mechanisms again exist at the level of a country's policy, at the level of the organization of childcare facilities and/or the group and at the level of individual parents.

This report wants to give you

1. a listing the primary barriers organized in a way the partner organisations emphasized them: what barriers they thought were important, at what level they should be situated?

2. an insight in the way these barriers interrelate

We believe however, that the impact of broader socio-economic factors should not be underestimated. A universal allocation of publicly funded provisions will have the most effect in reducing unequal use of childcare provisions. (Van Lancker 2016)

MICRO LEVEL

Focus on attitude, motivation and responsibility if a parent is in a way 'to blame' for his own situation? Does he/she take every possible opportunity to change this situation? Is he/she deserving?

Or, we can see our parents as having (different) individual setbacks, without being responsible for themselves, but who we want to help with training, language courses …

PSYCOLOGICAL FACTORS

Different psychological factors can keep vulnerable parents from taking the step towards a formal childcare provision such as fear of failure as a parent, lack of self-esteem and self-confidence (most partners), lack of trust (in self and in others) (Wattrelos).

Distrust in social provisions, lack of experience or bad experience with childcare, horror stories that go around, are problems of perception that were labelled by Arques as psychological, and thus individualized. Arques as well called the conviction that it is better to stay at home with your child as a mother and the fact that young mothers couldn't possibly imagine bringing their child to a crèche, psychological barriers, although they themselves remark that these beliefs are partly based on social-cultural values.

LACK OF TIMECONCIOUSNESS

Pace Partners Mechelen and Wattrelos mention the inability in keeping appointments, lack of time consciousness, not replying in time to telephone calls …. as problematic with the target group. Brighton phrased it as follows « they just don't come around to it «. In the case of childcare, there are waiting lists to be reckoned with, and this involves a lot of planning from months in advance, a strategy that disadvantaged people don't master particularly well. Of course, the fact that they are facing multi-problems might have something to do with it as well.

MOBILITY

The same remarks as in the Part on Employment are formulated on the subject of access to childcare. Vulnerable people experience difficulties in getting to a childcare provision that is not nearby their home. They have no car, no driver's licence, they are not familiar with public transport … Maybe they are not able to ride a bicycle. But how to ride a bicycle with 2 toddlers ? And how to get on and of a bus with a buggy and a 6-year-old, especially when that 6-year-old has to attend school at the other side of town? (Gijselinckx, 2013). First condition would be an affordable public transport. The French partners report lack of public transport, whereas in the UK it is available enough but too expensive.

LANGUAGE

A frequently mentioned threshold is language, certainly by some partners with an ethnically diverse target group and relatively much newcomers (pace partners Mechelen, Ghent, and Turnhout, as well as Kent).

Parents often don't understand the language (enough), which causes a variety of communication problems. They are not sufficiently language proficient to understand the registration procedure, to enrol effectively, to communicate with the supervisors about e.g. mutual expectations, to read and understand the house rules ... (Gijselinckx, 2013).

DIGITAL DIVIDE

As we already stated in 'Part 2 Employment', a lot of vulnerable parents don't have internet, or limited to using a smartphone and have no tablet/laptop … So, familiarity with digital procedures of enrolment and/or the access to websites of provisions will pose (additional) problems.

LACK OF KNOWLEDGE (ABOUT) THE CHILDCARE PROVISION

Arques mentioned Lack of knowledge about childcare provision, but also about public transport, financial support schemes … at the individual micro level. Of course, knowledge resides in the person, but it comes from the organisation, and the question is who should make the effort to get the information through?

We might of course view barriers as Language, digital illiteracy, not knowing, … at the level of the organisation and ask ourselves if measures shouldn't be taken there to make the services more understandable and to improve communication. We will see that some of these partners effectively do so, thus placing the barriers at both the individual level (the parent has to make the effort to learn our language, go to the library to use a desktop, …) as well as the organisational level (the childcare provision has to make efforts in making its provision understandable to the parent, make efforts in communication, …)

LACK OF SOCIAL NETWORK

Thus, finding information about the range of provisions appears to be a tall order. Usually, people get a lot of information from their informal network like parents and friends, which are important sources of information. Vulnerable parents who can't fall on a social network (or on a vulnerable one) are missing out on a lot of information on and about childcare provisions that might be important to them (references, when to make inquiries, and when to enrol, …)

PERSONAL CHOICE

Our UK partners both mention that parents sometimes don't wish to take up the free hours childcare offered when there is no more place available in the specific Nursery of their choice, and they then rather wait until a place is available there.

FOCUS ON CULTURAL VALUES

FAMILY VALUES, TRADITIONS

In general, mothers who believe their employment benefits their children and has fewer negative consequences ('costs') for them, are more likely to choose child care and to use it for more hours. Beliefs about costs of child care also relate to the type of child care selected (Sylva 2007, p. 134).

Birgit Pfau-Effinger construed 4 different Ideals of Care (Kremer 2007) that compete with each other, but one (or two) will be dominant in one country.

The first ideal is that of full-time motherhood. This ideal is no longer hegemonic. When women began to work, new strategies were put in place or old ideals were revived.

The second ideal is that of the surrogate mother. According to this model, good care is still best provided by 'a' mother, even if it is not the mother of the children. Care is e.g. provided by a childminder, babysitter, or family member and preferably (at home or) at the caregiver's home. Surrogate mothers have the same kind of qualities that mothers have – motherly warmth, attention, and patience – but they cannot replace her!

The third ideal is parental sharing. This model assumes that men are able to care for children just as well as women. Parental sharing is based on two ideas: that both the care provided at home and paid employment should be shared, so both partners work on a part-time basis. This ideal is dominant in the Netherlands. In theory it degenders care, but in practice it are the women that work mostly part-time.

The ideal of intergenerational care is based on the idea that the first generation (grandmothers) cares for the third generation (children), and the other way around (elderly care). Who could care better than the mother's mother? Experienced, trusted, and loved by the grandchildren. The ideal of intergenerational care is not gendered in theory, but it is in practice (mothers of the mothers mostly).

The ideal of professional care strongly contests the ideal of full-time motherhood because it a professional and different kind of care that offers something extra as well that every child should be able to enjoy). In the model of professional care, the education of professionals guarantees quality. Professional care, supported and practiced in e.g. Denmark, is the best 'guilt-reduction strategy' for working mothers.

Although Pfau-Effinger states that the First Care Ideal is no longer hegemonic, we still find that the French Partners (Arques and Saint-Martin Boulogne), as well as Kent and Brighton explicitly mention the reaction of potential PACE parents that they want to stay home to raise their child themselves (and don't want to go to work), because this is what a 'good mother' is supposed to do.

A survey on behalf of 'Kind & Gezin' in Flanders found that about 1/3 of the respondents didn't make use of any childcare provision for their children 0-3 year. For this group 43% this is a conscious choice as they want to take care of their child themselves because they think this is better. 14,6% choose to be home and not to work and 20,5% made a career break to raise the baby at home (Vande Gaer, 2013).

CULTURAL VALUES - FAMILY VALUES

In Brighton and Kent there was specific mention of culturally specific family values, in view of Kent most prominent with Bangladesh, Indian, travellers, Eastern Europeans communities. In Brighton a VSDC put it this way "white lower income groups in our community have no problem whatsoever; when they're entitled they will take up the free hours for every child immediately".

In Flanders and Den Haag reactions based on family values typical with the belief system of the migrant culture were found as well, were e.g. woman might think it's unheard of to leave children in the hands of strangers (to be able to work themselves). The French partners, however made no mention of this threshold, not having this diversity among their target group apparently.

SOCIAL PRESSURE & CONTROL

Mechelen reports of instances of social pressure where mothers don't make use of formal childcare because they get the message they "can't do that" or even "if you do that to your child, you are not welcome anymore"

In the feasibility study PACE partner Mechelen (Ghijselinckx 2013) was engaged in some years ago there is a quote in which a respondent says that a she (a mother) should not trust her children to strangers. At most she can ask a family member or someone she really knows well to help her out if it's really necessary. This is very much in contrast to the fact that most of these girls don't have a lot of family or friends to call on for help.

Putting mothers under pressure is also the husband that doesn't allow his wife to work or study because childcare is too expensive, but who refuses to help out himself with anything that is household or child related. The context of a small community, with people that know everything of each other also contributes to the fact "that the battle keeps going on, and when young mothers go to work they will be judged" . It also means that it is not done to bring your child to childcare "just to have time for yourself"(Arques).

CULTURAL VALUES - USABILITY OF CHILDCARE

Childcare provisions don't always welcome diversity. On the other hand, disadvantaged or vulnerable parents (with a different ethnic background) don't always see the value of formal childcare.

Families from diverse ethnic backgrounds with other cultural values, beliefs systems, languages … often don't feel at home in mono cultural childcare provisions were only one native language is spoken. They will question the pedagogical methods at times as well.

Vulnerable parents will often have the feeling that childcare services don't answer their needs or expectations.

Traditions concerning food/sleeping habits/the way the room is decorated … a lot of childcare facilities are trying hard to accommodate their target group, but this is not always easy. Also, some boundaries have to be set: not everything is organizationally feasible or desirable (Ghent & Mechelen).

INSTITUTIONS OR ORGANIZATIONS CAN ALSO CREATE OR MAINTAIN BARRIERS

Childcare provisions are institutions that are complex and bureaucratic, with 'income related rates, priority rules, enrolment procedures, fixed and limited opening hours, rigid structure and house rules … This kind of environment is extremely harsh and difficult for vulnerable parents who will have problems to know them, understand them, be able to access them, afford them ….

LACK OF KNOWLEDGE

Often vulnerable parents are not well enough informed about the different offers that exist in formal childcare provisions (Kent, Ghent, Mechelen, Turnhout), Kent mentioned that a lot of parents don't know of the possibility to use registered childminders in the free hours childcare scheme, thinking this is only applicable in nurseries and day-care centres.

In additions they are unaware about the criteria they need to meet, procedures that need to be followed to enrol their child, the terms and conditions ….

Wattrelos believes that some other barriers are in fact hidden barriers of lack of knowledge. E.g. some parents think that occasional childcare in a halte-garderie is too expensive, not affordable, but that is because they are not aware of the actual cost, and thus better informing parents on this matter could overcome this barrier.

Or they don't know enough about them. Vulnerable parents lack familiarity with the goals and the methods used by the childcare provisions – the why , the what and the how (Mechelen). But here we already touch the question of 'understanding the gathered information'

LACK OF UNDERSTANDING

Vulnerable parents are often in the dark about what formal childcare could do for them. As Brighton put it "They don't understand the specific offer".

Understandability also means that parents can understand what a service is for and how it works. Explaining how the childcare provision works is important and a tour of the facility could be really helpful (Thirion et al. 2013)

Understanding forms poses extra problems, mentioned by PACE partners Kent, Ghent and Mechelen. Ghent draws our attention to the fact that as a city council they are stuck with a heavy administration, fixed procedures and timings to organize their public childcare provisions, because of matters of scale and the public nature of the provision (study visit Ghent), even though efforts are made on a permanent basis. They often see in this target group that families are not familiar with the method of administration or that they lack the skills to get there fast.

Again, **insufficient language proficiency** poses extra problems for gathering information, but also in understanding the information, acting on the information (registration procedures e.g.). Language-based (and cultural) barriers make it impossible for them to follow the bureaucratic procedures for enrolment of their children (Leseman, 2002).

The **digital divide** will only amplify the former barriers (Mechelen, Gent), and becomes an insurmountable barrier where in principle parents can only enrol their children by means of a digital platform e.g. Tinkelbel in Ghent, and other routes have to be envisaged.

AVAILABLE & AFFORDABALE CHILDCARE

Most of the barriers availability and affordability originate in national/regional policies and legislation, and will be by nature barriers on the MACRO level. However, organisations have some room for discretion, and they make decisions with implications to affordability and availability as well.

In Flanders vulnerable parents are confronted with long waiting lists in income related childcare, notwithstanding the priority rules that are in place by which every (income related) childcare provision has to reserve 20% of its places to children of parents who meet at least 2 criteria out of: work, single parent, low income, foster child or children from vulnerable families. Absolute priority is to be given to parents in a work situation, this is as well anyone e.g. seeking work, follow a vocational training or an integration trajectory. Of course, it is up to the childcare provision to interpret these priority rules an in practice, most places go to parents who work (Steunpunt, 2016)

Waiting lists (Arques, Flanders, Kent) will have as a consequence that parents have to enrol their child up to a year in advance, and that the available place are reserved to the parents that register first and who know to be very proactive planners. Mostly these are not vulnerable parents (See above Lack of time consciousness).

As an answer to budget restraints the organisations go on the search for money, saying they have to act more like a private company … One possible way to get more money is to invent new house rules with financial implications for the parent, of course within the boundaries of the law.

By consequence affordability becomes more problematic because of a variety of financial demands. According to Lead partner Mechelen demanding additional costs for diapers (cost of new, disposal elimination of dirty diapers), garbage bags (tax), …. Is an important example of such a rule. Another one is that parents have to pay for a session in case of unexpected absence: if you made the reservation you pay. 'Opvang bestellen, is opvang betalen' the principle is called in Flanders.

Some organisations demand a warranty, a question which the target group cannot comply with.

The tax based systems of reimbursement in the Netherlands and France are a major barrier for vulnerable parents who cannot bridge the first months paying the full amount. Of course, this is a barrier on the MACRO level, but some providers manage to create a financial fund as to help parents to bridge those first months, up to the point when they get the first reimbursements. (Saint Martin Boulogne).

LOCALITY

A general observation is that it is important for vulnerable parents that a childcare provision is available close to home. Considering the mobility problems they face, it's a good thing to have the childcare facility in the immediate neighbourhood and they can go there on foot. When parents can choose between different services, they often choose that service closest to home. (Kent and Brighton)

Childcare facilities however are geographically unevenly distributed. In more rural areas or more disadvantaged areas there are often fewer places available. (Steunpunt 2016)

MATTHEW EFFECT

The availability of subsidized childcare is greater in the wealthier areas of our cities and more families from higher social economic layers of the population enrol their children in formal childcare (Van Lancker 2012; Ghijselinckx 2013), even if the places are affordable to vulnerable parents. In the UK both nurseries and childminders are less prevalent in areas of concentrated disadvantage due to limited commercial interest and the difficulty of operating sustainably with lower demand and lower margins (Dickens, Wollny, & Ireland, 2012).

This is called the Matthew effect, as a reference to the Gospel of Matthew "For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him."

LIMITED OPENING HOURS

The availability of childcare will be limited when parents can only access the facility in between restricted opening hours. The question is whether those hours are in sync with the needs of the parents. Considering the fact that low skilled working parents and/or parents of a foreign origin are mostly employed in low-skilled, low-paid, precarious or flexible jobs with irregular working hours, this is very questionable (Leseman 2002)

Most partners find this to be a barrier (e.g. Wattrelos), although not everyone. In Gravesham (in a more rural area) a nursery is open until 3:15 PM with possibility to aftercare in the adjoining school, but only for + 3year olds but apparently there is no demand for more flexible hours. In Den Haag it is very normal that regular day-care is only available for half a day, because mothers work part-time, or formal care is supplemented with informal care. But flexibility is perceived as a problem.

FIXED SESSIONS IN CHILDCARE NURSERIES

Related to the problem of limited hours consists in the fact that parents cannot take up childcare hours as they see fit, but have to organise their childcare into fixed sessions according to the timetable provided by the nursery.

In Brighton parents can take up (free hours of) childcare in sessions of half days (mornings or afternoons), so to bring your child from 10 AM to 3 PM is impossible. The free 15 hours can only be taken up by half a day and 1 full day or by 3 half days. In Ghent the same barrier was mentioned. The Dutch system provides fixed sessions of 3 hours a day, morning or afternoon in de Voorschool.

Again, not every part-time job will have hours that fit in such a timetable. The offer of free childcare in the UK may help parents to access work, however the flexibility of this support is very restricted by patterns of early education. (Butler & Rutter 2016)

NO POSSIBILITY FOR AD HOC CHILDCARE

Not only is the rigid organization within childcare not very well equipped to address flexibility, it's not a great tool to handle sudden changes in situations of parent either:

"A petite enfance, on ne peut pas réagir aux urgencies" (Saint-Martin Boulogne)

When an unemployed parent has to attend a job interview or has to follow a training of 2 weeks, or any such activity which you can't predict months in advance, most childcare provisions won't be able to help you out. In many countries because of legal obstacles which make this impossible or very difficult to organize (Brighton, Kent), but many organisations won't want to bother because it's too hard on their organization. Also, if they have to reserve a to reserve a place(s) for incidental or occasional childcare on their own budget is very costly, and only bigger provisions seem to have enough carrying capacity to organize this (Ghent). Pace partners are seen very creative in trying to address this issue.

ORGANISATIONAL ISSUES

Availability of the (the same and trusted) caregiver allows the parent to build a stable relationship with him or her. Parents in poverty are in complex living situations and face a multitude of problems, which require a lot of time, understanding and empathy. This also requires continuity in the process. Building a relationship implies that parents will prefer to deal with one person, when in reality they are faced with frequent personnel changes. (Thirion et al. 2013)

Childcare provisions have a rather strict hierarchical structure, which makes it very difficult for a caregiver to take initiative. To work bottom-up is quite impossible. Every initiative has to go through the proper chain of command (and has even to pass the political decision forum). Pace partner Arques believes this to be a structural problem.

FOCUS ON ADAPTION STRATEGIES, STIGMA, PREJUDICE, LABELING ,

…processes which parents as well as staff responds to. Perception and Participation are the magic words here.

Monocultural facilities that do not take account of diversity in their daily practice usually fail to gain trust and thus contribute to segregation and discrimination (Leseman, 2002; Vandenbroeck, Lazzari & Schiettecat, 2013).

PARENTS :

DISTRUST/HAVE PREJUDICE OF PROFESSIONALS – BAD EXPERIENCES

Lack of trust in institutions/professionals is common with vulnerable people, which is not strange since they probably had some **bad experiences** in their pasts. This is a barrier put forward by most partners (Brighton, Den Haag, Arques, Wattrelos, Ghent). In addition, this distrust can sometimes be culturally fuelled. E.g. the Roma community is known to have very little trust in authorities en public services or our education system. The Roma won't be big customers of formal childcare.

Possibly a **negative image** about childcare has formed in the minds of some parents. Such perception is fuelled by the media and can act as a powerful barrier. Maybe parents heard about some unfortunate events, had bad experiences, but also the lack of good practices (success stories) can give a service or a provision a questionable reputation. We find an example with the partner in Den Haag who told us about a childcare facility that was closed down after serious financial fraud was discovered, with the result that a lot of parents couldn't get their tax reimbursements for childcare and thus lost a lot of money. The people in the neighbourhood don't tend to forget this very quickly.

In parents with negative experiences with society, a sense of **rejection** can be strengthened. It amplifies the feeling they have of " **Am I doing not well enough**?" (Gijselinckx, 2013). As a result, they can see childcare as a means by which society would like to compensate for their "deficient" upbringing and, so they refuse to participate in it.

STIGMATISATION AND LOSS OF PRIVACY AS 'SYMBOLIC COST'

If engaging in formal childcare has unpleasant side effects for parents, the **symbolic 'cost'** can become so big that childcare becomes no longer an affordable option for these parents. This concerns, for example, the disclosure of privacy which can be confronting for people living in closed communities or other consequences of the intervention that are experienced as nonsense or stigmatizing (Schiettecat, 2013).

CONTROLLING ADMINISTRATION, BUREAUCRACY

Vulnerable parents are **afraid to be pointed out as bad parents** or the y get the feeling to fail as parents. They experience the childcare professionalism as moralizing and intimidating. Some families are afraid of 'being judged' and therefore entrusting their child to a structure does not enter the family education strategy (Saint Martin Boulogne)

The administrative duties they have to fulfil, the surveys they have to answer, together with a lot of rules and regulations they only half understand is perceived as too complicated but also **controlling** (Mechelen)

PARENTS DON'T KNOW/SEE THE QUALITY OF CHILDCARE

PACE Partners Brighton and Den Haag believe it is a pity that parents don't see the quality, the value of childcare for their children, and see this as a barrier to childcare.

SHAME

Mechelen gives the example of parents that experience shame if they should admit that their child has a developmental delay.

STAFF:

In addition to barriers from parents to childcare, there are also prejudices from childcare to certain parents.

Childcare staff has difficulty to adapt to parents, and then parents are not at ease. They had no training to work with vulnerable people, don't know how to communicate with them, …and this is a major problem (Saint Martin Boulogne).

Childcare professionals are convinced, for example, that they are the only ones who know how to deal with small children, and that vulnerable parents are difficult to work with (Arques).

Another barrier is the fact that the team is not a reflection of group parents (e.g. in terms of diversity) (Gijselinckx, 2013).

Turnhout believes that childcare staff don't involve parents enough. Parents should participate more, be more heard so that we know what they want and what they need. Participation of parents is an expression of democracy and is an important tool in combatting combat social exclusion. But participation of vulnerable parents should not be seen as an obligation towards parents, but as a dialogue between educators and parents (Peeters, 2010)

MACRO LEVEL

MOBILITY

Expensive public transport will be a factor in the choice of nursery; e.g. public nursery in disadvantaged area with good accommodation and lots of outdoors playing grounds but on a hill, will be second choice to private nursery with less space but reachable on foot (Brighton). And given a choice … between different services, they often choose that service closest to home.

While too expensive public transport is a structural problem in the UK, The French partners in Nord-Pas de Calais are in a Region where the offer of Public Transport is insufficient for people to depend on for childcare and/or work.

AVAILIBILITY & AFFORDABILITY

The question if there are enough places of formal childcare available has to be seen together with the question of affordability, because knowing that there are e.g. enough unaffordable childcare places available has no meaning whatsoever for vulnerable parents (Van Lancker & Ghysels, 2013)

In Flanders the question vulnerable parents on the search of formal childcare have is ' Can we find a place in income related childcare' (Mechelen & Turnhout) Availability and affordability come together immediately. There may be enough places childcare in Flanders, if you count the places in private childcare initiatives that don't have to administer income related rates. But since those facilities are totally unaffordable to our parents, they are also 'unavailable' to them. When we look at the income related places in Flanders, we see big waiting lists, so there still is a shortage of affordable, accessible childcare.

In the UK we might think that affordability is not an issue anymore, because of the free hour slots that young parents are entitled to for their children. Free for 2 for disadvantaged parents allocates 15 hours childcare a week for 2-year olds, while for 3 and 4-year olds there is a universal right to 15 hours a week free childcare. However, outside those entitlements, childcare is extremely expensive, with reimbursement options through tax credit, a system which is by nature unfavourable to people with low incomes for different reasons (see below).

The new policy by which a Free 30 hours childcare is possible for 3-4-year olds, becomes very important in an otherwise unaffordable context. So, the pressure to work is on! since working minimum 16 hours (or earning the equivalent wages) is an entitlement condition. And at the same time, by working (or earning) at least 16 hours a week, a parent could escape the Benefit Cap

This appears to be a sound plan, but new problems arise on the supply side. The councils (e.g. Kent county council and Brighton & Hove City Council) have a statutory obligation to ensure sufficient childcare places, also at Free 30 hours. However, most providers are private providers, and they get less funding per hourly (paid) rate. Private providers are not very keen to organize those hours, not that these are additional hours, but yesterday they could charge the parents full rate, and today they only get a funding that is less. Since they are private agents, they are not compelled to organize those hours, and a lot of them (it is feared) won't do so.

There have been some experiments with networks of childminders, and also PACE partner Kent is working successfully along those lines. Childminders may be able to deliver the 30 Free hour offer but there are significant variations in childminder numbers across the country, with low numbers in many -disadvantaged- areas (Buttler & Rutter, 2016). This again is an example of the Matthew effect.

Affordability as policy childcare costs are important only in interaction with availability and childcare supply, and that primarily the latter determines childcare use in European countries where childcare is often heavily subsidized and regulated but rationed (Van Lancker & Ghysels, 2013).

This is the case in France, were affordability is said to be no issue, but availability certainly is. There are long waiting lists, just not enough place. Affordable, yes, but …. There is a digressive rate in line with de family composition and income. (between 0,40 € -2,92 € /child/hour). Those amounts are net costs. Net Costs show an affordable care, but ….

…The unaffordability may possibly lay in the system of reimbursement via the Tax System. This means that parents first have to pay a higher amount, have to wait a few months for the Tax administration to get a reimbursement. People that struggle already financially are not in a position to bridge that period of time. This system is prevalent in France , which becomes less affordable that way, but also in the Netherlands, were parents have to wait on the Tax administration for a reimbursement of 94% of the amount they paid to the childcare provision. In the UK, when parents need childcare hours on top of the free hours (or if they're not entitled to free hours). In Belgium parents with children in formal childcare get tax reduction, but the income related rates parents have to actually pay are 'net rates', so they don't have to wait for any reimbursements (they won't pay more to begin with, aside from -smaller- tax reductions later on).

In the Netherland major changes are in childcare with the implementation of the new law 'Harmonisatie Kinderopvang' are to be expected. This law has as a consequence that formal childcare will become less affordable. Our partner De Mussen in Den Haag has made a business case already from which we can conclude that the new conditions stipulated by law will lead to a lesser demand of formal childcare.

OCCASIONAL CHILDCARE

In the UK and the Netherlands, the organization of occasional childcare is made virtually impossible by regulations and conditions to be met by registered childcare

Since in the UK there is no possibility to organize occasional childcare within nurseries, the only 'creche' option they could arrange for their parents was within the Children's Centres, were very short termed occasional childcare was organized within the limits of the law, as was possible for 'not registered childcare'.

In the UK childcare initiative don't have to register with Ofsted (or can get an exemption) If they provide care where a child does not stay with them for more than two hours a day, or, if they care for children under eight for four hours or less each day and the care is for the convenience of parents who plan to stay on the premises where they are providing care or within the immediate area.

Still, this might be enough to attend a job interview – if you hurry-, but it won't give a parent the chance to follow a training/course. Employment coaches in Brighton told us that frequently parents find themselves in a position that they can't attend a training because of childcare problems.

In Den Haag occasional childcare is strictly forbidden by law, our partner tells us, because it is regarded as a distortion of competition on the childcare market. The only possibility to find occasional 'childcare' is within the sector of Social Work (instead of Education), but if it's allowed then is up to the community council and -if available- most of the time not affordable. De Mussen points out that extra effort is demand from our parents to find work, but that at the same time childcare is less and less accessible for unemployed parents who find themselves very much in need of occasional childcare.

In France (Saint-Martin Boulogne) and Flanders (Ghent), occasional childcare is possible. This doesn't mean that it will be available to the parents who need it. Barriers in these countries are situated rather on the meso level : provisions can organise occasional childcare. But due to considerations involving reasons of budget and internal organisational, they decide not to. Only the bigger (public) organisations are capable of doing so in Flanders, because they can and want to.

FLEXIBILITY DEMANDS BY THE LABOUR MARKET

Especially in the UK there is this huge tension between a highly flexible labour market (more than in the Netherlands, France or Belgium), and the impossibility to find a matching offer of flexible childcare. The colleagues in Brighton from FIS-DWP emphasized this, also because low education level with vulnerable parents leads to certain fields of employment (hospitality, care …) were flexibility in jobs is even more important. In the guidance they provide as employment coaches they sometimes refer parents to the use of childminders, nannies registered by Ofsted, as a possible -more flexible solution (Study visit Brighton, FIS-DWP)

But again, childminders are less common in the most deprived areas with 18 per cent of the total number of registered childminders in the 30 per cent most deprived areas (Butler & Rutter, 2016)

"The country-level relationship between childcare service use and In Work Poverty might be influenced by the kind of jobs that are available and feasible." (Horemans & Van Lancker 2017). And more specific, what the nature and the return is of those jobs.

Inn Flanders the demand for more flexible opening hours exist as well (as well as for occasional childcare possibilities) as a response to often changing and atypical working hours (before 7am or after 6pm or during the weekend). "According to VDAB [public employment mediation service] the demand for atypical care will only increase, given that the biggest growth in jobs in Mechelen for the coming years is expected in the logistics and transport sector that runs at 24h at 24h, 7 days at 7".(Ghijselinckx, 2013)

Partner De Mussen in Den Haag also mentions the increasing gap between the (non-existing) availability of affordable flexible childcare and the demands of work.

Of course, there is more need for this kind of flexible childcare, because of the recent trends on the labour market, and precarious, flexible work is often the only kind of work low skilled people can earn some money with. On the other hand, in some countries, very precarious or flexible ways of working are up to this day not viewed as a 'suitable job' in a way that unemployed people can also refuse such a job without being sanctioned for it. Knowing this, improving the availability of flexible childcare could have the effect of changing the criteria for an appropriate employment relationship, of 'suitable job', thus causing an activation frenzy amongst unemployed jobseekers (Steunpunt Armoede, 2016)

BUDGET RESTRAINTS

Public services that organize childcare want to deliver services because they believe they should, and not only because they are profitable, like occasional or flexible childcare if possible (City of Ghent, Brighton, …) Of course, in the context of budget restraints, these local authorities will have to priorities or fall back on their core business.

Some major national legal changes are also co-inspired by budgetary motives, like the new childcare legislation in the Netherlands.

COHERENT BODY OF FAMILY POLICIES

Family policies pursued in the different countries have their effect on the take up of childcare. Family policies include also the possibilities to make career breaks or leaves to stay at home, but also the conditions to do so and whether the leave is paid or not. Also, the length of maternity (and paternity) leave, and again whether this period of absence is a well-paid one or not, is part of a country's family policy?

The objectives of family and labour market policies may be at odds. If , for instance, a policy would want to give women a n equal chance and stimulate employment in general, a policy of long periods of well-paid maternity leave are a hindrance, because low-skilled mothers are encouraged to become home carers. (Van Lancker & Ghysels, 2013). In the UK women get a very long maternity leave e.g., however when you are not an employee this won't be a 'well-paid' period. Recently, mixed signals involving family are given in the UK, because on the one hand mothers /lead carers don't have to be available for work, and later only in so far as it takes into account the care of the child. On the other hand, they are forced into work by the Benefit Cap, but this applies only to the vulnerable parents.

REFUGEE CRISIS: AS TEMPORARY CRISIS

Ghent mentioned this (huge) barrier. As a PACE partner Childcare of the City of Ghent want to work with the most vulnerable parents. They meet a lot of e.g. Syrian and Iraqi families who struggle with their specific problems and trauma in consequence of their dangerous journey. When asked if they won't consider formal childcare, those fears and trauma still result in the fact that parents are afraid to be separated from their children .

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PARENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON CHILDCARE

Like the topic 'employment', we performed a thematic analysis of what parents said about childcare. Most reports pay somewhat less attention to childcare than to work.

The themes are: (1) Why would parents use, or not use, childcare (acceptability)?; (2) How well can parents afford to use childcare (affordability)?, (3) Can parents find the right childcare for their needs? (availability) (4) Can parents get access to childcare easily? (accessibility)?

Throughout the analysis, we pay attention to the differences between reports, but we also try to find out the commonalities.

WHY WOULD PARENTS USE CHILDCARE?

Parents in these interviews have different opinions about childcare. Whereas some of them are more or less actively looking for childcare, others do not feel the need to bring their children to childcare. Not all interviewed parents have experience with childcare.

What are the reasons for parents to pursue a place in childcare? Because they think it is good for their children (0), and because it may allow them to do other things (0).

FOR THE CHILDREN

Several parents who were interviewed already use childcare. It has **possibilities** for their children they cannot offer themselves: to make friends, learn the language, play with other toys.

Parents value childcare also as a place for **socialising** their children.

And some parents explicitly see the surplus value of professionals taking care of their children. Professionals are seen as more sensitive and patient with children.

Professionals are more sensitive and patient with children, while friends and relatives can easily lose their temper. (parent from Den Haag, NL)

Those are also the advantages for some parents who do not yet use childcare. It is seen as good for a child's well-being and development. It is an opportunity for children to play with other children, and children can learn and experience new things.

I think it would help my child to be more social, to make friends of his own age. Now he's always with me and I do not think that's OK. (parent from Mechelen, BE)

Childcare has also practical advantages, such as 'a whole day long with food'.

FOR WORK AND OTHER ACTIVITIES.

There is an inextricable link between childcare and what parents said in response to questions about work. Nearly always, the parents claimed that the lack of available childcare was a barrier for work. Therefore some actively seek a place in childcare, so that they can advance in other domains of their lives.

But having children in childcare gives parents also other opportunities, such as voluntary work, house chores, caring for family members, shopping, meeting with friends, or to have some rest.

WHY NOT USE CHILDCARE?

However, there are many reasons for parents for not trusting or using childcare.

Some parents do not feel confident about professional childcare. Some hear stories and rumours, from other people or in the media. Some have a bad experience with childcare. And sometimes parents wonder whether their child will be tended to immediately when it is in distress.

I do not have any confidence to others for confiding my children. (parent from Arques, FR)

I do not have a good feeling with childcare centres, except at De Mussen, where I know the teachers personally, but I would never use a centre I am not familiar with. (parent from Den Haag, NL)

These questions and expectations comes back when parents are asked about their dreams for childcare.

More teachers, smaller groups of children, so teacher can spend more one on one time with the children. (Parent from Gravesham, Kent, UK)

These questions do not always stem from a lack of confidence. Sometimes parents are just **not familiar** with professional childcare.

Another reason that is quoted in several reports, is the cultural expectations for parents. In one report, this is discussed as the **cultural role of parents**, especially of the **mother.** These parents say they feel they cannot leave their children in the care of others. Mothers sometimes refer to fathers as the ones who forbid the family to use childcare.

I was never against of childcare, but father did not want; he never wanted it. He never really explained me why; he said that children do not need to meet with other children or a person we do not know. parent from Arques, FR)

Other people taking care of babies and elderly people is very strange and it cannot be done. (parent from Gent, BE)

Several interviewed parents feel **uneasy or guilty** when they would leave their child in the care of others, especially when they do not know these people. Some of these parents put it even stronger: as a moral and affective duty to stay near their children.

My children made me understand when I did not have any time to spend with them. (parent from Arques, FR)

When childcare solutions are needed, some of these parents prefer family or a friend to take care of their children.

Grandma is safe and easy. (parent from Den Haag, NL)

This can put parents in a double bind[2], between the desire to be a good parent (and especially a good mother) and the wish to be a responsible citizen, which is translated as 'someone who is financially independent'.

[2] The french report states 'une personne est prise entre deux impératifs'.

However, the motivation is not always one of 'guilt', but is often also framed as a positive desire to be actively present in the life of their children.

I want to be in the life of my child. (parent from Arques, FR)

HOW WELL CAN PARENTS AFFORD TO USE CHILDCARE? (AFFORDABILITY)

Another salient theme in the reports, was the affordability of childcare. Some parents say they can very well afford the childcare. However, they are a minority.

Most parents feel that childcare is **too expensive**, although this works differently across contexts. In France, for example, parents have to advance the first month of care before being reimbursed by the 'Caisse d'Allocations Familiales' (CAF). The expense would exceed the budget of the household, thus leaving them unable to pay other daily bills.

In Belgium, childcare has often income related pricing. But it can be quite an administrative hassle to get the right reduced day price.

In the Netherlands, new legislation limits the possibilities for families to use the more informal and cheaper forms of childcare. Childcare becomes more decidedly more expensive.

In the UK, cost is also mentioned by most parents as a barrier to childcare.

I have never accessed other types of childcare like childminders apart from what my children are offered at the appropriate ages. I have always thought that childcare is an expensive venture which will amount to paying all you earn to sustain it, so I decided to stay a home and mind my children instead. But if I could change anything I will offer full time (6 hours [per day]) to children from age 3 and 3 hours to children age 2." (Parent from Gravesham, Kent, UK)

Parents need to balance the cost (and value) of childcare with their income. This becomes even more difficult when parents seek childcare not for paid employment but to follow trainings or to do voluntary work. One partner reports that parents only use childcare in such a case if it is free of charge.

But it works also the other way around. When parents work, the difference in net income of the family is not always high. Particularly because in some contexts, parents lose benefits when they work. Childcare can become too expensive when parents start working.

When parents have more than one child in childcare, it becomes even more expensive.

For one child, I can pay. For two children, I have to stop. I cannot pay. (parent from Gent, BE)

It's pointless to work because you would pay more in childcare than you earn. (parent from Brighton & Hove, UK)

Childcare can have extra costs on top of daily prices, such as lunch money, diapers to bring, …

Lunch money [in the childcare setting] is very expensive so I have to pay on top. (parent from Brighton & Hove, UK)

There is also a more 'cultural' aspect to affordability. Parents do not always feel welcome in childcare settings, or feel judged by childcare staff.

Nursery propose an interview and demand a valuable reason when someone does not have a job. (parent from Arques, FR)

Families feel there is a connection between children's centres and social services and people feel they are being watched and judged by the staff in the centre. (parent from Brighton & Hove, UK)

CAN PARENTS FIND THE RIGHT CHILDCARE FOR THEIR NEEDS? (AVAILABILITY)

Not all interviewed parents used childcare at the time of the interview. However, many parents said that they had difficulties in finding a place in childcare, or in finding childcare with opening hours adapted to their needs. These two are not the same.

Some parents have difficulties in **finding a childcare place with good opening hours**. This means: opening hours that fit their needs. This has to be placed in context, because not all childcare services are open for a full day. Another way to put this into context, is by paying attention to the hours and time slots parents can take up.

Sometimes parents can use a limited package of opening hours, which is for instance the case in the UK where the target group of the PACE project are those parents that use 15 hours free childcare, and are eligible for 30 free hours. But we not only have to look at the number of hours families can use, but also at the freedom parents have or have not to choose the hours they use. For instance, sometimes parents cannot use these 15 hours per week during holidays.

I cannot use the 15 hours in the holidays. (parent from Brighton & Hove, UK)

Having to deal with strict time slots does **not enable parents to return to work.** Or the hours of the childcare arrangement do not correspond to those of the activity desired by the parent interviewed.

Having access to a day-care centre adapted to the working hours would help a lot. Employers also expect long work experience, they are quite competitive, and the competition is tough. (parent from Wattrelos, FR)

The hours are not adaptable (example, for catering jobs). (parent from Arques, FR)

I have a friend who manages work and childcare via the help of friends who pick up her child from school and look after him until she gets back from work. (parent from Brighton & Hove, UK)

Sometimes, parents need **occasional childcare**, so that they can go out for a professional interview. Especially when parents already of some work experience, they acknowledge that occasional childcare can be an important pre-condition to return to work. Parents often rely on **informal solutions** for these situations. But occasional childcare spaces are often scarce.

Places are scarce in general, which sometimes leads to a drama for parents.

I got a letter no childcare. No childcare is complete misery, you know. What do I do? Stop working? (parent from Gent, BE)

Sometimes parents have to resort to individual nannies or childminders, a solution that is often even more expensive than regular childcare.

Due to the lack of childcare places, most of the time parents are expected to register a long time on beforehand for a childcare space. This leads to a **long waiting time** between a request and an answer. Not all parents know this, or do this (especially when they are in a survivor mode). But even when they do it, the waiting time for an answer can be long, and parents cannot be sure of childcare place for their children.

Childcare, or the lack of it, can stop parents in their pursuits in life. For example, some parents have to or want to follow language courses. These language courses start on short notice. Childcare often needs a much longer notice. When families do not have a childcare place, the parents cannot attend the language courses.

CAN PARENTS GET ACCESS TO CHILDCARE EASILY? (ACCESSIBILITY)

The question whether parents can access childcare easily is of course a matter of available places on the right hours for parents. This has been discussed in the previous paragraph. But an easy access is determined by many other, often practical, issues.

Distance and mobility are often interlinked. In some areas covered by the PACE project, public transportation was scarce. This forces the parents to go on foot, or use other means of transport. Distance is a concrete barrier for some parents. Distance is also important for families, so they can save time.

Administration is another important obstacle for some parents. Procedures are felt to be hard and complex. Some parents complain about the number of documents they have to collect. One project partner explicitly wonders whether a new type of discrimination has risen with regards to administration. They wonder whether administration adapts itself to difficulties some people meet in dealing with the administration.

Administration is complicated, especially when urgent childcare must be done. (parent from Arques, FR)

Lack of information is part of the administrative barriers. Parents do not always know where to find information about childcare, or cannot always understand this information.

People also often miss information about the impact of childcare costs on their income.

CONCLUSION: A STEEPLECHASE TO CHILDCARE

What parents say about childcare, amounts to a bundle of hurdles and barriers they have to cross if they want to use childcare.

A barrier that is named by several partners is the barrier of ‘the cultural and psychological thresholds’. Meaning that parents say they want to stay at home with their children, or feel that they have to take care of the children themselves. Sometimes women are not allowed to send their children to childcare.

It presents partners with a certain difficulty because PACE is difficult enough even with ‘willing’ parents. What to do if parents do not want to?

But when and if parents want to send their children to childcare, the road to childcare is long and bumpy and parents are not certain of a place. There is a shortage of places and childcare is often expensive. Parents cannot always afford to pre-finance places.

Procedures for a place are long and complex and waiting lists are also long. Childcare is very seldom flexible. Parents, who sometimes live from day to day or who are expected to be flexible with regards to the labour market, cannot be sure of occasional childcare for their children.

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PACE
GAP ANALYSIS

PART 4
DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION

In this discussion section, we list the main findings from the gap analysis and discuss them in the following way. First, we describe the main 'facts' from the study visits, survey and parental interviews, we situate these facts in the current policy context of childcare and employment and we explain our opinions on these contextualized facts. Second, we share our reflections on the outcomes and the process of the gap analysis. Last, we wrap up the discussion section with an outlook on further developments and potential ways forward in the PACE project.

WHAT DO WE LEARN FROM THE GAP ANALYSIS? FACTS-IN-CONTEXT AND OUR OPINION ON THESE FACTS

EMPLOYMENT

"**Flexibility**" clearly is the watchword for the employment sector and for how governments formulate employment policies (see, as an example, the focus on flexibility of the brand new Dutch government: easing laws on redundancy and employment termination and lengthening the period after which employers should be offered a fixed contract). All PACE project partners report that there is a shortage of jobs for low-skilled people and that low-skilled jobs are getting more and more precarious, with for instance short term and zero hours contract, marginal part-time and temporary agency work. Also the parental interview reports clearly show that parents from the PACE target group are on the wrong side of the current, constantly deepening divide in the labour market: the divide between those with high incomes and job security and those with low wages, low job security and even a lack of basic stability. The PACE target group seems to be part of what is often referred to as a new social class, the "**precariat**" (Standing, 2013). This group is characterized by labour insecurity, insecure social income and lack of occupational identity: they are in, or want to be in paid work because they have to (labour is instrumental), and they do not feel connected to their job, there is no sense of being part in a social community, or being part of a meaningful story, either for themselves or for the community (Standing, 2013).

The gap analysis learned us a lot about what PACE project partners and the parents consider to be thresholds to entering the labour market. On a micro level, a (perceived) lack of skills, and a lack of self-confidence and social network are mentioned most often. On a meso level, both project partners and parents mention the influence of family and cultural values (e.g. the choice and/or expectation for mothers to stay home with the children) but also the need for more tailored support both in preparing for employment and the start of employment. In addition, we learnt from the study visits and the literature review that we generally lack a coherent, structural approach towards families living in vulnerable situations: there is too little collaboration between different services and sectors. As a consequence, the flexibility demands of the labour market, for instance, put parents from the PACE target group in a very precarious position, as other life domains (e.g., children) are not as flexible in their answer to these demands. In some cases, the PACE organisations themselves raise barriers or contribute to existing barriers. This is most apparent in the organization of childcare, which is characterized by fairly rigid rules and regulations and expectations of parents (e.g. fixed sessions, non-flexible opening hours, childcare that is available after school hours on the condition that parents bring in their children themselves). The lack of a structural, coherent approach is also present on the macro level, where it results in phenomena such as the poverty trap. Some of the interviewed parents, mainly in Flanders and the UK, mention this phenomenon and show us what it means from their point of view, what it means in their lives (e.g. "It's pointless to work because you would pay more in childcare than you earn"). Other important barriers on macro level are the current flexibility demands in the sector, lack of work for everyone (very clearly in the PACE project partner Brighton & Hove) and the low chances for upward mobility for low-skilled workers in temporary contract, especially women. As indicated by the 2016 Employment and Social Developments report of the European Commission, it does not suffice to get people into employment to

get them out of poverty. There is a lot of in-work poverty, and for the most vulnerable people, there are no smooth transitions from unemployment to employment nor is there fluent transition from low-paid, insecure work to better paid and more secure employment.

Of course, the barriers which we identify on different levels (micro, meso, macro) are interconnected. They influence and strengthen each other. For instance, when parents cannot enter employment because the requested flexibility on the labour market does not match with nursery and school hours (meso and macro level barriers), they do not get the opportunity to acquire skills and self-confidence in relation to employment (micro level barrier), which makes it even more difficult for them to find a job. Another example is that even when organisations try to answer the needs of parents, for instance in offering more flexible childcare, they are influenced by governance and policy (e.g. occasional childcare is not legal in the Netherlands, in UK, childcare providers are often private providers that have little to gain from offering flexible child care). So, both parents and organisations are trapped in a web of interconnected barriers that restricts their freedom of choice.

What we also learn from the gap analysis, especially from the interviews with parents, is that almost in all PACE project organisations, many parents are willing to work, not only for financial reasons, but because they long for a sense of purpose, a larger network, an occupational identity. We feel, however, that parents are also very vulnerable in that sense, because many of the jobs that are available for them, might not lead to this sense of belonging or purpose, nor to a substantial increase in income (see what we wrote earlier on the "precariat"). In addition, we must realize that the target group of this project is in high risk of in-work poverty. The most recent annual review on Employment and Social Developments in Europe (European Commission, 2016) points out that a combination of low hourly rates of pay, low work intensity (e.g. part-time work or intermittent employment) and household size (i.e. number of children in the family) significantly increases the risk of poverty. This combination is exactly what the parents from our PACE target group are confronted with. In addition, PACE parents are generally low-skilled parents and women – the two groups who the same report on Employment and Social Developments mentions are at the largest risk of being at the bottom of the hourly wage distribution (in Belgium, being at the bottom decile of hourly wage distribution means that your hourly wage is about 50% of the average wage). In the mid 2010's, it was believed that flexibility of the labour market would lead to increased employability levels and would go hand in hand with more social security (the well-known "flexicurity strategy"). Several reports, however, postulate that higher flexibility does not lead to higher security, rather the contrary (e.g. European Commission, Joint Research Center, Unit of Econometrics and Applied Statistics, 2013). Research also indicates that increased flexibility has often been the consequence of difficult economic circumstances rather than of well-conceived policies. The same applies to employers: they do not choose for flexible jobs, but are forced into them out of sheer necessity. At the same time, flexible jobs often mean less eligibility for benefits (i.e. maternity/paternity, sickness, unemployment) and less favourable benefits.

In sum, employment is not necessarily a way out of poverty and does not equal better quality of life. The current 'focus on flexibility' makes it even more challenging for families in vulnerable situations to get into employment in a meaningful manner. Therefore, we believe that an important focus of the PACE project should be on **sustainable employment** for the PACE parents, rather than on employment per se. With sustainable employment, we mean that employment has to be compatible with other life domains (in other words, it should be 'manageable') and that it should lead to an increase in quality of life and life circumstances, as indicated by more objective parameters such as income or housing and by subjective parameters such as self-confidence, well-being, belief in the future.

Should "sustainable employment" always be equal to paid work? Being in paid employment currently is an essential gateway to becoming a 'good citizen' (meaning someone who pace his taxes and who consummates). Even when two people do exactly the same thing, such as taking care of children or the household, the one who is paid to do this is valued more than the one who does this without payment. We want to address this issue, because it is at the core of the project itself: the goal of the project is to get parents into employment (= doing 'the right thing') and to get others to take care of their children (and thus, also 'doing the right thing'). In

that sense, the PACE project subscribes and implements the current European, or even global, economically-inspired agenda/discourse. An undesirable and, in the case of PACE very paradoxical (as the project is on child *care*), side effect of implementing this agenda is pointed out by Joan Tronto, who states that we have arrived in a situation where there is a 'care deficit': everyone is so busy being employed, that it has become challenging and even precarious to spend enough time and energy caring for ourselves and for others (Tronto, 2013). Tronto states that care should be the starting point for how societies organize themselves. In any case, we should avoid arriving into a situation where economic gains become more important than caring for each other. We follow this line of reasoning in the sense that justness and quality of care should and will be a central tenet within the PACE project. This means that we have to consider what good care means for children, parents, professionals and communities. It might mean that economic values do not prevail, certainly not when it means that parents cannot care for themselves or their children anymore in a proper way. Also, success of the project might mean (or depend on) that parents share the care for their children with a child care setting and other parents, and have more time for themselves (i.e. to take care of themselves), not necessarily that they are in paid employment.

So, although the goal of the PACE project is described as bringing vulnerable families closer to employment, we want to designate clearly that our main focus in this project is not this goal per se, but the reasoning behind it: under the condition that it is sustainable, and given that it does not jeopardize quality of life of parents, children nor the quality of care for each other, work – whether it be unpaid volunteer work or paid employment - can further the quality of life and the life prospects of families living in vulnerable situations, through increasing their social network, their sense of belonging, their self-confidence, the quality of 'care' for each other and their access to professionals and services.

CHILDCARE

The PACE project encompasses 9 project partners that either provide child care under own management, collaborate with private providers of childcare or both. The focus is on centre-based childcare for pre-school children. The PACE project partners are very diverse in how they organize and/or collaborate with child care settings. Still, there are some key issues that arise in all partners in relation to the gap between the needs of parents (and organisations) on the one hand, and the current child care offer on the other hand.

First, it is crystal clear that there are **structural barriers** to child care (affordability, availability, accessibility) and that these have a huge impact on the take up of childcare. Affordability of childcare is an issue mostly in the UK, but is also mentioned in the Netherlands and in Belgium. In France, the issue of affordability is raised less often by parents, but we learn from the study visits in France that regular childcare is fairly expensive. It should be noted, though, that in most cases, there is a possibility for 'affordable childcare' (e.g., 30 free hours in UK, income related childcare in Flanders). However, these benefits are not always clear to parents, they require a lot of administration and/or the application of policy that is in principle favourable for vulnerable parents depends on the good-will of providers.

Availability, in terms of legal entitlement for childcare, is a challenge in all four PACE countries, certainly when it comes to children below three years. Most PACE partner organisations, however, state that childcare is, in principle, available for the parents within their working area. We do see that this is most often the case in the more urban and affluent areas compared to more rural areas (e.g., Kent, some of the French partners) – which is in line with the literature (Bennett & Moss, 2011). But … availability is more than a place available. First, it is related to affordability. If you can afford to wait (very paradoxically …) and to pay for a private (non-income related) provider, it is far easier to get a child care place than when you need urgent, flexible or affordable care – or a combination of these. For instance, in Flanders, private providers still do not have to offer income related child care. Public providers do, but places in publicly funded provisions are scarce. If you do not find a place there and are not able to afford the cost for private provision, child care is not an option. Second, an available place is not the same thing as a child care place matching the parents' needs. For instance, a single parent working flexible hours mainly in evenings and weekends needs flexible child care, more or less matching his or

her working hours. Even if there is plenty of available child care during school hours, this is no solution for parents who need flexible care. Previous research has confirmed that the inflexibility of child care is a barrier for parents, especially vulnerable parents (e.g. Wall and José, 2004). Availability is also related to accessibility: rigid, monolingual and complicated enrolment procedures and administration function as deterrents for parents, who might be eligible for a place in child care. Accessibility is also to be taken literally: for many parents, reaching the childcare setting is a challenge. Even a distance of a few kilometres/miles can be insurmountable, given that there is no public transport, no care to drive or use, and thus has to be bridged on foot, in the company of one or more small children. Another aspect of accessibility is time. For instance, if parents can make use of flexible childcare after school hours but are expected to move their children themselves from one location to another (while they are supposed to be working), this is obviously no help to them. Many authors have pointed out the importance of structural barriers to childcare. We also know that these barriers contribute largely to social inequality in the use of child care and that government involvement in these factors can help to tackle social inequality (Van Lancker & Gysels, 2016). Within the PACE project, we also note that the structural barriers described above are all determined by macro level factors. However, we want to avoid concluding from the paper of Van Lancker and Gysels (2016) that government involvement is *the only way* to tackle affordability, availability and accessibility. Local governments and actors often do have some leeway to tackle each of these barriers. Within the PACE project, we have seen several examples of childcare services (unwillingly) contributing to or maintaining barriers. For instance, it is great to have an enrolment procedure that benefits parents living in vulnerable situations, but if the procedure is monolingual and requires digital skills, it might not lead to the desired effects. Another example is providing occasional childcare without referring parents with a more extended child care need (e.g., several days a week for an extended period) to regular child care. The result is that the occasional child care setting is often fully booked, also because other providers in the environment refer parents with a need for flexible care to this setting.

Besides structural barriers, both organisations and parents identify **informal barriers** to childcare. Parents report that they do not always confide in formal childcare. This is not always the consequence of a lack of trust, sometimes they just don't know the system. For some parents, using childcare means feeling and/or being observed and judged. This is deterrent for parents, especially parents who have had bad experiences with welfare institutions. Also, some parents prefer to stay at home with their children, because they are used to this, want to do this or are expected to. All these 'informal barriers' are recognized by the PACE partner organisations. Some of the PACE organisations offer a new dimension to these informal barriers for parents by stating that there are also informal barriers on the level of child care staff, or on the level of the interaction between staff and parents. For instance, not all childcare staff has received training on working with parents in poverty or with cultural diversity. During study visits, is has been repeatedly mentioned that staff members do not feel confident in working with parents from the PACE target group.

Another gap relates to how parents on the one hand and professionals on the other hand look at **the value and benefits of child care**. For professionals working within child care, it is generally clear that "childcare is good for you and your children". That is: childcare, given that it is good quality childcare, will enhance children's opportunities in life. This is especially true for children from disadvantaged families (Bennett, 2012). From the parent interview reports, we learn that parents do not necessarily share this stance. Some parents do not feel comfortable with the idea of 'strangers' taking care of their children. Others want to see their children growing up and make a positive choice to spend time with their children. Of course, there are also parents (both parents who already use child care and parents who do not use childcare yet) mentioning benefits of child care for their children: it is a place where they can play with other children (socialize), learn the language and experiment. One might be tempted to see these parents (the ones mentioning benefits) as the ones who "have seen the light" and the others (parents showing hesitance in using childcare) as the ones who "need to be convinced". We believe, however, that there is danger in deciding *for* parents what 'good parenting' means. Presently, parenting is often looked at in an instrumental way: it is meant to help children achieve good outcomes, to foster their cognitive, motor, socio-emotional development (e.g. look at the ways in which toys for babies are advertised: "it will lead to a higher IQ" etc). Also childcare is often regarded in this way: it will

help children to acquire pre-literacy and numeracy skills and to be better prepared for school. As good parenting currently means good outcomes, it might become irresponsible for parents (certainly the 'disadvantaged parents') not to use childcare, as it leads to better results. Another way to frame parenting, and 'good' parenting, is to situate it in the context of the relationship between the child and the parent. Parenting is an ever-continuing, transactional process of individual parents and individual children (called the 'first person perspective' by Ramaekers and Suissa, 2013) captured in a context (i.e. parents are more than 'just' parents), without there being a targeted 'endpoint' of the parenting process.

> *"What the first-person perspective in the parent-child relationship, as we see it, is intended to bring out is a sense of the fact that parents' decisions and action are always already embedded in a complex intertwining of a diversity of considerations. As parents, we are never just in ethical encounters with our children, intent on preserving the caring (or some kind of) ideal, but we are at the same time, within these very relationship aspects of our lives, making judgements on other and related matters". (pages 60-61)*

Of course this does not mean that professionals, or the childcare sector, are meaningless. They can be *very meaningful* for both parents and children. The question is, however, from which approach they can be most meaningful: when they set general targets for parents and children in a rather normative way (i.e. "childcare is good for you") – Ramaekers and Suissa would refer to this as "the third-person perspective", or when they look at families from the first person perspective, realising that "parenting is moral all the way down" and helping parents to understand and enrich the relationships they have with their children.

Another observation from our study on childcare gaps, related to the previous observation on differences between professionals' and parents' views on the benefits of childcare and good parenting, is that there seems to be a **hierarchy in the functions of childcare**. We feel that many of the PACE organisations focus on either the economic function (get parents to work) and/or the pedagogical function of childcare (foster children's development, educational function). This is in line with what we observe in many European policy documents, who also focus on economic and pedagogical functions – the latter function is by the way often reframed as economic-on-the-long-term: through educating all children and giving them more opportunities, we will get more productive citizens in the end. As we mentioned above, one risk of this approach is that it starts from a third perspective approach on what 'good, responsible parenting' means, restricting the options of parents in making their own choices. Another risk is that the childcare sector looks at 'childcare quality' in a very pedagogical manner (i.e. it means that children learn a lot, achieve good outcomes, show high well-being and involvement), which has consequences for the ways in which they deal with parents and children, the way childcare settings are organised (i.e. rigidity) and for the 'mindset' of staff (i.e. looking at children in terms of their outcomes, at parents as people who have to learn?). In a narrow view on pedagogical quality, the social function of childcare is less prioritized or seen as a 'consequence' of realising the pedagogical and economic functions of childcare. When disadvantaged families use childcare, they can work and their income will increase (economic function) and at the same time, their children are given better (educational) opportunities (pedagogical function). As a consequence, these families will become less disadvantaged, their children will have more opportunities in life and social inequality will diminish (social function). Another view on the three functions of childcare, that is supported by the European Quality Framework on ECEC (Proposal for key principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care , 2014), is that the social function is inherently part of child care quality. It is a precondition to achieve the pedagogical and economic function. Working on the social function of childcare means that you tackle structural barriers for parents and increase accessibility of childcare. It also means that you take an inclusive approach in working with parents, that you make every parent feel welcome every day, that you encourage parents to exchange with each other and approach them as (first-person perspective) the experts of their own child.

EMPLOYMENT AND CHILDCARE: A DIFFICULT MARRIAGE

One of the main conclusions from this gap analysis is that employment and childcare are difficult to marry. While the childcare sector is heavily regulated and rigid, employment increasingly demands flexibility. For parents in a fixed contract, well-embedded in a social network of family and friends, this flexibility can be surmountable and even positive, if flexibility works in two directions and thus means that they get some flexibility in return as an employer, if it means that they can afford flexible childcare or have enough options for informal childcare. For parents from the PACE TG, the flexibility we are talking about is not the 'nice version' of flexibility. It means precarious jobs in non-office hours, zero-hour contracts, and not necessarily work that makes you feel meaningful, or part of a bigger 'community'. This is challenging enough on its own, but having young children in childcare makes the story a lot more complicated. Childcare does not have a clear, flexible answer to the demands of the employment sector.

What we have learnt from our literature research, study visits and the interviews with parents is that social policy on employment and childcare is generally fragmented. The employment sector and the childcare sector are separate worlds, each with their own ways of dealing with social inequality. The main problem, however, is that people's lives are not fragmented: they have one, often complicated, life. Parenting and employment are predominant and overlapping themes that cannot be dealt with separately. This is very clear from the parental interview reports, which illustrate how parents are always balancing the (economic and personal) need for employment against the needs of their children and the choices they want to (be able to) make as a parent. What these reports also teach us, is that childcare and employment are often each other's barriers: as an unemployed parent, it is difficult to afford childcare. At the same time, it is not possible to start working without childcare for your children.

So how can we weigh up to the many challenges these parents are confronted with? One thing that clearly comes out of the gap analysis is the need for an integrated approach of childcare and employment, which starts with the willingness of professionals, organisations and policy makers to approach parents' lives as whole, rather than as a sum of separate life domains.

THE VEXING ISSUES OF FREE WILL, CHOICE AND RESPONSIBILITY

Within the first year of the PACE project year, the researchers have been focusing mainly on how the project partners approach employment and childcare, which are the two central themes of the project. The choice to focus on the project partners is a logical one, as they are at the heart of the project: they have engaged to improve the life circumstances of parents living in vulnerable situations, they committed themselves to try new things, experiment, and innovate on the level of employment and childcare. On the level of PACE partner organisations, the 'mesolevel', we note that partners use different strategies in working with parents, trying to improve their lives.

The first thing we notice is that the majority of the PACE partner organisations situate barriers for parents mainly on a personal level (micro level), and/or the level of the community/group (mesolevel). Some of the barriers that are mentioned most often are lack of self-confidence, lack of skills, lack of social network, lack of mobility (as an attitude), language and digital barriers, lack of knowledge (e.g. of the possibilities of the childcare system), cultural values with regard to use of childcare. Although PACE organisations attribute the choices parents make mainly to personal and 'psychocultural' factors, they do not look at parents from a "blame-based" perspective (see Vranken, 2014). In addition, most PACE organisations also mention barriers for parents on meso- and macro-level and refer to the interactions between factors on the different level. Still, we see that the view of organisations, which tends to focus on parents' personal barriers, impacts on the choices they make in working with parents. Many PACE organisations choose to work with parents in a way that helps

them (parents) to realise that they do not make the 'right choices', by offering them support that targets individual barriers. For instance, some partners will work with parents mainly on building self-confidence, a social network, soft and labour market skills, to allow them to come closer to the labour market. Other partners want to work on parents' knowledge of the childcare system and help them to discover the (pedagogical) benefits of childcare. During some study visits, it was mentioned that "we have to help parents realise that [*working, bring their child to childcare*] is just the better option". What we see is that professionals are generally very **understanding** towards parents (in the sense of showing compassion), but this does not always mean that the choices parents make are **understandable** to them. As a result, professionals feel like they have to *make the parents understand* different things (as mentioned above: the benefits of childcare, the benefits of being employed), through explaining (e.g. calculating benefits and showing parents what the difference of being employed would mean for their family income), experiencing (e.g. helping parents to get a taste of childcare through adaptation sessions) and activating parents (get parents into an activation trajectory).

From the above paragraph, it might seem as if all PACE organisations look at parents in the same way and as if they all use the same strategies in working with parents. Of course, this is far from the truth. There is a great lot of variety between the PACE organisations and even within one organisation, there is diversity in visions and strategies. Looking at parents as *people who do not make the right choice yet* is something we noted during our round of study visits. However, some organisations try to influence parents' individual choices in a very direct way (for instance through explaining), while others take a more subtle approach (nudging). In addition, we also came across totally different approaches. For instance, some partners make the choice not to see parents as (involuntary) 'problem carriers', but to focus on the conditions and circumstances that limit the choices that parents have. In some cases, we see that PACE organisations aim to change the circumstances of parents, on the level of organisations, policy or collaboration between sectors (meso and macro level), thus allowing them to make a different choice. An example of this is the decision of one of the partners to start a fund that helps parents with low incomes through the first months of child care (i.e. parents initially have to pay the full prices, afterwards they get refunds. This system makes the first month of childcare expensive, for some parents this is a real barrier). Also, we see that many of the PACE organisations already reflect critically on their own practice, on the way they work with parents, the manner in which they collaborate. Still, we believe that there is more room for critical reflection of PACE partner organisations on how both the parents from the TG and themselves (their organisations) are 'trapped' by structural constraints that limit their freedom of choice.

WE'RE ALL STUCK IN OUR OWN WAYS

We all make choices, every day, all the time. We make choices guided by our own needs and desires. We bring our children to childcare because we want to, because we think they will thrive there, and because we need to in order to work. Everyone has his own opinion on which choices are good, which are better, and which are utterly bad choices. We generally have little difficulty in judging other people's choices and in line with what is known from social psychological research, we tend to attribute our own poor choices more often to external causes ("I couldn't help it, I was forced through the circumstances" cf. accident model, Vranken, 2014) while we tend to attribute the choices of others to internal causes ("It's their own fault, they're just not intelligent enough, …" cf. blame model, Vranken, 2014). Only just a few days ago, one of my friends accidently illustrated this perfectly (and within the PACE framework), by referring to unemployed people as "they just don't want to contribute [*to society*], they are pitiful people, making all the wrong choices." My friend suggested, in a fairly harsh manner – and at the same time judging like social psychology would predict - that people are responsible for their own choices. Her statement implied that the causes for people not to participate in employment, are to be located within themselves. They are to be blamed. At the same time, she denied the individuality of each of these 'unemployed people's' lives, the vast diversity within this group, by naming them as one group, one category of 'pitiful people' (which could also be explained by social psychology, but let's not go into detail on every aspect of what my friend said). She had not finished her statement yet. What she said

next was “there are so many facilities and options for these peoples, so many services that are set in place to help them.” Then she started naming some of these organisations and services. What she actually meant here, is that (she thought) the ‘unemployed people’s’ agency is strong enough to mitigate the effect of structures and policies that have been installed to help “the poor unemployed people” (making better choices).

The things my friend say might seem shocking and sound very judgemental. Still, her perspective is not a strange one. Policies are being built on derivatives of this type of vision, although often being sold in a softer and more empathic version. There are myriad examples of social policies that are based on an individual-responsibility (agency) model, rather than on structural measures. For instance, many governments emphasize the importance of supporting parents who live in poverty with raising their children. This might sound as a noble initiative, but it places the responsibility for solving child poverty with the parents and possibly downsizes the importance of structural measures against poverty. It also implies that people living in poverty need support with regard to parenting, and even that better parenting might help to overcome (the effects of) child poverty.

Within our research work for PACE, we have never come across statements on parents as blunt as the ones cited above. PACE organisations generally recognize the influence of structural factors, limiting the choices and opportunities that are available for parents. On the other hand, we do not consistently see that the recognition of the power of ‘structure’ translates into a structural approach to tackle social exclusion. As mentioned above, PACE partners organisations actually often use strategies based on the idea of personal agency. Working on soft and labour skills, self-confidence and knowledge of the childcare system will probably help some of the parents, but we believe that there is a significant risk that things might get worse for other, if an individualistic approach is not combined with a structural one. It might even work in a counterproductive manner. Imagine that a parent gains confidence, acquires soft skills and work experience and brings his or her child to occasional childcare. He or she starts to work very optimistically … Up to here, this sounds like the success story we aim for: the parent has become ‘stronger’, he or she makes ‘better choices’. But what if, after a while, this same parent realises that the occasional childcare offer is not sufficient to cover all his/her working hours, but regular childcare stays out of reach because of waiting lists or because it is too expensive? Also, the work the parent has just started, is temporary and demanding, who does not get any additional support or coaching on the work floor. In the end, the parent gives up because this new life, including child care and employment, is not manageable, and decides to stay home again with the children. With good reason?

Yes, we believe that there is no point in judging the choices parents make as ‘good’ or ‘bad’. We think that parents generally have good reasons to make the choices they make and that we should consider the fact that their choices are often limited by structural factors. This might sound like a matter of opinion, like we decided for ourselves that ‘structure outperforms individual agency’ instead of vice versa. However, it is also a matter of fact. Unequal access to childcare used to be explained by a matter of parental choice (Vandenbroeck & Lazzari, 2013). However, further research has demonstrated that personal choice does not explain social differences in child care use. These can be primarily explained by structural factors such as affordability and availability (Van Lancker & Ghysels, 2016). Besides the importance of structure, there is the fact that parents from the PACE target group are struggling in several life domains at the same time. And while organisations often consider only one or several of these life domains (e.g. parenthood, employment, …) for the parents, their life cannot be simply subdivided in different domains. A decision of parents with regard to childcare might at first sight seem ‘a bad choice’ (e.g. deciding to stop childcare suddenly), while it becomes understandable when you take their ‘life as a whole’ into consideration (e.g. childcare has become unaffordable because of a sudden change in income for the family).

The same reasoning actually applies to organisations. Organisations are also ‘trapped’ within a web of meso- and macro-level factors, which influences the decisions they make and the approach they chose. For instance, the fact that UK organisations make the choice to focus mainly on getting parents towards employment as fast as possible, is determined by the current UK policy (universal credit and 30 free hours of childcare only for

parents who work 16 hours). Also here, there is no point in judging the choices that are made. A more fruitful approach, in both working with parents and organisations, to expand the choices they have through changing the circumstances and conditions that determine these choices.

One of the crucial challenges for the project no is to make people to be aware of how they are moving, how they can move, and to increase their options and comfort.

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