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Early learning opportunities for children at risk of social exclusion. Opening the black box of preschool practice

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ABSTRACT

Influenced by a growing number of longitudinal studies showing positive effects of preschool attendance, Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is framed as a potential equaliser of opportunities, benefitting children at risk of social exclusion and children from families with a migration background. However, as research into daily interactions in contexts of diversity and multilingualism remains scarce, the qualitative processes by which preschool may reduce or rather reproduce inequalities, remain under-theorised. In the present study, eight children were closely followed during their first year in pre-primary education in the Flemish Community of Belgium through video observations of daily interactions. The results suggest that both the quantity and quality of individual verbal interactions were low, with few opportunities for language production. The majority of utterances by teachers were disciplining in nature. The few occasions where a home language was used in individual interactions were intended to better direct the behaviour of the child. By closely observing these interactions, unintended mechanisms that hinder an equal distribution of learning opportunities were found in each of the classes.

KEYWORDS

Preschool; teacher–child interactions; learning opportunities; transitions; multilingualism

Introduction

Quality ECEC experiences

Children from families with a migration background are considered to especially benefit from the positive impact of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) (Brilli, Del Boca, and Pronzato 2011; Felfe and Lalive 2018). As a result, ECEC has been framed as a potential equaliser of opportunities (European Commission 2018; Marope and Kaga 2015; OECD 2017), although these beneficial effects can only be achieved in contexts of high-quality provision. The UK-based Effective Pre-School, Primary and Secondary Education project study (EPPSE: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/research-projects/2018/oct/effective-pre-school-primary-and-secondary-education-project-eppse>) shows that in high-quality settings, all children make more progress in their development and that this effect can last up to secondary education (Taggart et al. 2015). However, not all studies draw similar conclusions. For example, research in France (Caille 2001) comparing grade repetition in

primary school of children who entered preschool aged two and aged three, shows that—when controlled for socioeconomic background—entering preschool at two years old instead of three has no significant positive effect on later school success. Along similar lines, a recent study in the Flemish Community of Belgium (Sierens et al. *in press*) finds mixed effects of early universal preschool participation on academic outcomes measured at nine years old: a significant small positive effect for science, but not for reading. These studies contribute to the understanding that it is not only the extent of preschool participation that should be considered, but also its process quality, with a special focus on adult–child interactions (Slot 2018). Nevertheless, a Danish study by Jensen, Holm, and Bremberg (2013) shows that raising the quality of preschool through in-service training of teachers increases the gap between children of higher and lower SES. Given these somewhat contrasting findings, it is crucial to understand how process quality of preschool education is constructed and implemented by teachers and school staff, and how the conceptions of process quality relate to the experiences of children and parents at risk of social exclusion.

Adult–child interactions and language development

The preschool age is a crucial period for young children’s language acquisition (Becker, Klein, and Biedinger 2013; Magnuson et al. 2004). There is consensus in this regard that process quality is crucial (Slot 2018) and that it is characterised by stimulating and supportive teacher–child interactions in enriched classroom settings (Sabol et al. 2013). This is rooted in socio-constructivist learning theories (Hedges and Cullen 2012), which state that children learn by acting and communicating in everyday situations with their parents, other educators and other children. The acquisition of skills in general, and language skills in particular, arises from a child’s desire to understand its environment and to share experiences and emotions with meaningful others. In these interactions, the role of the adult is crucial (Duru-Bellat 2004; Fillmore and Snow 2003; Hattie 2008). Teachers’ expectations and (linguistic) beliefs influence a child’s development (Pulinx, Van Avermaet, and Agirdag 2017), as does the quality of the adult–child interaction in ECEC services (Slot, Lerkkanen, and Leseman 2015). This is especially true for language acquisition (Ramirez-Esparza, Garcia-Sierra, and Kuhl 2014). Establishing a high-quality environment in this regard requires a rich, natural and spontaneous language input that actively stimulates children to use verbal expression and to articulate actions and thinking processes (La Paro, Hamre, and Pianta 2012; Loman, Moons, and Verstedden 2012). The language used by adults in this context should be adequately abstract, but comprehensible in the way it connects speech and actions (Bogaert et al. 2015). Moreover, it should start off from the lifeworld and experiences of the children themselves (Ramaut et al. 2013). To achieve this in the context of a preschool class, it is necessary for children to be offered many rich opportunities to practice, and for them to receive supportive feedback on their verbal utterances (DeKeyser 2007; Ellis 2005). In addition, when the multilingual repertoire of the child is acknowledged, valued and used, school success can be improved (García and Wei 2014; Jaffe 2003; Moodley 2007; Olivares and Lemberger 2002; Olmedo 2003; Ramaut et al. 2013). A key aspect for migrant children is the valorisation of multilingualism as an ‘added value’ and ‘resource’, rather than a ‘problem’ or ‘deficit’ (Sierens and Van Avermaet 2014). In contrast to the availability of these findings, empirical research into daily interactions in contexts of

diversity and multilingualism is still scarce, and as a result, the qualitative processes by which preschool might be equalising or broadening the gap, remain under-theorised. Too little is currently known about the first lived experiences of migrant children in preschool. In our study, we closely followed eight children during their first year in preschool, leading to detailed quantitative and qualitative analyses of daily interactions.

Research context

The ECEC system in the Flemish Community of Belgium is characterised by a split between childcare (for children from birth to three years old, under the Ministry of Welfare, Public Health and Family) and pre-primary education or ‘preschool’ (for children from two and a half to five years old, under the Ministry of Education), with the latter being the focus of the current study. Although they are free to choose, the majority of the Flemish preschools are organised according to the ages of the children, with separate classrooms for three, four and five year olds. Because preschool education in Flanders is accessible to children aged two and a half, most schools offer ‘entry classes’ for these toddlers. In some schools, the children move to the following class after a few months. In others, the entry classes offer education for children from two and a half to four years old. Both types, however, are characterised by groups of around 20 children or more under the responsibility of one teacher who is sometimes supported by an assistant for a few hours per week. All preschool teachers are qualified to Bachelor’s level (ISCED 6); the assistants usually have a post-secondary diploma in ‘Childcare’ (ISCED 4). Professional support for teachers is provided by Pedagogical Counselling Services (PSCs), which are set up by the educational umbrella organisations. A recent evaluation of the PSCs shows that they mainly provide support by organising seminars and lectures for the staff rather than offering in-service training accompanied by coaching (Commissie Monard 2019).

The Flemish Community of Belgium has the highest enrolment rates at one of the earliest ages (more than 98 per cent of all children aged three to five are enrolled) among OECD countries (Departement Onderwijs en Vorming 2016). Despite the quasi-universal preschool enrolment, a persistent achievement gap remains between children with and without a migrant background, and between children who speak Dutch at home and those who use a different language (Danhier and Jacobs 2017). There is accordingly a compelling case to study qualitative processes in preschool and to discover how these processes may or may not reduce inequalities (Jacobs et al. 2009). Detailed observations of the lived experiences and early learning opportunities of children at risk in preschool may contribute to unravelling what precisely defines high-quality interactions in contexts of cultural and socioeconomic diversity. In so doing, this could help us to understand the early reproduction of social inequalities. Our study uses a mixed-method design, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches, to closely examine real-life experiences in four preschool classes.

Methodology

Sample

Our study investigates the first learning experiences of eight children entering preschool, during one year starting from their very first day in the classroom. A purposive sample

(Robson 2002) of four cases was built, each being a classroom of the youngest children in preschool (an entry class, as per the above description).

Each case was selected in a different school to maximise the diversity of contexts. Schools were selected on the basis of having 30–60 per cent of enrolled children belonging to at risk populations, and being situated in four different cities. ‘At risk’ is defined by the Flemish community by the following indicators: low income (using a school allowance), low educational level of the mother and a home language other than Dutch.

For each case, two ‘focal children’ were selected. These eight children were indicated by their respective school board as belonging to one or more of the ‘at risk’ categories. Seven of them had a home language different from Dutch and six came from a family with a migration background.

Data collection

Data collection consisted of extensive video observations over a period of 11 months. Each of the four cases was visited 8–13 times by one or two researchers, who recorded the classroom practice on video without intervening. No specific activities were chosen prior to the observations. Instead, uninterrupted periods of two to four hours at different times during the school day were filmed. In this way, the full spectrum of what happens in the classroom was caught on camera. Observations were carried out using two cameras: one camera following a focal child and a second fixed camera overlooking the entire classroom. In total, there were 44 observational periods, which resulted in over 166 h of video footage. Additional field notes were made to capture as much of the actual experiences as possible. This was explained to the teachers in advance, as well as who were the focal children. We asked the teachers to act as they normally would, when being filmed. Informed consent was obtained from all the parents in the selected classes, as well as from the staff and management of the schools. We treated children’s consent as an ongoing process, open for negotiation throughout the study (Flewitt 2005). At the beginning of the observation period we explained the purpose of our presence to the children and we provided the teachers with pictures of the research team, which could be used to visually announce our visits to the classroom. During each observation, the researchers sensitively interpreted children’s nonverbal actions and gestures expressing their assent. Because of the importance of being emotionally and physically close to the children when video recording them (Pálmadóttir and Einarsdóttir 2016) we tried to create familiarity and safety by being present in the classroom and on the playground before and after filming. In between filming periods, we occasionally discussed issues of safety and possible discomfort with the teachers, as well as with the research team. The study was in line with the ethical protocol of the Faculty of the authors.

Procedure

All video recordings were transcribed and coded in a custom-designed spreadsheet, distinguishing different activities and specifying in which activity the focal children were involved. Each activity was timed, allowing us to compute how much time was spent in each of the activities, how the time was divided among the activities and the durations for which children were asked by the teacher to sit still and wait quietly.

For the in-depth analysis of the children's experiences, we selected six types of activities: circle time (whole group activity in a designated classroom area); free play (individual and small group activity in different corners of the classroom); snack time; changing clothes and arranging satchels; playtime in the playground (free play outside the classroom); and lunch at noon (outside the classroom, in the school's lunchroom). For each of the cases, we randomly selected video footage of these six types of activities where both of the focal children were involved. The teachers did not take part in this selection process.

This resulted in the selection of 79 activities (31.5 h of video recording) eligible for analysis. All teacher-child (TC), child-teacher (CT), teacher-teacher (TT) and child-child (CC) utterances were transcribed verbatim and their duration was quantified to the nearest second. A verbal utterance was conceptualised as any language expression by a speaker until he/she was interrupted or stopped (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974). Therefore, when a pause of two seconds occurred in between a word sequence, we coded this as two distinct utterances. During playtime and during lunch break, the children were together in a large group including other classes, playing outside or having a meal in a large lunch room. This coincided with much excitement and noise. As a result, the coding of individual utterances appeared to be unreliable. Therefore, the individual utterances of the focal children during these activities lacked verbatim transcriptions, which resulted in the full coding of 54 activities instead of 79.

Analysis

We quantitatively analysed the number and duration of all verbal utterances during each of the 54 activities, at the level of the whole class as well as at the level of each individual focal child. In addition, we assessed the quality of the TC interactions with each of the eight focal children individually. Drawing on state of the art research findings concerning language development support and inspired by existing frameworks (e.g. Bogaert et al. 2015; Loman, Moons, and Versteden 2012) and validated rating scales (La Paro, Hamre, and Pianta 2012), we focussed on three core dimensions: language input (LI), opportunities for language production (LP) and feedback (FB). The indicators for these three dimensions, based on a literature review, are shown in Table 1.

The occurrence of each of the three key dimensions was scored on a 4-point Likert scale, with 0 = absent, 1 = limited, 2 = medium and 3 = frequent. Together with the quantitative coding of individual utterances, this served as the starting point for an in-depth analysis of the verbal interactions. The 54 activities serve as the unit of analysis. Table 2 presents the number of selected activities (N) for each class and their average duration.

We counted the number of individual verbal interactions that involved the focal children during the four types of activities. For each class and for each activity, all utterances to and by the focal children were counted and indicated according to their direction, as shown in Tables 3 and 4. The total and average number of utterances per activity is indicated, as well as their respective duration. We particularly focused on individual interactions with the focal children, as these contain the most learning opportunities. Therefore, we did not consider the utterances of the teacher to a whole group of children (for example group instructions such as 'Okay children, it's time to clean up') as individual utterances to the focal children, even when they were involved in the group that was addressed.

Table 1. Indicators for the qualitative analysis of teacher-child interactions.

Language input (L.I.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Rich: spontaneous, natural, varied, limited amount of diminutives, using full sentences, articulate actions and thinking processes, challenging children to use new vocabulary• Understandable: making a connection between language and actions and objects, repeating and paraphrasing, alternating and good intonation• Connected to the lifeworld and knowledge of the child, its vocabulary and concepts
Opportunities for language production (L.P.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Using open ended questions• Stimulating the child to analyse and to reason and stimulating its capacities for problem solving and reflection• Stimulating mutual interaction between children• Stimulating informal interaction
Feedback (FB)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Giving clues and help• Posing supportive questions• Responding to questions with new questions• Giving stimulating comments• Giving extra information after a response• Challenging the child to articulate actions and to put deeds into words

Results

Quantity of utterances

There were very few utterances from the teacher to the individual focal children. Similarly, the focal children gave very few utterances towards the teacher and they had even fewer verbal interactions with their peers. During circle time, snack time and clothes and satchels, utterances to and from the focal children were even scarcer. Circle time was the activity with the least individual utterances: apart from two exceptions (eight TC utterances for focal child 2 in class 2 and twelve TC utterances for focal child 1 in class 3), the focal children were addressed individually on average 1.5–4.8 times.

TC utterances were more frequent than any other interactions, irrespective of the type of activity. The language input was thus largely determined and initiated by the teacher. During most activities, the focal children verbally addressed the teacher on average 0–1.5 times. Verbal interactions between children were even scarcer, with no more than 0.8 utterances on average observed.

During free play times, the number of individual verbal utterances was higher, which was the case for all interaction modes, including peer interactions. However, the interaction patterns with the focal children differed. The language quantity during free play was largely determined by the presence or absence of a teacher in the activity. When a teacher-guided activity occurred during free play time, more expanded language input from the teacher was observed. However, while the spontaneity of free play has the potential to increase language opportunities, the focal children often did not benefit from this. Whether or not they did, depended largely on the presence and the behaviour of the teacher. We found that the number of utterances of a teacher towards an individual child during free play was positively associated with the number of utterances of the child towards the teacher ($p = .026$; one-tailed). However, we found no significant

Table 2. Overview of selected activities^a.

	Class 1			Class 2			Class 3			Class 4		
	N	Average length	SD	N	Average length	SD	N	Average length	SD	N	Average length	SD
Circle time	4	0:10:56	0:04:33	3	0:16:51	0:07:40	5	0:13:44	0:11:28	4	0:12:37	0:08:52
Free play	4	0:32:25	0:06:04	4	0:29:17	0:07:12	3	0:27:08	0:05:18	4	0:39:31	0:02:48
Snack time	3	0:22:10	0:02:37	3	0:16:21	0:03:47	2	0:13:34	0:04:23	3	0:24:08	0:02:00
Clothes&Satchels	3	0:08:38	0:03:46	4	0:08:22	0:02:48	2	0:03:22	0:00:08	3	0:10:17	0:03:38

^aExcept for class 1 and class 2, the specific number of activities (N) goes for both the focal children in the classes. Focal child 1 of class 1 had three free play moments instead of four, focal child 2 had two free play moments instead of four and three snack times instead of four. Focal child 1 of class 2 had three free play moments instead of four, two snack times instead of three and three clothes & satchel moments instead of four.

Table 3. Quantity of individual utterances Class 1 and Class 2.

		Interaction Mode	Focal Child X				Focal Child Y			
			Total Number of Utterances	Total Duration	Average / Activity	Average Duration/ Activity	Total Number of Utterances	Total Duration	Average / Activity	Average Duration/ Activity
Class 1	Circle Time	T-FC	11	0:00:36	2,8	0:00:03	13	0:00:59	3,3	0:00:05
		FC-T	1	0:00:01	0,3	0:00:01	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00
		C-FC	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00
		FC-C	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00
		Total	12	0:00:37	3	0:00:03	13	0:00:59	3,3	0:00:01
	Free Play	T-FC	23	0:01:17	7,7	0:00:03	34	0:01:28	17	0:00:03
		FC-T	6	0:00:03	2	0:00:01	1	0:00:00	0,5	0:00:00
		C-FC	12	0:00:49	4	0:00:04	2	0:00:07	1	0:00:04
		FC-C	14	0:00:44	4,7	0:00:03	2	0:00:02	1	0:00:01
		Total	55	0:02:53	18,3	0:00:03	39	0:01:37	19,5	0:00:02
	Snack Time	T-FC	32	0:01:48	10,7	0:00:03	16	0:00:32	8	0:00:02
		FC-T	1	0:00:00	0,3	0:00:00	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00
		C-FC	1	0:00:03	0,3	0:00:03	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00
		FC-C	1	0:00:08	0,3	0:00:08	2	0:00:07	1	0:00:04
		Total	35	0:01:59	11,7	0:00:03	18	0:00:39	9	0:00:02
	Clothes & Satchels	T-FC	15	0:00:51	5	0:00:03	8	0:00:43	2,7	0:00:05
		FC-T	2	0:00:03	0,7	0:00:02	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00
		C-FC	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00
		FC-C	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00
		Total	17	0:00:54	5,7	0:00:03	8	0:00:43	2,7	0:00:05
Class 2	Circle Time	T-FC	9	0:00:39	3	0:00:04	24	0:01:38	8	0:00:04
		FC-T	4	0:00:04	1,3	0:00:01	3	0:00:03	1	0:00:01
		C-FC	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00
		FC-C	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00
		Total	13	0:00:43	4,3	0:00:03	27	0:01:41	9	0:00:04
	Free Play	T-FC	49	0:03:13	16,3	0:00:04	43	0:02:28	10,8	0:00:03
		FC-T	20	0:00:30	6,7	0:00:02	8	0:00:05	2	0:00:01
		C-FC	12	0:00:20	4	0:00:02	21	0:00:40	5,3	0:00:02
		FC-C	16	0:00:25	5,3	0:00:02	22	0:01:01	5,5	0:00:03
		Total	97	0:04:28	32,3	0:00:03	94	0:04:14	23,5	0:00:03

Snack Time	T-FC	26	0:01:06	13	0:00:03	21	0:00:54	7	0:00:03
	FC-T	3	0:00:02	1,5	0:00:01	3	0:00:00	1	0:00:00
	C-FC	1	0:00:01	0,5	0:00:01	2	0:00:07	0,7	0:00:04
	FC-C	2	0:00:07	1	0:00:04	1	0:00:01	0,3	0:00:01
	Total	32	0:01:16	16	0:00:02	27	0:01:02	9	0:00:02
Clothes & Satchels	T-FC	27	0:01:36	9	0:00:04	27	0:01:16	6,8	0:00:03
	FC-T	2	0:00:04	0,7	0:00:02	1	0:00:01	0,3	0:00:01
	C-FC	9	0:00:25	3	0:00:03	6	0:00:13	1,5	0:00:02
	FC-C	7	0:00:19	2,3	0:00:03	9	0:00:25	2,3	0:00:03
	Total	45	0:02:24	11,3	0:00:03	43	0:01:55	10,8	0:00:03

Table 4. Quantity of individual utterances Class 3 and Class 4

		Interaction Mode	Focal Child X				Focal Child Y			
			Total Number of Utterances	Total Duration	Average / Activity	Average Duration/ Activity	Total Number of Utterances	Total Duration	Average / Activity	Average Duration/ Activity
Class	Activity									
Class 3	Circle Time	T-FC	60	0:03:20	12	0:00:03	24	0:01:06	4,8	0:00:03
		FC-T	13	0:00:17	2,6	0:00:01	4	0:00:06	0,8	0:00:02
		C-FC	1	0:00:04	0,2	0:00:04	1	0:00:02	0,2	0:00:02
		FC-C	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00
		Total	74	0:03:41	14,8	0:00:03	29	0:01:14	5,8	0:00:03
	Free Play	T-FC	28	0:01:57	9,3	0:00:04	22	0:02:16	7,3	0:00:06
		FC-T	8	0:00:15	2,7	0:00:02	10	0:00:09	3,3	0:00:01
		C-FC	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00	5	0:00:25	1,7	0:00:05
		FC-C	3	0:00:19	1	0:00:06	4	0:00:16	1,3	0:00:04
		Total	39	0:02:31	13	0:00:04	41	0:03:06	13,7	0:00:05
	Snack Time	T-FC	20	0:00:55	10	0:00:03	12	0:00:51	6	0:00:04
		FC-T	11	0:00:32	5,5	0:00:03	1	0:00:02	0,5	0:00:02
		C-FC	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00
		FC-C	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00
		Total	31	0:01:27	15,5	0:00:03	13	0:00:53	6,5	0:00:04
	Clothes & Satchels	T-FC	8	0:00:29	4	0:00:04	4	0:00:20	2	0:00:05
		FC-T	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00
		C-FC	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00
		FC-C	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00
		Total	8	0:00:29	4	0:00:04	4	0:00:20	2	0:00:05
Class 4	Circle Time	T-FC	6	0:00:17	1,5	0:00:03	10	0:00:46	2,5	0:00:05
		FC-T	1	0:00:03	0,3	0:00:03	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00
		C-FC	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00
		FC-C	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00	3	0:00:08	0,8	0:00:03
		Total	7	0:00:20	1,8	0:00:03	13	0:00:54	3,3	0:00:04
	Free Play	T-FC	6	0:00:15	1,5	0:00:02	44	0:04:15	11	0:00:06
		FC-T	4	0:00:04	1	0:00:01	6	0:00:05	1,5	0:00:01
		C-FC	1	0:00:04	0,3	0:00:04	1	0:00:01	0,3	0:00:01
		FC-C	1	0:00:08	0,3	0:00:08	1	0:00:01	0,3	0:00:01
		Total	12	0:00:31	3	0:00:03	52	0:04:22	13	0:00:05
Snack Time	T-FC	29	0:01:12	9,7	0:00:02	30	0:01:21	10	0:00:03	

Clothes & Satchels	FC-T	5	0:00:07	1,7	0:00:01	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00
	C-FC	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00
	FC-C	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00
	Total	34	0:01:19	11,3	0:00:02	30	0:01:21	10	0:00:03
	T-FC	14	0:00:38	4,7	0:00:03	7	0:00:22	2,3	0:00:03
	FC-T	3	0:00:04	1	0:00:01	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00
	C-FC	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00
	FC-C	1	0:00:03	0,3	0:00:03	0	0:00:00	0	0:00:00
	Total	18	0:00:45	6	0:00:02	7	0:00:22	2,3	0:00:03

correlation between the number of utterances between peers and of utterances from the teacher to the focal child ($p = .274$; one-tailed).

Quality of TC interactions

Table 5 shows the sum scores of the qualitative coding of the TC interactions with the focal children for language input (LI), opportunities for language production (LP) and feedback (FB).

Language input

The focal children experienced richer language during activities such as individual care moments (for example nappy changing) or an individual activity guided by the teacher during free play. However, these moments were short, did not occur frequently and opportunities for language-rich interactions were often not seized. The majority of the TC utterances were directive and disciplining in nature: teachers in the four classes frequently used language to guide the organisation and manage the activity or the group. Routine times and transitions during the day often coincided with disturbance and noise. This impacted on the language use of the teachers: the noisier the occasion, the more the teachers used specific and commanding language with short sentences and without invitations for interaction. This hindered both qualitative peer interactions and child–teacher interactions. This was most explicit during clothes and satchel times and during circle time, but it was also the case during the rare moments when the home languages of the focal children were used by the teacher.

Although seven of the eight focal children were multilingual, the language input of the teachers was almost exclusively Dutch. In class 1 and class 2 we did not record any use of language other than Dutch in all 28 activities. In class 3, the teacher only once spoke French to focal child Huri¹, who has a Turkish-French background. We recorded three utterances where the teacher used French:

Oh, Huri, what are you doing? No, no! You are not allowed to do that. No, *c'est dangereux*.
It's dangerous. You cannot! Now sit down nicely and quietly.
Huri, *finit*. Sit down on the bench! Stop it!
Put it down softly, Huri. *Doucement. Oui, bravo*.

In class 4, we recorded three similar TC utterances in French towards Yano during two activities. These examples suggest that the teachers used the home language as a means to control the behaviour of the children and to manage the group activity.

We observed that group size had an influence on both the quantity and the quality of verbal interactions. This was most obvious in class 3, where the group size increased from 8 children in September to 20 in the following January. During circle time on 9 September 2015, the small group of eight children clearly benefited from a peaceful atmosphere and mutual verbal interactions. Visibly at ease, the teacher explained the structure of the day. During circle time on 18 December 2015, the group had almost doubled to 15 children. There was more disturbance and the utterances of the teacher were more negative, directive and reprimanding.

The language input during free play differed from during the other activities. In most cases, the teacher was also present at a table or in a corner to support the individual activity

Table 5. Quality of individual TC interactions.

				Focal Child X												Focal Child Y											
				L.I.				L.P.				FB				L.I.				L.P.				FB			
		N	Total duration	0	1	2	3	0	1	2	3	0	1	2	3	0	1	2	3	0	1	2	3	0	1	2	3
Circle Time	Class 1	4	0:43:43	2	2	0	0	3	1	0	0	3	1	0	0	3	1	0	0	4	0	0	0	3	1	0	0
	Class 2	3	0:50:33	2	1	0	0	2	1	0	0	3	0	0	0	1	2	0	0	2	1	0	0	3	0	0	0
	Class 3	5	1:08:41	1	3	1	0	2	3	0	0	4	1	0	0	2	3	0	0	4	1	0	0	5	0	0	0
	Class 4	4	0:50:27	3	1	0	0	4	0	0	0	4	0	0	0	3	1	0	0	4	0	0	0	4	0	0	0
	Total	16	3:33:24	8	7	1	0	11	5	0	0	14	2	0	0	9	7	0	0	14	2	0	0	15	1	0	0
Free Play	Class 1	4	2:09:42	1	1	1	0	2	0	1	0	1	2	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	1	0	0
	Class 2	4	1:57:08	1	0	2	0	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	2	1	1	0	4	0	0	0	4	0	0	0
	Class 3	3	1:21:25	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	3	0	0	0	1	2	0	0	2	1	0	0	3	0	0	0
	Class 4	4	2:38:03	2	2	0	0	2	2	0	0	4	0	0	0	1	2	1	0	2	1	1	0	3	0	1	0
	Total	15	8:06:18	5	4	4	0	6	4	3	0	9	3	1	0	5	5	3	0	9	3	1	0	11	1	1	0
Snack Time	Class 1	3	1:06:30	0	2	1	0	1	1	1	0	1	2	0	0	0	2	0	0	2	0	0	0	2	0	0	0
	Class 2	3	0:49:04	0	1	1	0	0	2	0	0	2	0	0	0	1	2	0	0	3	0	0	0	3	0	0	0
	Class 3	2	0:27:08	1	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	2	0	0	2	0	0	0	2	0	0	0
	Class 4	3	1:12:23	1	2	0	0	1	2	0	0	3	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	2	1	0	0	3	0	0	0
	Total	11	3:35:05	2	6	2	0	3	6	1	0	7	3	0	0	2	7	1	0	9	1	0	0	10	0	0	0
Clothes & Satchels	Class 1	3	0:25:54	1	1	1	0	2	0	1	0	1	2	0	0	2	1	0	0	3	0	0	0	3	0	0	0
	Class 2	4	0:33:27	0	3	0	0	3	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	2	2	0	0	4	0	0	0	4	0	0	0
	Class 3	2	0:06:43	2	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	2	0	0	0	2	0	0	0
	Class 4	3	0:30:50	1	2	0	0	3	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	2	1	0	0	3	0	0	0	3	0	0	0
	Total	12	1:36:54	4	6	1	0	10	0	1	0	9	2	0	0	7	5	0	0	12	0	0	0	12	0	0	0
Total		54	16:51:41	19	23	8	0	30	15	5	0	39	10	1	0	23	24	4	0	44	6	1	0	48	2	1	0

of a child, mostly crafts chosen by the teacher. One by one, the teacher asked the children to come to the table. She explained what the children were expected to do and she helped them to get started. During these times, both the quantity and the quality of the individual TC interactions were higher for most children, albeit not for every child. For example, during the four free play times in class 4, we observed focal child Milena, who was not engaged in any of the individual activities. Over a total of 2 h and 40 min, there were only six individual TC utterances:

Um, Milena (7 September 2015).

Um, Milena, bicycles over there! (7 September 2015).

You can ride the bicycle, but you have to do it over there (7 September 2015).

Yes, we'll wash, Milena (7 September 2015).

Here, Milena (22 September 2015).

Do you want to take a look at the books, Milena? The books? Or the dolls? (6 October 2015).

The utterances were all very short, had no open questions and no invitations for interaction. During the fourth free play period, we observed no individual TC interactions with Milena. On average, the free play times in this class had a duration of 39.5 min, on the vast majority of occasions without any verbal learning opportunities for Milena in interaction with the teacher. Considering the relatively large groups in the four cases, it is understandable that teachers cannot involve every child in a long one-to-one interaction during each activity throughout the day. However, this example illustrates what a child may miss when being unintentionally overlooked in a group.

Opportunities for language production

The conversational turns in individual TC interactions were mostly reduced to one (closed) question followed by an answer. For example, in all 13 activities (for a total of 3 h and 51 min) focal child Precious (class 1) was only asked six open-ended questions:

What is that? (clothes and satchels, 9 September 2015).

Where is your fruit, love? (snack time, 9 September 2015).

What's wrong? (snack time, 9 September 2015).

Hi Precious, what do you have there? (free play, 20 October 2015).

What do you say? (free play, 20 October 2015).

How do you get to school? (circle time, 3 March 2016).

These questions did not stimulate Precious to engage in a conversation. All the other questions put to Precious were closed questions. There was only one exceptional dialogue of more than just one question and one answer during the circle time on 20 October 2015:

Precious: Miss, look. Miss.

Teacher: Hi Precious, what do you have there?

Precious: Two sticks.

Teacher: Are there two sticks?

Precious: Yes.

Teacher: One, two, three. Three magic wands.

In the 13 activities (with a total duration of just over 3 h 51 min) focal child Precious (class 1) made only ten CT utterances:

What is that? (clothes and satchels, 9 June 2015).

Please (snack time, 18 September 2015).

Miss, look Miss (free play, 20 October 2015).

Two sticks (free play, 20 October 2015).

Yes (free play, 20 October 2015).

No (free play, 20 October 2015).

I'm ready (free play, 20 October 2015).

Miss (free play, 20 October 2015).

Ride a bicycle (circle time, 3 March 2016).

Your hair. His hair (clothes and satchels, 3 March 2016).

Both the quantity and the quality of focal child Ramiz' (class 1) individual interactions were low. There was only one verbal interactive moment with the teacher that showed some qualitative aspects (during free play on 21 January 2016). Ramiz was working on a puzzle with the teacher. The scene lasted about four minutes. The teacher asked Ramiz three questions about putting a piece of the puzzle in place, and one question about how the task was proceeding. Ramiz never replied verbally:

Teacher: This one where?

Teacher: Put it in.

Teacher: Oh, easy.

Teacher: And the little sheep? Take the sheep!

Teacher: No, that's not right, Ramiz. It doesn't fit.

Teacher: Try here. Look.

Teacher: Easy!

Teacher: Yes, easy.

Teacher: Yes, bravo Ramiz, good! And the doggy?

Teacher: Good! Bravo Ramiz, super! No, here.

Teacher: Yes, bravo, super!

Teacher: Good, Ramiz.

Teacher: Yes! Bravo! Wow. Now you have to try alone. Now alone. Like this.

Teacher: Come on Ramiz. Try!

Teacher: Turn it Ramiz.

Ramiz: Cat.

Teacher: How are you getting on, Ramiz?

Teacher: Try, Ramiz.

In all of Ramiz' 11 activities (with a total duration of approximately 2 h 54 min), 'cat' was the only word he spoke to the teacher. His other verbal utterances, towards classmates, were also limited: 'Hello! Hello!' (during snack time on 6 May 2015), something to his brother

that we could not understand during snack time on the same date, '*Mais, non*' (during free play on 9 June 2015) and '*No!*' (during free play on 21 January 2016).

We observed few verbal peer interactions in general, and in all 54 activities there were no TC interactions wherein the teacher stimulated peer interactions. When children were in the classroom as a group, they were instructed to be quiet and listen to the teacher. We found no examples of a teacher stimulating the children to ask other children for help or to do something together.

Feedback

We observed hardly any feedback in any of the activities. When feedback occurred, it was aimed at confirming the desired behaviour of a child, mostly benefitting the organisation of routines. Many individual utterances by the children were ignored by the teacher. It was the teacher who decided which child got to say something and, in most cases, also the frame of what was allowed to be said. There were times when children wanted to speak, chat or stand up and take the floor, for example during circle time. However, in most cases, the children were asked to be quiet. The utterances of children who were already proficient in Dutch (school) language skills, however, were more easily recognised and valued by the teacher, which resulted in more opportunities to speak and to interact. Sometimes, they took the floor by speaking out loud in a way that the teacher appreciated, even when they broke the 'be quiet' rule by doing so. A salient example was during a snack time for class 1 on 18 September 2015. The children were having a snack in the corner of the classroom where the circle times were also held. Pan flute music was playing and the children had to be quiet. When a child was ready, he or she had to wait in silence on the bench until the rest of the group was ready. The teacher paid extra attention to this and rebuked the children when they were not silent. She also verbally prompted the children to continue and to hurry up with their snack. The most common utterances of the teacher were: '*shush*', '*good*', '*thumbs up*' and '*carry on eating*'. A nonverbal interaction between focal child Precious and another girl (Maya) took place. Both children looked at each other, made funny faces and laughed. Even though they hardly made a sound, the teacher reprimanded focal child Precious: '*shush, Precious!*' She did not address Maya. One minute later, another girl (Ante, a Dutch speaking girl) asked and got the floor:

- Ante: Miss?
 Teacher: Yes, Ante?
 Ante: I ate an ice cream with my granny.
 Teacher: Did you eat ice cream with your granny?
 Ante: Yes, with chocolate.
 Teacher: With chocolate?
 Ante: Yes, at home.
 Teacher: At home? In your granny's house or in your house?
 Ante: With my granny.
 Teacher: With your granny. So she has ice cream in the house? Wow!
 Ante: One ice cream, not two!
 Teacher: No, not two!

This scene suggests that native speaker Ante was given the opportunity to speak because of her assertiveness and her skills, and probably because her social and cultural capital was in line with that of the school.

We also frequently observed an interaction with a focal child being ended in favour of an interaction with another child, thus hindering opportunities for language-rich conversations with the focal child. For example, while putting on coats, focal child Yano of class 4 was called by the teacher to help with his coat. ‘*Yes, come here, Yano!*’ This could have been a perfect occasion for an individual verbal interaction between the teacher and the child, and this may very well have been the intention of the teacher. However, other children demanded the teacher’s attention and received it. Yano, in turn, did not ask for personal attention and remained quiet, missing the opportunity for interaction. Our observations illustrate how the teachers’ behaviour of unintended prioritising when caught up in these routine moments influences opportunities for interaction.

Discussion

High expectations are set for preschool education as offering powerful equalising opportunities for migrant children and their development in general, and their language development in particular. However, the setting and the working conditions of local ECEC contexts may seriously affect a teacher’s potential ability to meet these expectations. In the Flemish pre-primary educational system, the typically large groups with their specific group composition—separating the youngest children from their older peers—have downsides that may be considered challenging for teachers. In their transition to school, most children are unfamiliar with the ins and outs of their class and its daily routines, and have no experienced peers to socialise them.

In our study, we observed that the teachers concentrated predominantly on structure and routines. Earlier research (Van Laere and Vandenbroeck 2018) suggests that they do this out of a concern to socialise the children as soon as possible and to include them in learning processes. In so doing, there is a risk of neglecting caring tasks, which are often considered a hindrance for teaching. However, the focus on structure and routines mostly impeded children from engaging in meaningful interactions with the teacher and with peers, jeopardising the full realisation of the learning possibilities for each child.

Our observations also suggest that disruption and noise may deepen existing inequalities. Indeed, children have to combine verbal assertiveness with an active knowledge of the school language and routines to be able to rise above the disturbance and obtain reciprocal verbal interactions with the teacher. Requests or attempts of children who are more insecure, verbally less assertive or hesitant are more often overlooked in the turmoil. This gives the already privileged children (who use the school language at home) more opportunities for meaningful interactions with the teacher. Conversely, most remarks, reprimands or restrictions are aimed at children who have difficulties in understanding routines and the school language. Because of the focus on group management and structure, there is a lack of additional attention given to children with more caring needs. Paradoxically, children who are less familiar with the school language and its routines (for example, because of a different cultural background) have to rely more on their own initiative and are often left unaided to learn the structure and the routines. Consequently, they are made responsible for their own learning process. Moreover, we never observed a situation where a child was stimulated to ask other children for help or to give support to another child. The children in our study missed opportunities and were not encouraged to care for each other and to learn from one another. There are no indications that this might

be the result of a deliberate choice by the teachers. Instead, we assume that the behaviour of the teachers is based on an implicit bias and co-constructed by the systemic conditions of large classrooms where all children without preschool experience are enrolled together.

Considering the low number of verbal peer interactions, the children were mainly dependent on teachers to further their Dutch language skills. One-on-one interactions with teachers are therefore paramount. However, they did not occur for each child during each activity, and when they occurred, these moments were short and did not initiate verbal interaction. There were hardly any conversational turns consisting of more than a closed question followed by a short answer. Moreover, we only found a few examples where the teachers expanded the vocabulary of the children in an individual interaction. The most extensive conversations took place in interactions with children who already possessed adequate Dutch language skills.

Seven of the eight focal children were multilingual, yet this was barely apparent in the four classes. The home languages of the children were not valued and the few examples where teachers used a home language in individual interactions were intended to better control the behaviour of the children. The full potential of including multilingualism in the class practice was never reached, nor was it used to expand meaningful learning experiences for the children.

Conclusion

Part of the problem ...

The aim of the present study was to examine the first school experiences of children at risk of social exclusion. Driven by the growing number of longitudinal studies that show the overall positive effects of preschool attendance, this study was designed to unravel the emergence of learning opportunities for the youngest children in the Flemish pre-primary education system. The results point towards a paradox. While it is often readily assumed that preschools matter and may contribute to reducing inequalities in education, the findings suggest that preschools may also be part of the problem, rather than part of the solution. Classroom interaction of high quality and a rich verbal interaction climate is pivotal to enhancing language learning. However, our study suggests that this potential is not always reached. Both the quantity and the quality of individual verbal interactions were found to be low, and the opportunities for children's language production were very scarce. This was especially true for children with a home language different from the dominant one in the school as feedback was almost non-existent and often interrupted by children with more skills in the dominant language. According to the meta-study of (Hattie 2008), the quality of feedback is essential for learning in schools.

... Or part of the solution?

This suggests that mere attendance at preschool might reproduce or even increase the existing inequalities when poor verbal classroom interaction quality is observed. Consequently, the findings of this study have a number of implications for future practice. First, they show the importance of continuous professional development and coaching of preschool staff in working with children in contexts of increasing diversity and migration. Second, they

bring the systemic conditions in which early years' professionals work to the fore. Providing inclusive care and education for a diversity of young children and their families asks for a competent ECEC system that goes beyond individual competencies (Urban et al. 2012). Necessary preconditions for enabling this includes cooperation and appreciation among colleagues, accompanied by child-free hours that facilitate group reflection and are supported by the active involvement of team leaders or principals (Van Laere and Vandenbroeck 2018). When professionals are given opportunities for collegial consulting, to observe and critically reflect on each other's practice and build strong relationships with the community and the parents, they can break down the walls of their own classrooms and evolve together with their team towards a professional learning community that fosters both wellbeing and learning opportunities for all children and their families (Sharmahd et al. 2017).

Limitations of the present study

One major limitation of this study is its relatively small scale. Data on the experiences of eight children cannot be generalised nor is it representative for the whole population of toddlers starting preschool. Moreover, only four types of activities were selected for the analysis of individual verbal interactions. To fully grasp the learning opportunities, more detailed observations and the analysis of interactional practices at a micro level are necessary. A second weakness of the study is the fact that we did not use validated instruments such as the Caregiver Interaction Profile (CIP) or the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS). Because of the specificity of the data and in line with the research objectives, a self-constructed framework for the evaluation of verbal interactions was chosen, having made use of an array of validated instruments. The last notable limitation is that we did not involve the teachers in the selection or the analysis of the activities. Although we watched some of the video material with three teachers, their own assumptions, values and beliefs were not considered, as these were not the focus of the present study. Therefore, it is difficult to interpret some of the results, and further research will need to unveil teachers' beliefs about early (language) learning.

Notwithstanding these limitations, by integrating qualitative and quantitative data we have been able to obtain a glimpse into the black box of what really happens in preschool classes and have unravelled micro mechanisms that potentially might enforce existing inequalities.

Note

1. All the names have been changed to maintain anonymity.

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