

Belgium: Flemish Community

Auspices

In the Flemish Community of Belgium, a clear division exists in responsibility for education and care. All childcare arrangements must be reported to *Kind & Gezin*, a governmental, public agency dependent on the Flemish Minister of Welfare, Health and Equal Opportunities. *Kind & Gezin* officially supervises the great majority of such arrangements and subsidises a significant number of them. In addition to providing daycare places, *Kind & Gezin* has responsibility for policy and inspection of out-of-school care. Local authorities and non-profit organisations also have a role in providing childcare, a role that is partly historical and, in some cases, partly in response to initiatives being developed by *Kind en Gezin*.

The Ministry of Education of the Flemish Community has competence for education matters in Flanders and sets the broad aims and objectives of education in the Community (the Federal Government sets the requirements for diplomas, the duration of compulsory schooling and pensions). In parallel, there is considerable autonomy to organise schools, a freedom originally established to guarantee confessional choice. Most schools and educational services fall under one of three main umbrella organisations or networks: *Official Community Education* that is, non-confessional, Flanders Community education, covering 13% of children; *Official Subsidised Education* organised by local authorities, covering 22% of children; and *Private Subsidised Education* covering 65% of pupils. The Federal Government intervenes with regard to minimum requirements for diplomas, beginning and end of compulsory education, pensions, tax benefits for childcare costs, parental leave and career breaks, or with the regions, in employment policy.

Developments

Flemish society has become increasingly multicultural, and there is growing public awareness of immigrant issues, poverty and the need for equity. Child poverty levels have been reduced to a low level, and a main policy concern is to make regular care and early education accessible to all children who need it, irrespective of their family situation, their socio-economic background or their ethnic origin. Demand for childcare is growing rapidly, and legislation is before parliament to expand services by another 10,000 places over a period of four years. There emerges also a strong concern to improve quality in care, especially to make care settings more educational and stimulating for infants and toddlers. Much effort is being invested in professional development, especially in the subsidised sector.

In early education, a universal and well-organised system has been in place for decades. There is a firm determination to promote equity and quality across the system, and significant funds are being invested on behalf of low-income and immigrant children. Another important policy orientation is to bring pre-primary (the *kleuterschool*) and school closer together, so as to make basic education a cohesive unity. Goals are elaborated in the “Developmental Objectives” or minimum goals (knowledge, insights, skills and attitudes) considered desirable and attainable by children in primary and pre-primary classes. At the same time, there is widespread recognition that pre-primary has its own specificity, that of developing the total personality of the child. Many in-service training opportunities are offered to *kleuterschool* teachers, and new co-constructive approaches to inspection, quality improvement and control are being put into place. The research capacity of the universities and their ability to bring quality instruments and new pedagogies into the system is also another strength.

Context

Expenditure on ISCED Level 0 institutions as a percentage of GDP¹: 0.5% for Belgium as a whole.

Labour force rates: In Flanders, 74.2% of women with a child under 5 years participate in the labour force.

¹. See introduction to Appendix I.

Parental leave: Universal paid maternity leave is 15 weeks (17 weeks for a multiple birth) with a partly paid parental leave to 3 months full-time or 6 months part-time before the age of 4 years. Universal paid leave for fathers just after a birth has recently increased from 3 to 10 days.

Attention to children with special educational needs before compulsory education begins a) *Children with disabilities* - In Flanders, the tradition has been to support these children at home, but there is growing awareness of the benefits of including children with light handicaps in ECEC. Since 2001, a number of daycare centres and out-of-school facilities receive substantial extra funds to receive children with disabilities. Subsequent special education is well funded, though often separate from mainstream provision. b) *SES children:* the child poverty level is 4.8% after redistribution; c) *Ethnic and bilingual children:* About 16% of children under three years are from immigrant backgrounds. The government makes significant investments in social exclusion and priority education programmes.

Provision

Both daycare and early education are characterised by mixed public and private provision, funded by the Flemish Government. Education from 2.5 years is free, with supplementary investments given to schools catering for low-income/ethnic areas and families. *Kleuterschool* are operated by the different networks (see above), each group being financed or subsidised by the Government.

In the subsidised care sector, parents pay fees, according to income, on average, 25.5% of actual costs in daycare centres and 69.4% of costs in family daycare (2001). All parents are granted tax benefits to recuperate these costs, up to 100% of €11.16 daily (2002 rates). Services (daycare centres and family daycare) are mostly used by working mothers in dual-income families, although statistics show that there is also a strong uptake by single-parent families.

- *0-1 year:* In the first year, maternal care predominates. Between 6 months and 1 year, about 52% of children use daycare (centres, family daycare and informal daycare. Because tax relief is offered to families that use care supervised by Kind & Gezin, the use of informal daycare is limited.
- *1-3 years :* From 1-2.5 years, about 55% of children use daycare, 28.8% on a full-time basis and 71.2% part-time. From 2.5 years, only 31.7% of children still use daycare. Overall from 1 to 3 years, 25.7% of children use a daycare centre, 38.3% a family daycare facility, 1.4% an out-of-school facility, and 33.6% informal daycare, usually grandparents (2001). Daycare centres are often open 10-12 hours per day.
- *2.5-5 years:* 85% coverage at 2.5 years in free pre-primary school. Almost 100% coverage at 3- 4 years (at 98.4% in 1997-98). The pre-primary school opens daily (half-day Wednesday) from 8.30 - 15.30, with after-school care if needed.

Child-staff ratios: Child-staff ratios in subsidised daycare centres are 7:1. From 2003, this ratio will improve to 6.8:1 and from 2005 to 6.5:1. In the *kleuterschool*, government has likewise invested to improve ratios, and has reduced the maximum child-staff ratio to 18:1 (1998-99), but numbers can be greater or lesser depending on the time of the year.

Staffing and training: The division between care and education is reflected in the training and status of staff in each sector. Staff in subsidised daycare centres are generally trained childcare workers (*kinderverzorgster*), who have taken the professional stream in education and are given one further year of specialisation in their field. Trainees do not receive a strong theoretical base for their future work. Family daycarers in subsidised provision are selected by interview, and receive an in-training of between four to sixty hours. Afterwards, though regularly visited and guided by Kind & Gezin supervisors, they benefit little from further in-training. In contrast, intensive in-training of childcare workers in the subsidised centres is provided within their contractual hours.

In the *kleuterschools*, the *kleuteronderwijzers(essen)* (nursery school teachers) are trained at tertiary level for three years in teacher training colleges alongside primary and lower secondary teachers. In-service training is well developed in the education sector, and the Ministry of Education devolves substantial training budgets to the level of the school. The umbrella organisations are also required by the Quality Decree to engage in in-service training activities and quality inspection.

OECD Policy Issues

Among the issues for policy attention identified by the OECD Review team for Flanders were:

Better child-staff ratios for the early years classes: Traditionally in the *kleuterschool* (kindergarten), there has been no guarantee of favourable adult-child ratios or of group size for children of 30 months upwards. Since September 2001, pre-primary schools with at least 35 children receive extra hours for employing child care workers.

Co-ordination of care and education: There seems to be a need for greater co-ordination between the systems to promote coherent policy and provision. The co-operation that took place as a result of the OECD visit has been a useful starting point for considering the issue.

Status and training of personnel: Several issues arose in this field: a) the barriers that exist to hinder the movement of personnel from one system to another. Since September 2000, pre-primary schools can employ childcare workers; b) the relatively low status and pedagogical training of childcare workers and family day-care providers (considerably better in-service opportunities are offered to subsidised childcare centre staff). c) the scarcity of staff from ethnic origins, and the weakness of multicultural training at many levels.

Inclusiveness: Since the review, several innovative and publicly funded projects (MEQ, OVB and *Zorgverbreding*) to address the needs of immigrant children have been developed or extended. Outcome targets and measures for the different groups might also be considered, so as to measure the effectiveness of programmes. From 1 September 2002, OVB and *Zorgverbreding* will be replaced by the new "Gelijke onderwijskansenbeleid" (policy for equal opportunities in education).