

Belgium – French Community

Auspices

In the French Community of Belgium, education and care are divided administratively, although brought together under the Minister of Childhood (Ministre de l'Enfance). The Minister has full competence for early care and basic education (the *école maternelle* and primary education) within the French Community. Some policy and funding responsibilities have been devolved to the two regions, Wallonie and Bruxelles-Capital.

For children from 0-3 years, the Minister relies on ONE (Office de la Naissance et de l'Enfance), a governmental, public agency responsible for mother and child health and protection, and for all aspects of childcare policy and provision. All settings, wishing to provide care to children under 6 years of age must declare themselves to the ONE, obtain its authorisation and bring their programme into conformity with the *Code de qualité de l'accueil*, decreed in May 1999.

The Minister of Childhood also designates the broad aims and objectives of basic education in the Community, which includes primary education and the *école maternelle* for children from 2.5-6 years. Most schools and educational services fall under one of three main umbrella organisations or networks: French Community Schools (non-confessional, covering 10% of children); the public network of Communal Schools, organised by local communes, covering 50% of children; and the Free or Private Schools (including the voluntary, state-aided Catholic system) covering 40% of pupils.

Developments

In the French Community, childcare and the *école maternelle* are seen as powerful tools against social exclusion, and a privileged means of integrating "at risk" children (including immigrant children) into the education system. At the same time, the *universal* right to early care and education is emphasised, and is implemented through the *école maternelle*, which is open to all children from the age of 2.5 years.

In the care sector, the wish to improve the quality of services has given rise to management reform, concertation and planning. A code of quality for child services was decreed in 1999, based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and European Union recommendations. Emphasis is placed too on training and professional development. There is high take-up of training opportunities, particularly in Brussels where the FRAJE, a training association attached to the region, has been very active (see Box 3.3 in Chapter 3). There are also efforts to create new municipal posts to co-ordinate early childhood services in different milieus.

At the *école maternelle*, the focus on quality has given rise to official guidelines (*Décret mission*), drawing attention to fundamental goals, such as developing the creativity of children, early learning, socialisation and citizenship, and the early diagnosis of disability or special need. Consultations are taking place to translate these guidelines into a curriculum that can be used by teachers in all *écoles maternelles*. In-service training is also seen as a privileged instrument to improve the understanding and professional practice of personnel. It is planned to bring together the different networks for common training sessions. The commitment of university researchers to the early childhood sector is great, and in collaboration with teachers and staff, they carry out many action-research projects on the ground. An important signal to the early childhood sector sent out by the government has been the recent decision to upgrade pre-school teacher salaries to a level equivalent to that of their primary school colleagues.

Context

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

Labour force rates: in Belgium, 82.7% of women aged 25-34 years participate in the labour market. 31.5% work part-time.

Parental leave: universal paid maternity leave is 15 weeks, with partly paid parental leave to 3 months full-time or 6 months part-time before the age of 4 years.

Attention to children with special educational needs before compulsory education begins: a) *Children with disabilities:* in Belgium, the tradition has been to support these children when young in the home, but there is growing awareness of the benefits of including children with light handicaps in ECEC. Special education is well funded, though often separate from mainstream provision; b) *Children from low-income families:* after redistribution mechanisms, the child poverty level for Belgium as a whole is 4.4%, but poverty can be more severe in low-income neighbourhoods in the large cities of the French Community; c) *Ethnic and bilingual children:* immigrant children constitute 12% of the basic school population, reaching 30% in Brussels. Strong government investment in social exclusion and priority education programmes exists.

Provision

In both care and education, the system is one of mixed public and private provision. Education from 2.5 years is free, with special supports for low-income/ethnic areas and families. In the care sector, parents pay fees to recognised services, according to income, from 17%-25% of actual costs. In turn, they are granted tax benefits to recuperate these costs, up to 80% or 345BF daily. In the care sector, provision is publicly subsidised and supervised when supplied by community services, and supervised only when provided by private bodies, e.g. private family day-care. In the education sector, *écoles maternelles* are operated by official, community and private networks – almost completely financed by the French Community Government.

0-1 year: parental care predominates, although many infants from three months are enrolled in the public crèches. Because of regulations and tax-credits paid to families for use of accredited services, there is little informal care except familial.

1-3 years: 21.5% full- or half-day coverage of children in day-care centres and a further 12% in family day-care. Further care is provided by drop-in services (*haltes-garderies*, etc.) and by informal, non-registered childminders. Normally, the registered services open 10-12 hours per day.

2.5-5 years: 85% half-day coverage from 30 months in free pre-school. Almost 100% of children are enrolled at 3-4 years. The pre-school is open daily (half-day Wednesday) from 8.30-15.30, with after-school care available if needed.

Child-staff ratios: in childcare, ratios are as follows: in centre-based day-care (*crèche*) 1 children's nurse (*puéricultrice*) for 7 children; in family day-care, 1 adult for 3 children. Crèches (18-48 places) must also employ a medical nurse and trained social worker, one of whom is generally the manager. In the *école maternelle*, the maximal child-staff ratio is 19 to 1, but in most cases, it is much less. *Puéricultrices* are often employed to assist teachers with the younger children.

Staffing and training

The division between care and education is reflected in the training and status of staff in each sector. The *puéricultrices* in the care sector have a secondary level, four-year general professional course, followed by two years (16-18 years) of child nursing, which comprises a number of paramedical courses and practical placements. Their salary level is low, about half that of a pre-school teacher. Personnel in family day-care or *maisons d'enfants* (children's centres) are required simply to have a "useful experience" although in the *maisons d'enfants*, many *puéricultrices* are found. Much in-service training is available, especially for personnel belonging to community services in Brussels. In the *école maternelle*, teachers are trained at tertiary level for three years in one of 14 higher education colleges. The Community devolves in-training budgets to the level of the school, which must organise eleven days training per year. The umbrella organisations are also required to engage in training activities and inspection of quality.

OECD policy issues

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

Understandings of gender roles, and the reconciliation of work and family life: there are ambiguities in the roles offered to women – in principle, equal opportunity to work, but in practice, an insufficient number of affordable childcare places, a low benefit parental leave scheme and little paternal participation in parental leave. Together, these conditions create an incentive for poorly educated mothers to leave the workforce and remain at home. Key issue here are: the level of parental leave benefit, the duration of leave, a more diversified supply of affordable services and more flexible work conditions that provide an opportunity for paternal time with children.

Understandings of childhood and early development: the construction of childhood in the French Community has been based on a clear division between care and education. Although services still remain apart, a more unified approach

is being adopted today, which could be further strengthened through greater co-ordination between the services, and the dissemination of a common psycho-pedagogical vision in the training of *puéricultrices* and teachers. In this regard, a unifying factor may be the Belgian tradition of the *école maternelle*, especially its understanding that early learning takes primarily through play, discovery and the child's own activity.

The coherent organisation of after-school provision: the situation on the ground is unsatisfactory for many young children, for whom after-school provision is not available or is little better than "supervision" on school premises. Both supply and quality need to be increased, the parents and networks consulted and supported, and a particular effort made to provide adequately for disadvantaged families and children.

The need to value the social role of the école maternelle: the *école maternelle* in Belgium often plays close attention to identifying and supporting children in need of special educational support. This tradition should be further strengthened as late diagnosis can lead to children "at risk" being placed in special classes in primary school, which may reinforce their sense of failure. The opening toward immigrant communities, practised in many *écoles maternelles*, should also be disseminated widely and encouraged.

Greater co-operation between the school networks and the local authorities so as to make transitions for children easier between family, care, school, or out-of-school hours.