

## Netherlands

### Auspices

ECEC policy and provision in the Netherlands is a shared responsibility between national, provincial and local governments. The national government takes on those tasks that can be more efficiently organised at national level, *e.g.* legislation, rules and regulations, developing policy frameworks, formulating national standards and attainment targets, promoting innovations, national monitoring and evaluations of quality. At central government level, two ministries have major responsibility for young children. The Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport (VWS), has responsibility for family support, socio-educational activities and the funding and supervision of out-of-home childcare. The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCenW) is responsible for children in primary education from 4-6 years (compulsory schooling begins at 5 years but children remain in the early years cycle up to 6 years). In addition to the different levels of local government, other major bodies are expected to play a role in decision making and implementing early childhood policy, *viz.* the employers, unions, parent, youth and other professional organisations.

### Developments

After a period of decentralisation, the Dutch Government is moving toward an integrated framework of services for young children from 0-6 years, crossing traditional education, social welfare and preventive youth healthcare lines, and achieving consensus with local authorities about ECEC policy goals. Much work has been done to tighten up regulatory frameworks, training regimes and quality control. National standards and attainment targets are becoming better known. A special focus is given to children “at risk”, including ethnic or bilingual children, toward whom increasing government and local authority investments are being made. Another striking feature of Dutch early childhood policy has been the use of an experimental phase to trial innovative programmes in ECEC. A number of such programmes are now being mainstreamed to the advantage of children both in school and outside. Dutch governments have also succeeded in involving employers in the ECEC sector as a major funder of childcare provision.

### Context

*Expenditure on ISCED Level 0 institutions as a percentage of GDP:* 0.4%. The Dutch background report and further communications from the Ministries provide information of massive new investments in ECEC both by central government and municipalities, especially toward children “at risk”.

*Labour force rates:* in 1999, 78.5% of women aged 25-34 years participated in the labour force. 55.7% worked part time.

*Parental leave:* 16 weeks maternity leave at 100% earnings + non-paid, partial leave (must work 50% of regular working hours per week) up to six months. Family-friendly work policies have been introduced and initiatives to bring flexibility into the length and timing of work hours.

*Attention to children with special educational needs before their entry into compulsory school:* a) *Children with disabilities:* with a growing awareness of the benefits of including children with light handicaps in ECEC, more children are being integrated into mainstream services. Subsequent special education is well funded, though often apart; b) *Children from low-income families:* the child poverty rate is 7.7% after redistribution; c) *Ethnic and bilingual children:* the immigrant population is significant in the Netherlands: 13% of children between 0-5 years are from ethnic or bilingual backgrounds, mainly concentrated in the large cities. Government and local authorities make important investments in social integration and targeted educational programmes.

## Provision

Three “circles of provision” have been created around the child and family i) *General provision* for young children aged 0-6 years; ii) *Interventions* toward families and children who need special attention, and iii) *Specialised or intensive forms of help for children with special education needs* (SEN).

General provision includes childcare in *childcare centres* for 0-4 years (generally full-day or half-day), *family day-care* (for the youngest children) and *out-of-school care* for the 4-12 year olds. Each type of provision has its own aim, background, funding system and governing structure. Childcare for 0-4 years is used by about 20% of children, out-of-school care is used by 5.3% of children; and places in family day-care amount to about 10% of the total volume of childcare for 0-12 year olds. There are also *playgroups* (used by over 50% of 2-4 year olds) and *pre-primary education* for 4-6 year olds which takes place in the *basisschool* and is the first stage (though non-compulsory) of primary education (100% enrolment). Primary education is free. Two-thirds of schools are privately managed, but all are fully publicly funded.

Childcare provision is private (both for-profit and non-profit) but publicly co-funded. Though the parental share of total costs is high (over 40%), childcare costs are subsidised by government and employers. Employers are an important stakeholder, either setting up their own childcare services or, more usually, purchasing or renting “company places” in childcare centres. These places represented about 50% of all childcare places for 0-4 year olds in 1998. Cost ceilings are calculated by the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport. Depending on income, costs to parents range from 6%-21% of net family income for a full-time place in childcare. Parental fees are related to the actual use of childcare, and some costs can be deducted from income tax. The aim of government is to fund childcare equally through (local) government, employers and parental fees.

Childcare provision mainly targets families with two working parents, resulting in a marked tendency for middle- and high-income parents to use services more than low-income families. Despite a fourfold increase in places in the nineties, the demand for day-care places still outstrips supply in the Netherlands.

Playgroups are the most popular form of provision for 2-4 year olds in the Netherlands, usually established by private bodies with the legal status of foundations. Many of these foundations are independent; others are part of a larger co-operative structure, frequently a childcare organisation or general welfare foundation. Children usually visit the playgroups twice a week (2-3 hours per visit) to play with their peers or participate in an intervention programme. Almost all playgroup provision is subsidised by local government, but parental contributions are also demanded, often income-related. Special efforts are directed to children at risk (children from low-income families and from ethnic minorities) in both playgroups and primary schools. In addition to the *Law On Funding Education Disadvantage*, further significant investments are planned – 100 million guilders each by central and local governments – in the effort to expand playgroups and provide more intensive programmes in schools and outside school.

*Child-staff ratios:* child-staff ratios in childcare are set for each age cohort. One qualified group leader (either MBO or HBO level, see below) must be assigned to every 4 children, ages 0-1; to 5 children, ages 1-2; to 6 children, ages 2-3; to 8 children, ages 3-4; and to 10 children, ages 4-12. Staff ratios in the early years of the basic school are higher, but have been reduced recently to 1:20. As large investments are being made to improve general quality and to integrate more effectively children at risk, it is probable that class sizes may be reduced further.

## Staff training and ratios

The status of staff, almost wholly female, has traditionally been low, particularly in the day-care and playgroup sector. Acute recruitment problems and staff shortages are now imminent but efforts are being made to address the issue through raising wages and improving secondary labour conditions. ECEC workers in contact with children must have, in principle, a higher professional qualification, either a HBO (four-year tertiary, non-university qualification) or an MBO (a senior secondary level, vocational education qualification of two-three years). Quality regulations with regard to childcare also apply to the out-of-school care and to play-groups, including staff qualifications. In the education sector, teaching staff are trained for four years in the PABOs or primary teaching training colleges (HBO), as polyvalent teachers who can work in the entire 4-12 year age range. They take, however, a specialisation for either the age group 4-8 years or 5-12 years. Regardless of what class they teach, all teachers are now paid at equal rates.

## OECD policy issues

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

*Coherence and co-ordination of services:* during the early years of decentralisation, the co-ordination and coherence of the system was often stretched in terms of management, training and categorisation of personnel, equitable access and quality control.

*Understandings of childhood and early education:* during the early 90s, ECEC was mainly seen from a protection and care angle. Progress is being made, particularly in playgroup and early primary school provision, where a number of

improved educational programme are coming on stream. However, the institutional division between care and education still remains, leading to quite separate treatment of infant/toddlers and pre-schoolers.

*Greater support to parents.* the funding of Dutch ECEC services relies heavily on parents in terms of fees, opportunity costs and daily time devoted to children, a contribution borne in particular by mothers. The review team recommends further attention to gender issues. A reduction of costs to parents may also be necessary, particularly to encourage greater use of services by low-income parents. The parental contribution to child-rearing could further be supported by expanded maternity and parental leave and the provision of more out-of-school care.

*Staffing and training.* imminent staff shortages may be explained by a combination of factors, but within the care sector, relatively low status, uncertainty about career paths, poorer work conditions and wages, are issues that merit attention.