

The 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 years up. Obligatory schooling begins at 5 years, but 4 year olds are allowed to enter primary education, and almost all of them (98,6 %) do so. 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 toward achieving consensus with local authorities about ECEC policy goals. Much work has been done and is still being 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, in whom large government and local authority investments are being made in recent years. This increase of investments on a national scale is at least partly the spin off of another striking feature of Dutch early childhood policy: the use of an experimental phase to trial innovative programmes. A number of such programmes, including intensive pre-primary early education programmes, have been validated by research. The outcomes were recognised at the political level as valuable. These programs are now being mainstreamed to the advantage of children both in school and outside. Another ongoing development is the involvement by the Dutch government of employers in the ECEC sector, as a major funder of childcare provision.

Context

Expenditure on ISCED Level 0 institutions - Expenditure on ISCED Level 0 pre-primary is less than 0,4%. (OECD median expenditure is 4.4%). The Dutch background report and further communications from the Ministries provide evidence, however, of massive new investments in ECEC both by central government and municipalities, especially toward children "at risk".

Labour force rates: in 2000, 77.3% of women aged 25-34 years participated in the labour force. 56.8% 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: 15% 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 daycare* and *out-of-school care* for the 4-12 year olds. Childcare for 0-4 years is used by 20,% out of school care is used by about 5% of children between 4 and 12 years old and places in family day-care amount to 6,25% of the total volume of childcare for 0-12 year olds. There are also *playgroups* (used by over 50-70% of 2-4 year olds) and *primary education* for 4-12 year olds, which takes place in the *basisschool*. 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 2000. 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 double-income families, resulting in a marked tendency for well-to-do parents to use services more than low-income families. Despite great progress in the nineties (a fourfold increase in places), the demand for day-care places still outstrips supply in the Netherlands, as in most OECD countries.

Playgroups are the most popular form of provision for 2 - 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 (over 80%) is subsidised by local government, but parental contributions are also demanded, often income-related. Special efforts are directed to children at risk (low SES, ethnic minorities in both playgroups and primary schools. In two years time (2000-2002) a steep increase in budget (€ 95 million extra) has been realised for the implementation of ECEC-programs for those at risk. Policy target is to enrol over 50 % of the 2 to 6 year old at risk children in these intense and special educational programmes.

Due to an agreement between the national government and the Union of Dutch Municipalities, the municipalities are expected to raise their expenditure on behalf of the 0 – 6 year olds at the same rate. At the moment local investments do not yet meet this level, but the effort will be intensified.

Child-staff ratios: Child-staff ratios in childcare are set for each age cohort. One qualified group leader (MBO or HBO level) 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 20:1. 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 daycare 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 2-3 years). Quality regulations with regard to childcare also apply to the out-of-school care and – to a certain extent (through local bylaws and the collective labour agreement & Salary Decree) - 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 were:

Coherence and co-ordination of services: During 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. In this area, the most remarkable development are the local initiatives to intensify collaboration and even the merging of child provisions like school, playgroup and childcare/out of school care, into community schools or child centres. Motivated by the policy freedom due to decentralisation at the one hand, and demands from society at the other hand (collaborated effort to fight educational disadvantages, enhancing enrolment in to the labour market of both parents, prevent juvenile delinquency) an alley strategy predominates at the local level.

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. Recent large scale implementation of targeted educational programmes in preschool playgroups and primary schools has enhanced the cooperation, moving towards an integrated approach.

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 recommends a reduction of parental costs, supported by expanded maternal and parental (for fathers as well as mothers) 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.