

OECD Country Note

Early Childhood Education and Care Policy

in

the Flemish Community of

Belgium

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Purposes of the Thematic Review

1. This Country Note for the Flemish Community of Belgium (hereafter referred to as Flanders) is an output of the OECD *Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy*, a project launched by the OECD's Education Committee in March 1998. The impetus for the project came from the 1996 Ministerial meeting on *Making Lifelong Learning a Reality for All*. In their communiqué, the Education Ministers assigned a high priority to the goal of improving access and quality in early childhood education, in partnership with families, with the aim of strengthening the foundations of lifelong learning (OECD, 1996). The goal of the review is to provide cross-national information to improve policy-making in early childhood education and care in all OECD countries.¹

2. Belgium is one of twelve countries participating in the review between 1998 and 2000. The others are Australia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States. These countries provide a diverse range of social, economic and political contexts, as well as varied policy approaches toward the education and care of young children.

3. The scope of the review covers children from birth to compulsory school age, as well as the transition to primary schooling. In order to examine thoroughly what children experience in the first years of life, the review has adopted a broad, holistic approach to study early childhood policy and provision. To that end, consideration has been given to the roles of families, communities and other environmental influences on children's early learning and development. In particular, the review is investigating concerns about *quality*, *access* and *equity* with an emphasis on policy development in the following areas: regulations; staffing; programme content and implementation; family engagement and support; funding and financing.

4. As part of the review process, each country hosts a review team for an intensive case study visit. After each country visit, the OECD produces a short Country Note that draws together background materials and the review team's observations. The present report for Flanders will be one input into the final OECD Comparative Report that will provide a review and analysis of ECEC (early childhood education and care) policy in all twelve countries participating in the review.

¹ A detailed description of the review's objectives, analytical framework, and methodology is provided in OECD (1998).

Flanders' participation in the Review

5. Belgium was the seventh country to be visited in the review, one week each being devoted to the Flemish and French Communities. Prior to the review visit to the Flemish Community, an excellent and wide-ranging Background Report on ECEC policy in Flanders was provided by Professor Ferre Laevers and Ruth Janssens on behalf of the Steering Committee convened by the Ministry of Education of Flanders. Guided by a common framework that has been accepted by all participating countries, the Background Report provides a concise overview of the country context, major issues and concerns, distinctive ECEC policies and provision, innovative approaches and available evaluation data. The Background Reports are an important output of the review process, because they provide a state-of-the-art overview and analysis of policy and provision in each participating country.

6. After analysis of the Background Report and other documents, a review team composed of OECD Secretariat members and experts with diverse analytic and policy backgrounds (see Appendix I) visited Flanders from 18–23 October 1999. The six-day visit was co-ordinated by the Flemish Ministry of Education, working in close collaboration with *Kind en Gezin* (which has responsibility for developing childcare policies - see below). In the course of the visit, the team met with many of the major actors involved in ECEC policy and practice and had the opportunity to observe a number of examples of early childhood programmes for 0-6 year olds (up to 12 years for out-of-school care - see Appendix III). Discussions revolved around six main issues:

- the ECEC context, major policy concerns, and policy responses to address these concerns;
- the roles of national government, decentralised authorities, and other social partners, and the institutional resources devoted to planning and implementation at each level;
- feasible policy options that are suited to the Flemish context;
- the impact, coherence and effectiveness of different approaches;
- innovative policies and practices, and their potential for replication; and
- types of data and instruments that exist, or should be developed, in support of ECEC policy-making, research and evaluation.

Structure of the Report

7. The Country Note presents the review team's analyses of key policy issues related to ECEC in Flanders. It draws upon information provided in the Background Report, formal and informal discussions, literature surveys and the observations of the review team. In addition to the present introduction that forms Chapter 1, the structure of the report is as follows:

- Chapter 2: *Contextual issues shaping ECEC policy in Flanders*. This chapter includes a very brief overview of some demographic, labour market, gender status, economic and social features, and governance.

- Chapter 3: *Overview of current ECEC policy and provision in Flanders*. The description focuses on the broad structure of the system. Information is provided on the early education and care services and on the policy context in which decisions concerning young children are made.
- Chapter 4: *Issues arising from the visit* outlines the more important issues related to policy and practice in ECEC that were identified by the reviewers in the course of studying the Flanders. The six issues chosen are:
 - early entry to education;
 - co-ordination of care and education;
 - status and training of personnel;
 - issues of diversity - immigrants/ethnic minorities and children with disabilities;
 - the role of parents within ECEC; and
 - the implications of demographic change.
- Chapter 5: *Conclusions* offers some concluding remarks that policy-makers in Flanders may wish to consider in their discussions of early childhood policy and provision.

Acknowledgements

8. This report acknowledges the substantial public investment in early childhood education and care in Flanders and the firm commitment to future improvements that was evident among all the groups that we consulted. We would like to thank all those involved in preparing the Background Report and the comprehensive programme for the team review visit. The documentation was outstanding, and was made available to us in English. The reviewers also wish to place on record their appreciation of the open-minded and informative meetings that were held throughout the review process - also in English - that each group provided. The reviewers were also very grateful for the magnificent hospitality. In short, as well as being given a comprehensive overview of ECEC, we also had an excellent introduction to gastronomic life in Flanders!

9. Throughout the Country Note, the analyses and suggestions offered are tentative, in recognition of the difficulty facing a visiting review team - no matter how well briefed - in fully grasping the variety and complexity of a country-wide system and the range of issues that need to be taken into account. While all the members of the team are experienced as researchers and policy analysts in the field of ECEC, they are clearly influenced by their own cultural perspectives and histories. A six-day fieldwork period, even when multiplied by the number of members of a team, is limited in terms of the amount of data that can be collected and verified.

10. The facts and opinions expressed in the Country Note are the sole responsibility of the review team. While we have received every help from the Ministry of Education, *Kind en Gezin*, and from many researchers and practitioners in Flanders, they have no part in any shortcomings that this document may present. To mitigate the potential for misunderstanding or error, it is assumed that the Country Note will be read in conjunction with the Background Report issued by Flanders, as the two documents are intended to complement one another.

Terminology

11. All Flemish terms are explained at least once in the text. The following are among those most commonly used:

- *Diensten voor opvanggezinnen (DOGs)*: family daycarers who are affiliated to a childminding service recognised and subsidised by *Kind en Gezin* (see below).
- *IBO - Initiatief voor Buitenschoolse Opvang*: an initiative at municipal level, recognised by *Kind en Gezin*, for out-of-school care for children from 2.5 to 12 years.
- *Kind en Gezin*: a public agency reporting to the Minister of Welfare, Public Health and Equal Opportunity of the Flemish community, has responsibility for preventive health policies for all children, and childcare policy and practice for infants and toddlers aged 0-36 months and out-of-school care for children aged 30 months to 12 years.
- *Kinderdagverblijven*: daycare centres, usually set up by a local authority or non-profit organisation, which are recognised and subsidised by *Kind en Gezin*.
- *Kleuterleidster*: pre-school teacher.
- *Kleuterschool*, pl. *Kleuterscholen*: free pre-school provision for children 2.5 to 6 years, generally attached to a primary school.
- *Onderwijsnetten*: the main umbrella organisations -

Gemeenschapsonderwijs or Autonomous Council for Community Education: The Council provides non-denominational education in many communes covering 13% of pupils;

Officieel Gesubsidieerd Onderwijs or Official Subsidised Education, which is a network of schools organised by local authorities and which covers 18% of pupils; and

Vrij Gesubsidieerd Onderwijs or subsidised private or voluntary state-aided education, mainly Catholic schools, but also including some non-denominational schools, which covers 68% of pupils.

- *OVB Onderwijsvoorrangsbeleid voor migranten*: offers extra teacher hours and teacher training for schools with high percentages of children from ethnic minority backgrounds.
- *Zorgverbreding*: “extending care” programme aims to increase teacher hours and teacher training for marginalised groups of children who are at risk of failing at school.

12. The currency of Flanders is the Belgian franc. In February 2000, 40.34 BEF = 1 euro; 40.62 BEF = 1 US\$

CHAPTER 2: CONTEXTUAL ISSUES SHAPING ECEC POLICY IN FLANDERS.

Governance

13. From an outsider's point of view, policy on ECEC in Flanders, as on all other issues, is very much shaped by the complex federal structure of Belgium. Flanders encompasses two concepts: the Flemish autonomous region which is the northern Dutch speaking part of Belgium, and includes the cities of Brugge, Antwerp, Ghent and Leuven; and the Flemish Community which refers to all Flemish-speaking citizens including those in the metropolitan area of Brussels. There are approximately 5.8 million people within Flanders. The French Community is mainly based in the Walloon region in the south of Belgium and accounts for approximately 3 332 500 persons. Just under one million people live in the Brussels metropolitan region, which is officially bilingual and predominantly French speaking. There is a small German speaking community of approximately 70 500 persons in the east of Belgium.

14. Since 1970 there have been a series of constitutional steps by which Flanders has become an autonomous region within the federal state of Belgium. Although it has had a shared administrative history with other regions of Belgium, and in some respects has very similar patterns of provision, Flanders has sought to maintain its own cultural identity, in particular, to promote spoken and written Dutch. As one senior official put it to us: "Our language is a little language and we want to protect it". The federal state retains important areas of competence including most foreign affairs, defence, justice and social security. The Ministry of Education of the Flemish Community has competence, however, for all education matters with the Flemish community, with the exception of certain matters that are determined at the federal, Belgian level. These are the determination of the beginning and ending of compulsory education, the minimal conditions for the issuing of diplomas and the rules for retirement of teaching staff.

15. Flanders has had coalition governments, and the need to maintain political balance between the six parties has been critical in government policy-making. The most recent election has changed somewhat the political landscape, however, and new policies are now being drawn up in many areas including education. In the Flemish Parliament, the CVP coalition has now the largest block of seats, with the Liberal Party (*Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten*) being the largest party in the Flemish government. Other political parties include the *Christelijke Volkspartij* (Christian Democratic Party), the *Socialistische Partij* (Socialist Party), the *Anders Gaan Leven* (Green Party), the *Volksunie* (Flemish Nationalist Party) and the *Vlaams Blok*, an extreme rightwing party which is strong at local level, particularly in areas that traditionally have high immigrant populations, and most noticeably in Antwerp where they have secured 30% of the vote.

16. Flanders has 308 municipalities spread over 5 provinces, all of which have some autonomy of action in deciding local policy. Diverse patterns of governance are noticeable between cities because of varied political and social histories, and can lead to different approaches toward social and educational issues. Significant powers are further devolved by government onto thirty or so semi-autonomous organisations, or public institutions which take responsibility for a whole range of economic, environmental, cultural, scientific and social activities. Typically, these organisations report to a board

appointed by the Flemish government, but take autonomous decisions as to the strategy and means of achieving the objectives of government policy.

17. Within education, there is also considerable autonomy to organise education, a freedom originally established to guarantee confessional choice within the education system (Article 24 of the Belgian Constitution). It is possible, therefore, for an individual to start his or her own school, and providing there is sufficient evidence of demand within a community, most capital expenses will be met by the state, and teachers' pay will be subsidised according to agreed regional formulae. Outside the umbrella organisations (see para. 36 below), a small number of schools, for example following Freinet or Steiner principles, have been established, but generally most schools and educational services fall under the auspices of one or other of three main umbrella organisations.

18. All childcare arrangements must be reported to *Kind en Gezin*, the public agency that officially supervises the great majority of such arrangements and subsidises a significant number of them. It is an impressive organisation, whose style of operation and flexible approach has earned accolades within Flanders and abroad. In addition to providing childcare places, it has responsibility for community health services and preventative childcare. The childcare aspect of its work includes oversight of day nurseries, childminding for children under 36 months, and out-of-school care for children 36 months to 12 years. Some 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*.

19. Because *Kind en Gezin* does not deliver services directly and attaches great importance to local arrangements, what happens in one city or municipality cannot always be easily replicated in another. There is therefore a complicated web of precedents and negotiations that underlie initiatives and developments. ECEC is an area where demographic change produces particular pressure points, and where some revisioning of the services is widely acknowledged to be necessary. But policy making is complex in Flanders, and policy-makers necessarily proceed with caution. As one official summed it up for us: "we are a very small country but a complicated one".

Demographic, economic and social features.

20. Flanders encompasses just under half of the land and over half the population of Belgium. Overall the population density of Belgium is 333 per kilometre, which is one of the highest in Europe. Demographic information from Belgium is not fully desegregated for Flanders, partly because of the complicated regional structure. We have therefore drawn heavily in this report from 1998 demographic data on children in Flanders provided by *Kind en Gezin*. Whilst it has the advantage of being very recent and very comprehensive, the analysis of this data is not always directly comparable on an international basis. For example indices of poverty do not follow the standard definition, i.e. those families living on below half of the average wage.

21. The birth rate in Flanders is falling slightly. Until relatively recently the birth rate was approximately 10.9 per 1000 inhabitants, but in the last 5 years has begun to fall still further. In 1998, there were 63 042 live births, a drop of 1 529 over the previous year. The average age of first-time mothers is about 29 years, indicating that, as elsewhere in Europe, women are marrying later and deferring having families. However, relatively few children, under 8%, live in households where parents cohabit rather than marry, and only 5% of children live in single parent households (as opposed to the figure of 15% given for Belgium as a whole). There are also few young marriages - only 3% of women were under 20 when they were married. There was a small upsurge in divorce when a more liberal divorce act was introduced in 1995, but divorce rates are generally low. These figures suggest a stable, family-orientated society.

22. In 1998 there were 194 099 children under three, and 400 422 children under six. There is no easy means available to researchers of counting in full the number of children from immigrant backgrounds as official statistics mention only the actual nationality of children, but in 1998 there were 10 689 children under three with non-Belgian or stated immigrant backgrounds. This is approximately 5.5% of the total population of children under three, but the percentage of children from ethnic minority backgrounds may well be higher if criteria other than nationality is used, for example, nationality of parents, mother tongue of parents or grandparents, or country of origin. The concentration of ethnic minorities is certainly high in port cities like Antwerp, where some schools report more than 90% of children come from ethnic minority backgrounds, as defined by grandmother's mother tongue. Generally, birth rates amongst ethnic minority communities tend to be higher, partly because of the age distribution of the ethnic minority population, but we were not able to consult the figures available at the Flemish Population Center (Centrum voor Bevolkings en Gezinsstudiën) on this point. Similarly, we cannot make any inferences on the assimilation and dispersal patterns of second and third generation immigrants.

23. Around 65% of children under compulsory school age have a mother in paid employment. It is estimated that of these working mothers just over half, approximately 55.1% of mothers of children under compulsory school age work full-time and the rest work part-time. (About 6% of fathers of children under compulsory school age also work part-time). Most children come from families where both parents are in work; only 5% of children under 12 come from households where no-one works. This figure is lower than that given for Belgium as a whole, where the rate of non-working households with young children is calculated to be 9%.

24. Care for children under three and out-of-school care for older children are generally provided by relatives, usually grandparents. About 38% of children under three are looked after by grandparents. Outside of school hours, grandparents look after about 40% of children at *kleuterschool* and about 68% of children at primary school. However the evidence suggests that these percentages are slowly diminishing, by a rate of about 2% a year, as grandparents themselves continue in the workforce.

25. Approximately 8% of children come from households in poverty, when poverty is self-defined as a family that finds it difficult or very difficult to manage on their current income. Another measure used in Flanders with regard to severe deprivation (in Dutch *kansarmoede*, meaning severe lack of opportunity or access to basic needs of the living situation) is to take six selection criteria: the family's monthly income; the parents' educational level; children's physical development, the parent's employment situation, and housing and health. If a family meets three or more criteria, it is considered to be underprivileged. Using the 1998 sample, about 4.3% children were born into an underprivileged family. Deprivation is strongly concentrated in a limited number of municipalities. Half of all children born into an underprivileged family live in cities such as Antwerp and Ghent, including those children classified as immigrant. However, even allowing for different data collection methods, these figures appear very low compared with Belgium as a whole (15%) and the UK where child poverty is estimated to affect one in three children.

26. As already indicated, most families are still in regular contact with grandparents, and over 70% families live less than 9 km from a grandparent. This also suggests low population mobility. Whilst parents may commute to work, the relatively small size of Flanders, its population density, the geographic dispersal of small to medium size industry (see below) and the good road and rail infrastructure mean that mobility is not so necessary as an employment strategy as it would be for men and women in some other countries. The data suggests that families are brought up in close communities and tend to stay in them.

27. There have been strong movements for gender equality within Belgium; there is a high percentage of women in the workforce, and various measures are in place to ensure equal rights at work. But whilst there is concern about equality issues there is less emphasis on gender equality than, for

example, in Nordic countries. As has been the case for Belgium as a whole, the model of mother at home co-exists with the model of the woman who works. The *Kind en Gezin* study referenced above suggests that in over 60% of families with children, mothers do more than three quarters of household work, and this figure increases the younger the child. Generally most families describe themselves as conformist or mainly conformist in their attitude to child-rearing values

28. Maternity and paternity and parental leave are determined at the federal level for Belgium as a whole, by the Ministry of Labour and Employment. A mother is entitled to 15 weeks paid maternity leave at full pay and can take a further three months of parental leave at a fixed rate of 20 400 BEF (just over \$500 or Euros per month). Under European legislation, women (and men) also can take a career break (*loopbaanonderbreking*) with a small allocation or seek part-time employment. The particular pattern of leave chosen by mothers has an impact on the provision of services. Unlike in the Nordic countries, many childcare services in Flanders have to accommodate very young children. This is discussed further below.

29. As mentioned above, *Kind en Gezin* is responsible for delivering preventative health care. This includes information for new mothers, visits from district nurses to new mothers, infant welfare centres offering vaccination and specialist advice, special infant welfare clinics for the most deprived families, and 60 district centres which are a base for the district nurses and public inquiries about infant welfare. There is a very low infant mortality rate, at 4.8 per 1000 live births, one of the lowest in Europe. *Kind en Gezin* also provides social work support, and subsidises a confidential child abuse centre in each province. Few children are born into circumstances that warrant adoption. Most adoptions are of children from non-European background, from countries such as India, Vietnam and Haiti; only 24 children adopted in 1997 and 40 children adopted in 1998 came from within Belgium.

30. Flanders is clearly a prosperous region. As one respondent put it to us: “We are a middle class country”. From having been a relatively deprived area a century ago, it has developed a lively economy where exports count for 85% of the gross regional product (i.e. figures for Flanders desegregated from Belgian statistics). Small and medium size companies account for nearly 50% of employment in the private sector. It is the centre of the world diamond trade, and has strong metallurgical and chemical industries. Agriculture accounts for only 3% of GRP (Gross Regional Product). Part of this new prosperity may be due to its strategic location. Flanders has a dense road and railway network, three seaports, and three international airports, and is convenient as a hub for multinationals serving the rest of Europe. It also has a centuries long, vibrant history as an international region.

31. The yearly budget of Flanders amounts to 1 571 billion US dollars. 90% of this comes through the Federal Government. The federal government collects VAT, income tax, and radio and television license fees, which are then reimbursed, in full, or in part, to Flanders. Only about 10% of the budget is obtained from regional revenues, taxes or loans (local communities cannot levy taxes). 5.8% of GRP is spent on education, and it is planned to increase this amount. This compares for example with the OECD average of 5.3%. Similarly there is a relatively high expenditure on welfare, public health and social infrastructure, of 1.64 billion US dollars.

32. Putnam (1994) argues in his book *Making Democracy Work* in relation to northern Italy, that “civic communities” or strong local civic traditions lead to economic prosperity in the contemporary economic climate. Much the same argument can be made for Flanders, although the political make-up of Flanders is somewhat different from Northern Italy. As indicated above, there is a great deal of civic pride in local autonomy, and a strong social fabric, underpinned by a high investment in basic services.

CHAPTER 3: OVERVIEW OF ECEC IN FLANDERS.

General levels of provision

33. Flanders has a long tradition in ECEC. The first infant school was founded in 1828 and the first worker's crèche or *kinderbewaarplaats* in 1845. In 1880 a ministerial directive was issued to regulate *kleuterscholen* or kindergartens, and in 1890 the first model curriculum, drawing on the work of Froebel, was introduced. The high population density and keenness of religious organisations to start early with moral and religious education, meant that *kleuterscholen* were rapidly established as part of the education system. Since 1965, children from the age of 30 months have been allowed to enrol in the *kleuterscholen*, thus providing free, full-day educational services to parents who wish to use them. As we shall see below, uptake is enormous, with 85% of children enrolled at the age of two-and-a-half years. Compulsory education begins at age 6.

34. *Kind en Gezin* was established by decree in 1984 (taking over from the former Belgian NWK) and maintains oversight of care services for children under three, and of out-of-school care for children aged two-and-a-half to twelve years. The table below gives a picture of the current administration of care and education services and their take-up.

Table 1. Care and education services, uptake and hours of opening

	Types	% coverage by age	Operating hours
Care	Registered and subsidised centre-based day nurseries (<i>kinderdagverblijven</i>) offering 13 079 places	0-3 months - exceptional 3-36 months - 8.3%	10-12 hours per day throughout the year
	Registered but non-subsidised centre based day nurseries (<i>POIs</i>), offering 9 551 places	0-3 months - exceptional 3-36 months - 2.8%	
	Registered and subsidised home based family daycare (<i>Diensten voor opvangezinnen -DOGs</i>) offering 26 628 places	0-3 months - exceptional 3-36 months - 11.9%	Family daycare is available 10-12 hours per day throughout the year Also provides out-of-school care for children 3-12 years
	Registered but non-subsidised family daycarers (<i>Particuliere opvangezinnen - POGs</i>) offering 7 985 places	0-3 months - exceptional 3-36 months - 6.5%,	
Out-of-school care	Registered out-of-school care (<i>Initiatieven voor buitenschoolse opvang - IBOs</i>)	2.5-12 years - % of children enrolled is not known.	Before and after school, Wednesday afternoons and holidays
Pre-school Education	Mainstream nursery classes attached to primary school, from 2.5 to 6 years (<i>Kleuterscholen</i>)	at 2.5 years - 85% 3 years - 97.6% 4-5 years -- 99% No of children enrolled in 1998 = 242 621	Monday – Friday 8.30-15.30 excluding lunch hour (12.-13.30) and Wednesday afternoon. 182 schooldays per year
	Special education according to disability (<i>Buitengewoon onderwijs</i>)	2.6-6 years - .7%	As above, some residential provision.

35. All education and the greater part of the care services are publicly funded, and both aim at universal coverage for all those families who wish to use the services. The right to free education is a constitutional one. *Kind en Gezin* also aims to “make regular care accessible for all children irrespective of their family situation, their socio-economic living conditions, their ethnic background and their individual problems”.

Education services

Auspices

36. As mentioned in the previous chapter, most schools and educational services fall under the auspices of one or other of three main umbrella organisations or *onderwijsnetten*:

- *Gemeenschapsonderwijs* or Autonomous Council for Community Education: The Council provides non-denominational education in many communes covering 13% of pupils;
- *Officieel Gesubsidieerd Onderwijs* or Official Subsidised Education, which is a network of schools organised by local authorities and which covers 18% of pupils; and
- *Vrij Gesubsidieerd Onderwijs* or subsidised private or voluntary state-aided education, mainly Catholic schools, but also including some non-denominational schools, which covers 68% of pupils.

37. These organisations engage in separate negotiations with the trades unions representing their employees, and consult with their own parent organisations. They also have some control over the curriculum followed within each establishment. However, the Ministry of Education is responsible for designating the aims and objectives of all educational services. In 1995, the Government of Flanders introduced an overall statement of curricular principles laid down in the *Text of the Government of Flanders: The Act of February 22nd 1995*, which all schools must follow. Although it has its own curriculum, pre-school education is regarded as part of the primary system.

Classroom organisation

38. Children are age grouped into classes, each with their own classroom base, and follow school timetables including playtimes. Generally the ratio is 1 teacher to 22 children, but this may vary according to the particular needs of the school and its deployment of staff. There are three or four school entry dates for the youngest children and the class may be split or reorganised during the first year, or else be allowed to grow larger, even in excess of 30 children. In practice, the same teacher is maintained during the year with the same group of children, but from year to year children move on to a new teacher. Classroom teaching for this age is centred on weekly themes, elaborated in diverse activities, but free play covers about 25% of the time, mostly taking place in the afternoon.

Curriculum

39. The Government of Flanders ratified in 1997 a set of minimum goals (*ontwikkelingsdoelen*) that are considered desirable and attainable for children in pre-school. All schools must work on these goals, regardless to which umbrella group they may belong. The *ontwikkelingsdoelen* emphasise a broad and harmonious approach to education and identify three linked areas of educational competence:

- *Personal characteristics*: having a positive self-image, being motivated and taking initiatives;
- *General development*: being able to communicate and co-operate, being autonomous, dealing with the surrounding world in a creative and problem solving way, determining one's own direction when studying; and
- *Specific skills*: physical education, expressive arts, language, environmental studies and mathematics.

40. It is stressed, however, that teaching is cross-curricular and the broader objectives of achieving social competence and life long learning skills should be kept in mind.

41. In Flanders, then, there is no *national* curriculum but each school board is free to develop its own curriculum and its method of teaching. In practice, it is the umbrella organisation to which the school belongs that undertakes the task of curriculum development. All curricula must be submitted for prior approval to the Ministry of Education, and the minimum goals or *ontwikkelingsdoelen* are used as a point of reference to validate the curricula or teaching goals proposed. The language of instruction is always Flemish and this is the also the case for the youngest children, whether or not their mother tongue is French, Arabic, Turkish or some other language. Language policies are discussed further in Chapter 4.

Training

42. Table 2 below shows the staffing and training paths in childcare and early education:

Table 2. Training paths for childcare and early education workers.

Type of training	Minimum requirement	Diploma/certificate	Type of work	Certification	Nature of task
Pedagogue/ Psychologist	Secondary school to age 18	University level, 5 years	Various, including head of daycare centre	Recognised, but not many choose to work in childcare area	Executive
Nurse Social nurse Social worker	Secondary school	Higher education in professional college, that is, 3-4 years post secondary	Various, including daycare centre and support worker for family daycare scheme	Recognised and necessary	Executive
<i>Kleuterleidster</i> or early childhood teacher	Secondary school	Higher education/ Professional college, 3 years post secondary	Teacher in the <i>Kleuterscholen</i> Also in childcare centre and out-of-school centre (<i>IBO</i>)	Recognised, but not many choose to work in childcare	Direct contact with children
Youth and special needs care worker	3 years of secondary school	Technical secondary school		Not yet recognised	Direct contact with children
Childcare worker <i>Kinderverzorgster</i>	Professional secondary education + one year of specialisation	Seventh year technical school diploma	Daycare centre	Recognised and necessary for childcare centre	Direct contact with children
Family daycarer	None – selection by interview	In-service training of between 4-60 hours	Family daycarer in subsidised scheme	n/a	Direct contact with children
Out-of-school care	None	Specific course min 200 and max 250 hours	<i>IBO</i>	recognised by <i>Kind en Gezin</i>	Direct contact with children

43. *Initial teacher training* is usually stratified according to the type of teaching to be undertaken. Pre-school teachers (*kleuterleidsters*), primary school teachers, and teachers of lower secondary school are trained at higher education institutes or teacher training colleges and undertake a three-year post-18 course. The required pedagogical knowledge, insights, skills and attitudes are laid down in a set of basic competencies (“competencies for the starting professional”). Some of these competencies are common to different types of teachers. However colleges have some discretion in how the principle of “communality” is applied, as well as some discretion in the course content. In their training, *kleuterleidsters* must undertake at least one placement with children with special needs, although not necessarily in a special school. A two-year part-time in-service training is available for teachers who wish to specialise in special

education, although this is not compulsory. There is no pay differential between nursery and primary teachers.

44. A university education is required for upper secondary school teachers and for teachers in higher education institutes. A doctoral thesis is usually required for those working in universities. This means that the most highly qualified teachers are unlikely to be working at a nursery level; and conversely those in positions of administrative responsibility, or undertaking research, or lecturing in teacher training colleges, are unlikely to have come from the pre-school ranks. Other countries have adopted different models, e.g. in the UK, until now, all teachers, at whatever level, have been required to obtain a university degree *and* a further teacher training qualification. These models are discussed further in Chapter 4.

45. *In-service training* is well developed in Flanders and the Ministry of Education devolves substantial training budgets to the level of the school. The umbrella organisations are required by the Quality Decree to engage in in-service training activities and, in general, organise the programmes for the schools affiliated to them. Special in-service training programmes have also been introduced to support experiential education and/or linked to special initiatives such as *Zorgverbreding* (“extending care”) or *OVB* (programme for schools with a large immigrant intake). Consideration is also being given to in-service training for *kleuterleidsters* who wish to consider undertaking posts of special responsibility, for instance becoming the teacher in charge of a pre-school unit. Queries were raised, however, about the extent of in-service training that is needed to deal with societal change and educational advances.

Special education

46. Very few nursery aged children appear to attend special schools, but by primary age the figure for special education is relatively high, that is 5.8%. We did not have time to explore the processes by which children are referred to special school, but we were informed that the aim of special education is to integrate children into the world of education, on the one hand, and into society on the other. This means that as well as following a modified version of the curriculum, children are also usually taught basic self-help skills in the special classes or schools. We understand that the Psychological, Medical and Social Guidance Centres, which operate within the framework of the umbrella organisations, play an important complementary role in supporting schools to make decisions about special education for children who cannot cope with mainstream.

Quality control and regulation

47. Quality control is linked to the curricular objective of promoting all-round harmonious development. Measurement of the quality of the education system is undertaken through inspection. The Education Inspectorate is attached to the Ministry of Education. Educational counselling, on the other hand, is connected to the networks or umbrella organisations, which employ school advisers and “local inspectors”, often at municipal level. The task of this personnel is to offer pedagogic advice and support to the schools of the network, and they are not attached to the education ministry. Again pre-school is treated as part of the wider primary remit in the inspection process, but it was unclear to us what percentage of inspectors had actually had prolonged pre-school training or had been recruited from *kleuterleidster* ranks.

48. In principle, each school should have a full inspection or audit from the Education Ministry every six years, lasting up to one week. Considerable documentation has to be prepared for this inspection, and a full written evaluation is provided, although there are regulations in place about what the evaluation may and may not include, and who has access to the full written evaluation. More frequent inspection visits are organised by the Ministry, for instance in connection with evaluations for funding bids for special

programmes such as the *Zorgverbreding* “extending care” programme or the *OVB* programme for schools with a large immigrant intake.

49. There was some discussion with the team about the relevance of a full inspection audit and the part which self-evaluation might play. These matters are currently under consideration for several reasons. On the one hand, there is a feeling that inspection is a rather external exercise, and on the other, that self-evaluation is rather cursory and consists in teachers filling in planning and self-evaluation sheets, e.g. daily and weekly planning agendas, various observation charts on the progress of children, etc. These sheets are examined before each inspection visit, but the main complaint of the teachers was not the inspection but that there was too much paper work to do, which took precious time away from interaction with children. But there is little doubt that schools are well-managed and that high quality standards are maintained across the system, with perhaps the exception of the early pre-school classes where, it is felt, the staff-child ratios are not suitable for very young children. In fact, it is assumed that the most basic aspects of the service must meet national criteria - the premises, the training of the staff, the curricula, and so on. If they did not meet these basic criteria, the school would not be eligible for funding.

Education finance

50. Most of the education financial statistics for pre-school are subsumed under those of primary education. Education expenditure as a whole currently stands at 253 billion BEF, of which approximately 85% is spent on wages. About 28.5% of the budget is spent on primary education, including pre-schools. There are various funding formula determined at regional level which guarantee the types and levels of subsidies to the *onderwijsnetten* (umbrella groups) for revenue and capital spending. However, all education is free to the user. Further investment in pre-school education, as well as some reorganisation of existing education budget heads is anticipated.

Educational research

51. In education, cross-fertilisation between research and policy is regarded as an important aspect of educational planning, and has been endorsed as a procedure in a 1994 governmental regulation. Since that time, an annual budget of 100 million BEF has been devoted to scientific research directed at policy and practice. As many research projects study a mixed population of pre-school children and children in compulsory primary school, and sometimes even include children at secondary level, it is not possible to say exactly what percentage of research covers the early childhood education period. An analysis of funded research projects would suggest, however, that over the last six years (1994-1999), an average of 30% of that budget has been spent on research projects with some relevance to early childhood education. The Minister for Education lays down the priority themes for research annually, and universities are invited to bid. Unusually, bids are submitted to two separate committees, a policy committee to adjudicate on policy relevance, and a scientific committee to adjudicate the research design and contribution to scientific knowledge. After an assessment of the adjudications, a double classification is made and submitted to the Minister, who selects the projects that achieve the best results on both sets of criteria. The Minister then submits her/his proposal to the Flemish government.

52. Research proposals accepted and funded by the government include:

Recent Research

- Analysis of the capacity for diagnosis and remediation in primary education
KU Leuven - R. Vandenberghe and P. Ghesquiere (1995-1997)

- Effects of the Flemish policy regarding special needs provisions in regular classrooms
U. Gent - J. Verhaeghe (1995-1997)
- Children with special needs in regular education. Cooperation between regular and special education
KU Leuven - Prof. B. Maes and P. Ghesquiere (1995-1997)
- Internal quality assurance: an investigation into the determining factors in the use of results of evaluation
KU Leuven - Prof. R. Vandenberghe and R. Bouwen (1995-1997)
- Mechanisms for the adjustment of the financing of education with regard to special needs provision and expansion of scale
KU Leuven and U. Gent - Prof. Cossey and J. Heene (1995-1997)
- Alternative funding-methods for primary and secondary education
UFSIA - Prof. Nonneman (1995-1997)
- Evaluation of the policy concerning quality control: analysis and effects of counselling, in-service training and auditing
KU Leuven - Prof. R. Vandenberghe (1995-1997)

Current research

- Research into the use of a “pupil monitoring system” for early childhood education
VU Brussels Prof. I. Kristoffersen and C. Andries
- Development of a strategy for internal evaluation with regard to integral quality assurance in primary education
KU Leuven - Prof. F. Laevers
- Effects of school autonomy on the pedagogical project: a pedagogical and juridical research
U. Gent - Prof. Verhaeghe
- School choice in primary and secondary education
KU Leuven and U. Gent - M. Douterlungne and J.P. Verhaeghe
- In-service training: the development of a follow-up monitoring system
KU Leuven - R. Vandenberghe
- Costs of studying in primary education
KU Leuven and U. Gent - J. Bollens and J.P. Verhaeghe
- Well-being, involvement and satisfaction of pre-schoolers and pupils in primary education. A monitor for systematic observation and investigation
KU Leuven - F. Laevers
- Transition from regular to special education at the level of primary education: an analysis of the processes by which children are referred to special education
K.U. Leuven - P. Ghesquiere / M. Douterlungne

Research projects beginning 1999 - 2000

- Expansion of scale in primary education: evaluation of effects on educational quality
KU Leuven - G. Kelchtermans
- New family structures and participation in education. Examination of experiences and research into the need to support parents with regard to the school careers of children and the development of measures of support from schools
KU Leuven and U. Gent - H. Colpin and J.P. Verhaeghe
- Extension of care in relation to the increase of pupil rates in special education
KU Leuven - M. Douterlungne
- Difficulties in the current typology of special education in Flanders in the context of the international discussion on categorial versus non-categorial education for children with specific educational needs
KU Leuven - Prof. P. Ghesquiere and B. Maes
- Evaluation of educational policy with regard to minorities in primary education
KU Leuven and U. Gent - V. Vandeveldel and M. Verlot

Innovative projects

53. There are a number of innovative, developmental projects within schools. At pre-school level, the team was introduced to the influential project, *Experiential Education*. The project aims to improve teacher performance through strengthening teacher observation of children across two dimensions, *wellbeing* and *involvement*. Rating scales have been produced for teachers to use systematically in order to determine the levels at which children in the classroom are operating along these dimensions. The concept of *care width* is used to describe the amount of attention the teacher uses to focus on the children. The rating scales enable the broadest *care width* to be applied, so that all children are observed, and those most in need of extra attention from the teacher can get it. Practical suggestions are provided concerning classroom organisation and techniques for dealing with children. Great emphasis is placed on providing activities that meet children's needs, allow for child initiatives, and promote social competence. A schematic model, the *Temple Scheme*, links the various concepts involved.

54. Experiential education has been used widely in Flanders -and increasingly in other countries - to provide insights into the educational processes taking place in the early years. Although overall comparative or longitudinal data are not yet directly available to show how different groups of children who have had experiential education fare, individual accounts of teachers and case histories of particular schools who have adopted it suggest that it has proved very successful. As a practical tool, which has been carefully designed for teachers themselves to use to improve their practice, it has certainly enthused and empowered those staff whom the review met. In particular, it has been used to address the needs of more marginalised children within the Flanders education system through the *Zorgverbreding* "extending care" programme.

55. Experiential education does not attempt to address directly issues of structure, such as adult-child ratios, or school time-tabling, or the ethnic and linguistic balance of the teaching staff. It focuses instead on what can be changed attitudinally and practically within existing systems to effect improvement. In the literature describing the project, the attitudinal change of teachers and their renewed practice are seen as the main instruments for improving child involvement and well being. Measurement scales for teachers based on experiential education are used by many schools as part of the *Zorgverbreding* programme for marginalised children (see further discussion in Chapter 4 below). Again, a highly appreciated initiative,

Zorgverbreding is unusual in the extent to which it emphasises mental well being and interpersonal techniques to tackle the problem of marginalisation and risk of school failure among children. The emphasis contrasts, for example, with the more social, cultural or community approaches adopted in other European countries, or with the growing movement, inspired by Reggio Emilia, to give parents and children a direct voice in early childhood institutions and to see children as important contributors to classroom developments (Dahlberg et al. 1999; Mayall and Alannen 2000).

Box 1: Experiential Education

Experiential education draws on the theoretical contributions of the educational constructivists, in particular, Piaget, who stressed the crucial role of the adult in shaping and “scaffolding” a child's thinking and developmental progress. Another influence has been the psychotherapeutic approach of Carl Rogers, and his American disciple, Eugene Gendlin. Gendlin has emphasised the importance of understanding how other people are feeling, in order to have a meaningful dialogue with them. Experiencing how someone else feels is fundamental to communication: “concrete bodily feeling constitutes the basic matter of psychological and personality phenomena”.

Experiential education aims to achieve its goals through changing teacher practice. The teacher is encouraged “to take the experience of the child as a point of reference”. A detailed system has been developed and refined over more than twenty years to enable the teacher to act *experientially*.

Attention to three practical principles underpin experiential education:

- *Enriching the environment*: the teacher is encouraged to constantly enrich the educational environment by bringing in a wide range of materials and activities. These offer children a chance to explore their everyday reality more deeply (for example a tent whose floor is covered with leaves; a puppet show)
- *Enabling and expanding child initiative*: this includes setting rules that guarantee a smooth class organisation and a maximum of freedom for every child, e.g. very clear rules about how many children may use the tent at a time, to minimise quarrelling and argument or the weakest getting left out.
- *Focussing on experiential dialogue*: that is on the interactions between teacher and children, so as to expand the teacher's sensitivity to the emotional and developmental needs of all children.

The key tool that has been developed to enable teachers to act experientially is a *process-orientated child monitoring system*. Rather than concentrate on outcome measures, such as literacy, or spelling, this tool attempts to measure process variables, that is how the child is experiencing classroom life. The assumption is that through systematic observation scales, teachers can be trained to measure the intensity of children's mental activity and how they feel, or in the language of the scale: their *involvement* and *wellbeing*. The observation scales are backed by a guidance manual, and a multi-media training programme. Teachers trained in this way can rate children for involvement and wellbeing in the domains of motor development, expressive language and communication, thinking and understanding and self-guidance. They can obtain a more acute picture of what the child is feeling and experiencing.

Those children who have low scores on involvement and wellbeing need special attention from teachers. The guidance manual gives advice about general action points for improving the classroom environment, e.g. through rearranging the classroom environment to suit the needs of children. It also has specific action points for children with socio-emotional problems (e.g. giving positive attention and support, working on physical release of energy); and developmental problems (e.g. developing language competencies).

The observation processes adopted by the teacher are represented schematically by the concept of *care width*. The teacher is the centre element in the beneficial influence afforded by the experiential education environment, the warm light or glow offered to those who come within her orbit. Without the systematisation offered by experiential education, the radiant light offered by the teacher is often partial and some children may be excluded from it. The experiential education score sheets enable teachers to direct their light equally at all children, and make sure that they can make all the inputs they need to help the child develop in all domains.

The final goal of experiential education is for the child to become an “emancipated person”. This entails: “emotional health and authenticity, a strong exploratory attitude, openness to the outer and inner world, a sense of linkedness and, based on this, a strong motivation to contribute to the quality of life and the universal process of Creation.”

For further information: Centre of Experiential Education, Leuven, Belgium

Care sector

Auspices

56. In Flanders, there is a long tradition of care services, including charitable schemes to provide childcare for workers' children. As in most industrialised countries, however, public social services and childcare have developed significantly in the last decades. As stated above, responsibility for childcare services is lodged with *Kind en Gezin*, a public agency whose board is (re)appointed by the Flemish Minister of Welfare, Public Health and Equal Chances every six years. Board members include experts and representatives of different kinds of services. *Kind en Gezin* has responsibility for planning for childcare, including out-of-school care (except when taken in charge by schools) and regulating all childcare facilities, but it does not directly provide childcare. In addition it has a remit for the health and welfare of young children through a health visiting system for new mothers, and for preventive care, which includes adoption, residential care, support for multi-problem families, child abuse centres etc.

Types of care

57. As indicated in Table 1 above, there are four major types of care for children under three:

- Subsidised daycare centres (*kinderdagverblijven*), usually set up by a local authority or non-profit organisation, recognised and subsidised by *Kind en Gezin* (13 079 places);
- Subsidised and registered family daycarers (*Diensten voor opvanggezinnen*), who are affiliated to a local base subsidised and registered by *Kind en Gezin* (28 628 places);
- Non-subsidised private daycare centres who are registered and under the surveillance of *Kind en Gezin* (9 551 places); and
- Non-subsidised private family daycarers who are registered and under the surveillance of *Kind en Gezin* (7 985 places).

58. Although registration is obligatory for all, there may also be private unregistered daycarers. There is very little data on these, but it is likely that they are few since the system of tax relief for childcare requires parents to use only registered facilities. Current estimates are that these places constitute 3% of care provided.

59. Daycare centres and daycare projects usually maintain their own waiting lists, and parents hedge their bets by putting their name on several lists. In consequence, there seemed to be some problem in estimating demand for and take-up of facilities. The evidence available from waiting lists suggests that daycare centres may be a preferred option for parents, but the evidence could be a product of the way in which waiting lists are organised. Given the numbers of women with young children who work part-time, just under half of those in employment, then many of the places in subsidised and regulated care settings are shared places, and some juggling of places is necessary. Thus, a family daycarer affiliated to a service may have up to eight children at one time (children in out-of-school care included) during the course of a week, but, on average, there are no more than four children in the care of one adult, including the daycarer's own children under six years.

60. Increasingly, childcare facilities are being co-ordinated on a local basis. Parents who are working full-time have first call on places, particularly in the public subsidised crèches. The team visited a daycare centre on the outskirts of Ghent, which also had a family daycare project lodged in the same building.

There was also on the premises a home-based emergency short-term care service for parents with sick children. Parents paid an agreed amount towards care, depending on their income. This payment did not meet the total cost of the care provided, whether at the daycare centre or in the family daycare, both of which were subsidised by *Kind en Gezin*, but it did allow for some redistribution between more and less well-off families.

61. In the case of family daycare, parental fees were paid into a central pool, which was then reallocated by the project, so all family daycarers were paid the same amount, that is, 14 Euros per day per child. Although this sum is not liable for tax, family daycarers do not have any income guarantee or social security if they or the children they mind become ill. In fact, the actual numbers of children attending a family daycare may vary considerably from day to day and from year to year. This absence of a regular guaranteed income had proven problematic for some family daycarers and we were told that it had led to turnover of family daycarers in the project.

62. There is regular support from social work advisers attached to a family daycare network. One adviser would support a minimum of 28 family daycarers, which would include arranging payments and contracts, helping to place children, and providing access to a toy library. Family daycarers are not required to have a basic qualification, but in practice, are sometimes women with higher general education levels than qualified daycare workers. Some basic initial training is provided and family daycarers workers attached to networks are also expected to undertake between 4-60 hours of in-service training. However, unlike the in-service training provided for centre-based staff, family daycarers are not subsidised for attendance. However, the level of support for family daycare has attracted much attention outside Flanders, and has been highlighted by the International Family Daycare Organisation as a useful model.

63. About a third of the number of subsidised childcare places are offered in centres. These are staffed by qualified childcare workers. Children are generally organised in groups of ten, with two staff per group. Because of the basic health and safety orientated training of care workers, and the social work or nursing backgrounds of childcare managers (see below), there is some concern over the nature of the educational input to *kinderdagverblijven* and *DOGS*. The intention is to provide a care and educational input, but in practice, without additional specialised support, it may be difficult to do so (see Chapter 4).

Training in the care sector

64. Training for childcare workers in Flanders is generally recognised to be in need of improvement. Pupils choosing the career have taken the professional secondary stream and are given one year extra of specialisation in their field. In general, the level of education demanded for accession to the profession is much lower than the level required of teachers, nor are trainees provided with a strong theoretical base for their future work. From what the review team experienced, the content of their basic childcare qualification appears medically orientated, with much emphasis on care, safety and hygiene routines, and relatively little educational input. Although the staff of the professional secondary school that we visited spoke knowledgeably of the school project and goals, the training facilities that we saw appeared old-fashioned and poorly resourced. The numbers of young men training as childcare workers are negligible.

65. The content of training for those with managerial positions in the care sector has a social work rather than a childcare orientation. More comprehensive in-service programmes are being developed, however, supported by *Kind en Gezin*. The MEQ project (see Box 3 below) offers one example of an across-the-board training programme, but altogether, about 17 organisations offer broad in-service training programmes.

Out-of-school care

66. *Kind en Gezin* also has responsibility for the oversight of out-of-school care for children up to the age of 12 years. Up to fairly recently, out-of-school care was provided informally by schools or through a variety of local out-of-school initiatives and through family daycare. Now, *Kind en Gezin* is developing policy in this area, and hopes to extend out-of-school care more systematically as part of a comprehensive care package for working parents. Remarkable progress has been made in a short period, with many new projects are coming on line. Frequently, they are sponsored by local authorities through Ministry of Labour job creation schemes that offer employment to long-term unemployed people working in out-of-school projects. The qualifications and suitability of personnel have therefore become a concern.

67. Given the plethora of schemes on the ground, policy-makers in Flanders have adopted a multi-track policy, which builds on existing local initiatives. In the new regulations, out-of-school care can be provided by three types of facility: by the normal daycare facilities (*kinderdagverblijven*, *POI*, *DOG* and *POG*), by schools and by specific initiatives (*IBOs*). A quality charter covers these three types of out-of-school care. It encompasses educational content; infrastructure, transport arrangements and access; participation of parents; health and safety.

68. In order to start an initiative for out-of-school care, its need should be recognised by a local policy plan. All stakeholders in a municipality - existing providers, parents, local authorities, social welfare councils etc. - are asked to draw up a local policy plan for out-of-school care, based on a survey of local need. The local consultative group must not only produce a policy plan, but also provide information about local services, provide an annual report, and give quality ratings to non-recognised, mostly school-linked, provision. This is not straightforward as there is an ongoing debate about the relationship of schooling to out-of-school care. The ratings are based on a quality charter that encompasses educational content; infrastructure, transport arrangements and access; participation of parents; health and safety. If a local scheme objects to the quality rating awarded by the local consultative group, it can appeal to *Kind en Gezin* whose decision is binding. However these arrangements are still evolving.

69. The team visited two out-of-school projects, one based in a small school, for local children; and a much larger free standing project which provided a pick up service from local schools and was staffed primarily through the Ministry of Labour scheme. In this big project there was a wide range of activities, and children appeared to have a great deal of freedom to choose activities and organise and pace their own time. Only a very small number of parents participated in planning on a regular basis. The organisers informed us that though they were well disposed to the initiative, parents showed little interest in getting involved, except in the organisation of the annual feast. The cost to parents for this scheme was 1.30 Euros per hour per child.

Quality control

70. Quality control in subsidised daycare centres is the responsibility of each director, but *Kind en Gezin* has developed a number of rigorous control mechanisms. Twenty-five inspectors attached to *Kind en Gezin* attempt to visit subsidised and regulated establishments at least once a year, a formidable rate of visiting. Extensive self-evaluation and rating scales have been developed for measuring quality in subsidised provision. For the *kinderdagverblijven*, *Kind en Gezin* has developed a rating scale to assess the pedagogical approach and framework conditions. For the non subsidised daycare centres, *Kind en Gezin* has developed a shortened version of the rating scale for the *kinderdagverblijven* and an extensive instrument for self-evaluation. For the childminding families (both types), another rating scale is being developed.

71. The Quality Law Decree of 1997 enacts that every welfare organisation must have a quality system in operation, and a quality handbook that establishes the quality system used by the particular centre or service. As in the education system, the actual inspections are used as a management tool; and are not directly related to registration (the more detailed regulation and inspection applies only to those centres that are already subsidised). The pursuit of quality enables *Kind en Gezin* to maintain a management overview of the service, and to decide what kind of inputs and supports are necessary to maintain or improve it. In addition, the regulation prescribes sanctions on services that fail notably to measure up to the demands of their quality handbook, up to the withdrawal of *Kind en Gezin* recognition. Nor is inspection used as a “kitemark”, since the score obtained is not made available to parents to enable them to make a decision about whether or not to use the service. As indicated below, a rather different kind of quality assessment is in use for out-of-school projects, based on a kite-marking scheme that is adjudicated at a local level.

Box 2: The inspection of childcare in Flanders - the use of rating scales

The attention given to quality control and inspection in Flanders is quite remarkable. Twenty-five inspectors attached to *Kind en Gezin* attempt to visit subsidised and regulated establishment at least once a year, a formidable rate of visiting. Extensive self-evaluation and rating scales have also been developed for measuring quality in subsidised provision, which includes;

- criteria on sleeping and eating arrangements
- criteria relating to the pedagogic project offered by the setting, such as flexibility of interaction and stimulation;
- criteria relating to the support framework, such as teamwork, meetings, and staff training.

The impetus for the use of scales was to provide reliable and externally measurable criteria for *Kind en Gezin* inspectors, as, it was felt that crèche managers were not always sufficiently reliable informants. More standardised and comparable criteria were required than the previous interview-based assessment.

The Department of Orthopedagogics at the University of Leuven developed the scales on the principle that the most important aspect of quality was “the interactions between child and educator”. The final result is a rating scale, which uses twelve criteria related to quality of interactions. The criteria are subdivided into those, which directly reflect interaction, and those, which constitute the framework conditions for interaction to take place. The former are: flexibility, individualisation, stimulation, structuring, stimulating the child's independence, giving the child freedom of movement, and safety. The framework conditions are: caring skills, co-operation with parents, teamwork, staff training and pedagogic observation.

These criteria are broken down into indicative practical tasks and on each task, a four point score is given: unsatisfactory; minimum; good; very good. For example, one indicative task is how sleeping is handled, and it can be rated on each of the first seven criteria. Other tasks are: toileting, eating, care, activities, toys, communication, infrastructure, and special care situation. In order to limit subjective judgement, for each task undertaken, the answer is simply: “yes the task is undertaken” or “no it is not”. The rating of unsatisfactory to very good is based on the number or nature of the task completed.

When the scale was piloted it was found that both interscorer reliability (i.e. two inspectors applying the same criteria in the same place) and intrascorer reliability (i.e. the consistency of an individual inspector in applying the rating scale) were satisfactory. As the scale was devised with *Kind en Gezin* inspectors, it is assumed that the validity of the scale (i.e. its relevance to everyday practice) is also satisfactory. A team of twenty-five inspectors administers the system and carry out regular annual inspections to evaluate the quality of crèches/ day nurseries and to provide a baseline against which improvements can be measured. An inspection takes about four hours to administer. A report is given to the individual crèche although the report does not mention the actual score, which is confidential.

A reduced version of the scale has been tried out in unsubsidised daycare centres, and a further version of the scale is also being developed for family daycare. A working party, consisting of inspectors, psychologists, representatives of family daycarers and of parents using family daycare, has produced a discussion paper “A View on the Pedagogical Qualities of the Childminding Family” on what constitutes good quality family daycare as a basis for further work.

Childcare financing

72. The total budget of *Kind en Gezin* is 9 billion BEF of which 5.8 billion is spent on childcare. This figure includes fees from parents who pay towards subsidised childcare. Childcare is directed at working parents, that is those who are in employment. The poorest families tend to be those who are not in employment or who, because of their immigrant status, can only undertake low-paid and temporary work, and these families by and large do not or cannot use childcare. The fact that childcare is not used by the poorest families is cited by those who are keen to maintain school entry age at 30 months, since school is free and is universally appreciated and used. *Kind en Gezin* is aware of this issue, and is supportive of projects, such as Elmer and MEQ, that address the needs of immigrant communities and of families in poverty.

73. The approximate level of parental fees in Flanders is as follows. In *kinderdagverblijven* and in *DOG*s (childminding families affiliated to a service), parents pay according to their income, going from a rate of 64 BEF per day for an annual income of 190 000 BEF to a maximum of 623 BEF per day for an annual income of 1 677 620 BEF. There are deductions for children in charge and also if child care is used for more than one child at the same time (both deductions cannot be cumulated). For the half day attendance of a child, parents pay half. Compensation mechanisms ensure that both daycare centres and childminding families obtain the same amount per day regardless of what the parents pay. In 1998 the average in the subsidised sector was 450.7 BEF daily (c. \$/Euro 11). In *POI*s and *POG*s (non subsidised sector) parents pay the real cost and there is no compensation for low income groups. In 1997 the average was 534.6 BEF per day in non subsidised daycare centres (*POI*s) and 473.1 BEF in non subsidised childminding families (*POG*). The information for half-day attendance is not available

Research

74. As we have seen above, educational research places emphasis on academic research in order to explore social developments, to renew policy and to provide more detailed information about existing services or about the effectiveness of various initiatives. Within the childcare sector, the same concerns are evident and research includes:

- an analysis of demographic data on households with children (discussed in more detail in Chapter 2);
- an analysis of demand for childcare amongst particular groups of parents e.g. low income, unemployed, single parents, etc.;
- a breakdown of the supply of childcare according to geographical area;
- an evaluation of the effectiveness of consultation procedures used in out-of-school care; and
- ongoing research on evaluation instruments and rating scales.

Experimental Projects

75. *Kind en Gezin* recognises the need to understand and respond to new circumstances, and has commissioned detailed research and policy analysis to investigate childcare practice. It has supported new and experimental provision and the Resource and Training Centre for Childcare (VBJK) based in Ghent. This Ghent centre includes the MEQ project, which trains ethnic minority women for work in childcare and acts as a training base for the area, with a special emphasis on intercultural work (see Box 3 below).

Kind en Gezin also gives recognition to the Elmer centre in Brussels, which offers childcare support and training for ethnic minority women.

Box 3: Milestones towards Quality through Equality (MEQ)

The MEQ project focused on the situation of women and children from ethnic minority communities. In parallel with similar projects in England, France and Ireland (European Union NOW programme), it identified how conventional understandings of quality childcare generally exclude the voice of immigrant or ethnic women. Women from first, second or even third generation immigrant backgrounds are likely to feel excluded from discussions about childcare for a number of reasons. In general, they will have had a poor education, having left school early. They are less likely to be employed, and if they do work, it is more likely to be in the informal labour market. As in most other countries, their children are least likely to attend any subsidised form of childcare. As a result, childcare centres are predominantly “white institutions” which pay very little attention to the particular needs or customs or linguistic diversity of ethnic minority children.

The MEQ project set out to change this situation, by offering a programme of training and employment for immigrant women, and by working with a network of 25 daycare centres to introduce multi-cultural approaches. The project was multi-funded, with major contributions from *Kind en Gezin* and other agencies such as the Bernard van Leer Foundation.

- After an initial orientation course, 30 immigrant women (from an initial pool of 150) were placed in daycare centres with a two-year contract on normal terms and conditions. The work was combined with a training programme for one or two days per week at local *Centres for Social Advancement through Education*, offered on a modular basis and leading to a basic care qualification which entitles the women to take up employment in a variety of care settings.

- Education, training, mentoring and supervision modules were also offered to the participating daycare centres around multicultural and multiethnic issues. These modules included examining policies on selection and recruitment, and on strategies to develop relationships with local immigrant communities.

- A monitoring group for the project was set up, including representatives from *Kind en Gezin*, the childcare centres, the immigrant community, departments of psychology at the local universities, and the Monitoring Cell for Immigrant Employment. (BWM)

By the end of two years, 25 immigrant women qualified as care workers, 17 of whom have now found permanent positions in daycare centres. The work within the daycare centres to promote multicultural approaches proved to be complex and challenging. “Working in an intercultural way involves dealing with all sorts of preconceptions, values and norms.” The project draws on the *Anti-bias curriculum* of Louise Derman Sparks (1989, NAEYC, Washington, D.C.) which teaches children to recognise diversity and “to deal with it in a positive way”.

NOW funding to the project finished last year. MEQ has now entered on the phase of disseminating training materials and methodologies more widely in Flanders. Among the resources it makes available to the public and the childcare community is a CD-ROM, *Respect for Diversity in Early Childhood Education*, and a web site on diversity and early childhood education <http://www.decet.org/> These resources give many practical and useful examples of how to deal with a range of multiracial issues. The CD-ROM includes a theoretical overview and reference texts; examples of recruitment and selection procedures; how to build a multi-cultural team; and specific case studies of discrimination and how to address them. It also includes examples of multicultural books: a multicultural music guide which includes lullabies, and an introduction to various musical instruments. There are many examples too of multicultural toys and other classroom resources.

CHAPTER 4: ISSUES ARISING FROM THE VISIT

76. It can be seen from the brief account in Chapter 3 that not only does very comprehensive childcare and pre-school coverage exist in Flanders, but that it is underpinned by an infrastructure which includes training, quality assurance and research, and sustained financial investment in the system. Whatever shortcomings may exist, this is a very substantial achievement. Such strong systems, based on universal precepts and offering such widespread coverage, are still relatively rare. However, part of our job as a team, as well as identifying those strengths that can be generalised beyond the immediate country context, is to address what we perceive as systemic weaknesses or issues needing further attention. The reviewers offer, in a spirit of support and professional dialogue, their outsider's perceptions of these issues but in full awareness of the sensitivity with which such issues need to be addressed, particularly, as we have stressed, in a situation where governance arrangements are already complex and delicately balanced. We stress that various Flemish colleagues in the course of the visit referred openly to all the six issues that we raise. Indeed two of them are highly topical and there is already pressure to address them directly.

77. Although issues in the early childhood field are generally multivariate and inter-linked, we have attempted, for the purposes of organising our analysis, to delineate and separate them. These issues are:

- early entry to school and the educational tradition;
- co-ordination of childcare and education;
- status and training of personnel;
- issues of access and equity;
- the role of parents within ECEC; and
- reconciling work and family life.

Early entry to school and the educational tradition

78. Schooling in Flanders begins very early at 30 months. Provision is for a full school day (8.30-3.30 with a 1 hour 30 minutes lunch break) and is free, like all basic education provision. Although pre-school education has its own identity, and children do not begin to formally read and write until the age of six years, nevertheless the system is organised like a school. In practice, children are age-grouped in classes based in classrooms, and the class has outside playtimes at prescribed times, as do primary age children. The class of young children progresses through the school, as do other classes, with a different teacher for each school year. Sometimes, in fact, there may be change of teacher in the very first year for early entrants, as class numbers expand because of the entry system, which allows for five intakes a year. Teacher's time is calculated in terms of 45-minute lesson periods. The adult-child ratios are often allocated in terms of the needs of the whole primary school, although in practice the very youngest children tend to be in smaller classes. The teacher works to a comprehensive curriculum, developed by the

school board or an umbrella organisation, and approved by the Ministry of Education. Although these curricula have an official status and are rather detailed, teachers have still some discretion in their application.

79. This school-orientated system presents a number of difficulties for young children. For the youngest children, those of 30 months, starting school may be a formidable transition either from home-based care or from a day nursery, where groups are likely to have been much smaller, and adults more readily available. At this age, toileting, eating and sleeping may still be problematic. The youngest children may also have considerable difficulty in coping with the high adult-child ratios, the increases in group size throughout the first year, and even a change of teacher as the class expands and is split. The smallest children sometimes need a warm and familiar lap to crawl into, and the need for a childcare assistant in the classroom is often keenly felt. All these difficulties are compounded if children do not speak Flemish as a first language, and have to manage the language as well as everything else. Some teachers commented to us about the vulnerability of the youngest children: “They only follow me. If they go outside to the playground then they are a little afraid.” Even for older *kleuterscholen* children, the school orientation may present difficulties. Compared with provision in many other countries, this is a highly formalised system. As one teacher made clear to us, right from the beginning: “young children must learn the rules” (about classroom procedures).

80. This approach to children contrasts with the goals for children set out, for example, in the Nordic countries. Until school begins at six or seven years, children typically have considerable freedom and autonomy to organise their time and to roam through the spaces of the nursery, inside and outside. As far as possible, they remain free from time-tabling and other pressures of institutional life. Those who work with children see it as their job not to teach or to organise children, nor to introduce basic curricular ideas, nor even to monitor children’s progress. Instead they view their work as supporting children individually and as a group in whatever activities the children choose to follow, on the basis that children have a *right* to self determination which should be respected as much as possible. In accordance with the wishes of parents, environments are structured to orient choice and there is much “scaffolding” by pre-school personnel of learning activities. The same childcare staff would tend to stay with the same small group of children throughout the three or four years of nursery, and child-staff ratios would be very low in order to facilitate the continuity of children’s experiences. In Norway, for instance, the policy towards children in early education and care emphasises their autonomy:

Childhood as a life-phase has a high intrinsic value and the children’s own free-time, own culture and play are fundamentally important...the need for control and management must at all times be weighed against the children’s need to be children on their own premises and based on their own interests

Norwegian Framework Plan for Day Care Institutions

81. In these terms, if one conceives of ECEC as a continuum between adult-directed and child-directed activities, early education in Flanders would be represented rather towards one end of a continuum, with childcare in Nordic countries at the other end. The daily routine is highly structured and teachers spend a great deal of time preparing, selecting and organising activities. As mentioned by Oberhuemer and Ulich (1997), “in this teacher-centred programme, children’s self-initiative is not of prime importance”.

82. We fully acknowledge the importance of the educational tradition within Flanders, the extent to which schools are evaluated and measured by the quality control measures that are in place, and the impressive results that have been achieved overall. The system is highly respected by parents, who, as indicated in Chapter 2, regard conformity to traditional values as important. However the relative formality of the Flemish education system for the youngest children is *already* seen as problematic within

Flanders. The success of *Experiential Education* is an indication of the need to give more initiative to children. There is too a lively question whether the school entry age should not be raised from 30 to 36 months, because of unease about the suitability of this kind of education for very young children. However, as we pointed out in our short description of financing in Chapter 3, raising the entry age may have a negative impact on the children of poor or immigrant families, who generally do not use the organised childcare services but who are willing to send their children to school at age two-and-a-half or older because school is free and culturally is meaningful. This is a question that needs further research.

83. Already, there are impressive and far-reaching attempts within the existing system to introduce a more child-centred approach, particularly at this age. *Experiential Education*, for example, is aimed at improving the work of individual teachers, and through them, impact on the adaptation of children to schooling. But these attempts also raise questions about the wider rigidity of the system and of school organisation, and whether improving the performance of individual teachers, however effectively, is in itself sufficient to counter these rigidities. In short, both questions - the age of school entry, and the attempts to develop better classroom practice - raised for the team the issue of whether the education system itself could be more flexible when catering for the younger children. This leads us to the second issue, that is the nature of the separation between care and education.

Co-ordination of childcare and education.

84. As is the case in many other countries, there has not been in the past in Flanders a coherent joint vision, either in policy or in practice, of education and care services, nor a real understanding of how *together* the care and education sectors might contribute to the development of children. Important structural and cultural differences continue to exist both in approach and practice.

85. Historically, the childcare system has been orientated towards resolving the problems faced by working mothers and their need for care to cover working hours. The emphasis has been on *care*, that is, on meeting children's physical needs, and ensuring their health and safety. The staffing ratios, the initial training of staff, the location and layout of the premises, and the equipment used, reflect this orientation. For instance in one centre we visited, in the room with the youngest children, the care staff were engaged in washing down the chairs very thoroughly indeed whilst children were left sitting in groups on the floor. The cleaning routines took precedence over interaction and communication with children, instead of being undertaken, as in a school, in the children's absence.

86. Conversely, the education system, although in principle orientated to life-long learning, excludes children before the age of 30 months and, delivers education, even for pre-school children, as part of a formalised system. As discussed above, there is little allowance for care routines in *kleuterscholen*, although teachers express the need to have a childcare assistant to assist them in the classroom with the youngest children. Conversely, the care system has lacked in the past a strong developmental orientation, a tradition that still can be seen in the training and practicums prescribed for the young women preparing to be careworkers.

87. The divergence of approach to children is further underlined in Flanders by other traditional divisions, such as the existence and competition of the umbrella organisations. No doubt, reality must be accepted for what it is, particularly as the pillar or network system is seen as the embodiment of freedom of education and a guarantor of fairness and peace. Yet, the team felt that an effort to forge a coherent and forward looking vision of child services could serve to lessen the discontinuities felt by children as they move from one system to the other, or from home to school. Parents are subject to many pressures and priorities in reconciling work and family life, and may feel obliged to change their children from one network to another more abruptly than they or their children might wish. There is evidence, in fact, that

some parents make use of multiple enrolments before finally deciding on the network and school of their choice.

88. Another transition that all children must undergo is the transition from home or childcare in order to go to school, but there seems to be little real action to achieve a smooth transition between the two. In one school, the local inspector said that she would like to support childcare on the school site but thought that the regulations were such that it would be impossible to make arrangements to use school premises in this way: “I would like a system where children in childcare could go for a couple of hours in the school – so their acclimatisation is smooth, so that it would be easy for children to go from one system to another...but the regulations do not allow it.” We were then somewhat surprised to realise that there actually was a crèche upstairs within the same building. Because of the perception of what the rules would and would not permit, there was no attempt to arrange such acclimatisation, and enable any interchange between the school and the crèche - either younger children visiting the school or older children visiting younger brothers and sisters in the crèche. It was unclear from this account whether or not regulations are indeed insurmountable without recourse to higher authority or whether it is merely a case of custom and practice. We also visited another municipality where the day nursery, the kindergarten and the out-of-school facility were all on the same site. Children in this facility did not experience the discontinuities that were so evident elsewhere, and appeared to move freely between the site facilities. One of the workers explained to us: “here we don't experience the wall between care and education.”

89. A further example of the discontinuities experienced by children concern out-of-school care. We did see some examples of co-operation on the ground, and we were much impressed by the progress made in developing out-of-school care on a local planning basis. We visited one municipality where the new *IBO* (initiative for out-of-school care) worked closely with local schools, and children from a group of sites were picked up from the school premises and brought to the *IBO*. Yet many schools appear to prefer to organise their own informal childcare arrangements where one or two local women help out before and after school and at lunchtimes. We heard of several instances where one woman is left responsible for many children on her own on the school premises. These informal arrangements usually arise from the school's own priorities and concern to cater for working parents, rather than through the auspices of *Kind en Gezin* or through the local *IBO*. Some of these arrangements seemed to us less than satisfactory for children and raised questions of appropriateness and safety.

90. As a further example of this lack of coherence in the conception of care and education services, we also noted that the inspection and quality assurance mechanisms in the education and care sectors, although well developed and well executed in both cases, are also separately conceived and followed through. The inspection of each system is targeted on somewhat different populations and evaluates different aspects of the services provided. A holistic approach towards children, which both care and education systems claim to provide, would again imply more continuity and consultation than currently exists, and indeed, lead perhaps to important savings.

91. We also were given the impression that relatively inflexible training routes perpetuated the division between care and education. In our discussion of training in Chapter 3, we have already noted that the training of childcare workers was of a relatively low level and further, there were few, if any, routes out of it. Career choices appear to be made very early on in a pupil's school life, and once made, can be changed only with difficulty. The useful experiences gained through working in a care setting cannot be transferred to an education setting; neither the training nor the structure of services permitting such a transfer of skills. In contrast, many countries now offer more flexible, modular training, and provide opportunities for childcare workers to obtain higher qualifications which offer them a place in the classroom as assistants or a route into teaching as mature students. These more flexible training routes could be profitably explored within the Flemish context.

92. The team visited one teacher training college and again we were impressed with the commitment and thoughtfulness of those faculty members who spoke to us. The teacher trainers seemed reflective about their practice, and stressed the need to be holistic, especially when working with younger children: “as teachers we need basic understanding of how people think and feel and act...a general training for people who work with people.” Our impression was that attitudes are open, and change is possible, if historical and structural barriers can be overcome. In short, co-operation between care and education seems wanting, less by intention than default. There is no absence of goodwill, but education and *Kind en Gezin* officials have their own organisational priorities and their own agendas, arising from the political and legal frameworks in which they work. As these frameworks are now changing, it may be a good moment to re-evaluate how the two systems of care and education can co-operate more closely over provision. We would be pleased if our review could serve as some kind of catalyst for future development.

Status and training of personnel

93. The relatively low level of training for childcare workers has been an issue in Flanders for a number of years and is generally acknowledged to be a problem (see para. 62 above). Another weakness in training in the field of early education and care is that there are few recognised routes to qualification that bridge the two systems. Specialised routes are proposed to children at the age of 13/14 years for children within the secondary schools system in Flanders. Choice lies between the mainstream academic route on the one hand and the less prestigious vocational or professional route on the other. Once a path is chosen, it is very difficult to undo the choice or make a change. Pupils choosing a career in childcare take the professional secondary stream with one year extra of specialisation in their field. Pupils aspiring to become teachers take the academic stream, with a further three years of teacher training. This rigid streaming makes later access by childcare workers to posts in schools or to posts of responsibility in day nurseries or family daycare networks extremely difficult. In short, career opportunities and progression within the early childhood field appear rather closed, with the system being unable to give sufficient weighting to expertise acquired or sense of responsibility shown by personnel during their careers.

94. A further issue is the question of status of childcare workers and teachers. In general, their status and remuneration have not increased relative to other professions, while expectations and demands on them continue to grow. Already, signs of problems in recruitment are beginning to appear - at least in certain localities - for example in family daycare, which, outside the home, takes in charge the majority of young children under 3 years. Although recruitment to teacher training college remains relatively stable, recruits tend to come from the less strong streams in secondary education. Moreover, staff of the college we visited voiced their concern about dropout rates, which in the first year have in some cases been as high as 50%. In this situation, proactive measures to recruit and retain more young women (and men) from ethnic minority groups could be helpful, and at the same time address issues of equity and multiculturalism.

Issues of access and equity

95. Throughout most of Europe the patterns of migration, immigration and recent movements of refugees fleeing from conflict situations mean that populations, particularly urban populations, are increasingly diverse. Flanders is no exception to this trend, and in particular, Antwerp, which is a large port city, and Brussels, which is a capital city, have sizeable ethnic minority populations. How do education and care systems cope with these kinds of changes and ensure fair access to services and fair treatment within them? Again there is a spectrum of responses across countries, and indeed within any given country. Responses vary from an attempt to contain and limit what is regarded as a difficulty or even a threat to established society, to a view that diversity is enriching for everyone concerned or even a matter for celebration. Flanders faces a particular problem in that the extreme right wing party *Vlaams Blok* has considerable popular resonance in those areas of Antwerp and Ghent where the ethnic minority

population is highest. However, it is important to underline that Flanders has a major achievement to its credit, namely, that it has succeeded in keeping levels of child and family poverty - among all social groups - very low compared to most other countries.

96. In some countries with a longer history of action with ethnic minorities, distinctions have been made between combating racism on the one hand, and providing extra support for those who are perceived to be vulnerable on the other. Programmes to combat racism lay emphasis on identifying and addressing the negative attitudes held towards ethnic minority communities by the wider community. Measures such as ethnic monitoring and targeting designed to ensure equal access and treatment within services are put in place, and the content and practice of services are subject to scrutiny for racist bias. This is a more proactive approach than providing extra support for ethnic minority children, which although useful, may be taken to imply that any problem lies within the group who are being targeted for support, rather than with mainstream attitudes and practices.

97. These are extremely sensitive issues, and no developed society has overcome them, but the discussion about equity and fair treatment has become extremely pertinent in Flanders because of the activities of the far right. We heard, for example, of several unresolved racist incidents within school and care settings in Ghent and Antwerp. Personnel did not seem to know how to deal with such incidents as, within the education system, projects are geared to offering extra support to pupils rather than encompassing a strong focus on diversity and equality (see Box 4 below). Fortunately, there are outstanding experts in this field amongst Flemish practitioners and academics who have concrete suggestions about how such issues can be taken in charge (see Box 3 on the MEQ project). Moreover, it has been agreed recently that teacher-training colleges may now submit action plans and apply for special funds to promote issues of diversity. It is only fair to teachers and carers who are uncertain when confronted by such incidents that monitoring strategies and policy guides should be rapidly formulated for the use of schools and centres. Parents too must be given to understand that policy guidelines and protocols exist to deal with intolerance or racist behaviour and that they will be applied in public education and care.

Box 4: Education initiatives to tackle the learning difficulties of children from “at risk” groups

The *Zorgverbreding* “extending care” initiative is a preventive programme aimed at those children perceived to be in danger of failing school. Schools with significant numbers of children from poor families - often from single parent backgrounds - are eligible to apply for the programme. Children in the last two years of pre-school and in the first two years of primary school are targeted. A sum of 650 million BEF has been allocated for the programme, which can be spent on providing between 6 and 18 extra teaching hours a week. Schools applying should provide an action plan, in order to bid for the money on a competitive basis. The extra teaching hours are used to improve teaching practices; stimulate language skills; support social and emotional development; involve parents; and support an intercultural approach. Additional training sessions have been offered to those 800 or so schools whose bids have been successful.

A parallel project, again administered by the Ministry of Education, is *OVB (Onderwijsvoorrrangsbeleid voor migranten)* or educational priority policy in relation to immigrants. Schools with children from poor, immigrant backgrounds are eligible to apply for the programme. The project offers schools extra teacher hours on the basis of the numbers of pupils who experience learning and/or developmental difficulties because of their ethnic origin and socio-economic background. Ethnicity is defined in this case by the place of origin of the mother; additionally the mother's educational level is taken into consideration in making allocations. In order to be considered for subsidy under this scheme, schools must submit an action plan for approval, which includes outreach to parents and communities, reinforced Flemish language teaching and intercultural education. Bids have so far been accepted from 548 schools. Both these programmes *Zorgverbreding* and *OVB* are time limited.

98. Another issue concerns language use and the acknowledgement of the culture of the home. Owing to recent history and the ensuing legislation enacted in Belgium, it is not simple to modify the delicate balance of present language usage. Yet, experts generally agree that, whereas a real mastery of the state language is absolutely necessary for older children, some use of mother tongue language and/or acknowledgement of the home culture in early pre-school is important for the well-being and language development of young children. In consequence, if the best interests of young children are to be served, openness to other languages and cultures may be envisaged as part of the training of personnel in care centres and the early years of pre-school. Multi-language and multi-racial books and artefacts, and the use of bilingual teaching assistants are strategies that have been successfully used elsewhere to address this problem. In its CD-ROM, the MEQ project provides examples of intercultural and bilingual strategies (see Box 3), aimed to help the cognitive development and communication capacities of young children who come from language backgrounds different from the school.

99. Further questions of equity were raised by the position of children with disabilities. An estimated 0.7% (1 811) of children of pre-school age were in special schools, which seems a rather low figure, given that we saw only one child with a disability in the schools we visited. For primary age children, the figure given is 5.8%, which is high by international standards (although we are aware of the difficulty of comparisons in this area, owing to wide variation in definitions of special educational needs and in data collected). We were told that selection for special schools takes place mainly in the first year of primary school. Once in primary school, at age 6, children begin to learn to read. In practice, most of them are able to do so by the end of the first term. For children with difficulties, pedagogues and psychologists from the Guidance Centres linked to the schools are consulted. We did not however visit any of the clinics or talk to professionals who provided testing and assessment services.

100. We did visit a special school, a Catholic institution that provided residential as well as daily care, and again the conscientiousness and commitment of the staff impressed us. This school, based in what had previously been a religious institution, catered for 21 nursery age children, 71 primary age children, and 90 secondary age children. The special school aimed to provide “a complete human and Christian fulfilment of the young person with mental retardation”. Many of the children we met had profound disabilities, and self-management and communication were necessarily major aims of their education. Classes were kept very small, and teachers had care assistants with them in the classroom. We also met a parent representative of the school, who expressed considerable satisfaction with the service provided, but queried whether the school should not have more in the way of resources, for although the per capita budget for special education is higher than for ordinary education, yet was often insufficient. He also raised the question of transport. The school recruited from a radius of 25 km, and some children, including one child who was extremely hyperactive, were spending considerable time in the school bus.

101. This appears to be a general problem within special education in Flanders. Eight different kinds of institutions exist for special education, and children are sent to the school which best caters for their particular disability. This means that some children spend very long hours, sometimes in excess of 4 hours a day, in transit to and from their special school. Professionalism and specialisation develop their own *raison d'être*, and we do not doubt that the specific regimes of special schools were highly developed and detailed, but set against this must be question of how to improve public services to such children, especially young children. The Salamanca agreement, signed in 1992 by 90 countries, argues for the integration of children with special needs into mainstream education, wherever possible, as a priority. From this perspective, children with special needs are not a separate category of children, meriting special and segregated treatment, but part of the *normal* spectrum of childhood, entitled to the same services, and enjoying the same activities, as other young children. The great majority of them can gain a great deal from joining in with their peers, and mainstream children also learn how to be more tolerant of differences. Other arguments put forward in favour of integration are that diagnostic categories shift according to new medical and psychological knowledge, so that building a fixed system around such categories is always

problematic. Additionally it is argued that far from detracting from classroom teaching, teachers who are alert to a range of needs and problems amongst children, are likely to be better teachers than those who pitch their teaching to a narrow range.

102. The above discussion relates mainly to the education system. Access and equity are treated somewhat differently within the care system, which originated as a service for *working* parents. The team raised the question of access and equity for those families who for reasons of ethnicity or disadvantage are out of work, or work in the black economy, and therefore do not access care services in the first place. *Kind en Gezin* is very aware of this problem and is manifestly concerned with quality provision for children from all backgrounds. The extent to which it accepts financial responsibility for services to working and immigrant parents is admirable, particularly for those of the team who come from countries where no such public responsibility exists. As mentioned in the previous chapter, we visited two outstanding multicultural projects that were designed to improve access to services for ethnic minority groups and to offer vulnerable groups extra support and training.

103. Yet, the Elmer project, in Brussels, designed to offer childcare to women from ethnic minority backgrounds, gives rise to concern about current standards for subsidisation, such as requiring that programme subsidies can only be allocated if premises meet certain criteria. Elmer is a case in point as, though clearly an important project for the immigrant neighbourhood in which it is situated and worthy of financial support, its premises are sub-standard. Within the existing regulation, it therefore cannot be subsidised, although *as a project*, it receives financial support from *Kind en Gezin*. The regulation is entirely understandable, as young children should not be accommodated in unhealthy buildings. At the same time, the current form of the regulation and its application should not be allowed to hinder the development of new projects, especially in poor neighbourhoods with sub-standard housing, precisely the type of neighbourhood that is often in need of services.

104. We discussed these issues of equity with Professor Verhellen of the University of Ghent, an academic who has a considerable international reputation in the field of children's rights. His view, already in the public domain, is that Flanders offers a very comprehensive education system for children, but one which, despite current efforts, is still by and large still under threat of becoming inflexible with regard to the 6% or so of children at the margins, that is, the very poor, those from ethnic minorities, refugee children and those with disabilities. "The challenge" he notes, "is to make the system more flexible and more responsive." He stressed that education and care are key arenas for achieving children's rights.

The role of parents within ECEC

105. The members of the team all came from backgrounds where issues concerning parents - parents rights to information and consultation, to representation and participation, and support for parenting etc. - have been prominent. Parents exert a powerful influence on their young children, and children in turn are very attached to their parents. Any programme in childcare or early education is likely to be more effective if it takes the views of parents into account and works closely with them.

106. We noted the efforts that have been made by the education department on a regional level and by the umbrella groups (*onderwijsnetten*) with regard of *lokale schoolraden* (local schools committees) and *participatieraden* (participation boards). We were pleased to see the informative literature produced by the Ministry of Education for parents. The recent *Manual for Parents* provides a clear and accessible account of the rights and duties of children and their parents in elementary education. The lively editions of *Klasse*, a series of magazines and a website, also provide a democratic forum for communication within the school community. We noted also that schools provide their own local literature for parents, and that there is a special project based in Ghent where "home-school" co-ordinators have been appointed in 27 primary schools. These co-ordinators have been given the task to "support the enhancement of the

educational opportunities of children from socially disadvantaged families by initiating actions at the school level". We also observed that in the programmes mentioned above, *Zorgverbreding* and *OVB*, increased efforts were being made to contact parents and keep them informed, and that there were full meetings between teacher and parent at least once a year to discuss the child's progress. In parallel, *Kind en Gezin* has attempted also to develop projects where parents, particularly those from marginalised backgrounds, are given support, as in the Elmer project. We also saw a parent advice centre located alongside a day nursery. The *IBOs* too have arisen out of widespread consultation on the ground with local communities.

107. However as the Background Report pointed out: "Parent participation and involvement have only recently become important issues in care and education in Flanders." Thus, although the *Zorgverbreding* and *OVB* programmes have the brief to find out more about the child's home circumstances, the extent of direct involvement of parents in school life was unclear. Likewise, the teacher training and the further education colleges that we visited did not appear to have materials or programmes about dealing with parents. When we asked about it, staff seemed puzzled that the issue was raised.

108. An example from Finland may make this point clearer. When children start daycare (i.e. in the Finnish context, childcare for children from one to six years) parents can visit the centre with the child before the child begins regular attendance. In this exploratory visit, they may come with the child to play in the garden, or join in a mealtime with their child. After both parent and child are more familiar with the centre, then the child can gradually begin to attend for a few hours alone. Parents have a chance to come in and get to know the daycare personnel and understand the activities and routines that take place. In England and the Netherlands there are also a number of centres where parents, especially if they are unemployed, are welcome to stay and join in the activities with their children.

109. No doubt, there are similar initiatives in Flanders, and both the MEQ and Elmer projects suggest that, given a flexible system, parents, particularly from ethnic minorities, are glad to be involved with their young children in centres. In addition, with support and a little training, they could prove a useful pool for recruitment, given current shortages. But the point is worth making that careful explanation to parents of the goals of childcare and early education, that enlisting their good will to support early learning, can help children greatly. The kinds of situations we have noted in other countries - where parents are present continuously in projects or school, and where there are regular and shared parent/staff activities - are especially important in the case of marginalised parents, who may not use care services, and whose children are most likely to fail in school. It has been our experience that programmes which explicitly address the needs of parents in marginalised communities - their need for education, for training, for support in parenting - play an important role in combating social exclusion.

Reconciling work and family life

110. A major feature of Flanders, as of all OECD countries, is the changing position of women in the workforce. In recent years, the numbers of women with young children participating in the labour market has increased very rapidly. This is partly because of equal opportunities policies that give women the right to compete on equal terms in the labour market, and partly because of the nature and demands of the market itself for specialised and flexible labour. These changes affect older women too, who are also more likely to be in employment and less likely to be available to offer childcare support to the next generation.

111. Men too are experiencing changes in their role as workers and breadwinners. Some few fathers are choosing to take advantage of current parental leave arrangements and stay at home or work part-time in order to spend time with their young children. The review of demographic trends commissioned by *Kind en Gezin* shows a slight increase in this direction. This in turn raises the issue of whether men can be encouraged to work in childcare and early education. The experience so far has been that men can be

encouraged to take on this work, but, like encouraging ethnic minority men and women to work in areas in which they are currently underrepresented, it requires special measures and new recruitment and training strategies.

112. Labour market participation by women has in turn a knock-on effect on childcare. The demand for out-of-home childcare is higher, and women who may have been relied upon previously to be childcarers, e.g. women at home with their own children or older women or mothers engaged in part-time work are all subject today to the pressures of the labour market. We saw some evidence of these market phenomena in operation in Flanders. There is an increased demand for pre-school and out-of-school care, part of which, it is envisaged, will be met by the increased recruitment of family daycare. There has been a decline in the number of grandparents who are available to help with childcare, albeit slight (2%), and a fall in the number of family daycarers, which may be more serious.

113. Yet family daycarers suffer job insecurity as the system is presently organised. They are not entitled to sick pay if they fall ill and do not earn if children do not arrive as arranged. They are expected to undertake training in their own time and receive no incentives for being trained or undertaking extra work. We do not have overall figures, but in the particular family daycare project we investigated, we learnt that there had been a fall of around one third in the numbers of women coming forward, presumably for the reasons we have outlined. However, according to figures that we received from *Kind en Gezin*, there is not a decrease in numbers throughout Flanders, at least up to 1998: in the subsidised sector there were 7 157 childminding women in 1998 compared to 6 643 in 1997. In the coming years, *Kind en Gezin* hopes to promote a substantial expansion in the *kinderdagverblijven* and in the private daycare centres.

114. Childcare has also been traditionally a low status, lowly paid job, and if there are other more lucrative labour market opportunities, then women will inevitably pursue them. As the labour market becomes more competitive, then childcare has also to offer more competitive rates, and to look at the possibility of new sources of recruitment - as mentioned above - from ethnic minority communities or from men. As recruitment and retention become problematic, then a revised view of status, remuneration, training, job access and support for workers is likely to be necessary.

115. One means of reconciling the increasing conflict between the demands of work and family is to provide more maternity and parental leave. One member of our team pointed out that in her country, Finland, paid maternity leave is for 105 working days, and then there is a further period of parental leave subsidy for 158 days, which either the mother or father may claim. Finally there is the option for either parent of unpaid leave but with job rights guaranteed, and enhanced child allowance, until the child is three. The argument for providing such leave arrangements is partly because it is in the best interests of the child, but also because, if cost-benefit arguments are made, it is probably a cheaper option than providing extensive subsidised childcare, as care of the youngest children requires high adult-child ratios.

116. In the Flemish context, the situation of infants in daycare centres was of particular concern for the team. The relatively limited nature of maternity and parental leave means that some very young babies are being left in daycare at a very early age. This limits opportunities for breastfeeding or for bonding between mother and child, although professional opinion is still very divided on this issue. Moreover, the low monthly sum provided by the state to nursing mothers who wish to extend their leave gives little choice to women except to return to work. In short, in present economic conditions, it is difficult for a mother to choose to look after her child, if the remuneration offered bears no resemblance to the salary she could normally command. However, we also respect the arguments that were put to us, that many Flemish women are cautious about cutting back on daycare in favour of women staying at home. Where gender equality has been hard won, proposals to extend parental leave could be seen as “two-edged”, and result in women losing some of the gains they have accrued in the workforce. We can only point out that in the Nordic countries, where extended parental leave proposals have been adopted, gender equality has been very high on the agenda, and women do not appear to have suffered any loss of status as a result.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS

117. An obvious conclusion from our review is that Flanders offers exceptionally generous coverage of education and care to its young children. By the age of three years over 98% of children are in full time school; and under two-and-a-half years, over 21% of children are in subsidised childcare facilities, either day centres or with childminders. This widespread coverage is enviable: very few other countries are so committed to providing free or publicly subsidised services for children to this level. The level of service reflects a national commitment to the importance of underpinning family life through universally provided and high quality public services, a commitment widely shared by politicians and policy-makers, by service providers and parents and the public at large. As one respondent, a faculty member of a teacher training college put it to us: “The task of the Government is to take care of children. It is a constitutional right.”

118. Despite - or perhaps because of - the complex structure of Flemish governance, the education and care systems have strong managerial mechanisms that can incorporate private and non-profit sectors as important partners in the delivery of services. Services are forward-looking; they are being planned and developed to reflect societal changes, both in terms of the types of services available and in terms of the budgeting required to underpin further change. Education and childcare services in turn are backed up by highly efficient health and family support services, and Flemish society itself is mostly stable and prosperous, with very low levels of child poverty or other negative obstacles to children's wellbeing.

119. The quality of provision is also carefully assessed. There are extremely sophisticated monitoring and evaluative systems in operation, and an infrastructure of support and advice at various levels. We have noted too a willingness to move away from an external control model to one in which consultation and self-assessment can become more important. Moreover, the Government sponsors a wide range of research to investigate detailed aspects of services. We also met some very distinguished practitioners and academics, highly involved in the debate on early services.

120. Paradoxically, in Flanders, it is the very extent of the coverage and the strength of its traditional lines that may be challenged in the future. All countries are under pressure to demonstrate flexibility in response to changing circumstances, especially in the early childhood sector, which is always extremely sensitive to societal change. It is these pressure points which test the system: the more established and widespread the system, the more change can be difficult. During the visit, the team discussed intensively the issues raised in the last chapter with a view to future developments in policy and services.

Early entry to school

121. The context of this debate - whether or not to raise the school entry age to 36 months - is quite clear: starting pre-primary school in Flanders can be a difficult transition for a child coming from home-based care or from a day nursery, where peer groups are likely to have been much smaller, adults more readily available, and the need for toileting and sleeping more easily dealt with. In the *kleuterschool*, there is no guarantee of favourable adult-child ratios or of group size, even for children of 30 months, as the wider needs of the school generally take precedence. On the other hand, there is the strong, common-sense argument that the school provides a universal, free neighbourhood service that is recognised by even the

most vulnerable groups of families and children, who do not have the same access to care that they currently have to school.

122. It is likely that parents will opt for the status quo, for even if the pre-primary induction class is not perfect, it works for their children, does not cost them money directly and allows them to work. If then, the present school entry age is retained, a satisfactory way to address the issue would be to limit and fix the child-adult ratios for the youngest groups of children, and provide care assistants in classrooms. Care assistants could also help with school-based, out-of-hours care arrangements. There is already a precedent for this in the special education system, and the co-ordination involved would help to give care and education a more unified visage.

123. The alternative scenario of extending the number of places in the care system and/or placing the responsibility on families to care for their children for a further six months may be less acceptable to parents. Social advantages once acquired are difficult to reverse and there is too the challenge of providing new places in one system while reducing them in the other. The task is not impossible, but seen from an outside perspective, the former solution would seem simpler and more consistent with present patterns of demand. Since we understand too that the education budget is expanding, with a possible redistribution of monies spent on secondary education to be made toward primary education, the cost of improving the quality of provision for the youngest children may be within the scope of current budgetary arrangements.

Co-ordination of care and education

124. Both the care and education systems in Flanders have great strengths. Their respective lines of management and delivery points are admirably clear, if somewhat complicated by the additional layer of the “pillars” or networks. Yet, as we noted in Chapter 4, there is not a coherent joint vision of policy and practice in education and care services, as to how *together* they might contribute to the development of children. Overall, there seems to be a need for greater co-ordination between the systems to promote coherent policy and provision. As indicated in Chapter 4, children may experience negative transitions because of the lack of co-ordination between the systems or between the networks when parents exploit excessively the different choices available. The co-operation that took place a result of the OECD visit has hopefully been a useful starting point for considering the issues. Given this starting point, senior managers from care and education could consider how they might develop and implement a common vision for the care and education of young children. Among the mechanisms that have helped to forge a common vision of childhood across care and education systems in other countries, are:

- Providing common curriculum guidelines for the entire age span, 0-6 years and again, for the entire age-group covered by out-of-school care. The work of care and education specialists on such a project could provide a valuable opportunity for synergy - to explore together the fundamental questions about early childhood services. How does a country understand its work for young children? What are the implications of structuring services along separate care and education lines? What are the typical early childhood institutions of the country about? What is the project of these institutes? How can their project be implemented in a manner respectful of young children? How can out-of-school care arrangements be linked to core educational and citizenship aims, while making them attractive for children?
- Common attention to appropriate adult-child ratios for the youngest children at school. As pointed out in the section above, a real opportunity exists in Flanders at the moment (with the discussion of the raising of the school age) for the Ministry of Education and *Kind en Gezin* to address this question together and, if it is deemed appropriate, to assign assistants from the care sector to supplement the ratios. In 1996, the European Childcare Network recommended a ratio of 1:8 for children aged 24-36 months;

- Common attention to the issue of training. We shall briefly raise some questions about training in Flanders in the section below, but would like to suggest here that a common vision of the early childhood project is embodied above all by early childhood staff. Hence, the need in all countries to investigate the content of training of care and education workers and to develop links between them; and
- Co-operation at local level between care and education centres to ease the transition from the home to care centre or pre-school, or from daycare to pre-school. Experience from northern Italy and other countries would show, for example, that co-operation between staff and parents is very helpful in removing the insecurity that children feel in these transitions. When there is question of children moving from daycare into pre-school, preliminary cross-visits from one centre to another and the mutual communication of non-sensitive information about the needs of individual children have also been found helpful. Likewise, some agreed way to lessen competition among the networks must be found, especially where very young children are concerned.

Status and training of personnel

125. Several issues were raised with regard to the status and training of both careworkers and teachers, in particular, arising from the split nature of the care and education systems. Though child development is stressed in the early care system, personnel are still insufficiently aware of the educational aspect of their work. Yet, there is currently a surplus of pre-school teachers on the labour market in Flanders. The nature of the system prevents them, however, from moving toward the care sector. In parallel, barriers exist to hinder the movement of personnel from the care system into the lower classes of the pre-school, where their presence could be of real help to the youngest children and their teachers. The experience of other countries would show that to reduce the negative effects that a split system can engender, joint reviews of training are useful. They help to develop necessary links between the different kinds of training, to make training routes more flexible and to create a common vision and common goals for early childhood services.

126. In almost all countries, there is pressure to raise the level of training for early childhood workers. In Flanders, the focus is rightly on upgrading the initial training of the careworkers. However, this will demand substantial and sustained extra funding. If public funding is not available, then careworkers will have to assume the training costs themselves or, as happens in some situations, states or municipalities pass on part of the costs to parents through raising childcare fees. As far as we could judge as outsiders to the Flemish context, this would probably be unacceptable to both groups, and would also be a further deterrent to disadvantaged parents to use childcare services.

127. In the meantime, both the Ministry of Education and *Kind en Gezin* have ambitious in-service training programmes, which, no doubt, are helping careworkers and teachers to become, reflective and critical of their own practice. Setting aside time for staff to attend courses but above all to reflect together on their work, is an essential quality instrument and an initiative of which the care and education managers in Flanders can be proud. We do not know the exact percentage of time that is actually devoted to continuous team training in Flanders, but from what teachers in particular told us, we presume it to be significant. The European Commission Childcare Network proposed that 10% non-contact time with children should be set aside for such training, and as part of remunerated staff hours. The only significant part of the system that does not benefit from such extensive in-service training is the family daycare sector.

128. As noted in Chapter 4, family daycare plays a critical role in daycare in Flanders. The number of family daycarers, however, is declining significantly for a number of reasons. In part, it may be because

likely candidates can get much better paid part-time work or even because parental preference may now favour centre-based care. There are, however, other basic issues that enter into the calculations of potential family daycare candidates, such as the insecurity about not having a regular supply of children to pay their basic expenses or about not having access to health care or normal social security coverage through their job. The status given to the profession is also unsatisfactory: initial training is short, while, unlike centre-based careworkers, family daycarers are obliged to assume the opportunity costs of continuous training themselves. If they do decide to put their names forward and are selected, they receive excellent follow-up and moral support from *Kind en Gezin*. However, the weakening situation of this important element in the care system raises several important issues for the future of daycare in Flanders, e.g. should this less formal but neighbourhood-based childcare service be continued (candidates are well chosen, and often have good, general educational levels)? If the answer is affirmative, what should the policy-makers be doing, so that family daycarers receive a higher status and benefit from better training? How should this training be conceived? Can pathways of access be created for them into centre-based care or pre-schools? Can their neighbourhood and family-based quality be used to recruit women from ethnic minorities, which in turn, would make it easier for ethnic families to benefit from childcare when and where they need it?

Promoting equity

129. The question of equity arises from our discussions with various persons and groups in Flanders concerning how certain children fare in early childhood services, in particular, children who come from very poor families, those from ethnic minorities, refugee children and children with disabilities. As the early childhood system is based on the principle of providing universal, high quality services to all children without discrimination, special efforts are being made on behalf of these children. The centres for expertise on inter-cultural education (Steunpunt ICO) and on second language learning for immigrants (Steunpunt NT2) are important actors in this field. Where lacunae have been noted, innovative projects have been publicly funded, programmes which have already attracted international attention, such as *Experiential Education*, and the *MEQ Project*. These programmes deserve to be developed and extended. Outcome targets and measures for the different groups might be also considered, so as to increase effectiveness and enable cross-national research on these issues, for as we have mentioned above, no country has managed to resolve fully the difficult issues of poverty and discrimination.

130. Yet, the rise of hostility toward ethnic populations in the European Union demonstrates how necessary it is to be positive about diversity, and rigorous about non-discrimination, particularly, as Professor Verhellen remarked, in our education systems. The early years provide a remarkable opportunity to promote tolerance and the skills of living together. The presence in the daycare centre or pre-school of children with special needs or from different European or other ethnic backgrounds is potentially very enriching. Among the initiatives that are proving useful in Flanders and other countries to promote openness and a sense of equity among children are the following:

- Curricula that encourage the education of children in the shared foundation values of our democracies, such as equality, responsibility and solidarity. The resources and packs developed by MEQ provide much suitable material to inspire such programmes;
- Recruitment of teachers and classroom assistants from ethnic minority backgrounds or, when appropriate, with disabilities, to reflect the legitimacy of all groups in society. In parallel, some use of mother tongue teaching or mother tongue resources within the daycare centre and early years classroom can be appropriate. Both Sweden and the Netherlands have undertaken very useful work in this domain, without any lessening of effectiveness where the learning of the official language is concerned; and

- Protocols to help teachers or childcare workers to deal with racial tensions or racist incidents, when such arise. As with questions of abuse or cruelty, teachers are often caught unprepared by such incidents and need the help of the school authorities to deal with them and prevent their reoccurrence.

131. Improvements in the situation of children with special needs is similarly a question of emphasis in Flanders, as a tremendously comprehensive system has already been put into place for them. Apart from the challenge of bringing services to these children rather than vice versa, what seems to be at issue is a question of definition, a conception of children with disabilities that still seems more medical than developmental. The eight definitions used to categorise these children contrasts with the three-fold categorisation proposed by the OECD, and may be a factor in the present tendency to segregate these children in special centres. We have already mentioned how important it is for all children - both for the children with disabilities *and* for the mainstream - to be together in inclusive classrooms. A certain part of the generous allowances made available in Flanders to children with disabilities, e.g. favourable staffing ratios, per capita allowances and provision of specialist help, might be used more efficiently and in the best interests of children, if channelled toward inclusive education (OECD, 1999).

Parent involvement

132. As noted in the previous chapter, we recognise the important progress that Flanders has already made to take into account the role of parents in the development and early learning of their children. Parents are the first educators of children and it is their right to be involved in, support and influence the activities proposed to their children. Their involvement is in the best interests both of children and of the early childhood services themselves. Giving regular information to parents and in turn, requesting it from them, may lead to more vigorous participation in the educational and civic project that the school embodies. However, as the Background Report points out, there is not yet a wide range of expertise on this issue available to schools and daycare centres in Flanders, nor do teacher-training colleges focus strongly on the issue. For this reason, it may be useful to commission a review of models and projects in other countries, to provide some idea of the range of initiatives, with an evaluation of their aims, objectives and efficacy.

Reconciling work and family life

133. With increasing numbers of mothers entering the labour market or returning to work more quickly after the birth of their child, the question of who will take care of the young children has become an acute issue in all countries participating in this review. Flanders has experienced less dramatic change in this respect than in a number of other countries, as the help of grandparents was, until recently, readily available, while the admission of children into school from the age of two-and-a-half is long-standing. However, some shortages of childcare places are being experienced and in addition, some mothers, particularly of young infants, feel under stress in their attempt to reconcile work and their desire to spend more time with their babies. For this reason, a review of policy in other countries with respect to parental leave and work-sharing policies may be worth undertaking.

134. Some countries have introduced long-term, paid parental leave schemes, with the entitlement to return to one's job. The argument in favour is that prolonged leave during the first year of an infant's life favours the development of the child and allows the mother to return with tranquillity to the workforce, when high quality care services are then available for infants who already have some maturity. Generous parental leave initiatives demand considerable initial funding - from the state or employers or insurance schemes - but are possibly less expensive to the public budget in the long run. Although the experience of

the Scandinavian countries runs counter, many women's groups in Flanders fear, however, that they will lose the hard-earned gains that women have accrued in the labour market and may not find extended parental leave a positive solution. Attempts to resolve the dilemma in other countries have included clear gender equity laws and more flexibility in the labour market, e.g. more flexi-time at work or more part-time work positions being made available.

135. Satisfactory reconciliation of work and family responsibilities demands, in general, governmental intervention and negotiations with the relevant social partners, which tends to make it an issue outside the immediate competence of the care and education authorities. In addition, in the Belgian context, it is a national, rather than a regional question. But the attempt to allow families to have more time with their children is worth making: even a few minutes a day for parents to speak with their child's teacher is invaluable and promotes that closeness between the home and school that can do so much to strengthen civic values. Likewise, flexibility in working hours can reduce enormously the strains and pressures on young parents, that at certain stages of life are so inimical to family life and child-rearing (Rutgers, 1996).

Conclusion

136. The review team would like to stress that our overall impression of early care and education services in Flanders is indeed very positive. The coverage provided by the state, in partnership with local communities, is admirable, as is also its commitment towards supporting family life and the continuance of a stable and equitable society. The *kleuterschool* is a symbol of what needs to be maintained, an institution that is universal in principle, localised and free, and is characterised by concern for the personal, social and intellectual development of children. Current levels of quality control and research are also at a high level across both care and education. In short, our recommendations are for improvements to a system that is already comprehensive and well-managed, and offers many useful examples for other countries.

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APPENDIX I: OECD REVIEW TEAM

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APPENDIX II: INFORMATION ON THE FLEMISH BACKGROUND REPORT

The OECD project on Early Childhood Education and Care is supervised and organised by the Steering Committee convened by the Ministry of Education of Flanders. The Background Report was provided by Prof. Dr. Ferre Laevers and Ruth Janssens .

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APPENDIX III: PROGRAMME OF THE REVIEW VISIT

18 to 23 October 1999

Monday 18 October

Brussels, Education Department

Morning: Orientation and policy -- participants: OECD review team; Veronique Adriaens; Steering Committee Members; Ch. De Graeve and W. Boomgaert from the Education Department; F. Laevers (author of the Background Report); P. Bedert and K. Verheggen from the Child and Family Institution

9h15

Welcome

9h30 - 10h15

Presentation of the programme by the President of the Steering Committee, G. Monard, Secretary-General of the Education Department

10h15 - 10h30

Information about logistics

10h45 - 12h15

Discussion on topics from the Background Report with the author, F. Laevers, and the Steering Committee; presentation by Bea Buysse (Child & Family Institute) on the aspect "childcare"; presentation by F. Laevers on the aspect "pre-primary education"; question time

Afternoon: Discussion with policy-makers education and care and representatives from inspection and the educational development department (DVO) -- participants: OECD review team; Steering Committee; Ch. De Graeve and W. Boomgaert from the Education Department; Prof. Laevers (author of the Background Report); L. Vandenberghe, W. Verniest, P. Bedert and K. Verheggen from the Child & Family Institution

14h00 - 15h15

Pre-primary education policy: presentation by M. Wouters, Advisor Department of Educational Development (DVO) on "attainment targets" (ontwikkelingsdoelen); presentation by J. Van Vreckem, Inspector from the Education Department, on "quality control" (kwaliteitsbewaking); followed by question time

15h30 - 16h45

Policy plan for childcare: presentation by K. Verheggen (Child & Family Institution); question time

17h00 - 18h00

Conversation with the Minister of Education and Training, M. Vanderpoorten, and with the Minister of Welfare, Public Health and Equal Chances, M. Vogels; also present some staff members, the OESO team, Steering Committee Members, L. Vandenberghe and P. Bedert from the Child & Family Institution

Tuesday 19 October

Region of Brussels

Morning: Education

9h00 - 11h30

Presentation and visit in a rural pre-primary school: Gemeenteschool Wauterbos (Kleuterschool), Dwarshaagstraat 20, 1640 Sint-Genesius-Rode; Director: Mr. Vital Swaelens; team accompanied by V. Adriaens, Ch. De Graeve and inspector Van Vreckem

Focus on pre-primary education with “zorgverbreding” (extension of care to support children at risk); presentation by Trees Vanhoutte (from the team of Prof. Laevers) on “zorgverbreding”; visit to the school

Afternoon: Care

14h15 - 15h45

Visit of the project Elmer (Emancipation by working activities), Gallaitstreet 116, 1030 Brussels (project child care and specific provisions for deprived families); accompanied by Bea Buysse; presentation of the project by A. Lembrechts, project co-ordinator

16h30 - 18h00

Visit to an Initiative for Childcare outside the school hours (*IBO*) “Het Maantje” in Ternat; explanation of the activities that are organised for the children; accompanied by Bea Buysse and S. Plattiau, co-ordinator of “Het Maantje”

Wednesday 20 October

Region of Ghent - Lokeren

Care: quality and training

Morning

9h15 - 10h00

Visits to two families providing home-based child care (*POGs*) in two groups.

Family (POG) 1: childcare mother: Hilde De Nagel; accompanied by Bea Buysse and A. Joos, social worker from Patjoepelke

Family (POG) 2: childcare mother: Nancy Vande Velde; accompanied by Veerle Vanden Broeck, social worker from Patjoepelke

10h15 - 11h00

Visit to Patjoepelke: presentation of the care supply offered by Patjoepelke (integrated supply of child care: recognised centre organising home based care, daycare centre, care of children outside the school hours); visit to the Daycare Centre Patjoepelke that has participated in the MEQ project – Milestones towards Quality through Equality; M. Verbeke, Director Daycare Centre; accompanied by Bea Buysse, A. Joos (social worker), J. Peeters (co-ordinator VBJK), and Serif Buba (participant in the MEQ project)

11h30 - 13h00

Presentation of the MEQ project by the VBJK (Resource and Training Centre for Childcare, Vormingscentrum voor de Begeleiding van het Jonge Kind); participants -- the OECD review team, Prof. Baekelmans (President VBJK); Jan Peeters (co-ordinator VBJK); Michel Vanden Broeck (scientific assistant VBJK); Bea Buysse; Ivo Lowet (inspector Daycare Centres, Child & Family); Leo Van Loo (quality controller, Child & Family); and one participant in the MEQ project

13h00 - 14h30

Lunch at the VBJK: participants -- the OECD review team; Prof. Baekelmans (President VBJK); Jan Peeters (co-ordinator VBJK); Michel Vanden Broeck (scientific assistant VBJK); Ivo Lowet (inspector Daycare Centres, Child & Family); Leo Van Loo (quality controller, Child & Family); one participant in the MEQ project; A. Joos and M. Verbeke from Patjoepelke; and Bea Buysse

Afternoon

14h30 - 15h45

Visit to Private Daycare Centre (*POI*) “De Toverstaf”, Lübeckstraat 58, 9000 Ghent (Care Centre with an experimental project: “smooth transition” from a Daycare Centre to the first part of pre-primary education, supported by the City of Ghent); presentation of the projects “smooth transition” by Ivo Lowet (Child & Family) and Dany Verdonck (Pedagogical Centre, City of Ghent); accompanied by Leo Van Loo (quality controller Child & Family), Jan Peeters (co-ordinator VBJK) and Rita Uyttendael (Alderwoman for Education, City of Ghent)

16h15 - 17h45

Meeting in the house of the Provincial Division of the Child & Family Institution, Jubileumstraat 25-27, 9000 Ghent; presentation by Leo Van Loo (quality controller Child & Family) on quality measuring in Child Care Centres and Private home based care; discussion on the aspect “training” with Jan Peeters (VBJK); accompanied by Ivo Lowet, Inspector Daycare Centres Child & Family

18h00 - 18h45

Faculty of Social Pedagogy (University of Ghent), H. Dunantlaan 2, Ghent; presentations in two groups

Group 1: presentation and discussion with Prof. Verhellen (University of Ghent) on children rights and young children (0-6 years); accompanied by W. Van Belleghem

Group 2: presentation and discussion with Marc Verlot (Steunpunt ICO - Support Centre for Intercultural Education, University of Ghent) on intercultural education and young children; accompanied by Ch. De Graeve

19h00

Dinner in Ghent at restaurant “Basile”: OECD review team; Ch. De Graeve, W. Van Belleghem and M. Verlot

Thursday 21 October

Region of Antwerp

Pre-primary education: quality and training

Morning

9h00 - 12h00

Presentation and visit in a communal school for elementary education where the inspection team of the Education Department has been recently for a “schooldoorlichting” (school-based review); presentation on pre-primary education and quality control/assurance at Gesubsidieerde Gemeentelijke Basisschool, Corneel Franckstraat 33, 2100 Deurne, tel.03/321.00.39; Director: Mrs. Giettenaer; accompanied by V. Adriaens, Ch. De Graeve, M. Groeseneken, Inspectorate Pre-primary Education of the City of Antwerp and as a representant of the School Board, and Mr. Staes, Inspector Elementary Education from the Education Department; discussion with the 3 parties (Director, Board and Inspection) on experiences with the school-based review that happened recently [the Dutch review report will be available in the school]; visit to the classrooms

Afternoon

Visits to two schools where training is given

14h00 - 15h30

Presentation and visit in a school for training of “Child care workers”: Stedelijk Instituut voor technisch Onderwijs nr.7, Lamoriniërestraat 7, 2018 Antwerpen, Director: Marc Zys; accompanied by V. Adriaens, and M. Zys

16h00 - 17h30

Presentation and visit in a school for higher education with initial training for teachers pre-primary education and conversation with some students on the training they receive: Hogeschool Antwerpen, Departement Lerarenopleiding en Culturele Agogiek, Verschansingsstraat 29, 2000 Antwerpen; accompanied by V. Adriaens, Jan Thas, Head Division Teacher Training of the school

Friday 22 October

Region of Leuven/Louvain

Morning

Presentation and visits to two schools

8h30 - 10h30

Project “Experiential Education” in a pre-primary school: Kleuterschool Sint-Jozefsinstituut, Jozef Pierrestraat 120, 3200 Kessel-Lo, Director: Zr. Marie-Josée Vanderveken; presentation of the project by Prof. F. Laevers; accompanied by V. Adriaens, Ch. De Graeve and inspector Jules De Bent from the Education Department

10h45 - 12h30

School for special pre-primary education and meeting with local parents' organisation: "Ter Bank" – gesubsidieerde vrije school voor buitengewoon basisonderwijs (kleuteronderwijs type 2), Tervuursesteenweg 295, 3001 Heverlee, Director: Jan Wynants; comments by Jan Wynants; accompanied by V. Adriaens, Ch. De Graeve, and inspector Trees Buysse from the Education Department

Afternoon

14h00 - 16h00

Meeting with representatives of the umbrella organisations of school boards, of teacher unions and of parent organisations + one person from the Care interest group (VMSI-Caritas) at the Groot-Begijnhof (Grand Beguinage), Louvain, room Anna De Paepe

16h15 - 18h00

Discussion with researchers on ECEC (education and care); the researchers will say a few words on the research they are doing or have done, followed by question time; accompanied by T. De Ruytter, Education Department

19h00

Dinner in Sire Pynnock, Hogeschoolplein, 9-10, Louvain; participants -- OECD review team, Prof. Laevers, some Steering Committee Members (G. Monard, G. Janssens, T. De Ruytter, B. Buysse) and G. Hostens from the Education Department

Saturday 23 October

Final discussion and debriefing, Hotel Arneberg

9h45 - 10h00

Welcome & coffee

10h00 - 12h00

Final discussion with members of the Steering Committee, Prof. Laevers, L. Vandenberghe, W. Verniest and P. Bedert from the Child & Family Institution; arrangements concerning the review report and the publication of the Background Report