



TRANSATLANTIC FORUM ON INCLUSIVE EARLY YEARS

INVESTING IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF YOUNG CHILDREN FROM MIGRANT AND LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

ECEC in the Flemish Community Belgium

As preparation of the site visits

Political situation and government

Belgium is a federal state with 3 communities (Flemish, French and German speaking), 3 regions (Flanders, Wallonia, Brussels capital) and a federal parliament and government. Competences are divided in a rather complex manner, which makes it difficult to draft a clear picture for the whole country.

ECEC and education are placed under the community authorities, while social security and asylum and migration policies remain on the federal level. Policies regarding poverty and equal opportunities are situated both on the community and federal levels.

As ECEC policies fall under the community governments, the underlying principles and policy priorities are no longer completely aligned across communities. For instance, in day-care policies, we have recently seen an increased attention in policy for the social function on the Flemish side, while the French community has invested more in the content of the pedagogical function.

This paper will focus on policy in the Flemish Community and serves more specifically as an introductory framework for the site visits of the TFIEY.

General family and ECEC policies

Belgium has a range of supporting policies for families with young children, such as: maternity leave (15 weeks with 75 to 82% full wage), paternity leave (10 days), possibility to take time off work for child rearing, child support, social security, medicare, social housing, youth work, accessible education etc. However, it should be noted that these measures do not always benefit those families who need them most. On the contrary, the principle of 'Whoever has, will be given more' (the Matthew effect) is still very present in these areas.

In recent years, various initiatives on parenting support (such as generalized preventive health and infant consultation schemes, parenting advice and programs such as Triple P) have been strongly supported and funded by the Flemish government.

Key concepts of ECEC

ECEC is a community competence and falls within the welfare policy area, completely separate from education, which accounts for the many differing policies and views.



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	ECEC	Education
Competence	Ministry of welfare	Ministry of education
Viewed as	A basic provision, despite a persistent shortage of places and a tendency to prioritize working parents	Basic provision for 2,5 - 6 year olds, universally accessible
Professionalism	Low standards, approx. 80% without formal qualification requirements	All teachers have a bachelor degree
Inspection	Central quality monitoring, albeit mainly technical standards	Pedagogical standards
Finances	Parents pay according to their income level in approx 2/3 of provisions	Officially free of charge for all
Availability	Scarcity of places, not enough for all children	Every child is guaranteed a place in school
Goal	Threefold: an economic function (labour participation), an educational function and a social function (equity)	Clearly formulated pedagogical goals

While preschool (kindergarten 2,5-6 years) has become a basic provision considered to be beneficial to children’s education and development, day care (0 – 3 years) historically has had a more negative connotation, which has begun to change only recently. Developed largely in the second half of the 19th century, day care services focused mainly on children from poor (labour class) families. For a long time, it was considered to be a necessary evil: ‘necessary’ to avoid high child mortality and as a substitute for deficient maternal care in disadvantaged families; ‘evil’ because it would allow mothers (fathers hardly came into the picture) to run from their responsibilities and, later on, because it would hinder the development of an attachment between mother and child.

In more affluent households, due to higher educational attainment and well-paid jobs for fathers, women mostly stayed at home to take care of their children. It was not until the 1960s that women started to make up a greater part of the workforce as a result of several changes, such as the democratisation of higher education, emancipative movements, the rising cost of living for families etc. Around the same time, the beneficial effects of childcare services in the pedagogical sense became a point of interest, and some cities (e.g. Ghent) began to increase Investments in educational quality and professionalisation.

In recent years, active interventions have been pursued to improve the accessibility of day care (cfr. the social function of ECEC). Unequal enrolment in day care, especially in areas where places are too scarce,



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has extensively been documented by research¹. Children from families with low income, low levels of education and lower socio-economic status are less likely to attend and profit from day-care. As a consequence, public means are not evenly distributed across all families. Over 70% of families of Belgian origin use day-care as opposed to only 32% of families of ethnic minorities and 21% of socio-economically disadvantaged families. Also, due to the strong emphasis on the economic function of day-care, a persistent misunderstanding that day care should only be for 'working' families remains. Many vulnerable parents, including the unemployed, seem to feel that their children would not be welcome in these services. A variety of thresholds, both formal and informal, still constitute a challenge for universal access.

Current issues

The Flemish government has supported and funded several initiatives to improve the accessibility of day-care services. All funded providers are now expected to reserve 20% of places for children from vulnerable families (low income, migration background, social vulnerability...). In 2012, a new Flemish decree on day-care for infants and toddlers was voted, defining day-care as a 'right' and guaranteeing access for all by 2020. (At this point, the decree has not yet been implemented.)

On a more local and grassroots level, innovative practices such as community based childcare, meeting places for parents and children, and 'parent led crèches', initiatives focussing on diversity have been developed. These local policies are important; the Flemish policies only defines the greater picture, leaving room for more specified local initiatives (see the case of Ghent).

On the issue of professionalisation, a new bachelor's degree has been introduced in 3 tertiary education colleges in the Flemish community on 'the Pedagogy of the young child', educating pedagogical coaches who will support teams in day-care centres and coach them on several domains: communicating with and supporting families, establishing links to the community, reflecting critically on the job, and developing a pedagogical vision on how to work with young children, all in order to raise the level of professionalism in ECEC.

The case of Ghent

The city of Ghent has a long tradition of investment in childcare and education, with a clear focus on working class children in the municipal services. After World War II, and even more from the 60s onwards, the city has deployed several innovative practices and strongly invested in e.g. pedagogical support for

¹MAS (2007), *Analyse van het zoekproces van ouders naar een voorschoolse kinderopvangplaats*, Leuven, Market Analysis & Synthesis. Vandenbroeck, M. And Geens, N. (2011), *Cartografie van de Brusselse Nederlandstalige kinderopvang 2, Evoluties 2005-2010*, Gent- Brussel: Vakgroep Sociale Agogiek UGent - VGC.



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personnel, guaranteeing pedagogical quality and the inclusion of children from vulnerable families. This is the case for Kindergarten (3-6y) as well as for preschool day-care (0-3y). The case of Ghent is quite exceptional in having both within one policy department.

In the early 60s, some municipal schools already provided after school care, also attended by children from low-income families. The city of Ghent also wanted to move forward on pedagogical quality for all children and established a 'Pedagogical centre', which among other things, changed the rationale for child care very explicitly towards the well-being of the child. Within day care settings this was quite extraordinary, given the traditional medical approach of services in those days.

Throughout the following decades this Pedagogical centre introduced and implemented the holistic child-centred approach both in Kindergarten and in day care. Here we add some characteristic examples, far from being exhaustive².

- Typical for Ghent policy was e.g. the focus on pedagogical quality for all children and working towards getting a social mix in kindergarten and day care. Translated to child care, this meant that it would no longer be a "necessary evil", but rather a qualitative, educational environment, complementary to the child's home environment, and welcoming all children.
- On professional development, during the 70s, the city started to invest in a system of continuous pedagogical mentoring and support by specialised staff from the Pedagogical Centre. In this support there is a strong focus on the importance of learning how to deal with diversity and how to include different groups of vulnerable families.
- Several projects and innovative policy developments were introduced in day care on issues such as parent participation (reaching also those parents who were not supposed to be interested in ECEC), community based care and accessibility for all.
- The city being an important provider of child care (0-3), a very concrete intervention on accessibility is the Tinkelbel system, which aids parents, including the most vulnerable ones, to find a place in the day-care centres of the city of Ghent for their children. The system is based on the principle of social justice and redistributes scarce places among all families on an objective and fair basis. This has proven to be an effective instrument against the former 'first come, first served' rule, which often only benefitted well-informed and well-off families. This system has specific priority rules built in for vulnerable families (low income, migrant background, lone parents...) and numbers show that different groups within the Ghent population are indeed equally represented within the daycare system.

² For a more complete review, see PEETERS, J. And VANDENBROECK, M, *Caring and learning together: A case study of Ghent, the Flemish community of Belgium*, in Early Childhood and Family Policy Services, Unesco, 2010 (doc 2010/ED/BAS/ECCE/PI/4)

These local policies need to be seen in the given context of the time (not covered in this introduction) with e.g. the so-called 'school war' between catholics (a major player in Flemish education) and liberals and socialist. Local policy was, in this sense, not only inspired by pure pedagogical reasons, but also used as a way to get more children enrolled in the municipal schools and out of school care.



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- Community based work was introduced in Ghent's education policy with a strong emphasis on the poorest neighbourhoods in the city. This way, the city of Ghent tries to offer care and education of high quality also to those children who could benefit the most.

Relevant data

- Belgium has almost 11 million inhabitants.
- There are around 70.000 births per year in Belgium. About 23% of the newborns in Flanders have a mother of non-Belgian origin.
- Child poverty is currently at a rate of 18%. Non-EU immigrants run a risk of poverty up to 3 to 4 times higher than EU immigrants.
- There has been a significant increase of migration to Belgium since the 80s (over 50% from EU countries).
- Compulsory education starts at age 6 and continues to 18 years of age; almost all children in Belgium attend Kindergarten (from age 2,5 to age 6)