

Belgium – The relation between childcare/home and preschool

Context and system

Belgium is a federal state with 3 communities (Flemish, French, German Community) and 3 regions (Flanders, Walloon, Brussels-Capital) next to the federal level. Policy areas such as family services, childcare services, education, youth work and welfare are regulated at the community level.

Split ECEC system between childcare and preschool sector

Childcare sector

Childcare provision for younger children (0-3 years old) and out of school care (2,5 – 12 years old) is the responsibility of the Ministers of Welfare and Family.

In the Dutch speaking community, it is managed by the Flemish governmental agency “Opgroeien” (before: Kind & Gezin).

In the Fédération Wallonie Bruxelles (Wallonia-Brussels Federation - WBF) it is managed by the Office de la Naissance et de l’Enfance, under the general auspices of the Minister for Childhood, Health, Culture, Media and Women’s Rights (Ministre de l’Enfance, de la Santé, la Culture, des Médias et des Droits des Femmes)

The agencies are responsible for regulations, allocation of places, funding, quality standards and quality management. As these are in the hands of the communities, regulations and funding norms are somewhat different between the north and the south of the country. The day-to-day running of childcare centres is the responsibility of the service providers (local authorities, non-profit organisations, and also some private for-profit providers). All childcare services must be registered

with the agencies and a large majority % of the places are offered by services subsidised by the agency.

Preschool sector

Preschool education for children aged 2½ to 6 years is the responsibility of the Ministries of Education. Preschool is an integral part of Basic education (Basisonderwijs) including both preschool and primary education. Since this year (2020-2021), in Flanders and in WBF the last year of preschool (5-year-olds) is compulsory and there is a discussion ongoing about further lowering the compulsory school age. There are three main types of provider/provision: (1) preschool settings run and fully financed by the Flemish Community/WBF; (2) subsidised public settings organised by local authorities; and (3) subsidised private settings – mostly confessional (catholic). In Flanders, almost 64% of children in provision attend a private, mostly Catholic, setting, 22% municipal and 14% state-maintained settings. In WBF the distribution is different at the preschool level: 52,8% officiel subventionné (municipal); 40% libre subventionné (private funded); 7,1% WBF. Although, schools receiving public funding are required to operate within a regulatory framework, they still enjoy considerable autonomy. Directors of schools have therefore considerable discretionary space to develop their pedagogical approach. Different school boards are distributed over 3 educational networks and may belong to an umbrella organisation, that is, a representative association of school boards that acts as a partner for schools in policy discussions with the government. The umbrella organisations often take over some of the responsibilities of governing bodies. For example, they draw up their own curriculum, teaching methods, pedagogical plan and timetables. This means that the governing bodies concerned surrender some of their autonomy to the networks. When there are no connecting out-of-school care centres (under the auspices of the Ministry of Welfare and Family in Flanders; of Childhood, Health, Culture, Media and Women's Rights in WBF), schools foresee their own before and after schoolcare (mostly free play under little supervision).

Challenges

Social challenge(s):

- *Difference in access:*
 - Childcare: places are scarce & unequally accessible. Parental fees are means tested in approx. 3/4 of childcare places. Childcare is attended by 50% of children in Flanders and 48% in Fédération Wallonie Bruxelles, but children with migration backgrounds, and children living in poverty are significantly underrepresented)
 - Preschool: right and free (high attendance, 97% 3 year olds)
- The engrained idea that the ideal child at the start of preschool, already attended childcare. Consequently, children who have to cope with their first socialisation outside the family environment (higher chance of being in a societally disadvantaged position), will likely face more problems to start in preschool.



Pedagogical challenge(s)

- Differences in pedagogy:
 - Childcare: focus on care, lack of 'learning' (educational stimulation), in search for more educare (cfr. pedagogical curriculum). Quality evaluations in Flanders show that the emotional support is average to good but the educational support is moderate to poor. There are no data available in WBF.
 - Preschool education: focus on learning, lack of emotional and physical care, in search for more educare (cfr. quality framework inspectorate). Language interaction is poor. This is also the case in WBF and some research projects were carried out to support preschool teachers (see Desmottes, Leroy, Maillart, 2020; <http://hdl.handle.net/2268/247028>).
 - Out of school care (under auspices Ministry of Welfare and Family in Flanders; of Childhood, Health, Culture, Media and Women's Rights in WBF): focus on care & play
 - Before and after school care (under auspices Ministry of Welfare and Family in Flanders; of Childhood, Health, Culture, Media and Women's Rights in WBF): more supervision & free play
 - Difference in staff support:
 - Childcare: 1 staff for 8 or 9 children in Flanders and 1/7 in WBF.
 - Preschool: no regulations, but on average 1 teacher for 20-25 children and maybe some hours of a childcare workers (assistants). No regulations in WBF. According to a survey focused on transition (Housen, Royen, 2019) 75% of the teachers and directors estimated 21 children per class and 25% more than 30 children in June 2018.
 - Out of school care (under auspices Ministry of Welfare and Family in Flanders; of Childhood, Health, Culture, Media and Women's Rights in WBF): 1 staff for 14 children. In WBF the adult child ratio depends on the age of the child and the number of hours of school age childcare (1/8 for under six-year-olds: 1/12 for longer care periods; 1/18 otherwise)
 - Before and after school care (under auspices Ministry of education): not clear but estimated to be high number of children for one adult. A recent study in Brussels shows that it can vary from 1/14 to 1/120.
 - Differences in infrastructure: better age appropriated educare infrastructure for young children in childcare centres than preschools
 - Less parent involvement in preschool than in childcare
- ➔ These differences result in rather abrupt vertical and horizontal transitions for young children and families.



In WFB, research projects on transition (a survey Housen, Royen, 2019 + cases studies, Housen, Royen, Pirard, 2020) underline poor interactions between professionals and parents which hinders smooth transitions (very little transition practices). The covid context is worsening this situation. A third project (Housen, al, forthcoming) focuses on this issue with a grounded theory approach.

Professional challenge(s)

- Childcare workers are trained at the level of vocational secondary school; preschool teachers are Bachelors. Differences CPD opportunities, salaries and societal appreciation → create tension and feelings of inequality in collaborations in vertical and horizontal transitions.

In WBF, 4 years graduated by University College and Universities is expected from 2023. Preschool teachers will work with children from 2 to 8 years. A new bachelor's degree in childcare and education (Bachelier en accueil et en éducation du jeune enfant) should also be set up in September 2023.

In WBF, currently the director who must work in the childcare service but doesn't work directly with children is often a medical, social or/and more recently pedagogical worker. Depending on the size of the childcare service (at least 14 children according to the new law) and the management options of the institution, he or she can work alone or in a multidisciplinary team where some tasks can be shared or delegated. He or she has at least a bachelor level, but rarely an orientation related to childcare when he or she is enrolled. From December 2022, an additional qualification recognised by ONE will be set up as a modular multidisciplinary certificate (25 ECTS) with five parts especially focused on childcare. In the education sector, the missions of the directors (preschool and primary school included) have been officially defined since 2007 (decret 2-02-2007) and were reviewed in 2019 (decret 14-03-2019) according to the general reform of the school (Pacte pour un enseignement d'excellence, Pact for a teaching of Excellence). The directors are promoted teachers with an additional qualification and are in charge of both the management and the organisation of their establishment. They are considered as pedagogical and educational leaders in charge of the Action plan (plan de pilotage) of their establishment. They don't take into account the specific ECEC issues. In 2020-2021, only 12,89 % (251/1947) of the directors were preschool directors without being also in charge of a primary school and in June 2021, only 16,25% (331/2037) had a first qualification of preschool teacher. So the director is often a primary teacher with an additional general qualification without specific skills, knowledge or views about preschool issues. He is responsible for both primary and preschool which can be implemented in different places. The director often works in an office (often in the primary school) and does not work directly with children on a regular basis. In this context supporting the preschool staff with a pedagogical and educational view may be difficult.

In addition, CPD is organized for childcare workers and for preschool professionals by different bodies.

→ Supporting an ECEC educational view could be difficult

Institutional challenges

- Different visions, societal rationales of ECEC and regulatory frameworks inhibit collaborations between different policy domains and between childcare, preschool and out of school care.
- Outdated idea that childcare (0-3) and out of school care has solely a care and economic function (family-work conciliation), and preschool has only an educational (educational attainment) and social function (equal educational opportunities), became again apparent in the COVID crisis when out of school care and preschools had to collaborate more in some regions to organize emergency care.

Ways of coping

The current debate on dealing with the institutional splits on policy, practice and research level started 10 years ago when the European Commission developed a communication on ECEC. One of the advices was to work on a conceptual and institutional integration of childcare and preschool education. In Flanders, the VLOR, an important network of educational stakeholders, reacted with organising a conference in the Flemish parliament (in 2011) and stating that integration is not desirable. However, they would like to have more alignment between childcare and preschool education. Since then:

- More studies were done on perspectives of children, parents and professionals during institutional splits
- The inspection has increased its attention for the youngest children in preschool and their caring needs
- The government initiated an interdepartmental working group on transitions
- New practices/action research was initiated to cope with institutional splits in two ways
 1. To create better warm and inclusive transitions within the existing split system by having inter-institutional collaborations
 2. To develop integrated ECEC projects that challenge the existing split system

The Flemish Minister of Welfare is interested in both above strategies to deal with the institutional splits from the necessity to have more pedagogical continuity (pedagogisch doorgaande lijn). Moreover, together with the Ministry of Education, the Minister initiated a new project subsidy to develop integrated ECEC projects

In WBF, smooth transitions at the start of preschool have become one of the priorities of the Government (Déclaration de Politique Communautaire de la FWB, Community Policy Statement, 2019-2024) and the topic of a three-year research project funded by the Minister of Education (Housen, Royen, 2019; Housen, Royen, Pirard, 2020; Housen, Genette, Pirard, 2022). Bridges between staff in preschool, leisure centres and childcare centers have been recommended



especially thanks to mixed action project groups. A quality chart focused on transition is being elaborated by stakeholders from preschool.

Interesting opportunity....

In Flanders, from January 2022 onwards, 12 pilot projects on pedagogical continuity are funded for three years by the Flemish government. A local network of a childcare, preschool and out of school care is expected to collaborate to enable integrated ECEC for children from 0-6 years old. The pedagogical continuity in development, care, education, learning and play of children is at the core of the pilot projects in order for children to have rich and varied development- and play opportunities. Collaboration with the home and neighborhood environment are considered important quality dimensions. The pilot projects are supported in a learning network that will be initiated by VBJK, Centre for Innovations in the Early Years and CEGO, Centre for experiential learning. The project is steered by a group with representatives of welfare and education as well as the unions. The collective goal of the project is to develop a practice model on pedagogical continuity by integrated work. The Department of Social work and social Pedagogy of Ghent University will conduct research on these pilot projects.

In the first exploratory phase, (1st of January 2022- 31st of August 2023) pilot projects need to develop their plans and start their integrated work for children and families. In this period the learning network and the steering group have the task to examine what essential conditions and hindrances in regulatory frameworks of childcare, out of school care and preschool are. Before the second phase (1st of September 2023- 31st of December 2024), proposals will be made if deviations from the rules are needed. Based on these recommendations, the Flemish government will decide on temporary flexibility in the regulatory framework (for instance loosening regulations about qualifications) in order for the pilot projects to succeed.

