

# Netherlands – Split systems in ECEC

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## Context and system

### Split ECEC system between childcare and preschool sector

Historically, the Dutch childcare context was characterised by a 'split system' with two separate sectors for young children, namely, childcare and education, each with its own pedagogical roots (see Bahle, 2009), structural quality characteristics (see Euridyce and Eurostat report, 2014) and regulations (e.g., parental financial contributions; staff salaries and qualifications; opening hours, admission of children, Singer, 2017). Currently, two types of center-based ECEC for children below four years of age exist, each with its own tradition and function: day-care centers for children from birth until age four years and centers originally referred to as playgroups and now often called preschools for two-to-four year olds. A small proportion of the children (approximately 9%) are enrolled in formal home-based care provided by child-minders (OECD, 2016).

The system of early childhood education and care in the Netherlands comprises two separate and partly overlapping sectors (childcare and education), for which two ministries share responsibility. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment (Ministerie van Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid - SZW) has the overall responsibility for ECEC settings for under-4-year olds, out-of-school care arrangements for 4- to 13-year olds and also family day care services. Special publicly funded early childhood intervention programs for 2- to 6-year olds exist (Voor- en Vroegschoolse Educatie; VVE) that are implemented in targeted preschool provisions (and in kindergarten for 4-6 year olds), but also in regular childcare as organizations can apply for this funding when they serve eligible children. Despite efforts to harmonize and integrate the day care and the preschool provisions, segregation of children depending on their eligibility for these targeted programs continues in practice (split 1: horizontal transitions, concurrent provisions in the preschool years, i.e. lack of integration in the system). There is also a different type of split between formal childcare in the

preschool years (0-4 yrs) and primary school (4-13 yrs) with a transition for most children at the age of 4 (split 2: vertical transition, transition from preschool 0-4 yrs → primary school, 4-13 yrs, i.e., lack of continuity for a child from a life-course perspective).

### Childcare sector

Day care has traditionally reflected a strong labour market perspective, although this has changed with recent Childcare Acts and regulations.

The pre-service training requirement for the childcare sector (both preschool childcare 0-4 and afterschool care, 4-12 yrs) in the Netherlands is a three-year upper secondary vocational course in Pedagogical Work. This Pedagogical Work training has two levels, ISCED 3 or 4; the majority of caregivers have a certificate at level 3.

### Preschool sector

The first preschools, at that time called playgroups, had a social-cultural orientation with strong roots in the community and were part of the local welfare policy (Leseman & de Winter, 2013; in Slot, 2018). These playgroups provided children with (better) play opportunities and promotion of social development. Nowadays, Dutch preschools mainly attract children from lower-educated parents and children with an immigrant, including second or third generation, background. This is a reflection of the current educational policy that is aimed at combating disadvantages at an early age by providing compensation programs in preschools. Since 2000, the number of targeted centre-based compensation programs steadily increased to a nation-wide system. These programs are increasingly provided in regular day care provisions as organizations can apply for the municipal funding if they serve eligible, disadvantaged children.

Recently, an Associate Degree was introduced for the professional development of pedagogical staff working with young children (Dutch abbreviation: 'AdPEP' and 'AdPEM'). Professionals (e.g., currently working below bachelor level, ISCED-5) are educated to work in an ECEC setting at a high level function. This development implies that there is more variation in ISCED levels and an upgrade for childcare staff (ISCED- 3/4/5).

### Primary school

Kindergarten, as part of primary schools, is publicly funded and concerns children aged 4-to-6 years. Although not compulsory before age five years, parents are entitled to free kindergarten from age four years and almost 100% of the children are enrolled on their fourth birthday.

The pre-service training requirement for the primary school sector in the Netherlands is a four-year study at a professional bachelor for primary school ('PABO') at ISCED level 5. Primary school teachers are Bachelors, whereas most childcare workers are trained at the level of vocational secondary school.

Recently, five teacher education institutes ('PABO') have started a new specialization for teaching younger children in a pilot (2-6 yrs., 'PABO voor het jonge kind', see <https://www.paboweb.nl/themas/86> and the new national expertise centre for young children Landelijk Expertisecentrum Jonge Kind). A topical question is whether these institutes are fully equipped for the education of teachers for the new age range of young children in two sectors,



including not only the traditional 4-12 yrs (since 1985 when Kindergarten was added to the primary school) and 2-4 yrs (since the new pilots).

### **Collaboration**

Preschools (and increasingly day-care centres) and kindergartens work with the targeted education programs. The main idea of these programs is to provide children with a continuous curriculum across the 2–6-age range. Recently, we also see rapprochement and cooperation in so-called integrated child centres (in Dutch: 'integrale kindcentra', ikc's), where day care, preschool, primary school and after-school programs are integrated into one centre. This trend is also addressed in so-called 'policy scenario's' from advisory reports from the government (interim report in 2020, final report in 2021), which were discussed with stakeholders, including social scientists (NL, BE).

## **Challenges**

An important prerequisite for a coherent system is a close collaboration between day-care provisions, preschools and schools, thus maximizing continuity of the provided education and care between 0–12 years (e.g., split 1 & 2). Although team cooperation between childcare and educational staff may increase over time in pioneering integrated child centers (Balledux et al., 2017; Fukkink & van Verseveld, 2020), there are still 'worlds of difference' between childcare and education (Verheijen-Tiensta, Ros, & Vermeulen, 2020), even if they are 'under one roof'.

### **Social challenge(s):**

The current ECEC system in the Netherlands is fragmented as children from disadvantaged backgrounds attend preschools using targeted education programs, whereas children from more affluent families tend to be enrolled in day-care provisions (e.g., split 1). This segregation effect is a result of the targeted educational policy in the Netherlands that has focused on the implementation of education programs in preschools only, though this is starting to change now.

### **Pedagogical challenge(s)**

- Childcare is in search for 'educare' (see also Belgium). Quality assessments have shown that support for broad development and learning is relatively weak, compared to sensitivity/emotional support, similar to other countries (Slot et al., 2019). In addition, recent studies strongly suggest that the quality of education in Dutch kindergarten is (also) in need of improvement.
- The government provides a broad pedagogical framework that has to be followed by childcare providers. The Dutch government has refrained as yet from establishing a national curriculum for child-care centres, although there are pedagogical frameworks (Singer & Klerenkooper, 2009; Fukkink, 2017).

### **Professional challenge(s)**

Interprofessional Collaboration and Practices (IPCP): A question that has recently received increasing attention is how various pedagogical professionals from different organisations and operating from within their own specialisms, can best work together to achieve an integrated range



of services within a coordinated system of cooperation (Fukkink & Lalihatu, 2020): how do professionals with different professional backgrounds (child care, education, youth care) work together in integrated child services? Also, the cross-sectional cooperation between Pedagogical Workers in a childcare setting and primary school teachers in an educational setting deserves more attention (Fukkink, 2018). This requires a broader perspective on teams and professional networks instead of individual staff members (see also CoRe report, Urban et al., 2012, [http://ec.europa.eu/education/more-information/doc/2011/core\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/more-information/doc/2011/core_en.pdf)).

### Institutional challenges

- Coordination between childcare and the primary education system is a topical social issue in the Netherlands. Cooperation between primary education and childcare is not a given, and both childcare and school settings are currently searching for appropriate forms in terms of organisational governance and pedagogical practice (e.g., Taskforce, 2017). This became also clear when childcare providers and directors from primary schools had different COVID19 policies and institutions did not always collaborate.
- The professional development of staff is not only important for individual staff, but also requires coordination at the national level related to pre- and in-service training (a) and the recent trajectories of teacher education for younger children (PABO-Jonge Kind) “versus” associate degree programs (b).

### Ways of coping

- There is some collaboration between preschools and kindergartens in the program they use and the implementation of early intervention (VVE) programs.
- As children’s development is monitored as part of working with these programs, this information is handed over to the kindergarten teachers (with the consent of parents) when children transition from preschool to kindergarten.
- Professional development with a focus on permanence (i.e., continuous monitoring of professional development), collectivity (i.e., partnership with different stakeholders, including parents), and reflection (i.e., discussing the alignment between pedagogical theory and ECEC practice) (Henrichs et al., 2016) is needed. A professional learning community dedicated to this theme, seems interesting for professionals from both the childcare and educational sector; currently, there are only PLC’s for primary and secondary schools (but not ECEC).

### Who would you like to invite for policy/research exchange?

- Stakeholders from PABO, incl. PABO-Jonge Kind



- Stakeholders related to Pedagogical Work (ISCED-3/4), associate degree (AdPEP/AdPEM, ISCED-5) and Pedagogy at bachelor level (ISCED-5)
- PO-Raad
- Ministerie van SZW
- Ministerie van OCW
- Sector organisations from childcare

