



WORKPACK 2: POLICY EXCHANGE & ADVOCACY

Policy Baseline Report – BELGIUM (FL)

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1. Introduction

1.1. Aim

The aim of this policy baseline report is to give a state of affairs on how ECEC policies in Belgium (FI) are dealing with the transitional moments for the youngest children. We therefore interviewed different ECEC stakeholders in the period of September-December 2020 and analysed policy documents related to transitional policies and practices. By doing this policy baseline study, we want to gain a better understanding of what exactly opportunities and challenges are in governing transitions. Moreover this analysis have been given us input in order to organise the international exchange of policy makers in Denmark, in May 2022.

As different stakeholders and VBJK/Ghent University are currently working intensively on the transition of the youngest children (2,5 years old) in the field of policy, practice and research, this specific transition will be the main focus of the Intrans TOT in Belgium (FI) and the selection of the Belgian delegation for the international policy exchange in Denmark 2022. Because other countries in the Intrans project are also focussed on the connection between ECEC and compulsory school education, we shortly address in this policy baseline study how transitions from preschool to primary school (6 years old) are governed in the Flemish community of Belgium, especially as in most cases preschools are connected to primary schools (same building, same organisation with one director).

1.2. Context

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. In this policy baseline report we have focused on the Flemish community of Belgium. However, the discourse on transitions and problems that arise due to the institutional splits are rather similar in the other communities.



Belgium (Fl) is historically characterised by a double ECEC split system, where child care services for children up to three years of age (*kinderopvang*) and out of school care services for children from two and a half to twelve years of age are (*buitenschoolse opvang*) under the auspices of the Minister for Welfare and preschool institutions (*kleuterschool*) for children from two and a half to compulsory school age are under the auspices of the Minister for Education. Consequently we are dealing with a vertical transition (from home/environment to preschool environment) and an extra horizontal transition (daily transition from preschool to out of school care). These three types of institutions have distinct curricula, professional profiles and child–staff ratio (Peeters & Pirard, 2017).

One of the biggest differences between childcare and preschool institutions is that the accessibility for the youngest is more problematic as childcare is related to family-work reconciliation policies and preschool education is part of the agenda to ensure lifelong learning for all children. Statistics demonstrated how childcare is fairly inaccessible for families living in poverty, families from ethnic cultural minorities and single parents (Van Lancker, 2013; Van Lancker & Ghysels, 2012; Vande Gaer, Gijssels, & Hedebouw, 2013; Vandebroek, Geens, & Berten, 2014). A recent report showed how affluent families use childcare twice as much as their poorer counterparts (46.7% versus 86.0%). Similarly, the unmet needs for childcare are twice as high in poor families and ethnic minority families, than average (Teppers, Schepers, & Van Regenmortel, 2019). On the contrary the accessibility of preschool education is fairly good. Every child is entitled to free preschool from two and a half years onwards. Of the five and three -year-old children within Belgium 99% are currently enrolled in preschool¹ education. In the school year 2018-2019, 96.5% of the three years old attended preschool for a minimum of 150 days and 94.9% attended preschool for a minimum of 250 days. One of the side effects is that the Belgian preschool education system unintentionally sees to work under the assumption that every child has attended childcare before entering preschool (Amerijckx & Humblet, 2015; Peleman, Vandebroek, & Van Avermaet, 2019; Van Laere & Vandebroek, 2017). Considering the inaccessibility of childcare services, consequently disadvantaged children who have to cope with their first socialisation outside the family environment will likely face more problems to start in preschool. Not only does it define their first school experience; more importantly, it contributes to shape their entire experience of preschool. Knowing that childcare institutions are not available for everybody, it also means that we need to proactively work on how to reach children and their families who did not attend childcare, especially as they are the most societally vulnerable families. The preventive family support services (*Preventieve Gezinsondersteuning*), governed by the Ministry of Welfare and the Upbringing Agency (former Child & Family → agency also in charge of childcare) are therefore important partners in the transition theme.

[If you like to gain a better understanding of the levels of governance in Belgium in relation to ECEC and the ECEC workforce profiles, please check the annexes.](#)

¹ <https://www.statistiekvlaanderen.be/nl/aanwezigheid-kleuters-in-kleuteronderwijs>

1.3. Method

To gain a deeper understanding on the current opportunities and challenges in governing transitions in Belgium (Fl) we have analysed policy documents related to transitions in the early years. For the historical contextualisation we have based this text on the analysis of the PHD studies of Michel Vandebroek (history of childcare) and Katrien Van Laere (specifically, the policy and public debates since the 60ies on lowering compulsory school education and preschool education). Since 2000 we have selected every relevant Flemish policy document that is related on how to govern transitions.

Moreover we have interviewed Flemish and local ECEC stakeholders in the period of September/December 2020. We have conducted individual interviews and focus groups with cabinet staff of the Minister of Education and the Minister of Welfare; administrators of the interdepartmental Flemish working group on transition; representatives of a teacher trade union; representatives of umbrella organisations in education and childcare; civil society organisations representing children and families (including families living in poverty and families with children with a disability); and administrators or councils of local municipalities in charge of childcare and/or education.



2. Policy context and ongoing debates

2.1. Origins of the ECEC double split system

Early childhood education and care in Belgium has been characterised by a split system since its very origins in late 19th century.

The first educational institutions for young children were opened in 1827. The main objectives being: children's moral well-being and children's preparation for primary school. Since 1880, Belgian preschools for children three to six years old became state-publicly funded, combined with professional training for personnel. (Oberhuemer, Schreyer, & Neuman, 2010, p. 32). In the 1960s policy makers became very much interested in the relationship between social inequality and school. As they were concerned with the low educational attainment of working class children in primary school, they started being interested in preschool education because of it allegedly equalising potential. (Van Laere & Vandebroek, 2014; Vandebroek & Van Laere, 2019). Due to the economic crises in the seventies/eighties, the social-political objective of enabling social and cultural emancipation of working class children was increasingly accompanied by a more economic approach in which the future employability of children and the prevention of school failure and later unemployment were considered key elements to increase the nation's economic growth (Brackeva, 1986; De Ceulaer, 1990). Reinforced by the poor results of Flanders in the PISA studies, the political attention for educational inequalities increased in the new millennium (Stanat & Chistensen, 2006; Van Laere & Vandebroek, 2014). Enabling access to preschool education (e.g. debates on lowering the compulsory school age, toddler participation policies) was seen as an important means to increase the future employability of children by preventing school failure and reducing educational disadvantage. Since then, several political decisions have been made to increase the attendance of children in preschool, influenced amongst others by a study (Groenez, Van den Brande & Nicaise, 2003) arguing that if children "at risk" do not attend preschool frequently, they are to develop learning delays in the last year of preschool. At risk, in this case, meant children who have a non-European home language; or have a non-Belgian identity; or are from lower educated parents; from single mothers; or from parents in independent professions (Groenez et al., 2003).

The development of childcare centres for the youngest children between 0 and 3 years old is characterised by different rationales than the debates on preschool education. In 1845, the first childcare centre for children zero to three was opened in 1845 in Brussels. The PhD study of Vandebroek (2004) clarifies the history of the Belgian and Flemish childcare starting from this milestone until 2004. The author demonstrated how childcare centres through time are positioned between the public and private space, and how these centres are constructed from changing relations between economical, educational and social concerns. For example, the first childcare centres were established using a social-economical ratio. On one hand the labour market was in need of 'cheap' female workers; on the other hand childcare created an opportunity for the upper-middle class to fulfil a social mission: normalising and civilising the working class. This social mission created a belief that childcare centres could contribute to the maintaining of the social order (Vandebroek,



Coussée, & Bradt, 2010, p. 143). In the beginning of the 20th century, medical and hygienic care became crucial in order to 'protect' the working-class children from child-mortality and infections – a focus present until the seventies. While debating the first childcare legislation just before the First World War, it was for example argued that child care needed to be separated from education because childcare concerned a supporting and medical service for mothers and children in need (*caritas*). This could not be considered education for children. (Peeters & Vandebroek, 2010; Vandebroek, 2006). *"In contrast to preschool education, child care was considered a 'necessary evil': necessary to combat child mortality by substituting deficient mothers, but evil, since it may incite mothers to escape from their maternal duties"* (Peeters & Vandebroek, 2010, pg. 8). In the seventies and eighties, the economical function of childcare started dominating the discourse of childcare policy, to the detriment of the social function. Notwithstanding, regulations in 1974 tried to combine an economic and social function by introducing priority targets: working parents, single parents, low-income families and families in 'pedagogical' and 'social' 'distress'. Due to the economic crises and the globalisation in the second half of the eighties, the employment of high-qualified women increasingly received attention in policies. Consequently, children from low-educated and/or unemployed parents were excluded from childcare practices (Vandebroek, 2004, p. 302). Irrespective of the attempts of being more accessible towards societally vulnerable communities, this evolution has had a major impact on the policies and practices of childcare centres up till today.

The different rationales and societal functions of childcare and preschool education have resulted in a conceptual split between caring and learning. Studies commissioned by the Department of Education in 2001 and by the Upbringing Agency (former Child & Family) in 2015 (MEMOO) demonstrated how childcare services are good in providing emotional and physical care and individual attention and preschools are good in offering developmental stimulating activities (Vandemeulebroecke & Demunter, 2001; Vandebroek et al., 2016). Consequently, childcare centres are historically dealing with a lack of focus on learning and developmental stimulating activities and preschool institutions are dealing with a lack of offering emotional and physical care to children.



2.2. Transition from home/childcare to preschool environment (2,5/3 years old)

Transition debates occurred once in a while

Once in a while debates occurred on the vertical transition between childcare and preschool and consequently the tension between care and learning.

For example in 1973 debates occurred on the financing and management of the toddler centres (*peutertuinen*) for children from the age of eighteen months until three years old in the school system (Peeters & Vandebroek, 2010; Vandebroek, 2006). Until then the toddler centres were not financed by the Agency in charge of childcare (former NWK /ONE, Child & Family Agency). The infant consultation schemes that were in these toddler centres were funded and therefore the former Upbringing Agency had insight on what happened in these new centres. When the government decided to fund new childcare centres, a discussion started on who should fund the toddler centres. Whereas the educational department argued that the organisation of toddlers centres belonged to the Ministry of Education because this may give a head start to children from working class families, the paediatrics of the former Upbringing Agency accentuated that care and education needed to be separated. In the end they decided that the former Upbringing Agency would fund these toddler centres on the condition that they would be structurally separated from the school arguing that there cannot be any education in the 'pre-pedagogical age'. The inspection therefore had to control that no educational activities took place in the funded toddler centres. Preschool teachers could no longer work in these toddler centres (Peeters & Vandebroek, 2010, pg. 13; Vandebroek, 2006).

Another debate that demonstrated a field of tension in this transition period, concerned the starting age of children in preschools. Before 1975 children could attend preschool from the age of three years old. In 1975, the former Minister of Education decided to lower this age to the age of two and a half years as small scaled experiments in schools had proven successful to work in an 'educational way' already with two year olds and France was used as an example to endorse this pre-primary educational approach². Since then one of the main issues that have occasionally been addressed by different stakeholders is the fact that preschool education is not well adapted to the psychical and emotional caring needs of the youngest children throughout the whole school day. In 1997 for example, a new decree for pre- and primary schools was in development. In these debates, the commission of education proposed to raise the starting age again to three years old as the commission members considered children of two and a half years old not 'schoolready' meaning that they are not self-reliant enough and are not potty trained to be in a preschool environment. The commission considered the childcare services as more age appropriate and wanted to increase the available places in childcare. This proposal resulted in two studies, commissioned by the department of education, in which different stakeholders could discuss the pros and cons (Dehaes, Lambrechts & Pauwels, 1999; Vandemeulebroecke & Demunter, 2001). Although all stakeholders recognised the problem of the preschool not being age appropriate for two and a half year olds, the discussion was

² <https://assets.vlor.be/www.vlor.be/import/rbo-advoo4-0505bijlage.pdf>



whether preschool could become more caring with for example having better adult-child staff ratios and better infrastructure, or whether childcare centres already had these facilities and professional profiles. A problem that was frequently addressed is that childcare is not free in comparison to preschool. Moreover what would happen with the preschool teachers who previously worked with the two and a half year olds? The Flemish education council (*VLOR - Vlaamse Onderwijsraad*), representing important stakeholders and providers, formally advised that the starting age of two and a half years of age should remain. They argued that preschool education offers sufficient quality guarantees for the youngest children, that preschool education in Belgium is fairly accessible and free for parents and that increasing the starting age would be detrimental to the prevention of 'scholastic delay'³. As a consequence the starting age in preschool education remained at the age of two and a half years old.

Another debate in relation to the transition to preschool is the idea that practitioners with an upper secondary childcare qualification need to be deployed to assist the preschool teachers, especially to support children in caring matters such as potty training⁴. In the 80s various experiments took place but this was always cut due to budget cuts and since 2000, preschool teachers have received support for a number of limited hours per week from a qualified childcare worker, to help with the caring tasks of the youngest children in pre-school (2.5–4-year-olds) (such as potty training as a main public and mediated issue). Due to a lack of budget and policy priority, mostly people with no specific childcare qualification supervise the in-between moments in the school day. One could argue that this division of tasks does not necessarily jeopardise a holistic view of education where both caring and learning are addressed. An essential question, however, is whether holistic education needs to be embodied in one person or whether it can be assumed by different people with different roles. When holistic education is embodied in practitioners with complementary tasks, it is of crucial importance to make sure that the caring and learning functions are equally valued (Van Laere et al., 2012). In the current situation, this can be challenging since the preschool teachers and the childcare assistants have unequal professional statuses. Since the Flemish government recently decided to attribute more money to preschools, one of the proposals was to invest it in the deployment of more childcare workers (*kleuterverzorgers*) (Vlaamse regering, 30/09/2019)⁵. Consequently the Minister of Education nearly recently doubled the budget for the preschools to deploy childcare workers to assist preschool teachers in the transition.

³ <https://www.vlor.be/advies/advies-met-betrekking-tot-het-handhaven-van-de-instapleeftijd-voor-kleuters-op-2-jaar-en-zes->

⁴ <https://vbjk.be/storage/files/c82of1d6-3df4-485b-b65b-7d296ea85bc4/report-literature-review-supporting-the-collaboration-between-ecec-core-and-assisting-practitioners.pdf>

⁵ <https://vbjk.be/storage/files/8398fb19-fe5a-4b20-b96f-ea017d1e356f/rapport-value-zes-ankerpunten.pdf>
<https://soundcloud.com/vbjk-communicatie/naar-een-slimme-inzet-van-kinderverzorgers-in-de-kleuterklas>



The EC ECEC 2011 recommendation and more qualitative approach of 'toddler participation policy' as turning points

Despite these occasional debates, ensuring warm and inclusive transitions across the early years was until 2011 not on the political Flemish agenda. In February 2011 the European Commission sent out a communication on Early Childhood Education and Care. In this communication, the Commission stated that an integrated concept of childcare and preschool education is desirable and underlined the importance of an integrated approach to education and care, taking into account the needs of children in a holistic manner (European Commission, 2011). The Flemish Education Council (VLOR) took this advice seriously and on April 6, 2011 published the "Advice on childcare and education for young children". Moreover, the VLOR took the initiative to bring together representatives of childcare and preschool education in the Flemish Parliament on 3 February 2012. In this advice, the VLOR stated that it has difficulties with this specific recommendation in the sense that they consider the ECEC split system as a good operating system. Instead they made a plea to install a stronger connection between the childcare and the preschool sector. Both childcare and preschool education should work towards a common vision in which 'care' and 'learning' are considered to be of equal value (VLOR, 2011)⁶. Consequently, the Departments/Agencies of Education, Welfare and Integration in the Flemish Community of Belgium started to collaborate in 2015 to smoothen the transition between the childcare/home environment and the preschool environment by establishing a interdepartmental working group of administrators. They developed an action plan in order to ensure pedagogical, professional, structural continuity and continuity with the family / neighborhood⁷. The starting point of this plan is the acknowledgement that transitions mark a very significant phase in the lives of young children and their families. Transition is understood as a process of continuity and change in which children and families feel prepared on one hand and after the transition to preschool feel good and involved. Reciprocity between families and ECEC centres are central key concepts.

Action plan transitions – core ideas

Structural continuity: a close collaboration between administrations and the different types of basis institutions that are involved in the lives of young children and their families (childcare, preschool and preventive family support):

- *Stimulate Flemish and local collaborations and mainstreaming*
- *Promote inspiring practices that make the difference for socially disadvantaged children and families*
- *Support people or organisations who want to organise integrated work by tackling the hindering policy condition/measurements coming from different policy domains*

Professional continuity: a shared responsibility from all professionals from different fields for a warm transition:

- *By investing in professional exchanges (seminars, conferences, intervision trajectories)*
- *By developing learning networks for current and future ECEC professionals*

⁶ https://assets.vlor.be/www.vlor.be/import/rbo-rbo-adv-001_o.pdf

⁷ <https://www.expoo.be/transitie-tussen-thuis-buurt-kinderopvang-en-kleuterschool>

https://www.expoo.be/sites/default/files/atoms/files/REFLECTIE-instrument%20transitie_oktober%202018.pdf



Pedagogical continuity: an aligned pedagogical framework with attention to transitions where caring and learning is seen as equally important in terms of pedagogical quality:

- *Addressing the theme of transition in curricula of children and ECEC staff*
- *Exchange between different organisations and policy fields on social pedagogical theme's related to transition*
- *By aligning governmental communication materials for parents on the transition to preschool*

Continuity with the home environment, neighborhood and local community:

- *Developing a reciprocal dialogue between professionals, parents, local community members*
- *By expanding and investing in local networks that stimulate reciprocal parent participation.*
- *By expanding on existing relations with relevant parents with attention to the transition to preschool*

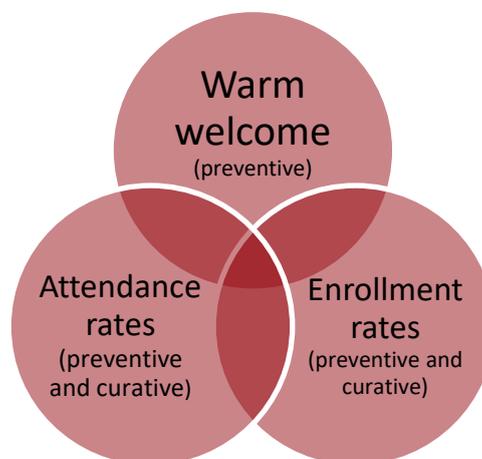
Another important reason why the focus on transitions became more important recently, was the mind shift in approaching the 'toddler participation policy' (*kleuterparticipatiebeleid*) in a more qualitative manner instead of solely approaching it as a quantitative benchmark that needs to be achieved (enrolment and attendance rates). Despite the aim over the years to invest in the equalising potential of the early years and having one of the highest enrollment rates of toddlers in preschool in Europe, the educational gap between children with high socioeconomic status and low socioeconomic status (SES) and between children with and without migrant backgrounds, remains persistent in Belgium⁸. One of the pathways to deal with this problemacy, was the idea of lowering the compulsory school age. As this is a federal competence and this needed time and debate, the Flemish government started developing their own policy in order to stimulate the 'toddler participation' (*kleuterparticipatie*) (Vandenbroucke, 2007; Crevits, 2015). The underlying idea was that toddlers needed to be more present in preschools and families needed to be more convinced of the importance of preschool education. Statistics in 2016 showed how the probability of children not attending preschool frequently enough, increases when children are non Belgian nationals, have a lower educated mother, receive a school allowance and/or speak a language other than Dutch at home. The same report also suggested that a later start in preschool is associated with grade retention in primary school (Crevits, 2016). Whereas in the first years of the 'toddler participation policy' the focus was solely on raising the enrolment and attendance rates of toddlers by convincing parents, a shift occurred over the years towards a more qualitative approach. Several stakeholders over the years had questioned for example the sole focus on convincing parents to send their children to preschool. The trade unions, the Flemish education council (VLOR) and the Office of the Children's Rights Commissioner raised concerns that lowering the compulsory school age is no guarantee for the prevention of learning delays of disadvantaged children if parents do not experience a trustful relationship with schools. Alternatively, the government could better invest in ensuring quality

⁸ According to the PISA studies, the Flemish community of Belgium is one of the regions in Europe with the most pronounced educational gap, related to the home situation of the children (OECD, 2016, 2018). Children with migrant backgrounds and children living in poverty have lower scores on standardised tests; they need to repeat school years more; they are overrepresented in vocational secondary studies; they have a higher chance to leave secondary school without a qualification; and they are significantly underrepresented in higher education in comparison to their peers (Agirdag, 2016). Children living in poverty have four times more chance to be redirected ¹¹ towards special needs education in the Belgian educational system than compared to their peers (Unicef, 2012).



education by professionalising preschool staff and extending the 'equal opportunities decree' (GOK) to preschool (Commissie voor Onderwijs Vorming en Wetenschapsbeleid, 18/5/2004; Kinderrechtencommissariaat, 2016; VLOR, 2004, 2017). Several local poverty organisations and the federal poverty organisation underlined the importance of investing in quality education for children living in poverty, better partnerships with parents and the establishment of a welcoming atmosphere in preschool with respect for diversity and awareness of social inequalities (Dautrebande, 2008; Steunpunt tot bestrijding van armoede bestaansonzekerheid en sociale uitsluiting, 2006).

Commissioned by the former Minister of Education, the Department of Education and Training executed in 2015 a qualitative study of literature and focus groups with stakeholders, as well as a quantitative analysis of statistics concerning enrolment and attendance of toddlers (Departement Onderwijs, 2015). The qualitative study hypothesised several barriers hindering the increase of 'toddler participation', such as a lack of information on the school system for parents, a parental concern on caring questions, an inappropriate care infrastructure, a lack of a smooth transition between childcare and preschool, and different home- and school cultures. From that perspective, better parental involvement before and after children start in preschool, attention for children's physical and emotional well-being, a more inclusive approach for vulnerable families and high quality professional preschool staff are hypothesised to be good levers to increase the 'toddler participation' (Crevits, 2016; Departement Onderwijs, 2015). Due to this qualitative study and debates that were held in the interdepartmental working group on transitions, the 'toddler participation policy' shifted into both a qualitative and quantitative approach. From now on preschools and educational umbrella organisations are stimulated to work on three domains in relation to toddler participation⁹:



Succeeding this quality approach of toddler participation, the Flemish inspectorate of the quality of education also organised a study on quality toddler participation and developed a vision and reflection framework how quality preschool education should be understood. They developed different quality levers and for the first time following levers are included that relate to warm and inclusive transitions¹⁰:

- *Preschool education should start from an educare vision:*

⁹ <https://data-onderwijs.vlaanderen.be/documenten/bestand.ashx?id=11737>

¹⁰ <https://www.onderwijsinspectie.be/nl/onderzoek-kleuterparticipatie>

- *Is the infrastructure sufficiently geared towards the geared to the psychosocial and physical needs of the toddlers?*
- *We look at the balance between care and learning by examining how preschool teachers perform rituals, routines, and outside class activities, how drop-off and pick-up moments are organized and what the role and position of the childcare assisting practitioner is.*
- *The well-being of the (youngest) toddlers is a good indicator of this lever.*
- *We concretise the lever of high-quality interactions in warm relationships, rich language and executive functions*
- *We consciously opt for the lever educational partnership (instead of parental involvement) because the determining factors of reciprocity and equality are emphasized:*
 - *We consider to what extent parents are recognised as full-fledged, and privileged partners.*
 - *In addition, we also take into account the welcoming nature of the school: we examine, among other things, whether the school is sensitive to signals of disadvantage and whether the school is accessible to all toddlers.*



In the beginning of October 2019 a new Flemish government was formed. The policy note 2019-2024 of the Minister of Welfare¹¹ included the necessity to focus on pedagogical continuity and continuity with the home /neighbourhood environment:

“We are taking further steps in strengthening the continuity between home, childcare for babies and toddlers, preschool education and after-school care. We want to do this by facilitating neighborhood-oriented processes to achieve more integrated services.” (Beke, 2019, pg. 71).

¹¹ <https://www.vlaanderen.be/publicaties/beleidsnota-2019-2024-welzijn-volksgesondheid-gezin-en-armoedebestrijding>



The policy note 2019-2024 of the Minister of Education¹² underlines the importance of continuing the 'toddler participation policy' and

“Because it is important to invest in children from a young age, I will continue to focus on increasing the toddler participation. Flanders is world top in terms of the number of preschoolers attending school. It is my ambition that all toddlers from the age of 3 years of age must be enrolled in a school and be sufficiently present. In the child allowance growth package, the participation allowances provide a financial incentive to enroll in preschool education and to actually be present. In addition, I work closely with the local authorities in setting up campaigns for those groups of preschoolers who are not or not sufficiently present in the classroom today.

To get more hands on in the classroom, I increase both the operating resources and the framework for the preschools. This reduces the number of students per teacher. I also provide additional childcare workers in the preschools. In order to increase the quality in preschool education, I am taking measures to maximize the available class time. For example, the proportion of toilet-trained preschoolers must increase so that preschool teachers are less burdened. For the timely start of toilet training, I expect an extra effort from the parents, supported by the Child & Family Agency. (Weyts, 2019, pg. 41)”

Although both policy notes are not directly mentioning transition as an issue, the Minister of Welfare addresses the importance of continuity between childcare services and schools. The Minister of Education continues the path of the toddler participation policy and wants to increase the quality in preschool by having more helping hands in the classrooms. He also addresses the problem of having non potty trained children in preschool at the age of 2,5 years old. Therefore the parents should be responsabilised with the help of the Upbringing Agency. Reinforced by this policy note, the Department of Education started a study to develop 'smart wearable diapers'¹³ The goal of this project is to 'find a technological tool to help parents, child care workers and other educators in the toilet training process of toddlers and preschoolers. The age at which children become toilet trained has increased in recent years, partly due to the use of comfortable disposable diapers.' A stakeholders group was established for the research part of this project and some stakeholders questioned the message this project could give to parents and ECEC professionals. Taking into account that children can become potty trained until the age of 4, this project can create the idea that children should get potty trained earlier, before the age of 2,5 years old and children who are not potty trained at the age of two and a half years old are preferably not welcome in preschool (being potty trained as a preschool readiness feature).

In sum, concerning transition from home/childcare to preschool environment many things are set in motion the last years. Whereas most emphasise the importance of warm transition and pedagogical continuity and continuity with parents, there is still a field of tension, in which the underlying idea exist that children need to be made preschool ready for example by being potty trained at the age of 2,5 years old.

¹² <https://www.vlaanderen.be/publicaties/beleidsnota-2019-2024-onderwijs>

¹³ <https://www.innovatieveoverheidsopdrachten.be/projecten/slimme-luier-wearable>





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COVID 19 health crisis as a new turning point?



At the end of May 2020, the Flemish Government set up the Societal Recovery Committee (MRC) with the request to formulate recommendations to restore society quickly and properly (short term), and even to improve it compared to the past (long term), also building further on the positive evolutions that were identified. The Flemish Government also asked for recommendations with regard to a new wave of COVID-19 with the aim of limiting the damage to the social fabric. The MRC consisted of 9 experts and 9 representatives of the Flemish ministers¹⁴.

Due to the concern of a growing learning gap between disadvantaged and advantaged children, the Committee formulated a recommendation on the development of more 'warm schools':

"An evolution towards more 'warm schools', which allow teamwork, develop talents and passion, combine wellbeing and learning capacity and provide optimal support for children and young people to make maximum use of that learning capacity." (MRC, 2020, pg. 34)

Moreover childcare centres and schools are seen as 'safe harbours' for children and young people in vulnerable situations:

"The accumulation of problems in different areas of life (poverty, housing, unemployment, etc.) leads to insecurity for children and young people in vulnerable situations and their families. Childcare and schools can play an important role in being close to these children and young people, receiving the signals and - if necessary - diverting them to the correct authorities.

How?

- Facilitate a better connection between schools, parents, bridge figures, professional and voluntary youth work and organisations, being and working close with vulnerable families. Let the central control take place from the neighborhood network in order to be able to work together and coordinate further from there.*
- Provide quality and accessible childcare and preschool education.*
- Set up pilot projects for integrated childcare and preschool education projects that also involve out-of-school care activities."*

(MRC, 2020, pg. 49)

Although not all of these recommendations were taken into account by the Flemish government, the Minister of Welfare decided in his new budget policy letter to work with this last recommendation.

Together with my colleague responsible for Education, we will also continue to focus on the transition from home context to childcare and preschool, which should benefit toddler participation. We are further expanding childcare into high-quality basic facilities in which all young children can develop to their full potential, while also seeking connection with the

¹⁴ <https://publicaties.vlaanderen.be/view-file/37581>



development goals of preschool education. In order to effectively realise this qualitative development, we are exploring, together with my colleague, how the pedagogical and care continuity for children from 0 to 6 years can be further provided from our facilities.”(Beke, 2020)

The Minister of welfare will invest and finance pilot projects that work on pedagogical continuity by integrating childcare, preschool education and out of school care in the period 2021-2024. The Minister of Education simultaneously stated in his new budget policy letter that he will continue to focus on the warm transition between home context, childcare and preschool education, which should benefit toddler participation (Weyts, 2020). This, in the Flemish Community of Belgium, 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 will be supported in a learning network. The project will be 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. 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.



2.3. Transition from preschool to primary school environment (5/6 years old)

The transition from preschool to primary school for most children takes place in the same school building and school organisation. The director is responsible for both preschool education and primary school education. So the Ministry of Education is fully responsible for this transition. As explained in 2.2., a popular idea amongst Belgian policy makers is that disadvantaged parents need to be activated to send their children regularly to preschool. The earlier and the more frequent these children will attend preschool, the better they would be prepared for their school career and eventually participation in the labour market and society. Since lowering the compulsory school age is only possible by federal law, the Flemish government started developing their own policy in 2007 in order to stimulate so-called 'toddler participation' (*kleuterparticipatie*) (Vandenbroucke, 2007). One of the proposals in this stimulus plan was to not allow children from entering primary school at the age of 6 when they do not sufficiently manage the Dutch language and did not attend preschool regularly enough. The former Minister of Education initiated a language test in 2010 for children who have not effectively attended preschool education in the Dutch language system during at least 220 half days in the previous school year; for pupils of five years it is 185 half days. If children did not pass this test, they had to attend an extra year of preschool before being allowed in primary school (Commissie voor Onderwijs en Gelijke Kansen, 8/10/2009; Commissie voor Onderwijs Vorming Wetenschap en Innovatie, 23/4/2009). Children from seven years or older can attend primary school without proving their attendance (Hulpia et al., 2014). In 2008-2009 96.7%; in 2011-2012 97.6% of the 6 years old pupils did attend preschool education for more than 220 half days. In total 1726 children did not attend preschool education for 220 half days (most of them score high on SES-variables). In 2012-2013 642 pupils took a Dutch language test; 81% succeeded this test. 79% of the pupils who did not succeed the test are (again) in the 3d grade of preschool education. After years of criticism by several stakeholders¹⁵, the language test was abolished in 2014. Instead, the class councils (*klassenraden*) decided whether children are admitted to primary school when they have not attended the required number of half days (250) during the final year of preschool (Commissie voor Onderwijs en Gelijke Kansen, 11/4/2014; Departement Onderwijs en Vorming, 2014).

Simultaneously debates in the Belgian senate on lowering the compulsory school age continued. The plan to lower the compulsory school age also found support in political discussions in the French Community of Belgium (e.g., *Pacte pour un Enseignement d'Excellence*). Proposals initiated by different political parties were well received and were unanimously approved in the senate commission. From September 2020, the compulsory school age is no longer at six years old, but at five years old. The main motive is to combat social inequalities and prevent early school leaving at later age. Almost all five year olds attend preschool but the exceptions are children with a migration background living in the big cities. Motivated by this policy change, the Minister of Education decided to organise a language screening at the age of 5 or 6 years before entering primary school education.

¹⁵ E.g. it is only a snapshot at one specific moment; it only focuses on 'language' – it does not take specific context and pupils characteristics into account; also the aims / purposes of the test are not clear – it is a repressive measure which should stimulate pupil attendance? (Hulpia et al. , 2014)



“A crucial key is managing the rich Dutch language by all learners. A good command of Dutch is the first condition for this a successful school career, opportunities on the labor market and a solidarity-based society. Dutch is the subject that makes all other subjects possible. That’s why we grab the lowering of the compulsory school age as an opportunity to acquire language skills earlier by doing a uniform, cross-network and cross-border, standardised language screening at the age of 5 to 6 years. Let’s have children who have a language delay follow the language integration process. In principle, this consists of a language bath class or another fully-fledged alternative, but in all cases aims to reduce learning disadvantage and prevent school dropout as much as possible and really achieve equal opportunities for everyone.” (Weyts, 2019)

Some criticism was formulated by the Flemish education council (VLOR - *Vlaamse Onderwijsraad*). They stress the importance that this earlier age doesn’t imply that the last year of preschool becomes more schoolified and doesn’t start from an appropriate vision of the development of children. They question the sole focus on language and the proposal to have a language screening test (Koala):

De VLOR is in favor of a broad and development-oriented vision of preschool education. It would be a shame to only approach preschool education functionally from the language development of young children. Quality preschool education focuses on the developmental goals and aims at a broad development of children in which physical and emotional care (“care”) and learning (“education”) are equally important components (“educare”). Learning through play is paramount (VLOR, 2019, pg. 17)¹⁶

In sum, the vertical transition debate from the preschool to primary school environment is characterised by an underlying notion that children need to be made school ready before entering primary school, meaning that they need to master a certain level of Dutch so all children can start on an equal foot. Criticism is formulated in the sense that stakeholders fear that the introduction of a language screening test implies an increasing schoolification, jeopardising an educare pedagogical approach for young children.

¹⁶ <https://publicaties.vlaanderen.be/view-file/32388>



3. State of affairs in governing transitions

In order to provide a state of affairs on the governance of transitions, we use the framework of the OECD to understand different dimensions of transitions: pedagogical continuity, continuity with home environment/neighborhood, professional continuity & structural continuity. For each dimension, we have summarised the perspectives of the interviewed ECEC stakeholders .

3.1. Pedagogical Continuity

Historically Belgium (FI) is dealing with a conceptual split between care, learning and play due to the double split system. Studies commissioned by the Department of Education in 2001 and by the Child & Family agency in 2015 (MEMOQ) demonstrated how childcare services are good in providing emotional and physical care and individual attention and preschools are good in offering developmental stimulating activities (Vandemeulebroecke & Demunter, 2001; Vandebroeck et al., 2016). Consequently, childcare centres are historically dealing with a lack of focus on learning and developmental stimulating activities and preschool institutions are dealing more with a lack of offering emotional and physical care to children. Nevertheless, the need to develop more educational stimulation and provide rich language learning opportunities is not only a working point in childcare, but is also a point of attention for preschool education for the youngest children. Although it is assumed by policy makers that children learn the dominant language when they attend preschool as frequent and as young possible; this is not always the case in reality. A recent small scaled study of Peleman, Vandebroeck, and Van Avermaet (2019, 2020) in which societally disadvantaged children were followed, showed that both the quantity and quality of individual verbal interactions between them and the preschool teachers were low, with few opportunities for language production. By closely observing these interactions, unintended mechanisms that hinder an equal distribution of learning opportunities were found in each of the classes (Peleman, 2020):

Childcare (0-3 years old under auspices Ministry of Welfare): : focus on care, lack of 'learning' (educational stimulation), in search for more educare (cfr. pedagogical curriculum).

Out of school care (2,5-12 years old, under auspices Ministry of Welfare): focus on play & care

Preschool (2,5-6 years old, under auspices Ministry of Education): focus on learning, lack of emotional and physical care, in search for more educare (cfr. quality framework inspectorate).

Before and after school care (2,5-12 years old, under auspices Ministry of education): not clear but estimated to be more supervision & free play

In recent years more and more ECEC stakeholders became aware of this conceptual split between learning, care and play. Most interviewed ECEC stakeholders agree that a better integrated educare approach and pedagogical continuity is desirable for children both in childcare, preschool and out of school care. Several actions have been undertaken over the last years, but still more work should be done:



- The interviewed administrators of the local municipalities have developed a policy vision on educare and initiated different innovative projects to increase the pedagogical continuity in both the vertical and horizontal transitions.
- The interdepartmental working group on transitions is organising a working group on pedagogical continuity, in which administrators of the Department of Education, the Upbringing agency, the inspectorate of education, representatives of different umbrella school organisations learn from the different visions and curricula existing in childcare, preschool and out of school care.
- The Inspectorate of Education (2019) considers educare, language interactions and warm welcome for children an essential quality item of preschool education and the 'toddler participation policies' that were set in place by the Ministry of Education.
- In-service training of ECEC staff is more focused on pedagogical continuity in transition. For example a pedagogical guidance center of an umbrella organisation emphasises the importance of warm transitions to preschool education in order to create familiarity and emotional security for every child. Despite seeing many difference between the different preschools, they support the schools by offering pedagogical guidance service in good transitions. Moreover they focus on how to support school policies to invest in a warm welcome for new children and to establish good transitional moments for every child during a school day. (How to transform routine moments to moments in which you can work on language development). Another interviewed local authority underlines the importance that is also up to you to address issues of transitions in professional coaching trajectories. In most cases childcare centres will contact a pedagogical coach to work on pedagogical quality. Then this is an opportunity to talk about the importance of educare and also warm transitions to preschool/out of school care.
- The pre-service training of preschool teachers and pedagogy of the young children are gradually incorporating the idea of educare and warm transitions more (see Intrans workpack 4)
- The Flemish Educational Council (VLOR) initiated a strategical working group with different stakeholders on defining the essence of preschool education for young children.

In order to gain a better understanding of the state of affairs on pedagogical continuity we address three relevant items: curriculum, adult-child ratio/group size and infrastructure.



Child curriculum

According to some interviewed stakeholders, a conceptual split also stems from or results in a didactical split between childcare and preschool. Both sectors have their own child curriculum and they question on how to finetune these curricula more in the future.

For childcare centres for children below the age of three years, a pedagogical framework was issued in 2014 by the Flemish Ministry for Welfare¹⁷. Commissioned by the Upbringing Agency, the framework was developed by Ghent University and the Catholic University of Leuven. It describes in detail what is understood by pedagogical quality and how it can be achieved. The pedagogical framework contains a best effort obligation for childcare centres, which is a commitment to work along the lines of the vision set out in the present framework. One is expected to make efforts to get going with the present framework. This does not imply an obligation to achieve results. Quality will not be judged by measuring children's development or by examining to what extent one works together with families and external parties. However, one is expected to make an effort to that end.

The framework starts from the societal meaning of childcare, a competent and rich image of the child and of the parents. The curriculum furthermore describes pedagogical acts professionals can do in order to realise pedagogical quality. This was a conscious choice to not limit the curriculum to goals that the individual child needs to achieve.

Actions with respect to children

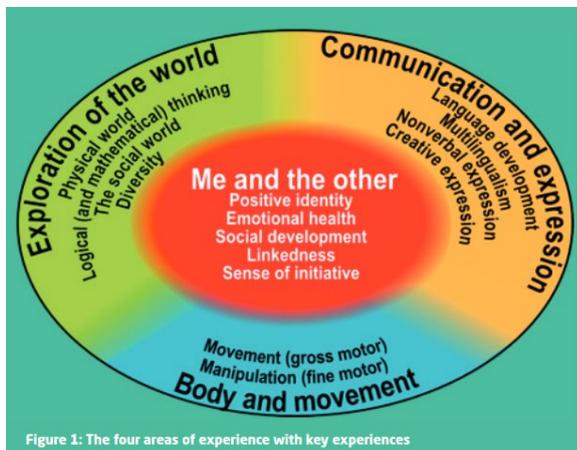


Figure 1: The four areas of experience with key experiences

- practitioners adopt a holistic approach
- practitioners make sure that children feel emotionally safe
- practitioners are sensitive for children's needs
- practitioners fulfil an active and stimulating role
- practitioners offer opportunities for autonomy
- practitioners adapt their approach to each individual child
- practitioners learn children how to live together
- practitioners offer each child integrated development opportunities in the four areas of experience: me and the other, exploration of the world, communication and expression, body and movement

Actions with respect to families

- practitioners and families get to know each other
- participation from and systematic consultation with families

Actions with respect to society

- acknowledging and appreciating diversity
- working together with other facilities and services (eg. schools)

¹⁷ <https://www.kindengezin.be/img/pedagogische-raamwerk-engelseversie.pdf>

For preschool education the Flemish government defined broad developmental goals, in terms of knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes that children need to master. The word 'development' refers to a process of growth, possible 'pathways' to achieve results. Every child goes through this process on his own way, and at his own pace. These developmental goals do not have to be achieved but are aimed at¹⁸. The developmental goals are defined in 5 domains: Dutch, mathematical initiation, physical education, artistic education, world orientation. Every governing body or school board must include the developmental objectives in their curriculum. But the way in which these developmental goals are translated in a curriculum is decided by the umbrella organisation¹⁹. Mostly, each umbrella organisation takes over this role and each umbrella organisation defines its own curriculum (*leerplannen*), which is in line with the objectives of the Flemish government, and is followed by the school boards (Hulpia et al., 2014). For example the catholic umbrella organisation developed a rather new 'Eagerness to live and learn' curriculum for catholic schools in Flanders (*ZILL, Zin in leren en leven*). Better educare can be guaranteed for the youngest children in preschool as this is connected with the personal competences of children (besides the cultural competences) (Fret, X). The new curriculum is applicable for both preschool and primary school education. By installing this pedagogical continuity between preschools and primary schools, they have noticed that preschool and primary school staff easily work together and understand each other's work better. Convinced of the importance of pedagogical continuity for children, they also doubted to include the ages from 0 to 2,5 years old. Because the childcare sector is organised in such a different way than preschool education, they eventually decided not to include the youngest ages.

The developmental goals will soon be revised and especially the umbrella organisations and local authorities responsible for supporting ECEC centres hope that this will be in line with the educare vision. The interviewed local administrators agree that the MeMOQ/ and pedagogical framework in childcare is helpful to address educare. But they are lacking a more progressive framework in the educational sector. The developmental goals do not cover educare as such. The interviewed childcare umbrella organisation has some concerns that the childcare perspective and the recent innovative developments of the pedagogical framework will not be taken into account in the debates on the new developmental goals. From their point of view, much work still needs to be done so that the educational sector gets to know the pedagogical evolutions that have been taken place in the childcare sector as both sectors could learn and enrich each other. In the public eye, the childcare sector is more invisible in comparison to preschool education as their important pedagogical and social function is not sufficiently known and recognised, besides the economic function that enable parents to go to work or follow a training.

¹⁸ In primary and secondary education there are also attainment targets, which are minimum goals which have to be achieved

¹⁹ Constitutional Note: In Belgium the school boards / governing bodies are largely autonomous in terms of teaching methods and staff, adult-child ratio, curricula, pupil assessment and schools' pedagogical project. (OECD, 2011; Hulpia, et. al, 2014)



Adult-Child ratio

Childcare (0-3 years old under auspices Ministry of Welfare): 1 staff member for 8 or 9 children

Out of school care (2,5-12 years old, under auspices Ministry of Welfare): 1 staff member for 14 children

Preschool (2,5-6 years old, under auspices Ministry of Education): no direct regulations, up to autonomy of schools, estimations 1 teacher for 20-25 children and often some hours of a childcare workers (assistants)

Before and after school care (2,5-12 years old, under auspices Ministry of education): not clear but estimated to be high number of children for one adult.

In childcare centres for the under-threes there are usually at least nine and at most 18 children in a group at any one time. A qualified staff member is responsible for a maximum of eight children. If several staff members are present, each one may also be in charge of nine children. During rest/nap times, a staff-child ratio of 1:14 is also permissible. There are ongoing attempts to reduce the staff-child ratio to 1:7 or 1:5. The necessity to reduce the staff-child ratio in combination with other quality measurements, became very apparent in the recent quality crisis of the childcare sector. Ignited by the death of a 10 month old baby in a childcare centre, flawed quality enforcement procedures, poor working conditions, low societal appreciation, high adult-child ratio, general low level of initial qualification and occupation shortage of childcare workers became more apparent in the public and political eye.

Preschools are usually organised into single-age groups: 2½ to 3 years, 3 to 4 years, 4 to 5 years and 5 to 6 years. However, settings are free to choose their preferred group format and may also decide on group size. In many preschools, entry classes (*instapklassen*) or reception classes (*onthaalklassen*) are organised for children who are between two and a half and three years of age. In other preschools, the youngest children attend the first-grade class of preschool, which comprises children from two and a half to four years of age. A preschool class typically consists of 20–25 children with one preschool teacher (Hulpia, Peeters, & Van Landeghem, 2014; Van Laere, Vandenbroeck & Peeters, 2011).

The difference in adult-child ratio is according to the interviewed local authorities, civil society organisations that represent families, trade union and umbrella organisations, considered as a major problem in transitions. For years the interviewed trade union advocated to invest more means into preschool education. They point out that the Ministry of education often refers to the fact that the means for primary school education and preschool education by the end of the last legislative period were aligned. However, this alignment only concerned some operational costs that are not calculated based on what the needs are of young children in schools. The trade union makes a distinction between three sources of means that are necessary to invest in:

- Operational costs (*werkingsmiddelen*)
- Costs to enable successful learning processes for children, so teachers and childcare workers can work more in smaller groups and use each moment to have rich interactions



with children instead of only creating a playing environment in order to be able to manage just a big classgroup

- Costs to organise and lead the school: these costs are needed to have good, both organisational but also pedagogical leadership and increase the policy capacity making (*beleidsvoerend vermogen*)

The different paths are historically underfinanced according to the trade union and the COVID crisis made this even more clear (see the corona commission reports in the Flemish parliament). In line with the intentions of the Minister to foresee 'more hands in the classroom', the interviewed trade union and other interviewed stakeholders urge that more staff is needed and for example more childcare workers can support the preschool teachers so the teachers can focus on education. The Minister of Education recently nearly doubled the budget for the preschools to deploy childcare workers to assist preschool teachers in the transition.

Moreover preschool institutions need sufficient personnel to achieve adequate child-staff ratios throughout every moment of the day (including lunch breaks). Preschool institutions need to assure that the number of children in classes is adequate so teachers and childcare workers can provide sufficient individual attention and give support to children regarding their caring and learning needs. Some preschool institutions work with mixed age groups, which could serve as an inspiration as these schools better manage to construct a concept of educare in which children also care for each other as an important part of growing up. The transition into these class groups is smoother both for children and preschool staff than, for example in the case of 20 children who all start school at the same time and in the same class.

Infrastructure

One of the main problems in old school buildings with a more classical lay-out is the lack of care infrastructure for young toddlers. In comparison to the childcare facilities it is a challenge to rebuild/ rethink preschool infrastructure into age-appropriate and peaceful eating, toileting, outdoor playing and sleeping facilities for young children. Recently one of the administrators of the Department of Education is more informed on this matter and in turn also advises schools on how to approach their renovation or building plans. The corona crisis also demonstrated that more investments need to be made to enhance the school buildings and have more and better care infrastructure for the youngest children. There is often not enough space, the toilets are not in order (see the corona commission reports in the Flemish parliament in which both trade unions and umbrella organisations problematise this matter).



3.2. Continuity with home/neighborhood

In the educational 'toddler participation' policies and practices, a shift can be identified towards focusing more on how to support preschool staff in communicating with a diversity of parents. Based on a qualitative study, the former Minister of Education underlined the importance of investing in parental involvement in preschools in her action plan, titled 'Preschool counts every day' plan (Crevits, 2016). Moreover the Flemish inspectorate of education accentuates in their quality vision on 'toddler participation' the importance of establishing an educational partnership with parents based on respect and reciprocity rather than increasing 'parental involvement'²⁰. In the childcare sector the importance of developing a reciprocal relationship with parents is stressed in an extensive way in the child curriculum (pedagogical framework) and in the professional profiles.

The interviewed administrators of the interdepartmental working group on transitions state that due to their collaboration on Flemish administrative level, more alignment was made possible which resulted in seemingly small actions that can make a significant difference for children and families: (e.g. agency growing up can quickly communicate the updated (due to COVID) inscription dates for preschool education towards parents and childcare sector, education and the 'houses of the child' organised common actions to search for children who are not inscribed in preschool education, the individual integration counselors are better informed on the importance of preschool education and can support parents who recently immigrated or refugee families with young children, ...). Despite their efforts, they do not know for sure whether their actions actually have a direct effect on children and families. They hope this will make a difference especially for more vulnerable families. So inclusion and equal opportunities are important dimensions in their perspective on transitions. The administrators do stress that the collaboration with parents in both childcare and preschool settings, both also in the transition moments, remains an important working point.

To gain more insight on the effect on families of young children, we have organised a focus group for several civil society organisations who represent families (including families living in poverty and families with children with a disability). They acknowledge that many good transitional practices have been developed over the last years. From their perspective, good transitional practices are practices where there is time for familiarisation trajectories for both children and parents; parents can regularly communicate with teachers on caring matters and schools take the initiative to contact parents and reassure them especially on caring matters. In practices where there is a good collaboration between the school and after school care, this is much better organised in order to address both learning, care and play of children. Nevertheless, they underline that these new practices are not sufficiently mainstreamed for all children and families. Practical and caring concerns of parents remain on following items:

- Parents experience pressure from the childcare centres that they need to send their children to preschool even if they have the feeling that the preschool is not really adapted to the needs yet of their child.

²⁰ <https://www.onderwijsinspectie.be/nl/onderzoek-kleuterparticipatie>



- Parent of children with special needs experience that it is hard to find a place in mainstream preschools take also take into account caring matters and for example enable the possibility to have therapy on the schools. Many parents want their children to be able to go to a mainstream school in the neighborhood, local community. This also requires an intense structural collaboration between the educational policy field and the welfare policy field.
- The lack of being able to sleep in school
- Still the focus that children need to be potty trained, creates stress amongst parents. Rhythm of the child is uttermost important to respect in supporting toilet learning
- The lack of having good out of school care that could help preschools in caring moments
- The preschool classes have too many children for not enough staff: care therefore is at risk
- Playgrounds are considered too big for young children
- When parents are not allowed in schools they have less chance to communicate with the teacher but also to exchange with other parents.
- The idea of preschool education is too much based on simply making children school ready for primary school.
- Social mix in enrolment systems needs to stay in the attention. Long beforehand we need to pay attention that parents can visit schools, be informed and explore the possibilities in order for them to make a good choice. (what could be the role of family coaches of the Upbringing agency in this matter – *gezinscoachen?*)

For these reasons, the poverty organisations make a strong plea to invest in more bridge figures that can outreach to families and bridge families and schools. In general, the civil society organisations address that they experience a huge difference in the language and discourse that has been used by respectively the Ministry of welfare and the Ministry of education. Whereas the Upbringing agency emphasises the importance of care and warm transitions, in their view the educational policy plans are very much performance oriented in order to be ready to attend primary school. The questions is raised whether a different use of language and discourse by educational policy makers in line with the welfare policy makers could also have a more positive impact on how the relationship between families and ECEC staff can be developed in practice. According to the interviewed civil society organisations, it seems that childcare centres do everything they can to involve and dialogue with parents. In the schoolsystem parents rather have to demonstrate how involved they are in the learning of their children.

Due to the COVID19 health crisis, parents are not allowed in childcare centres and preschools. Although the digital communication has improved, this physical distance seems to be a major threat in order to have good continuity with families. The parents' umbrella association of the catholic education conducted a parents' survey in September 2020 among 2011 parents, 472 of whom were parents of children in preschool education. Many parents expressed their concern about the start in preschool precisely because there are no or less familiarisation moments, parents can not accompany their child in the classroom, little opportunity for face-to-face chats with the teachers. Some parents



postponed the start of preschool, according to this survey.²¹ Also a couple of press articles addressed the problems of transitioning to preschool for children and parents in COVID times²²

Also the umbrella organisations addressed the importance of establishing warm transitions by having good contacts with families and local communities in the in-service and pre-service training of ECEC professionals. More specifically:

- How to invest in a warm welcome for new children and families. One of the items is ensuring that the enrollment moment transforms from a formal moment to a pleasant moment for parents
- How to welcome and involve more parents in the classrooms.
- How to have a more reciprocal understanding of the parent-school relationship

Moreover they state that we need further professionalisation of preschool teachers (both in the pre-service and in-service training) on:

- ensuring that teachers become more familiar with various home contexts and become more aware of their own frame of reference.
- the importance of reciprocal parents-school relationships instead of a narrow view on 'parental involvement' in which parents are foremost individually responsible for contacts with the schools.

"In the end we would like to create an atmosphere that we, parents and teachers, both from our own expertise, are building a better world for this child. "

Finally, the educational umbrella organisation emphasizes that we can much more before enrolling children in preschool. How can we better in a structural way support parents before enrollment in preschool education. This requires several steps, can this be done by childcare or a school development organisation?

²¹ Bevraging ouderkoepel van het Vrije onderwijs

²² <https://www.demorgen.be/nieuws/een-kleuter-voor-het-eerst-afzetten-aan-de-schoolpoort-tijdens-een-pandemie-dat-is-echt-superklote-bee4a7ef/>, https://www.nieuwsblad.be/cnt/dmf20200823_97247926



3.3. Professional Continuity

In Belgium (FI) it has been rather challenging to organise common in-service trainings for a mixed group of preschool teachers and childcare / out of school care workers with different qualification levels. In the city of Ghent they have for example tried to organise joined in-service trainings in the 80ies and this is what happened:

In an interview the former director of the Pedagogical Centre warned that the administrative integration of childcare in education did not automatically lead to a better collaboration between the two types of professionals: childcare workers and preschool teachers. On the contrary Dr. De Meyer suggested that in the early 1980's, by working together, the prejudices between one group and another even increased. The working conditions and level of initial training requirements were very different for both groups: teachers having higher salaries, more holidays and less working hours per day. The childcare workers were seen as carers but not as educators and therefore they felt inferior to the teachers. Consequently, the integration on the work floor needed to be carefully monitored by the Pedagogical Centre. The former Director of the Pedagogical Centre tried for instance in the beginning of the 1980's to set up common in-service training courses for teachers and childcare workers. But neither group was happy with this: the teachers complained that the in-service training was not meeting their expectations and the childcare workers felt insecure in the presence of the teachers. The Pedagogical Centre therefore decided to split the in-service training for both groups again. (Peeters & Vandebroek, 2010, pg. 15)

In the Erasmus+ Value project there was one successful pilot, but also one less successful pilot in which the joined in-service training was in the end questioned by the school director, although the professional relationship between preschool teachers and assisting staff and the quality of the pedagogy significantly increased. But why is it so challenging in Belgium (FI) to create more professional continuity by for example having better collaborations between different ECEC staff profiles and joined-in service training? The split system has for a long time been reflected in the qualifications required for work in these two different sectors. Core practitioners in preschool education predominantly have a bachelor's degree (ISCED 6) and core practitioners in childcare settings have a vocational degree (ISCED 3B) or no degree²³. The last 10 years a new bachelor degree in pedagogy of young children has been organised to be able to work in childcare. In preschool education preschool teachers are assisted by a childcare worker. The bachelor initial trainings take place at higher education institutions - university colleges- specialising in teacher education or pedagogy of the young child. The upper-secondary, vocational qualification route especially for childcare workers is situated within the secondary schools or adult education. Many preschools collaborate with the after-school care services either within or outside of the school building. After-school care workers organise the leisure time of children after school and may also supervise them between educational activities and during the lunch break. They have a minimum of three months of training and many hold a secondary vocational degree in childcare (ISCED 3B). In addition, many staff members without any specific childcare qualification can be responsible for the supervision of play time outside and lunch time (Hulpia et al., 2014; Van Laere, et al., 2011). Consequently these different

²³ ISCED (International Standard of Education Classification, 2011)

ECEC staff groups experience differences in professional status, CPD opportunities, salaries and societal appreciation.

The interviewed local authorities and trade union agree that when little or no work or support is done on how to connect ECEC staff with different initial qualification level, this can create tension and feelings of inequality in collaborations in both vertical and horizontal transitions. Childcare or out of school care workers tend to be the subordinates of the preschool teachers and teachers are the subordinates of primary school teachers. The deployment of childcare workers in preschool education and the collaboration between preschool teachers and childcare or out of school care workers is rather problematic when this is not supported in in-service training or innovation projects

It should be noted that the interviewed local authorities and teacher trade union question the initial qualification level of childcare workers. In that sense they wonder if a HBO 5 is not a better qualification level so childcare workers can really provide better educare and language learning, beyond the technical execution of caring tasks. The content and form of this initial training needs to be discussed, upgraded and better valued. Moreover they stress the need to have more qualifying trajectories that more job mobility is created and childcare workers can become preschool teachers or pedagogical coaches if they want. This needs a further intense debate.

Another challenge in professional continuity that has been addressed by the local authorities is the lack of possibilities to have flexible collaborations between preschool teachers, childcare workers and out of schools carers which hinders ensuring pedagogical continuity and educare throughout a schoolday of a child. One of the obstacles is the fact that preschool teachers are not with the children every hour. Consequently, the needs of children remain unaddressed during teachers' coffee and lunch breaks, when children are expected to play outside (speeltijd) with little supervision. Considering that teachers are officially expected to stay 15 minutes after the lesson and that many lunch time breaks last a lot longer, this raises many questions on how this 'remaining time' for children is organised and whether this actually is in tune with the caring needs of children (Kint, 2016). It should be further researched how the ECEC professional system can evolve towards more co-teaching and working in shifts so the pedagogical continuity throughout the day for young children can be assured and parents are more able to meet the educators who know their children personally.

Both the interviewed local authorities and the teacher trade union agree that schools need a better regulatory framework for child-free hours so teachers and childcare/out of school workers can actually sit together, reflect and co-construct practices. The trade union for example proposes that within the 26 hours of a preschool teacher, two hours should be blocked for exchange and professional development. According to the trade union, professional exchange needs to be included in the core task of a preschool teacher so teachers do not have to professionalise themselves outside the foreseen hours.

Finally the interviewed local administrators problematise the big staff turnover that they experience in ECEC centres. When you want to work on better transitions and educare, this awareness process to create change has to restart. Moreover it is found important in deploying new teachers, childcare workers and ECEC directors, to check whether people have good competences to work in team.



3.4. Structural Continuity

In order to have warm and inclusive transitions, additional work on a structural, more systemic level needs to be done. This is called the importance of structural continuity and it concerns the level of governance in order to stimulate pedagogical continuity, continuity with the home and community and professional continuity. In Belgium (Fl) we can identify two pathways to deal with the institutional split:

- new practices and policy proposals that want to improve the transition for children and families within the existing ECEC split system
- new practices , policy recommendations (the COVID19 recommendation on developing pilot projects) or policy ambitions (setting up pilots financed by the Minister of Welfare) that underline the importance of developing an integrated provision for young children consisting out of preschool staff, childcare staff and out of school care staff. These type of projects challenge the existing ECEC split system.

The interdepartmental working group on transitions is concerned with both tendencies. As they are still busy with further aligning work of different policy domains, one of the challenges is to actually have equal partnership between childcare, preschool and out of school care policy domain in which complementary and continuity in child curricula are central (in contrast to curricula built solely upon a vertical hierarchy of learning outcomes for what comes next). Last year, the municipal network of childcare (VVSG) together with the Department of Education, the educational agency Agodi and the Upbringing Agency created a kind of script for local policy makers on how to realise warm and inclusive transitions as the local government can be play an important facilitating and even leading role in ensuring warm and inclusive transitions.

There was a strong consensus amongst the interviewed umbrella organisations, local authorities and civil society organisations that better pedagogical continuity, continuity with home/neighborhood and professional continuity in transitions can only be guaranteed when also on policy level the domains of childcare and preschool education are more aligned and collaborate better. Due to the double ECEC split system, these interviewed stakeholders experience that the different visions, societal rationales of ECEC²⁴ and regulatory frameworks inhibit collaborations on micro-level between childcare, preschool and out of school care.

“ We can talk in theory on the importance of collaborations, but the real struggles are seen on the practice level”.

The stakeholders stress that there is a need to develop a, equivalent partnership with mutual respect for each other’s vision between childcare, out of school care and preschool education. Especially the

²⁴ The traditional idea that childcare (0-3) and out of school care has solely an 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 organise emergency care. In other regions, the different ECEC services realised how they are more alike than different.

childcare stakeholders and local authorities address that the childcare sector often has the impression that they are in a more subordinate position and not visible enough for example in the recent COVID debates on how to organise emergency care.

In line with this perspective, the administrators of the Flemish interdepartmental working group also accentuated following working points:

- Although they have a specific working group on this, they stress that it is important to identify the bottlenecks which hinder concrete collaborations between childcare and education. How can they develop policy proposals that will stimulate collaborations. One of the bottlenecks are the differences in staff profiles and labor conditions, the differences in affordability of childcare (paid) and preschool (free) for families, the differences in social priority policies in the inscription (e.g. in an integrated centre, it is not sure that children can stay from the age of 2,5 years old)
- Separated administrations do require a lot of time to meet, discuss, get to know and understand each other's visions and regulation frameworks. Each time somebody new comes in, the whole process has to restart.

"The longer I work on this, the more I believe that collaboration between human beings works better than collaboration between structures"

- Better collaboration on micro, meso- and macro level is still needed between welfare, education, integration and the combatting poverty field. The question on developing sustainability in these collaborations arose in the focus group. Also more collaborations could be found with other civil society organisations to enable warmer and more inclusive transitions for children and families.

As part of the actionplan on transitions following activities have been undertaken to create better structural continuity:

- The administrators of childcare and education organised common dissemination activities on raising awareness on the importance of working on transition. By showing up as a duo and demonstrating their level of exchange and collaboration, this can motivate people on the local level to also collaborate. (*"This is a 'together' story, we need each other and that will make the difference"*).
- The administrators of childcare and education have a working group in which they got to know each other's regulations frameworks on staff, infrastructure, etc.... Service providers who want to work on a better transition or even want to work in a more integrated way, can contact this working group to get a quick reply on what possibilities and limitations are within the regulations. For the moment, they do not receive so many inquiries.

The cabinet employees of the Minister of Welfare and the Minister of Education clarified more the policy priorities that the Ministers have chosen for the upcoming years. This might help to understand what the mandate and the possibilities of the administrators are. For the Minister of Education, preschool education is an important preparatory stage for primary school education. They will



foresee a growth path to increase the funding of pre- and primary school education (e.g. by investing in more childcare workers in preschool education,...). The 'toddler participation' policy remains an important lever to ensure equal opportunities and ensure that all children are well prepared for the primary school education. The Minister is especially concerned that children do not master the Dutch language well enough before they enter primary school education. Therefore they will prioritise first the transition from preschool education to primary school education by installing the new compulsory language screening test for every toddler (Koala). Especially since the compulsory school age is recently lowered from 6 to 5 years old.

The Minister of Welfare will focus on the transition from home/childcare to preschool education in a more elaborated manner. He funds since 2022 12 integrated pilot projects on pedagogical continuity across the early years in order to prevent the hard transitions that children and families experience in our current system. There is a lot of unfulfilled potential that has not yet been explored because both systems (welfare and education) do not have enough exchange and opportunities to learn from each other. In the preschool education for example childcare workers are deployed but not according to the competences they have acquired. Therefore it is needed to work on better transitions, better collaboration between the two policy domains and better alignment of the pedagogical curricula. The Minister of Welfare wants to even go a step further and finance pilot experiments in which childcare and preschool, out of school care organisers collaborate and install integrated ECEC projects. By doing so, they want to create financial incentives for ECEC providers and local municipalities to challenge the double split ECEC system. The focal point should be the perspective of the client (children and families) instead of the perspectives of the institutions. These pilots are supported by a learning network. They would like to learn from these pilots on the level of financing and regulations: what is possible and which adjustments are needed in the administrative procedures and regulation frameworks. Local municipalities and other local stakeholders are essential actors of change. According to the stakeholders it is up to the Flemish regional policy level to make innovation possible instead of impossible at the local level. The Flemish policy level can support and stimulate these collaborations and also create a platform for exchange of inspiring practices. Some challenges currently are hindering working on transitions or working on integrated pilots:

- Regulations on the 'exclusive use' of spaces. In childcare this is more strict than in preschool education. When you work with an integrated age group, is this for example still an exclusive space? How do we interpret 'exclusivity' of spaces?
- The regulations on deployment of ECEC staff members are more strict in preschool education than in childcare. Therefore this can hinder a smooth, flexible collaboration between team members with different profiles (preschool teachers, childcare workers, out of school care workers).
- ...

They stress however that they have learned from the interdepartmental working group of administrators, that it is not only a matter of the regulations itself but more so a matter of how administrators interpret the regulations. Much can be made possible but when administrators on the Flemish and local level are unfamiliar with the new evolutions in the ECEC sector on transition and



integrated work, they will probably choose the easy way, and tell ECEC organisers certain things are not possible. So this raises the question on how to support and guide administrators to understand where these questions are coming from and reflect on the interpretation of the regulation frameworks.

“Change never really comes without process guidance and time to reflect and debate”.

The administrators of the local authorities underlined the importance of the local policy level in which they are able to develop local answers to local needs. You cannot just oblige all the local municipalities to invest in warm transitions when the local municipalities themselves do not feel the urge or are not enthusiastic about the importance. Different scenarios for different types of local municipalities should be made possible. When there is a bottom-up dynamic, more effective transitional practices and policies can be developed. The Flemish government can however create financial incentives to stimulate people to think about transitions. Conversely one of the municipalities underlined that the Flemish government can determine the broad outlines (e.g. the choice of working more in an integrated way) in a top-down manner, but is it up to the local municipalities to decide on the 'how'. As the Flemish level doesn't know exactly what happens in all the ECEC centres, it is important that the local municipalities have a steering/guiding role towards the ECEC centres.

Another local municipality moreover underlined that childcare and education of young children are in essence the same. As a local municipality they can do a lot, especially when the council is both responsible for childcare, out-of-school care and preschool education. In another local municipality they experience that they can indeed do a lot in different steps: it starts with creating a dialogue between different stakeholders by organising for example study visits, developing a common vision and investing in coaching trajectories in which childcare workers, out of school care workers and teachers collaborate. Developing an overall common vision with childcare and preschool stakeholders was a crucial step in order to create a willingness to work on education and transitions. The best progress is seen in cases where childcare centres and preschools are located in the same site. But when it comes to real collaboration they still experience a large dependency on the Flemish separate regulatory frameworks of childcare and education.

The local administrators accentuated following challenges and working points in terms of governing better transitions:

- A lot still needs to be done in order to align the childcare/welfare and education policy domain as this has major effect on the possibilities of collaborating on the micro level. The local municipalities sometimes receive the signal, but why would we work on more pedagogical continuity when the regulatory frameworks are not ensured and the three policy domains don't seem to collaborate themselves?
- One of the issues is that different fragmented regulatory frameworks inhibit the options to successfully collaborate: one municipality addressed the issue that square meters doesn't say anything about the pedagogical quality that is offered to children. They suggest to ensure regulatory framework in which you maintain the pedagogical quality for children and



loosen the strict rules in terms of infrastructure and staff deployment. So the centres have the flexibility to collaborate in transitions and even start an integrated way of working. Ofcourse inspection needs to maintain whether the pedagogical quality is in order. Less strict rules in practical things (*regelluw kader*) doesn't mean giving up quality.

- Although it is a positive point that enrollment systems of both childcare and preschool education take into account accessibility of vulnerable families and having a social mix (more democratisation and depillarisation), there is a clear split between both enrollment systems. According to the local authorities this is a problem as in centres where childcare and preschool is at the same site, parents are not sure whether their children will be able to enroll in preschool. On the other hand it is important to not unintentionally prioritise children who already attended childcare over children who didn't attend childcare before. That could enhance existing social inequalities. This is still a double-edged sword. In the new project on pedagogical continuity this is however a point that cannot be touched upon or discussed in the development of a more flexible regulatory framework due to the constitutional item of Freedom of Education.
- ECEC centres with their different pedagogical, social and economic functions need to be close by to families and local communities. Having a community-based focus on ECEC is crucial. The infrastructure must be based on this integral support of children and families. In the larger local municipality the next step is to invest more in integrated community based child centres where childcare, preventive family support and preschool education is located.



4. Concluding points of attention for international policy exchange

We hereby provide a short overview of the main positive evolutions and challenges/working points to govern warm and inclusive transitions for children, families and ECEC staff in the Flemish community of Belgium. These are different points of attention that could be taken into account into the international policy exchange in May 2022 in Denmark.

PEDAGOGICAL CONTINUITY	CONTINUITY WITH HOME & NEIGHBORHOOD
<p>The interviewed local municipalities, the civil society organisations and the umbrella organisations want better pedagogical continuity and a common vision for children also in terms of better curricula alignment. –For example the developmental goals of preschool education (curriculum) are now being revised. The question is whether this is happening from a top-down preparatory approach (how to ensure that children obtain (European) key competences in school and later on labour market) or whether this also can be based on the pedagogical framework of childcare (how to ensure that learning, care and play are intertwined). How can these bottom-up and top-down dynamics be better merged in the development of an age appropriate pedagogy for young children in both childcare, preschool and out of school care?</p> <p>There is still a lot of developmental work to ensure pedagogical continuity during the school day. Many in-between moments are waiting and technical caring moments for children , supervised by low or non-qualified staff. Relation with professional continuity – how can preschool staff and out of school care staff (both on the level of directors and individual practitioners) have a better collaborative model so pedagogical continuity for children can be guaranteed?</p> <p>A main challenge in pedagogical continuity is the huge difference in adult-child ratio between childcare and preschool education and between out of schools care (under the auspices of the Upbringing Agency) and after school care. Interviewed stakeholders address the necessity to have more staff available so adult-child ratio can be lowered across the early years</p>	<p>The scope of ‘toddler participation policies’ has broadened the last years from only focusing on raising inscription and attendance of children (by convincing parents on the importance of preschool) to also investing in quality welcoming policies in preschools and having more reciprocal dialogues with parents.</p> <p>The civil society organisations representing families, welfare stakeholders, the local municipalities, the umbrella organisations, the Agency of educational services and the educational inspectorate underline the importance of establishing warm welcomes for children and their parents. Although a lot has changed in a positive sense, the COVID crisis challenges the continuity with home. Many parents have not been allowed to enter preschools and childcares which can create in some cases even more distance even more distance between ECEC and families. In other cases staff and parents found each other more in the co-education by having digital encounters and together trying to find alternative ways to stay in contact.</p> <p>Developing a reciprocal understanding of the parent-ECEC staff relationship in contexts of diversity and increasing poverty remains a challenge in both pre- as in-service training for ECEC staff, especially for preschool staff.</p> <p>By setting up community-based networks (childcare, preventive family support, , community building,...) more work is needed to help parents to transition to preschool (dialogue on their questions, concerns, choose a school, subscribe,...). How can this be organised on a local level so individual childcare centres and schools are not solely responsible for this?</p>

PROFESSIONAL CONTINUITY	STRUCTURAL CONTINUITY
<p>The ECEC workforce consists of different professional profiles (preschool education, childcare, pedagogy of young children) that can enrich each other in order to guarantee good pedagogical continuity and continuity with home/neighborhood in transitions.</p> <p>Differences in professional status, labor conditions and different societal appreciation create an atmosphere on the work floor which inhibits equivalency.</p> <p>The deployment of childcare workers in preschool education and the collaboration between preschool teachers and (out of school)childcare workers is rather problematic and hierarchic when not supported in in-service training or innovation projects. As the trade union stated their jobs are not exactly the same, but a better meaningful collaboration is needed so caring and learning of children can be addressed.</p> <p>Some stakeholders addressed the fact that the initial training level for childcare workers (ISCED 3B) does not suffice to work in a pedagogical way, beyond the technical execution of caring tasks. The content and form of this initial training needs to be discussed, upgraded and better valued.</p> <p>The work statutes of childcare workers and preschool teachers are very different. Moreover the work statute of preschool teachers doesn't allow a lot of flexibility in collaborations due to the strict teaching hours (<i>lestijden</i>). This hinders setting up flexible systems in which more co-teaching and working in shifts can be stimulated so the pedagogical continuity throughout the day for young children can be assured.</p> <p>ECEC centres need a better regulatory framework for child-free hours so all professional profiles (teachers and childcare workers/out of school care workers) can sit together, reflect and co-construct practices.</p>	<p>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. The Flemish education council (<i>VLOR - Vlaamse Onderwijsraad</i>), 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 the government initiated an interdepartmental working group on transitions. New practices/action research were initiated to cope with institutional splits in two ways</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) To create better warm and inclusive transitions within the existing split system by having inter-institutional collaboration 2) To develop integrated ECEC projects that challenge the existing split system <p>The Minister of welfare is interested in both above strategies to deal with the institutional splits from the necessity to have more pedagogical continuity. The ministry funds for the next three years pilot projects on integrated ECEC services, supported by a learning network. The Minister of Education considers warm transitions within the existing ECEC split system important in order to have good 'toddler participation' (raising the inscription and attendance rates of toddlers in preschool).</p> <p>In the learning network and steering group of the new project on pedagogical continuity they will identify and clarify better the regulatory bottlenecks that hinder better collaboration between childcare and education on the work floor:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Which of these bottlenecks are a matter of having a limited interpretation of the administrators in charge of staff, infrastructure,... ?→ need to sensitise administrators to make things possible ✓ Which of these bottlenecks are really hindering a legal collaboration? <p>According to many stakeholders there is an urgent need for better collaboration and finetuning of vision and regulation frameworks between childcare, out of school care and preschool education. → developing a common vision on young children and families in which the educational, social and economic function of ECEC are integrated and in which care, learning, socialisation and play needs and rights of children are integrated.</p>

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6. Annex

- SEEPRO Professional profiles in childcare, out of school care and preschool education:
 - o http://www.seeepro.eu/English/pdfs/BELGIUM_ECEC_Workforce.pdf
 - o http://www.seeepro.eu/English/pdfs/BELGIUM_Key_Data.pdf
- Levels of governance in Belgium (FI)

Source: Hulpia, H., Peeters, J., & Van Landeghem, G. (2014). *Study on the effective use of early childhood education and care in preventing early school leaving. Case study report: Flanders*. Brussels: European Commission DG E&C.

The system of early childhood education and care in Belgium is organised as a split-sector system. Different ministerial authorities are responsible for provision for children under 2½ years of age (childcare sector, Ministry of Welfare) and for children from 2½ years up to the age of 6 (education sector, Ministry of Education). Regarding education and welfare, responsibilities were devolved to the three Communities in 1984. Only the age for starting and completing compulsory schooling and the minimum requirements for qualification awards are still determined at the federal level. Consequently, the federal government has only limited prerogatives in terms of education and welfare.

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 Ministry of Welfare, Health, Family and Poverty Reduction (Ministerie van Welzijn, Gezondheid Gezin en Armoedebestrijding) and is managed by the Flemish governmental Upbringing agency (Agentschap Opgroeien, new name of Child & Family Agency). The agency is responsible for regulations, allocation of places, funding, quality standards and quality management. The day-to-day running of childcare centres is the responsibility of the service providers (local authorities, non-profit organisations, and also private for-profit providers). All childcare services must be registered with the agency and 70% 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 Flemish Ministry of Education, Sports, Animal Welfare and the Flemish border (Vlaams ministerie van Onderwijs, Sport, Dierenwelzijn en Vlaamse Rand) and is managed by the Department of Education (Departement Onderwijs) and the Agency for Educational Service (AgODi). It is an integral part of Basic education (Basisonderwijs) including both preschool and primary education. Since this year (2020-2021), the last year of preschool (5 year olds) is compulsory. There are three main types of provider/provision: (1) preschool settings run and fully financed by the Flemish Community (GO!); (2) subsidised public settings organised by local authorities; and (3) subsidised private settings – mostly confessional. Almost 64% of children in provision attend a private, mostly Catholic, setting, 22% municipal and 14% state-maintained settings. Although, schools receiving public funding are required to operate within a regulatory framework, they still enjoy “considerable autonomy”. Different school boards (*inrichtende machten*) 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 Flemish 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), schools foresee their own before and after schoolcare (mostly free play under little supervision).

