# 19 Early childhood education and care in the Netherlands

## A shift towards an integrated system aimed at enhancing children's development and learning

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### Introduction

The number of children enrolled in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) has grown dramatically in the past two decades, and, by now, the vast majority of children attend some kind of centre-based ECEC. The Netherlands has a fragmented and split ECEC system. Historically two types of centre-based ECEC for children below four years of age exist, each with its own tradition and function: *day-care* centres for children from birth until age four years and centres originally referred to as *playgroups* for two-to-four year olds. From four years of age, children attend kindergarten, which is part of the primary school, with an enrolment rate of about 98%.

Day care falls under the responsibility of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment and, as such, has traditionally reflected a strong labour market perspective. With the increase of maternal employment to about 56% in 2004, the number of children enrolled in day care more than doubled between 1995 and 2005 resulting in an enrolment rate of about 20% of children below four years of age, which is still low in an absolute sense. The main reasons for not using day care were the lack of places, long waiting lists, and the high costs (Akgündüz & Plantenga, 2014). The Childcare Act of 2005 marked a major change by privatising the sector, introducing a subsidy system for parents, and introducing a statutory quality framework. The quality framework specified mostly structural preconditions concerning teacher's educational qualifications, group size and ratio. Further, the Act formulated that day care should be aimed at four broad goals, namely providing emotional security; fostering children's personal competences; fostering children's social competences; and transferring basic cultural values and norms. The OKE (Promoting Development through Quality and Education) Act of 2010 provided a strong impetus for the sector to develop beyond fulfilling a predominately care function, enabling parents to reconcile work and family life, to a stronger educational function supporting the broad development of children in its own right.

Playgroups, as part of the local welfare policies, first emerged in the 1960s with a strong social-cultural function allowing children to play with peers. These playgroups operate on a half-day basis in which children are enrolled for two half days a week. Playgroups are viewed as a gradual preparation for kindergarten illustrating a traditionally stronger educational function. This stronger educational focus is aligned with the targeted approach of combating early disadvantages in children that are related to low parental education levels or cultural minority background of the children that are typically enrolled in these provisions. This gradually resulted in the transformation into educationally oriented *preschools.* Since 2000, the implementation and monitoring of these targeted education programs carried out in the preschools fall under the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sciences.

Kindergarten has been integrated into primary schools following the Primary School Act of 1985. Although primary school is not compulsory until age five years, virtually all children enter primary school at their fourth birthday. Although kindergarten is part of the primary school, the practices differ greatly from the grades three to eight that are focused on formal instruction in typical school subjects.

## The current state of affairs

Currently, more than 80% of all two- and three-year olds and about half of the children below two years of age participate in centre-based ECEC, which is above the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average, but only on a part-time basis (OECD, 2016a). Moreover, the enrolment shows social selection effects, which are related to the split system in the Netherlands. Although, on average only 20% of the children below four years of age do not attend any form of centre-based ECEC, this number is twice as high for children from the lowest income families (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek [CBS], 2015). In addition, the type of provision that is used depends on parent and home characteristics showing segregation tendencies already in an early stage of children's lives. It is common to use multiple care arrangements, such as combining centre-based care with home-based care or using centre-based day care together with informal care (often by grandparents).

## Day-care provisions for 0–4 year olds

Currently about half of the children below four years of age attend a day-care centre for on average two full days a week (CBS, 2015). Day care is used only by dual-earning parents, which can be explained by the fact that subsidies via tax reduction are provided only if both parents are working or pursuing further (tertiary) education. Although the female employment rate in the Netherlands is about 77% and among the highest in Europe, this usually concerns part-time employment of, on average, 25 hours a week (OECD, 2016a). In addition, parental or family care in the home environment is highly valued for children,

hence care by grandparents for one or two days a week is very common. Another explanation for the part-time usage of day care could be related to the costs for parents, which is among the highest in Europe and twice the OECD average (OECD, 2016a).

With the privatisation of the childcare sector in 2005, the number of available places has expanded dramatically and parents were given subsidies from the central government. From 2005–2008, these subsidies for parents were substantial and parents only paid half of the fee (Bettendorfer, Jongen, & Muller, 2015). However, with the financial crisis and related budget cuts from 2012 the costs for parents have increased, resulting in a decrease in the enrolment rate in an absolute sense (in the number of children enrolled) and in a relative sense (in the number of hours children were enrolled) (Akgündüz & Plantenga, 2014). The situation appears to have stabilised since 2015/2016. Overall, children in day-care centres are usually from middle- to higher educated parents belonging to middle- to higher income groups in the Netherlands. The centres operate from early in the morning until early in the evening, usually between 7am and 7pm for five days a week and all-year round, which is attuned to their working hours for most parents.

A small proportion of the children (approximately 9%) are enrolled in formal home-based care provided by child-minders (OECD, 2016a). Until 2005, this type of care was unregulated and informal. However, from 2005 home-based care became eligible for parents to receive subsidies via tax reduction if the child-minder complied with basic regulations in line with the regulations for centre-based care.

## Preschool provisions for 2–4 year olds

Currently, about 30% of children attend a preschool before entering kindergarten at age four years. The first preschools, at that time called playgroups, had a social-cultural orientation with strong roots in the community and were part of the local welfare policy (Leseman & de Winter, 2013). These playgroups provided children with (better) play opportunities and promotion of social development. Nowadays, Dutch preschools mainly attract children from lower-educated parents and children with an immigrant, including second or third generation, background. This is a reflection of the current educational policy that is aimed at combating disadvantages at an early age by providing compensation programs in preschools.

In 1995, the first educational curricula or education programs for 3–6 year old disadvantaged children were implemented by a joint initiative of the Ministries of Welfare and Education. The first two programs concerned a Dutch adaptation of the High/Scope Curriculum (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997; called *Kaleidoscoop* in the Netherlands) and the other, called *Piramide*, was an adaptation of the Success for All approach developed by Slavin and Madden (1999). Both programs were implemented in preschools and kindergarten departments of primary schools that collaborated to provide a continuous educational trajectory from age

3 up to age 6, before transition to Dutch third grade. Since 2000, the number of targeted centre-based compensation programs steadily increased to a nation-wide system. All programs have in common that they employ a play-based and holistic approach with an emphasis on four core domains: (Dutch as a second) language, math, motor and social emotional development. In order to receive municipal funding, only programs accredited by the national Accreditation Committee for Child and Youth Interventions of the Netherlands' Youth Institute can be used (www.nji.nl).

Preschools operate during the same hours as schools, usually between 9 and 12am in the morning and between 1 and 3pm in the afternoon. Preschools are open for 40 weeks a year and have regular vacations, aligned with primary schools. Disadvantaged children, eligible for the education programs based on low parental education levels or immigrant background, receive a minimum of 10 hours of ECEC, usually four half-days a week, of which parents pay a very limited income-based fee. Non-eligible children, whose parents also pay an income-based fee, are enrolled in the same centres, but for only two half days a week (usually 5 hours).

## Kindergarten for 4–6 year olds

Kindergarten, as part of primary schools, is publicly funded and concerns children aged four-to-six years. Although not compulsory before age five years, parents are entitled to free kindergarten from age four years and almost 100% of the children are enrolled on their fourth birthday. Children attend kindergarten for about 20 hours a week. Traditionally, the attendance was divided among three full days from 8.30–3.00 pm with a lunch break in between on Monday, Tuesday and Thursday and two shorter days from 8.30–12.30pm on Wednesday and Fridays. In this model, children used to go home for lunch, as mothers did not work outside of the house (or adapted their working hours according to the school schedule). Still, Wednesdays and Fridays are the most common days for mothers to be at home, which is also apparent in less usage of other types of care such as day care on these days. As female labour market participation grew, more children used in-between-school care during lunch, which was usually provided by volunteers at schools. Since 2006, this in-between-school care has been professionalised. Every school is now obliged by law to provide this type of care, although they usually invite an external childcare organisation to organise this service (Inspectorate of Education, 2008). At the same time, a new movement advocated the five-equal-days model in which children go to school for the same amount of time for all five days, resulting in days from approximately 8.30am – 2pm.

## Collaboration between the different provisions

Currently there are different ways in which the teachers of the three different provisions collaborate, particularly in view of addressing the education gap among disadvantaged children. As a part of the educational policy in combating early

disparities, preschools (and increasingly day-care centres) and kindergartens work with the targeted education programs. The main idea of these programs is to provide children with a continuous curriculum across the 2–6-age range. Hence, there is some collaboration between preschools and kindergartens in the program they use and the implementation of these programs. Also, as children's development is monitored as part of working with these programs, this information is handed over to the kindergarten teachers (with the consent of parents) when children transition from preschool to kindergarten, so children can be supported in their development based on their individual needs. Sometimes this information is discussed during a meeting between the preschool and kindergarten teachers, but most times, it is in the form of a short report. Another way for collaboration between the different sectors concerns meetings, often at the municipal level, to discuss the developments and new policy directions than can be implemented at the organisational level. These meetings mostly occur in view of local (educational) policy and involve the directors of the organisations.

## Structural and process quality

According to a comparative review by the OECD (2006), the structural characteristics of Dutch ECEC are in the mid-range of quality. For teachers working in day care or preschool the minimum educational requirement is a three-year vocational training in a relevant area. The average group size is dependent on children's age and ranges from 12 for babies until 16 for three-year-olds. Relatedly the children-to-staff ratio also varies depending on the age of children and ranges from 4 for babies until 8 for three-year-olds. As age-heterogeneous groups are very common, there are rules set to calculate the maximum group size and ratio depending on the particular age composition in the group. The same requirements apply to preschools, although the variation in group size and ratio is more limited as these provisions have more age-homogeneous groups with only two- and three-year olds. For kindergarten, the structural conditions are a little different. Teachers in kindergartens are required to have a four-year Bachelor degree in teaching. Although, there are no strict regulations concerning group size, this usually is between 20–30 children. Sometimes there is an assistant, particularly in schools with a high proportion of disadvantaged children, but usually there is only one teacher per classroom. As schools receive extra funding from the municipality when they have a higher proportion of disadvantaged children (related to low parental education levels or cultural minority background), this money is mostly used to appoint another (assistant) teacher or to lower the group size.

Concerning the process quality, or the quality of teacher-child interactions, several studies have shown that Dutch ECEC teachers, in all types of provisions across the 0–6 age range reveal moderate to high levels of emotional support in showing positive and affectionate relations, responsiveness and child-centredness in their interactions. By providing clear classroom routines and rules, teachers aid in developing children's self-regulation skills (Helmerhorst, Riksen-Walraven, Vermeer, Fukkink, & Tavecchio, 2014; Slot, Leseman, Verhagen, & Mulder,

2015; Slot, Boom, Verhagen, & Leseman, 2017; pre-COOL Consortium, 2015). However, the facilitation and support of children's cognitive and language development is considered, on average, to be low to moderate. This pattern of results reflects the state of affairs in most western countries.

## Curriculum

In the Netherlands, there is a common understanding of what is considered to be of importance in ECEC (Sylva, Ereky-Stevens, & Aricescu, 2015; Slot, 2016). A large survey among 285 parents and 300 teachers revealed a strong emphasis on supporting the development of children's social-emotional and interpersonal skills or 'soft skills', which appeared important for children below and above three years of age (Broekhuizen, Leseman, Moser, & van Trijp, 2015). Learning-related skills and pre-academic skills are viewed as increasingly more important as children get older and particularly parents attach more value to these so-called 'hard skills' compared to teachers.

Although there is no legislated national or local curriculum, the basis for everyday pedagogy and practice is laid out in the Childcare Act of 2005 that stipulated the focus on the four core goals of providing emotional security, enhancing children's personal and social competence, and transferring cultural values and norms. Based on this act researchers and stakeholders jointly developed a Pedagogical Framework for day-care provisions (Singer & Kleerekoper, 2009). This framework reflects the holistic view on children's development as it takes a broad approach to children's development and learning. In this framework all developmental domains, cognitive, language, creative, moral and physical, are theoretically underpinned and further elaborated with ample examples for implementation in practice. It is unknown to what extent this framework is used in actual practice.

There is a shared and common view across all types of provisions that ECEC should incorporate a holistic view on children's development, which is reflected in a strongly play-oriented pedagogical approach. An observational study in 376 day care and preschool classrooms revealed that free play was the predominant activity children were involved in during a regular morning (Slot et al., 2015). This reflects the typical Dutch pattern of practices in ECEC that are strongly child-centred and provide ample opportunities for play, with some activities initiated by the teachers such as creative (e.g. arts-and-crafts or music) and educational activities (e.g. book reading and making puzzles) (Slot et al., 2015).

At the same time, there is evidence of a gap in children's skills as young as two years of age, based on family background characteristics such as parental education level and home language (Leseman & Veen, 2016), that requires a stronger educational approach to maximally support and foster their development in order to (partly) close this gap (Socioeconomic Advisory Council, 2016). This is the main aim of the targeted education programs that are now widespread in Dutch preschools and are increasingly also being used in day-care provisions. However, a stronger integration of social-emotional or interpersonal skills (i.e.

self-regulation, learning to learn, curiosity or creativity) and pre-academic learning related skills (i.e. general learning skills and domain-specific skills, such as pre-literacy and numeracy), in the curriculum deserves more attention to prepare children adequately for life in the 21st century (Socioeconomic Advisory Council, 2016; Slot, 2016). Striking a good balance between play, especially exploratory and enriching play with an active and supporting role of the teacher, and the provision of educational activities aimed at children's broad development and learning related skills remains important. A large cohort study among two-year olds indeed illustrated the benefits of play-enriching activities and high-quality educational interactions in narrowing the education gap in disadvantaged children three years later (Leseman et al., 2017).

The kindergarten curriculum is characterised by a lot of time for free play, a child-centred approach and the use of specially designed play-work materials (Leseman, 2002). Classrooms are usually age-heterogeneous combination classes with first and second graders (4–5 and 5–6 year old children) in one group in the majority of primary schools (80%). Classrooms are organised by several 'activity centres' or play areas (e.g. construction centre, play-work centre, creativity centre, house centre for pretend play). The average curriculum reflects a certain eclecticism and consists of the following elements: circle time intended to enhance language development and communication skills, book-reading, play-work lessons in which children work with special materials in small groups under guidance of the teacher (for instance, paper, glue and scissors, folding paper, textile, string beads, clay, paint or colour-pencils, sorting games). There are also work lessons involving special developmental materials (e.g. puzzles, sorting games, memory games) and worksheets for the older kindergarteners, to prepare them for formal instruction (focusing on pre-literacy and numeracy).

## Governance and quality monitoring

Two different ministries are responsible for ECEC in the Netherlands: the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment and the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Sciences. Basic quality monitoring in day care and preschools, falling under the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, is done by the municipal public health authority and is focused on basic safety and health (hygiene), structural characteristics (e.g. group size, ratio and teacher's qualifications) and the presence of a pedagogical work plan. In addition, there is a periodic evaluation of the process quality of representative samples of day care and preschool provisions conducted by a national research consortium (e.g. Fukkink et al., 2013; de Kruif et al., 2009; Vermeer et al., 2005). In addition, the Inspectorate of Primary Education monitors additional aspects in centres working with targeted education programs that are part of the national priority policy for disadvantaged children (i.e. of low educated or cultural minority parents). These aspects concern, for instance, whether the centre works with an accredited education program and with teachers, who are trained and certified to work with this program. Evaluation also focuses on aspects of implementation of the program, such as

the availability of a year-plan for the themes and activities, presence of an extra teacher, and the use of an observation- or test-based child development monitoring system regarding the four core domains of language, math, motor skills and social emotional development.

Kindergartens, as part of primary schools, fall under the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Sciences, although in the Dutch primary school system the actual governance is decentralised to local or regional school boards which are organised according to the confessional pillars (e.g. protestant, roman catholic, Islamic schools or neutral public schools). School boards are responsible for several primary schools in a city or region and have a high degree of autonomy, but should conform to national statutory rules regarding teachers' educational qualifications, and lesson hours per week, on the one hand, and to the learning goals and achievement standards specified in the Primary School Act, on the other hand. Within these boundaries, schools and school boards are free to select education programs, curricula, instruction methods and child achievement monitoring systems. Quality monitoring is done by the Inspectorate of Primary Education and is based on children's test-based performance on standard norm-referenced tests and checklists (language, math, literacy, social-emotional competence and citizenship), the use of a monitoring system, and the teaching process related to the key goals formulated in the broad domains of language, math, social studies, creativity and movement.

## Moving towards an integrated ECEC system

The current ECEC system in the Netherlands is fragmented as children from disadvantaged backgrounds attend preschools using targeted education programs, whereas children from more affluent families tend to be enrolled in day-care provisions. This segregation effect is a result of the targeted educational policy in the Netherlands that has focused on the implementation of education programs in preschools only. Preschools are provided with municipal subsidies to ensure availability for eligible children and maintain or enhance quality of the provided program. Dutch research has shown that children from disadvantaged families already lag behind in their social-emotional, language and cognitive development as early as two years of age (Mulder, Hoofs, Verhagen, Van der Veen, & Leseman, 2014). There is evidence that the quality of interactions, particularly support for children's learning and development, in preschools is higher than in day-care centres (Slot et al., 2017), which can be partly explained by the use of the targeted education programs (Slot et al., 2015). This higher quality and relatedly the use of the education programs, in turn, have shown to narrow the education gap at age five years (Leseman & Veen, 2016; Leseman et al., 2017). At the same time, recent results from the OECD not only showed an average decline in students' basic academic skills compared to 2006, but also highlighted increasing disparities at age 15 years as the differences between low and high performing children were caused by social background factors (OECD, 2016b).

There are several recent developments that are focused on promoting equal opportunities for all children. Broadly speaking, these developments are along two lines. First, there are several initiatives to enhance quality in ECEC for children below four years of age. Second, there are developments taking place in aligning ECEC and primary school in terms of a continuous curriculum across all developmental domains and ages and concerning active collaboration between professionals working in the two sectors.

With the implementation of the OKE Act in 2010 both day care and preschool provisions fall under the same statutory quality framework meaning that both types have to adhere to the same structural and process quality standards. Moreover, this act characterises a shift in the function of ECEC moving from a care oriented approach as a right for *parents* in order to reconcile work with a family life to a stronger educational approach as a right for *children* to develop to their full potential. In 2013, a new policy initiative was launched in order to re-evaluate the statutory quality framework based on the Childcare Act of 2005. Policymakers had several discussions with renowned researchers, practitioners from the field, local policymakers and other stakeholders, such as from the municipal health authority, to revise the quality framework. The newly proposed framework, still to be approved by the parliament, shows a shift from focusing on strict (structural) regulations involving a lot of paper work that was not always considered useful towards a more process-oriented approach of monitoring interactional quality and aspects known to contribute to this, such as professional development (Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, 2017). The four basic goals set out in the Childcare Act of 2005 have been further elaborated and now show more explicit continuity across ages (e.g. between day care and primary school) and across settings (e.g. between primary school and after-school care).

At the same time there is a joint initiative by several important stakeholders (including an organisation of municipality representatives, the council for primary education and organisations representing the childcare sector) to establish a legal entitlement to 16 hours of ECEC for all children from age two-to-four years (Sociaal Werk Nederland, 2017). The basis for this initiative is to establish a universal provision for all children as a means to promote broad development and provide all children with a good start at school. An important prerequisite for this is a close collaboration between day-care provisions, preschools and schools, thus maximizing continuity of the provided education and care between 0–12 years. An initiative building on these principles is the so-called *integrated child centre* for 0–12 years where day care, preschool, primary school and after-school programs are integrated into one centre. A first step for these integrated child centres is to provide all these services on the same location so children have the opportunity to be involved in a range of different activities that foster their broad development and learning. The next step concerns collaboration between the different organisations and the professionals of these organisations, resulting in *one* team of professionals based on a shared pedagogical vision and mission and central leadership (Landelijk Steunpunt Brede Scholen, 2014).

## Conclusion

Kindergarten for four- to six-year-old children has a long history and is well established in the primary school system, whereas the Dutch ECEC system for children below age four years showed major changes in the past two decades. The day-care sector expanded rapidly in the past years and the enrolment rate has increased from about 10% to over 80% of children below age four years. The majority of children attend day care or preschool on a part-time basis for, on average, two days a week. The two main types of centre-based care, cay care and preschool, target a different population (children from dual-earner families and mostly disadvantaged children respectively), but the traditional differences in orientation and function have largely disappeared. The day-care sector has shifted from a merely care or job market orientation to a strong developmental and educational function with specific attention to addressing inequalities in an early stage, which is in line with the goals of the preschools using the targeted education programs.

The structural characteristics of the Dutch ECEC system can be considered of mid-range quality compared to other European countries. The group size and children-to-staff ratio are relatively favourable, but teachers working with children below age four years tend to have lower educational qualifications than other European countries. However, the findings concerning process quality show a highly comparable picture with mid- to high levels of social-emotional quality and lower levels of interactions fostering children's learning and development. This pattern of findings applies to the full range of 0–6 provisions.

Although there is no legislated curriculum for children below age four years and kindergarten, there is consensus about what is important for children, which is apparent from the practices in ECEC. Adopting a child-centred approach children are allowed ample time for free play with the provision of some group activities focused at enhancing children's learning and development, such as shared book-reading, circle time or arts-and-crafts activities. There is increasing attention for fostering children's school readiness, particularly in view of addressing early inequalities, but this is mostly based on a play-based approach. In the second year of kindergarten there is a stronger focus on children's pre-academic skills and more formal ways of learning, such as with worksheets, are used in preparation of the transition to first grade.

Current developments in ECEC focus on integrating and more strongly aligning different ECEC provisions to better support children's broad development and enhance their chances in life. The importance of collaboration between the different sectors is growing rapidly, despite challenges at the legal and administrative level. The collaboration and alignment of ECEC is taking place along different lines. At the policy level, the new proposal for an overarching quality framework for provision for 0–4 year olds further integrates the two types of centre-based provision for this age range. This alignment concerns the structural preconditions as well as the curricular focus in everyday practices and quality of

interactions. The further improvement of process quality is highly valued and having professional development opportunities and coaching on the job are now part of the newly proposed quality framework as important prerequisites of process quality. The proposal also notes the importance of collaboration both within the same sector (e.g. 0–4 year olds) and between different sectors (e.g. day care and preschool with kindergarten). Along the same lines, there are also developments in the field characterised by a strong investment of different stakeholders, such as the integrated child centres for 0–12 years.

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