

## **New legislative work for social inclusion in Flanders, Belgium**

Katleen Govaert, Kind in Gezin, England

Flanders scores highly at European level in terms of the number of formal child care places per thousand children under the age of 3 years (342 places in 2004). The Flemish government and the child care sector are aiming to provide an adequate number of child care places, with the emphasis on quality.

Active advances are under way in child care in Flanders, which is trying to keep pace with the many developments in society. The time has come for the Flemish government to stop and think for a while. What do we want to achieve with child care? What works well and should be kept as it is? And what can we improve?

Inge Vervotte, Flemish Minister of Welfare, Public Health and the Family, is tackling the challenge and has worked with Child and Family to produce a proposal for a new organisation for Flemish child care.

I shall begin this presentation with a brief outline of child care in Flanders from the perspective of accessibility and social inclusion.

I shall go on to explain the objectives recently formulated by the Flemish government as regards child care, in which the three societal functions of child care play a key part.

Lastly, I shall discuss the issue of how we are now aiming actually to achieve these objectives.

### **I. Child care in Flanders: the current situation**

#### *Strong expansion within a short period*

In the past few years, child care has expanded substantially. Between 1999 and 2004, the Flemish government achieved major expansion in the child care options for babies and toddlers. In the course of this period, the number of child care places rose by more than 8500 (+14%). Between 2004 and 2008, the Flemish government is aiming to increase the number of places available for children under the age of 3 years even further, by another 5000 child care places.

#### *Is this expansion enough?*

European objectives are mainly restricted to the economy and employment. In the Barcelona Agreement (2002), the following objectives were decided on for child care, admittedly for socio-economic reasons:

- there must be 33 child care places per 100 children under the age of 3 years;
- there must be 90 child care places per 100 children from the age of 3 years up to the age of compulsory schooling.

For children under the age of 3 years, the European objective was achieved in Flanders in 2004, namely 34.2 places per 100 children under the age of 3 years.

For children from the age of 3 years up to the age of compulsory schooling, Flanders scores very highly. Children can go to preschool as from the age of 2.5 years, and 98% of Flemish children do so.

Out-of-school care is also available in the various forms of child care and in schools.



Even though Flanders scores highly by European standards, with 34.2 places per 100 children under the age of 3 years, nevertheless there are child care shortages. The need for child care can vary widely from area to area. Parents who cannot find any child care are not interested in the fact that Flanders has fulfilled the European objectives set. The 33% norm may be achieved at regional level, but 5000 more child care places for small children are needed.

→ One of the reasons for the great demand for child care is the high level of employment among men and women. In Flanders, 72% of women with at least one child under the age of 3 years is in employment, and for women with at least one child under the age of 6 years the figure is 76% (2002). This means that Flanders has to set the bar higher than the European target figure.

→ Another reason is that many parents choose formal child care, or that informal child care (primarily grandparents) is not available to all parents. Grandparents themselves are still working, or do not live locally.

→ The last reason why supply does not meet demand is to do with the fact that we have come to realise that parents need child care not only in order to combine work and family, but also, for example, to look for work, to undergo training, or for other reasons. Child care as family support. In child care in Flanders, we have observed less use of child care by certain target groups – ethnic minorities, underprivileged families and single parents.

#### *Accessibility*

It is a reality that vulnerable groups in Flanders make less use of child care, although they may well be precisely the groups that need child care for social and educational reasons. The cost of child care plays a part. In subsidised child care, the price is dependent on income. Child care is reasonably cheap for people with a low income (the minimum rate is 1.31 euros per day). Free child care is also possible for families in financial difficulties. However, the cost of child care is not legally regulated in independent child care, which makes this form of child care less accessible for these parents.

The elimination of exclusion mechanisms from child care is at least as important as affordability. Research by VBJK (Centre for childcare expertise) revealed the formal and informal ('cultural') barriers experienced by socially vulnerable groups in particular. Formal barriers include reservation lists and the requirement for regularity and procedures in child care. Informal ('cultural') barriers also play a part – for example, the way in which it is publicised, language and staffing. As a result of these barriers, families from ethnic minorities and underprivileged families often perceive child care as being "something that isn't for us".

Some early childcare provisions found that they were barely fulfilling their social role, and that they were insufficiently receptive to relationships with the neighbourhood. They have reviewed their policy of their own accord. For many years Kind en Gezin has been subsidising projects in a few cities specifically aimed at vulnerable groups. Not long ago, in 2004, 12 child care projects developed out of a Community and Neighbourhood Service (*Buurt-en nabijheidsdienst*) were included in an experiment which Kind en Gezin is subsidising. These projects are specifically intended to have an impact on

2



**PLENARY SESSION**

**A European Seminar on Respect for Diversity, Equity and social Inclusion**

children who, for various reasons, cannot (yet) be helped by mainstream child care. In order to reduce the informal barriers for the target group, half the staff comes from at-risk groups themselves, and the working method very explicitly involves the participation of parents, children and the community. In future, Kind en Gezin hopes to find ways of extending this impact across child care in Flanders as a whole. Close cooperation is therefore desirable between these projects and other child care provisions, including with regard to admission policy.

## **2. The Flemish government's objectives in the field of child care**

In the next few years, the Flemish government aims to organise child care in Flanders in such a way that:

- parents and children can rely on all child care being safe and responsible – all child care must fulfil the same clear conditions;
- child care fulfils the three societal functions in response to local child care needs and requirements – available within a reasonable distance, affordable and accessible to all families;
- child care provisions work together at local and regional level to achieve these aims as well as possible with the resources available. The bringing together and coordination of their resources and know-how will result in child care that is efficiently organised at local or regional level.

Child care offers a child-rearing environment that complements the family and is therefore open to all families, all children and all parents. Child care helps to ensure that all children are given the same optimum opportunities (for development) in the absolutely crucial initial phase of their lives. Child care must take account of the diversity that exists among families and their children and the different child care needs that exist.

Child care has an *economic function*, since it enables parents to participate in employment, but also because child care constitutes an important precondition for bringing those with less education into the labour market.

Child care has an *educational function* as a site of social education, where children learn to respect the great diversity in ethnic origins, religion, family composition, sexual preferences and physical capacities. Child care's educational function also ensues from the fact that it complements parental education and from the support it provides for education.

Child care has a *social function* in the contribution it makes to a just community via social integration, and to combating exclusion mechanisms. Among other things, it involves eliminating the Mattheus effect<sup>1</sup> from child care, making it possible for families from at-risk groups to play an active part in child care, and providing a neighbourhood-oriented (networking) impact.

Child care does not take place in isolation, it is not an island within a neighbourhood, a community or a region. Child care needs to be rooted in a local and regional community and to be aware of the situation, needs and requirements of the parents and children who live and work there.

---

<sup>1</sup> Mattheus effect: on the basis of socio-economic and socio-cultural differences, higher social categories play a relatively greater part in the use of social facilities available (e.g. child care), thereby taking a greater share of official social spending, and also obtaining more benefit from it than the lower social categories. As a result, the gap between higher and lower social categories increases.



**PLENARY SESSION**

**A European Seminar on Respect for Diversity, Equity and social Inclusion**

Thus for the first time the three societal functions of child care are being explicitly recognised at policy level and the fact that they are of equal value is being confirmed. The research of VBJK and the doctorate work of Michel Vandebroek on 150 years of children, parents and child care in Flanders have definitely played a major part in this.

### **3. How are we now aiming actually to achieve these objectives?**

If we are to achieve the objectives set, the legislation needs to be streamlined. The basis will have to be established in a child care decree that lays down the main lines for the modernised child care landscape, firmly rooting the three societal functions of child care.

The Flemish government will employ its legislative tools and resources in such a way that child care can develop into groups of authorised child care provisions that:

- work together as widely as possible in structural terms at local or regional level;
- jointly fulfil *the three societal functions*, particularly the social function;
- attune their joint impact to local social policy on child care, in response to actual local needs;
- also develop and implement a joint social and educational local child care project in dialogue with the local authorities and the Local Child Care Consultative Forum, with actual and potential users, and any other relevant *local social players*;
- jointly develop *multifunctional child care provision* that is highly accessible, including to at-risk groups, and which accommodates local child care needs.

These groups of provisions will give shape to what the Flemish government is aiming to achieve with child care. Their societal relevance justifies government investment and support. For cooperation of this kind, the Flemish government is creating the term *Centrum voor Kinderopvang(CKO)*, Centre for Child Care.

#### *Multifunctional provision – what?*

The integrated impact of a Centre for Child Care (CKO) must allow a response to a wide range of child care requirements. A Centre will always be expected to ensure basic provision and supplementary provision in accordance with local needs.

- Basic provision is understood as comprising both preschool and out-of-school care, in the form of group child care and family child care throughout the day, and for a minimum number of days a year. Within this basic provision, a Centre must also always offer a possibility for caring for children with specific medical, social or educational needs and for fulfilling requests for occasional child care that are urgent for social reasons.
- The supplementary provision responds to the specific local needs of parents and children, as determined in the local child care policy plan and/or in dialogue with those involved in child care at local level. It may involve child care with extended opening times (early and late, night child care, weekend and holiday child care), child care for sick children, child care at home, child care organised on the basis of initiatives with a social and/or educational aim (e.g. language lessons), the establishment of a meeting place for and offering of child-rearing support to parents of children in child care, etc.

#### *Accessible child care in practice – how?*

In order to be able to realise the three societal functions of child care, and particularly the social function, it is crucial to guarantee accessible child care. A Centre for Child Care fulfils this in various ways.

- *Achieving access for groups that are currently underrepresented in child care*



Child care must be available to *all* families. In order to prevent exclusion, the Centre ensures an admission policy such that the group of children cared for accurately reflects local/regional society. In addition to caring for children whose parents are working or undergoing training, a Centre also always provides priority access for children from one parent families and the families with the lowest incomes, and for children who, for social and/or educational reasons, are cared for and supervised outside their own families during the day. The Flemish government is creating possibilities by means of which a CKO can offer the best possible response to child care requests from families from at-risk groups.

→ *An affordable parental contribution*

A CKO offers as much child care as possible at a cost that accords with the family's financial resources. The Flemish government is aiming to apply a similar rule on parental contributions as widely as possible to all child care within a CKO.

→ *Parents can have all their child care requests dealt with in the same place*

The CKO has a central system for recording and dispatching child care requests and answering them as efficiently as possible. Parents need to make their child care requests in one place only in order to receive maximum further assistance, and to obtain access to all the child care possibilities within a CKO. This system must also be able to provide a response to occasional and urgent child care requests. To ensure that it can offer parents maximum further assistance, a CKO also develops contacts with other Centres for Child Care and other local social facilities. The CKO agrees with the local authorities how it should make up-to-date information on child care possibilities actively available for parents.

*Coordination with other local players*

In the first instance, Minister Vervotte's proposal sets out to offer cooperation between child care facilities. It indicates that in the process of change, a link will also be established at local level with other sectors of relevance to families.

→ *Preventive health care*

At local level, a CKO can aim at cooperating with facilities providing child-rearing support. This may be done by creating referral paths, working together in specific situations, and training employees in vision and know-how in respect of child-rearing support. Cooperative child care within a CKO has more scope for organising itself to this end and interacting with facilities providing child-rearing support.

→ *Education*

Today some child care facilities are already working closely with local schools. This trend can be further intensified as part of the CKO story. It can go beyond coordination and arrangements for organising out-of-school care. Other possibilities include specific arrangements and cooperation in respect of children in the transition period between day care and starting school.

→ *Youth work*

Today out-of-school care is already working with local youth work initiatives. Although they are not the same thing, it is very sensible for local child care and youth work to be coordinated for the benefit of children and their families, or in response to local child care needs. It is advisable for CKOs to enter into such coordination and cooperation.

→ *Community work*

Coordination and cooperation between a CKO and community work is advisable for families with young children, so that child care can play a specific part in strengthening the social fabric and improving social integration in the community.



In this presentation, I have offered a brief overview of the current situation in Flanders and the proposal of the Flemish Minister Inge Vervotte for reorganisation of child care in Flanders from the perspective of accessibility and social inclusion.

The Minister is currently in discussion with representatives of the child care sector on how the modernisation objectives can go on to take concrete shape.

In the next phase, pilot projects will show how the general principles can be put into practice.

Kind en Gezin will be working with its partner VBJK to develop tools to help child care provisions to achieve accessible child care and to respond to a variety of familial needs. Meanwhile, we take inspiration from examples of good practice from other countries and, in particular, from within the DECET Network.

### **References:**

Keersmaekers G. (2004). Kinderopvangbeleid in Vlaanderen: groei en ontwikkeling in Vandenbroeck M. (red.) *Pedagogisch management in de kinderopvang*, pp.37-50. Amsterdam: SPW.

Kind en Gezin (2005). Kind in Vlaanderen 2004. Brussel: Kind en Gezin.

Also available in English: [http://www.kindengezin.be/KG/English\\_pages/default.jsp](http://www.kindengezin.be/KG/English_pages/default.jsp)

Kind en Gezin(2005). Een conceptueel kader voor de stroomlijning van een nieuwe organisatie van de Vlaamse kinderopvang, Basistekst. Brussel: Kind en Gezin.

Storms B.(1995). Het mattheüeffect in de kinderopvang. Antwerpen: Centrum voor Sociaal Beleid/Universiteit Antwerpen.

Vandenbroeck M. (2004). In verzekerde bewaring, 150 jaar kinderen, ouders en kinderopvang. Amsterdam : SPW.



## Enclosure

	<u>2002</u>	<u>2004</u>		
	Regular use	Regular use	Limited use	No use
Ethnic minority children	19.6	<b>23.7</b>	<b>6.7</b>	<b>69.5</b>
Children in underprivileged families of wich	18.8	<b>21.7</b>	<b>5.9</b>	<b>72.4</b>
Children in underprivileged Belgian families	26.8	<b>29.7</b>	<b>3.4</b>	<b>66.9</b>
Children in underprivileged ethnic minority families	8.1	<b>12.7</b>	<b>7.9</b>	<b>79.4</b>
Children with a single parent	NA	<b>48.0</b>	<b>11.4</b>	<b>40.6</b>
All Children	52.2	<b>55.7</b>	<b>10.1</b>	<b>34.2</b>

Ethnic minority children, children in unprivileged families and children with a single parent: use of childcare for children aged 3 months and 3 years in the Region of Flanders-2002 and 2004 (percentages)

*Regular use =for at least one continuous period of 5 hours per week*

Sources: Child and Family-Surveys on the use of childcare for children aged under 3

