



EMBRACE

Fostering inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities in early childhood education and care

Mapping the Terrain – Country Report Belgium



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1. Introduction

Belgium is a federal and multilingual country comprising of the Flemish, Walloon, and Brussels Capital Regions and the Flemish, French, and German-speaking language Communities. For the scope of this report, we will consider the two largest communities, the Flemish and French speaking in Flanders, Walloon, and Brussels Capital Regions.

Education has been a community matter in Belgium since the 1988 constitutional reform, therefore, each Region and language Community has its own early childhood education and care (ECEC) system. Federal authorities are only responsible for staff pensions, laying down compulsory school attendance, and determining the minimum requirements to obtain a diploma.

In Belgium ECEC is regulated as a split-sector system, with the childcare sector responsible for children under 2½ years of age and the education sector for children from 2½ to 6 years old. Places in pre-primary setting are free for children from 2½ to 6; according to Eurostat (Eurostat, 2017)¹, nearly all children (98,7% in 2020) aged 4 to 6 years attend kindergartens in Belgium and the participation rate of under 3-year olds increased from 7% in 2005 to over 50% in 2015 (Peeters et al, 2017 p. 7).

In Flanders, pre-primary education for children aged 0-2½ is administered by the agency Kind en Gezin,² under the Ministry for Welfare, Families and Equal Opportunities. The Flemish Ministry of Education is responsible for childcare provision for children 2½ to 6 years. In 2014, the Flemish Parliament Act on Childcare for Babies and Toddlers set standards including quality monitoring, license, and staff qualification on childcare. Other rules aiming to improve the quality of ECEC were introduced such as a fixed maximum ratio of children/childcare worker, and a maximum of 18 children in any setting. A staff member is responsible for a maximum of eight children with higher ratios if several staff members are present (1:9), or during rest/nap times (1:14) (Peeters et al, 2017, p.9).

In Wallonia, childcare for children below the age of 2½ years is under the responsibility of the Birth and Childhood Office (ONE)³, and pre-primary institutions for children aged 2½ to 6 years come under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education. To provide care for 0-6 year-old children, childcare facilities must have authorisation from the ONE, which is also responsible for subsidising, supporting, and monitoring childcare facilities, providing information to parents, and helping to

¹ Eurostat, pupils from age 4 to the starting age of compulsory education at primary level, by sex - as % of the population of the corresponding age group,

https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/educ_uoe_enra10/default/table?lang=en

² <https://www.kindengezin.be/fr/enfance-et-famille>

³ <https://www.one.be/public/>

create new childcare places. According to ONE's standards, at least one staff member is responsible for six to seven children (Peeters et al, 2017, p.10).

Belgium has a history of segregated education and special schools operate in all three Communities. Since 2009 and the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, efforts increased to support inclusion of all children including children with special educational needs and disabilities in regular ECEC provision.

In the Flemish Community, in regular ECEC settings extra staff hours are funded for children who need additional support. Each setting can decide how these hours will be used (individual support, coaching staff, etc.). Most early intervention services support the transition to inclusive mainstreams education, however the widespread nature of special schools means that these efforts are not always obvious. Special education settings are open to children over 2½ years old with a specific certificate. The transition of children from early intervention to mainstream kindergartens is rather successful for children with sensory, physical, or motor disability, but for children with a severe form of autism or intellectual disabilities challenges remain.

In 2019, the Vallonia early childhood care reform "Grandir Ensemble" was approved to support and increase the quality and accessibility of childcare settings in the interest of children and families⁴. Children with special educational needs in regular ECEC settings can be granted support by specialised staff. Also, some special education settings provide for children with physical disabilities.

⁴ <https://www.one.be/professionnel/milieus-daccueil/accueil-en-transition/>

2. Findings from the desk research

Preschools in Belgium enjoy a high degree of autonomy, which allows each one of them to develop its own educational policies, as well as to appoint its own staff. The qualification level of the childcare worker in Belgium is low in comparison with other European countries, with the indication of having at least one educator with a bachelor's degree for each group of babies and toddlers (Peeters et al, 2017).

Since ECEC system is divided between childcare and education sectors, professionals have different qualifications, working conditions, regulations, and opportunities for professional development.⁵ Core practitioners in pre-primary education predominantly have a bachelor's degree and core practitioners in childcare settings have a vocational qualification. Holders of the degree will mostly work in management positions, but not necessarily. In pre-primary education a growing number of Childcare Workers now work as an Auxiliary Worker (Teacher's Assistant), with limited access to professional development in comparison to teachers.⁶

In Flanders, the professional bachelor Early Childhood Education was founded according to the plans of the decree of 2014 that stipulates that in 2024 at the latest, everyone in childcare settings must have qualifications to work there. For childcare centres for children below 2½ years, a pedagogical framework was issued in 2014 by the Flemish Ministry for Health and Families, which describes in detail what is understood by pedagogical quality and how it can be achieved, it is expected that each setting can demonstrate how certain aspects of the pedagogical framework are implemented.

In Wallonia, general training recognised for childcare workers is focused on early childhood with a social or pedagogical orientation at least at upper secondary technical education level (ONE, 2020).⁷ For what concerns continuous training, the 2020 reform provides the obligation for each facility to draw up a training plan, in consultation with its staff; (co-)carers for an average of two days of in-service training per year, based on ONE continuous trainings manual (ONE, 2021).⁸

When it comes to initial and continued education for ECEC staff on topics concerning inclusive ECEC of children with intellectual disabilities, in both Wallonia and Flanders the vision is about

⁵ <https://www.vlaanderen.be/en/working-in-childcare>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ ONE, Formations initiales au 1er Janvier 2020,

https://www.one.be/fileadmin/user_upload/siteone/PRO/Milieux_accueil/Reforme/Formations-initiales-2020.pdf

⁸ https://www.one.be/fileadmin/user_upload/siteone/PRO/Brochures/Formations-continues-petite-enfance-2021-2022.pdf

including every child, and work around each one of them and their strengths and weaknesses. Thus, trainings covering childcare will include sections around inclusion and how concretely adopting an approach that values diversity in childcare, without going into the details of disability and its different forms, including intellectual disabilities. The idea is that by following closely and keeping track of how each child develops and when any issue will arise, carers and teachers will find information and support on how to address this.

In 2014, in Flanders 16 ‘Centres for Inclusive Childcare’ were designated as centres of excellence to support parents and ECEC settings and their staff with inclusion and diversity topics. The centres promote inclusive childcare, share their expertise in their region, raise parents’ and stakeholders’ awareness of inclusive childcare, support other childcare settings’ development of their inclusive childcare provision and develop a network of relevant partners. Each centre receives a subsidy to enable them to provide inclusive childcare in a proactive way and to employ an inclusion coach (1/2 full-time equivalent member of staff) to put these tasks into practice (Vandekerckhove et al, 2019).

Continuous training is foreseen and decided at the level of the single establishment based on territorial available offers, which may, or may not, cover disability as a topic. In Wallonia, the Continuing Education programme identifies fourteen areas of focus for training, and inclusion and diversity approach is one of those. It focuses on identifying the foundations and practices of an inclusive approach and how to welcome all diversities (languages, gender, disability, poverty, situations of vulnerability, etc.), and how to think about and support the reception of a child with a disability or with special needs. In this axe, trainings are proposed about “Welcoming children with disabilities in day care” (ONE 2021, p. 78), “Specific emergencies from 0 to 18 months Reception of children with special needs” (ONE 2021, p. 82).

Work with families and communities is also part of the overarching vision for both Flanders and Wallonia as a key tool for inclusion, in line with international standards. In Wallonia, childcare facilities must develop pedagogical projects that comply with the Quality Code for Childcare. Three brochures⁹ address professionals and explaining the content of the Quality Code based on three approaches: “Meeting families”, “Meeting children” and “Supporting the work of professionals”. Elements such as developing partnership and trust with parents, inclusion, partnership, and work with the community are part of these. The ONE Continuing Education programme proposes the “Mirror workshop” about fostering reflection and the building of a family wall as a tool for inclusion and work with families (ONE, 2021 p. 72).

⁹ <https://www.one.be/professionnel/brochuredetailpro/brochure/reperes-et-pratiques-daccueil-de-qualite-0-3-ans-partie-3/>

In Flanders the city of Ghent developed the ‘bridging professionals’ project in 1997 to enable stronger links between school and home life, and between schools and other support services, that expanded in time towards more than 40 bridging professionals active in around 50 schools (in 2019). According to the bridging professionals themselves, four basic and inter-related core values shape their daily work: building trust, connecting, empowering/strengthening and positive communication. They carry out home visits, they take time develop relationships of trust with parents and their children. They make parents more aware of the school culture and explain its rules and regulations (Vandekerckhove et al, 2019, p. 61).

3. Findings from the key interviews

3.1. Interview participants/Sample

Three interviews were conducted, despite the efforts to fix meetings with teachers and carers working in ECEC, it was only possible to talk to other figures: policy makers and an inclusion coach. The average age was 55, and they all had a long story of work in the fields of education and early childhood education and care and university degrees psychology, social nursing, and political science.

The professional profiles were Director of External and International Relations for the Office for Birth and Childhood in Vallonia, Commission Head of Unit School and Multilingualism of European Education and Culture Executive Agency EACEA, and inclusion coach in the city of Ghent.

For what concerns the inclusion coach it was explained that ‘Centers of Inclusive Childcare’ in Flanders are entitled to recruit an inclusion coach. This is subsidised by the agency ‘Growing Up’. The Inclusion coach is the point of contact for inclusion-related topics for all childcare initiatives for all types of care: 0-3 years old, in-family care, out-of-school care, etc. Questions might reach the inclusion coach through the in-home support service, supporting the parents in finding childcare for a child with specific support needs; or directly from the childcare facility if a child is registered but the childcare facility does not know whether they can respond to the care needs of the child. In that case the inclusion coach can support by giving advice or setting up a support trajectory.

3.2. Key findings

During the interview it was underlined that the traditional approach to education and ECEC is rather segregating and decentralised, with different levels of quality and inclusion in different areas and establishments. The ratification of the UNCRPD did impulse action, policies and practices for quality and inclusion. At present, training requirements for ECEC staff are diverse, with efforts to increase quality, with attention to the inclusion element. However, initial teacher trainings focus

more on the general values of inclusion and not on disability as such, and same goes for the additional ones. This is seen as choice, to avoid a medical approach towards disability, which is seen as one of the many forms of diversity.

In Flanders, according to the respondent, there is teaching around the vision on inclusion. However, courses do not discuss the different forms of disabilities, nor the approaches. From the respondents' perspective, focusing too much on the various disabilities, risks to divert the attention from the individuality of each child. In practice, ECEC professionals keep track of the development of each child, and address problems when necessary. It was estimated that ECEC professional in Flanders are prepared to deal with a great diversity of children and families, and that no other skills are needed than those needed to work with typically developing children. The increasing number of professionals with a bachelor's degree is seen as positive as they might have more advanced communication skills and be better at finding creative solutions.

In Flanders it was detailed that ECEC professionals try to encourage children to identify and address differences and similarities as an element to foster the collaboration between typically developing children and children with intellectual disabilities. In terms of practices, the 'Family Wall', was mentioned, a physical space where each family is represented, usually by pictures brought by the family itself. The building and using a family wall are also one of the trainings proposed by the ONE catalogue for continuous training.

In Wallonia, Inclusion is a crosscutting principle for childcare, which is open to all, and that needs to ensure proper support, including medical with medical control for every child in ECEC settings. In terms of pedagogy, methodologies must be adapted to specific needs and diversity of each child. However the diversity of profiles that can access the childcare profession makes it difficult to assess if initial trainings have inclusion and inclusion of children with disabilities in their curricula. Since inclusion of children with disabilities in ECEC and education is a political objective, ONE set up a taskforce for accessibility, in charge of reflecting about how to improve accessibility in ECEC. A reform of the management contracts (*contrat de gestion*) was mentioned, which sets the requirements to be director of a nursery. At present, being director is possible for those who have a Bachelor's in social assistance of nursing. The reform is about developing a specific training path for early childhood, including modules about disabilities. The professionals that have a bachelor's degree in social assistance and nursing, do have modules about disabilities, and in the continuous training offers there is something specifically about disability, but not as a part of a compulsory programme. It was underlined that a multi-disciplinary approach with different professionals working together is a guarantee for detecting and addressing different needs.

Continuous training in Wallonia is foreseen and it is defined by each establishment in collaboration with staff, based on the ONE catalogue. Also, the above mentioned series of tools “Benchmarks for quality childcare for quality childcare practices” provide guidance for childcare for 0 - 3 years children. *Meeting families*¹⁰ (ONE, 2009) is about providing vision and tools to professionals to working with families before welcoming children in the everyday practice and preparing them to transition to kindergartens. *Meeting children*¹¹ includes chapters on how to adapt spaces, how to give an active role to child, how to individualise the approaches and to support peer interactions (ONE, 2004).

Concerning parents’ involvement in the inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities, the respondent from Flanders mentioned she and a colleague developed a tool to focus on the trust relationship with parents (getting to know all parents, parents as partners, parental participation, etc.), which was made available to all inclusion coaches and used to connect parents with each other.

On the question about programs, practices and methodologies aiming at enhancing the collaborations of ECEC settings with community members in fostering inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities, the respondent from Flanders stressed that there are packages or tips for neighborhood-oriented working. For example the ‘Koala projects’, which are community-oriented and facilitate for parents to meet and support each other.

¹⁰ https://www.one.be/fileadmin/user_upload/siteone/PRO/Brochures/Pratiques-accueil-A-la-rencontre-des-familles.pdf

¹¹ https://www.one.be/fileadmin/user_upload/siteone/PRO/Brochures/Pratiques-accueil-A-la-rencontre-des-enfants.pdf

4. Conclusion and policy recommendations

Both the desk research and interviews confirmed that in Belgium there is a diverse and decentralised system of ECEC, where recent reforms, linked also with the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, moved the different regional systems present in the country towards developing tools for the inclusion of all children. Inclusion, valuing of diversity and the welcoming of children with disabilities in ECEC are key pillars both in the French and Dutch speaking communities. This led to reflection and action around quality, which includes higher training requirements for staff, and training tools that include diversity and disability, and practices about working with families and communities.

At present, initial training for staff can be diverse and may or may not include a focus on disability. Inclusion and diversity are at the chore of recent reforms, and the choice of continuous trainings covers diversity and disabilities, but it is up to each establishment to choose which trainings to propose to the staff, also based on existing gaps. Continuous trainings proposed by ONE do touch upon disability, inclusion, and collaboration with families. The figure of inclusion coaches in Flanders gives additional support to staff and families on how to deal with disability, and in developing and proposing trainings and materials to staff working in ECEC.

However, it seems that trainings looking into specific characteristics and needs linked with intellectual disabilities are not clearly mainstreamed in the initial and continuous trainings. This is partly due to a vision where disability is seen as one of the many possible diversities. However, giving initial and on-job tools to ECEC staff to be able to identify disabilities, know which are the key aspects of the main common ones, and methodologies to better address needs can only be positive for the quality and inclusiveness of childcare, with positive impact on the development of child relational, behavioural, and cognitive skills.

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