

Preschool education in the Netherlands

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For a long time, preschool education in the Netherlands was in fact ‘nursery school education’. Primary schools taught children the three R’s and nursery schools were a separate world, where children were looked after and played together. In 1986, nursery schools and primary schools were integrated. Since then, the term ‘primary school’ refers to educational establishments catering for children aged 4 to 12 years, while the term ‘preschool education’ refers to educational provisions for children aged under four years¹.

In this overview, we shall look at various aspects of preschool education in the Netherlands. To facilitate comparison with Russian preschool education, we shall also include the education of 4-6-year-olds, who in the Netherlands are taught in primary school grades 1-2.

Basic figures on preschool playgroups and primary schools in the Netherlands

Number of preschool playgroups: 4,250 (2001; since then, the number has increased)

Percentage of 2-3-year-old children attending a preschool playgroup: 62,5% (2006)

Number of children attending a preschool playgroup: 251,000

Average attendance: two half days per week

Average group size in preschool playgroup: 7-12

Number of primary schools: ca. 7,000

Percentage of children aged 4 years attending primary school: ca. 98%

Overall percentage of children attending primary school: 100%

Number of children attending primary school: 1.6 million

Number of children in primary grades 1-2: 400,000

Average class size in primary grades 1-2: 20

The place of preschool education in the Dutch education system

In the Netherlands, the term ‘preschool education’ refers to education for children aged from 2 to 4 years old. This type of education is particularly intended for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (i.e. children of parents with a low level of education). These children receive education in preschool playgroups. Prior to entering a preschool playgroup, some of the children have attended, with their mother, a programme preparing them for the playgroup.

¹ The Netherlands is not unique in this respect. Other countries where nursery and primary school provisions are housed under the same roof are Austria, France, Ireland and Portugal. This arrangement leads to more contacts, gives children the opportunity to visit primary school classrooms and makes it easier to align goals and methods (OECD, 2006).

As a separate provision for the 0-4 age group, there exist childcare centres, where children of working parents are looked after. These centres mainly cater for children of middle-class and upper-class parents and generally do not pursue educational goals.

When children reach the age of 4, most are enrolled at a primary school. From age 5, this is compulsory. In the first two grades of primary school, from age 4 to 6, children are taught by a nursery school curriculum, with ample opportunities for play and games, as well as activities that encourage children to learn through discovery. Also, there are prereading and premathematics activities to prepare children for formal learning in primary grade 3. In primary grade 3 (age 6), then, formal instruction in reading, writing and arithmetic starts.

Education in preschool playgroups and primary school grades 1-2 is jointly referred to as 'preschool and early school education' (Dutch acronym: VVE). For this age group, specific development stimulation programmes (VVE programmes) and educational policies have been developed.

In recent years, the term 'preschool' is increasingly used as a noun, to designate a steady cooperation between a preschool playgroup and a primary school. In some preschools, the preschool playgroup is located within the primary school. Municipal governments encourage steady cooperation in order to foster continuity in provision (see below under cooperation).

Figure 1. Educational provisions for children aged 0-12 years

	preschool education	primary education	
0 – 2.5 years	2.5 - 4 years	4 - 6 years	6 - 12 years
programmes preparing for preschool playgroups	preschool playgroups	grades 1-2 (former nursery school; no formal instruction in reading, writing and maths)	grades 3-8
	preschool and early school education (VVE)		

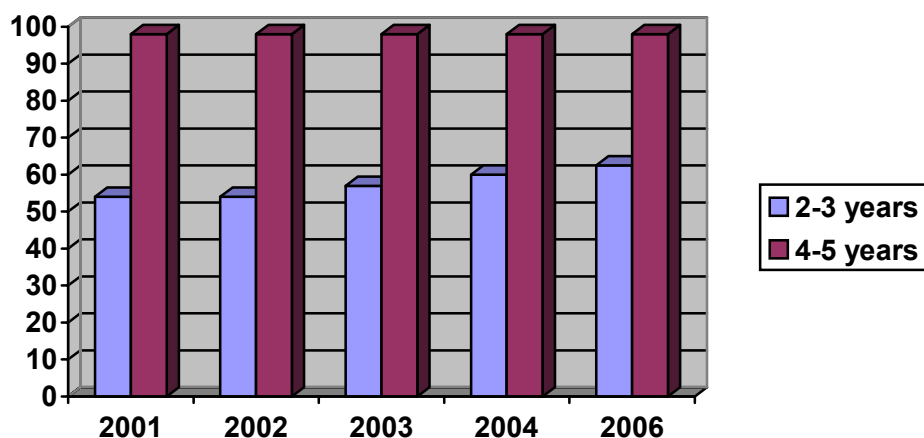
compulsory education 5-16 years

Attendance

About 62,5 percent of Dutch children aged 2.5-3 years attend an educational preschool provision. Attendance is not compulsory, but parents are increasingly aware of the benefits of preschool education for their child. Native Dutch children are more likely to attend a playgroup than children from non-Dutch origin.

At age 4, 95-98% of children enter primary school, even though compulsory education starts at age 5. From age 5, compulsory school attendance is strictly monitored by municipal attendance officers. From that age up to the end of primary school, attendance is about 100%.

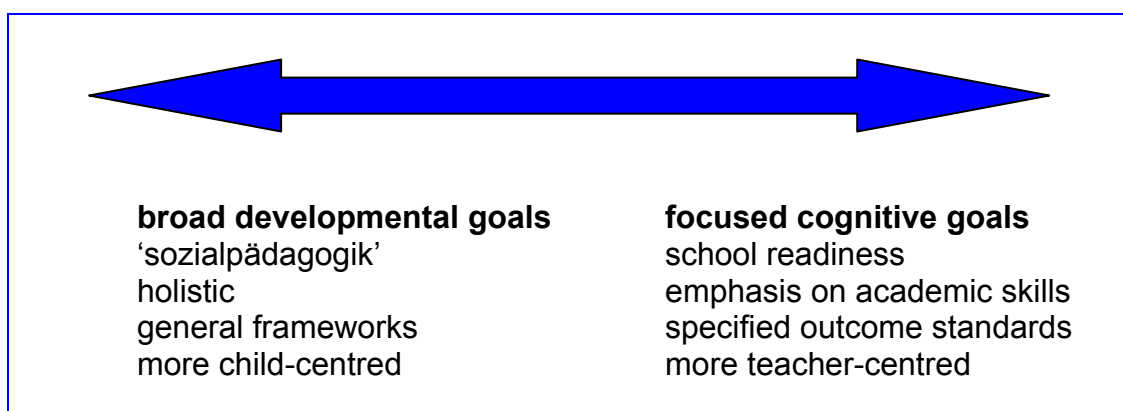
Table 1. Participation in educational provisions at ages 2-3 and 4-5 in percentages.



Educational orientation

The recently published OECD study *Starting strong II* (2006) compares the early childhood education and care (ECEC) provisions of several OECD countries. One of the conclusions of the analysis is that, in terms of the educational orientation of ECEC systems, a distinction can be made between systems that pursue broad developmental goals and systems that pursue focused cognitive goals. Some of the characteristics of the systems are presented in table 2.

Table 2: educational orientations in preschool education



On this continuum, the Netherlands is located on the right-hand side (but not at the end of it), together with France and the Anglo-Saxon countries. The picture is not exactly the same for the entire sector, however. Some programmes are more holistic or child-centred than others and several programmes claim explicitly to foster the 'overall development of children'. However, the overall picture is that in preschool playgroups and, even more so, in grades 1-2 of primary school, a prominent place is taken up by educational activities aimed at preparing children for the academic tasks

that become more and more important as the child progresses through primary school, in particular language and mathematics.

Educational goals

The aim of preschool playgroups is to offer children aged from 2.5 to 4 years opportunities for playing, for meeting other children and for development. No educational goals have been defined for playgroups at the national level. However, more and more playgroups have started to use development stimulation programmes. These programmes do have explicit educational goals, although these are generally formulated in general terms (e.g. in the domain of language: preparing for reading and writing; in the domain of cognition: sorting, classifying (group) and ordering objects; working with numbers, counting, making comparisons).

For primary school children, the Ministry of Education has defined national educational goals in the form of 58 attainment targets, to be achieved at the end of primary school. These are two examples of attainment targets for Dutch language proficiency:

- Pupils know the rules for spelling verbs, the rules for spelling other words than verbs and the rules for using punctuation marks.
- Pupils acquire an adequate vocabulary and strategies for understanding words that are unfamiliar to them. ‘Vocabulary’ also includes concepts that enable pupils to think and talk about language.

There are attainment targets for: Dutch, English, Frisian (for the province of Friesland), mathematics/arithmetic, orientation towards yourself and the world (social studies, biology, history, geography, environmental education), art, movement. It is up to the schools to decide how, from grade 1, they work towards the attainment of such targets.

The preschool curriculum

Educational establishments in the Netherlands are free to determine the content of education. This freedom is enshrined in the Constitution. This means that in the Dutch education system there exists no national curriculum for any age group. Government does have an influence on the content of education through the attainment targets it has set for several stages of the education system. For the age range from 5 to 12 years attainment targets have been defined that should be reached at the end of primary school (see above). No national attainment targets exist for the under-fives.

The freedom to determine the content of education leads to considerable diversity in the curricula used in schools and playgroups. Curricula are developed by commercial publishers and non-commercial educational institutions, in line with the attainment targets set by the government. Schools and playgroups buy the curriculum that best fits their educational philosophy.

In recent years, a number of VVE programmes (i.e. development stimulation programmes) have been developed that cover both the preschool playgroup and the early primary school years, i.e. the age range from 3 to 6 years. Development stimulation programmes include educationally oriented activities in the form of playful activities, in which children explore concepts related in particular to the

domains of literacy and numeracy. Most of the time, the tasks are related to a theme that provides an authentic context for activities over a longer period (several weeks). The tasks are incorporated in the daily programme, which also includes circle time, storybook reading, eating and drinking, physical exercise, handicraft and free play in the classroom and outside. The best known and most frequently used development stimulation programme is Pyramid, developed by the Cito National Institute for Educational Measurement.

Language development is an area of special concern, because delays in the language development of large groups of children from Dutch and non-Dutch origin appear to have a detrimental effect on these children's school careers. Inadequate language proficiency affects not only achievement in language, but also in other language-dependent subject areas, such as arithmetic, geography, technology and history, thus influencing pupils' overall school achievement. That is why in 2002 the Ministry of Education commissioned the development of a national professionalisation programme for early childhood education workers, focused on fostering children's language development. This has resulted in the Language Route, an approach aimed at improving the interaction skills of playgroup leaders and primary school teachers.

Funding

For preschool playgroups, funding arrangements differ between subsidised and non-subsidised playgroups. The funding of subsidised playgroups generally consists for about 40% of structural subsidy from the municipality's welfare budget, 40% parental contributions, 15% special project subsidies and 5% from various sources, such as interest, foundations, and profit-generating activities. Data on the funding of non-subsidised (privately run) playgroups are harder to come by. However, it is estimated that their funding consists for about 95% of parental contributions and about 5% of other sources. In most municipalities, the contribution parents pay for their child to attend a playgroup depends on the parents' income level. For two half days per week, parents with a low level of income pay a monthly contribution ranging from € 10 to € 30. Parents with a high income pay up to € 70 per month.

Primary schools are funded by the State, through the Ministry of Education. Privately-run schools (e.g. Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Hindi and Montessori schools, set up by parents) and publicly-run schools (set up by local governments) are funded on the same footing. The law allows schools to ask parents for a voluntary parental contribution. In most schools this amount is 100 to 150 € per year, but it may be considerably higher (reportedly up to € 7,000). Parents who are unable or unwilling to pay the contribution may not be forced to pay and the school may not refuse to admit their child on that ground.

Staff training and qualification

There is no specific training course leading to a qualification for preschool playgroup worker. The majority of playgroup leaders have a further education qualification in social work. The training curriculum for such courses includes: methodical, social and organisational skills, as well as optional specialisations such as working with handicapped people or young children. Student who complete this course may find employment as playgroup leader, child care worker, classroom assistant or aide for

the handicapped. In addition to the playgroup leaders, many playgroup organisations also employ assistant leaders (28% of the playgroup organisations) and/or volunteers (75%).

Primary school teachers are trained at higher education level in Primary Teacher Training Colleges. All teachers are trained and qualified to teach the entire age range from 4 to 12 years. In the training programme, explicit attention is given to teaching young children. In accordance with the Education Staff Qualification Requirements Decree (2005), the primary teacher training focuses on the development of teacher competencies: interpersonal competencies, pedagogical competencies, subject-related and didactic competencies, organisational competencies, cooperative competencies (cooperation with colleagues and cooperation with parents and other stakeholders outside school), and competencies related to professional reflection and development. Content knowledge of curriculum subjects (e.g. children's literature, grammar, language tasks, spelling, mathematics) and of cross-curricular topics (e.g. ICT, child development and learning, designing educational activities, child rearing, personality development, society today, communication) is incorporated in the development of teacher competencies.

Cooperation between preschool playgroups and primary schools

Cooperation between preschool playgroups with primary schools is considered important, because alignment of methods and curricula over this age period is considered conditional for effective learning. Also, cooperation can make it easier for children to transfer from the playgroup to the primary school, for example, if children are given the opportunity to visit the primary school and meet the teachers while they are still in the preschool playgroup.

An increasing number of primary schools are now cooperating closely with a preschool playgroup. This occurs particularly in the inner-city areas, where there are concentrations of disadvantaged children. The cooperation takes place in various domains: the playgroup agrees to send its children to the primary school when they reach the age of 4 (although the parents have the final say in this); the primary school (grades 1-2) and the playgroups use the same VVE-programme; and the playgroup staff and primary teachers follow the same in-service training courses in order to align their didactic methods. Cooperation of this kind is actively encouraged by municipal governments.

When the playgroup and the primary school are housed in the same building, as is the case in the growing number of community schools, contacts between playgroup staff and primary teachers are more frequent, which makes it easier to align programmes and methods and to exchange information about children.

Cooperation with other agencies

For preschool playgroups, an important partner outside the domain of education is the local youth health care centre (JGZ). Mothers of children aged 0-4 years visit the centre for regular checkups of their child. If the staff of the centre judge that the child will benefit from participation in a preschool provision, they inform the parents about

the possibilities to enrol their child in such a provision. Thus, many playgroups receive children through referrals from the municipal youth health care agency. Other important partners for playgroups are the local welfare organisations. Many of these offer programmes for disadvantaged families preparing the parent and the child for participation in a preschool playgroup. This is particularly important for parents who are hard to reach through the 'regular' channels. Such programmes may involve home visits, meetings with other parents and children, information meetings and the like. In order to lower the threshold for participation, parents are often recruited by a person from their own ethnic background.

In many municipalities, cooperation between playgroup organisations and other agencies working with young children is organised in local "0-6 years" networks.

For primary schools, important partners are:

- Welfare agencies: school social work, after-school childcare provision, after-school activities in schools and community centres
- The municipal youth health care agency: medical checkups, school psychologist
- Cultural organisations: cultural projects, after-school activities
- School advisory services: in-service training courses for teachers, introduction of new teaching methods and programmes, setting up pupil monitoring systems etc.
- The library: library use, reading promotion projects, language stimulation programmes, information meetings for parents, support for school libraries.

In recent years, the number of community schools, in which all these, or some of these, provisions are housed under the same roof, has been steadily increasing. It is estimated that by 2010, there will be about 1,000 community schools.

Administrative responsibility

At the national level, preschool playgroups fall under the responsibility of the Ministry of Welfare and Social Affairs. The Welfare Act (1994) has placed the local responsibility for playgroups in the hands of municipal authorities. At the institutional level, playgroups may be run by an independent foundation (this is the case for 60% of playgroups), a local welfare agency (25%) or childcare organisation. Inspection of the quality of playgroup work has generally been delegated by the municipal authorities to the local youth health care agency (JGZ). Quality requirements are related to: arrangement of buildings and playgrounds, hygiene, safety, group size, staff-child ratio, parent participation, pedagogical policy and educational qualifications required of staff.

Primary schools fall under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education, in as far as funding and quality control is concerned. Apart from that, schools enjoy a great amount of freedom in the running of the school and the organisation of education. This is true both of publicly-run and privately-run schools. School management teams are responsible for the daily running of the school. School boards, which often govern more than one school, are responsible for hiring staff and developing (in consultation with the head teachers) school policies. Parents may influence decisions of management teams and school boards through the parent participation council (see also below).

Parent participation

The Care Institutes Client Participation Act (1996) requires preschool playgroup providers to set up a client (i.e. parent) participation council that has advisory powers. The council has the right to advise the playgroup provider, to consult the provider and to be informed by the provider. This council, then, gives parents some influence on important management and policy decisions. In everyday practice, active parent participation is often limited. Most children attend two half days per week and contacts with parents are often limited to the moments parents bring or collect their child. In playgroups that use a developmental stimulation programme parent participation is more extensive. These programmes usually contain a parent participation component, consisting for instance of information meetings, parent visits in the group, or materials for parents to take home and work with together with their child. Some playgroups inform parents about their child's development through notebooks or portfolios in which they write about activities in which the child has participated or in which they collect things that the child has made in the playgroup. Playgroup staff are paid only for the hours in which they are with the children. This may partly explain why staff are sometimes reluctant to invest time in contacts with parents outside the hours in the group.

In primary schools, a distinction should be made between the formal participation of parents, based on legal rights, and informal participation, initiated by the school itself. The most important formal rights of parents are listed below.

- The right to found a school: This right is included in the Constitution. Many schools in the Netherlands have been founded by organisations of parents. These privately-run schools, provided they meet specific criteria of quality, are funded by the government on the same basis as publicly-run schools.
- The right to choose a school: Parents are in principle free to choose a school for their child. In practice, most parents choose a school that is near to their home, although there is a tendency for white parents to shun schools with a large concentration of minority pupils.
- The right to participate in decision-making: Primary schools are legally required to set up a participation council, comprising equal numbers of elected staff and parent representatives. The council has some general powers and has the right to give its advice or consent and to put forward proposals.
- The right to be informed about what schools do: Primary schools are required to publish a school prospectus to inform parents about: the school's educational aims and methods, monitoring of progress, information provision to parents, regulations concerning absenteeism, the timetable, special needs provision, pupils' performance, complaints procedure.
- The right to file a complaint: Primary schools are required to set up a committee where parents can file a complaint about behaviours and decisions of administrators or teaching staff. Schools are required to inform parents about the existence of the committee and the way it works.

Informal parent participation takes many different forms, such as parent information evenings, school-parent contracts, courses for parents, coffee mornings, classroom assistance, library assistance, help in school excursions, or a parent room (a room in the school where parents can meet each other and the teachers informally). Few schools have an explicit, targeted policy with regard to parent participation.

Preschool education policy

Policy interest in preschool education has been growing since the end of the 1980s. At that time, primary had been confronted with an influx of immigrant children. Many of these children were at risk of school failure as a consequence of language, social and economic disadvantages. In 1992, a committee of education experts (the Van Kemenade Committee, so named after its chairman) drew the attention to the importance of preschool education in an advisory report to the government on educational policy towards immigrant children. Another committee was appointed (the Meijnen Committee) to make proposals for setting up preschool education provisions. On the basis of national and international research findings, the Meijen committee found that, in order to be effective, preschool programmes should meet conditions regarding:

- intensity of attendance (at least 4 half days a week)
- duration of the intervention (at least two years)
- starting age (2 or 3 years, in any case one year before starting primary school)
- staff/child ratio (preferably 1:8)
- parental involvement

In addition, the committee formulated the following pedagogic-didactic conditions:

- groups stability
- active learning, individual attention, relevant content (for children)
- observation and testing, phased programme.

The committee advised the government to test and evaluate a small number of programmes that met these criteria and that covered both the preschool playgroups years (ages 2-3) and primary school grades 1-2. Two programmes were selected: Pyramid and Kaleidoscoop (based on the American High-Scope programme). Between 1995 and 1999 these programmes were subjected to an extensive experimental study in preschool playgroups and primary school grades 1-2. The evaluation of the experiments showed the following results:

- There were effects on children's cognitive and language development.
- The effects were stronger among the children who had attended all four years.
- The effects were significant, but modest, except for a strong effect of Pyramid on children's cognitive development.
- The experiments show the importance of education in the early years (age 2-3) for the effectiveness of VVE-programmes.

Following up on these findings, the Ministry of Education in 2000 made substantial budgets available to municipal authorities to organise VVE programmes at the local level under the following specific conditions:

- The programmes should be suitable for 2-year-olds and should extend into primary school grade 2.
- The programmes should use should be a structured didactic approach.
- Intensive guidance should be available for the children.
- The programmes should be delivered by qualified staff, in a preschool institution or a primary school.

In 2002, the Ministry of Education specified in a national policy framework that, by 2006, municipalities should reach 50% of the target group with a VVE programme.

In 2006, nearly all municipalities with target groups have developed a VVE policy and have implemented VVE programmes, although these do not always meet the quality criteria included in the first regulations. Pyramid appear to be the most frequently used programme, but there are many municipalities that use locally developed programmes.

As a result of a recent change in policy, local governments are no longer responsible for the policies to combat educational disadvantages. Municipal authorities still do have the responsibility for the education of children up to 4 years, but budgets to combat disadvantage among primary school children have been moved to the school boards. In other words, the government has made a cut between the responsibilities for preschool and early school education for disadvantaged children. This change has made it more difficult for municipal governments to pursue coherent compensatory policies (of which VVE policies constitute the essence) for the 3-6 age group. Nonetheless, the government expects municipalities to increase the participation rate of target groups in VVE programme to 70% by 2010.

Current concerns

Inefficiency of the system

Provisions for children under six years of age are fragmented. There are educational provisions in the form of preschool playgroups. These are mainly intended for, and used by, disadvantaged children. At the national level, they fall under the responsibility of the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport (VWS); at the local level under the municipal government. In addition to the playgroups, there are childcare centres, without an educational objective, mainly used by children of middle-class and upper class parents. At the national level, these fall under the Ministry of Social Affairs, and Employment. At the local level, they are administered by independent, private organisations. Finally, there are primary schools for all children from age 4. At the national level, these fall under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science; at the local level, they are administered by the school boards. Such a fragmented system makes it difficult to align policies and educational practices. Also, according to many, the divided system for under-fours (playgroups vs. childcare centres) fosters social division and hinders contacts between children from diverse backgrounds. Recently, several proposals have been made for the integration of preschool provisions into Child Centres (inspired by Scandinavian models) catering for all children up to four years. Policy makers gradually seem to be warming up to this idea.

Participation rates of target groups

Municipalities appear to be fairly successful in reaching the VVE target groups. However, there are still many young disadvantaged children who do not participate in any kind of preschool provision. The ones that have not yet been reached may well be the most difficult to reach. At the local level, increasing efforts are being made to set up cooperative strategies whereby parents are referred to preparatory preschool activities and projects by the municipal youth health care agency. But parents need not necessarily heed the advice of the agency. Some municipalities have set up an elaborate system of referral which ensures that children are closely followed by a chain of educational, social and care provisions available for the entire 0-4 age range,

so that an agency can act pro-actively if a parent does not respond to an advice by an agency earlier in the chain.

Quality of preschool education

The quality of preschool education may be hindered by practical obstacles (e.g. high staff turnover, financial limitations), as well as by an inadequate level of professionalism. The latter is a risk in particular among playgroup staff, who have not always received a specialised training in working effectively with young children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The in-service training programmes that are part of the VVE programmes are intended to counter this risk. Also, the government has recently made budget available for the development of a general in-service training course for playgroup staff and grade 1-2 primary school teachers. These training courses will start in the spring of 2007.

Concern for continuity

As a consequence of the freedom educational establishments have to choose their own curricula, preschool playgroups and primary schools do not always use the same VVE programme. In consequence, it may happen that a child follows one programme (or no programme) in a playgroup and another (or none at all) in a primary school. This risk is not imaginary, because parents are free to choose the primary school for their child. It is attempted to solve this problem by encouraging close one-to-one cooperation between schools and playgroups and, in some cases, by requiring parents to sign an agreement when their child enters a playgroup, whereby they promise to enrol their child at the school with which the playgroup cooperates.

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