

# Early Childhood Education in Three Countries

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(This article examines early childhood education in Belgium, the Netherlands and Sweden. Part I comprises an introduction by Dr. Gilbert R. Austin, with Dr. Anthon de Vries describing the Netherlands scene and Ms. Anne-Marie Thirion the Belgian. In Part II to be published in Vol. 8, 2, Dr. Karl-Gustaf Stukát will describe the situation in Sweden, with conclusions by Dr. Austin. Summaries in French and Spanish will also appear in Part II.)

(Este artículo examina el estado en que se encuentra la educación de la primera infancia en Bélgica, Holanda y Suecia. La parte I consta de una introducción por el Dr. Gilbert R. Austin, así como con una descripción del panorama holandés a cargo del Dr. Anthon de Vries y otra del belga por Ms. Anne-Marie Thirion. En la parte II, que se publicará en el Vol. 8, 2, el Dr. Karl-Gustav Stukat describirá la situación en Suecia, con conclusiones extraídas por el Dr. Austin. Los resúmenes en francés y español se publicarán también en la parte II.)

(Cet article a pour sujet: l'éducation dans la petite enfance en Belgique, aux Pays-Bas et en Suède. La première partie est consacrée à une introduction du Dr. Gilbert R. Austin et à la description de la situation aux Pays-Bas par le Dr. Anthon de Vries et en Belgique par Mlle Anne-Marie Thirion. La deuxième partie sera publiée dans le Vol. 8, 2. Le Dr. Karl-Gustaf Stukát y décrit la situation en Suède, et le Dr. Austin y tire les conclusions. Des résumés en Français et en Espagnol figureront à la suite de cette deuxième partie.)

One of the most important emerging problems in the Netherlands, Belgium and Sweden is the changing social role of the home and family. This is reflected in the diminishing size of the average household, and in a marked reduction in gross reproduction rates in the last five to ten years, attributable in part to the application of new knowledge of birth control. Another important trend in the changing social structure of the home and family is the changing role of women. In all developed countries of the world women are seeking greater personal freedom and greater equality with men. The job of being a wife, mother and home-maker is not sufficiently interesting for most modern women. The change in women's perception of their place in society can also be traced to the results of education which encourages women to seek fulfillment of their lives through varied activities such as social work, advanced education and employment outside the home.

The marked increases in enrolment in pre-school education reflect these social changes. At first glance, it seems that smaller family size would cause a decreased demand for pre-school education. This does not seem to be true. Rather, it appears that a mother with only one or two children recognizes that by providing outside care for those

children she will be free to seek her personal fulfillment in other ways. If a mother has five or six children, care for one or two of them in a pre-school or day-care centre is not much of a motivator because of the large number still at home. In the same vein, the reduction in the number of children in a family is a strong motivating force for seeking outside child care. In one-child families, the social isolation of that child is viewed as a potentially troublesome problem. Therefore, since children are by their nature desirous of playing with other children and parents are desirous of having them do so, it is easy to see why families seek greater provision of child care and education.

A most important fact that emerges in this look at these countries is the different historical perspective by which early childhood education has evolved. Among the common characteristics the countries share is their vision of health and welfare functions. Today, we find in all three countries increasing concern about the educational aspects of young children's care. It is important to note here that the provision of near adequate health and welfare aspects of child care in these three countries took over 50 years to establish and cement in place. We have been seriously trying to make progress in the educational sphere of pre-school for non-middle-class children for only ten to fifteen years. Therefore, it may be much too early to expect significant results.

An area emerging in the pre-school education field as particularly important is stress on early detection and prevention

of problems. This idea comes from the health and welfare background in which it emerged as the best way to provide good health care for children. It is now being adapted to the educational aspects of early childhood education.

Another area receiving emphasis is language development, especially planned provision to foster pre-reading skills and pre-numeral skills. These areas of growing major concentration are interesting to consider because traditionally they were not areas of high concern in nursery school curricula.

Much research in these countries increasingly is acknowledging the great importance of the parental role in aiding the early cognitive growth of their children. All three countries are attempting to integrate school planning with parent planning.

The countries chosen here display a considerable range in the area of pupil teacher ratio and offer various reasons for this. It is important to note that the facts and figures provided are concerned with the pupil teacher ratio and the adult pupil ratio. These are very different figures since a most recent occurrence in the area of pre-school programs is the incorporation of large numbers of "para-professionals" or aides into the school system to assist the professional school teacher. The number of children assigned to a professional teacher is also reflected very much in differences in program costs, which are substantial across these countries.