

# The Netherlands

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The Netherlands have a well developed kindergarten system for children between four and six years of age. In 1957 the kindergarten came under the legal and financial control of the government; since that time almost all children of pre-school age attend a kindergarten (in towns 100 percent, in the country 90 percent).

In the 19th century "matressen-schools" were the places working-class mothers brought their young children to be kept during the day. Over-crowded places, officially under the supervision of the elementary school inspection, but in reality without any supervision, "they were kept by old women or store-keepers". Physicians in the public health system were the first to discover and change the circumstances of these schools. In the second half of the 19th century psycho-hygienic considerations were the main philosophical ground behind the vast development of the kindergarten system.

In the first half of the 20th century the development of 'keeping-schools', Fröbel and Montessori schools for pre-school children, provided the opportunity for many children to attend kindergarten. Since 1960, a demand has been growing for places for young children. This time the demand is coming from middle-class mothers who wish to work to raise the family income. Based on this demand there is a proposal to allow children to attend kindergarten from their third birthday.

Accompanying the growth of kindergarten is the mushrooming growth of day-care for

middle-class children from two to four years of age. A recent development is the demand for nursery schools for lower class children from one to four years of age. These day-care centres, often financed by the community, have psycho-hygienic aims and are mostly well equipped with one staff member per eight children. Children attend these centres in general not because their mothers go out working, but because of a social indication, which says that the parents are not supposed to be good educators. The number of these special nursery schools is rather low in the Netherlands.

## *Prevailing conception of the child*

The leading child psychologist since 1930 in the Netherlands is Langeveld. His influence on the general conception of child upbringing and developmental psychology in the Netherlands has been, and still is, very strong. His philosophy gave full credit to the family as an educational institution and to the strong effects of environmental variables and teaching on the development of the child. Pedagogics (philosophy of education) is in his terms practical-normative-anthropology of the child, which refers to an integrated study of child development. As education is not possible without standards and aims, a careful study of values, standards and aims of a community and single families is as necessary as a well developed system of anthropological knowledge of the child. Consequences of Langeveld's demands

were: a lively interest in the teacher-training colleges for clinical child studies and reflective studies on standards and aims of the community. His view was not contrary to the division in the Dutch educational world between Protestant, Roman Catholic, Non-Religious and Humanistic schools.

His plea for acceptance of differences in views of life and standards as long as they do not interfere with the ultimate goal of child upbringing in our western society (adulthood as a critical moral independency) resulted in a general acceptance of his philosophy of education; so that his influence was and is to be found in all the training colleges of teachers all over the country.

The prevailing conception of early childhood education is that the child should have much freedom but that the adults at the same time are responsible for the education and cultivation of the child.

#### *Organisational patterns of early childhood education*

Statistics on kindergartens in the Netherlands provide us with the following data for 6,379 kindergartens all over the country, divided as follows: 1,607 non-religious, 1,946 Protestant, 2,281 Roman Catholic and 545 schools of other signature. 491,732 children attended kindergartens and 15,954 teachers were working in the schools in 1971, which means a ratio of one teacher per 31 children. The maximum ratio per teacher is 39 children. A child enters the kindergarten in the month following his fourth birthday.

The Dutch kindergarten is fully financed by the government. However, the government is working on the idea of a school-fee to be paid by the parents according to their tax-paying capacity. Non-religious kindergartens come under the inspection of the government inspectors at the regional and town level headed by a general inspector in the Ministry of Education. The private kindergartens (primarily religious)

are placed under the inspection of parent committees and regional inspectors. Both public and private are subject to the general supervision of the Ministry of Education.

On the number of nursery schools for toddlers no official data are available. The Dutch Union "Werlegemeenschap kindercentra" counts 700 to 800 members; they are nursery schools using the services of the union. Another union, the SALCO, counts about 200 nursery schools all over the country. These day care centres are all fully financed by the municipalities, as they receive children on what is called "social indication." These centres are mostly to be found in poor areas of the bigger cities. The SALCO is a union of societies for social help in the Netherlands.

The ratio of children per teacher in the nursery schools of the "Werkgemeenschap" and the SALCO is about one teacher per six to twelve children. Teachers are most of the time women with a lower technical training who followed a special "child-care" course; qualified kindergarten teachers are also to be found among the nursery school teachers, but their number is relatively small.

It might be too simple to classify the normal Dutch kindergarten as "unstructured", as there is enough structure to be found in the schools, but as to the stimulation of emotional, social, and cognitive development of children, little systematic planning is to be found. The philosophy behind this lack of systematic stimulation is that the pre-school period should be a time in which the child is free to develop through play and spontaneous activities. One may question the reliability of this philosophy. As there was and is in general little knowledge on the value and results of systematic stimulation, the philosophy of a free and spontaneous development could have served as a sop.

The current kindergarten system has incorporated some of the Montessori principles of stimulation of exploratory and self-directed activities for children, but

often without the typical Montessorian materials. Most of the Montessori schools are not very orthodox, due to the interest in new trends in ECE of the Montessorian Society.

Recently some work on a more structured curriculum for kindergarten has been pursued at the University of Utrecht. They have a number of programmes for disadvantaged children i.e. caravan dwellers (gypsies), canal barge children and urban slum dwellers. The result of these different contributions is a lively kindergarten curriculum with many different and appealing activities.

### *Research*

In the mid 1960s, influenced by the Head Start activities in the United States, a few research projects started. These projects all show a rather haphazard collection of sociological, developmental - psychological, learning - theoretical, practical - normative - anthropological and curriculum-development issues. Nevertheless they serve to inspire more detailed studies in which different areas will get full attention from different research teams in the immediate future.

Main research projects till now are:

(i) *The Utrecht Compensatory Programme* which consisted of three independent approaches: a family programme in which diagnosis of the level of educational stimulation in the family was connected with improvement of this kind of stimulation by tutoring of the parents; a school-readiness programme in which the readiness for reading and arithmetic in pre-school children was stimulated, and a language-and-thought programme in which by ortho-didactic means verbalisation and reasoning in pre-school children was stimulated.

(ii) *The School-Readiness Programme from the University of Nijmegen* connects diagnostics with an ortho-didactic curriculum for the first level of elementary school with many children who seem to show problems with the current teaching practices

in elementary school. Both the Utrecht and Nijmegen projects will direct their attention now and in the immediate future more and more to early diagnosis of learning disabilities with a strong accent on environmental influences.

(iii) *Fostering Abstract Thinking in Pre-School Children from the University of Amsterdam*. In this programme early diagnosis and curriculum development have been linked together from the beginning. Research results of all three programmes are only to be found in preliminary reports, and as all these programmes are still developing more precise instruments for evaluation and better theoretical frames, we have to wait several years before we are able to report results.

With its main goals as activation of community and parents, and a search for a more motivating educational system for children from unskilled workmen's homes, a project of the Research Institute for Applied Psychology of the University of Amsterdam has started curriculum development combined with counselling practices for schools, and a home visitors' organisation to communicate with parents about their educational practices. This project, by way of a school advisory centre, counsels kindergartens and elementary schools. Their task in the kindergartens was just started in 1972 so nothing can be reported yet on research plans, and results will not be available before 1975.

The last important project on ECE to be mentioned is the Experimental Nursery School in Amsterdam, a project of the Ministry of Health and Welfare. The main question to be answered by this project is, whether a daily visit to a nursery school is stimulating the emotional, social and cognitive development of toddlers. As this research project is as new as the other three mentioned, no results are available yet.

Early Childhood Education in the Netherlands is well established. We hope that research on early childhood education will enable us to educate young children even

better in future and that we also will learn to improve, when necessary, the educational forces in parents. The philosophy behind this wish is that we believe in the forces of intelligent child rearing practices to stimulate a rich development of emotional, social and problem-solving capacity which is necessary to make the young adult free to choose his ethics and way of life in a critical and responsible way.

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**References:**

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TUNISIA - Tunis - 1967. Joint UNESCO/UNICEF programme to train primary school teachers in Tunisia, with emphasis on practical subjects. Girl teacher trainees attend child care class in Monifloury training college, Tunis. Picture by courtesy of UNESCO/R. Greenough.