



BERNARD VAN LEER FOUNDATION

NETHERLANDS EARLY LEARNING STRATEGY SUMMARY

APPROVED MARCH 2011

Eisenhowerlaan 156
2517 KP The Hague
The Netherlands
31-70-331-2200

www.bernardvanleer.org

Programme Officer: Jeanet van de Korput

Overview

The Netherlands strategy for bringing quality early learning to scale is one of two active strategies on which we programme in the Netherlands. The goal is to 'reduce the learning gap between children of low socio-economic status (SES) and other children in the Netherlands'. The strategy intends to achieve this goal through interventions in the first 4 years of life and, in doing so, overlaps and complements another strategy of the Foundation in the Netherlands which focuses on achieving 'a reduction in violence in families with children under 4 years of age growing up at social and economic disadvantage'.

The strategies also overlap geographically. Both have some components which are national in scope, but they focus mainly on the four largest cities in the Randstad (or coastal provinces): Amsterdam, Utrecht, Rotterdam and The Hague, and two municipalities still to be selected from rural areas of Friesland and Groningen.

This summary gives an overview of the goal, key outcomes and strategies, and evaluation metrics.

Goal: Reduce the learning gap between children of low socio-economic status (SES) and other children in the Netherlands

Children of parents with a low level of education and of migrant families enter school with a disadvantage in Dutch language and mathematical skillsⁱ. This is a double disadvantage for children in migrant families, who are more likely to have parents with limited education and grow up speaking a different language in the home.

This handicap is reflected in data from Cito tests carried out at the end of primary school. On the total scores, the gap between non-native, non-Dutch-speaking children and native Dutch children is 10 percentage points. The gap in language is 11 percentage pointsⁱⁱ. The impact of this apparently small difference in their 12th year of life is a major factor in defining whether they are tracked into a school system that sends them to university, college or vocational education. The consequences for their role in the workforce are enormous and affect them throughout the rest of their lives.

In the Dutch context, where the principal reasons for poor learning relate to a poor educational environment at home and low proficiency in the Dutch language, there is a range of early learning services that have the potential to reduce this disadvantage. These include modalities such as home visiting, childminders, pre-schools, playgroups, daycare centres, after-school care, and the first years of primary school. However, the quality of these services, especially for children under 4, is low across the board and 16%ⁱⁱⁱ of low-SES children in that age group do not participate in any learning programmes at all.

Outcomes and strategies

The Bernard van Leer early learning strategy in the Netherlands focuses on stimulating informed demand among low-SES parents, and on monitoring and advocacy to ensure that the integration of early learning and childcare results in quality services that are accessible and affordable for low-SES children. While we believe that improving the qualifications and motivation of professionals running the services is also a key factor for change, we will not orient our strategy toward this need given the very high level of ongoing investment from the Dutch government at this time.

The strategy has evolved in a context of great uncertainty with regard to Dutch policy for early learning. The intention of the current government, under the leadership of Prime Minister Mark Rutte, is to focus on the improvement of Dutch language skills among all children, especially those with parents who do not speak Dutch at home^{iv}. There also seems to be a tendency towards integrated systems for early learning and childcare (doing away with targeted programmes for migrant children), as well as investigating the possibility of lowering the school starting age to 2.5 years. The last government had already increased the financial contribution from parents for daycare and expects a financial contribution from parents for other services targeting disadvantaged children under 4 (Coalition agreement)^v. Our strategy is designed to ensure that these and other changes do not adversely affect young children from low-SES backgrounds, but rather help to reduce the learning gap we currently observe in pre- and primary school.

Low-SES parents value early learning services, are able to recognise quality, and make use of available subsidies.

Strategies to achieve this outcome:

1. **Research and fund home-based and neighbourhood-based programmes in partnership with the corporate sector.** This strategy intends to reach out to low-SES children and support their families by linking them to programmes not only for early learning but for employment and issues of substance abuse. This is critical to reaching the 15% most excluded of low-SES children. Supermarkets can potentially play an important role in reaching out to neighbourhoods.
2. **Neighbourhood campaigns to raise awareness of the importance of early learning for children in the first 4 years of life.** This strategy aims to increase demand among those families who are not aware of the benefits or subsidies available for these services, as well as to encourage more stimulating home environments. Working in partnership with other neighbourhood and self-help organisations, we can involve children's voices in the campaigns. Fathers will be a focus since we know that greater involvement of fathers in the early years has a positive impact on learning and health outcomes for children. We have commissioned research into the existing participation initiatives for young children in the Netherlands.

Low-SES parents have greater leverage over service providers.

Strategies to achieve this outcome:

1. **Support parent representative groups – to further expand the system of quality cards, a consumer index that makes the performance of specific centres and services more transparent.** This is important because it allows parents to identify more easily how the quality of a service compares to others. In geographical areas where they have a choice, parents can use this method to inform their decisions about enrolment. In areas where choice does not exist, they can use the ratings as a basis for discussion with providers, as well as with regulatory bodies.
2. **Support stricter enforcement of government sanctions for services that do not meet minimum quality standards for early learning.** Sanctions do exist for poor service quality, but are not evenly enforced. Moreover, criteria for assessment are not linked to learning, but rather focus on health, hygiene and safety. If we can help ensure that assessment criteria include aspects of early learning, and that regulatory bodies (such as the municipality) take action when poor reports surface, parents gain leverage.

Municipalities know, and want to know, how to implement Wet OKE (law to integrate early learning and childcare) to the benefit of low-SES children, and sufficient subsidies exist in municipal budgets to ensure their participation.

Strategies to achieve this outcome:

1. **Support existing longitudinal studies to assess the impact of approved methodologies in improving language skills and other early learning services.** These approved methodologies are known as VVE programmes, which stands for *Vroeg- en Voorschoolse Educatie* (Early and Pre-school Education). This information will help determine whether the VVE methodologies have the intended effect of reducing educational disadvantage. This is relevant because the programmes are being integrated with daycare. The result of this research can be a tool to demonstrate the importance of early learning services (if a positive impact is found) and to assess whether VVE alone provides enough pedagogical inputs to improve the quality of daycare.
2. **Fund research and documentation on the benefits and disadvantages of integrating early learning and care for low-SES children.** This will involve looking at the experience of other ethnically diverse countries that have integrated early learning and care to see how it has affected learning inequity. We will construct theoretical scenarios of possible impacts in the Dutch context and trace initial results from the Dutch municipalities that are most advanced with service integration. Some key questions will be whether integration could increase cost barriers to the participation of low-SES children and whether specific adjustments need to be made

during the process of integration (such as multilingual environments, subsidies on the demand side) to ensure equity for low-SES children.

3. **Advocacy with kids to promote early learning.** This involves connecting children and the newly appointed Child Ombudsman, creating spaces in which they can talk and be listened to, and collecting data among their peers to create outreach. A campaign could include policymakers and aldermen to raise awareness of the need for good-quality early learning. This strategy can help to create additional pressure to invest in services that benefit low-SES children.
4. **Organise information exchange meetings for politicians** to emphasise the need to start good-quality services at an early age. Based on the findings of the above research, guidance can be provided on how to approach the implementation of Wet OKE and early learning in general.
5. **Dissemination of successful and equitable models integrating early learning and childcare.** Also based on the findings of the above research, we will be able to support opportunities for municipalities to learn about successful experiences and better inform other stakeholders (such as parents) about how to approach Wet OKE. This is important so that civil servants and advocates for low-SES children understand the risks and advantages of different methods of integrating early learning and care. We may also include a prize for the most successful municipalities and service providers.
6. **Support community leaders in enabling parents from low-SES communities to have a greater voice in policy debates and lobby groups.** Parents from low-SES communities do not have strong representation in mainstream debates and lobby groups, with the result that their interests, when different from those of other parents, are likely to be underrepresented. This strategy is important since their voices need to be heard by municipal governments implementing Wet OKE.

Evaluation

Evaluations will be conducted on the programme as a whole, as well as on individual projects. The purpose of evaluation will be both to measure our impact and to learn consistently from programming in order to make mid-course corrections where needed. Some of the key impact data we will track (all of which will be disaggregated by socio-economic and ethnic groups) are included in the table below.

Early learning in the Netherlands
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• School readiness and Cito scores for children who have used early learning services• Access to early learning services for children under 4• Quality of early learning services for children under 4• Funding available for early learning services including subsidies for low-SES children

ⁱ Turkenburg, M. and Gijsberts, M. 2007. Opleidingsniveau en beheersing van de Nederlandse taal, in: *Jaarrapport Integratie 2007*, Den Haag: SCP; Gijsberts, M. and Dagevos, J. (eds.) 2009, *Jaarrapport Integratie, 2009*, Den Haag: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau (SCP); Leseman, P. 2007. *Early Education for Immigrant Children: report to the Transatlantic Task Force on Immigration and Integration*

ⁱⁱ www.onderwijsinspectie.nl

ⁱⁱⁱ Beekhoven, S., Ijsbrand, J., Kooiman, P. (2010) *Landelijk Monitor Voor-en Vroegschoolse Educatie 2010*, Sardes.

^{iv} Coalition Agreement VVD-CDA, 30 September 2010, pages 27 and 40
(<http://www.government.nl/dsc?c=getobject&s=obj&objectid=127729>)

^v Coalition Agreement VVD-CDA, 30 September 2010, pages 27 and 40
(<http://www.government.nl/dsc?c=getobject&s=obj&objectid=127729>)