

Governance of complex early childhood education and care systems

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IMPACT

Objective

This dissertation studies differences between municipalities in the quality of municipal Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) ECEC policies, the quality of pre-primary ECEC centers and of kindergarten education. The aim of the dissertation is to identify promising governance strategies for effective implementation of educational equity policies in ECEC systems. In most countries, these ECEC systems are complexly organized. ECEC programs are provided in split, privatized, marketized, and decentralized systems. Therefore it is challenging to provide a continuous high quality program during the entire early childhood period until formal instruction in primary education starts.

The complexity also holds for the Dutch ECEC system; it consists of several, partly separate components and different governance systems and a mix of private and public organizations. Dutch childcare is intended for children aged 0 to 4 and is mainly used as an instrument to enable parents to participate in the labor market. Childcare is offered in a hybrid market by private parties, both for-profit and not-for-profit organizations. Targeted pre-primary education for disadvantaged children from 2.5 to 4 years of age, is offered in childcare centers by the same organizations that offer regular childcare. In the pre-primary education sector, municipalities have to ensure sufficient high-quality pre-primary provisions, and distribute subsidies among pre-primary ECEC centers. Dutch kindergarten for children over 4 years old, is part of primary education and consequently, school boards are responsible for the financing and quality of kindergarten education, and also for implementing equity policies in the kindergarten period of primary education. The Dutch ECEC system is rather complex, with two challenges: effective governance and effective equity policies.

Main conclusions

The main conclusion of this dissertation is that governing ECEC to realize the potential contribution of ECEC to children's development and to economic returns in long term in a complex, hybrid, split and decentralized system, is not an easy task. In this dissertation, we tried to unravel the structures and mechanisms of the Dutch ECEC system that complicate the governance of this system and we sought for alternative approaches to the governance of the ECEC system that can potentially deal more effectively with its current complexity. We defined ECEC as all center-based services for children aged 0 to 6 years that potentially contribute to their development and school readiness and, more specifically, that potentially prevent early emerging educational gaps by children's family background. We reviewed and empirically examined several governance instruments in this dissertation. Two instruments stand out: (1) encouraging the coordination of ECEC in the municipality, based on

formalized, equity mission-driven collaborative network governance, with strong collaboration between partners, and inspirational governance of the municipality, and (2) setting up specific performance agreements that aim to increase the quality of ECEC. Applying these instruments likely leads to more effective local ECEC policies in municipalities and, based on several indicators, to higher quality in ECEC. Governing the quality of primary school kindergartens, considered part of the ECEC system for 0 to 6-years-olds, seems to be most complex, given the limited association of both school boards and municipalities with the quality of kindergarten ECEC.

Implications for policy

This dissertation provides several suggestions to improve the governance of the Dutch local ECEC system until age 6 in order to obtain a more effective implementation of educational equity? policies in the early childhood period. Decentralizing the governance of social services to the local level does not automatically lead to an improvement and such a major transformation of governance needs to be carefully considered in the context of, and specifically adapted to, the peculiarities and mechanisms of the systems of these services. A simplification of the Dutch ECEC system is needed, but transforming a complex system is not an easy task.

In order to improve governance effectiveness, we propose that the responsibility for formulating and coordinating equity policies should be assigned to municipalities. This should include a transfer of the educational equity budget of the school boards to the municipalities, or, at least, earmarking this part of the schools' block grants. Connecting to the earmarking, the accompanying commitment to collaborate with pre-primary ECEC centers under auspices of the municipality, and elaboration with the municipal educational equity policy at the school and kindergarten level accompanied by the implementation of a continuous age-appropriate ECEC curriculum and pedagogical approach.

To enable the implementation of educational equity policies, a local network should be set up in each municipality, in which the services involved, or needed, to implement the policy optimally become connected. This concerns first and foremost the local providers of pre-primary education and care and the primary schools who provide kindergarten education. The network involves professionals who are directly involved in the implementation of ECEC and early childhood equity policy, school principals or teachers, rather than schoolboards, led by a network coordinator who is employed or appointed by the municipality. The network should be built on the basis of formalized agreements, should develop a shared mission and vision, set common goals in line with the national goals and develop a plan on how to reach these goals, and should monitor the performance relative to the goals set. To avoid differences between municipalities, it is important to formulate guidelines regarding networking and concrete goals and content of the educational equity policy at the national level.

The municipal educational equity policies, including ECEC, need to be defined within the administrative LEA consultations and, if necessary, adjusted in the LEA, under auspices from the municipal. Boards of schools with a moderate to high proportion of disadvantaged children will be required to join the municipal educational disadvantages policy, to translate this policy in collaboration with their school principals into school-specific educational equity measures, and to implement and evaluate the results of the policy within their schools. In addition, it is important that the content of the agreements become more meaningful and concrete.

We also propose that the Inspectorate should monitor the entire system: from the process *and* content of local policy-making, to the implementation of the educational equity policy at the local level, to the compliance of ECEC providers, schools and school boards. This also includes monitoring the shared mission, set agreements and aspired results, and ultimately, the quality of care and education provided by the pre-primary ECEC centers and the primary schools. The inspection should appoint failing municipalities and school boards, and ultimately have sanction powers for constantly failing municipalities or schoolboards.

The proposed measures described above amount to the curtailment of school boards' autonomy at least for the early childhood period and the implementation of the early childhood educational equity policy. This implies a fundamental break with the tradition of educational governance in the Netherlands. The question is whether our proposals are feasible in the current system. Perhaps 'soft governance' offers an interim solution, with more substantive steering through a legal framework that goes beyond formal processes, on the one hand, and that gives additional fiscal and administrative instruments to municipalities to commit and, whenever needed, steer school boards to fully support the municipal educational equity policy, on the other hand. More substantive steering requires a legal framework with, first and foremost, substantive, that is, value-, content- and evidence-based requirements for high quality pre-primary ECEC and kindergarten education.

As mentioned before, it is complicated to change the structure of the education system fundamentally, yet an improvement of the governance of the system is required. The complex system now allows for interests other than the public interest of providing good ECEC education to vulnerable children. More effective governance allows enabling better implementation of the educational equity policy and to increase the quality of the entire ECEC system to the benefit of all young (disadvantaged) children, in the interests of children, communities and society as a whole.