

City Impression Ghent

1) General Information

Ghent is a fast growing city (+ 11% of inhabitant in the last 10 years) and a young city (with a relatively high number of students). About 30 percent of the city's population has a migration background. Ghent is also a city with a growing number of young children, who need education and care.

The ECEC period is divided into a childcare period (0-2½ to 3 years) and education at school from 2 ½ years onwards to 12 years. The biggest part of childcare is provided in childcare centres (residential) but there is also a relatively big part in home care (“onthaalouders”).

The school system is divided in the pre-school part (2 ½ - 6 years (“kleuterschool”)), and the school part from 6-12 years.

In Flandres (so also in Ghent) the educational part is provided by government-aided public education (the city of Ghent) and by government-aided private education (mainly Catholic education).

The city of Ghent is very active in the field of education and care, not only in numbers but also in the scope of its responsibility. For instance, the city of Ghent has set up a network of out of school care that is for a big part funded by the city of Ghent. There is out-of-school care and holiday care during the school year but also during school holidays and even on a small scale during weekends and special periods a year.

One of the policy pillars of the city of Ghent is the cooperation between care and education.

Around 50% of the children between 0-2½ and 3 take part in childcare institutions. In the pre-school age, the number rises up to 95%. The participation in childcare is growing in Ghent. Parents have to pay for childcare. The municipal childcare institutions stagger the contributions depending on the income of the parents. Accordingly, childcare is free of charge for parents with a very low income. Some of the other providers do the same, while others take a flat fee regardless of income.

Primary education (from 2 ½-3 years on) in Flanders is free, but parents have to pay for out-of-school care. Out-of-school care and holiday care for pre-schools and elementary schools are organized by the city of Ghent and is part of its local educational system.

The budget for childcare and education is to a great extent funded by the Flemish government. But also the city of Ghent is spending a substantial amount of additional money on childcare provisions and after school care and pre-school education. The expenses for childcare are rising, both for the Flemish community and the city of Ghent

Childcare facilities are open for a maximum of 11 hours a day, all year round. All institutions are accredited by *Kind en Gezin*, an organisation that is responsible for the whole of Flanders.

2) Inclusion Politics

The Flemish Ministry of Education and the city of Ghent have tried to translate the by now widely available and accepted research on the importance of high-quality ECEC into expanded provisions at the system level. They call for progressive universalism as a strategy to combine universal and targeted services and thus prevent the separation of institutions.

Childcare/ ECEC does not only have an economic function (labour market) but also a pedagogical and social function.

Mixed universal services, when they can be achieved, are often more likely to be successful than services targeted toward low-income families. The city of Ghent developed, therefore, the registration instrument “Tinkelbel”. All parents who want a childcare place for their children must register in this system. Half of the places are reserved for families in the neighbourhood. Another large percentage of places is reserved for low-income or unemployment-affected families, families who speak another native language than Dutch, as well as low-skilled mothers, single mothers and teenage parents. Some extra places are reserved for immigrant parents who are attending integration training and/or a job-creation measure as well as for parents in an urgent crisis.

The combination of universal and targeted services is also important in order to successfully communicate and shape the issue of ECEC expansion, as the majority of the middle class is interested in this topic. Maintaining a sense of solidarity around the issue of ECEC is therefore crucial, particularly as the middle-class majority is often most influential in driving policy decisions. For this reason, too, mixed universal services, when they can be achieved, are often more likely to be successful than services targeted toward low-income families.

Another success factor is a large investment by the city of Ghent in high-quality childcare and pre-schools, especially in the quality of the staff. Therefore the city of Ghent has developed a very extensive educational guidance system (also called support system). There are activities like pedagogical days, team coaching, individual development, coaching weekends etcetera. A competent system and pedagogical counselling are the basis for the whole system. This, added to the progressive universalism, is the foundation for the inclusive policy of the city of Ghent.

Another important factor on the way to a successful inclusion policy is the cooperation with the University of Ghent and VBJK and a long history of co-operation with national and European partners, resulting in a tradition of innovation.

Having a competent system with high quality childcare and high quality staff must be based on common key values and pedagogical principles. Important pedagogical principles are: a holistic view on education, the well-being of the child as a central principle, the child as an actor in its own development, individual learning strategies and good observation and reflection. For successful inclusion it is also very important to be a part of the local community and stimulate the participation of the most important educators: the parents as co-educators. This is based on recognition of diversity of children, parents and communities.

These pedagogical principles are the basis for a number of offers and innovations, for example the so-called “Brugfunctionaris”, who is a connecting figure between institutions and parents.

It seems that the city of Ghent developed a series of initiatives and a holistic view on education for inclusive childcare and pre-schools, without defining structural quality indicators (child-teacher ratio as an important factor).

At the same time, the facilities are desired by children and parents. This fact is also reflected in the politics of the local coalition of social-democrats, green party and (social) liberals in Ghent.

This coalition has a broad focus and, as a result, childcare and (pre-) schools are not considered as one-sided issues.

To sum up: the key values for social inclusion are:

- Availability, accessibility and affordability
- Respect and value for diversity
- Participation of parents
- Part of the community (Affiliation or belonging of the educators in the social environment of parents and children?)
- Pedagogical quality
- Recently the values for ecological awareness, innovation and sustainability have become more and more part of the key values.

The participation of parents is one of the key aspects of the education and care system in Ghent. The parent is the first and most important educator of the child. A lot of energy goes into bringing parents into the institutions but also bringing the institutions into the neighbourhood and the streets and parks. Education and care are visible and parents can connect to services. The neighbourhood is a valuable and important learning environment. It is a method of connecting parents and professionals together. The parents are active partners in the streets in the neighbourhood as assistants in using public transport or just have fun with children in a party on the square.

To maintain a high quality service the city of Ghent has invested lot of energy and finances in supporting the professional in care and education. A high quality support-system is in place for all the professionals but also for parents if needed. The teams have pedagogical days, college-groups, team coaching (also in weekends and during annual team days). The main focus is, of course, also on the professional teams. The basic task is to develop a common view (also between education and care). The city of Ghent is aiming at diversity in teams (diverse in age, sex, knowledge/ or skills, ethnic origin).

There are some bottlenecks and challenges: there are many changing teams and there is (as in many other cities in our project) a shortage of staff. There is a need of access to coaching on the floor: to open the class-room or the childcare group more. Because of the fact that the city of Ghent is financially responsible for the out of school care, there is a lack of funding for the out of school care. The quality arrangements which are (also financially) made by the Flandres

community have to improve more (some steps were taken in the last period). And the cooperation between teachers and out of school professionals is a challenge, as in most cities.