

BELGIUM, FLEMISH COMMUNITY

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Language and Literacy

Belgium is a federated country with three official languages: Dutch, French, and German. The Flemish region of Flanders, a Dutch speaking community with nearly 6.5 million inhabitants, is in the northern part of the country. French and Dutch are the official languages of the region of Brussels, and Wallonia is a French speaking community situated in the southern part of Belgium next to a small German speaking community in the eastern part of the country.

Dutch is the official language and the language of instruction in the Flemish Community, which includes the Dutch speaking schools in the region of Brussels. The Flemish population, however, is becoming more ethnically and culturally diverse, with the percentage of students speaking a home language other than Dutch increasing annually; during the 2015–2016 school year, this included up to 17 percent of the population in primary education.¹ The larger cities in Flanders tend to have significant immigrant populations speaking different mother tongues at home. In the classroom, these children are educated in Dutch.

Overview of the Education System

The Minister of Education heads the Flemish Ministry's Department of Education and Training, and the Flemish government supervises education policy from the preprimary level through university and adult education. The Belgian Constitution guarantees all children the right to education.² Mainstream preprimary education, which is not compulsory, is available for children ages 2½ to 6. Almost all children in Flanders receive preprimary education. Compulsory education starts on September 1 of the year in which children reach age 6 and continues for 12 years. Students must attend school full time until age 15 or 16. After that, at least part time schooling (a full time combination of part time study and work) is required, although most young people continue to attend full time secondary education. Free compulsory education ends in June of the year in which the student reaches age 18. Preprimary, primary, and secondary schools that are funded or subsidized by the government cannot demand any

fees. Compulsory education does not necessarily require attendance at a school; home education is an alternative.

The Flemish government develops the attainment targets and the minimum objectives of the core curriculum (e.g., for the end of primary school). Governing bodies (i.e., school boards) are the main key to the organization of education in Flanders and can be responsible for one or several schools. These bodies are free to choose teaching methods based on their own philosophy or educational vision. They also can determine their own curriculum and timetables and appoint their own staff. Most schools in Flanders are part of an educational association of schools—an organization that supports schools in terms of logistics, administration, and pedagogy (e.g., the association of Catholic schools or the associations of public schools commissioned by the Flemish Community or organized by a town or a province). These associations of schools develop their own curricula for each grade or each phase of two grades. In that sense, there are several national curricula in Flanders.

In Flanders, preprimary and primary education are offered in two forms: mainstream and special. Special preprimary and primary education are meant for children who need special help, temporarily or permanently. Many students with special needs are able to remain in regular education with some special attention and aid from a teacher or a remedial teacher. However, regular education is not always equipped to meet the needs of students who require special assistance temporarily or permanently. Special education schools provide these children (6.3 percent of the population of students in primary education) with adapted education, training, care, and treatment.

These students are divided into eight education types based on the nature and degree of the main disability within a certain group. Approximately 60 percent of them belong to the type “Education-basis offer”: children whose special educational needs are significant and for whom it is proven that the adaptations are disproportional or insufficient to include the student in the common curriculum in a mainstream primary school. This type combines the former type 1 (minor mental disability) and type 8 (severe learning disability), which was slowly phased out. The other types are organized for students with a mental disability (type 2); an emotional or behavioral disorder (type 3); a motor disability (type 4); a temporary admission to a hospital, residential setting, or preventorium (type 5); a visual impairment (type 6); aural impairment or a speech or language defect (type 7); or an autism spectrum disorder without a mental disability (type 9).

There is no common curriculum in special schools. Students in special schools have an individualized curriculum that is adapted to the needs and possibilities of each student. The objectives are autonomously selected by the school, based on the attainment targets of mainstream primary education and/or the developmental objectives of the educational types 1, 2, 7, or 8. With the exception of education types 2 and 5 and subject to certain conditions, all students of all education types can receive support in mainstream education within a framework of integrated education. With support, a limited number of students who have a moderate or severe intellectual disability (with a registration report for education type 2) can be catered to in mainstream primary education within the framework of inclusive education.



Language/Reading Curriculum in the Fourth Grade

Reading Policy

Freedom of education is a constitutional right in Belgium. The Flemish government doesn't regulate educational processes and methods. The responsibility for the quality of education lies mainly with the school and the teachers. The Flemish coalition agreement is very clear about this: the government imposes the “what” but not the “how.”³ Schools thereby have an increasing amount of responsibility for their own projects. This allows schools to develop their own educational policies—including their own pedagogical plan, teaching methods, curriculum, and timetables—and to appoint their own staff. Although schools receiving public funding are required to operate within a regulatory framework, they have considerable autonomy.⁴

Quality control by the Ministry is limited to quality control by the Flemish Inspectorate, which acts as an independent professional system of external supervision. The government, through the eyes of the inspectorate, evaluates whether the efforts of schools toward these attainment targets—including those for Dutch—are sufficient. In addition, the Inspectorate examines whether the curriculum-based objectives are being reached and whether the developmental objectives and cross-curricular attainment targets have been sufficiently pursued.

The concept note *Measures for primary education and the first stage of secondary education*, which was approved by the Flemish government at the end of May 2016, aims to strengthen language education in primary education.⁵ The note foresees the option of language initiation in French, English, or German from the first year of primary education. From the third year onward, this can develop into fully fledged foreign language education.

Concerning reading policy, the Flemish government is limited to decisions on the minimum objectives, which is called the core curriculum (i.e., the “what”). Nevertheless, the Minister of Education aims to strengthen primary education with special attention to language, develop a broad framework for an active language policy in schools, and stimulate organizations to take initiatives to promote reading.^{6,7} Consequently, many organizations take initiatives to enhance literacy and reading, frequently in association with or sustained by the Ministry or one of its departments.

Summary of National Curriculum

Preprimary and primary schools have to implement at least the core curriculum of the Flemish Ministry of Education and Training and have to pursue or achieve the “final objectives.”⁸ These objectives are “minimum objectives the educational authorities consider necessary and feasible for a particular part of the pupil population ... [that] apply to a minimum set of knowledge, skills and attitudes for this part of the pupil population.”

The common core curriculum in preprimary and primary schools consists of physical education, art education, world studies (split into “Man and Society” and “Science and Technology”), mathematics, and Dutch (listening, speaking, reading, writing, strategies, linguistics, and [inter]cultural focus). Cross-curricular themes, particularly for primary education, include learning to



learn, social skills, and Information and Communications Technology (ICT). French is a compulsory subject for students in Grades 5 and 6 of primary school. French may be offered from the third year and in the Brussels-Capital Region from the first year of primary education.

The general objectives of preprimary and primary education are translated into developmental objectives and attainment targets that indicate more concretely what is considered desirable and achievable for children in elementary education. The general aims are a broad curriculum, active learning, care for every student, and coherence.

For Dutch, the core curriculum contains more general objectives for students:

- Transmit information orally and in written form and incorporate various oral and written messages from others into relevant situations in and out of school
- Think critically about language and about their own and others' use of the language
- Know which factors are important in communication and take them into account
- Have a positive willingness to:
 - Use language in different situations to develop themselves and to give and receive information
 - Think about their own reading behavior
- Have an unbiased attitude toward linguistic diversity and language variation
- Find pleasure in dealing with language and linguistic expression

After the “independence” of Flanders, the first core curriculum was developed in 1997 before it was partially updated and expanded in 2010. The Ministry currently focuses on the clear definition of objectives by reducing the core curriculum and by (re)formulating concrete and ambitious goals that meet the needs of the 21st century. However, preprimary and primary schools still have to follow the core curriculum of 2010. The final objectives of mainstream primary education contain final objectives of Dutch listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

During preprimary Dutch reading education, the emphasis is on preparatory instruction that increases phonemic awareness and graphemic identification while introducing concepts that will be used in later education. For this group of students, the final objectives need not be attained. The school must make visible efforts to work toward these objectives and to aim for them. These developmental objectives for Dutch reading state preprimary children are:

- Able to recreate a message using visual material
- Able to understand messages related to concrete activities that are represented by symbols
- Able to distinguish letters from other marks in materials, in books, and on signs
- Prepared to spontaneously and independently look at books and other sources of information intended for them

Reading instruction in the first year of primary school focuses on the acquisition of decoding skills (technical reading) and includes stories and activities aimed at the development of reading comprehension. From that moment on, instruction in comprehension gradually and systematically increases, aiming to develop autonomous and critical readers. The final objectives for Dutch reading in primary schools are as follows:

- Students are able to find information (level of processing = description) in:
 - Instructions for a range of activities intended for them
 - The data in tables and diagrams for public use
 - Magazine texts intended for them
- Students are able to arrange information (level of processing = structuring) that is found in:
 - School and study texts intended for them and instructions for school assignments
 - Stories, children's books, dialogues, poems, children's magazines, and youth encyclopedias intended for them
- Students are able to evaluate information based on their own opinion or on other sources (level of processing=evaluating) such as:
 - Letters and invitations intended for them
 - Advertising texts that are directly related to their own world

Besides these objectives, the core curriculum also includes skills and strategies. Students have to be able to use skills and strategies in relation to the necessary skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing in achieving the respective final objectives. Among other things, students must take into account, as indicated in the final objectives:

- The total listening, speaking, reading, and writing situation
- The type of the text
- The level of processing

The core curriculum also emphasizes the development of language criticism, which is needed to achieve the final objectives. Students must be prepared within a specific language context to reflect on:

- The use of standard, regional, and social language variations
- Particular attitudes, prejudices, and role play in language
- The rules of language behavior
- Certain language activities
- How certain points of view are adopted and/or revealed through language

Additionally, students must be prepared to:

- Reflect on the listening, speaking, reading, and writing strategies that are used
- In a specific context, reflect on the following aspects of language:
 - Sound level
 - Word level (creation of words)
 - Sentence level (word order)
 - Text level (simple structures)

Regarding these final objectives, students must be able to use appropriate terms, including:

- Sender, receiver, message, intent, situation
- Noun (plus article), diminutive, verb, stem, ending, prefixes and suffixes, other words
- Subject, verb ending, part of sentence
- Heading, paragraph

The Decree on Elementary Education of 25 February 1997 (Article 8) states: “On the basis of a pedagogical project, schools must create an educational and learning environment in which pupils can experience a continuous learning process. This environment must be adapted to the development progress of the pupils.”

School boards (often in conjunction with the educational umbrella organizations) draw up their own curriculum containing the final objectives stated in the core curriculum of the government. That curriculum must be approved by the government upon the advice of the inspectorate. This curriculum is a required guide for preprimary and primary education. The final objectives must be clearly incorporated into curricula, work plans, and textbooks used by the schools. Most schools use a curriculum drawn up by their association of schools (e.g., “GO! Education” for public schools in the Flemish community, government aided public education of local authorities, or government aided private education). These organizations have developed a comprehensive curriculum and accompanying didactic suggestions to achieve the attainment targets of the core curriculum of the Flemish Ministry of Education and Training.

Teachers, Teacher Education, and Professional Development

Teacher Education Specific to Reading

In her policy note for 2014–2019, the Flemish Minister of Education guaranteed sufficient, professional, and motivated teaching personnel. To do so, she wants to strengthen initial teacher education; actualize the basic competencies and the professional profile of teachers; realize a professional, challenging, and varied educational career; and development for and support of teachers’ careers.

Initial teacher education includes a three year program for teachers of preprimary, primary, or the first phases of secondary school, in which there is a distinction between teacher education courses and their courses linked to the subject areas. In teacher education, however, there is no education program specific to teaching reading in preprimary and primary schools; this is part of the general (language) education of the primary school teacher.

Requirements for Ongoing Professional Development in Reading for Teachers

The Ministry takes no specific initiatives to enhance the competencies of teachers to teach reading. The Decree on Quality of Education in 2009 clarifies that schools are responsible for providing good quality education, which includes organizing professional development for teachers. Schools can organize training on their own premises or in their school community, or work together with one or more external organizations.

The educational umbrella organizations have their own Pedagogical Advisory Services (paid by the government) to provide educational and methodological support to schools. These are among the most important partners of most schools in quality assurance. The school counselors offer support to schools within their network, including in-service training, support for self-evaluation, and quality assurance. Many other training organizations offer various activities to enhance the competencies of teachers. Although all these organizations can support professional development in teaching reading, this is no official structure by the Flemish Community.

Reading Instruction in the Primary Grades

Instructional Materials

The freedom of education implies the autonomy of choosing instructional approaches. The only suggestions regarding materials are in the curricula developed by the educational umbrella organizations. Therefore, schools are free to use any materials the teachers prefer. Most schools use a series of textbooks developed by an educational publishing house. These textbooks generally are written by teachers or educational counselors. Most schools choose one series of textbooks to ensure continuity in all grades. In the first grade, there is an emphasis on technical reading. Most schools use a specific method, including a specific manual to learn the technicalities of letters, words, and sentences.

Generally, Flemish schools are adequately resourced to achieve the final objectives of the core curriculum. In preprimary and primary schools, many tools are available to stimulate the development of reading skills of students. Special education resources can be made available to students with a visual, auditory, or physical disability who attend mainstream preprimary and primary education. These resources include technical equipment, paper or digital transcripts or adaptations of lesson materials, sign language interpreters, and copies of other students' notes.⁹



Use of Technology

Information and communications skills are important for children and adults, and Information and Communications Technology (ICT) is influencing teaching and learning methods. New cross-curricular attainment targets and developmental objectives for ICT have been in use in preprimary and primary school since 2007. All schools are equipped with modern computers and other technological instruments, depending on their own needs and wishes. The tendency toward more inclusive education challenges schools to use gradually more assistive technology tools for reading, such as text to speech technology, audiobooks, optical character recognition software, graphic organizers, and digital schoolboards.

Role of Reading Specialists

Reading specialists are rare in primary schools; typically, the classroom teacher is the only reading specialist. If necessary, he or she can receive additional help from a remedial teacher, a care teacher, or a care coordinator. For a limited time, students with special needs can be helped in regular primary schools by a specialist teacher or a speech therapist inside or outside the classroom. However, the current political emphasis on a language policy in every school leads to increasing attention in schools to improve the quality of language teaching. A 2013 survey of the Flemish Ministry of Education on Dutch reading and listening showed that 91 percent of Flemish students achieved the final objectives of the core curriculum.¹⁰ Almost all the teachers involved spend time on reading instruction at least once a week. Generally, school teams do not have a need for language or reading specialists for Dutch instruction.

Second Language Instruction

An increasing number of students has limited or even absent knowledge of Dutch when starting preprimary or primary education. For this reason, attention is paid to monitoring the knowledge of Dutch and to adapting the provision of Dutch language training to the needs of the students. Schools may use the Toolkit of Broad Evaluation Competences Dutch to measure competence in Dutch or set up a language trajectory tailored for each student individually. Remediation within regular classes is possible, but primary schools also may choose to organize language immersion classes that offer intensive training in Dutch.

Students with Reading Difficulties

Diagnostic Testing

There is no structural or systematic testing of students to diagnose reading difficulties. The language and reading curriculum does not prescribe assessment standards and testing methods. The schools decide whether students have attained all the objectives and, thus, use their own tests and award qualifications. Most teachers use formative assessments to follow up on the development of their students.



In primary education, teachers are attentive in detecting reading difficulties. They follow students' progress through continuous observation and periodic testing, particularly via tests linked to the series of textbooks used. Once a reading difficulty is detected, teachers rely on the Pupil Guidance Center during a periodic multidisciplinary consultation to confirm the initial diagnostics through specialized testing. Most schools, however, do not wait for a formal diagnosis to support students with reading difficulties.

Instruction for Children with Reading Difficulties

Students with reading difficulties often receive support in their own classroom as a result of formative assessments and diagnostic testing. In general, teachers use differentiation to meet the reading difficulties of their students. This support consists mostly of similar learning activities (i.e., same materials, process, and instructions).

Students get more specific support in the case of persistent reading difficulties such as dyslexia. Once these difficulties are determined, remedial teaching procedures can be implemented inside or outside the classroom. Remedial teachers, care teachers, or a care coordinator mostly are responsible for this additional support. In the case of a more severe, specific difficulty, schools use a thoroughly individualized curriculum and individual assistance with consideration of students' specific needs. In recent years, learning difficulties, including reading difficulties, have been increasingly dealt with by schools with curricular adaptations, remediation, compensation, or dispensation—STICORDI measures (i.e., measures to STimulate, COmpensate, REmediate, DIfferentiate, and DIscharge, from *STImuleren, COmpenseren, Remediëren, DIfferentiëren, and DIspenseren*).

Although many students with reading difficulties remain in regular primary education, the needs of some students exceed the capacity of regular schools. Special education schools provide these students with adapted education, training, care, and treatment. Teaching methods are highly individualized in special education. In addition to the assistance of teachers and depending on their difficulties, students receive social, psychological, orthopedagogical, medical, and/or paramedical integrated assistance.

Monitoring Student Progress in Reading

In the Flemish community, education is explicitly regarded as more than training and instruction. In addition to instructional content, a school also must convey values, attitudes, and convictions to its (freely specified) pedagogical framework. This often leads to outcomes that do not easily lend themselves to exact measurement. For this reason, there are no externally imposed tests and no national examinations.

The freedom of education in Belgium includes the autonomy of Flemish schools in choosing instructional methods and subsequently in testing their students. Nevertheless, the standards and the procedure for the assignment of a primary school certificate are laid out in the education legislation. At the end of elementary education, the class council autonomously decides whether a certificate of



primary education will be issued. The class council judges whether students have reached and mastered the attainment targets for primary education. The Ministry has provided on its website an overview of “tests for schools” to support schools in making these determinations. Three types of tests have been available on this website since 2009:

- The Flemish version of the student monitoring system of the Dutch organization CITO (*Centraal Instituut voor Toetsontwikkeling*, or the Central Institute for Assessment Development), including tests of language and technical reading
- The Start of Primary Education Linguistic Skills Screening test (known by its Dutch acronym, SALTO), a listening test to screen the Dutch language proficiency of students starting their first grade of primary education
- The parallel tests developed by the Flemish Ministry within the framework of the periodical survey on final objectives and development objectives, including a parallel test for Dutch reading

The schools decide whether students have attained the final objectives of the core curriculum. Most teachers use tests linked to a series of textbooks and/or develop their own tests. On a more objective level, most schools also use standardized tests for technical reading and reading comprehension. Additionally, a follow-up system is applied independently from the series of textbooks in use to verify student achievement level or learning gains. Students and their parents are regularly informed about results, progress, learning behavior, and personal development through written school reports.

Many schools also use a test that includes reading at the end of Grade 4 or 6, provided by an educational association of schools. Thus, individual teachers and school teams receive external data of the achievements of their pupils. They confront these data with their own results to obtain a more objective assessment. School teams also can use the data from these assessments to control the effects of their education.

Since 2002, systematic surveys have been organized to enable authorities to get an overview of the quality of the Flemish education system based on reliable and objective student performance data. In 2002, 2007, and 2013, the review focused on reading. The results of the latest survey were reassuring: 91 percent of Flemish students succeeded in acquiring the learning outcomes for reading in 2013. Nevertheless, when considering that 2 or 3 percent of a birth cohort goes directly from Grade 5 or even 4 to a secondary school and that many students go to special education schools and in many cases do not meet the attainment targets, this result is perhaps not reassuring at all. A parallel test of this survey is available for schools to use for internal quality management, but the test is not suited for the assessment of individual students.

Special Reading Initiatives

The Flemish Minister of Education and Training has undertaken several initiatives to enhance students’ knowledge of and competence in the Dutch language and foreign languages (particularly French, English, and German). The Ministry of Education aims to broaden literacy for students in



compulsory education and for adults in general—especially for those with a home language other than Dutch. The targets of the Flemish Minister are the:

- Elaboration of a strong(er) language policy
- Amelioration of the didactical approach of languages, especially Dutch
- Review and actualization of the curriculum for Dutch
- Development of additional teaching materials
- Continuation and the extension of additional support for immigrants
- Organization of several actions to promote reading

Currently, the following initiatives of the Ministry promote literacy in the Flemish Community include:

- Concept note on languages at school (2011)—Initiatives on enhancing the knowledge of the Dutch language and of foreign languages such as French (possible from the third year of regular primary school) and English or German (offered as initiation)
- Toolkit of Broad Evaluation Competences Dutch (2011)—A set of valid and reliable instruments for teachers and schools to measure the competencies of Dutch
- New strategic plan called Raising Literacy (2012–2016)—Raising the level of literacy of the population is the central mission of the plan

The Ministry of Education and Training develops general objectives, but it is up to schools, experts from the field of action, and key organizations to take initiative. Currently, the following initiatives to promote reading and literacy in the Flemish Community includes:

- Book Babies—A project to enhance the use of children’s books by parents during early childhood
- The Book Finder—A website that stimulates reading by assisting children and teenagers in choosing books
- Readers Tipping Readers—A website with reading tips from readers to readers, describing the general content of their favorite books
- The week of readout—A week in which adults read books to children
- The Month of Youth Books—An annual campaign that focuses on increasing the enjoyment of reading from reading and viewing illustrations, using a quality offering
- Best book teacher—This annual prize aims to reward teachers who show a practical and daily effort to include children’s books in class
- O Mundo, A Little World Library—A project to introduce the most beautiful picture books in multicultural classrooms
- IBBY-Flanders—A project from a department of the International Board on Books for Young People in Flanders that strives for children to have access to books

- The Book Jury—The Children and Youth Jury is a jury of children ages 4 to 16, in which jurors get a list of books to review and sometimes meet in groups to talk about books; it is the biggest reading group in Flanders
- Culture Connect (*Cultuurconnect*)—An organization with projects to support libraries and local cultural and community centers, including reading projects
- Culture in Schools Starts Here—A Web portal organized by *CANON Cultuurcel* and *Cultuurnet Vlaanderen* that provides an overview of cultural activities, partners, and support
- The LIST Project—A research-based project organized by the Hogeschool Utrecht in the Netherlands and implemented by school counselors to improve reading instruction and follow a three phase system consisting of regular support, remedial teaching, and intensive remedial teaching¹¹

Use and Impact of PIRLS

In general, the PIRLS 2006 findings received little public attention in Flanders, with information related to the study being made available mainly to the participating schools, policymakers, and educational researchers. When the results were first released, a few newspaper reports (e.g., in *De Standaard*) and radio items featuring the findings reached the general public. Later, the fact that only a small percentage of students were positioned as advanced readers attracted commentary in journals (e.g., in *Onderwijskrant*) and led to various groups such as parents of gifted children engaging in actions directed at influencing educational policy.¹²

The PIRLS results also have been mentioned in various other contexts over time, such as in recent discussions on reform of secondary education. In a document setting out government policy for education for 2009 to 2014, the Minister of Education stated that “our well-performing children do not perform very well.”¹³ This comment was a direct reaction to the PIRLS 2006 results.

A follow-up study conducted by Driessens and Faes on the impact of PIRLS 2006 in participating schools found only limited evidence of influence on school policy and practice relating to reading.¹⁴ Driessens and Faes were particularly interested in how schools interpreted and used the school feedback reports. Based on the findings of their quantitative and qualitative analyses, they concluded that although school principals and some other school staff read the feedback report for their school, most of these readers had difficulty interpreting the feedback results. This difficulty may partly explain why only a few principals used these data to adjust school policy. Driessens and Faes also noted that schools generally were only motivated to address issues highlighted by the data when stakeholders such as parents exerted pressure on them to do so.

Suggested Readings

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