LITERACY IN BELGIUM

(French Community)

COUNTRY REPORT

CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

March 2016

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1 Introduction

This report on the state of literacy in Belgium (French Community) is one of a series produced in 2015 and 2016 by ELINET, the European Literacy Policy Network. ELINET was founded in February 2014 and has 78 partner organisations in 28 European countries[1]. ELINET aims to improve literacy policies in its member countries in order to reduce the number of children, young people and adults with low literacy skills. One major tool to achieve this aim is to produce a set of reliable, up-to-date and comprehensive reports on the state of literacy in each country where ELINET has one or more partners, and to provide guidance towards improving literacy policies in those countries. The reports are based (wherever possible) on available, internationally comparable performance data, as well as reliable national data provided (and translated) by our partners.

ELINET continues the work of the European Union High Level Group of Experts on Literacy (HLG) which was established by the European Commission in January 2011 and reported in September 2012[2]. All country reports produced by ELINET use a common theoretical framework which is described here: "ELINET Country Reports – Frame of Reference"[3].

The Country Reports about Children and Adolescents are organised around the three recommendations of the HLG´s literacy report:

- Creating a literate environment
- Improving the quality of teaching
- Increasing participation, inclusion (and equity[4]).

Within its two-year funding period ELINET has completed Literacy Country Reports for all 30 ELINET member countries. In most cases we published separate **Long Reports** for specific age groups (Children / Adolescents and Adults), in some cases comprehensive reports covering all age groups. Additionally, for all 30 countries, we published **Short Reports** covering all age groups, containing the summary of performance data and policy messages of the Long Reports. These reports are accompanied by a collection of good practice examples which cover all age groups and policy areas as well. These examples refer to the **European Framework of Good Practice in Raising Literacy Levels;** both are to be found in the section "Good Practice"[5].

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[1] For more information about the network and its activities see: www.eli-net.eu.
[2] In the following, the final report of the EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy is referenced as "HLG report". This report can be downloaded under the following link: http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/school/doc/literacy-report_en.pdf.
[3] See: http://www.eli-net.eu/research/country-reports/.
[4] "Equity" was added by ELINET.
[5] See: http://www.eli-net.eu/good-practice/.

2 Executive Summary

LITERACY PERFORMANCE DATA

French-speaking Belgium participated in IEA's PIRLS (4th graders reading comprehension) in 2006 and 2011, and has been participating in OECD's PISA (15 year-olds' reading literacy) since 2000. It consequently is possible to describe the changes over time in average reading proficiency, according to different characteristics of the readers, and to compare relative reading levels of proficiencies for different age groups.

French-speaking Belgium performed well below the EU average in PIRLS 2011 (506 vs 535 EU-average) and slightly above the EU average in PISA 2012 (497 vs 489 EU average). While the performance in PIRLS remained about the same in 2006 and 2011 (500 vs 506), a significant increase (+ 21 score points) - the equivalent of about half a year of schooling - was observed in PISA between 2000 and 2012.

The proportion of pupils who can be considered as low-performing readers was almost the same in PISA as on EU average (20%). At grade 4, this proportion of low-performing readers was higher than the EU average (29% vs 20%). These students can read simple texts, retrieve explicit information, or make straightforward inferences, but they are not able to deal with longer or more complex texts, and are unable to interpret beyond what is explicitly stated in the text. The proportion of low-performing readers has slightly decreased in PIRLS between 2006 and 2011 (34.4% vs 29.6%). That proportion decreased as well in PISA between 2000 and 2012 but more drastically (from 28.2% to 19.2%). The decrease is high for boys (-7%) and even higher for girls (-8.5%).

The proportion of top-performing readers was very low (2%) in PIRLS, compared to EU average (9%). This proportion reached 10% in PISA, a little more than in EU countries on average (7%).

The gap according to the pupils' socio-economic background was somewhat lower than the EU average in PIRLS (65 vs 76 on average). It should be underlined that the percentage of parents whose highest level of education was university or higher was much above the EU average. In PISA, the socio-economic gap was much higher than the EU average (136 vs 89 on average). However, the indices of socio-economic background are not the same in PIRLS and PISA, so the comparison should be taken with caution. The higher socio-economic gap among 15 year-olds is potentially linked with the structure of the educational system, in which tracking starts earlier than in most of the countries. Early tracking is known to increase inequity.

In PISA 2009, the gap between native students and students with a migrant background was higher than in EU countries on average (60 vs 38 EU-average). It should be underlined that the proportion of students with an immigrant background was very high in BFR (22.1% vs 8.3 on EU average). In PIRLS, the mean score difference between those who always spoke the test language at home, and those who sometimes or never did so was below the EU average (16 vs 26). Here again, the proportion of pupils reporting they sometimes/never spoke the test language at home was much higher than in other countries on average (29% vs 20%). In PISA, this gap according to language spoken at home was above the EU average (79 vs 54).

In French-speaking Belgium, the gender gap (in favour of girls) was lower than the corresponding EU average differences both in PIRLS (5 vs 12 on EU average) and in PISA (26 vs 44 on average). The

gender difference was stable over time both in PIRLS and in PISA. At both levels, the increase in reading performance observed across the three cycles was quite similar among girls as among boys (+19 score point for girls, +20 for boys in PISA; +7 score points for both in PIRLS), resulting in the observed status quo of the gender gaps.

In conclusion, French-speaking Belgium has significantly increased its performance in reading over time among 15 year-olds, whereas its performance in PIRLS remained quite unchanged, showing an increase not large enough to be significant. In PIRLS, French-speaking Belgium still performs well below the EU countries on average, and has a proportion of low-performing readers higher than the EU countries on average, but it significantly decreased. In PISA, a drastic decrease of this proportion was observed between 2000 and 2012. It is now slightly below the EU average and the proportion of top-performers is above. The spread of achievement (gap between low and top performing readers) is lower than in the EU on average in PIRLS and higher in PISA.

The gap according to the gender is lower than on EU average in both studies. The trends are similar among girls and boys: both improved their overall reading performance to the same extent and in PISA, a drastic decrease of the proportion of low-performing readers was observed in both groups. The gap according to socio-economic status is somewhat lower in PIRLS and very much higher in PISA. The gap according to migration or language spoken at home is lower than the EU average in PIRLS but higher in PISA. Results regarding equity are still a matter of concern for 15 year-old students in French-speaking Belgium.

KEY LITERACY POLICY AREAS FOR DEVELOPMENT (AGE-SPECIFIC AND ACROSS AGE-GROUPS)

Creating a Literate Environment

Pre-Primary Years

Providing a supportive home environment: Compared to the European average, Belgium (French) has favourable scores as PIRLS data show: Most parents have positive attitudes to reading; however, 14% of pupils have parents who do not like reading. The availability of children's books in the home is high; yet 11% of pupils in Belgium (French) had 10 or fewer books at home, and these students did less well on PIRLS overall reading literacy (by 72 score points), compared with students who had 200 or more books.

In Belgium (French), parents engage often in literacy related activities with their children (30%). It is lower than the European average.

In addition, in Belgium (French), there are fewer parents who never engage in the nine literacy related activities, than in the EU 24 (2%). This Early Literacy Activity Scale correlates with later reading performance in grade 4. Students who were sometimes or never or almost never engaged in these activities with their parents before the beginning of primary school did less well on PIRLS overall reading literacy compared with students who were engaged often in these activities.

Primary Children and Adolescents

Providing a literate environment in school: According to PIRLS 2011, 89% of 4th graders in Belgium (French) were in classrooms which had class libraries – well above the corresponding EU-24 average of 73% (ELINET PIRLS 2011 Appendix, Table H2).

Supporting reading motivation, especially among boys and adolescents: In Belgium (French), as in some others countries, the reading motivation from 4th grade (cf. PIRLS 2011) to age 15 (cf. PISA 2009) has been declining.

In Belgium, all the individual characteristics studied are significantly connected to the reading performances. The girls, the non-retained pupils, those speaking French, those stemming from a socioculturally privileged environment, and those having positive good reading self-perceptions have better results than the others.

Moreover, the effect of the reading motivation on reading performances is not similar for all the pupils. The effect is stronger for pupils stemming from a socioculturally privileged environment.

Supporting reading motivation among Belgian boys is an important issue since achievement differs according to reading purpose. In Belgium (French), the reading scores of the girls for the literary texts are significantly superior to those of their male classmates (513 versus 503). Regarding the reading of informative texts, the results (profits) do not differ: the average of the girls amounts to 504, that of the boys to 503.

Strengthening the role of public libraries in reading promotion: There are about 180 public libraries in the French part of Belgium, which are recognised by the Ministry of the French Community. Their role is to develop the reading practices. They propose a department of loan of documents and, very often, they give their members the opportunity to browse the Internet, to participate in writing workshops or to take part in sessions of tales for example.

In some cities in the French part of Belgium, some public libraries are especially dedicated to children and to teenagers.

Offering digital literacy learning opportunities at school: Since 1998-1999, primary and secondary schools have started a huge programme for fitting out primary and secondary schools with computers. Unfortunately, especially in primary schools, computer rooms are largely underused. Many teachers are not trained to use this kind of tools as a support for their teaching.

According to Hindryckx and Lafontaine (in Mullis et al., 2012), computer technology is not emphasised in the process of teaching reading, and actual usage may depend on personal preference or on initiatives put in place by school staff. They point out that computers are used most often to locate information, and in activities designed to increase reading speed, lexical and syntactic knowledge, or text comprehension.

Improving the Quality of Teaching

Pre-Primary Years

Improving the quality of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC): According to Eurostat the total public expenditure per child in pre-primary education as a percentage of GDP in Belgium is 0.6% (2014, Figure D3) and the student/teacher ratio in pre-primary schools for children at the age of four is 16.1 students per teacher.

2.7% of the pre-primary teachers in Belgium are males.

Moreover, in the French part of Belgium, the length and the content of the preschool pre-service training is an important issue. The Statement of the Governmental policy advocates for a master's level in teacher initial education. The recruitment of pre-primary teacher is also a matter of preoccupation since a large part of students studying in order to become a pre-primary teacher have a certificate from vocational secondary education.

Improving early language and literacy screening and training: In Belgium (French), there is no systematic testing of students to diagnose reading difficulties. Moreover, outcomes from diagnostic tests must be confirmed through specialised testing by a psychologist or speech therapist. Since 2011-12, one person in each school is required to be trained in the area of dyslexia.

Introducing comprehensive literacy curricula in pre-primary schools: In the French Community of Belgium, there are core skills, ("*Socles de compétences*") that all teachers and schools, whatever the organising authority[6] have to follow. Each organising authority develops its own program, but a commission checks whether the program is coherent with the "*Socles de compétences*".

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[6] There are three main organising authorities: the State, the provinces/municipalities, and what is called « réseau libre » (in the vast majority of cases, catholic schools). All schools are publicly funded.

At pre-primary school level, play is the prime agent in pedagogical work. Official legislation emphasises welcoming, closely observing and listening to the child, in order to provide pedagogical support in his or her development. It refers to the need to respect the child's individual learning pace and to center activities within a functional context.

Thus, in most of the programmes for the pre-primary level developed by the organising authorities, the activities to be carried out are in relation to the subjects. For example, as regards communication situations, from the first cycle onwards the suggested activities related to the skill "orienting one's reading based on the communication situation" include using a reading corner, using the library, and finding a book in the classroom's library corner (schools administered by the French Community). At this cycle, it is rather a matter of initiation, as the language skills only need to be mastered at the end of the 2nd cycle (8 years).

Primary Children and Adolescents

Ensuring adequate time for language and literacy instruction in primary and secondary schools: According to PIRLS 2011 teachers in Belgium (French) report allocating less time to teaching reading across the curriculum and in reading classes (120 hours) than on average across EU countries (147 hours).

Improving the quality of literacy instruction: Belgium (French) is far below the EU-24 average on the frequency with which students engage in activities such as locating information in the text, identifying the main idea and explaining or supporting their understanding. The data suggest a weak emphasis on teaching reading comprehension strategies in Belgium (French). One might speculate whether this lack of teaching comprehension skills contribute to the weak reading performance of an important proportion of Belgian (French students) in grade four and at the age of fifteen years.

Improving the quality of pre-service and in-service teacher training: According to PIRLS 2011, fourth-grade students are typically taught reading by general-purpose primary school teachers who are responsible for teaching all basic subjects.

There is **less emphasis on teaching reading pedagogy in initial teacher education in Belgium (French)** (33% of students are taught by teachers who identify it as an area of emphasis), compared with the EU-24 average (59%). This may arise because among pre-service teachers, reading is included French language rather than being considered as a subject matter in its own right. According to PIRLS 2011, 5% of students in Belgium (French) are taught by teachers who report that remedial reading was an area of emphasis in their pre-service teacher education. The corresponding EU-24 average is 22%.

Futhermore, 5% of students in Belgium in PIRLS 2011 have a teacher who reported assessment methods in reading as an area of major emphasis in initial teacher education, compared with an EU-24 average of 27%.

Improving the quality and quantity (participation rates) of continuing professional development (CPD): Although teachers in Belgium (French) are expected to participate in continuous professional education as a professional duty (6 half-days per year are obligatory), the participation rates are still wanting. According to PIRLS 2011 41% of students in Belgium (French) were taught by teachers who had allocated no time to professional development in reading in the last two years.

Improving the quality and participation rates of continuing professional development targeted at building literacy expertise of teachers is especially important considering the high proportion of weak readers among Belgian (French) primary and secondary classes.

Extending systematic assessment of literacy skills: Since 2008, the Basic Studies Certificate (CEB, grade 6) is delivered at the end of primary education on the basis of an **external certifying assessment**, which is compulsory in every school type[14]. This examination assesses the mastery of the competencies expected at the end of primary education in French language but also in mathematics, science, history, and geography.

A common external certificative examination is also organised at the end of the third phase (grade 8) in the educational continuum (CE1D). Students are tested in French (but also in mathematics, science and foreign language).

Building a stronger focus on literacy into curricula: In both primary and secondary schools curricula, literacy is seldom considered as the integration of reading, writing skills and speaking skills. This segmented output approach doesn't favor the development of an integrated approach, considering the interrelated dimensions of the cognitive, social and sociocultural components of literacy;

In primary school curricula, the range of reading skills to be developed is quite large but doesn't include metacognitive processes. This doesn't make visible the importance to develop explicit teaching of reading strategies. The term "strategy" is not even mentioned in the standards. Then skills are exercised rather than explicitly taught.

Increasing Participation, Inclusion and Equity

The High Level Group of Experts on Literacy drew attention to persistent gaps in literacy, namely the gender gap, the socio-economic gap, and the migrant gap (HLG Final report 2012, pp. 46–50). These gaps derive from the reading literacy studies that repeatedly show unequal distribution of results among groups of children and adolescents (PIRLS, PISA).

Performance gaps in Belgium (French Community) and on average across the EU-24 are shown in Figures 2 and 3.

Figure 1: Performance Gaps in Belgium (Fr.) and on Average across the EU-24 - Primary Level
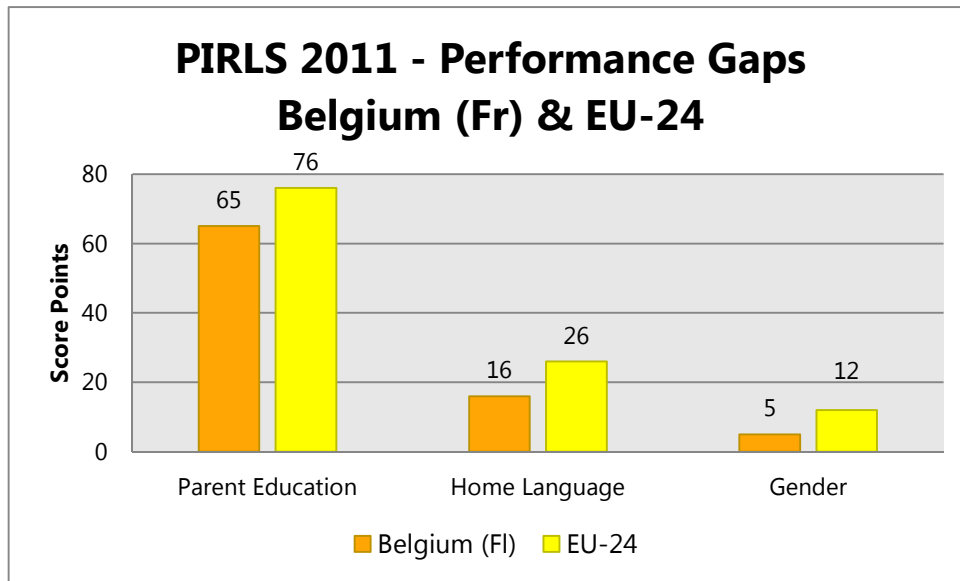
PIRLS 2011 - Performance Gaps Belgium (Fr) & EU-24

Education: University – Lower Secondary or lower; Language: Language of test spoken always – sometimes/never; Gender: Girls – Boys.

Figure 2: Performance Gaps in Belgium (Fr.) and on Average across EU Countries - Post-Primary Level

PISA 2009/2012 - Performance Gaps Belgium (Fr) & EU-Avg
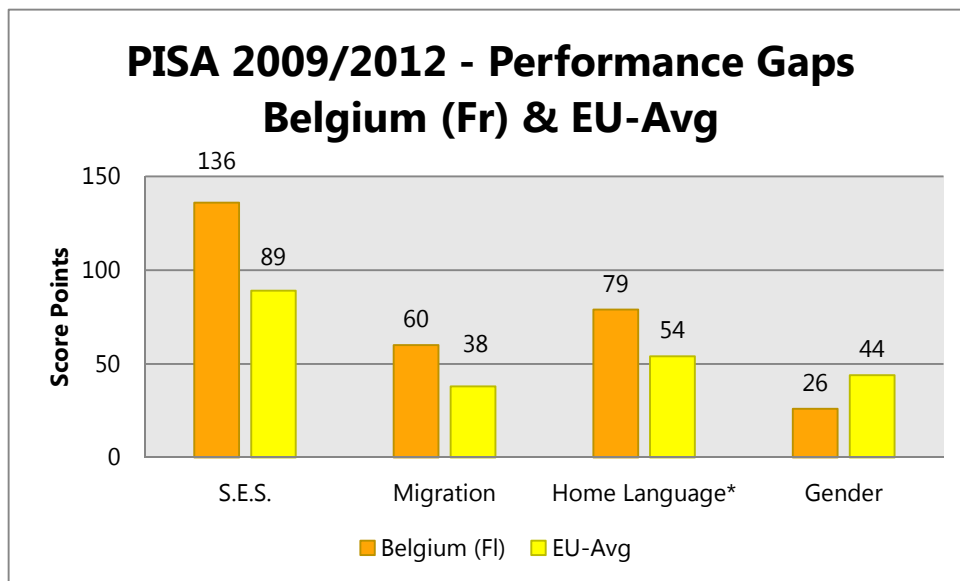
SES: Top – Bottom quartile on PISA ESCS scale; Migration: Native – first/second generation immigrants; Language: Speaks language of the PISA test at home – speaks another language; Gender: Girls - Boys

Pre-Primary Years

Compensating socio-economic and cultural background factors: Belgium (French) has a high percentage of pupils who have a migration background. About 29% sometimes speak a language other than French at home. The difference in reading achievement between pupils in Belgium (French) reporting that they always or sometimes/never spoke French was 16 score points, which is lower than the corresponding EU-24 average difference (26).

Increasing pre-school attendance of disadvantaged children: The participation rate at age 3 is 92% and at age 4 and age 5 is about 96% (Mangez, Joseph, Delvaux, 2002). However, there is a difference in enrolment rate between children aged 3 to 5 with and without migration background.

The length of kindergarten attendance has a positive effect on reading. In Belgium (French), children who attended 3 years and more had a higher reading score at grade 4 (513) than children who attended between 1 and 3 years (490).

Primary Children and Adolescents

Supporting struggling literacy learners: In Belgium (French), students have significantly increased their performance in reading over time among 15 year-olds, whereas their performance in PIRLS remained quite unchanged.

In PIRLS, Belgium (French) still performs well below the EU countries on average, and has a proportion of low-performing readers higher than the EU countries on average. This proportion has slightly declined in 2011. In PISA, a drastic decrease of this proportion was observed between 2000 and 2012. It is now slightly below the EU average and the proportion of top-performers is above.

In PIRLS 2011, teachers estimated that 21% of students in fourth grade in Belgium (French) are considered to be in need of remedial reading instruction. Teachers also estimated that 7% of pupils do indeed benefit from remedial reading instruction (ELINET PIRLS 2011 Appendix, Table K1). Hence, there is a shortfall of 14% between those in need and those benefiting. On average across EU countries, 18% of students in Grade 4 are identified by their teachers as being in need of remedial teaching, while 13% are identified as benefiting of such teaching.

3 General Information on the Belgian (French part) Education System

The general information on the Belgium (French part) Education System is derived from Eurydice[7], a paper by Dominique Lafontaine (2006) and PIRLS 2011 Encyclopedia (Hindryckx and Lafontaine in Mullis et al., 2012, p. 90).

Belgium is a Federal State with three official languages: French, Dutch and German.

In 1989, the Education Department was transferred from the federal government to the French, Flemish, and German Communities defined on a linguistic and cultural basis. There are also three Regions defined on a geographical basis: the Flemish region, Brussels capital and the Wallonia.

The federal authorities are still responsible for deciding the extent of compulsory education, minimum conditions for obtaining a diploma, and teachers' pensions. Competence for Primary and Secondary education lies with the Communities. Education is either organised by the French Community or subsidised by it (grant-aided public education and denominational or non-denominational grant-aided independent education). Provided they comply with laws, decrees and orders, controlling authorities enjoy fairly extensive autonomy, particularly with regard to methods of education and assessment.

Compulsory schooling starts at age 6 and ends at 18. Between the ages of 15 and 18 years, students can follow part-time schooling. Pre-primary education is well developed and free of charge. Children can enter preschools at the age of 2 and a half years old. The vast majority of children regularly attend preschool.

Primary education last 6 years (grade 1 to 6) and secondary education does, too (grade 7 to 12).

Continuing the work of primary education, the first stage of secondary education (grades 7 and 8) aims to construct and develop common basic knowledge and skills among all pupils. From the third year of secondary education onwards (grade 9 to 12), a distinction is made between two main education streams: on the one hand secondary "transition" education (general, technical or arts), leading to higher education, on the other hand secondary "qualification" education (technical or arts, and vocational) leading to the labour market. Students having graduated from the qualification stream can take an extra-year which qualifies them to enter higher education. Part-time education is organised in special centers called CEFA (Centres d'éducation et de formation en alternance - Centres for dual education and training).

Specialised education is provided for pupils with special educational needs, but various measures have been taken recently to help ensure the integration of some of these children in ordinary education.

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[7] See: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Belgium-French-Community:Overview.

Figure 3: Structure of the Belgian School System
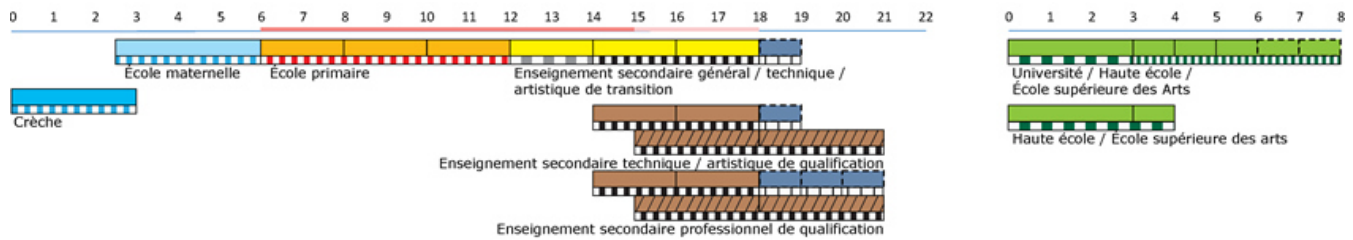
Source: Structure of European education systems[8]

At the end of the nineties[9], two major decrees for education have been promulgated. The first decree, called "*Décret Missions"* defines four main missions for the educational system of the French Community[10] and the means to reach those objectives. Among those objectives, the development of the individual is stressed, but one can also find a strong emphasis on equity issues. The third mission is "to get all students to acquire knowledge and skills which will enable them to engage in lifelong learning and to participate actively to the economic, social and cultural life" and the fourth is "to guarantee to all students equal opportunities of social emancipation".

This decree also introduces an important curriculum reform. "Les socles de compétences" (Core skills) have been drawn up for several grade levels (grade 2, 6, 8 and 12) and new programmes congruent with those competencies were elaborated and gradually introduced when approved by the adequate commissions[11].

The second Decree[12] called "*Décret sur l'école de la réussite"* (Decree for a successful school) is aimed at setting up an organisation based on cycles for primary education: a first cycle (last grade of preschool to grade 2) and a second cycle (grade 3 to grade 6). Grade repetition should be avoided within cycles; this objective was set in 2000 for cycle 1 and in 2005 for cycle 2. This Decree launches an attack on one of the strongest pillars of the organisation of the educational system in French Community – grade repetition.

In addition to these reforms, the French Community has regulated the enrolment of pupils in the first stage of secondary education by a decree (2011). The Declaration on Community Policy (DPC) 2014-2019[13]: The federate to succeed was adopted over these next years. The future of Wallonia and Brussels relies on the quality of education. The very last development of a "Pacte d'Excellence" (October 2015) aims to take up this challenge. The quality of education presupposes to overcome some taboos and to make best use of public resources available, to provide each social catchment area with adequate, complete and complementary supply.

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[8] See http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/facts_and_figures_en.php#diagram.

[9] July 24, 1997: Decree defining the priority missions for primary and secondary education (Parliament of the French Community of Belgium).

[10] Historically, it is the first text law, which defines general objectives for education common to all schools whatever the organizing authority (State, public, catholic).

[11] While missions and standards of competencies are common to all schools, programmes vary according to the organising authority. For each subject matter, it means that there will be at least four different programmes and in some cases even more. The amount of work to adapt all those programmes is tremendous.

[12] March 14, 1995: Decree aimed at promoting a successful school in primary education.

[13] See: http://www.federation-wallonie-bruxelles.be/index.php?id=dpc2014-2019.

"Le pacte d'excellence" (Teaching Excellence Pact)[14] is based on a participatory process, which will run from 2015 to mid-2016, with the aim to define action priorities at a 10-year horizon to strengthen the quality in education. Indeed, the whole world of education should be part of the pact. Teachers, headmasters, educators, parents, students, all have indeed useful expertise in the construction of this project, developed in close consultation with the economic, social and cultural sectors.

[14] http://www.pactedexcellence.be.

4 Literacy Performance Data for Children and Adolescents

4.1 Performance Data for Primary Children

The performance data for primary children are derived from the IEA´s PIRLS studies.

Inaugurated in 2001 and conducted every 5 years, **PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study)** is an assessment of pupils' reading achievement at fourth grade organised by the Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). The survey was administered in 35 countries in 2001, 45 education systems in 2006, and 50 in 2011. PIRLS assesses different purposes for reading (literary and informational) and different reading processes (retrieve explicit information, make inferences, interpret and integrate ideas and information, examine and evaluate content, language, and textual elements). Both multiple choice and open-ended questions are used.

Combining newly developed reading assessment passages and questions for 2011 with a selection of secure assessment passages and questions from 2001 and 2006, PIRLS 2011 allowed for measurement of changes since 2001. PIRLS 2011 also examined the national policies, curricula and practices related to literacy in participating countries, and included a set of questionnaires for students, parents/caregivers, teachers, and school principals to investigate the experiences that young children have at home and school in learning to read, in particular their attitudes and motivation towards reading.

For all PIRLS data used in this report, detailed tables with data for all participating countries in ELINET are provided, together with the EU averages (see Appendix C: ELINET PIRLS 2011 Data, Appendix D: ELINET PIRLS 2006 Data).

4.1.1 Performance and variation in reading: proportion of low and high performing readers

Pupils in French-speaking Belgium achieved an overall mean reading score of 506 in PIRLS 2011 (Table 1). Just two EU-24 countries achieved lower mean scores – Romania (502) and Malta (477). Performance among French-speaking Belgian pupils was broadly similar across reading purposes, while they achieved a mean score that was 13 points higher in basic comprehension processes (Retrieve & Infer) compared with more higher-level processes (Interpret, Integrate & Evaluate) (ELINET PIRLS 2011 Appendix, Tables A2-A5).

Table 1: Overall Performance on PIRLS 2011 – Belgium (Fr) and EU-24 Average

	Overall Reading – Mean Score
Belgium (Fr)	**506**
EU-24	535

Significant differences (relative to the EU-24 Average) are shown in **bold**.

29% percent of French-speaking Belgian students achieved at or below the Low PIRLS benchmark, compared with an EU-24 average of 20% (Table 2). Just 2% achieved at an advanced level, compared with an EU-24 average of 9%. In this respect, their profile is similar to that of Norway.

Table 2: Performance by Overall PIRLS Reading Benchmarks 2011 - Percentages of Pupils – Belgium (Fr) and EU-24 Average

	Below 400	400-475 Low	475-550 Intermediate	550-625 High	Above 625 Advanced
Belgium (Fr)	6	23	45	23	2
EU-24 Avg	5	15	36	35	9

The standard deviation for Belgium (French) (65 points) is marginally below the corresponding estimate for the EU-24, indicating that the spread of achievement in Belgium is a little narrower (Table 3). This low spread is however not a positive sign, since nearly half of the students are at the intermediate level The difference between scores at the 90th and 10th percentiles is another measure of spread. In Belgium, this was 166 points – lower than the EU-24 average difference of 181. Among EU member countries in PIRLS, Italy (167) has a similar spread of achievement.

Table 3: Spread of Achievement – Standard Deviation, 10th, 90th Percentiles, and Difference between 90th and 10th Percentiles on Overall Reading – Belgium (Fr) and EU-24 Averages

	Standard Deviation	10th Percentile	90th Percentile	90th-10th
Belgium (Fr)	65	420	586	**166**
EU-24 Avg	70	441	621	**180**

Significant differences in **bold**

In 2011, French-speaking Belgian pupils performed at about the same level on the PIRLS overall reading scale as their counterparts in 2006 (Table 4). While performance did increase by 6 points between 2006 and 2011, this difference was not large enough to be considered as significant. On average across EU countries, there was only a slight change in performance (1 point) between 2006 and 2011. Belgium (French) did not participate in PIRLS 2001.

Table 4: Trends in Performance 2001-2011 (Overall Scale) – Belgium (Fr) and EU-24

	2001	2006	Change (2006-2001)	2006	2011	Change (2011-2006)	2001	2011	Change (2011-2001)
Belgium (Fr)	-	500	-	500	506	6	-	506	-
EU Countries	534	534	0	534	535	1	534	535	1

Significant differences in **bold**

4.1.2 Gaps in reading

As in every European country, there are achievement gaps between different groups.

Parent's educational achievement

Pupils in Belgium (French) whose parent achieved a University degree or higher reached a mean score (534) that was some 65 points higher than pupils whose parents completed Lower Secondary education or below (469) (Table 3.9). The average difference across the EU-24 was 76 points, indicating a relatively weaker relationship between parents' educational level and performance in Belgium (French). Taking into account the global weakness of the pupils' results in Belgium (French), this result could mean that even children whose parents have a university degree underperformed the test due to ineffective reading practices.

Table 5: Percentages of Parents Whose Highest Level of Education was Lower Secondary, and Percentages who Finished University or Higher – Belgium (French) and EU-24 Average

Level of Education	Lower Secondary or Below		University or Higher		Difference (Univ or Higher – Lower Sec)
	%	Mean	%	Mean	
Belgium (French)	16	469	50	534	**65**
EU-24	18	495	30	571	**76**

Statistically significant mean score differences in **bold**.

Primary language spoken at home different from language used at school

In Belgium (French), 71% of pupils reported that they always spoke the language of the PIRLS reading test (French) at home – compared to the EU-24 Average 80% (Table 3.11). Twenty-nine percent of students in Belgium (French) reported that they sometimes or never spoke the test language – more than the corresponding EU-24 average of 20%. The difference in reading achievement between pupils in Belgium (French) reporting that they always or sometimes/never spoke the language of the test was 16 score points, which is lower than the corresponding EU-24 average difference (26).

Gender

In 2011, girls in French-speaking Belgium achieved a mean score on overall reading that was 5 points higher than the boys' mean score. This was less than the EU-24 average difference of 12 points (Table 6). The size of the gender difference in Belgium in 2011 is the same as in 2006. Across EU countries, the data point to a small reduction in the size of the gender difference between 2001 and 2011 (Table 3.5).

Table 6: Trends in Performance by Gender 2001-2011ý (Overall Scale) – Belgium (French) and EU-24 Average

	Belgium			EU		
	Girls	Boys	Girls-Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls-Boys
2011	509	504	**5**	541	529	**12**
2006	502	497	**5**	541	528	**13**
2001	-	-	-	542	525	**17**

Significant differences in **bold**

Figure 1: Performance Gaps in Belgium (Fr.) and on Average across the EU-24 - Primary Level
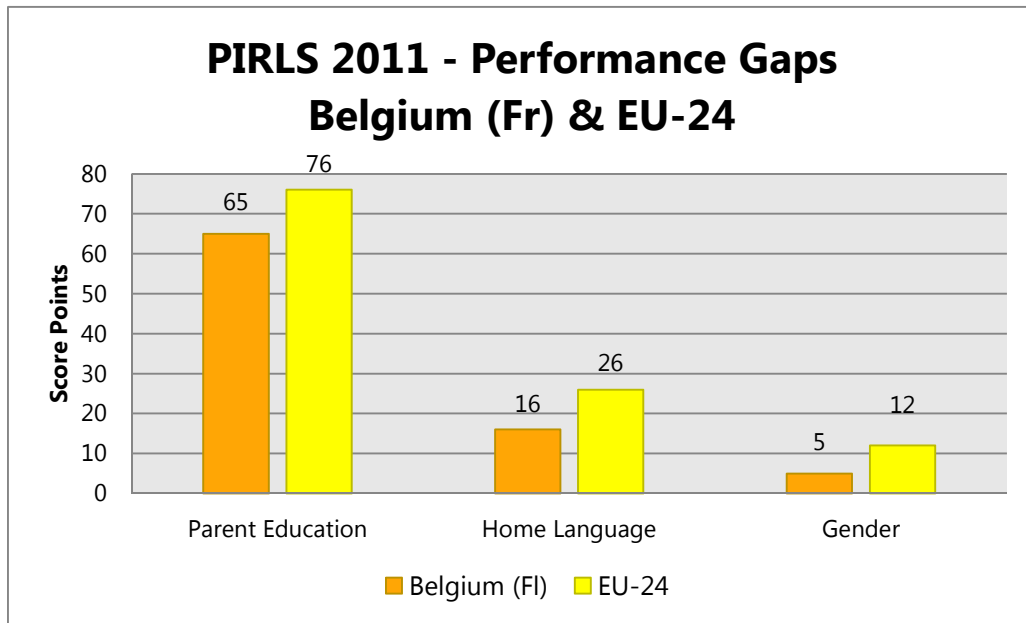
PIRLS 2011 - Performance Gaps
Belgium (Fr) & EU-24

Education: University – Lower Secondary or lower; Language: Language of test spoken always – sometimes/never; Gender: Girls – Boys.

Attitudes to Reading

Belgian French-speaking pupils scoring in the top quartile of the Like Reading scale achieved a mean overall reading score of 536 points. This was some 27 points lower than the EU-24 average on this scale (Table 3.6). On average across the EU-24, the difference between students in the top and bottom quartiles of the Like Reading scale was 52 points, indicating a similar relationship between liking reading and performance in Belgium (French) (55 points).

Table 7: Mean Overall Reading Scores of Pupils in the Top and Bottom Quartiles of the PIRLS Like Reading Scale – Belgium and EU-24 Average

Like Reading	Overall Reading Score		
	Top Quartile	Bottom Quartile	Difference (Q4-Q1)
Belgium (French)	536	481	**55**
EU-24	563	511	**52**

Significant differences in **bold**

Pupils in French-speaking Belgium in the top quarter of the Confidence in Reading scale achieved a mean score (538) that was some 75 points higher than students in the bottom quarter (463) (Table 8). The average difference across the EU-24 was 80 points.

Table 8: Mean Overall Reading Scores of Students in the Top and Bottom Quartiles of the PIRLS Confidence in Reading Scale – Belgium (French) and EU-24 Average

Confidence in Reading	Overall Reading Score		
	Top Quartile	Bottom Quartile	Difference (Q4-Q1)
Belgium (French)	538	463	75
EU-24	570	490	**80**

Significant differences in **bold**

Since 2008, the Basic Studies Certificate (CEB, grade 6) is delivered at the end of primary education on the basis of an **external certifying assessment**, which is compulsory in every school type[14]. This examination assesses the mastery of the competencies expected at the end of primary education in French language, mathematics, science, history, and geography.

A common **external certificative** examination is also organised at the end of the third phase (grade 8) in the educational continuum (CE1D). Students are tested in French, mathematics, science and foreign language. The CE1D became compulsory for all pupils in 2013.

Students are also tested at the end of grade 12 in reading or history, depending on the track they attend.

External formative assessments of pupils' attainments are organized every year in October at grade 3, and 5. These Non-Certificative External Assessments were institutionalised by decree (june 2006).The goal of these assessments is to allow teachers to diagnose the strengths and weaknesses of their pupils and to adjust their teaching accordingly. The unit responsible for these assessments (*Service général du pilotage*) produces in collaboration with the University of Liège an analysis of the results and a document with advices for teachers. The unit analyses the results and devises teaching guidelines

In 2014, the reading assessment focused on informative texts both in grade 3 and grade 5.The results showed that reading performances remain affected by the sociocultural level of the primary schools. In grade 3, the mean score is **63 percent** (the mean score for students enrolled in schools which benefit from positive discrimination policies is 54% whereas the mean score for the other students is 66%).

In grade 5, the mean score is 60% (the mean score for students enrolled in schools which benefit from positive discrimination policies is 52% whereas the mean score for other students is 64%).

4.2 Performance Data for Adolescents

The performance data are derived from the OECD PISA study.

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) led by OECD (http://www.pisa.OECD.org) **assesses the skills and knowledge of 15-year-old students every three years in all OECD countries and** in a number of partner countries.

Since 2000, PISA has been testing students in reading, mathematics and science. The OECD assessment also collects information on students' backgrounds and on practices, motivational attributes and metacognitive strategies related to reading.

The PISA tests assess different aspects of reading literacy – retrieve information, interpret, reflect and evaluate on texts – and use a variety of texts – continuous (prose) and non-continuous (texts including graphs, tables, maps...). About half of the questions are multiple-choice, the other half open-ended (short or constructed answers). Results are reported on scales defining different levels of proficiency ranging from 1 (low performing) to 6 (high performing). Level 2 is considered as the level all 15 year-olds should reach, and will enable them to participate effectively to society. Since 2015, PISA has been administered on computers only in most participating countries.

The follow-up of students who were assessed by PISA in 2000 as part of the Canadian Youth in Transition Survey has shown that students scoring below Level 2 face a disproportionately higher risk of poor post-secondary participation or low labour-market outcomes at age 19, and even more so at age 21, the latest age for which data from this longitudinal study are currently available. For example, of students who performed below Level 2 in PISA reading in 2000, over 60% did not go on to any post-school education by the age of 21; by contrast, more than half of the students (55%) whose highest level was Level 2 attended college or university (OECD 2010, S. 52).

4.2.1 Performance and variation in reading; proportion of low and high performing readers

The French-speaking Belgium has participated in PISA since 2000. It is therefore possible to describe the change in reading performance over twelve years on average, according to different characteristics of the readers.

Table 9: Reading performance in PISA 2012

	Mean	S.E.
Belgium (French)	**497**	(3.9)
EU-27	489	(0.6)

S. E. = standard error; Significant differences between the country and the EU average are shown in **bold**

In PISA 2012, the French-speaking Belgium performed above the EU's average.

Table 10: Trends in reading performance - PISA 2000-2012

	2000		2009		2012		Change 2000–2009		Change 2009–2012		Change 2000–2012	
	Mean	S.E.	Mean	S.E.	Mean	S.E.	Mean	S.E.	Mean	S.E.	Mean	S.E.
Belgium (French)	476	(7.2)	490	(4.2)	497	(3.9)	15	(9.7)	7	(6.3)	**21**	(10.1)
EU-27	489*	(0.7)	486**	(0.6)	489***	(0.6)	3*	(5.0)	**5****	(2.7)	3*	(6.0)

Significant differences between assessment cycles in **bold** *EU21 **EU26 ***EU27

As shown in table 10, the reading performances of students in the French-speaking Belgium have improved significantly between 2000 and 2012. An increase of 21 score points is equivalent to half a year of schooling. According to Lafontaine (2014), this positive change is specifically linked to the educational reform of 2006-2007 ("Réforme du 1er degré"), changing the structure of the education system at grades 7-8. A differentiated stream and curriculum have been created, providing a reinforced curriculum in language of instruction and mathematics for low achievers, i.e. the students who did not get their certificate at the end of primary education. The students who follow the differentiated curriculum have the obligation to take again this primary education external assessment and to be successful before being oriented to a less demanding track, as it was the case before. The combination of a reinforced curriculum and the obligation of reaching a common minimal standard raised the average level, and more particularly lowered the percentage of low-performing readers, and increased the performance of at risk students (namely boys, migrants, students who don't speak the test language at home).

Table 11: Spread of achievement. Difference between 10th and 90th percentiles on the reading scale, all students and by gender – PISA 2012

	Difference 90th–10th for all students		Difference 90th–10th for girls		Difference 90th–10th for boys	
	Score diff.	S.E.	Score diff.	S.E.	Score diff.	S.E.
Belgium (French)	**269**	(7,4)	**250**	(9,7)	**287**	(12,7)
EU-27	251	(1,3)	230	(1,2)	259	(1,6)

Significant differences between the country and EU in **bold**

In the French-speaking Belgium, the spread of achievement is significantly higher than in the EU countries on average.

Table 12: Percentage of low-performing (below level 2) and high-performing (levels 5 and 6) students - PISA 2012

	Below level 2		Levels 5 and 6	
	%	S.E.	%	S.E.
Belgium (French)	19.2	(1,4)	**10.0**	(0,9)
EU-27	19.7	(0,2)	7.0	(0,1)

Significant differences between the country and EU in **bold**

In French-speaking Belgium, the proportion of low-performers in 2012 is the same as in the EU countries on average, whereas high-performers are more numerous than in the EU countries.

Table 13: Trends in the proportion of low-performers (below level 2) in reading, all students, and by gender – PISA 2000-2012

| | Proportion of students below level 2 in reading | | | | | |
| | All students | | Girls | | Boys | |
	%	S.E.	%	S.E.	%	S.E.
2000	28.2	(2.7)	21.3	(2.9)	33.7	(3.3)
2009	23.2	(1.6)	18.9	(1.7)	27.2	(2.4)
2012	19.2	(1.4)	**14.2**	(1.6)	24.1	(1.7)

Significant differences between assessment cycles in **bold**

Between 2000 and 2012, the proportion of low-performers in reading decreased quite substantially - namely by 9% - in the French Community of Belgium: among girls, a decrease of 7.1% is observed, while among boys the percentage comes to - 9.6%.

4.2.2 Gaps in reading performance

Socio-economic status

Table 14: Difference in reading performance between bottom and top national quartiles of the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status – PISA 2009

| | Difference between bottom and top national quartiles in the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status |
	Score diff.
Belgium (French)	**136**
EU-26	**89**

Significant differences between assessment cycles in **bold**

In the French-speaking Belgium, the gap in reading performance according to the students' socioeconomic background is much higher than in the European average. The gap of 136 score points is equivalent to three-and-a-half years of schooling. The French-speaking Belgium is more performant but also much less equitable than European countries on average. Experts consider that it is mainly due to a differentiated structure of the education system, and to the high rate of grade retention (the highest by far among OECD countries) (Lafontaine & Monseur, 2012).

Migration

Table 15: Percentage of students and reading performance by immigrant status – PISA 2009

| | Native students | | | | Students with an immigrant background (first- or second-generation) | | | | Difference in reading performance between native and students with an immigrant background | |
| | Percentage of students | S.E. | Performance on the reading scale | | Percentage of students | S.E. | Performance on the reading scale | | | |
			Mean	S.E.			Mean	S.E.	Score dif.	S.E.
Belgium (French)	77.9	(2.2)	508	(3.8)	22.1	(2.2)	448	(9.7)	**60**	(9.9)
EU-26	91.7	(0.0)	490	(0.4)	8.3	(0.0)	452	(6,4)	**38**	(6.4)

Significant differences between native and students with an immigrant background in **bold**

In the French-speaking Community of Belgium, the percentage of students with an immigrant background is high (22.1 %), much higher than in the EU countries on average. The gap between native students and those with an immigrant background is 58 score points, which is equivalent to one-and-a-half years half of schooling. The gap between native students and those with an immigrant background is higher than the EU countries on average.

Language spoken at home

Table 16: Percentage of students and reading performance, by language spoken at home – PISA 2012

| | Speak test language at home | | | | Speak another language at home | | | | Difference in reading according to language spoken at home | |
| | Percentage of students | S.E | Performance on the reading scale | | Percentage of students | S.E. | Performance on the reading scale | | Score diff. | S.E. |
			Mean	S.E.			Mean	S.E.		
Belgium (French)	82.3	(0.8)	506	(3.9)	17.7	(1.6)	427	(9.6)	**79**	(9.4)
EU-27	86.7	(0.0)	494	(0.4)	13.3	(0.0)	441	(5.4)	54	(5.4)

Significant differences in **bold**

In the French-speaking Community of Belgium, the gap between students speaking the test language at home and those who do not (17.7% of the students) is higher than the EU's average. The gap of 79 score points is equivalent to two years of schooling.

Gender

Table 17: Mean reading performance by gender and gender differences – PISA 2009

	Boys		Girls		Difference (B – G)	
	Mean	S.E.	Mean	S.E.	Score diff.	S.E.
Belgium (French)	478	(6.2)	503	(4.5)	**-26**	(7.1)
EU-26	463	(0.5)	506	(0.4)	**-44**	(0.5)

Significant differences between boys and girls in **bold**

Gender difference in reading performance in the French-speaking Belgium is lower than in EU countries on average.

Table 18: Trends in reading performance by gender – PISA 2000-2012

	Belgium (French)				EU-27			
	Girls		Boys		Girls		Boys	
	Mean	S.E.	Mean	S.E.	Mean	S.E.	Mean	S.E.
2000	495	(7,9)	460	(9,1)	506*	(0,8)	473*	(0,9)
2009	504	(4,4)	478	(6,1)	507**	(0,7)	464**	(0,()
2012	514	(4,4)	480	(4,3)	511***	(0,6)	468***	(0,8)

Significant differences between assessment cycles in **bold** *EU21 **EU26 ***EU27

In the French-speaking Belgium, the average increase in reading performance observed between 2000 and 2012 is similar among girls (+ 19 score points) and boys (+ 20 score points). The trend is different in EU countries on average: between 2000 and 2012 the girls' performance increased by 5 score points while the boys' decreased by the same value.

Figure 2: Performance Gaps in Belgium (Fr.) and on Average across EU Countries - Post-Primary Level
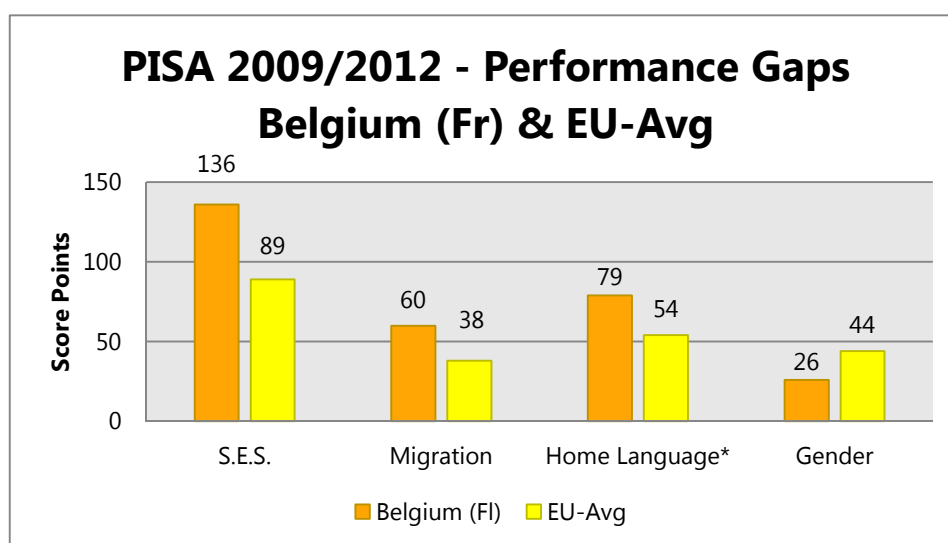
SES: Top – Bottom quartile on PISA ESCS scale; Migration: Native – first/second generation immigrants; Language: Speaks language of the PISA test at home – speaks another language; Gender: Girls - Boys

Engagement and metacognition

Table 19: Mean reading scores between students poorly engaged and highly engaged in reading – PISA 2009

	Low quarter		Top quarter		Difference
	Mean	S.E.	Mean	S.E.	
Belgium (French)	435	(4.9)	558	(3.7)	**123**
EU-26	444	(0.8)	543	(0.8)	**99**

Significant differences according to the level of reading engagement in **bold**.

In the French-speaking Belgium, there is a gap of 123 score points - which is equivalent to three years of schooling - between the students reporting as being highly engaged in reading (top quartile), and those reporting being poorly engaged (bottom quartile) in that activity. Not surprisingly, students who report as being engaged in reading perform better in the PISA test. The difference between the most and the least engaged readers is higher in the French-speaking Belgium than in the EU's average

Table 20: Mean reading scores between students in low and top quartiles of understanding and remembering strategies – PISA 2009

	Low quartile		Top quartile		Difference
	Mean	S.E.	Mean	S.E.	
Belgium (French)	420	(5.8)	556	(3.9)	**136**
EU-26	**433**	(0.8)	**531**	(0.8)	**98**

Significant differences according to the degree of awareness of efficient reading strategies (understanding and remembering strategies) in **bold**.

In the French-speaking part of Belgium, there is a gap of 136 score points - equivalent to more than three years of schooling- between the students who know which strategies are the most efficient to understand and remember a text, and those who have a limited knowledge of this. On average, in the EU-26, the gap is somewhat lower (98 score points). This huge difference reflects how closely reading proficiency and awareness of efficient reading strategies are linked.

Table 21: Mean reading scores between students in low and top quartiles of summarising strategies– PISA 2009

	Low quartile		Top quartile		Difference
	Mean	S.E.	Mean	S.E.	
Belgium (French)	419	(5.5)	555	(3.6)	**137**
EU-26	440	(0.8)	530	(0.7)	**90**

Significant differences according to the degree of awareness of reading strategies (summarising strategies) in **bold**.

In the French-speaking Belgium, there is a gap of 137 score points – which is equivalent to more than three years of schooling- between the students who know which strategies are the most efficient to summarise a text, and those who have a limited knowledge of that. On average, in the EU-26, the gap is somewhat lower (90 score points). Again, this huge difference reflects how closely reading proficiency and awareness of efficient reading strategies are linked.

External formative assessments of pupils' attainments are organised every year in October at grade 3, 5, and 10. These Non-Certificative External Assessments were institutionalised by decree (June 2006).The goal of these assessments is to allow teachers to diagnose the strengths and weaknesses of their pupils and to adjust their teaching accordingly. The unit responsible for these assessments ("Service général du pilotage") produces, in collaboration with the University of Liège, an analysis of the results and a document with advice for teachers. The unit analyses the results and devises teaching guidelines[15].

In 2014, the national external reading assessment focused on informative texts in grade 10.The results showed that reading performances remain strongly affected by the track in which students are enrolled in. In grade 10, the mean score is 62% for students enrolled in the "*general*" track, 55% for the "*technique de transition"* track. Among the vocational tracks, the mean score for the "*enseignement technique de qualification"* is 47% and for the "*enseignement professionnel"* track is 33% general.

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[15] See: www.enseignement.be/evaluationsexternes.

5 Policy areas

The High Level Group of Experts on Literacy (2012, p. 38) recommended that all EU Member States should focus on the following areas as they craft their own literacy solutions:

1) Creating a more literate environment

2) Improving the quality of teaching

3) Increasing participation, inclusion and equity (the term "equity" was added by ELINET).

The following parts refer to these three key issues, however some overlapping may occur.

In order to achieve as much comparability as possible across countries, quantitative and qualitative indicators for which information from international data are available are reported. Appendix A provides more information on criteria for the choice of indicators and the chosen indicators for the pre-primary age group. For each of these indicators, Appendix B contains a table with numbers of the European countries participating in ELINET. Appendix C has been created using the international database for PIRLS 2011 – and contains separate tables for all information reported. If countries did not participate in PIRLS 2011, data for PIRLS 2006 are referred to. Appendix D offers this information for the PIRLS 2006 data.

5.1 Creating a literate environment for children and adolescents

The EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy stated the following in relation to ***creating a more literate environment***:

> "Creating a more literate environment will help stimulate a culture of reading, i.e. where **reading for pleasure** is seen as the norm for all children and adults. Such a culture will fuel reading motivation and reading achievement: people who like to read, read more. Because they read more, they read better, and because they read better they read more: a virtuous circle which benefits individuals, families and society as a whole." (HLG report 2012, p. 41).

Parents play a central role in children's emergent literacy development. They are the first teachers, and shape children's language and communication abilities and attitudes to reading by being good reading role models, providing reading materials, and reading to the child.

Schools play an important role in offering a literate environment for students. Schools may foster reading motivation and reading for pleasure by establishing school and classroom libraries, offering a wide variety of books and other reading material in different genres, providing sheltered and comfortable spaces for individual reading activities (like reading clubs), and not forcing children into having to express and exchange their individual (intimate) reading experiences.

However, schools do not have sole responsibility. A broad range of actors may shape literacy motivation, from parents and peers to libraries. Parents may provide role models and influence children's attitudes towards literacy practices. Also, libraries have a vital role if they offer free books, especially for families who cannot afford to buy books. Regional or national campaigns may inspire children and their parents to engage in reading activities (Cf. ELINET Country Reports, Frame of Reference, pp. 29ff.).

Adolescence is a crucial phase in life where young people develop long-term *identities and self-concepts* which include media preferences and practices (*media identity*). From this perspective, it is of great importance that families, schools and communities offer young people rich opportunities to encounter the *culture of reading* and develop a stable *self-concept as a reader/writer* and member of a literary culture. This includes access to a broad variety of reading materials (in print and electronic forms) and stimulating literate environments in and outside of schools; it also includes opportunities to get actively involved in engaging with texts, and communicating, reflecting on and exchanging ideas about texts with peers and ´competent others´, such as teachers or parents (Ibid., pp. 45f) .

5.1.1 Providing a literate environment at home

The **home learning environment**, particularly in the first three years, is extremely important (Brooks et al. 2012). It determines the quantity and quality of interactions between the infant and the primary caregivers, who are the most powerful agents of language development, both receptive and expressive, in the context of everyday activities and experiences. During these years, experience-dependent creation of synapses is maximal. We know that the more words the children are exposed to, the more they can learn. Caregiver-child relations in their turn strongly influence the ability to learn, by influencing self-esteem, general knowledge and motivation.

Several indicators are used to describe the literate home environment of very young children in this report, drawing on data from international sources (PIRLS) that are comparable across countries. It is important to acknowledge that some of the PIRLS data are self-reported and may be biased by social desirability and the ways in which questions are interpreted by parents within countries.

Parental attitudes to reading

PIRLS 2011 used the "Parents Like Reading Scale" according to their parents' responses to seven statements about reading and how often they read for enjoyment. The figures are presented below with the percentage of students in Belgium (French) whose parents "like", "somewhat like" or "do not like" reading as reported by PIRLS 2011 (Mullis et al. 2012a, Exhibit 4.4 – Parents Like Reading, p. 120).
- Like reading: 29.2% (European average 35.3%)
- Somewhat like reading: 56.3% (European average 52.6%)
- Do not like reading: 14.5% (European average 17.9%)
  (For an overview of European countries see table B1 in Appendix B.)

Compared to the European average, the number of pupils in Belgium (French) whose parents have positive attitudes towards reading is slightly lower. The importance of parental attitudes to reading is shown by the fact that in Belgium (French) there are significant differences in reading performance at grade 4 between children whose parents like to read (average achievement 533) and those who do not (average achievement 480).

Home Educational Resources

Eighteen percent of pupils' parents in Belgium (French) reported having few home resources for learning (Table 22). Similarly, there was a 9 percentage point gap between the EU Average (25) for many resources, and the Belgian average (34), suggesting that pupils in Belgium have greater access to home resources. The difference in achievement between French speaking pupils in Belgium whose parents reported having many home resources and few resources was 82 score points – just 3 points higher than the corresponding EU-24 average difference (79).

Table 22: Percentages of Pupils Whose Parents Reported Having Few or Many Home Resources for Learning, and Corresponding Mean Overall Reading Scores – Belgium (French) and EU-24 Average

Level of Home Resources	Few Resources		Many Resources		Difference (Many - Few)
	%	Mean	%	Mean	
Belgium (French)	18	463	34	545	**82**
EU-24	25	495	25	573	**79**

Statistically significant mean score differences in **bold**.

Number of children's books in the home

Almost 11% of students in Belgium (French) reported having 10 or fewer books at home (ELINET PIRLS Appendix, Table E1). This is about the same as the EU-24 average of 11.3%. In Belgium (French), 14.7% had 200 or more books compared with an EU-24 average of 12.3%. The mean reading score difference in favour of students with 200 books compared with those who had 10 or fewer books was 71.8 points in Belgium (French), compared with an average of 81.7 points across the EU-24. Hence, the link between number of books and reading achievement in Belgium (French) is weaker than on average across the EU-24.

Early Literacy Activity Scale

PIRLS 2011 reports the percentage of students whose parents (often, never or almost never) engaged in literacy-relevant activities with them before the beginning of primary school (Mullis et al. 2012a, exhibit 4.6 - Early Literacy Activities Before Beginning Primary School, p. 126). Nine activities are considered: reading books, telling stories, singing songs, playing with alphabet toys, talking about things done, talking about things read, playing word games, writing letters or words, reading signs and labels aloud.

The composite scores for all these activities are listed below (for an overview of European countries see table B3 in Appendix B):
- Often: 30.0% (European average 40.7%)
- Sometimes: 66.9% (European average 57.4%)
- Never or almost never: 3.0% (European average 1.9%).

This means that, in Belgium (French) there are fewer parents who often engage in the nine activities, than in the EU 24 (2%). This Early Literacy Activity Scale correlates with later reading performance in grade 4. The average reading score of pupils who were engaged often in these activities was 524, as compared with 501 and 487 respectively for those pupils who were sometimes, or never or almost never, engaged in these activities with their parents before the beginning of primary school. These figures demonstrate the importance of the time devoted to literacy-related activities in early childhood and their association with achievement in Grade 4.

While the Early Literacy Activity Scale gives composite score, it is of interest to look at single items. If only the category "often" is considered, the percentage of pupils in Belgium (French) whose parents engaged in literacy-related activities with them before the beginning of primary compared with the European average:
- read books to them often: 50.2% (European average 58.4%)
- told stories to them often: 51.4% (European average 51.5%)
- sang songs to them often: 46.6% (European average 50.6%)

- played games involving shapes (toys and puzzles) with them often: 59.5% (European average 63.5%).

  (For more details and an overview of European countries see table B 4-B 7 in Appendix B.)

> **Challenge:** Since reading to the child is a predictor of future literacy achievement it is a matter of concern that there are differences between parents concerning social class and migrant factors. There is a need for programmes **to raise awareness of all parents** that literacy is a key to learning and life chances and that the basis for good literacy achievement is laid in early childhood. In particular there is a need for more family literacy programmes with **a focus on supporting migrant parents and care givers** in understanding and fostering their children's literacy development.

5.1.2 Providing a literate environment in school

Availability and use of classroom library

Based on data provided by their teachers, PIRLS shows that 89% of pupils in Belgium (French) were in classrooms which had class libraries – well above the corresponding EU-24 average of 73% (ELINET PIRLS 2011 Appendix, Table H2). Almost twice as many students in Belgium (Fr) (63%) were in classrooms with at least 50 library books, compared to students on average across the EU-24 (32%).

5.1.3 Providing a digital environment

Digital environment of primary students

According to principals, 17% of students are in schools with one computer available for 1-2 students and 28% have no computer available for reading instruction (European average 7%) (Mullis et al., exhibit 5.8, p. 158).

According to teachers' reports, 2.1% of students in Belgium (French) have a computer available for reading lessons, compared to the EU-average of 45% (ELINET PIRLS 2011 Appendix Table I6). Just 1.5% use a computer at least monthly to look up information. The corresponding EU-24 average is 39.9% (ibid). However, in Denmark, for example, over three-quarters of students use a computer to look up information on a monthly basis.

Since 1998-1999, primary and secondary schools have started a huge program for fitting out primary and secondary schools with computers. Unfortunately, especially in primary schools, computer rooms are largely underused. Many teachers are not trained to use these kinds of tools as a support for their teaching.

According to Hindryckx and Lafontaine (in Mullis et al., 2012), computer technology is not emphasised in the process of teaching reading, and actual usage may depend on personal preference or on initiatives put in place by school staff. They point out that computers are used most often to locate information, and in activities designed to increase reading speed, lexical and syntactic knowledge, or text comprehension.

Digital environment of secondary students

Digital equipment in Belgian French schools is satisfactory; broadband internet access is mostly available and schools enjoy good connectivity; however, students' frequency of use of computers is below EU average.

> **Challenge:** Students' frequency of use of computer during reading lessons should be encouraged through teacher professional development programmes in order to help students develop their digital reading skills. This need is observed both at primary and lower secondary school level.

5.1.4 The role of public libraries in reading promotion

There are about 180 public libraries in the French part of Belgium, which are recognised by the Ministry of the French Community.

Their role is to develop the reading practices. They propose a department for the lending of books and documents and, very often, they give their members the opportunity to browse the Internet, to participate in writing workshops or to take part in storytelling sessions, for example.

In some cities in the French part of Belgium, some public libraries are especially dedicated to children and to teenagers. For example, the Bibliobus is a mobile service that delivers books from public libraries to people and schools.

Cooperation between secondary schools, families, libraries and other agents in literacy promotion for adolescents

There is no systematic cooperation. This is left to local (municipalities) or school initiatives.

5.1.5 Improving literate environments for children and adolescents: Programmes, initiatives and examples

No such general programmes exist. There are local initiatives, but more often, they are issued from the Ministry of Culture, rather than Education.

Currently, as mentioned in the PIRLS 2011 Encyclopedia (Mullis et al., 2012, p. 89), the following initiatives promote reading in the French Community of Belgium:

- "Des coins lecture dans les consultations de l'Office national de l'enfance" [16] -A project that promotes the installation of reading areas in child care centres;
- Read Us a Story ("Lis-nous une histoire")[17]-A program in which senior citizens read stories to children in pre-primary schools;
- Opening My Daily Newspaper ("Ouvrir mon quotidien"[18]-A project that provides each interested class in Grades 5 and 6 two daily newspapers from the French-speaking press throughout the school year;
- Reading Makes You Happy ("Au Bonheur de lire"[19])-One of several catalogues that lists high quality books;
- "Salon du livre de jeunesse" [20](The Books for Younger Readers Fair) -A book fair for children, teenagers, and their parents;
- The Reading Passion ("La fureur de lire"[21])-A range of activities, including meetings with authors or illustrators, debates, reading shows by well-known actors, or literary games, that promote reading for the public at large.

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[16] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ARvDbWR_fC0.
[17] See www.lisnousunehistoire.cfwb.be.
[18] See www.ouvrirmonquotidien.cfwb.be.
[19] See http://www.culture-enseignement.cfwb.be/index.php?id=cult_ens_page104.
[20] See http://www.saloneduc.be/je-suis-visiteur/visiter/espace-livre-jeunesse.

However, in October 2015 a new programme for reading with 30 recommended actions, called "Pacte d'Excellence"[22], was launched by the current Ministry of Education. It concerns girls and boys between 0-18 years old. The objective is to put reading back in the centre of learning and educational and cultural practices, by considering that reading is an essential skill in the development and in the self-fulfilment of individuals and the democratic society.

Among the actions listed in this Plan, three of them seem to be quite innovative.

Realise an inventory of the initial training (formation) related to the didactics of reading in Federation Wallonia-Brussels: at the moment, there are very strong differences of approach between the pre-service teacher training schools of the Federation Wallonia-Brussels regarding didactics of reading. Some of them develop Credits specifically dedicated to reading (by including an introduction to youth literature), others do not. It was decided to launch an inventory, allowing to highlight the plurality of the existing practices and of recommendations and the results of this must be given at the beginning of 2016.

Revise the objectives, the skills and the knowledges to be mobilised in the learning of reading within the framework of the reform of the initial teacher training and the Teaching Excellence Pact: Based on the results of the proposal 1, to remedy the deficiencies noticed in the training to the didactics of reading, to objectify a series of skills and knowledges - in particular the cognitive, often underestimated dimension - which should appear in the initial training of the future teachers who will teach reading.

Appoint a person in charge of "reading" by schools, and develop a network of key resource staff in schools around reading.

Family literacy programs

There are no such literacy programmes for families.

Programmes for introducing parents and children to libraries and bookshops

There is a *General Department of Literature and Books* within the General Directorate of Culture. One of its mandates is the promotion of youth literature.[23] The directorate organises *La Fureur de lire* (The reading passion) "an annual reading event, mainly taking place in public libraries and bookshops, with the aim to promote reading through interviews with authors and illustrators, storytelling family walks, reading aloud to children, exhibits on comics, etc."[24]

The web page belonging to the organisation "Promotion des Lettres" is only partly functional and it was not possible to get all the necessary information.[25] There is, however, a project to send authors to schools.[26,27]

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[21] See www.fureurdelire.be.

[22] See http://www.pactedexcellence.be.

[23] Service général des lettres et du livre (N/A). Missions et services du SGLL. See: http://www.lettresetlivre.cfwb.be/index.php?id=sgll_missions (accessed September, 3, 2014).

[24] Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (2011). Teaching Reading in Europe: Contexts, Policies and Practices, 166.

[25] Promotion des lettres (N/A). Nos missions. http://www.promotiondeslettres.cfwb.be/index.php?id=missions (accessed September, 3, 2014).

[26] Promotion des lettres (N/A). Écrivains en classe. http://www.promotiondeslettres.cfwb.be/index.php?id=1373 (accessed September, 3, 2014).

No programmes are targeted specifically at adolescents and adolescents only.

Initiatives to foster reading engagement among children and adolescents

Introduced in 1979, the *Bernard Versele award* was created to raise the pleasure of reading, and the desire to share and exchange ideas.

Every Year, the *Ligue des familles* and volunteers select 25 books and provide primary and lower secondary schools with books from their selection. These books are divided into five categories called *Chouette* according to their level of difficulty. The originality of this award is that its jury consists exclusively of children.

The children have time to read, alone or accompanied by an adult, novels and albums. They indicate then their prize-winner, which is proclaimed in June. Every year more than 40,000 children from 3 to 13 years old elect their greatest book[28].

All in all, adolescents seem to be the least supported group. Either the initiatives are general, or they target children more than adolescents.

Reading promotion does not seem to be the most central aspect of the Department of Literature and Books: "*the main goal of the Department is to support creation, edition and dissemination of the French-speaking literature of Belgium.*"[29]

Offering attractive reading material for children and adolescents in print and non-print

The Public Central Library of Wallonia offers a wide range of literature directed towards adolescents. As one of the few central libraries it offers thematic booklets with reading recommendations, even though most have been compiled with younger children in mind.[30] The *Ligue des Familles* (League of Families) also regularly publishes literary recommendations for children and adolescents. It is assumed that the books mentioned in those publications are available in public and school libraries.[31]

Fostering digital literacy in and outside schools

According to Hindryckx and Lafontaine (in Mullis et al., 2012), all schools are equipped with modern computers thanks to the *Cyberclasses* project of the Walloon Region.

Computer technology, however, is not emphasised in the process of teaching reading — this depends on personal preference or educational staff initiatives. Computer technology is used most often in the context of looking for information and documentation or, sometimes, in activities aimed at increasing speed, lexical and syntactic knowledge, or comprehension of texts. An example of the latter is the use of the software programmes Elmo and Elsa, which are tailored to suit individual needs over a school year to support student reading progress.

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[27] Promotion des lettres (N/A). Ecrivains en classe. www.promotiondeslettres.cfwb.be/index.php?id=1526 (accessed September, 3, 2014).

[28] See: https://www.laligue.be/association/prix-litteraires/le-prix-versele

[29] Promotion des lettres (N/A). Nos missions. See: http://www.promotiondeslettres.cfwb.be/index.php?id=missions (accessed September, 3, 2014).

[30] Littérature de Jeunesse (N/A). Enseignants du primaire et du secondaire. See: http://www.litteraturedejeunesse. cfwb.be/index.php?id=5981 (accessed September, 3, 2014).

[31] Littérature de Jeunesse (N/A). Education permanente. See: http://www.litteraturedejeunesse.cfwb.be/ index.php?id=5972 (accessed September, 3, 2014).

Following the *Cyberclasses* project, a programme called *Ecole numérique* was launched and focuses more on the pedagogical uses.

5.2 Improving the quality of teaching

To improve the quality of teaching, important aspects need to be considered:
- the quality of preschool
- coherent literacy curricula
- high-quality reading instruction
- early identification of and support for struggling literacy learners
- highly qualified teachers (cf. Frame of Reference for ELINET Country Reports).

Especially crucial is the quality of teaching and of teachers, as the McKinsey report "How the world best performing school systems come out on top" (McKinsey et al. 2007) states: "The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers." (McKinsey et al. 2007)

5.2.1 Quality of preschool

While early childhood education has long been neglected as a public issue, nowadays early childhood education and care (ECEC) has been recognised as important for "better child well-being and learning outcomes as a foundation for lifelong learning; more equitable child outcomes and reduction of poverty; increased intergenerational social mobility; more female labour market participation; increased fertility rates; and better social and economic development for the society at large" (OECD 2012 *Starting Strong III,* p. 9). In all European countries, pre-primary education is an important part of political reflection and action.

The EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy stated:

> "Increasing investment in high-quality ECEC is one of the best investments Member States can make in Europe's future human capital. 'High quality' means highly-qualified staff and a curriculum focused on language development through play with an emphasis on language, psychomotor and social development, and emerging literacy skills, building on children's natural developmental stages." (High Level Group Report, 2012a, p. 59)

While there is no international or Europe-wide agreed concept of ECEC quality, there is agreement that quality is a complex concept and has different dimensions which are interrelated. In this report we focus on *structural quality* which refers to characteristics of the whole system, e.g. the financing of pre-primary education, the relation of staff to children, regulations for the qualifications and training of the staff, and the design of the curriculum. There are some data concerning structural quality, but there is a lack of research and data about process quality, practices in ECEC institutions, the relation between children and teachers, and what children actually experience in their institutions and programmes.

Annual expenditure on pre-primary education

According to Eurostat (2014, Figure D3), the total public expenditure per child in pre-primary education as a percentage of GDP in Belgium is 0.6%. The range is from 0.04% in Turkey and 0.1% in Ireland to 1.01% in Denmark (for an overview of European countries see table D1 in Appendix B).

Ratio of children to teachers in pre-primary school

According to European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat (2014), the student/teacher ratio in pre-primary schools for children at the age of four in Belgium is 16.1 students per teacher. For the other European countries, OECD (2014 p.324) provides information about the student/teacher ratio in pre-primary schools (for an overview of European countries see table D2 in Appendix B).

Percentage of males among preschool teachers

According to Pordata (2014), 2.7% of the pre-primary teachers in Belgium are males. The range is from 0.2% in Bulgaria and Hungary to 17.7% in France (for an overview of European countries see table D3 in Appendix B).

Preschool teachers' qualifications

As in most of the European countries the minimum required level to become a qualified teacher is Bachelor level (ISCED 5). The minimum length of initial education is 3 years (European Commission/ EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat 2014, p. 101). However, for some countries, the minimum required qualification is a post-graduate degree at master's level (e.g. Italy, France), but for some others, only an upper secondary or non/tertiary post-secondary level of education is required (e.g. Malta). The length of initial teacher training varies from 2 to 5 years, but for most countries, 3 or 4 years of training are required (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/ Eurostat 2014, p. 98-102).

In the French part of Belgium, the length and the content of the preschool pre-service training is an important issue. The Statement of the Governmental policy advocates for a master level in initial teacher education. The recruitment of the pre-primary teacher is also a matter of preoccupation since most of the students studying in order to become a pre-primary teacher have a certificate from the vocational secondary education.

In Belgium (French), the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) is compulsory. In most European countries, CPD is generally considered a professional duty for staff (European Commission/ EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat 2014, p. 104-105).

Challenge: In the French part of Belgium, the length and the content of the preschool pre-service training is an important issue. The Statement of the Governmental policy advocates for a master level in initial teacher education. The recruitment of pre-primary teachers is also a matter of preoccupation since most of the students studying in order to become a pre-primary teacher have a certificate from the vocational secondary education system.

Preschool language and literacy curriculum

The design of the kindergarten curriculum is an important aspect of quality. Therefore it is included in this section and not in the next section "Literacy curricula in schools". It also takes into consideration that young children have learning needs than are sometimes different to those of school children. Pre-school programmes should focus on developing children's emergent literacy skills through playful experience rather than systematic training in phonics or teaching the alphabet. There is no evidence that systematic instruction of reading in preschool has any benefit for future learning (Suggate 2012).

Fostering the development of emergent literacy skills through playful activities is an important function of pre-school institutions, providing a basis for formal literacy instruction in primary school. We consider the following to be key components: oral language development, including vocabulary

learning and grammar, familiarisation with the language of books (e.g. through hearing stories read and told), being engaged and motivated in literacy-related activities, experiencing a literacy-rich environment, developing concepts of print, and language awareness (for more information see the frame text of country reports).

In the French Community of Belgium, there are core skills, ("*Socles de compétences*") which all teachers and schools, whatever the organising authority[32] have to follow. Each organising authority develops its own programme, but a commission checks whether the programme is coherent with the "*Socles de compétences*".

Play is the prime agent in pedagogical work. Official legislation emphasises welcoming, closely observing and listening to the child, in order to provide pedagogical support in his or her development. It refers to the need to respect the child's individual learning pace and to center activities within a functional context.

Thus, in most of the programmes for the pre-primary level developed by the organising authorities, the activities to be carried out are in relation to the subjects. For example, with regards to communication situations, from the first cycle onwards the suggested activities related to the skill "orienting one's reading based on the communication situation" include using a reading corner, using the library, and finding a book in the classroom's library corner (schools administered by the French Community). At this cycle, it is rather a matter of initiation, as the language skills only need to be mastered at the end of the 2nd cycle (8 years)[33].

Improving early language and literacy screening and training

Fostering the **development of emergent literacy skills** is an important function of pre-school institutions, providing a basis for formal literacy instruction in primary school. We consider the following to be key components: oral language development, including vocabulary learning and grammar, familiarisation with the language of books (e.g. through hearing stories read and told), being engaged and motivated in literacy-related activities, experiencing a literacy-rich environment, developing concepts of print, and language awareness (for more information see the frame text of country reports). In our analysis of steering documents, we ask whether these components are included in the preschool curriculum.

For the following aspects no information was found in Eurydice data for Belgium's French community: familiarisation with the language of books (e.g. through stories read and told) phonological awareness (Eurydice 2011, p.54) and language awareness (phonological awareness). However, shared reading, and phonological awareness activities are frequently observed in pre-primary classrooms.

For these following components some information was found:

Oral language – vocabulary learning: Enriching vocabulary (Eurypedia 2011).

Providing a literacy-rich environment: Children are engaged in reading through use of a reading corner, the library, and by finding books in the classroom's library corner (Eurypedia 2011).

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[32] There are three main organising authorities: the State, the provinces/municipalities, and what is called « réseau libre » (in the vast majority of cases, catholic schools). All schools are publicly funded.

[33] See: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Belgium-French-Community:Teaching_and_ Learning_in_Programmes_for_Children_over_2-3_years.

Concepts of print: Steering documents mention as learning aims: awareness that print carries meaning, organisation of written language (Eurydice 2011, p. 55).

5.2.2 Literacy curricula

Curricula provide a normative framework for teachers and a guideline for their teaching aims, methods, materials and activities. However, one should keep in mind that there is a difference between the intended curriculum, as outlined in official documents, and the implemented curriculum – what actually happens in the schools.

Primary schools curricula

Among the European countries participating in PIRLS 2011, only six countries had a national curriculum specifically for reading, namely France, Hungary, the Netherlands, Northern Ireland, the Russian Federation, and Sweden. Reading in Belgium (French) usually is taught as part of the national language curriculum, which also includes writing and other communication skills (Mullis et al. 2012b, Vol.1, exhibit 5, p. 30).

According to the PIRLS 2011 Encyclopedia, activities linked with reading lessons are mainly developed as part of French (as mother tongue) lessons. French lessons focus on reading comprehension, writing, and communicating (Hindryckx and Lafontaine, in Mullis et al., 2012, p. 91).

Belgium (French) is identified as a country in which goals and objectives are prescribed in the language/reading curriculum, but not assessment standards and methods. However, in the PIRLS 2011 Encyclopedia, Hindryckx and Lafontaine (in Mullis et al., 2012) describe a system for assessing language and reading that includes national (census-based) testing every three years for students in Grades 2 and 5, as well as a terminal examination at the end of primary education that includes French language competencies. Hindryckx and Lafontaine also note the availability of assessment instruments based on the Core Skills ("*Socles de Compétences"*) that are distributed to schools organised and subsidised by the French Community, which can be used to track student performance on reading-related skills, though these are not prescribed. They further note that students and their parents are regularly informed about students' results, school progress, learning behaviour and personal development through written school reports.

Reading for pleasure

According to the PIRLS 2011 Encyclopedia, there is little or no emphasis on reading for pleasure in the language/reading curriculum in Belgium (French). Belgium (French) is among a group of 4 EU-24 countries participating in PIRLS 2011 which reported little or no emphasis on reading for pleasure in the curricula. A group of 9 countries participating in PIRLS 2011 reported that reading for pleasure was given major emphasis and 11 countries that it had some emphasis (Mullis et al. 2012b, Vol.1, exhibit 9, p. 36). Belgium (French) is among countries where reading for pleasure is not emphasised among teaching practices but rather considered as a line to be developed besides teaching.

Contents of literacy curricula

The Eurydice report "Teaching Reading in Europe" offers a broad range of information about the content of reading literacy curricula and official guidelines (European Commission/EACEA/ Eurydice 2011). In order not to duplicate this work, only two aspects were addressed in the ELINET country reports whose importance might not yet be acknowledged and therefore might be missing in the

literacy curricula and official guidelines: explicit instruction of grapheme-phoneme correspondences (phonics) and explicit teaching of reading strategies.

Explicit instruction of grapheme-phoneme correspondences

There is no indication that knowledge of phonics is focused in the curriculum in Belgium (French) during primary education. The curriculum includes only one indicator for word identification during primary years: enriching vocabulary (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2011, Figure 1.2, p. 56). According to PIRLS 2011, 44% of students have a teacher who never explicitly teachesthe use of grapheme-phoneme correspondences (Schillings, Hyndrickx, Dupont, Matoul, Lafontaine, 2012).

The core skills ("*Socles de compétences"*) include seven reading-specific competencies, with sub-competencies defining the standards more precisely for each grade level. Neither grapheme-phoneme correspondence, nor fluency, are mentioned (Hindryckx and Lafontaine, in Mullis et al.,2012, p. 92-93).

Teaching of reading strategies in primary schools

While literacy instruction in the early years is more focused on code-based skills, in later stages it is important to develop and foster a wide range of comprehension strategies with all children. Explicit teaching of comprehension strategies is effective for improving reading comprehension among readers with different levels of ability. These strategies include:

- Drawing inferences or interpretations while reading text and graphic data
- Summarising text and focusing selectively on the most important information
- Making connections between different parts of a text
- Using background knowledge
- Checking/monitoring own comprehension
- Constructing visual representations
- Pupils reflecting on their own reading process (Eurydice 2011, p. 55).

According to the analysis of steering documents by Eurydice (2011, 60), all of these strategies are mentioned in literacy curricula in Belgium (French) with the exception of "students reflecting on their own reading process". This last strategy is rarely mentioned in literacy curricula in European countries (Eurydice 2011), a remarkable result because self-monitoring of comprehension or reflecting on one's own reading process is a very important aspect in reading comprehension.

According to Hindryckx and Lafontaine (in Mullis et al., 2012), the *Core Skills* (*Socles de compétences*) published back in 1999, include the following seven elements, which are defined more precisely for each grade level:

- Directing one's reading according to the context, including preparing and managing reading activity, anticipating the content of a document, adapting one's strategy by considering internal and external indicators, and defining appropriate speed;
- Meaning building, including strategies such as extracting explicit information, inferring implicit meaning, and checking hypotheses;
- Determining the organisation of a text;
- Detecting the cohesion factor between a sentence and groups of sentences throughout a text. Elements include identifying factors of sentence articulation, chronological marks, anaphora and pronouns;
- Taking grammatical units into account, including detecting organisation and grammatical links in the text;

- Processing lexical units, including identifying synonyms and antonyms as well as different word parts;
- Detecting interactions between verbal and non-verbal elements (e.g., illustration, scheme, topography, and keys).

Hindryckx and Lafontaine (in Mullis et al., 2012) note that each school's organising body must decide its own teaching methods and determine its own curriculum, though the curriculum must concur with the *Core Skills*. There are four organising bodies – public schools organised by the French Community, public schools organised by local authorities, religious (mostly catholic) and non-religious private (but publicly funded) schools.

Literacy curricula in secondary schools

The *Core Skills* ("*Socles de compétences"*) described above are also applicable for the lower secondary school level (from grade 7 to 9). However, the level of skill expected to be mastered at the end of the lower secondary school is more demanding than in primary school.

The specific literacy competencies that students should have acquired by the end of secondary school (grade 12) are defined in different documents according to the school track they are enrolled in. The skills to be mastered at the end of the "*Humanités générales et technologiques"* differs from the ones to be mastered at the end of the vocational tracks ("*Humanités professionnelles et techniques"*).

In the "Compétences terminales et savoirs requis" (1999) which refers to the **transition tracks,** reading, writing, listening and speaking skills are detailed separately. Regarding reading, some new skills are proposed such as children exercising their critical mind, decoding images and the audiovisual media or develop a reflexive stance in their own reading. The reading, writing and oral communication skills are distinguished only by concern of methodological clarity and precision. According to the authors, these skills, which in reality are rarely separated, should be associated as far as possible and combined during the activities in class.

Beside this rather segmented approach of literacy skills, this document also details the disciplinary knowledge to be mastered. This list specifies knowledges about the language, about the literature and knowledge about the art.

In the "Compétences terminales et savoirs requis" (1999) which refers to the **vocational tracks**, the skills to be trained favour the personal fulfillment of the pupils, in particular by helping them in
- Being situated in the time and the space;
- Taking over their own culture;
- Taking over communication and reflection tools;
- Becoming aware of the implications of their choices.

These standards also include the study of the environment, the technologies and the sciences, the training in the active participation in the economic and social environment; and the training in citizenship in a democratic, united, pluralistic society which is open to other cultures. Regarding literacy, students are expected to develop appropriate tools of communication and reflection. To build their knowledge, pupils are guided to look for and handle some information, develop a critical mind, ask themselves questions, turn to sources presenting the information in various ways including the new technologies of communication and information, discover the languages used by the media, become aware of the complexity of messages conveyed by the media, to read, to write, to listen to and to speak in varied situations of communication. These standards also underline the development of

learning skills such as learn to learn, acquire cognitive processes which allow them to reach the knowledge, to understand it, to criticise and transform it, to assess their potentialities, or their learning style.

Challenge/need for action: In both primary and secondary schools curricula, literacy is seldom considered as the integration of reading, writing skills and speaking skills. This segmented output approach doesn't favour the development of an integrated approach considering the interrelated dimensions of the cognitive, social and socio cultural components of literacy.

In primary school curricula, the range of reading skills to be developed is quite large but doesn't include metacognitive processes. This doesn't make visible the importance to develop explicit teaching of reading strategies. The term "strategy" is not even mentioned in the standards. Skills are rather exercised than explicitly taught.

Digital reading is still not taken into account in the curricula.

Reading Instruction

While most literacy researchers have clear concepts about effective literacy instruction, we do not know much about what is actually going on in classrooms. In order to describe the practice of reading instruction we would need extensive observational studies. There is a noteworthy shortage of data on actual reading instruction in school. Only PIRLS offer some data for primary schools, based on self-reports by teachers (PIRLS), which might be biased by social desirability.

In PIRLS 2006, fourth-grade reading teachers reported about instructional materials, strategies and activities. The analysis of PIRLS 2011 teacher self-reports revealed differences between the approaches to reading instruction in European countries (Mullis et al. 2012a, Tarelli et al. 2012).

In PIRLS 2011, principals and teachers provided some information on language and reading instruction. Concerning the **instructional time spent on language and reading**, the following results are of interest:

In 2011, pupils in Belgium (French) spent fewer instructional hours in schools (738 hours per year) compared with students on average across EU-24 countries (850 hours). However, the allocation of time to teaching the language of the PIRLS test in Belgium (French) (342 hours) is greater than the average across EU-24 countries (241 hours). There is no official specified level. The average number of hours allocated to reading each year in Belgium (French) as part of language instruction (88 hours) is above the EU-24 average (68), though it is lower than a number of countries including the United States and New Zealand (both 131 hours). Teachers in Belgium (French) report allocating less time to teaching reading across the curriculum and in reading classes (120 hours) than on average across EU countries (147 hours).

Source: PIRLS 2011 (Mullis, Martin, Kennedy et al., 2012, p. 214, Exhibit 8.4). EU averages from PIRLS 2011 database (see ELINET PIRLS 2011 Appendix, Table I3).

It should be noted that response rates to the PIRLS Questionnaire items dealing with instructional time were flagged by Mullis et al. (2012) as being below expected levels.

No comparable data are available for secondary schools.

Activities of teachers to develop student's comprehension skills and to engage them

PIRLS 2011 provides information on the frequency with which teachers in Belgium (French) engage students in specific reading comprehension activities. The following are the percentages of students in Grade 4 in Belgium (French) and on average across the EU-24 who are engaged in specified comprehension activities 'every day or almost every day'.

Percentage of students whose teachers ask them to do the following daily or almost daily:
- Compare texts read with experiences: 4% (EU avg. = 35%)
- Compare what they have read with materials in other texts: 4% (EU avg. = 22%)
- Identify main ideas of what they had read: 25% (EU avg. = 55%)
- Explain their support or understanding of what has been read: 25% (EU avg. = 62%)
- Make predictions about what will happen next in the text: 10% (EU avg. = 22%)
- Make generalisations and draw inferences: 7% (EU avg. = 36%)
- Describe the style and structure of the text: 2% (EU avg. = 23%)
- Determine the author's perspective and intention: 4% (EU avg. = 21%)
- Locate information within the text: 27% (EU avg. = 66%)

Source: PIRLS 2011 database. See Mullis et al. 2012a, Exhibit 8.8, p. 226 for data for 'at least weekly', s. also Table I.1 in Appendix C.

Belgium (French) is far below the EU-24 average on the frequency with which students engage in activities such as locating information in the text, identifying the main idea and explaining or supporting their understanding.

PIRLS also assessed which instructional practices teachers use to **engage students in learning in Belgium and other European countries** (s. Table I.2 in Appendix C). PIRLS 2011 demonstrates that students whose teachers used instructional practices to engage students' learning in most lessons (items: summarising the lesson's goals, relating the lesson to students' daily lives, questioning to elicit reasons and explanations, encouraging students to show improvement, praising students for good effort, bringing interesting things to class) had higher scores in reading than those who used such practices in only about half the lessons or less (Mullis et al. 2012a, exh. 8.6, p.220).

In PIRLS 2011, teachers were asked a series of questions designed to ascertain the extent to which students are **engaged in learning**. These included: "I summarise what students should have learned from the lesson"; "I relate the lesson to students' daily lives" and "I use questions to elicit reasons and explanations". Based on a scale summarising frequencies across all six items, only 50% of students in Belgium (French) were deemed to be taught by teachers who implemented instructional practices to engage learning in "most lessons". The corresponding EU-24 average was 70% (ELINET PIRLS 2011 Encyclopaedia, Table I2). Regarding the instruction to engage students scale, the mean score for **Belgium (French)** was 9.0 (equivalent to using engagement strategies in about half of lessons), compared to an EU-24 average of 9.8 (equivalent to using strategies in every or almost every lesson). It is well documented in research studies that explicit teaching of comprehension strategies may improve reading comprehension among readers with different levels of ability. While there are no data available for secondary schools, some PISA data also suggest that there is a need for explicit instruction of reading strategies: as reported above, in French-speaking Belgium, there is a gap of 136 score points in reading performance - equivalent to more than three years of schooling - between the students who know which strategies are the most efficient to understand and remember a text, and

those who have a limited knowledge of these metacognitive activities. This remarkable difference reflects the close relation between reading proficiency and awareness of efficient reading.

> **Challenge:** The frequency of teaching of reading comprehension strategies according to PIRLS is below the European average and this might be improved. Also the extent to which teachers use instructional practices to engage students in learning should be augmented.

Digital literacy part of the curriculum for primary and secondary schools

Digital literacy is not a specific part of the curriculum so far. The ongoing process launched by the current Ministry of Education in "le Pacte d'Excellence" in the foundational reports highlights the challenges linked to digital literacy for the future.

It aims to implement the use of ICT in teaching throughout the years of schooling in order to:
- impart dynamism to and motivate learning by means of tools and approaches which reflect the young people's world and the development of society and technologies more closely;
- create conditions to ensure that the education system takes advantage of the digital society to support the personal development of young people and develop their skills, creativity, critical thinking and analytical abilities, in particular in order to go beyond the stage of mere 'consumption' of ICT;
- improve and modernise the functioning of the educational community by providing appropriate ICT tools, through the creation of a resource center, *Pédago TIC*[34].

The project will take place in several phases. A think tank has been set up for the French Community, the German-speaking Community and the Walloon Region, with the task of defining how to 'ensure the success of digital schooling in the French and German-speaking Communities'. The proposals in the action plan that result from the think tank's work will be the subject of a consultation exercise conducted as widely as possible among education actors, in order to evaluate and amend the proposals.

Ultimately, schools in all the networks will receive suitable technological equipment and effective Internet connections and a local platform. The ICT Plan[35] for education has the following goals to achieve by 2025:
- each pupil/student will have a 'digital school bag' which will replace all or some of the traditional textbooks and papers with digital resources that can be used both in the classroom and at home;
- initial and continuing teacher training will have integrated the mastery of ICT and educational software and their uses;
- various digital tools for administrative management and the management and exchange of teaching content will have been introduced into general use.

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[34] See: http://www.pedago-tic.be.
[35] See: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu.

5.2.3 Early identification of and support for struggling literacy learners

Effective assessment tools upon entry to primary school will help teachers identify literacy skills from the very beginning of formal education. Regular formative assessment throughout primary school will ensure that literacy problems do not continue to go unrecognised, and that students receive the support they need through education that matches their learning needs. This should prevent children leaving school with unrecognised literacy problems (EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy 2012a, p. 67).

Standards as basis of assessment of reading difficulties

Standards of reading achievement, allowing teachers, parents and school leaders to understand the rate of progress of learners and to identify individual strengths and needs, should be integrated in the curriculum and should be the basis of assessments. The High Level Group pointed out that there is a need to establish minimal standards of literacy achievement (benchmarks) for each grade, and to administer regular tests based on these standards, to allow for identification of struggling readers/writers (EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy 2012a, p. 43).

All EU countries have defined learning objectives in reading to be reached at the end of primary and secondary education cycles. However, only a few Member States have detailed standards (benchmarks) at each grade (school year) which form the basis of assessments allowing for early identification of reading difficulties and subsequent allocation of attention and resources. These standard-based assessments allow teachers and school leaders to judge children's progress and to target additional reading support.

Screenings for reading competence to identify struggling readers

According to Hindryckx and Lafontaine (in Mullis et al., 2012), there is no systematic testing of students to diagnose reading difficulties. Moreover, outcomes from diagnostic tests must be confirmed through specialised testing by a psychologist or speech therapist. Hindryckx and Lafontaine (in Mullis et al., 2012) note that, since 2011-12, one person in each school is required to be trained in the area of dyslexia.

Supporting struggling literacy learners

Staffing and funding may be differentiated according to the policy of positive discrimination. Schools may receive supplementary staffing for meeting special needs or the needs of newly arrived students (Eurydice, 2013b).

In secondary education, the vast majority of schools use part of the staff resources allocated to them for organising remedial periods; often devoted to mathematics, French and the chosen modern language. Some schools have also set up interesting initiatives such as 'need groups', which work on the basis of results obtained in formative assessments. It is said that particular attention must be paid to skills in the French language, in particular with pupils whose knowledge of the language of instruction is too low to enable them to adapt successfully to activities in the class in which they are enrolled (Eurydice, 2012b).

Individual education plans ought to be created for pupils who encounter severe learning difficulties and for whom a complementary year is considered an option.

Pupils encountering difficulties in attaining the Core Skills may have complementary activities as an intervention: individualised remedial and educational support activities, catch-up work; restructuring of acquired knowledge as part of optional activities or the two weekly periods of remedial classes. Two to four periods per week of remedial and/or reorientation activities are recommended (on average a maximum of two hours per week for the entire school year), regardless of the subject (Eurydice, 2012c).

Number of struggling readers receiving remedial instruction

PIRLS offers some data concerning issues of remedial instruction in primary schools. One question was whether all pupils receive remedial instruction when needed.

Based on a question that class teachers answered in PIRLS 2011, it is estimated that 21.4% of students in fourth grade in Belgium (French) are considered to be in need of remedial reading instruction. It is also estimated by teachers that 7.1% of the pupils do indeed benefit from remedial reading instruction (ELINET PIRLS 2011 Appendix, Table K1). Hence, there is a shortfall of 14.3% between those in need and those benefiting. On average across EU countries, 18.1% of students in Grade 4 are identified by their teachers as being in need of remedial teaching, while 13.3% are identified as benefiting of such teaching.

In Belgium (French), 29.6% of students in fourth grade performed at or below the PIRLS low benchmark on overall reading (ELINET PIRLS Appendix, Table A.6). Hence, the proportion of students identified by teachers in Belgium (French) as being in need of remedial teaching (21.4%) is below the proportion deemed to be poor readers by PIRLS.

Kinds of support offered

It is crucial that teachers provide support measures to help struggling readers. European Countries differ widely in their approaches, from in-class support with additional support staff (reading specialists, teaching assistants or other adults) working in the classroom together with a teacher, to out-of-class support where speech therapists or (educational) psychologists offer guidance and support for students with reading difficulties.

Based on teacher responses to a series of questions in PIRLS 2011, 22% of students in Belgium (French) are in classes where there is always access to specialised professionals to work with students who have reading difficulties, compared with an EU-24 average of 25% (Table 3.10). This finding is surprising because Hindryckx and Lafontaine (in Mullis et al., 2012) note that 'reading specialists play a minor role in reading education in schools' (p. 94). Just 5% of students in Belgium (French) are in classes where there is always access to teacher aides to work with children with reading difficulties, while a further 37% are in classes where there is access sometimes. Corresponding EU averages are 13% and 34%, indicating relatively greater use of teacher aides across the EU-24 than in Belgium (French). Access to volunteers to work with children with reading difficulties is low in Belgium (French) and on average across EU countries. "Access" is vague and is in the best case access to a non-free service rather than a specialised teacher or a language therapist who would be a permanent member of the school staff.

Table 23: Percentages of Students in Classrooms with Access to Additional Personnel to Work with Children with Reading Difficulties, Belgium (French) and EU-24 Average

Access to…	Belgium (French)			EU-24 Average		
	Always	Some-times	Never	Always	Some-times	Never
Specialised professional	22.1	39.0	38.9	24.9	41.8	33.3
Teacher aide	4.8	37.0	58.2	13.2	33.6	53.2
Adult/parent volunteer	0.4	5.1	94.5	2.8	17.5	79.7

Source: ELINET PIRLS 2011 Appendix, Tables K2-K4

According to responses provided by teachers in PIRLS 2011, 68% of students in Belgium (French) are in classes where the teacher arranges for students falling behind in reading to work with a specialised professional such as a reading professional (Table 24). The corresponding EU average is lower at 55%. A larger proportion of students in Belgium (French) (56%) than on average across the EU-24 (37%) are taught by teachers who wait to see if performance improves with maturation. Almost three-quarters of students in Belgium (French) are taught by teachers who spend more time working on reading individually with a student who falls behind – below the EU-24 average (90%). Finally, the vast majority of students in Belgium (French) (93%) and on average across the EU-24 (97%) are taught by teachers who ask parents to provide additional support to a student who falls behind in reading.

Table 24: Percentages of Students in Classrooms Where Teachers Engage in Specified Activities to Support Students Who Begin to Fall Behind in Reading, Belgium (French) and EU-24 Average

	Belgium (French) (Yes)	EU-24 Average (Yes)
I have students work with a specialised professional	68.3	55.2
I wait to see if performance improves with maturation	55.7	36.6
I spend more time working on reading individually with the student	72.0	90.1
I ask the parents to help the students with reading	93.0	96.9

Source: ELINET PIRLS 2011 Appendix, Tables K5-K8.

According to Hindryckx and Lafontaine (in Mullis et al., 2012), students with reading difficulties often receive support in their class as a result of formative assessment and differentiation. They note that, in most cases, support comprises repeating activities (the same materials, processes and instruction). Difficulties that are detected can be addressed inside or outside the classroom. Children with severe difficulties, including special education needs, may attend school in special education system, which also seeks to achieve the objectives outlined in *"les Socles de compétences"*.

Hindryckx and Lafontaine (in Mullis et al., 2012) note that schools in which there are large numbers of children from disadvantaged backgrounds may also benefit from participating in additional reading-related projects, and may receive additional supplementary funding for those projects.

Support for struggling readers – a legal right?

In 1997, the foundational « Décret missions » (Decree on the Missions of Schools) assigned four general aims to compulsory education:
- to promote self-confidence and the development of each student as an individual;
- to enable all students to learn knowledge and for life-long learning, and to play an active role in economic, social, and cultural life;
- to prepare all students to be responsible citizens able to contribute to the development of a society that is democratic, cohesive, pluralistic, and open to other cultures;
- to ensure equal opportunities to all students with regard to their social emancipation.

In order to reach these general objectives, the competencies that must be developed are approached in terms of acquisition of pupils' skills and previous knowledge (Eurydice, 2011a).

The Decree also imposes the implementation of differentiated pedagogy and formative assessment (Eurydice, 2012a).

5.2.4 Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and Continuous Professional Development (CPD) of Teachers

Entry requirements for Initial Teacher Education

In French-speaking Belgium, the certificate of completion of upper secondary education is the only requirement(European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2013. *Key Data on Teachers and School Leaders in Europe*).

This certificate at the end of upper secondary education is delivered by the school on the basis of an internal assessment. Basically, each student holding a certificate from upper secondary education can freely access ITE.

In Belgium (French), there are no specific selection methods besides the certificate of final examination of upper secondary education (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2013, Fig. A5, p. 32). According to Key data on Teachers in Europe (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2013), only a third of all European countries have specific selection methods for admission to initial teacher education in place.

There is a Competency framework listing 13 competencies for Teacher training. "Competence frameworks may be very broad, consisting of fairly general statements" (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2013. *Key Data on Teachers and School Leaders in Europe*).

Challenge/need for action: The aim of having highly qualified teachers requires selective teacher recruitment policies (cf. OECD recommendations, 2005). These policies currently do not exist in Belgium (French).

Level of qualification and length of the required training for primary teachers

Belgium (French) requires primary teachers to have a bachelor's degree which takes three years' study. In European comparison this is a relatively short duration. Typically, primary teachers' education routes are through a four-year university bachelor's degree programme in primary education. In ten European

countries – Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Germany, France, Iceland, Portugal, Slovakia and Slovenia – initial education for primary teachers is at master's level and usually takes five years. In recent years, an increase in the minimum length of initial teacher education can be noted for many countries (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2012, Fig. E2, p. 112).

Table 25 shows the proportions of Grade 4 students taught by teachers with varying qualifications in PIRLS 2011.

Table 25: Percentages of Students Taught by Teachers with Varying Education Qualifications

Highest Qualification	Completed University Postgrad Degree	Completed Bachelor's Degree or Equivalent	Completed Post Secondary Education but not a Degree	No Further than Upper Secondary
Belgium (French)	0	99	0	0
EU-24	27	53	14	6

Source: PIRLS 2011 Database (see Mullis et al., 2011, Exhibit 7.1, p. 188, and Appendix C, Table J1).

Length of required training of secondary teachers

- Bachelor´s level (3 years) for lower secondary teachers;
- Master´s level (5 years) for upper secondary teacher.
  (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2013. *Key Data on Teachers and School Leaders in Europe*)

The role of literacy expertise in Initial Teacher Training

"Content area literacy" is not a compulsory constituent of initial teacher training in Belgium (French). Beyond the general Competency framework, the curricula are local ones. In some schools delivering initial training for teachers, there might be some initiatives from professors, but there is no data available at a more general level, giving an overview of the practices.

Among the Standards of teacher competences, there is a) the assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of each individual student they teach, b) selection of appropriate instructional methods and c) instruction in an effective and efficient manner. These topics should therefore be addressed in pre-service teacher training.

In PIRLS 2011, primary teachers were asked to indicate the level of emphasis given to a number of topics deemed relevant to teaching literacy in their pre-service teacher education. The data in table 26 suggest that, compared with the EU-24 average, there is **less emphasis on teaching reading pedagogy in initial teacher education in Belgium (French)** (33% of students are taught by teachers who identify it as an area of emphasis), compared with the EU-24 average (59%). This may arise because in pre-service teacher education, reading is included in French language, rather than being considered as a subject matter in its own right. According to PIRLS 2011, 5% of students in Belgium (French) are taught by teachers who report that remedial reading was an area of emphasis in their pre-service teacher education. The corresponding EU-24 average is 22%.

As noted in Table 8.15 below, 5% of students in Belgium in PIRLS 2011 have a teacher who reported assessment methods in reading as an area of major emphasis in initial teacher education, compared with an EU-24 average of 27%.

Table 26: Percentages of Students Taught by Teachers who Reported each of Several Topics to be Areas of Emphasis during Initial Teacher Education

Topic	Test Language	Reading Pedagogy	Reading Theory	Remedial Reading	Assessment Methods in Reading
Belgium (French)	66	33	12	5	5
EU-24	74	59	30	22	27

Source: PIRLS 2011 Database (see Mullis et al., 2011, Exhibit 7.2, p. 190 and Appendix C, Table J2 – J3)

> **Challenge:** Initial teacher education needs a compulsory focus on developing literacy expertise among future primary and secondary teachers. The international surveys confirm that pre-service teacher training in Belgium (French) is less liable to provide future teachers with tools to cope with students' reading difficulties than other European countries.

Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

CPD attendance is mandatory, namely a certain number of days, depending on the type of training.

Two decrees dated 11 July 2002 have defined the arrangements for organising in-service training. Continuing training is obligatory for all permanently appointed or hired teaching staff (as well as for staff designated or hired on a temporary basis if it is included in their schedule) on the basis of 6 half-days a year (Eurypedia Reports on CPD).

During teachers' attendance to CPD, the classes are either suspended (max. 6 days per year) or the teachers are replaced.

"In ordinary pre-secondary education, classes may be suspended for a maximum of six half-days per year to allow teachers to attend obligatory training. Outside these half-days, arrangements must be made for the pupils of a teacher who is in training. To this end, teachers are replaced by other members of staff, by trainee teachers or, within the limits of the budgets set by the government, by members of staff engaged on a temporary basis or by organized educational, cultural or sporting activities.

In ordinary secondary education and specialized education, arrangements must be made for the pupils of a teacher who is in training, and these are similar to those described for pre-secondary education." (Eurypedia Reports on CPD)

"Participation in training organized in application of the decree on in-service training for staff members of educational institutions is free of charge. Teachers have their travel costs reimbursed and receive a meal allowance of €8.70 per day. They normally receive documents prepared by the trainers. Members of staff who are participating in training are considered to be in active service." (Eurypedia Reports on CPD)

Even though CPD is encouraged by the government and made a professional duty, CPD attendance is not much supported by the employer. For example, only 31% of teachers did not have to pay for any of their CPD programmes (OECD average: 68%) (Oecd, 2014b, p. 107). Only 18% of the teachers were allowed to attend CPD measures during working hours at school (OECD average: 54%).

Time frame and quality standards of CPD

6 half-days per year are obligatory (see 4.6.1). CDP on a voluntary basis (i.e. in addition to these obligatory 6 half-days) is limited to 10 half-days a year in ordinary pre-secondary education if it takes place during the teacher's working hours, unless there is an exemption. In ordinary secondary education and specialised education, the reference period during which the compulsory training must be taken is three years, and the teacher is limited to 6 half-days per year of voluntary continuing training during working hours. Outside working hours, there are no limits on the duration of voluntary training.

Some CDP combine out-of-school training and on-site training, aiming at making the training as closely linked as possible to the needs of specific schools.

CPD is offered by the Institute for In-Service Training (via training operators), at the organising body level or at the school level.

Continuing training is organised by a specially created Institute for In-Service Training, or at network level (or controlling authority level if the controlling authority does not subscribe to a representation body), or at school level. The Institute for In-Service Training does not directly train the teachers, but makes use of training operators.

The training operators are:
- members of the managerial and teaching staff, members of the auxiliary education staff, members of staff of the General Department of Inspection and members of the technical staff of the Centre for Psychological, Medical and Social Services;
- other physical persons who are national or international experts;
- continuing education agencies and youth organisations recognised by the French Community;
- universities;
- "Hautes écoles" (higher education, but not Universities);
- teacher training colleges and institutes;
- arts colleges;
- social advancement education institutions;
- part-time arts education institutions;
- architecture colleges;
- training centers;
- public or private companies;
- non-profit associations;
- sports federations;
- representatives of the Council of Europe, the European Community or the OECD;
- the Institute for In-Service Training.

The Government sets the conditions which training operators must additionally meet, in order to accredit their capacity to provide training. In particular, these conditions relate to the operator's experience, to the training provided in the past, and to the professional and financial guarantees offered.

Time spent on professional development related to literacy

No data are available concerning the participation rate of teachers in literacy-related professional development, with one exemption: In PIRLS 2011, teachers were asked how much time they had spent on reading professional development in the past two years before the study. The data for Belgium (French) and for the EU-24 average are given in table 8.16.

The table shows that 9% of students in Belgium (French) were taught by teachers who had allocated 16 hours or more to professional development, compared to 18% on average across the EU-24. On the other hand, 41% of students in Belgium (French) (compared to 29% on average across the EU-24) were taught by teachers who had allocated no time to professional development in reading in the last two years. The average reading score of their students was slightly higher (512) than with teachers who had spent more time on professional development (504, s. Table J4 in Appendix C). This could reflect the rather low level of their students which might encourage them to choose this kind of subject among other in-service training.

Table 27: Percentages of Students with Teachers Allocating Varying Amounts of Time to Professional Development Related to Reading in the Last Two Years – Belgium (French) and EU-24 Average

	More than 35 hours	16-35 hours	6-15 hours	Less than 6 hours	None
Belgium (French)	4	5	20	30	41
EU-24	9	9	25	28	29

Source: PIRLS 2011 database (see Mullis et al., 2012a, Exhibit 7.4, page 196, and Table J4 in Appendix C).

Challenge: Improving the quality and participation rates of continuing professional development targeted at building literacy expertise of teachers is especially important considering the high proportion of weak readers among Belgian (French) primary and secondary classes.

5.2.5 Digital literacy as part of initial teacher education

Future teachers follow a course about ICT, but there are no compulsory courses about digital literacy. Again, this is left to local initiatives by schools or professors as well as whether or not they are involved in the "*Ecole numérique*" project launched by the Walloon Region.

5.2.6 Improving the quality of literacy teaching for children and adolescents: Programmes, initiatives and examples

Improving the quality of preschool

According to Eurostat, the total public expenditure per child in pre-primary education as a percentage of GDP in Belgium is 0.6% (2014, Figure D3) and the student/teacher ratio in pre-primary schools for children at the age of four is 16.1.

Moreover, in the French part of Belgium, the length and the content of the preschool pre-service training is an important issue. The Statement of the Governmental policy advocates for a master's level in initial teacher education. The recruitment of pre-primary teachers is also a matter of preoccupation since most of the students studying in order to become a pre-primary teacher have a certificate from the vocational secondary education system.

Pre-school programmes state that each school must give every pupil the opportunity to progress at his or her own pace, by practising differentiated pedagogy. Thus, every child can, at his or her own pace, fully live out the successive stages of maturity, and gradually acquire and reinforce the attitudes and knowledge required for harmonious development.

The methods employed focus on development through "learning by doing", rather than the transmission of knowledge. Play is the prime agent in pedagogical work. Official legislation emphasises being welcoming, closely observing and listening to the child, in order to provide pedagogical support in his or her development. It refers to the need to respect the child's individual learning pace and to center activities within a functional context.

It is recommended to carry out projects that are suited to children's interests. As a methodology, projects provide opportunities for action, mutual acceptance, and voluntary participation with a view to attaining the set objectives. Pupils are divided into groups. These groups take part in various workshops organised by the teacher, who mainly takes care of one group, (e.g. painting, building games, library, maths, discovery, make-believe games: dolls, shops, etc.). Training in self-evaluation must be present from the earliest age. Homework is forbidden in pre-primary education.

By monitoring individual progress and through evaluations currently performed two or three times a year, the teaching staff are able to communicate to parents an evaluation of the behaviour and development of their children.

In the course of 2012, The "*Décolâge"!*[36] Project was launched in order to develop alternative practices to grade retention in the last year of pre-primary school, through a collective and collaborative approach. Some in-service training was proposed to school teams composed of pre-school teachers and some representatives of the Centres for Psychological, Medical and Social Services (CPMS), which are usually in charge of the pupils who encounter school difficulties. This training was aimed at providing the actors with some tools focused on the development of concepts of print and on maths abilities. The innovative approach consisted of training the teachers to consider the abilities of pupils, rather than implementing an early diagnosis. This project intended to modify teachers' beliefs related to at-risk pupils in order to give them more opportunity to develop their skills.

Providing more cognitively demanding literacy instruction in school

There are no programmes or initiatives in Belgium (French) to address this issue.

Early identification of and support for children and adolescents with literacy difficulties

The Centres for Psychological, Medical and Social Services (CPMS) are places of listening, where multidisciplinary teams (educational psychologists, educational psychology auxiliaries, social auxiliaries, paramedical auxiliaries and physicians), acting under professional secrecy, offer free services.

Each CPMS belongs to one of the three networks (French Community, grant-aided public education, and grant-aided independent education) and primarily serve their own schools' needs. Each centre provides guidance for a series of schools. All the centres are subject to an inspection organised by the French Community.

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[36] See: http://www.enseignement.be/index.php?page=26594.

The CPMSs have three main roles:

- To promote psychological, educational, medical and social conditions which will give pupils the best chance of developing their personalities harmoniously and of preparing them to assume their role as autonomous, responsible citizens, and to play an active role in social, cultural and economic life.
- To contribute to pupils' educational process throughout their school career, by encouraging the use of means by which they can be led to make constant progress, within an approach of ensuring equal access opportunities to social, civic and personal emancipation. To this end, among other things, the centres will mobilise the resources available in the pupil's family, social and school environment.
- With a view to providing orientation for the subsequent course of their life, to support pupils in the positive construction of their personal, educational and work plans and their integration in social and professional life.

Each CPMS's activities must be set within the context of a core programme which is common to all centres, the specific programme laid down by its controlling authority, which defines the priorities and values underlying the work of the centres which fall within its authority, and the plan of the centre itself.

The centre's plan, which constitutes a tool to steer the work of its teams, defines the fundamental values underlying its actions (with reference to the controlling authority's specific programme) and the concrete actions that it intends to implement in order to carry out the basic core programme and the specific programme. It is defined so as to take into account the social, economic, cultural and health characteristics and the needs and resources of the local school population and is also harmonised with the school plan and individual resources of each school within its area. The centre's plan is submitted to the school authorities and to the members of the participation council[37].

Pre-service and in-service teacher training

Initiatives and research projects in the field of literacy in pre-service and in-service teacher training are quite rare in Belgium (French). In November 2015, a European Erasmus + project will be launched in the area of Content area literacy. The project is led by The University of Cologne in Germany and involves Romania, Hungary, Portugal and Belgium. The application was submitted under Key action 2 aiming at Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices ("Strategic partnerships in the field of education, training and youth").

The BleTeach project (Blended learning in teachers' professional development) aims to develop a blended learning course in content area literacy for secondary teachers. In Belgium, the University of Liège, in collaboration with an in-service teacher training institute (Haute École de la Ville de Liège), will take part in this project.

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[37] See: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu.

5.3 Increasing participation, inclusion and equity

The High Level Group of Experts on Literacy drew attention to persistent gaps in literacy, namely the gender gap, the socio-economic gap, and the migrant gap (HLG Final report 2012, pp. 46–50). These gaps derive from the reading literacy studies that repeatedly show unequal distribution of results among groups of children and adolescents (PIRLS, PISA).

The **socio-economic gap** in literacy refers to the fact that children and adolescents from disadvantaged families have lower mean performance in reading than students from more advantaged families. However, the degree to which family background relates to the reading literacy performance varies from one country to another even in Europe. Family background measured as parents' educational level and/or occupation or measured as economic, social and cultural status is one of the most important predictors of reading literacy performance. Family background also explains some of the performance differences between schools.

The **migrant gap** refers to unequal distribution of learning outcomes between the native students and immigrant students who in most countries have lower levels of performance in reading than the native students. In many countries the migrant gap is associated with the socio-economic gap, but this explains only a part of it, because the migrant gap is also associated with home language differing from the language of instruction at school which increases the risk of low performance in reading. It is noteworthy that even language minorities with high status in the society (and above-average socioeconomic background) show below average performance if the language of school is not supported at home, which signals the importance of a good command of the language used at school.

Another alarming gap in reading literacy in many countries is the **gender difference,** which is more vital for adolescents than for children. In all PISA studies, 15-year-old girls outperformed boys in reading in all the European countries, and boys are frequently overrepresented among the low performers. PISA 2009 results showed that these differences are associated with differences in student attitudes and behaviours that are related to gender, i.e. with reading engagement, and not gender as such. Therefore the gender gap is also related to growing up in a family or in a school environment that values reading and learning and considers reading as a meaningful activity.

To achieve fairer and more inclusive participation in literacy learning we need to close these gaps, which already start in early childhood, by supporting children, adolescents and adults "at risk". The groups of students "at risk" must have access to language screening and flexible language learning opportunities in school, tailored to individual needs. Furthermore early support for children and adolescents with special needs is necessary.

In the section below we address the following questions:
- Compensating socio-economic and cultural background factors
- Support for children with special needs
- Promoting preschool attendance, especially among disadvantaged children
- Provisions for preschool children with language difficulties
- Support for children and adolescents whose home language is not the language of school.
- Preventing early school leaving
- Addressing the gender gap among adolescents

This section refers to children and adolescents who, for different reasons, can be considered as a group "at risk" (from disadvantaged homes, those whose home language is not the language of

school, or those with "special needs"). The focus is on preventing literacy difficulties among members of these groups. There is a certain overlap with the topic "Identification of and support for struggling literacy learners", dealt with in the section, "Improving the quality of teaching", which is concerned with those who have already developed literacy difficulties (s. 5.2.4).

5.3.1 Compensating socio-economic and cultural background factors

The child's **socio-economic and cultural background** has a strong impact on literacy. Material poverty and educational level, particularly of the mother, are well-recognised main factors influencing literacy (World Bank 2005, Naudeau et al. 2011). Socio-economic background also influences biological risks to children, by determining early exposure to risk factors and increased susceptibility (Jednoróg et al. 2012). The primary language spoken at home also influences literacy development (Sylva et al. 2004).

In order to describe the socioeconomic and cultural factors that influence emergent literacy, several indicators were used which stem from international surveys, thus providing comparability across Europe (for more information concerning the concepts and indicators (s. Appendix A).

Gini index

The Gini index is the most commonly used measure of inequality, and represents the income distribution of a nation's residents with values between 0% (maximum equality) and 100% (maximum inequality). In the European countries participating in ELINET the range is from 22.6% in Norway to 35% in Spain (for an overview of European countries see table A1 in Appendix B). With 26.6% Belgium is at the lower, positive end of the distribution.

Child poverty

An indicator of child poverty is the percentage of children living in a household in which disposable income, when adjusted for family size and composition, is less than 50% of the national median income (UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre 2012). The figure for Belgium is 10.2%. In the European countries participating in ELINET, the range is from 4.2% in Iceland to 25.5% in Romania (for an overview of European countries see table A2 in Appendix B).

Mother's education level

The PIRLS 2011 database offers information about mother's level of education referring to ISCED levels. The figures for the French part of Belgium are presented below and point to a high level of education, compared with the average figures for the European countries participating in PIRLS (shown in parentheses) (for an overview of European countries see table A3 in Appendix B).

> No schooling: 1.3% (0.6%)
> ISCED 1: Primary education: 6.4% (5.3%)
> ISCED 2: Lower secondary education: 14.7% (16.7 %)
> ISCED 3: Upper secondary education: 21.8% (36.1%)
> ISCED 4: Post-secondary non-tertiary education: 10.2% (7.1 %)
> ISCED 5B: Tertiary education (first stage) with occupation orientation: no data (9.5%)
> ISCED 5A: Tertiary education (first stage) with academic orientation 39.2% (13.9%)
> BEYOND: 4.1% (10.1%)
> Not applicable: no data (0.9%).

Teenage mothers

According to UNICEF (2001), the percentage of teenage mothers is 9.8% for Belgium. The range for the European countries participating in ELINET is from 5.5% in Switzerland to 30% in UK (for an overview of European countries see table A4 in Appendix B).

Single parent

According to Eurostat (2012, Figure A 7), in Belgium the percentage of children living mainly with a single parent is 12.4%. The range for the European countries participating in ELINET is from 1.4% in Croatia to 30% in Denmark (for an overview of European countries see table A5 in Appendix B).

Migrant parents

According to PIRLS 2006 (Mullis et al. 2007, Exhibit 3.12, p.136 – Students' Parents Born in Country), in Belgium (French), the proportion of children with parents born outside the country is 19% and with only one parent born outside the country is 25% (for an overview about European countries see table A6 in Appendix B).

Primary language spoken at home different from language used at school

The gap in reading achievement between students in Belgium (French) who regularly speak the language of the PIRLS test at home and those who do so sometimes/never is 16 points, compared with an EU-24 average difference of 26 points. Moreover, while 29% of students on average in Belgium (French) speak a language other than French 'sometimes or never', 20% on average across the EU-24 do so (ELINET PIRLS 2011 Appendix, F1).

5.3.2 Support for children with special needs

Not only children from culturally disadvantaged families are "at risk" in their literacy development, but also those with very low birth weight and severe prematurity, factors that are associated with developmental disabilities, including reading and writing disabilities. Cognitive and sensory disabilities must also be considered.

Very low birth weight and severe prematurity

According to PERISTAT (2010, Figure 7.11, p.149) the percentage of live births with a birth weight under 2500 grams in Belgium (French) was 5.6%. The range is from 3.0% in Iceland to 8.8% in Cyprus (for an overview of European countries see table E1 in Appendix B).

According to the same source (PERISTAT 2010, Figure 7.14, p.155) the percentage of live births with a gestational age <32 weeks is 0.9% in Belgium (French) (with a range from 0.7% in Iceland to 1.4% in Hungary). The percentage of live births with a gestational age between 32 and 36 weeks was 7.4% (with a range from 4.5% in Lithuania to 7.5% in Hungary (for an overview of European countries see table E2 in Appendix B).

Cognitive or sensory disabilities

Not mentioned explicitly.

5.3.3 Promoting preschool attendance, especially among disadvantaged children

The benefits of attending preschool institutions have been proven in many studies. The duration of attendance is associated with greater academic improvement (Mullis et al. 2012b).

There is a positive relationship between the length of preschool education attendance in the French-speaking Belgium and the average reading score in grade 4, as PIRLS 2011 data show (Mullis et al. 2012a, Exhibit 4.7, p. 128. These are the figures for the French-speaking Belgium:

- 3 years and more: 76% (average reading score 513)
- Less than 3 years but more than 1 year: 22% (average reading score 494)
- 1 year or less: 1% (average reading score no data)
- Did not attend: 1% (average reading score no data)

  (For an overview of European countries s. table C3 in Appendix B).

No child should be excluded from preschool because parents cannot afford to send their children to preschool/kindergarten institutions if they have to pay.

5.3.4 Provisions for preschool children with language problems

Literacy competence strongly builds on oral language proficiency, word knowledge, and syntactic knowledge. Measures must be taken by governments and institutions to ensure that children with poor language development (second-language speaking children and those from a low socio-cultural background, as well as others who experience difficulty in learning language) acquire adequate levels of oral language in kindergarten, preschool institutions and in school. It should be ensured that at age 4 at the latest all children are diagnosed in their oral language proficiency, and that there are obligatory courses for children falling behind in their acquisition of language competence. The aim should be that all children entering school can speak the language of the school so that they can profit from reading instruction.

5.3.5 Support for children and adolescents whose home language is not the language of school

After the decree on the education of newly arrived students of 2012, the following reforms have been made:

- Pupil beneficiary target group was extended in such a way that access is now open to a wider range of pupils who have been in the country for less than one year (legally or not) and who don't have a sufficient knowledge of French.
- Schools are allowed more flexibility in the administrative and practical organisation of the system.
- The term "bridging classes" was replaced with a process called "*Dispositif d'accueil et de scolarisation des élèves primo-arrivants – DASPA*", meaning "Welcome and Schooling of Newly Arrived Pupils".
- DASPA can now be organised wherever necessary, when previously they were only organised near the welcoming centres for asylum seekers.
- Specific continuing training programs for teachers working in DASPA are developed.

Language welcoming classes usually last from one week to six months, with a maximum of one year. In these welcoming classes, pupils receive specific support, allowing them to adapt to the country's socio-cultural and educational system, and to be guided towards the grade and track that suits them best (Eurydice, 2012b).

Furthermore, courses in the language and culture of origin are organised for pupils with a migrant background in pre-secondary and secondary education, and courses in cultural openness (or integrated as a part of the compulsory timetable) are offered for all pupils in class.

Pupils whose mother tongue is not the language of instruction may also be given language adaptation courses at a rate of three periods per week. Intercultural education is recommended by the government.

The French Community has also established partnership agreements with Spain, Greece, Italy, Morocco, Portugal, Romania and Turkey (China in the future) to facilitate integration of migrant children. These bilateral agreements allow volunteering schools to benefit from one or more teachers coming from these countries (Eurydice, 2012b).

5.3.6 Preventing early school leaving (team 3)

Literacy provision and participation in secondary schooling: What is the rate of early school leavers?

One important, but certainly not sufficient, precondition for raising performance levels in literacy for adolescents is literacy provision during secondary schooling, as functional literacy is mainly acquired in school-based learning. Thus, the provision of secondary education for all adolescents and the prevention of early school leaving may serve as indicators for the opportunities of adolescents to improve their literacy performance especially related to basic functional literacy.

According to Eurostat, in Belgium, the rate of early school leavers was 11.0 % in 2013, and 12% in 2012. The target value of the early school leaving (ESL) rate set for 2020 is 9.5%. The ESL rate is quite different according to the regions in Belgium. Interestingly in the region of Brussels, the rate (17.7%) is far above the European target value. In the following table, the data for the period 2010-2013 are shown.

Table 28: Percentages early school leavers – Belgium and its region from 2010 to 2013[38]

	2010	2011	2012	2013
Belgium	11.9	12.3	12.0	11.0
Brussels	18.4	18.9	20.1	17.7
Wallonia (French-speaking region)	13.7	14.7	14.8	14.7
Flanders (Dutch-speaking region)	9.6	9.6	8.7	7.5

The duration of compulsory education is 9 years. Children start school at the age of 6; compulsory schooling ends at 15 years in full-time mode and at 18 in part-time mode (Compulsory Education in Europe 2013/14, Eurydice report). After the age of 15, young people are obliged to undertake at least part-time schooling up to 18 (EACEA, 2012).

As far as students (ISCED 1-6) aged 15-24 years are concerned, we find that 69.3% of 15-24 year olds were in some form of education in 2011, which was above the average EU-27 value of 61.9%. The

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[38] Source: Eurostat, see: http//appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=edat_lfse_16&lang=en.

percentage of 18-year olds in education was 89.9% in 2011, and 89.5 in 2012. Belgium, for that criterion, is then above the EU-27 average (80.7%). Since 2001, Belgium has consistently been above the EU average value for this indicator.

5.3.7 Addressing the gender gap among adolescents

There is no general policy to address the gender gap. It is completely left to local initiatives (mostly individual teachers).

5.3.8 Increasing participation, inclusion and equity for children and adolescents: Programmes, initiatives and examples

Programmes against poverty

By the end of the year 2015, a second National plan for fighting child poverty 2015-2019 will be developed in consultation with the Regions and the Communities. In the Brussels Capital Region, the French-speaking Brussels Government has strengthened the nursery plan. 16 million € have been made available for new places in care facilities for children aged 0 to 3 years. The plan focuses on the creation of more places in existing socially accessible collective child care facilities in areas where the needs are greatest.

In order to combine work and family life, the Government announced the development of innovative experiences in early childhood care. Moreover, the efforts concerning the creation of places continues in collaboration with the French Community of Belgium (creation of 5,000 places in subsidised day care centres)[39].

There is also a network called *Réseau Wallon de Lutte contre la Pauvreté[40]*. It gathers 25 member associations of the general assembly and of a set of partners, in order to activate a participative approach on the access and the exercise of the rights of the people in situations of poverty in the Walloon Region, in a concern of Social Justice essential to a democratic society.

Family literacy programmes for migrant parents

A number of training organisations organise parental or family literacy programmes, notably supported by the Social Cohesion and Continuing Education sectors.

Immigrants who do not speak French are classified depending on their mastery of their own language. Those who have mastered writing in their own language have access to FLE classes (French as a Foreign Language).

Furthermore, the Roi Baudouin Fund calls for projects based around the support of reading with migrant parents.

See ELINET Country Report in Belgium (Wallonia) – Adult for more details.

Policies/programmes to prevent early school leaving

In French-speaking Belgium, to prevent early orientation and to reduce the practice of grade repetition in lower secondary education, the government has introduced a compulsory common pathway for the

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[39] See: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu.
[40] See: http://www.rwlp.be

first two years of secondary education (12-14 years), in the continuity of primary school (decree of 30 June 2006). During this period, for pupils experiencing learning difficulties, an individual learning plan is set up, which includes special support. Children have the opportunity to attend special classes to catch up with learning and then return to the regular classes (European Commission, 2013, p.36). The main objective of those measures is to prevent students' grade repetition which predicts early school leaving. They do not specifically focus on ESL, as is the case in other countries (USA, The Netherlands).

As a way of preventing ESL, in French-speaking Belgium, the government has decided to finance specific training for pupils who are elected by their peers to be class delegates. They can act as mediators to tackle problems inside their own class group, between different class groups, their peers and the staff of the school such as educators, teachers, and headmasters (European Commission, 2013, p.37).

Furthermore, a dedicated service checks for the implementation of compulsory education. Its purpose is twofold: identifying the children between 6 and 18 years old who do not comply with compulsory education and checking the school attendance of children who are registered in schools. The latter task is important to detect the pupils at risk of dropping out of school; truancy is regarded as one indicator of other difficulties faced by the pupil at school or at home. Based on information provided by the school, the administration sends an official letter to the parents to remind them of the need to respect compulsory education. If the situation does not improve and the problem cannot be solved within the school, field workers working for the Ministry of Education can provide additional support to the school stakeholders. One of the main aims of their intervention is to re-establish the communication between the pupil and his/her family and the school (European Commission, 2013, p.37-38).

Each school in French-speaking Belgium is linked to a psycho-medico-social centre (CPMS). These centres support young people and/or their parents in all issues related to school, vocational guidance, family and social life, and health. Preventing early school leaving is one of the many missions of those centres which are overwhelmed. The consultations are voluntary and free of charge. Psychologists, nurses, social workers and doctors form a multidisciplinary team that allow for a holistic approach in helping young people. The content of consultations remains strictly confidential (European Commission, 2013, p.39).

Recent laws (2006) are aimed at articulating compulsory education and support to youth policies in order to improve the well-being of young people, preventing violence, reinforcing school participation and supporting orientation/guidance.

These laws offer a legal frame which potentially can bring a better consistency between different initiatives which emerged in the 2000s. It must be considered as a first step, which essentially consists of creating a dialogue between youth support services, justice and school. However, there is a complete lack of research programmes which would implement some measures to prevent early school leaving and would rate their effectiveness.

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