



LITERACY IN BELGIUM (FLANDERS)

COUNTRY REPORT
CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

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1 Introduction

This report on the state of literacy in Belgium (Flanders) 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 countries¹. 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 2012². 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 equity⁴).

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.

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

Flemish-speaking Belgium participated in OECD's PISA (15 year-olds' reading literacy) since 2000, and in OECD's PIAAC (adults' reading literacy) in 2012. This means it 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 15 year-olds and adults. Flemish-speaking Belgium took part in PIRLS 2006 only; no trends can be reported in this case.

In PISA 2012, the Flemish Community of Belgium performed well above the EU's average (518 vs 489 EU-average). However, despite this good relative performance, a small decline has been observed between 2000 and the last two PISA cycles (2009 and 2012) (- 15 score points between 2000 and 2012).

A limited proportion of 15 year-olds (14%) can be considered as low performing readers. This is less than the average across EU countries (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 top-performing readers is higher than in EU countries on average (13% vs 7%). However, the proportion of low-performing readers has slightly increased (by 2.1%) in the Flemish Community between 2000 and 2012.

In PISA 2009, the gap according to the pupils' socioeconomic background was higher than the EU average (100 vs 89 on average). Moreover, the gap between native students and students with a migrant background was much higher than in EU countries on average (69 vs 38 in EU). The mean score difference between those who always spoke the test language at home, and those who spoke another language was much lower (17 vs 54), but it is widely due to the fact that students speaking a dialect have reported that they do not speak the language of instruction at home. The proportion of students speaking another language is unexpectedly high (25%) (see below adults).

In Flemish-speaking Belgium, the gender gap (in favour of girls) was lower in PISA than in EU countries on average (28 vs 44). The gender difference in Flemish-speaking Belgium was somewhat higher in PISA 2000 (35) than in 2012 (29).

In conclusion, Flemish-speaking Belgium has a highly performing education system: 15 year-olds perform better than in EU countries on average; the proportion of low-performing readers is much lower, and the proportion of top-performing readers is higher than in the EU countries on average. However, the gap according to socioeconomic status and migration background is respectively higher or much higher than in the EU on average. Flemish-speaking Belgium is then more effective, but also less equitable than EU countries on average.

In PIRLS 2006, the Flemish Community of Belgium also performed above the EU's average (547 vs 535) and the proportion of low-performing readers was limited (10% only vs 20% in EU). The spread of achievement between top and low performers was lower than the EU-21 average difference (141 vs 177). Also, the gender gap, with 5 points difference, was lower than the EU average with 13. In Belgium (FL) more students had parents whose highest level of educational attainment was university or higher (31%) than on average across the EU-21 (25%), while fewer had parents whose highest level was lower

secondary or below (Belgium: 12%; EU-21: 18%). Pupils in Belgium (FL) whose parents attained a University degree or higher had a mean score (572) some 61 points higher than students whose parents completed lower secondary or below (511). The average difference across the EU-21 countries was 76, indicating a relatively weaker relationship between parents' educational achievement and students' reading achievement in Belgium (FL). Results regarding equity are then going in different directions in grade 4 and 15 year-olds.

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

Creating a Literate Environment

Pre-Primary Years

Providing a supportive home environment: Since Belgium did not participate in PIRLS 2011, no data of a more recent date than 2006 are available regarding parental attitudes towards reading, and early literacy activities. With just under half the parents (49%) reporting a high attitude towards reading, and especially with 13% reporting a low attitude, Belgium (Flanders) is reporting rather low figures on attitude in comparison to other EU-21 countries, according to PIRLS 2006 data.

In Belgium (FL) and on average across the EU-21, similar proportions of students were categorised as having high educational resources at home (14% and 13% respectively), while 2% in Belgium (FL) and 5% across the EU-21 were categorised as having low resources. The difference in achievement between those with high and low resources is smaller (by just 8 score points) in Belgium (FL), compared to the EU-21.

A number of 8% of students in Belgium (FL) reported having 10 or fewer books at home. This is slightly lower than the EU-21 average of 11%. In Belgium (FL), 15% had 200 or more books, which is close to the EU-21 average of 16%. The mean reading score difference in favour of students with 200 books compared with those who had 10 or fewer books was 62.6 points in Belgium (FL), compared with an average of 76 points across the EU-21. Hence, the link between number of books and reading achievement in Belgium (FL) is weaker than on average across the EU-21.

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.

Children and Adolescents

Creating a literate environment in school: Although there are no recent research data available on aspects such as the number of school libraries in (pre-)primary education in Flanders, it is expected from every organiser of childcare that he or she stimulates the development of children in various domains (physically, cognitively, socially, emotionally, communication, creativeness and moral). 'Reading for pleasure' is not explicitly mentioned in the final requirements of the curricula in Flanders. Pursuant to the principle of educational freedom, decisions regarding teaching methods and teaching

aids appertain to the freedom of the school board. Hence, there are no official guidelines for 'reading for pleasure', and this explains why this is not specifically mentioned in both primary and secondary education contexts. It is up to the initiatives of for instance the Flemish reading foundation 'Everybody Reads' to support schools and teachers in this matter.

Offering digital literacy learning opportunities in schools: The Flemish Government has implemented a policy of promoting ICT in education since 1996. In this respect, the emphasis was and is on the educational use of the new media. The Government of Flanders currently applies an implementation policy based on five focal points: curriculum support and competences development; infrastructure; digital learning resources policy; training and support; research and innovation. Although the digital landscape in Flanders is still developing positively with regard to internet access and pupil-device ratio, there is a need for updating the equipment used in the classrooms and for stimulating the use of computers during lessons by teachers. A little over 50% of primary school teachers report using the computer during lessons, and only 4% report never using the computer. Digital equipment in secondary schools in Flanders is satisfactory. All secondary schools in Flanders have internet access, but not all schools have an internal network or 100% broadband internet coverage, which would be the preferred situation. Development in this area appears to be lagging behind. Only 35% of secondary school teachers use the computer regularly in lessons. Students' frequency of use of computers 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.

Strengthening the role of public libraries: There are currently 313 public libraries in Flanders, until very recently fully funded and regulated by the Flemish department of Culture, Youth, Sports and Media. Public libraries play an important role in reading promotion in the broadest sense, in reaching out in many ways to (struggling) readers in all age groups via 'live' and online campaigns throughout the year. Adolescents seem to be the lesser supported group. Either the initiatives are rather general, or they target children more than adolescents. Adolescents are mainly supported through 'recommended reading' information.

The prolonged existence of public libraries in many (smaller) Flemish towns will be under severe pressure since government funding is no longer guaranteed to continue in 2016.

Improving the Quality of Teaching

Pre-Primary Years

Improving the quality of preschool education: In Belgium (Flemish Community), pre-school teachers are trained at higher education institutes and undertake a three-year post-18 course. The minimum required level to become a qualified teacher is Bachelor level (ISCED 5).

In Flanders, developmental objectives are minimum objectives in respect of knowledge, insight, skills and attitudes the educational authorities deem desirable for a particular pupil population and which the school must strive to achieve in all its pupils by the end of nursery education. The developmental objectives form the common core curriculum. All schools must offer their pupils activities in all these areas of learning. In the course of its full inspections, the inspectorate checks whether the developmental objectives are pursued. Objectives and activities are set for all age groups in a continuous learning curve towards primary education.

Pursuant to the principle of educational freedom, decisions regarding teaching methods and teaching aids appertain to the freedom of the school board. Hence, there are no official guidelines.

In order to complete compulsory education with the highest chances of success, and in particular with a view to a fluent mastery of Dutch, Flanders wants to promote a maximal participation in pre-primary education. Specific attention is paid to the youngest children from the age of three onwards.

Children and Adolescents

Improving the quality of literacy instruction: In order to enhance the literacy levels in compulsory education, the VLOR (the Flemish Education Council) is asking for a broad evaluation of the developmental goals and attainment targets in (primary and) secondary education. "It is the responsibility of those who develop the curricula and of the teachers to guarantee, from a development-oriented point of view, that the pupils acquire literacy skills during their complete school career. Pedagogical and didactical competences of teachers have to be reinforced."

The Flemish Parliament started a broad societal debate on attainment targets in 2015. The debate, which continues until 2016, will address which basic curriculum every pupil in education must receive. Prior and parallel to this debate, the implementation of a major revision of secondary education in Flanders will influence the content, organisation and assessment of all major subjects, and eventually also to (digital) literacy and reading instruction⁶. Attention will be paid to the perspective of pupils in choosing learning pathways, to ensuring quality of basic education and to provide sufficient differentiation inside and outside the classroom, for all pupils.

Digital literacy as part of the curriculum for primary and secondary schools: The Flemish Government has implemented an ongoing policy of promoting ICT in education since 1996. This means that the government aims to encourage schools to integrate ICT in their class practice by means of information and awareness-raising campaigns, in-service training, infrastructure and project funding. In this respect, the emphasis is on the educational use of the new media and cross-curricular final objectives and developmental aims of ICT in education.

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.

Standards as basis of assessment of reading difficulties: The Flemish government endorses the attainment targets and developmental objectives that together form the core curriculum. All schools are required to meet these attainment targets, which specify the knowledge, skills and attitudes that students should demonstrate by the end of primary education and the first, second and third stages of secondary education. In Flanders there are three educational networks that, based on these goals from the core curriculum, draw up their own curricula and timetables. They define more specific goals for each grade.

The language and reading curriculum does not prescribe assessment standards and methods, but the educational networks do provide assessment methods, as do the Centre for Diversity and Learning in

⁶ See: <http://www.hervormingsecundair.be>.

Ghent and the Centre for Language and Education in Leuven. These two academic centres also developed two toolkits together to support primary and secondary schools in conducting broad evaluation of language learning.

To reinforce schools' policy powers on the basis of relevant information about pupils' development level and progress, the government is investing in the development of tests that can support schools in their internal quality assurance.

Improving the quality of 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. Schools are required to draw up an in-service training plan every year, setting out in-service training needs. The legislation adopts a broad interpretation of in-service training, provided it can be demonstrated that the funded initiatives contribute to the professionalism of the teaching staff. Every year, the minister decides on a number of themes for in-service training projects which are needed to support the implementation of educational reforms. The selected projects are then offered free of charge and on a cross-network basis. Many in-service training initiatives are offered by the network-specific pedagogical counselling services, which receive an annual budget for this purpose from the government. In-service training is organised on a free market basis. Schools can refund teachers' transport costs and registration fees and also decide whether teachers can be released from their teaching duties for the training.

Further professional development and specialisation for teaching staff is also possible via various advanced Bachelor's programmes in education (e.g. for special education, or extending special needs provision in mainstream schools and remedial learning).

Increasing Participation, Inclusion and Equity

Pre-Primary Years

Encouraging preschool attendance, especially for disadvantaged children: To boost infant participation, the Flemish Child and Family organisation has been called on. The Data Protection Authority gave permission to pass on the list of infants who have not been registered in education to Child and Family so that the parents can be contacted. During house calls the district nurse will try and find out why the child has not been registered and will point out the importance of infant participation to the parents.

In the childcare centres, childminding services and local community-oriented pre-primary childcare services recognised and subsidised by Child & Family, families pay a financial contribution according to their income. Families with more than one dependent child or with twins or multiples receive a discount.

Children and Adolescents

Supporting children with special needs and migrant children and adolescents whose home language is not the language of school: The equal educational opportunities policy (GOK) has been developed particularly for disadvantaged children and young people (both native and from ethnic minorities). In both mainstream and special education, it ensures extra support and also guarantees these pupils the right to enroll in the school of their choice.

To facilitate Dutch language skills and the integration of non-Dutch-speaking newcomers in mainstream education, schools can be granted supplementary teaching periods/extra teacher hours and an extra operational allowance, so that they can organise OKATN/OKAN, reception education for non-Dutch-speaking newcomers.

Thanks to this reception education for non-Dutch-speaking newcomers, schools can receive supplementary teaching periods (primary education) and extra teacher hours (secondary education) and an extra operational allowance per non-Dutch-speaking newcomer. In elementary education only, a second year of reception education may also be provided. In secondary education, extra teacher hours are also allocated per schools community for the provision of support and guidance for pupils entering regular secondary education from reception education (follow-up school coaches).

In light of language policy aspects of the ongoing reforms in primary and secondary education, the government has laid down regulations for a compulsory language screening for pupils, entering from preschool into primary education, and from primary into secondary education. For those pupils whose Dutch language skills are insufficient upon first entry into primary education, a 'language bath' period can be offered, for a year at most.

Preventing early school leaving: According to Eurostat, in Belgium, the rate of early school leavers was 11.0% in 2013, down from 12% a year before. The target value of the early school leaving (ESL) rate set for 2020 is 9.5%.

In Flemish Belgium, in 2012, the government adopted an action plan on 'Truancy and other forms of anti-social behaviour'. The action plan aims at all students in compulsory education, but also focusses on pupils at-risk of ESL. The action plan addresses anti-social behaviour and truancy in a continuum of mapping the phenomenon, informing and sensitising, preventive work, guidance, and sanctioning. It aims to reduce truancy and other forms of behaviour leading to ESL.

3 General Information on the Belgian (Flanders) Education System

The general information on the Belgian (Flanders) Education System is derived from Eurydice⁷.

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

Competence for education in Belgium has been transferred to the communities. Only the determination of the starting and finishing ages for compulsory education, minimum requirements for diploma conferrals and the pension system are still federal matters. In the Flemish Community, the Department for Education and Training takes care of policy preparation and four internal autonomous agencies are responsible for policy implementation. Together, they form the Flemish ministry of Education and Training.

The Flemish Education Council (VLOR) is the strategic advice council for the policy domain of Education and Training. The Child and Family agency directs formal child care, including pre-school as well as out-of-school care of children up to the age of 12. Educational provision, recognised, financed/subsidised and inspected by the public authorities, is organised by different (public and private) school boards/governing bodies on the basis of freedom of education.

Children can enter preschools at the age of two and a half year-olds. The vast majority of children regularly attend preschool. Pre-primary education is well developed and free of charge. Compulsory schooling starts at age 6 and ends at 18. Integrated primary education is a cooperation between mainstream education and special needs education. It implies that children with a disability take classes or activities in a mainstream school. In this process they receive support from special needs education.

At the end of primary education children who have obtained all goals from the curriculum take a certificate of primary education. Also, in special needs education, children may in certain cases obtain a certificate which has the same value as the one from mainstream education.

Primary education lasts 6 years (grade 1 to 6), as does secondary education (grade 7 to 12). Between the ages of 15 and 18 years, students can follow part-time schooling.

In secondary education, the largest part of the curriculum in the first stage is dedicated to basic competences. From the second stage onwards four different types of education are offered:

- *General secondary education (gse)*, which focuses on broad general education. It does not prepare pupils for a specific profession, but rather lays a firm foundation for higher education.
- *In technical secondary education (tse)* attention goes in particular to general and technical-theoretical subjects. After tse, a youngster may practise a profession or transfer to higher education. This type of education also contains practical training.

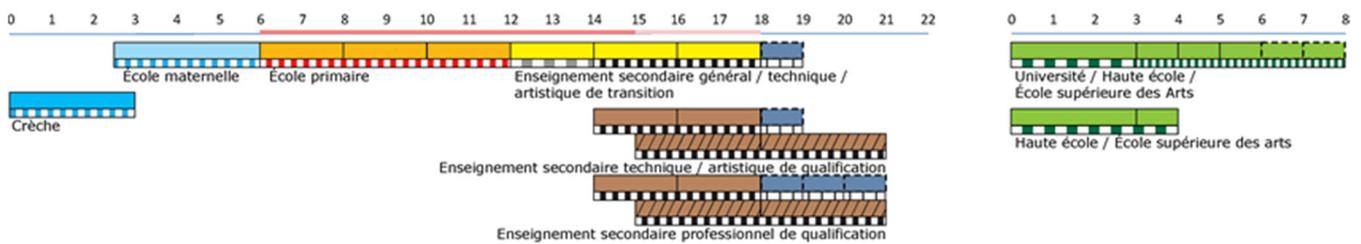
⁷ See: <https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Belgium-Flemish-Community:Overview>.

- *Secondary education in the arts* combines a broad general education with an active practice of art. After secondary education in the arts a youngster may practise a profession or transfer to higher education.
- *Vocational secondary education (vse)* is a practically-oriented type of education in which the youngster receives general education but where the focus primarily lies on learning a specific profession.

A pupil chooses one of these forms of education for one particular course of study.

A pupil obtains the certificate of secondary education after he/she has successfully ended the sixth grade of gse, tse or secondary education in the arts or the seventh grade of vse. With a certificate of secondary education a youngster is granted unrestricted access to higher education. As well as full-time secondary education, there is qualification-stream dual vocational secondary education and training and, in some institutions, post-secondary non-tertiary education.

Figure 1: Structure of the Belgian School System⁸



⁸ See Structure of European education systems: http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/facts_and_figures_en.php#diagram

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 organized 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.

Belgium (Flanders) did not participate in the PIRLS 2011 cycle, only in 2006. Although these data are rather old they are reported here to give a hint to the achievement levels and the reading attitudes of students.

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 D: ELINET PIRLS 2006 Data).

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

Performance in reading (PIRLS 2006)

Pupils in Belgium (FL) achieved an overall mean reading score of 547 in PIRLS 2006 (Table 1), which is significantly higher than the EU-21 average of 534. Students in Belgium (FL) ranked 7th of the 21 EU countries in the study, while performance among pupils was broadly similar across reading purposes (Literacy, Informational) and reading processes (Interpret, integrate & Evaluate; Retrieve & Infer) (Appendix Tables).

Table 1: Overall Performance on PIRLS 2006 – Belgium (FL) and EU-21 Average

	Overall Reading
	Mean
Belgium (FL)	547
EU-21	534

Significant higher scores (relative to the EU-21 Average) are shown in **bold**.

In Belgium (FL), 10% of pupils performed at or below the Low benchmark on overall reading. This is lower than the EU-21 average of 19% (Table 2). The share of advanced readers in Belgium (FL) (7%) was slightly below the EU-21 average of 9%.

Table 2: Performance by Overall PIRLS Reading Benchmarks 2006- Percentages of Pupils in Belgium (Flemish) and on Average across the EU-21

	Below 400	400-475 Low	475-550 Intermediate	550-625 High	Above 625 Advanced
Belgium (Flemish)	1	9	41	42	7
EU-21	4	15	37	35	9

Significant differences in **bold**

As performance on the PIRLS 2006 benchmarks suggests, achievement among students in Belgium (FL) is narrower than on average across the EU-21. The standard deviation for Belgian (FL) students (56 points) is also lower than the EU-21 average. The difference between scores at the 90th and 10th percentiles is another measure of spread (Table 3). In Flemish speaking Belgium, this was 141 – lower than the EU-21 average difference of 177.

Table 3: Spread of Achievement – Standard Deviation, 10th, 90th Percentiles, and Difference between 90th and 10th Percentiles on Overall Reading – Belgium (Flemish) and EU-21 Average

	Standard Deviation	10 th Percentile	90 th Percentile	90 th -10 th
Belgium (Flemish)	56	474	616	141
EU-21	70	442	620	177

Significant differences in **bold**

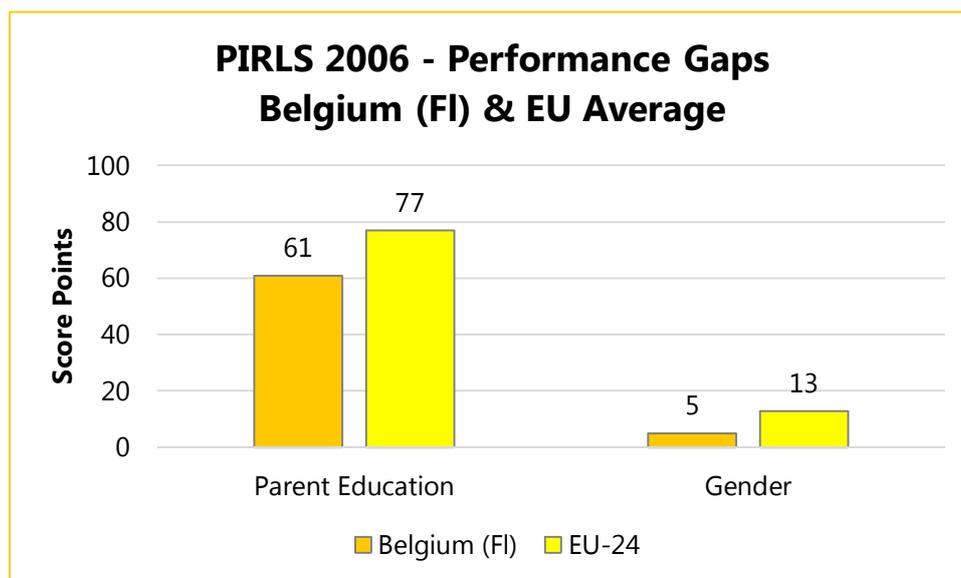
In 2006, girls in Belgium (FL) achieved a mean score on overall reading that was significantly higher by 5 points (550) than that of boys (540). This was less than half the EU-21 average difference of 13 points.

4.1.2 Gaps in reading

As in every European country, there are achievement gaps between different groups. For Belgium Flemish there are only data from PIRLS 2006. The gender gap with 5 points difference was lower than the EU average with 13. In Belgium (FL) more students had parents whose highest level of educational attainment was university or higher (31%) than on average across the EU-21 (25%), while fewer had parents whose highest level was lower secondary or below (Belgium: 12%; EU-21: 18%). Pupils in Belgium (FL) whose parents attained a University degree or higher had a mean score (572) that was some 61 points higher than students whose parents completed lower secondary or below (511). The average difference across the EU-21 countries was 76, indicating a relatively weaker relationship between parent's educational achievement and students reading achievement in Belgium (FL).

Figure 2 summarises gaps for parent education and gender in PIRLS 2006.

Figure 2: Performance Gaps: SES and Gender – Belgium (FL) and EU Averages – PIRLS 2006



Parent Education: University – Lower Secondary or lower; Gender: Girls – Boys.

Attitudes to Reading

In 2006, PIRLS provided an Index of Students' Attitudes Toward Reading (SATR). Thirty-eight percent of students in Belgium (FL) had a 'High' Attitude towards Reading, compared with an EU-21 average of 48% (Table 4). Sixteen percent in Belgium (FL) had a 'Low' attitude, compared to an EU-21 of 10%. In both Belgium (FL), and on average across the EU-21, the average difference in performance between students in the High and Low attitude groups was about the same (46-48 points).

Table 4: Index of Students' Attitudes Toward Reading (SATR)

Country	High SATR		Medium SATR		Low SATR		Difference High-Low
	Percent of Students	Mean Reading Score	Percent of Students	Mean Reading Score	Percent of Students	Mean Reading Score	
Belgium (Flemish)	38	567	46	540	16	520	46
EU-21	48	556	42	518	10	508	48

Statistically significant mean score differences in bold.

In 2006, 51% of students in Belgium (FL) were categorised as having a 'High' reading self-concept, the same as the EU-21 average (Table 5). Similar proportions in Belgium (FL) and on average across the EU-21 were categorised as having 'Low' reading self-concept. The overall reading scale score difference between students with High and Low reading self-concept in Belgium (FL) was lower (63 points) than on average across the EU-21

Table 5: Index of Students' Reading Self-Concept (SRSC)

Country	High SRSC		Medium SRSC		Low SRSC		Difference High-Low
	Percent of Students	Mean Reading Score	Percent of Students	Mean Reading Score	Percent of Students	Mean Reading Score	
Belgium (Flemish)	51	565	44	532	5	502	63
EU-21	51	559	46	514	4	471	88

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

4.2 Performance Data for Adolescents

The performance data are derived from the OECD PISA studies.

The **Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)** led by OECD⁹ **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 or metacognition 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.

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% had not gone on to any post-school education by the age of 21; by contrast, more than half of the students (55 %) who had performed at Level 2 as their highest level were at college or university. (OECD 2010, p. 52)

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

Table 6: Reading performance in PISA 2012

	Mean	S.E.
Belgium (Flemish)	518	(3,0)
EU-27	489	(0,6)

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

⁹ See: <http://www.pisa.OECD.org>.

In PISA 2012, the Flemish Community of Belgium performed well above the EU's average. However, despite this good relative performance, a small decline has been observed between 2000 and the last two PISA cycles (2009 and 2012).

Table 7: 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 (Flemish)	532	(4.3)	519	(2.3)	518	(3.0)	-14	(6.9)	-1	(4.6)	-15	(7.9)
EU-27	489*	(0.7)	486**	(0.6)	489***	(0.6)	-3*	(5.0)	5**	(2.7)	3*	(6.0)

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

Table 8: Spread of achievement. Difference between 10th and 90th percentiles on the reading scale, all students and by gender – PISA 2012

	Difference 90 th –10 th for all students		Difference 90 th –10 th for girls		Difference 90 th –10 th for boys	
	Score diff.	S.E.	Score diff.	S.E.	Score diff.	S.E.
Belgium (Flemish)	252	(6.1)	238	(6.9)	262	(9.4)
EU-27	251	(1.3)	230	(1.2)	259	(1.6)

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

In the Flemish Community of Belgium, the spread of achievement is exactly the same as in EU countries on average.

Table 9: 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 (Flemish)	13.7	(1.0)	13.1	(0.9)
EU-27	19.7	(0.2)	7.0	(0.1)

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

The above average performance of the Flemish Community of Belgium is equally balanced at both ends of the distribution, i. e. in the Flemish Community of Belgium, there are less low-performing readers and more top-performing readers than in the EU on average.

Table 10: Trends in the proportion of low-performers (below level 2) in reading, all students, and by gender – PISA 2000-2012

	All students		Girls		Boys	
	%	S.E.	%	S.E.	%	S.E.
2000	11.6	(1.5)	8.0	(1.6)	14.8	(1.9)
2009	13.4	(0.9)	9.7	(1.1)	16.9	(1.1)
2012	13.7	(1.0)	9.9	(1.1)	17.4	(1.7)

Significant differences between assessment cycles in **bold**

Between 2000 and 2012, the proportion of low-performing readers has slightly increased (by 2.1%) in the Flemish Community of Belgium, among girls (+ 1.9%) and somewhat more among boys (+ 2.6%).

4.2.2 Gaps in reading performance

Socio-economic status

Table 11: Difference in reading performance between bottom and top national quarters of the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status – PISA 2009

	Difference between bottom and top national quarters of the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status
	Score diff.
Belgium (Flemish)	100
EU-26	89

In the Flemish Community of Belgium, the gap in reading performance according to the students' socioeconomic background is higher than in the EU countries on average. The Flemish Community of Belgium is high on performance but low on equity

Gender

Table 12: Mean reading performance by gender and gender differences – PISA 2009

	Boys		Girls		Difference (B – G)	
	Mean score	S.E.	Mean score	S.E.	Score diff.	S.E.
Belgium (Flemish)	505	(3.0)	533	(3.3)	-28	(4.1)
EU-26	463	(0.5)	506	(0.4)	-44	(0.5)

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

Gender difference in reading performance is lower in the Flemish Community of Belgium than in EU countries on average.

Table 13: Trends in reading performance by gender – PISA 2000-2012

	Belgium (Flemish)				EU-27			
	Girls		Boys		Girls		Boys	
	Mean	S.E.	Mean	S.E.	Mean	S.E.	Mean	S.E.
2000	551	(5.2)	516	(6.0)	506*	(0.8)	473*	(0.9)
2009	533	(3.3)	505	(3.0)	507**	(0.7)	464**	(0.8)
2012	532	(3.8)	503	(4.4)	511***	(0.6)	468***	(0.8)

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

The average decrease in reading performance observed between 2000 and 2012 is somewhat stronger among girls (- 19 score points) than among boys (- 13 score points). The trend is different in EU countries on average: between 2000 and 2012 the girls' performance increased by 5 score points, and the boys' decreased by 5.

Migration and language

Table 14: 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		Score dif.	S.E.
			Mean	S.E.			Mean	S.E.		
Belgium (Flemish)	91.0	(1.0)	526	(27)	9.0	(1.0)	457	(6.1)	69	(6.8)
EU-26	91.7	(0.02)	490	(0.4)	8.3	(0.02)	452	(6.4)	38	(6.4)

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

In the Flemish-speaking Community of Belgium, the percentage of students with an immigrant background is rather small (9 %), close to the EU average. The gap between native students and those with an immigrant background is 69 score points, which is equivalent to more than one year and a half of schooling. The gap between native students and those with an immigrant background is much higher than the EU average, almost twice as high. Along with high SES gaps, this confirms that equity is an issue in the Flemish Community of Belgium.

Table 15: Percentage of students and reading performance by language spoken at home - PISA 2012

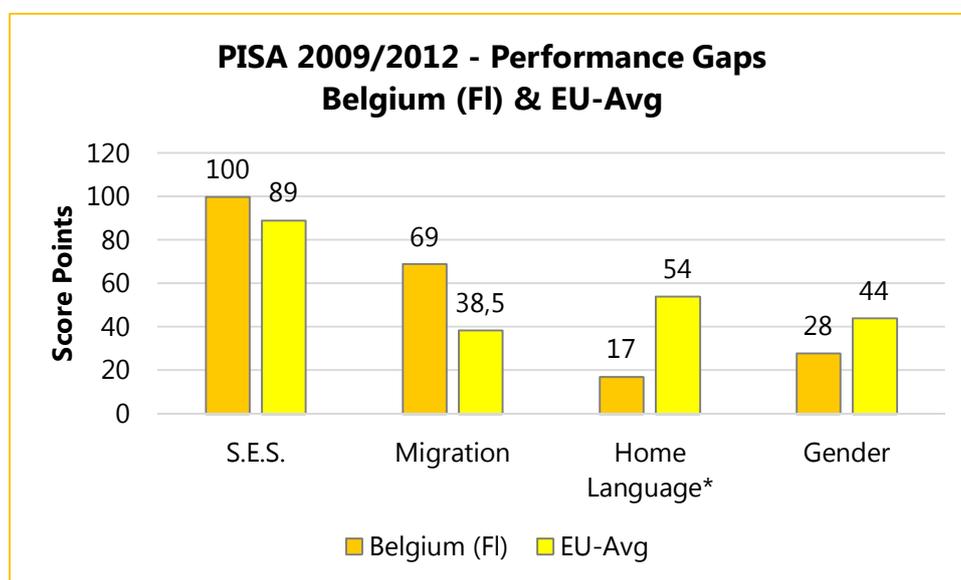
	Speak test language at home				Speak another language at home				Difference in reading according to language spoken at home	
	Percentage of students	S.E.	Performance on the reading scale		Percentage of students	S.E.	Performance on the reading scale		Score dif.	S.E.
			Mean	S.E.			Mean	S.E.		
BELGIUM (Flemish)	75.1	(1.5)	530	(3.5)	24.9	(1.5)	513	(4.9)	17	(6.5)
EU-27	86.7	(0.02)	494	(0.4)	13.3	(0.02)	441	(5.4)	54	(5.4)

Significant differences according to language spoken at home in **bold**

In the Flemish Community of Belgium, the gap between students speaking the test language at home and those who do not is rather small (17 score points) - much lower than on the EU countries on average. This might be due to the fact that about 25 % of the students report that they speak another language at home but most of these students do not have an immigrant background (as there are only 9% of non-native students, see table 9). Most of them possibly speak a dialect at home which is not the standard Flemish language, but close to it.

Performance gaps in Belgium (FI) are summarised in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Performance Gaps: SES, Migration, Language Spoken at Home and Gender – Belgium (FI) and EU Averages – PISA 2009/2012



Education: University – Lower Secondary or lower; Migration: Native – First or Second Generation Immigrant; Language: Language of test spoken always – sometimes/never; Gender: Girls – Boys; *2012

Engagement and metacognition

Table 16: 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 (Flemish)	478	(2.7)	587	(4.1)	109
EU-26	444	(0.8)	543	(0.8)	99

In the Flemish-speaking Community of Belgium, there is a gap of 109 score points - which is equivalent to more than two years and a half of schooling - between the students reporting being highly engaged in reading (top quarter), and those reporting being poorly engaged (bottom quarter) in that activity. Not surprisingly, students who report being engaged in reading perform better in the PISA test. The difference between the most and the least engaged readers is somewhat higher in the Flemish-speaking Community of Belgium than in the EU country on average.

Table 17: Mean reading scores between students in low and top quarters of understanding and remembering strategies – PISA 2009

	Low quarter		Top quarter		Difference
	Mean	S.E.	Mean	S.E.	
Belgium (Flemish)	462	(3.2)	582	(2.8)	120
EU-26	433	(0.8)	531	(0.8)	98

In the Flemish-speaking Community of Belgium, there is a gap of 120 score points - which is equivalent to 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 that. On average, in the EU 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 18: Mean reading scores between students in low and top quarters of summarizing strategies – PISA 2009

	Low quarter		Top quarter		Difference
	Mean	S.E.	Mean	S.E.	
Belgium (Flemish)	454	(3.0)	578	(2.8)	124
EU-26	440	(0.8)	530	(0.7)	90

In the Flemish-speaking Community of Belgium, there is a gap of 124 score points – which is equivalent to 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, the gap is somewhat lower (90 score points). This large difference reflects how closely reading proficiency and awareness of efficient reading strategies are linked.

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 (with 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*). In 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

For the country reports written for ELINET several indicators are used, for which data are available from international sources (PIRLS) with figures that are comparable. Since Belgium did not participate in PIRLS 2011, no data of a more recent date than 2006 are available regarding parental attitudes towards reading, and early literacy activities. PIRLS 2006 offers the following data on parents’ attitudes towards reading (Mullis et al. 2007, exhibit 3.10, p. 126):

Table 19: Index of Parents’ Attitudes Toward Reading (PATR) – Belgium (Flemish) and international Average – PIRLS 2006

Country	High PATR		Medium PATR		Low PATR	
	Percent of Students	Mean Reading Score	Percent of Students	Mean Reading Score	Percent of Students	Mean Reading Score
Belgium (Flemish)	49	562	38	538	13	529
EU-21	58	554	35	524	7	509

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

With just under half the parents (49%) reporting a high attitude towards reading, and especially with 13% reporting a low attitude, Belgium (FL) is reporting rather low figures on attitude in comparison to other EU-21 countries.

Home Educational Resources

PIRLS 2006 provide data for this aspect. In Belgium (FL) and on average across the EU-21, similar proportions of students were categorised as having high educational resources at home (14% and 13% respectively), while 2% in Belgium (FL) and 5% across the EU-21 were categorised as having low resources. The difference in achievement between those with high and low resources is smaller (by just 8 score points) in Belgium (FL), compared to the EU-21 (Table 8).

Table 20: Index of Home Educational Resources (HER) – Belgium (Flemish) and EU-21 Average – PIRLS 2006

Country	High HER		Medium HER		Low HER		Difference High-Low
	Percent of Students	Mean Reading Score	Percent of Students	Mean Reading Score	Percent of Students	Mean Reading Score	
Belgium (Flemish)	14	580	84	545	2	481	100
EU-21	13	584	83	536	5	476	108

Statistically significant mean score differences in bold.

Number of children's books in the home

A number of 8% of students in Belgium (FL) reported having 10 or fewer books at home (ELINET PIRLS 2006 Appendix, Table E1). This is slightly lower than the EU-21 average of 11%. In Belgium (FL), 15% had 200 or more books, which is close to the EU-21 average of 16%. The mean reading score difference in favour of students with 200 books compared with those who had 10 or fewer books was 62.6 points in Belgium (FL), compared with an average of 76 points across the EU-21. Hence, the link between number of books and reading achievement in Belgium (FL) is weaker than on average across the EU-21.

Challenge: 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 childrens' literacy development.

5.1.2 Providing a literate environment in school

Although there are no recent data available on aspects such as the number of school libraries in (pre-) primary education in Flanders, the Eurydice website states the following with regard to the task the different educational contexts face:

From every organiser of childcare, it is expected that he or she: Stimulates the development of children in various domains (physically, cognitively, socially, emotionally, communication, creativeness and moral).

For Primary Education in Flanders, there are five designated areas of learning in the common core curriculum, of which *Dutch* is one:

Dutch: listening, speaking, reading, writing, strategies, linguistics, (inter)cultural focus.

'Reading for pleasure' is not explicitly mentioned in the final requirements ('eindtermen') of the curriculum in Flanders¹⁰. There is, however, some emphasis in the general description of the language and reading curriculum on reading comprehension and reading for pleasure: '...(pupils) find pleasure in dealing with language and linguistic expression'.

Pursuant to the principle of educational freedom, decisions regarding teaching methods and teaching aids appertain to the freedom of the school board. Hence, there are no official guidelines for, or explanations why, 'reading for pleasure' is not specifically mentioned in both contexts. It is up to the initiatives of for instance the Flemish reading foundation 'Everybody Reads' (www.iedereenleest.be) to support schools and teachers in this matter.

5.1.3 Providing a digital environment

The Flemish Government has implemented a policy of promoting ICT in education (since 1996). In this respect, the emphasis is on the educational use of the new media (Ministry of the Flemish Community 2005). The Government of Flanders currently applies an implementation policy based on five focal points: 1. Curriculum support and competences development; 2. Infrastructure; 3. Digital learning resources policy; 4. Training and support; 5. Research and innovation.

Since 2006, a major revision of the core curriculum has been made for cross-curricular objectives, of which ICT is a major one (European Schoolnet, 2015). The cross-curricular final objectives and developmental aims of ICT in primary education are as follows: 1. Pupils have a positive attitude towards ICT and are willing to use ICT in support of their learning. 2. Pupils use ICT in a safe, sensible and appropriate way. 3. Pupils are able to practise independently in an ICT-supported learning environment. 4. Pupils are able to learn independently in an ICT supported learning environment. 5. Pupils are able to use ICT to express their own ideas in a creative way. 6. Pupils can retrieve, process and save digital information that is appropriate for them by means of ICT. 7. Pupils are able to use ICT in presenting information to others. 8. Pupils are able to use ICT to communicate in a safe, sensible and appropriate way (European Schoolnet 2015, p. 8).

Digital environment of primary students

The most recent monitor of ICT integration in Flemish Education (monitor in 2012, report in 2013) shows that the PC-to-pupil ratio has increased over the years to 1 PC, laptop or tablet per 5.7 pupils in general nursery and primary education in Flanders. Although this is a positive development, another conclusion is that a sizeable portion of these materials have become outdated (Van Braak et al., 2013). A little over 50% of primary school teachers report to use the computer during lessons, and only 4% report that they are never using the computer.

Digital environment of secondary students

Digital equipment in secondary schools in Flanders is satisfactory. All secondary schools in Flanders have internet access, but not all schools have an internal network or 100% broadband internet coverage, which would be the preferred situation. Development in this area appears to be lagging behind. Only 35% of secondary school teachers use the computer regularly in lessons.

¹⁰ See: www.ond.vlaanderen.be/curriculum/basisonderwijs/lager-onderwijs/leergebieden/nederlands/eindtermen.htm.

Challenge: Although the digital landscape in Flanders is still developing positively with regard to internet access and pupil-device ratio, there is a need for updating the equipment used in the classrooms and for stimulating the use of computers during lessons by teachers. Students' frequency of use of computers 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 313 public libraries in Flanders, until very recently funded and regulated by the Flemish department of Culture, Youth, Sports and Media. The main task of a public library is to initiate, maintain and develop reading practices of children, adolescents and adults. They basically propose a department of loan of printed and digital documents and, very often, they give their members the opportunity to browse the Internet, and to participate in reading and/or writing groups or workshops. Selected Flemish public libraries allow their clients to directly loan and download e-books without having to go to the library. To this end an iOS/Android app has been developed which can be downloaded for free. It is also possible to go to the libraries and read e-books on a library PC. Public libraries play an important role in reading promotion in the broadest sense, in reaching out in many ways to (struggling) readers in all age groups via 'live' and online campaigns throughout the year.

For many years, public libraries were fully funded with public money. Very recently, at the start of 2016, the Flemish government has decided that this fundamental source of financing the libraries' collections, activities and professionals will cease to be. Local authorities are also no longer legally required to provide their communities with libraries. This poses a real threat to the amount of reading promotion campaigns and opportunities people in Flanders are offered, and to the prolonged existence of their local library.

Challenge: Now that prolonged substantial government funding of public libraries has come into danger, this important and influential part of the literate and cultural environment is at risk of diminishing or disappearing from communities altogether.

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

Challenge: There is no systematic programmed or planned cooperation. This is left to the initiative of local authorities, schools or individual professionals.

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

Besides the work of public libraries in this field, the following headings give examples of initiatives that promote reading and reading engagement in Flanders.

Programmes for introducing parents and children to libraries and bookshops

-*Boekbaby's*¹¹ is inspired by the internationally renowned project *Bookstart*. The project encourages parents to read to their small children and make good use of the library. In order to stimulate this,

¹¹ See: www.boekbabys.be.

parents receive multiple sets of books to read to and with their pre-schoolers as well as information on using facilities in their local library.

Initiatives to foster reading engagement among children and adolescents and offering them attractive reading material in print and non-print

The Flemish reading foundation *Iedereen Leest* ('everybody reads')¹² hosts, launches and supervises many initiatives with regard to reading engagement (through attractive materials) for all age groups.

The following web pages, activities and initiatives are of interest regarding this aspect:

- <http://jeugdletteratuur.org> is a web portal that offers young readers reading tips, as well as information about authors and new books.
- www.lezerstippenlezers.be ('readers' recommendations') is Flanders' largest online community of readers. Its aim is to gather and provide as many reading tips, evaluations and recommendations as possible. Adolescents are part of the intended public as well as adults and, to a lesser extent, younger children.
- www.jeugdboekenweek.be is the platform promoting reading engagement for children aged 3-12. A new overall theme is chosen every year, and during one week in March there is a peak in promotional activities: awards, reading sessions in libraries and schools, etc..
- www.voorlezen.be is the platform promoting reading to children. It offers support to intermediaries such as professionals in daycare, preschool and primary education. In November of every year, one week is designated as a week filled with promotional campaigns to promote reading to children.
- www.boekenzoeker.org ('bookseeker') is the product of a Dutch-Flemish collaboration. The site offers an attractive search engine for readers in four age-groups: 0-8; 8-12; 12-15; 15-18 years.

Challenge: Adolescents seem to be the lesser supported group. Either the initiatives are rather general, or they target children more than adolescents. They are mainly supported through 'recommended reading' information.

Fostering digital literacy in- and outside schools

Pursuant to the principle of educational freedom, decisions regarding teaching methods and teaching aids appertain to the freedom of the school board. Hence, there are no official guidelines. ICT in elementary education is seen as a form of support for the learning process. Computer technology, however, is not emphasised as a means nor a goal in the process of teaching and fostering 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.

¹² See: www.iedereenleest.be.

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 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 recognized 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 programs.

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. 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 Belgium (Flemish Community), pre-school teachers are trained at higher education institutes and undertake a three-year post-18 course. In their training, they must undertake at least one placement with children with special needs, although not necessarily in a special school (Laevers & Janssens 2000).

The minimum required level to become a qualified teacher is Bachelor level (ISCED 5) (European Commission/ EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat 2014, p. 101).

According to European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat (2014, p. 107), in Belgium (Flemish Community), Bachelor's degree holders in other subjects may apply for a place on a short programme leading to the Bachelor's degree in pre-primary education. In some cases, waivers for certain subjects are allowed on the basis of recognition of prior learning (European Commission/ EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat (2014, p. 107).

In Belgium (Flemish Community) in both subsidised and non-subsidised private settings for younger children, Continuing Professional Development is a professional duty and a prerequisite for career development. It may be provided but it is not mandatory. Only those providers that ask for funding from the government have at least 12 hours per year of mandatory professional training. In most European countries, CPD is generally considered a professional duty for staff (European Commission/ EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat 2014, p. 104-105).

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 that 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).

The information on the Eurydice platform states the following on these matters:

In Flanders, developmental objectives are minimum objectives in respect of knowledge, insight, skills and attitudes the educational authorities deem desirable for a particular pupil population and which the school must strive to achieve in all its pupils by the end of nursery education.

The developmental objectives form the common core curriculum. These were formulated for five **areas of learning**:

- **physical education**: motor skills, healthy and safe lifestyle, self-awareness and social integration;
- **art education**: visual arts, music, drama, dance, media and attitudes;
- **Dutch**: listening, speaking, reading, writing, linguistics;
- **World studies**: nature, technique, humankind, society, time and space;
- **mathematical initiation**: numbers, measuring and space (geometric initiation).

All schools must offer their pupils activities in all these areas of learning. In the course of its full inspections, the inspectorate checks whether the developmental objectives are pursued. The school boards or the educational umbrella organisations draw up a curriculum, containing the developmental objectives, which is approved by the government upon the advice of the inspectorate who subsequently checks that the curriculum is also followed. Objectives and activities are set for all age groups in a continuous learning curve towards primary education.

Pursuant to the principle of educational freedom (see 2.1.1.), decisions regarding teaching methods and teaching aids appertain to the freedom of the school board. Hence, there are no official guidelines.

Activities in nursery education are often centered on a specific theme or point of interest. These themes are often linked to the calendar year, but may also be topics the infants bring up themselves. Working in corners as an organisational structure is found in most nursery schools. Children are given the chance to experiment, discover, discuss..., either independently or with the help of other children (and adults).

Initiation in foreign languages (French, English and German) may be offered from the first year of pre-primary education. It is compulsory to start with an initiation in French.¹³

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

¹³ See: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Belgium-Flemish-Community:Teaching_and_Learning_in_Pre-Primary_Education.

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.

Regarding these aspects, both information from the Flemish government on their website on pre-primary education as well as information from the Eurydice database confirm that on almost each one of the key components mentioned above, there is ample focus on the importance of these developmental goals for children in Kindergarten in Flanders. The Inspectorate and agencies supporting the practice of teachers offer ample stimulus and input to professionals in the classroom to work on these developmental goals. Most components can be observed in classrooms often, usually in combined (and repeated) planned as well as spontaneous activities. If any aspect could be mentioned as being less conspicuous in steering documents, it is explicit attention on grammar and vocabulary learning by teachers.

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. In order to enhance the literacy levels in compulsory education, the Vlor (the Flemish Education Council) is asking for a broad evaluation of the developmental goals and attainment targets in (primary and) secondary education. "It is the responsibility of those who develop the curricula and of the teachers to guarantee, from a development-oriented point of view, that the pupils acquire literacy skills during their complete school career. Pedagogical and didactical competences of teachers have to be reinforced."¹⁴

Primary schools curricula

The common core curriculum in Flanders consists of areas of learning and cross-curricular themes.

Areas of learning:

- **physical education:** motor skills, healthy and safe lifestyle, self-awareness and social integration
- **art education:** visual arts, music, drama, dance, media and attitudes
- **Dutch:** listening, speaking, reading, writing, strategies, linguistics, (inter)cultural focus;
- **French:** reading, speaking, oral interaction, writing
- **world studies:** nature, technique, humankind, society, time and space, use of resources; From 1 September 2015 onwards 'world studies' will be subdivided in 'science and technique' and 'human and society'.
- **mathematics:** numbers, measuring, geometry, strategies and problem-solving skills, attitudes.

Cross-curricular themes:

- learning to learn
- social skills
- ICT

¹⁴ See: <http://www.vlor.be/recommendation-literacy-occasion-publication-piaac-results-0>.

The same division into areas of learning is operated throughout pre-primary and primary education, except for 'French' which is not taught in pre-primary education and 'mathematics', which is called 'mathematical initiation' in pre-primary education. This increases transparency and underlines the developmental line throughout elementary education. The cross-curricular themes are also maintained in secondary education. The division into areas of learning is not in any way meant to give a certain structure to the education that classes or schools provide. This is very much left up to the schools. For instance, schools can decide themselves whether they offer certain contents of learning in an either more or less cohesive fashion.

Reading in Belgium (Flanders) is taught as part of the language curriculum, which also includes writing and oral communication skills. The school boards (in practice however often the educational umbrella organisations) draw up a curriculum, containing the final objectives, which is approved by the government upon the advice of the inspectorate.

Activities linked with reading are mainly developed as part of Dutch (as mother tongue) lessons. French is a compulsory subject for pupils in 5th and 6th grade. French may be offered from the 3rd year and in the Brussels Capital Region from the first year of primary education. Belgium (Flanders) can be identified as a country in which goals and objectives are prescribed in the language (reading) curriculum, but not in assessment standards or in methods and materials. However, the government has been setting assessment surveys for pupils in grade six for over a decade. In every survey, one (occasionally two) of the legally designated areas of learning are investigated in a random selection of primary schools in Flanders. Reading was part of these surveys in 2002, 2007 and 2013. Non-selected schools can opt to participate in parallel surveys and receive data on how their pupils perform in relation to the goals and objectives, as laid down by the Flemish Ministry of Education. Such data can give valuable feedback to school leaders as to the 'fit' and effectiveness of their school curriculum and teaching in this respect. Another source for schools and teachers who wish to monitor their pupils' progress in Dutch and Dutch as a Second Language proficiency is the online Toolkit Breed Evalueren (Toolkit Broad (Formative) Assessment).

The standards and the procedure for the assignment of a primary school certificate are laid down in the education regulation. At the end of elementary education, the class council autonomously decides whether a certificate of elementary education will be issued or not. The class council judges whether the pupil has sufficiently reached and mastered the objectives of the curriculum, which comprise the attainment targets for primary education. A pupil who does not receive the certificate is entitled to a written explanation for this decision, and to working points for his/her further school career. The possibility to appeal exists.

Reading for pleasure

Reading for pleasure has a place in the list of goals and objectives that underlie the teaching practices in primary education throughout Flanders. It is also part of the evaluation of the teaching practices in primary schools by the Flemish Inspectorate; it is, however, not part of a set national curriculum for language education.

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 (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

Eurydice (2011) states that Belgium (Flemish), is one of a small set of countries where steering documents for the primary level scarcely mention sub-elements of basic reading instruction. Nevertheless, they all contain goals or attainment targets which, implicitly or explicitly, require pupils to master basic reading skills.

There is no official indication that knowledge of phonics or grapheme-phoneme correspondence is focused on in the curriculum in Belgium (Flemish) during primary education, but there is for the pre-primary years. Eurydice (2011) states that the following elements are part of steering documents for pre-primary education in Belgium (Flanders): awareness that print carries meaning; playing with language, using nonsense words and rhyming; and breaking down speech into small units, blending syllables or sounds in sounds. For primary education, the list of aims and objectives does state, at its most detailed level, that pupils are aware of and can use sets of linguistic concepts, including phonological terms like 'sound', 'vowel' and 'rhyme'. Explicit instruction of this kind can definitely be observed in the first year(s) of primary schools in Flanders, but it is not compulsory.

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).

Challenge: According to the analysis of steering documents by Eurydice (2011, 60), Belgium (Flemish) is an 'odd-one-out' in a broader European context. Only a few of the effective strategies mentioned in the report could be observed in steering documents for (pre)primary education: just the first two and the last one are mentioned in the context of literacy curricula in Belgium (Flemish). This last strategy (pupils reflect on their own reading process) is rarely mentioned in documents on literacy curricula in other European countries (Eurydice 2011). It is remarkable that in Flanders this very important aspect in reading comprehension is mentioned, but some of the other, more widespread strategies, are not.

Literacy curricula in secondary schools

Internationally, Flemish secondary education ranks amongst the best. To retain this position, the Flemish minister of education continues to implement, in close consultation with the educational and social partners, the Master Plan for Secondary Education. This plan, which was approved by the

Flemish Government in June 2013, must allow for the strong points of the current system to be further developed and for possible points of improvement to be addressed. Throughout this process a focus lies on the provision of quality education for every pupil in Flanders.

The current developmental objectives and final objectives for secondary education specify *which* minimum knowledge and skills pupils should acquire, but do not specify *how* this should be achieved. Schools have complete freedom in this regard. Curricula contain essential data on the concrete practice of teaching and are tailored to a well-defined group of pupils. Moreover, they give tips on teaching strategies and their realisation. In principle, such curricula may be developed by the individual school boards but, in practice, they are usually developed by the educational umbrella organisations. Normally, the schools affiliated to these umbrella organisations adopt the approved curricula.

However, the curricula must, insofar as they have been specified, always unambiguously feature:

- the subject-related final objectives and developmental objectives,
- the specific final objectives,
- the recognised vocational qualifications or, instead, the preset competences.

All schools operate one or more curricula which have been approved by the government to ensure that the core curriculum and the specific component are realised. The inspectorate assesses the curriculum on the basis of the set criteria and the final objectives and developmental objectives and advises the Minister for Education as to their approval.

In the first stage of secondary education, pupils are not yet subdivided according to the various branches of education. As far as teaching and learning of Dutch is concerned, the framework used for the primary education setting is extended and amended: the level of skill expected to be mastered at the end of the lower secondary school is more demanding than for the primary school level. The specific literacy competencies that students should have acquired by the end of secondary school are defined in different documents according to the educational track they are enrolled in.

Students are expected to develop appropriate skill in, and knowledge of, tools of communication and reflection. To build their knowledge, pupils are guided to search for and handle information, develop a critical mind, ask themselves questions, turn to sources presenting the information in various ways, to read, to write, to listen to and to speak in varied situations of communication. This standard also underlines the development of skills such as learning to learn: acquire cognitive processes which allow students to access and acquire knowledge, to understand it, to criticise and transform it.

Challenges: In primary school curricula, the range of reading skills to be developed is quite large but only marginally includes metacognitive processes. This does not do justice to the importance of developing explicit teaching of reading strategies. Digital reading is not yet explicitly taken into account in the curricula.

In both primary and secondary schools curricula, literacy is seldom considered as the integration of reading, writing and oral proficiency skills. This segmented output approach doesn't favor the development of an integrated approach considering the interrelated dimensions of the cognitive, social and socio-cultural components of literacy. This, in turn, stands in the way of the optimal use of language in a learning context in different content areas: transfer of literacy competences is not as self-evident as it seems, especially in secondary education.

5.2.3 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, which might be biased by social desirability.

For Belgium (Flanders), data from PIRLS 2006 are the most recent data available. Data from a decade ago can not be counted upon to offer an adequate indication of current actual reading instruction. Therefore, at this point, no more than a global comment can be made that self-reported results on reading instruction in 2006 revealed that Belgium (Flanders) scored (a lot) under the EU21 average scores in every respect on the scale 'Teachers Implement Selected Activities Daily or Almost Daily to Develop Reading Comprehension' (see ELINET PIRLS 2006 Appendix H1).

No comparable data are available for secondary schools.

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

No recent data for available for Belgium (Flanders).

Challenge: Ongoing attention via educational research and practice is needed for the subject of investigating actual reading instruction in primary and secondary education in Flanders.

Digital literacy part of the curriculum for primary and secondary schools

The Flemish Government has implemented a policy of promoting ICT in education since 1996. This means that the government aims to encourage schools to integrate ICT in their class practice by means of information and awareness-raising campaigns, in-service training, infrastructure and project funding. In this respect, the emphasis is on the educational use of the new media (Ministry of the Flemish Community 2005, p. 25). According to European Schoolnet (2010), since 2006, a major revision of the core curriculum has been made for cross-curricular objectives, ICT, mother tongue, foreign languages, science and technology. The cross-curricular final objectives and developmental aims of ICT in primary education are as follows: 1) Pupils have a positive attitude towards ICT and are willing to use ICT in support of their learning. 2) Pupils use ICT in a safe, sensible and appropriate way. 3) Pupils are able to practise independently in an ICT-supported learning environment. 4) Pupils are able to learn independently in an ICT supported learning environment. 5) Pupils are able to use ICT to express their own ideas in a creative way. 6) Pupils can retrieve, process and save digital information that is appropriate for them by means of ICT. 7) Pupils are able to use ICT in presenting information to others. 8) Pupils are able to use ICT to communicate in a safe, sensible and appropriate way (European Schoolnet 2010, p. 7/8).

5.2.4 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.

The Flemish government itself only imposes attainment targets and goals that should be reached at the end of primary and the different stages of secondary education. The government endorses the attainment targets and developmental objectives that together form the core curriculum. All schools are required to meet these Flemish attainment targets, which specify the knowledge, skills and attitudes that students should demonstrate by the end of primary education and the first, second and third stages of secondary education. In Flanders there are three educational networks that, based on these goals from the core curriculum, draw up their own curricula and timetables. They define more specific goals for each grade.

The language and reading curriculum does not prescribe assessment standards and methods, but the educational networks do provide assessment methods, as do the Centre for Diversity and Learning in Ghent and the Centre for Language and Education in Leuven. These two academic centres also developed two toolkits together to support primary and secondary schools in a broad evaluation of language learning.

To reinforce schools' policy powers on the basis of relevant information about pupils' development level and progress, the government is investing in the development of tests that can support schools in their internal quality assurance. They make these available for voluntary use, free of charge, via the secure website *Toetsen voor scholen*, which is only accessible to recognised educational institutions. Three types of test have been available on this website since 2009:

- The Flemish version of the pupil monitoring system of the Dutch organisation CITO. For Flanders, this pupil monitoring system comprises standardised tests for pre-schoolers (language and sorting) and for primary education (technical reading and spelling). A pupil monitoring system (PMS) consists of a series of tests which are used to determine pupils' level of progress at regular intervals. It enables both pupils' current performance and their development to be systematically charted. Teachers can also check whether a pupil's performance and progress are comparable with those of other pupils: is the pupil progressing as expected, taking account of his/her starting level? A PMS offers useful information at pupil, class and school level.
- The SALTO (Start of Primary Education Linguistic Skills Screening) test. Schools can use this listening test, developed by the Centre for Language and Education, to screen the Dutch language proficiency of pupils starting their 1st grade of primary education at the start of

the school year (in September-October). The tool assesses whether pupils have sufficient skills in Dutch to understand simple instructions, questions and information about the way school works. The results from the test indicate which pupils need extra care and support with regard to their linguistic skills. SALTO can help teachers attune their language skills education to the needs of their pupils, and aims to encourage schools to initiate reflection about a school language policy.

- The parallel tests developed within the framework of the periodical survey on final objectives and development objectives [see 11.1.2.5]. Schools can administer these tests and then input pupils' answers into a secure feedback system and request a free school feedback report. The data are analysed and used to draw up the report by a research group from K.U.Leuven. The report contains information about the extent to which the school is succeeding in achieving the final objectives or development objectives, and compares its results with the Flemish average and with schools with a comparable pupil population (added value). It can constitute a starting-point for internal quality assurance. The website is supplemented every year with new sets of parallel tests. In 2011, parallel tests are available for:
 - Elementary education:
 - Dutch: reading and listening comprehension (2 tests)
 - mathematics (20 tests)
 - 1st stage secondary education (A-stream)
 - French: reading (1 test)
 - mathematics (10 tests)
 - 1st stage secondary education (B-stream)
 - mathematics (5 tests)
 - 3rd stage general, technical and arts secondary education
 - Dutch: reading and listening (2 tests).

In primary education, teachers also test small or large subject matter units on a regular basis in order to assess to what extent pupils have attained the pre-set objectives and also to evaluate the effectiveness of his or her own teaching.¹⁵

Challenge: The OECD (2011) in the reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education states as a result of the School Evaluation in the Flemish Community of Belgium, an "insufficient emphasis on improvement and excellence in attainment targets. In the deregulated context of Flemish education, the development of some commonality and comparability of quality standards across schools is a clear challenge. The existence of system-wide attainment targets is a clear strength of the system and provides some indication as to the minimum level of performance that all students should reach. However, what is lacking in the Flemish Community of Belgium is some more extended guidance regarding different levels of proficiency that can be reached by students and some kind of aspirational standards illustrating the level of performance that can be achieved by the most successful schools. The attainment targets do not provide sufficient stimulus for schools to strive for excellence and continuous improvement. Schools must ensure that all students meet the attainment targets – this represents the minimum learning objectives for students and schools. If schools use the parallel tests,

¹⁵ See: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Belgium-Flemish-Community:Assessment_in_Primary_Education; https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Belgium-Flemish-Community:Quality_Assurance_in_Early_Childhood_and_School_Education.

they can see how their students perform against these attainment targets. However, there are no clear criteria or indicators to help schools evaluate the aggregated student performance levels beyond these minimum objectives. Hence, there is a high degree of variability in the nature and rigour of judgements made by schools when evaluating their own quality. Many schools are coming to their own evaluative judgements in isolation, with the consequent risk that they might be out-of-line and perhaps too limited in expectation in comparison with quality standards applied in the best performing schools" (OECD 2011, 37). Although the present situation has definitely ameliorated in recent years, with growing attention to periodical surveys and pupil monitoring systems, this area of systematic evaluation and assessment throughout the educational system remains an issue.

Screenings for reading competence to identify struggling readers

In Flemish schools, the Dutch AVI-system is widely used to detect reading difficulties. Whether or not a school regularly screens for struggling readers, depends on the school's policy in this respect and its umbrella organisation. In most schools this is the case.

Supporting struggling literacy learners

This is an aspect that is looked into by the Educational Inspectorate of the Flemish Ministry of Education and Training. In order to cater for pupils with disabilities, who have fallen behind in their developments or learning, or who have socio-emotional problems within mainstream education, various systems have been developed:

- 1) extra special needs hours, special educational resources and support from sign language interpreters;
- 2) integrated education with support from special education;
- 3) inclusive education for pupils with a moderate or serious intellectual disability.

Pupils whose overall personality development cannot be ensured at all or sufficiently, whether on a temporary or permanent basis, may receive special education in separate schools.

The equal educational opportunities policy has been developed particularly for disadvantaged children and young people (both native and from ethnic minorities). In both mainstream and special education, it ensures extra support and also guarantees these pupils the right to enroll in the school of their choice.

Number of struggling readers receiving remedial instruction

PIRLS 2006 offers some data concerning issues of remedial instruction in primary schools, but since these data represent an educational context 10 years ago, it is unclear to what extent these findings aptly represent the current situation.

Based on a question that class teachers answered in PIRLS 2006, it was estimated that 18% of students in fourth grade in Belgium (Flanders) are considered to be in need of remedial reading instruction, with 14% of the pupils indeed receiving such remedial reading instruction. This is in line with the EU21 averages of 16% and 12%, respectively. Also, it is a slightly higher estimate than the PIRLS 2006 data report as the percentage of pupils scoring at the (below) low levels, deemed to be poor readers, which was 19.1%.

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 2006, 20% of students in Belgium (Flanders) are in classes where there is never access to specialized professionals to work with students who have reading difficulties, compared with an EU-21 average of 53% .

Table 21: Percentages of Students whose Teachers Reported that A Specialist Reading Professional Is Available to Work with Students Who Have Difficulty with Reading

Access to...	Belgium (Flemish)			EU-21 Average		
	Always	Some-times	Never	Always	Some-times	Never
Specialised professional	18	61	20	13	34	53
Teacher aide	5	24	71	5	23	72

Source: ELINET PIRLS 2006 Appendix, Tables J2-J3

According to responses provided by teachers in PIRLS 2006, 29% of students in Belgium (Flemish) are in classes where the teacher arranges for students falling behind in reading to work with a specialised professional such as a reading professional in the classroom. The corresponding EU-21 average is lower at 12%. The data also show that 66% of students are in classes where the teachers reported that, if a student begins to fall behind in reading, they have them work with a specialised reading professional in a separate remedial reading classroom.

Support for struggling readers – a legal right?

There is no legal right, but the education system offers a broad range of support systems for children falling behind in their learning, and for children with a non-Dutch mother tongue. In Flanders, the equal educational opportunities (GOK and GOK+) policy has been developed particularly for disadvantaged children and young people (both native and from ethnic minorities). In both mainstream and special education, it ensures extra support and also guarantees these pupils the right to enroll in the school of their choice.

On 12 March 2014 the Flemish Parliament approved a parliamentary act on measures for pupils with specific needs. It was stated: "The right of pupils to reasonable adaptations by the school to their special education needs will be guaranteed in accordance with the UN Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities".¹⁶

¹⁶ See: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Belgium-Flemish-Community:Reforms_in_School_Education#Pupils_with_specific_education_needs.

According to Eurydice 2011, national experts reported the following initiatives for tackling reading difficulties in 2009/10:

The IQRA-project (IQRA-Vlaanderen) The project intends to diminish or prevent learning difficulties with "allochtone" children. The focus is also on mastering the instruction language¹⁷.

Digibib (ADibib) This project of the NGO 'Die-'s-Lekti-kus' tackles the limitations in written communication of pupils with a normal intelligence. This project makes available digital books via a digital library; and offers training for teachers and care takers to make the use of the tools possible by pupils and teachers¹⁸.

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

Entry requirements for Initial Teacher Education

In Belgium (Flanders), the Certificate of final examination of upper secondary education completion is the only entry requirement for ITE (Eurydice, 2013). Whether students have to take an additional literacy or numeracy tests is decided at the institutional level. The 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.

There is a Competency framework listing 13 competencies for the 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: The aim of having highly qualified teachers requires selective teacher recruitment policies (cf. OECD recommendations, 2005). These policies currently do not exist in Belgium (Flanders).

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

Belgium (Flemish) requires primary teachers to have a bachelor's degree which takes three years' study. In European comparison this is a relatively short duration. Teachers in lower secondary education are required to achieve a Bachelor's level for which they have to study 3 years. Upper secondary teachers are required to achieve a Master's degree, which means a five-year study (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2013. *Key Data on Teachers and School Leaders in Europe*).

Challenge: Belgium (Flanders) requires primary teachers and lower secondary teachers to have a Bachelor's degree which takes three years' study. In European comparison, the duration of this training is relatively short. 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).

¹⁷ See: <http://www.bredeschoolhetkeerpunt.be/index.php?section=1&page=27>.

¹⁸ See: <http://www.letop.be>.

The role of literacy expertise in Initial Teacher Training

In several institutions for higher education that offer Initial Teacher Training, tackling assessing pupils' reading skills (technical reading as well as reading comprehension) is an important part of the curriculum (Moonen & van Bergen 2015).

Since the job title for teaching professionals in Belgium (Flanders) is the same ('teacher') for both those working in primary and in secondary education, the government has also developed one common professional profile¹⁹. This profile is made up of ten job specifications, each containing a number of 'can do' statements. From this profile, a set of basic competences for nursery-, primary- and secondary school teachers is derived²⁰. These competences also include ample references to the role of a teacher in enhancing literacy development. A few examples of such competences from each of the three levels of teaching:

the *preschool* teacher can:

1.11.2 evaluate texts and make them orally accessible by working on them in terms of language and through an adjusted teaching method.

the *primary* school teacher can:

1.13 contribute to making pupils sensitive and open to languages by raising their language awareness.
2.4.2 teach pupils how to handle information from and influence by the media in a critical and useful manner.

the *secondary* school teacher can:

1.4.3 in consultation with colleagues, indicate links between curriculum contents from his or her own subject area and related subject areas (horizontal coherence);

1.13.3 consult with the school staff team about a joint approach to aspects of 'learning to learn'.

Challenge: Initial teacher education needs a compulsory focus on developing literacy expertise among future primary and secondary teachers in order to provide future teacher with tools to cope with student's reading difficulties.

Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

Continuing professional development is left to the initiative of teachers and schools. However, schools are required to draw up an in-service training plan, on the basis of which they may draw on limited financial support for the in-service training attended by teachers. The government also sets priority in-service training themes every year with respect to which in-service training projects may be followed free of charge.

Many in-service training initiatives are offered by the network-specific pedagogical counselling services, which receive an annual budget for this purpose from the government.

After the initial teacher training programmes, further professional development and specialisation for teaching staff is also possible via various advanced Bachelor's programmes in education (e.g. for special education, extending special needs provision in mainstream schools and remedial learning, or school development).

¹⁹ See: http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/curriculum/lerarenopleiding/documenten/TCP_0.1.pdf.

²⁰ See: http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/curriculum/lerarenopleiding/documenten/BC_0.1.pdf.

There is compulsory continuous professional development (in-service training) for teachers which focuses on literacy development. Belgium (Flanders) develops comprehensive strategies to improve pupils' knowledge of the language of instruction (not only their reading skills) since 2007. The adopted comprehensive strategy encourages every teacher, whatever the subject taught, to take some responsibility for improving pupils' language skills (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2011, pp. 109).

Time frame and quality standards of CPD

No data available.

Time spent on professional development related to literacy

No data available.

Challenge: Although in Flanders there is compulsory CPD, the availability and participation rates of continuing professional development targeted at building literacy expertise of teachers is important.

5.2.6 Digital literacy as part of initial teacher education

In Belgium (Flanders), ICT in initial teacher education has gone through a national action plan. In March 2007, the Flemish Ministry of Employment, Education and Training published a policy plan entitled "Competences for the Knowledge Society, 2007-2009". In this plan, the necessity to support teachers' ICT competences in the teaching context is underlined and priorities are defined. This was followed by the introduction of a new ICT curriculum, which involved major changes to both integrated and specific teacher training. First of all the teacher training system is expected to provide the labour market with teachers who have the necessary initial qualifications – including ICT. Consequently, all teacher training services have to pay attention to the ICT competence of their students so they can manage the final objectives themselves to a large degree. This is possible only if ICT is incorporated into the training curriculum itself to a large extent.

However, teachers-to-be not only have to have basic competences, they also have to deploy ICT in an educationally responsible way in the teaching process. On top of basic competences all teacher training has to continue fleshing out the teaching methodology for the use of ICT and feature it in the training to a sufficient extent.

Flanders is still aiming at enhancing the literacy level in the region for the period 2015-2017. Specific attention is hereby paid amongst others to youngster who leave education early and to people in poverty who face difficulties in entering formal education. In addition, Flanders is working on enhancing digital literacy and media literacy.

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

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

The equal educational opportunities (GOK) policy has been developed particularly for disadvantaged children and young people (both native and from ethnic minorities). In both mainstream and special education, from 2002 to 2012 it ensured extra support and also guaranteed these pupils the right to enroll in the school of their choice. Special needs hours are allocated for pupils who need extra

attention because their development or learning has fallen behind or because of their socio-economic status.

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. In November 2015, a European Erasmus + project was launched in the area of Content area literacy (“BleTeach - Blended Learning in Teachers’ Professional Development - Developing a Blended Learning Course in Content Area Literacy for Secondary Teachers”). The project led by University of Cologne in Germany involves Belgium, Hungary, Portugal, Romania and Russia. 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”).

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 (might be more).

This section refers to children and adolescents who out of 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 **socioeconomic and cultural background** has a strong impact on literacy. Material poverty and educational level, particularly of the mother, are well-recognized 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).

Parents' education level

The PIRLS 2006 database offers information on the highest level of education of either parent. For Belgium (Flanders) the data show a relatively high level of education of either parent, compared to the international average: University or higher: 31% vs 25%; Post-secondary: 27% vs 21%; Upper-secondary: 30% vs 31 %.

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 (Flemish) the proportion of children with both parents born outside the country is 8% and with only one parent born outside the country is 13%.

Primary language spoken at home different from language used at school

According to PIRLS 2006 (Mullis et al. 2007, Exhibit 3.11, p.135), in Belgium (Flemish), the proportion of children who always speak the language of the test at home is 77%, sometimes is 21%, and never 2%. For 94%, respectively 85% of the children, either or both parents speak the language of the test at home.

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. Also cognitive and sensory disabilities must 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 (Flanders) was 6.6%. The range is from 3.3% in Iceland to 9.8% 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 1.0% in Belgium (Flanders) (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 6.9% (with a range from 4.5% in Lithuania to 9.3% in Cyprus (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).

To boost infant participation, the Child and Family organisation has also been called on. The Data Protection Authority gave permission to pass on the list of infants who have not been registered in education to Child and Family so that the parents can be contacted. During house calls the district nurse will try and find out why the child has not been registered and will point out the importance of infant participation to the parents.

No child should be excluded from preschool because parents cannot afford to send their children to preschool/kindergarten institutions if they have to pay. In Belgium (Flanders), free access to compulsory education is guaranteed under the Constitution (art. 24 § 3). Education Decree XIII of 13 July 2001 fleshed this matter out even further: schools may not seek any direct or indirect registration fees either in full-time secondary education or in part-time vocational secondary education. Indirect registration fees are costs the school boards or other organisations impose at the start or in the course of the school year, which are so high that they may form a genuine impediment to registration. Parents and adult pupils may only be charged for certain educational activities and teaching materials, but under strict regulations.

In the recognised childcare centres, childminding services and local community-oriented pre-primary childcare services recognised and subsidised by Child & Family, families pay a financial contribution according to their income. Families with more than one dependent child or with twins or multiples receive a discount.

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

The equal educational opportunities policy (GOK) has been developed particularly for disadvantaged children and young people (both native and from ethnic minorities). In both mainstream and special education, it ensures extra support and also guarantees these pupils the right to enroll in the school of their choice.

To facilitate Dutch language skills and the integration of non-Dutch-speaking newcomers in mainstream education, schools can be granted supplementary teaching periods/extra teacher hours

and an extra operational allowance, so that they can organise OKATN/OKAN, reception education for non-Dutch-speaking newcomers.

Thanks to this reception education for non-Dutch-speaking newcomers, schools can receive supplementary teaching periods (primary education) and extra teacher hours (secondary education) and an extra operational allowance per non-Dutch-speaking newcomer. In elementary education only, a second year of reception education may also be provided. In secondary education, extra teacher hours are also allocated per school community for the provision of support and guidance for pupils entering regular secondary education from reception education (follow-up school coaches).

In view of the varied language skills of many pupils in Dutch-language schools in Brussels, and elementary schools located in the peripheral and language boundary municipalities and those adjoining them, these schools are granted suitable facilities and extra support.

5.3.6 Preventing early school leaving

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 22: Percentages early school leavers – Belgium and its regions from 2010 to 2013

	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

Source: Eurostat²¹.

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).

²¹ See: http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=edat_lfse_16&lang=en.

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 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 a gender gap. Data from Pisa 2012 show that in Flanders, the gender gap (in favour of girls) was lower in PISA than in EU countries on average (28 vs 44). The gender difference also decreased from 35 in PISA 200 to 29 in PISA 2012.

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

Policy to increase inclusion and equity

In Flanders a new legislative framework for enrolments in compulsory education is being elaborated. At the forefront of this reform is a simplification of the system and a strengthening of the free school choice.

When elaborating the new legislative framework, specific attention is paid to equal chances for every child, the mixed composition of society and the commitment of the school governing boards. The simplified enrolment policy strives to reach the following goals:

- a maximal freedom of choice for the parents;
- realising optimal learning and development opportunities for all pupils;
- avoiding exclusion, segregation and discrimination;
- in addition for Brussels: protecting equal educational and enrolment opportunities for Dutch-speakers and retaining the Dutch-speaking character of the educational offer financed or subsidised by the Flemish Community.

Policies to prevent early school leaving

There is no enrolment fee in compulsory education. School/study allowances are allocated in nursery education, compulsory education and higher education on the basis of the same criteria and by means of a family dossier that covers all children from the same family for all educational levels. In order to increase pupils' participation, however, the allocation is contingent on regular attendance at school. Moreover, the school regulations contain an undertaking in which mutual agreements are set out about contact with parents, regular attendance and truancy policy, forms of individual pupil guidance and positive engagement with respect to the language of instruction.

On 26 June 2015 the Flemish Minister of Education presented, together with her colleagues from Welfare and Work, the concept note 'Together against school drop-out' to the Flemish Government.

The concept note contains a comprehensive plan with more than 50 action points. The goals of the note are to reduce the number of early school leavers, to push back truancy, and to guarantee study entitlement. A focus is put on prevention, together with actions against pupils playing truant.

With this concept note Flanders responds to the European recommendation to address in an integrated manner the problems of early school leaving and truancy by use of the European frame of

reference. For this reason measures are elaborated within the four domains of monitoring, prevention, intervention and compensation.

The Flanders Social and Economic Council (SERV) and the Flemish Education Council (VLOR) formulated an advice on the concept note on respectively 28 September 2015 and 12 October 2015. At the end of October 2015 the discussion of the concept note with the various stakeholders (providers of education, trade unions, cities, existing networks on study entitlement, Pupil Guidance Centres, etc.) was completed.

Pupil Guidance Centres (CPGs) in Belgium (Flanders) serve to deal with truancy open to pupils, parents and school teams alike. Once a school has informed the centre that a particular pupil has not been at school for 10 half days for no apparent legitimate reason, or if a pupil has been absent because he/she was suspended or temporarily or permanently expelled, the pupil guidance centre is obliged to organise learning-pathway guidance in and following consultation with the school.

In the context of participation by preschool children, the school together with the CPG starts a pathway for pupils from nursery education whose development and learning progress are jeopardised by their poor attendance record in nursery class.

Failing at school, a wrong choice of studies and a lack of motivation are often reoccurring reasons why youngsters leave school early. Also scholastic delay and truancy contribute to this phenomenon. In order to allow a maximum number of youngsters to leave secondary education holding a qualification, Flanders is working on a reform of the pupil guidance system. At the end of September 2015, the results of an audit of the system of pupil guidance were presented. On the basis of the audit a concept note on the reform of the system of pupil guidance was elaborated. Also the approved Ministry of Education concept note 'Together against school dropout' must contribute to pushing back truancy and early school leaving, cf the advisory paper by the Flemish Socio-Economic Council²².

²² See: <http://www.vlaanderen.be/nl/publicaties/detail/advies-conceptnota-schooluitval>.

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