

Chapter 8

**THE BELGIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM
AFTER PISA: REFORM APPROACHES IN THE
FRENCH-SPEAKING COMMUNITY OF BELGIUM**

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**1. BELGIUM AND ITS EDUCATION SYSTEMS: HISTORICAL
BACKGROUND CONTEXT**

Belgium is a Federal State. Since 1989, several levels of political power have been established and each level of power administers and legislates on matters it has charge of. Besides the federal Government, three different Communities, distinguished by their language and culture – the Flemish, the French and the German Communities – have their own governments. There are also three Regions defined on a geographical basis: the Flemish region; Brussels-Capital; and Wallonia.

Education is largely the responsibility of the Linguistic Communities. Very few educational matters are still legally defined at the level of the Federal State: these few include the minimum conditions for diplomas, the age for starting school and for the end of compulsory schooling, and retirement pensions for teachers. Since 1989, there has not been a Federal Minister of Education. Each Community has one (or sometimes more) Ministers of Education.

Even though the three education systems are now administered autonomously, they have a long common history and basically, their structure and their main organizational features have remained the same. Of course, they have diverged in some limited respects, but no major reform has intervened to date to make the systems notably different. No doubt there are noticeable cultural differences in the ways these education systems are managed, but structurally the principles remain comparable.

In this paper the focus will be on the French Community, but any necessary contextual information will be provided for the Flemish and German Communities. The description given below of the main characteristics of the education system of the French Community can

be broadly applied to both of the other systems. When striking differences are worth noting, additional information will be supplied.

2. BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN FRENCH COMMUNITY OF BELGIUM

Structural Characteristics

This overview has to be selective; it doesn't aim at giving a complete guide to the education system, but rather at outlining its contextual features so that the French Community's education system can be broadly situated in comparison with other education systems around the world. The selection is also based on the need to provide useful information about relevant features in relation to PISA and the reforms PISA results could call for.

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

Primary education lasts 6 years (grades 1 to 6) as does secondary education (grades 7 to 12).

Basically, one could say that the education system in Belgium is a non-comprehensive one. There is a strong background conviction in Belgian society that all pupils in an age cohort cannot be educated together – due to their heterogeneous abilities – and that it is preferable and more efficient to assign lower achievers or pupils with special needs to “special” classes or to younger groups. This strong conviction, shared by most teachers, students and parents, results in the following characteristics:

- The proportion of pupils attending special education schools is rather significant (4 % of all pupils).
- Rates of grade repetition are high: about 20 % of pupils have repeated at least one grade by the end of primary school and up to 60 % by the end of secondary education. Not surprisingly, rates of grade repetition are very much higher in vocational education than in academic education. Learning difficulties are essentially managed through grade repetition, assignment to “lower” tracks or by moving pupils to less demanding or prestigious schools.
- Secondary education is not truly comprehensive. In principle, education should be comprehensive up to the end of grade 8. But despite this unique structure, 10 to 20 % of the pupils attend “remedial” or prevocational classes. From grade 9, secondary education is divided into two main tracks: the “transition” track (academic or technological), leading to higher education, and the “qualification” track (technical or vocational) which delivers diplomas that act as qualification for the market place. One specific feature of this structure, established at the end of the seventies¹, is that

¹ At that time (1975) an important reform of secondary education called “reformed education” took place. This complex reform introduced the principle of comprehensive education for grade 7 and 8. It established bridges

the system of tracks is quite flexible and many bridges between tracks are possible. A student attending a vocational track can for instance “go back” to the technical track under certain conditions. Students’ assignment to the various tracks is not based on specific examinations: in some cases it is just dependent on advice, and in other cases it is the common decision of the teachers’ council. Assignment to non-academic tracks is clearly a “negative” orientation, taken after weak results in academic education (orientation by school failure).

There is no external certifying assessment or examination at any level. All examinations are internal, designed by the teacher for his/her own students. Students enter the University without ever having passed a common examination. Schools deliver diplomas on the basis of their own criteria.

Almost all schools are publicly funded. There are very few private schools charging fees for students. Nevertheless, schools are dependent on different authorities:

- Some schools are organized directly by the Ministry of Education (about 10 % of the schools in primary education, 25 % of the schools in secondary education).
- The other schools are publicly funded but organized either by public local powers (towns, provinces) or by private powers, essentially Catholic churches. 52 % of pupils in primary education and 17 % of students in secondary education attend public schools (local powers); 37 % of pupils in primary education and 57 % of students in secondary education attend Catholic schools (Etnic, 2004).²

There is no sectorisation or catchment areas: students can freely choose the school they want to attend without any geographic limitation. This “free choice” leads to huge competition between schools, which develop strategies to attract students. It also means that middle-class parents develop ingenious strategies in order to find the “best” school for their children. The sociologists call this system a “quasi-market” (Dupriez and Maroy, 2003) because the supply and demand law only regulates it. This results in huge differences in school intake, leading to a so-called “two speeds” education system especially in secondary education: on the one hand, “sanctuary” schools attended mostly by middle-class students, on the other hand “ghetto” schools attended by lower class or immigrants students. There are few heterogeneous or mixed schools.

Since the beginning of the nineties, the system has tried to compensate for this social inequity by allocating more resources to schools attended by a high proportion of students coming from underprivileged background (“positive discrimination policy”) (Demeuse and Monseur, 1999)³.

Teacher education for primary and lower secondary education lasts three years and is organized in colleges (higher education, not University). For upper secondary education, teachers are trained at the University, in a consecutive training model. They first study a

between tracks, and was aimed at delaying the study program choice of students and at giving them various opportunities (through options) to experience different subjects before choosing their orientation.

² Students attending Catholic schools are more numerous in the Flemish Community, accounting for up to 75 % of the pupils in secondary education.

³ June 30, 1988: Decree aimed at ensuring that all pupils have equal chances of social emancipation, notably through the application of positive discrimination policies (Parliament of the French Community of Belgium).

subject (for example mathematics, science or French language) for 4 years, and then an additional year is dedicated to educational psychology with some practical training in the field.

Important Reforms Implemented before PISA 2000

At the end of the nineties⁴, two major decrees for education were promulgated. The first decree, called “Décret Missions” defined four main goals for the education system of the French Community⁵ and described the means to reach them. Among those goals, development of the individual is stressed, but a strong emphasis on equity issues can also be found. The third mission is “to get *all* students to acquire knowledge and skills which will enable them to engage in lifelong learning and to participate actively in the economic, social and cultural life”. The fourth is “to guarantee all students equal opportunities for social emancipation”.

This decree also introduced an important curriculum reform. Standards of competencies were to be drawn up for several grade levels (grade 2, 6, 8 and 12) and new programs congruent with those competencies were to be elaborated and gradually introduced when approved by the appropriate commissions⁶. So, when the PISA assessment took place in 2000, the education authorities had just launched a new competency-based curriculum focussed on the student as an active learner, aimed at developing students’ knowledge and skills.. This new perspective contrasted with the old “transmission” approach, focussed on school matter content, and aimed to break off with the teaching of “inert knowledge” (Whitehead, 1929).

However, the implementation of the new curriculum had just started and sowed some confusion among teachers (Van Campenhoudt et al., 2004a; Van Campenhoudt et al., 2004b). Of course it must be remembered that the implementation was far from completed and PISA results cannot in any case be attributed to this new curriculum. One of the challenges of the interpretation of PISA results was to make the public understand that the intended curriculum is not equivalent to the implemented curriculum and that a rather long period of time is needed to validly assess the achieved curriculum.

The second Decree⁷ called “Décret sur l’école de la réussite” (Decree for a successful school) was aimed at setting up an organisation based on cycles for primary education: a first cycle (last grade of preschool to grade 2) and a second cycle (grade 3 to grade 6). Grade repetition should be avoided within cycles; this objective was to be reached in 2000 for cycle 1 and in 2005 for cycle 2. But the objective (decreasing grade repetition) has been strikingly weakened by a peculiar measure: if grade repetition was to be avoided, the cycle could be lengthened for pupils facing learning difficulties... A previous Decree in the mid-nineties had tried to reach the same objective for cycle 1 of secondary education (no grade repetition between grade 7 and 8, but the cycle extended to 3 years for low achievers). With hindsight,

⁴ July 24, 1997: Decree defining the priority goals for primary and secondary education (Parliament of the French Community of Belgium).

⁵ Historically, it is the first text law which defines general objectives for education common to all schools whatever the organizing authority (State, public, catholic...).

⁶ While goals and standards of competencies are common to all schools, programs vary according to the organizing authority. For each subject matter, it means that there will be at least four different programs and in some cases even more. The amount of work to adapt all those programs is tremendous.

⁷ March 14, 1995: Decree aimed at promoting a successful school in primary education.

this attempt clearly appears today as a failure since the 3rd year of the cycle obviously acts as a “hidden” grade-repetition (Chenu, Crépin, Jehin, 2003).

Further detail about these reforms will not be given here, but one should keep in mind that the policy changes described above were not negotiated with teacher unions, and nor were they based on a social consensus. Inspired by research in education, relayed by decision makers, they came into serious conflict with teachers’ professional habits. Large surveys of teachers undertaken in 2004 (Van Campenhout, 2004a and b) show that these major reforms, imposed by the administration (top-down), with minimum practical support and resources in the school field, have led to a deep and widespread feeling of loss of professional identity and motivation among teachers. At this time there appears to be a huge gap between policy makers and the school field.

3. TRENDS AND IMPACT OF COMPARATIVE STUDIES

Before PISA

The French Community and, before that, Belgium as one country, have regularly taken part in the IEA surveys (Six Subject Study at the beginning of the seventies, SIMSS, IEA Reading Literacy 1991, TIMSS 1995)⁸. Despite alarming outcomes especially in science and in reading comprehension (1991), the impact on education – if any – has been very small.

The IEARL results in 1991 and the TIMSS results in 1995 were widely reported in the media (to a lesser extent than PISA, however) and the latter had two consequences for education: a rather limited reform (one additional period of science at grade 7 and 8 i.e. 3 periods instead of 2) and discussions about the role of textbooks in education. Indeed very few textbooks are used for instruction in the French Community and this appeared as a possible explanation for our very low achievement in science.

Impact of PISA in the Media and on the Public

The international press campaign orchestrated by the OECD, eager to disseminate the PISA message as widely as possible, resulted in similar campaigns in many countries. Dissemination of PISA results in the French Community has been tremendous: many articles/features in newspapers and magazines⁹ (even in the most popular ones, like TV magazines), debates on radio and TV channels, and a huge number of conferences for professional audiences (such as schools, teacher unions, inspectors, principals and parents’ associations) and public audiences (such as political parties). Since December 2001, every sneeze in the educational field has been interpreted as a cause or a consequence of PISA!

⁸ For an overview of participation and outcomes of French-speaking Belgium in international comparative studies, see Lafontaine and Blondin, 2004.

⁹ See the OECD Pisa Website: <http://www.pisa.oecd.org/>

4. PISA: OVERVIEW OF THE RESULTS IN 2000

It would be difficult to work out which reforms the PISA outcomes called for without an insight into what those outcomes were. The results will be briefly described below with minimal use of figures. Those interested in more detail should consult the international report (OECD, 2001) and the national reports (Lafontaine et al., 2003¹⁰; De Meyer, De Vos and Vandepoele, 2002).

Two main topics will be discussed: achievement and equity.

Achievement

On the combined reading literacy scale, the mean score of the French Community of Belgium was below (but not statistically significantly below) the international mean (Table 1). Achievement in mathematic literacy was somewhat better: slightly below the international mean. In science literacy, results were worse and statistically below the international mean. Those PISA results are congruent with the results of previous international studies. In IEA Reading Literacy (1991) (Lafontaine, 1996), 14-year-olds in the French Community scored significantly below the international mean. In TIMSS (1995), achievement in mathematics was slightly above the mean and achievement in science was below the mean. Since 1970, achievement in science has been a major concern (Lafontaine and Blondin, 2004).

Table 1. Mean achievement on the reading, mathematics and science standardized scales in the Belgian Communities (Source PISA 2000)

French Community				Flemish Community				German Community			
	Mean	Error type	S.D		Mean	Error type	S.D		Mean	Error Type	S.D
Reading	476	(7.2)	111	Reading	532	(4.3)	96	Reading	507	(3.9)	90
Mathematics	491	(7.2)	109	Mathematics	543	(4.6)	98	Mathematics	518	(4.9)	89
Science	467	(8.7)	122	Science	519	(4.2)	95	Science	505	(5.2)	91
Oecd mean	500		100		500		100		500		100

Even if these results were not a surprise for well-informed people, the awakening was rude for those who did not know of previous international studies and who lived with the illusion that our education system was one of the best of the world. In addition, ironically, it appeared that to find one of the best performing education systems, one had only to drive a few kilometres North, to the Flemish Community! For many people, it was quite a shock.

¹⁰ The PISA "national" report from the French Community is available on the website <http://www.ulg.ac.be/pedaexpe/pub/down/docsdown.html> (only available in French).

Equity Issues

Distribution of Results

The distribution of students among the six levels of the reading combined scale was as follows (Table 2):

- 28 % of students show a high or very high level of reading literacy (levels 4 and 5). This proportion is only a little lower than the Oecd mean (31 %).
- 44 % of students reach intermediate levels of literacy (levels 2 and 3). This proportion is lower than the OECD mean (50 %).
- 28 % of 15-year-olds only reach level 1 or scored below level 1 and show low or very low reading abilities. This proportion of low performers is much greater than the OECD mean (18 %).

The most striking result in the French Community is this huge gap between a quite large group of high performers and a dramatically large group of low performers. The French Community's is, with Germany's, the education system where the disparities (standard deviation) are the highest in reading. The same trend is observed in mathematics and science.

Of course, the width of the dispersion is no doubt related to the frequent use of grade repetition in the French Community. In the French Community, 57 % of the PISA sample are in grade 10¹¹; 34 % have repeated one grade and are in grade 9; 9 % of students have repeated twice or more and are in grade 7 or 8. The French Community has an education system with one of the highest rates of grade repetition (Germany and Luxembourg are other examples). In addition, differences of achievement between academic and vocational tracks are very large.

Table 2. Percentages of students at each level on the reading combined scale in Belgium and on average among Oecd countries (Source: PISA 2000)

	Reading proficiency levels					
	Below level 1	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5
Belgium (Flemish C.)	4,1%	7,6%	14,3%	27,3%	31,1%	15,6%
Belgium (German C.)	4,5%	9,9%	19,4%	33,9%	24,5%	7,7%
<i>Oecd mean</i>	<i>6,0%</i>	<i>11,9%</i>	<i>21,7%</i>	<i>28,7%</i>	<i>22,3%</i>	<i>9,5%</i>
Belgium (French C.)	12,3%	15,9%	20,0%	24,0%	20,4%	7,5%

Social inequities

In the PISA international report (OECD, 2001), numerous analyses were focussed on the relationships between social background broadly speaking (parents' socio-professional status, parents' level of education, status of immigrants, family wealth and resources, cultural communication and so on) and achievement in reading, mathematical and scientific literacy.

¹¹ In more than half of the participating countries, the vast majority of the 15 year-olds attend grade 10 or equivalent. In the Flemish Community, 73 % of the students' sample attend grade 10 and 23 % grade 9.

On those indices, the French Community of Belgium appears as one of the education systems and often *the* education system in which inequities related with social background are the highest. In the international OECD report, in which only results for Belgium as one country were reported, Germany often appeared as the most inequitable system. But in this respect the situation in the French Community of Belgium is even worse.

Students who are vulnerable in terms of their socio-demographic background, are clearly more at risk of being among the low achievers in the French Community of Belgium than similar subgroups of students in the majority of other education systems. Students who get family support perform reasonably well; conversely, students who lack parental or environmental support are more at risk than in the other countries of suffering the negative consequences of this situation. The French Community of Belgium is also, along with Germany, Austria, Poland, Hungary and Czech Republic, one of the systems in which between-school variation is the highest.

One of the major lessons that can be learned from PISA is that the French Community education system does not succeed in coping with or compensating for social inequalities. Even if equity is highly valued in official Decrees, and despite compensating measures (positive discriminations), the education system is highly segregated and PISA demonstrated this weakness in an unequivocal way.

Results from PISA no doubt challenged the very core of the education system in the French Community. The fact that the same trends – high dispersion of outcomes and huge social inequity – are observed for each domain assessed by PISA leads to the conclusion that basic features or organisational characteristics of the system have to be brought in question. Nevertheless, there are some differences in achievement in the three domains. The mean achievement of 15 year-olds is relatively better for mathematics, more problematic for reading and critical for science. This means that some specific aspects linked to the teaching of reading and science demand reflection.

This was the key message delivered by the national report and by the National Project Manager. The relative underachievement in reading and science plead for specific subject matter measures; but the low equity calls for much more fundamental thinking about what constitutes the core of the education system – the non-comprehensive or the “segregated” approach – based on the three pillars: grade repetition, early assignments to tracks and complete freedom of choice of schools (the so-called quasi-market).

5. REFORMS OR MEASURES IMPLEMENTED IN RESPONSE TO PISA 2000

With reading literacy as the major domain in PISA 2000, students’ interests and motivation were investigated. The results showed that Belgian students’ engagement in reading was weak (Kirsch *et al.*, 2003; Lafontaine, 2003). Subsequently, several initiatives were taken in order to develop access to books and to foster students’ engagement in reading. Each of the three Ministers in charge of education¹² encouraged and funded projects aimed at developing students’ interest and motivation in reading.

¹² During the period 1998-2004, three different Ministers in the French Community had responsibility for education: Jean-Marc Nollet (Green Party), Minister of Childhood, in charge of nursery, pre-primary and primary

The Minister of Childhood drew up a plan for reading encompassing the development of book clubs in nurseries, the free provision of two daily newspapers in grade 6 and a project aimed at reinforcing the links between libraries and primary schools through local contracts.

The Ministry of Secondary Education recruited and trained volunteers for reading aloud to teenagers in secondary classes.

One of the major initiatives was a project funded by the Minister of Higher Education aimed at training higher education college staff in charge of the training of future primary and lower secondary teachers. This in-service training focussed on reading and writing (reading comprehension strategies, book talks and literature for teenagers). Unfortunately, the funds for this promising project of collaboration between teacher training colleges and Universities was cut after one year¹³.

Beyond these well defined initiatives, as I said before, every sneeze in the educational field was claimed to be a consequence of PISA, so that it is a difficult task to separate “true” PISA initiatives from more opportunistic ones. For instance, the new system for allocating funds to schools for their running costs proportionate to the percentage of students from low-income families was presented as a means of coping with the huge inequities revealed by PISA. It could be, but the link is weak.

One domain in which PISA surely played a catalyst role is the establishment of a New Board for Monitoring Compulsory Education. Discussions around this project preceded the release of the PISA reports, but the process has no doubt been sped up by PISA. The Decree devoted to Monitoring of the education system, passed by the Parliament of the French Community of Belgium in March 2002, establishes a new Board on which all the institutions involved in education are represented: school organizing authorities, teachers’ unions, inspectors, researchers in education, colleges in charge of teacher training and parents’ associations). The goals of this Monitoring Board include:

- guiding educational reforms and helping their implementation,
- developing a coherent system of indicators,
- defining priorities for in-service teacher training,
- organizing external assessments in order to improve the quality of education.

Not surprisingly, there was no call for curricular or program reform associated with PISA. As mentioned above, the French Community was in the middle of an in-depth curricular reform and the PISA tasks were seen as consistent with the new curricula.

6. UNSUCCESSFUL AND UNATTEMPTED REFORMS

Although Belgium has one of the shortest initial teacher training periods for primary and lower secondary education (3 years) and although it is one of the few countries in which this

education; Pierre Hazette (Liberal Party), in charge of secondary and special education; Françoise Dupuis (Socialist Party) in charge of higher education and scientific research.

¹³ Information about this project can be found on the website page:

<http://www.agers.cfwb.be/@librairie/documents/ressources/A005/index.asp>

training is non-academic, the issue of initial teacher training has been left virtually undiscussed. This could seem strange to external observers, but several reasons could account for the absence of debate. As in the case of curricular reform, a first reason is that the Minister of Higher Education had, just before PISA, reformed higher education colleges and reaffirmed them in their historical role as institutes for teacher training¹⁴. This means that the debate about initial training was to be buried for several years... Another reason is that the financial means for lengthening teacher training and/or for moving this training to the Universities were clearly lacking¹⁵. Additionally, even if means were available, the heavy competition for teacher training between higher colleges of education and Universities makes this topic taboo in the French Community.

After PISA, discussions and debates around inequity issues and how to face them were numerous. Nevertheless, apart from the establishment of a new Board for Monitoring Compulsory Education, at this point they have not given rise to any concrete measures aimed at reducing inequities.

Certainly, many policy makers and politicians, especially the left wing, perceive inequity as too high. But reducing it supposes major changes in the educational structure and in the organisation of the education system. More time is needed to move further on those questions and to build a social consensus around equity objectives for education. Indeed, except for some militant (activist) groups, one can conclude that, unfortunately, there is nowadays no social group or force ready to fight for more equity at school.

7. CONCLUSION

Attempts at reform during recent decades have clearly demonstrated that laying down structural reforms through administrative mechanisms was doomed to failure. The attempts to reduce grade repetition during the 1st cycle of secondary education have failed. Similar attempts for the 1st cycle of primary education are hardly more satisfactory. The recent survey of teachers (2004) has unambiguously demonstrated that teachers were not ready for this reform and the term for cycle 2 of the “Decree for a successful school” has been delayed from 2005 to 2007. Teachers also stressed that more resources and support were needed to accompany substantial reforms like the last curricular reform and the “Decree for a successful school”.

Ingredients for reducing inequities are reasonably well known and PISA itself drew new evidence that highly “stratified” systems (with early streaming) are less equitable and moreover often less efficient than weakly stratified (or more comprehensive) systems. But importing those ingredients from outside won’t be appropriate. After several deceptive experiences of unsuccessful reforms, the French Community of Belgium has no other choice than to adopt new ways of managing educational reforms.

First, a more rigorous approach based on research in education has to be followed. For decades, crucial steps of the construction of curricular reforms have been systematically neglected, either for financial or for political reasons. Many substantial reforms have been

¹⁴ Decree of December 12, 2000 and January 19, 2001 voted by the Parliament of the French Community.

¹⁵ It is well known that the French Community of Belgium will not have the financial means available for any substantial reform before 2007.

implemented precipitously, without any preliminary trial, experimentation and evaluation of the material and human resources needed for their successful implementation. Let us hope that the Board for monitoring compulsory education will succeed in acknowledging the unavoidable role of experimentation, evaluation and preliminary steps in the reform process.

Second, new approaches need to be found to gain teachers' involvement and cooperation in the reform processes. The recent survey of teachers (Van Campenhout, 2004a and b) demonstrates that the current gap and misunderstanding between the institutional sphere (policy makers, administration, inspectors, organizing school authorities, researchers...) and teachers is tremendous. Clearly, reducing this gap is a necessary condition for future reforms. This is no doubt a major challenge for the forthcoming years, but the situation is so tense that no other option seems possible.

At first sight, one could be deceived by the low impact of PISA in terms of reforms concerning the core of the education system and by the absence of measures aimed at reducing its inequity. As a PISA national project manager, I have been sharing this feeling.

The results of the recent survey of teachers about the impact of current reforms has shed another light on the situation and can be used to develop a more positive interpretation of this absence of substantial reforms.

In the present context, maybe no additional reform was the soundest option; another hasty reform would certainly have been worse than no reform at all. But the Board for Monitoring Compulsory Education will have to find without delay new ways of managing reforms at the technical and at the human level. Otherwise an uncomfortable feeling of powerlessness could spread among its members, and that would most certainly be disastrous for this newly established organisation, on which important hopes have been pinned.

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