



# Exchange of good practices on gender equality

## Gender training in education

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# Gender training in education in Belgium

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Policy Context in Belgium

Belgium has a federal structure with three communities (Flemish, French and German speaking) and three regions (Flemish, Walloon and Brussels Capital). There is no hierarchy between the federal state and the communities and regions. The management of the country therefore falls to several governments which exercise their competences independently in different fields. The regional competences are primarily related to socio-cultural aspects, such as, for instance, education.

Each of the communities is responsible for education policy from nursery to university level. But, the federal authorities hold the powers to determine the start and end of compulsory education, to establish the minimum conditions for obtaining a diploma and to determine education staff pensions.

As mainstreaming is a key element of equal opportunities policy, it is both a regional and a federal competence. Gender as an equal opportunities theme is one of the pillars of the regional equal opportunities policy level.

Since the Belgian participants of the conference are active at the Flemish community level, the focus of this paper will be on the policy and context of gender and education in Flanders.

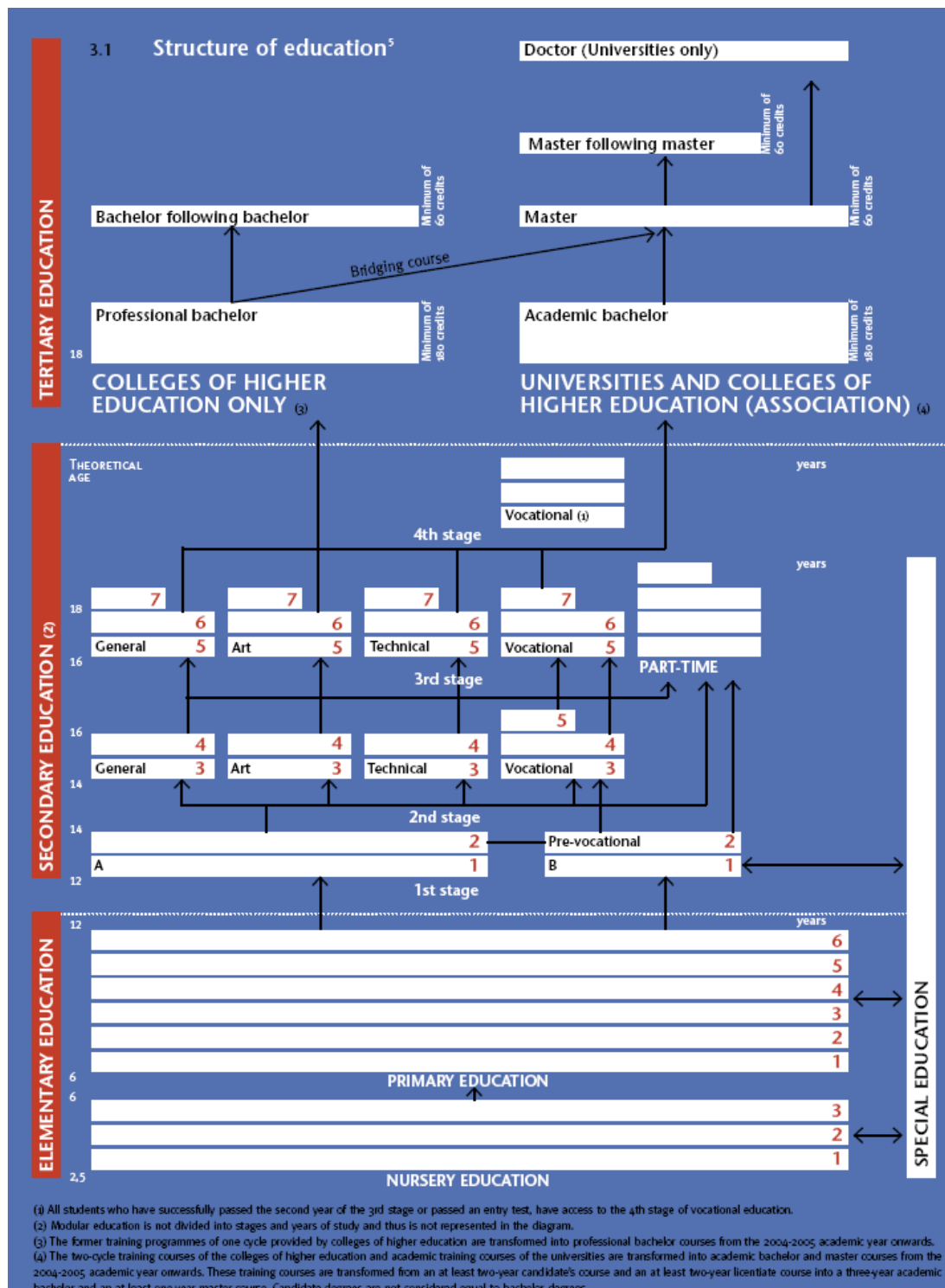
#### 1.1.1. Educational System in Flanders

The educational system in Belgium is based on the principle of right to education for everyone. Toddlers can start nursery school from the age of 2.5 years. Compulsory education starts at the age of 6 and ends at the age of 18. Fulltime education is compulsory until the age of 15.

Compulsory education can be followed by higher education (professional bachelor or academic bachelor and master).

In principle, all schools are mixed as a school is not allowed to refuse pupils on the grounds of gender.

1.1.1.1. Structure of Education in Flanders



### *1.1.1.2. The Curriculum*

Schools decide autonomously on their educational methods, curriculums, timetables and the recruitment of their personnel. Nevertheless, the government ensures quality education by imposing conditions to be met by the schools in order for them to become accredited and receive financial support.

Every governing body or school board must include the attainment targets or developmental objectives imposed by the Flemish government in the curriculum. Attainment targets are minimum goals which the government considers necessary and achievable for a particular group of pupils. In concrete terms, this concerns knowledge, insight, attitudes and skills. There are both subject-related attainment targets and cross curricular attainment targets.

For nursery education no attainment targets but developmental objectives were laid down. Developmental objectives are aims. They do not have to be achieved but aimed at.

### **1.1.2. Equal Opportunities Policy in Flanders**

Since 1995, the Flemish Minister for Equal Opportunities has been pursuing an Equal Opportunities Policy on gender, LGBs and physical accessibility in the Flemish region. In 2010, two themes were added to this: transgender and disability. The Flemish Equal Opportunities Policy also pays attention to overlaps between these discriminatory mechanisms, just as it does to overlaps with other discriminatory mechanisms, such as age or ethnicity (multiple discriminations).

The Flemish Equal Opportunities Policy aims to work on two fronts: empowerment of the target group and a change in mentality among the population. The policy is based on three important principles: a concerted action involving the government, civil society and the world of research, the use of various tools and methodologies and the combination of a functional or 'own' policy with a cross-cutting or horizontal policy (in cooperation with other Ministers) using a methodology of Open Method of Coordination or OMC.

The Flemish Equal Opportunities Policy considers education as an essential tool to achieve its goals. Carrying out campaigns, developing educational methods and publishing informative documents are suitable ways in which to inform and raise awareness among the general public and to work on changing public attitudes. Moreover, education leads to the empowerment.

## **1.2. Gender and Education in Flanders**

### **1.2.1. Gender facts**

Gender is already a factor in the first grade of secondary education. Gender gaps continue to grow in the course of the educational path. Girls are a narrow majority in art and general secondary education, whereas boys are a majority in technical and vocational secondary education. More girls than boys continue to higher education.

Looking at the different fields of study, gender segregation still prevails. 'Masculine' and 'feminine' fields of study still exist, often mirroring traditional gender stereotypes. Although this is particularly the case for technical and vocational secondary education, gender segregation can also be noticed in general and higher education. Most notably there is a lack of men in care-giving professional fields and lack of women in STEM-fields. (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics).

In general Flemish girls perform better than Flemish boys. 32% of the boys and 26% of the girls develop an education backlog of 1 year or more in the course of secondary education. More girls continue to higher education and the study efficiency of girls in higher education is higher.

The latest PISA study showed that on average Flemish 15-year-olds are doing well. However the gender gaps remain: Flemish boys lag behind in reading performance compared to the girls. Where math performance is concerned the situation is reversed. For the third area in the PISA study, science performance, no gender gap was found.

Furthermore the teaching profession has become a feminine field. The vast majority of teachers are women, especially in nursery and primary education where respectively only 3% and 20% of the teachers are men.

### **1.2.2 Gender and the curriculum**

Gender as such is not mentioned in the attainment targets imposed by Flemish ministry of education. Although insight into the concept of gender is crucial for many of the cross curricular attainment targets, the incorporation of gender into the curriculum is left to the interpretation of schools and teachers.

Schools decide autonomously on their educational methods and teaching materials. A recent screening<sup>1</sup> of training materials in primary education showed that although we have come a long way, gender stereotypes still prevail in teaching materials. This is especially the case when men and women are depicted in professional contexts.

International research has pointed out that the expectations and behaviours of teachers and pupils are often gendered. There has been little to none research in Flanders about the way teachers interact with pupils and the content of classroom discussions, examples, etc... An action research<sup>2</sup> in the first year of primary education revealed little difference in the way teachers interacted with boys and girls. However the research did find lots of gender stereotypical content in examples, teachers' and pupils' remarks and in classroom discussions. Stereotypical statements of pupils were seldom corrected by teachers.

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<sup>1</sup> Open Boek, Cavaria, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Bossaert, 2009.

## 2. Policy debate

Current concerns on gender and education are the underachievement of boys, the feminization of the teaching profession and gender segregation in study choice.

The gender gap in school performance is one of the issues that researchers, policy makers and teachers are concerned with. The feminization of the teaching profession is one of the suggested explanations. Questions are also raised about teaching methods and the 'feminine' school environment which are said to create better circumstances for girls to thrive in than boys.

Flemish research<sup>3</sup> has found no difference in school performance or learning attitude with a female or male teacher. There is however a general consensus for the need for more gender diversity among teachers.

To bridge the gender gap in school performance and reading skills, quick answers are sometimes sought in segregated educational activities. The desirability of such strategies has been under debate. From a gender awareness point of view this is a slippery path. More often than not, stereotypical views on gender interests are reinforced. Boys and girls miss the chance to stimulate different aspects of their personality, each learning within alleged gender specific worlds. Also, atypical boys and girls may feel left out in this approach. On the other hand insight into the difference between girls and boys in learning attitudes, preferred learning methods, maturity, etc has led to more differentiation in educational methods benefiting both boys and girls.

A cooperative study of the Flemish universities has been set up in order to investigate the causes and possible answers for the underachievement of boys. The action research started in 2011 and will last 4 years. The study is funded by the Flemish government agency for Innovation by Science and Technology.

Gender segregation in study orientation remains an issue for all involved. Campaigns and research activities have been set up to stimulate boys in to care giving professional fields such as teaching and girls into STEM-fields. Research has been set up by The Flemish research centre on Equal Opportunities Policy investigating the role of internalised gender images- and –stereotypes on study orientation and vocational choice in technical and vocational secondary education.

Gender experts, researchers and policymakers have found an important partner in LGBT-organizations as homophobia and discrimination are often grounded in stereotypical views on gender and gender roles.

For the current term of office (2009 – 2014), the competence for Equal Opportunities and for Education was entrusted to the same Flemish Minister, creating an unique opportunity to mainstream gender into education.

Raising gender awareness is one of the main objectives for the vertical equal opportunities policy in this term. A broad 'gender click'-action plan has been set up to create more insight into the concept of gender in different aspects of Flemish society. In this action plan several groups are addressed through different channels and different methodologies. The 'gender click action plan ' consists of 3 parts. First

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<sup>3</sup> SIONGERS, 2002.

of all, Equal Opportunities in Flanders provides funding for projects that stimulate the 'gender click'. Some of the projects are mentioned below. Secondly, a 'gender click' website provides a broad audience with information and insights on gender and its impact on all areas of life. The third part consists of a 'gender click' campaign. This campaign, which combines media attention and cultural activities, will kick off in spring 2013.

In the horizontal equal opportunities policy the OCM method will be used to keep gender issues on the agenda in other policies, such as education.

Policy plans for education during this term of office include among others the integration of gender diversity in school policy. A project within Flemish schools, led by a teacher, will assemble tools, good practices etc in order to counter homophobia, heteronormativity and gender stereotyping. Furthermore a gender perspective will be integrated in the planned restructuring of secondary education.

### **Some recent gender initiatives in education supported by Equal Opportunities Policy and/or Education Policy.**

#### *Action Plan STEM*

Action plan to stimulate careers in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics.

<http://www.samenlevingentechnologie.be/ists/nl/pdf/actieplanjan2012.pdf>

Flemish Ministry of Education and EWI, 2012-2020

#### *Gender in de klas (Gender in the classroom)*

Training tool for gender conscious teaching for teachers on all educational levels. The project includes a workshop 'Gender in the classroom' for teachers in training.

<http://www.genderindeklas.be>

RoSa Documentation Centre, 2010 – ongoing.

#### *Jongens worden ook leerkracht (Boys become teachers too)*

Investigation into the problem of boys dropping out of teacher training programmes.

Thomas More Hogeschool, HUBrussel, Khlim, 2012 -2013

#### *Voice Out*

Collection of methodologies for secondary education to eradicate homophobia through working on active citizenship and media wisdom. Part of the European Voice Out project.

<http://www.cavaria.be/nieuws/nieuwe-methodiekenbundel>

Çavaria, 2012

#### *De onderwijskaravaan (The caravan of education)*

Project that aims at banishing gender mechanisms and negative choices in study orientation for youngsters in ethnic-cultural minorities.

<http://www.ellavzw.be/themas/voorbije-projecten/>

Ella, 2012

#### *Wereld aan je voeten (The world at your feet)*

Project to stimulate a career in Technology using positive role models

[www.dewereldaanjevoeten.be](http://www.dewereldaanjevoeten.be), 2012



*Gender in children's books.*

Following the participation in the [Grundtvig Pagesproject](#), Practices against Gender and Ethnic Stereotypes, a Flemish adaptation of the toolbox was made.

[www.rosadoc.be/pdf/pagestoolkiteng.pdf](http://www.rosadoc.be/pdf/pagestoolkiteng.pdf)

RoSa Documentation Centre, 2010 -2012

*Genderklik in de kleuterklas (Gender click in Nursery School)*

Practical Training Tool for teachers aimed at raising gender awareness in nursery school.

<http://www.genderatwork.be/wp-content/uploads/GENDERKLIKvoorWEB2.pdf>

Genderatwork, 2011

*Open boek (Open Book)*

Screening of training materials in primary education on hetero-normativity and gender stereotypes. Next to a research rapport, a screening tool was developed.

<http://www.cavaria.be/open-boek-doorbreken-van-gender-en-heteronormen>

Çavaria, 2010 -2011

*Klasse: 1<sup>e</sup> lijn gender in de klas (Gender in the classroom)*

Klasse is a communication project launched by the Department of Education and

Training of the Flemish Community. It is aimed at all education actors in Flanders. In

January 2011 the editors of Klasse made a comprehensive file on gender in

education.

*Girls Days*

Initiative to stimulate girls' interest in Science and Technology. Training material and workshop for girls in primary education.

[http://www.girlsday.be/content/user/File/Girls\\_\\_\\_Day\\_2010/GD1\\_2010.pdf](http://www.girlsday.be/content/user/File/Girls___Day_2010/GD1_2010.pdf)

Agoria Vlaanderen, Technopolis en Artesis Hogeschool, 2010

### 3. Transferability Issues

- Policy context:
  - Belgium is committed to both Beijing Action Platform and CEDAW.
  - Main purpose of the practices fits into equal opportunities policy priority of raising gender awareness and that of education policy priority of creating gender diversity in school policy.
- Structure of Education
  - Practices could fit with existing organisations and school structure.
  - Practices could easily fit into several of the cross-curricular attainment targets, such as critical thinking, media wisdom, the socio-cultural and socio-relational targets as respect, identity, dealing with bias, etc. - thus making it easier for teachers to commit and use them in existing teaching practices.
  - Practices could be used to incorporate gender in teacher training programmes.

- Possible constraints:
  - Funding.
  - Training of teachers.
  - Insufficient awareness of necessity of teaching gender.
  - Monitoring of implementation.

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