



**WORKING PAPER**

**COUNTRY REPORT: BELGIUM**

**Goedroen Juchtmans**

**Ides Nicaise**

**HIVA, Catholic University of Leuven**

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## 1. Historical context

Until the nineteenth century, primary schools in Flanders were largely dependent on the Catholic Church. Education in these schools was restricted to reading and writing, next to religious education, which was considered highly important. The government remained in the background, leaving the organisation and content of education to the Catholic Church which mainly used it as a buffer against the Protestantism of the northern Netherlands (Van Gompel, 2006, p.110).

Both the French and the Dutch, who occupied the Flemish territory at the start of the nineteenth century, tried to change the existing educational situation by breaking the Church monopoly with explicit state intervention. In particular, Willem I, the Dutch king of the United Netherlands, took action to build up a modern educational system on the national level. He established Dutch as the official school language, gave the kingdom the exclusive right to found schools, provided education for teachers and appointed inspectors to control the government schools. Within schools, he demanded the use of modern didactic methods and materials, including whole-class teaching, the use of the blackboard and reading books. Furthermore, school buildings had to be financed by the local authorities (Van Gompel, 2006, pp.120-123).

This Dutch approach to education in which modern principles such as professionalism, efficiency and state control laid down the law, was in effect however a dead letter. Protest came from two sides: firstly, the Church which asked Catholic parents to remove their children from the government schools and promptly founded its own schools; and secondly, the French speaking bourgeoisie who contested Dutch as the official school language (Depaepe, 1998, pp.88-91).

In 1830, the Flemish territories became part of an independent country: the kingdom of Belgium. The legal foundation for this new centralised state, the Belgian Constitution (1831), was at that time one of the most liberal in Europe. Regarding education, this liberal framework led to the far-reaching *Article 24* in which the *principle of freedom of education* was included. Historically, this principle would evoke considerable conflict and struggle in which the position of religious education played a crucial role.

Initially, the Catholic Church did not use the “freedom of education” principle to found its own primary schools. Because of its privileged position, its influence on

state education was large enough. From 1842 onwards, religious education was compulsory. A state document of 1846 even demanded that all sorts of education (state education included) had to be taught in a religious sphere. Politically, however, Catholics were not the only party. In 1879, the Liberal party, which won the elections in 1878, established a new education law. Religious education was dropped from the primary school curriculum and became an optional subject which had to be followed after school hours. Furthermore, the new education law demanded that each local authority had to accommodate at least one official primary school (Van Gompel, 2006, pp.135-136). The bishops, and in their wake almost the whole country, were furious and provoked a huge controversy which is referred to as the '*first school war*'. During and after this school war, Catholics founded a large educational network of Catholic schools, thereby laying the foundations for the current segregated (or pillarised) character of Belgian education (Depaepe, 1998, pp.160-161).<sup>1</sup>

Due to the protests, the elections of 1884 were won by the Catholics who introduced a new education law. According to this law, local authorities were allowed to keep their official schools. Religious education was re-introduced as a compulsory subject. The government did, however, not subsidise independent Catholic schools, since Catholics primarily strived for a homogenised Catholic official school network (Witte, 1999, pp.442-450). Regarding primary education, they succeeded: Catholic schools were assimilated into the official school network or official municipal schools again assumed a confessional character. The modernisation of the educational system, which was supported by the liberals, could not however be blocked. Class proceedings were to be made efficient, well-organised and rational. Therefore, class teaching, the allocation of children to separate years or degrees, and pedagogical training education for teachers, which led to an improvement of the teaching profession, were welcomed.

Between 1900 and 1950, the explicit religious tensions between liberals, Catholics and the newly founded socialist party diminished. In 1914, under socialist influence, the government introduced compulsory school education for all children between the ages of 6 and 12. However, this law was not implemented until after the

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<sup>1</sup> Pillarisation exists if countries are "internally divided into blocs which hold different religious and ideological persuasions and which are effectively isolated from each other by innumerable institutions and organisations that exclusively serve members of their own community (Vanderstraeten, 2002, p 133)." In Belgium, the Catholic pillar has always been the largest bloc, in contrast to the smaller socialist and liberal pillars. In addition to schools, institutions and organisations, such as mutuality, labour movement and politics, have been pillarised to a high degree.

First World War, in 1919. Furthermore, instead of previous religious tensions, language conflicts between the French-speaking and the Dutch-speaking parts of Belgium occurred. It was only in the 1930s that Dutch became the official language in Flemish primary schools (Van Gompel, 2006, p.152).

Although in this period, explicit religious tensions did not occur, under the surface, important changes in society could not be denied. Firstly, some (mostly secondary state) schools moved away from the traditional, homogenised Catholic educational project to a more pluralised body. Municipal primary schools, however, remained de facto Catholic. Secondly, the Catholic Church felt confronted by the rise in socialism and secularisation. Regarding education, the bishops asked that the specific Catholic identity of the schools be emphasized, opposed the pluralism of state schools and associated state schools with wicked liberalism, subversive socialism and dangerous rationalism among free-thinking associations. As a result, Catholic parents were asked to take their children from the state schools.

Despite their efforts, after the Second World War, the reverse happened. Under the influence of the democratisation of state education, less wealthy and progressive Catholics found their way to the state schools (Witte, 1999, pp.449-451). Also politically, the Catholic party was divided. Some followed the position of the bishops, claiming the exclusive provision of an education representing Catholic belief and opposing non-denominational or pluralist education. Other more progressive Catholics believed that philosophical differences could no longer be denied and provided the foundation for further deliberations. These internal divide led to a policy in which the party defended its own Catholic educational network, restricted the expansion of the official educational network, and tried to retain its influence on the municipal official schools.

In 1954, the Catholics lost their absolute majority in parliament. Socialists and liberals formed the new government in which they drastically reduced subsidies for private education and increased the number of state schools (Lamberts, 2004, p.378). As in 1879, the Catholics protested against this new policy and provoked a *second school war*.

In 1958, the three parties reached a compromise or a form of distributive justice between the different educational networks, which is called the *School Pact*. Freedom of school choice became the central principle in this Pact. From the point of view of the Catholics, freedom of school choice legitimated the financing *a rato* of

significant numbers of pupils entering Catholic schools. On the other hand, Catholics had to accept the pluralist nature of state schools in which pluralism became synonymous with neutrality. More specifically, this pluralism (or neutrality) was reinforced by the introduction of a new subject: non-confessional ethics. Pupils of state schools could now choose between religion and non-confessional ethics.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, this neutrality principle was not applied to primary municipal schools which remained free to opt for the Christian educational project. Consequently, most of these official schools only provided religious (Catholic) education and had close connections to the local church (Witte, 1999, pp.461-462).

After the Second World War, another important development contributed to the pluralist and multi-religious character of Flemish society. Due to the need to rebuild the country and the lack of Belgian workers after the war, the Belgian government invited 'guest workers'. Initially, most migrants were of Italian origin. After hearing stories of poor working conditions in the coal mines, however, the Italian government discouraged the migration of its citizens to Belgium (from 1956). Hence, new guest workers were found in other Mediterranean countries (Morocco and Turkey). Confronted with an economic crisis at the beginning of the 1970s, the EEC decided to stop immigration in 1976. Consequently, guest workers chose to stay working in Belgium and finally to reside after bringing their spouses and children from their country of origin. In sum, after 1976, migration shifted from individual temporary migration to involving the migration of whole families to the host country (Noré, 2007, pp.8-9). The children of these families also attended Flemish schools. After being recognised as an official religion in Belgium in 1974, the main body of Islam has been allowed to provide its own religious education in official schools. The first Muslim religion courses started in 1978.

## **2. Legal and constitutional framework**

### **2.1. Constitutional framework**

To understand the legal and constitutional framework of Flemish education, it is worth noting two important Constitutional revisions.

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<sup>2</sup> Previously, free-thinking parents or pupils could just request an exemption from religious (that is, Catholic) education.

Firstly, after the state reform of 15 July 1988, Flanders as a Community became responsible for the educational system. Since then, the Flemish Parliament and the Community Minister have governed their own educational system. Only in three matters has the federal state preserved its jurisdiction, namely, “fixing the beginning and end of the compulsory school attendance period; establishing the minimum conditions for granting diplomas; and the pension system” (Eurybase, 2005-2006, 1.2.). Regarding the first case, compulsory education, the Law of 29 June 1983 prescribes “that minors, Belgian and foreigners alike, are subject to compulsory school attendance for a period of 12 years, starting in the school year during which the child reaches the age of 6 and ending at the end of the school year during which the youngster reaches the age of 18 (Eurybase, 2005-2006, 2.5.2.)”.

Secondly, in February 1994 “the principle of freedom of education” was restated. The current article, in which the compromises of the School Pact resound, stipulates both parents’ right to choose a school for their child and the provision of neutral education by the community which includes, among other features, respect for the philosophical, ideological and religious views of parents and pupils. Furthermore, the principle guarantees educational freedom, namely the right to establish schools autonomously and determine their own programmes, pedagogical methods and organisation, as stipulated in their own pedagogical project. In exchange for subsidisation, however, the governing body of schools which are not organised by the State was to accept a form of state control which demands that a minimum, legally fixed curriculum and schedule are respected. In Flanders, the Parliament (Decree of 24 July 1996) decided that every school should establish “clearly defined wordings of the final objectives (eindtermen) and developmental objectives (ontwikkelingsdoelen) adopted by Parliament and since implemented (Eurybase, 2005-2006, 2.3.1.1.)” To safeguard the separation between Church and State, this Decree does not apply to the content of religious education (and other philosophical education) over which the State has no authority. Only when schools contravene the democratic principles of society has the State a right to intervene.

Regarding religious education, the Constitution “guarantees for all pupils, enrolled under the Compulsory Education Law, weekly two periods of non-confessional ethics or religious education as part of the curriculum (Eurybase, 2005-2006, 9.4.3.1.)” The nature of religious education is not defined. A single state religion does not exist so each officially recognised religion can provide religious

education, either as an optional subject in state schools, or as a (mostly compulsory) subject in their own free educational network.<sup>3</sup> Specifically, in Belgium, the Christian religion (Catholic, Protestant, Anglican and Orthodox), Jewish and Muslim religions are recognized. Only Protestants and Jewish believers, however, found their own schools. In addition, some free non-confessional schools (VOOP), in which a course of non-confessional ethics is standard, exist.

Given the freedom to control the content of religious education, “the representative bodies of the recognised religions and the recognised union of the non-confessional community organise the inspection and support of the non-confessional ethics and religious courses taught at school. They are also responsible for the development of the curricula and the organisation of in-service training for teachers (Eurybase, 2005-2006, 9.4.3.1).”

## **2.2. Equality and human rights**

In Flanders, primary education is free of charge (Decree on elementary education of 25 February 1997). This means that parents may not be asked to pay a registration fee, and schools have to provide activities and school materials free of charge. The costs of meals, transportation on school trips and optional extra-curricular activities, however, have to be paid for by parents. By Decree, schools are obliged to inform parents of the maximum possible contribution required by them (Eurybase, 2005-2006, 4.7).

In 2002, the previously implemented educational priority policy (1991), the extended care framework (1993) and the non-discrimination declaration (1993) were integrated into an “equal educational opportunities policy (GOK)” in which special attention is given to children from deprived families. Of its three important policy instruments, two are especially relevant for this study:

- “free school choice”: every parent has the principal right to enrol their child in their chosen school and location. The school can only refuse pupils if the school or part of the school is full, or if the pupil has recently been expelled for disciplinary reasons. The decree also emphasises that “refusals on the ground of colour of skin, national or ethnical origin, descent, religion or sex are not

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<sup>3</sup> State and free schools have the right to provide philosophy of life rather than religious education courses. Although some discussions about (and experiments with) courses on Islam have taken place in Catholic primary schools, the free educational networks have chosen to make religious education about their own religion compulsory.

permitted (Eurybase, 2005-2006, 4.15.1.1).” In other words, free confessional schools cannot reject pupils of a different religion if their parents have complied with school regulations and practices. Furthermore, based on this statement, only mixed schools are in effect tolerated.

- Secondly, schools with a high number of children from deprived families receive additional financial resources. If these children are of different ethnic origin or do not have Dutch as their mother tongue, these funds are often used (at least partly) for intercultural education (ICO) or for extra language support.

### **3. Primary school structure**

Flemish education has five educational levels: kindergarten, primary, secondary, higher education and life-long learning (adult education). Children normally start primary school in September of the year in which they reach the age of six and, after six years of primary education move to secondary school.

In the school year 2006-2007, 387,157 children were enrolled in *regular elementary education*, 26,794 children in *special elementary education* which is meant for children with temporary or permanent specific needs, due to a physical or mental disability, serious behavioural or emotional problems or severe learning disabilities. Furthermore, the children of workers, immigrants, underprivileged and less educated people are overrepresented in special elementary education. According to Hirtt, Nicaise and De Zutter (2007, pp.68-69), this overrepresentation is not due to disability, but to the failure of schools to integrate them into the educational mainstream.

Of the total number of children in elementary education, 5.8 per cent have foreign nationality in which those of Dutch, Moroccan and Turkish nationality are the most highly represented. In addition, a lot of children with Belgian nationality are also of foreign descent. Given the simple naturalisation procedure, we assume that the proportion of children with an immigrant background is actually much higher.

Schools are usually classified as follows (Eurybase, 2005-2006, 2.3.2.):

1. *Community Education* (formerly State schools), financed by the Flemish Parliament;
2. *Subsidised official education*, organised by cities, municipalities and provinces;

3. *Subsidised privately-run education*, of which the vast majority are based on religion (free confessional schools), while a few are based on principles of rational enquiry or not founded on any specific confessional or philosophical basis (mostly alternative or method-based schools such as Freinet or Steiner). This network also includes one primary school (Lucerna) founded by members of the Turkish community).

All official and subsidised free governing bodies with the same background belong to a federation or umbrella organisation, which is called the *educational network*. These networks promote the interests of their members, provide support and participate in consultation structures.

Table 1 Existing umbrella organisations and educational networks

	<b>Umbrella Organisation</b>	<b>Educational network</b>
<i>COMMUNITY EDUCATION</i>	<i>Community Education (GO!)</i>	<i>Community Education</i>
	<i>Flemish Community Commission (VGC)</i>	<i>Dutch Community Education in Brussels</i>
<i>SUBSIDISED OFFICIAL EDUCATION</i>	<i>Education of Flemish Cities and Municipalities (OVSG)</i>	<i>Education of Cities and Municipalities</i>
	<i>Provincial Education Flanders (POV)</i>	<i>Provincial Education</i>
<i>SUBSIDISED PRIVATELY-RUN EDUCATION</i>	<i>Flemish Secretariat of Catholic Education (VSKO)</i>	<i>Catholic education</i>
	<i>Federation of Independent Pluralistic Emancipatory Methodic Schools (FOPEM)</i>	<i>Network of Freinet schools, experience-based schools and project schools within non-confessional education</i>
	<i>Federation of Rudolf Steiner schools</i>	<i>Steiner schools</i>
	<i>Flemish Education Consultation Platform</i>	<i>Free-thinking schools</i>
	<i>Governing body of free Protestant-Christian educational institute</i>	<i>Free Protestant-Christian schools</i>

Source: Eurydyce

### 3.1. Dominance of Catholic schools

In the school year 2006-2007, Catholic primary schools represented by the VSKO umbrella were the most popular within the Flemish education network. They were attended by 58 per cent of all children. In that respect, the VSKO also runs the most schools (see Table 2, school year 2006-2007). In contrast, Protestant schools made up a very small part of Flemish schools.

From Table 1 and 2, it can also be noticed that a Muslim educational network does not exist. Only Brussels has one secondary, but private school, ‘Avicenna’, which was founded in protest against the ban of the headscarf in the surrounding schools. A number of factors explain this lack of Flemish Muslim schools. Firstly, in community education and subsidised official education, children can already opt for a course of Islamic religion. Secondly, Muslims have their own Qumran schools after school hours in which teachers from the mosque provide religious education. Children attending Catholic schools can, therefore, get Muslim education in these schools. Thirdly, some researchers have suggested that the Muslim Community in Flanders does not have sufficient financial resources to create and organise their own educational network. In the future, however, they expect changes in this situation.

Table 2. Number of schools per educational network (primary education)

<i>Catholic Schools (VSKO)</i>	1402	60%
<i>Community Education (GO!)</i>	387	16,56%
<i>Municipal Education (OVSG)</i>	506	21,65%
<i>Provincial Education (POV)</i>	4	0,17%
<i>Free-Protestant-Christian Schools</i>	6	0,25%
<i>Other Subsidised privately run schools (Methodical Schools, Jewish Schools...)</i>	32	1,37%

Source: Statistical yearbook Education 2006-2007 supplemented with statistics of the VSKO.

Research on school choice indicates that parents consider the match of values and opinions between home and school as playing a significant role (Verhaest, 2006, p.12; Clycq, 2006, p.56; Desmedt & Nicaise, 2006, p.100). Interestingly, most parents did not explain this match in religious terms.

When choosing a *Catholic school*, parents primarily believe that they will find a certain educational and pedagogical “quality”, especially an emphasis on cognitive

learning and discipline (Creten, 2000, p.53; Clycq, 2006, p.57).<sup>4</sup> Only practicing Catholic parents find the religious, namely Catholic, identity of the school very important. For them, religious motives prevailed.

Parents, who choose *community education or subsidised official education*, are mostly driven by practical considerations (nearby location, cheap lunches etc.). Confessional and quality motives are less important, although non-believers and free-thinkers also tend to prefer this type of school. Furthermore, rating social equity highly as a motive in school choice was positively correlated with a preference for community education. This corresponds with the finding that better educated parents tend to prefer Catholic schools, while parents with a lower educational level choose community education or subsidised official education. For the latter group of parents, practical considerations – that is, these schools have a reputation of being relatively cheaper – prevail over other factors.<sup>5</sup>

### **3.2. Dominance of Catholic religious education**

In *Catholic schools*, which are attended by 60 per cent of all children, Catholic religious education is compulsory and is allocated three teaching periods in the primary school timetable. As stated in the Constitution, out of consideration for the philosophical choice of all parents, *community schools and subsidised official schools* must offer a choice between a religion-based course and a philosophical (moral) one, called non-confessional ethics. In contrast to Catholic schools, the chosen course is taught weekly for two teaching periods. All recognised religions are admitted and must indeed be provided for when requested by parents. Furthermore, in some subsidised privately-run methods-based schools (including Freinet and Steiner), religious education is replaced by an alternative course, which is called ‘cultural observation’ (cultuurbeschouwing).

During the school year 2006-2007, Catholic religious education was the most frequently chosen within community schools (C.S.) and municipal schools (M.S.),

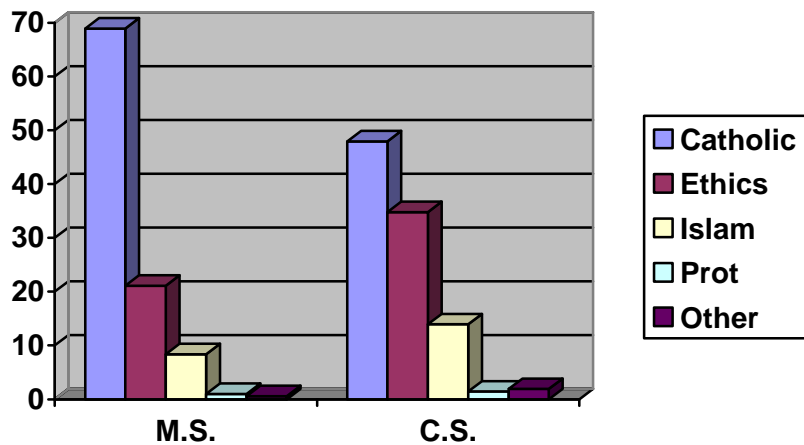
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<sup>4</sup> In other words, this type of parents assume that cognitive learning and discipline are both typical for Catholic schools and the best instrumental conditions for the development and well-being of their children. Cognitive learning and discipline are thus not experienced as values as such. Moreover, they are subordinated to qualities such as child-focused learning, care and openness (Creten et al., 2000, p 52).

<sup>5</sup> In fact, whereas all teachers in any educational network are directly paid by the government and teacher-pupil ratios are roughly identical across all networks, the subsidies for operating expenses in the free schools have remained lower until 2008.

while Muslim religious education also played a significant role (see Figure 1).<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Figure 1 below indicates that, compared to community schools, the historically strong position of Catholic religious education in regular municipal schools has remained, although less significantly than before. In special elementary education, this difference between municipal schools and community schools has disappeared (see Figure 2). Furthermore, the high take-up of Muslim religious education is striking, thereby confirming the observation that children of immigrant parents are referred more quickly to municipal special schools.

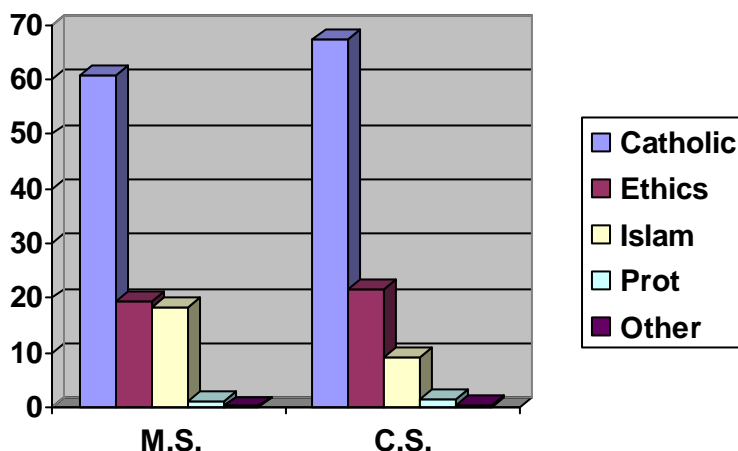
Figure 1. Choice of philosophy course within regular Municipal schools (M.S.) and Community Schools (C.S.)



Source: statistical yearbook of education 2006-2007

<sup>6</sup> The statistics for the most important network, free education, are not presented here as we know that Catholic religion is a compulsory subject in all Catholic schools.

Figure 2. Choice of philosophy course within special Municipal schools (M. S.) and Community Schools (C.S.)



Source: statistical yearbook education of 2006-2007

In sum, the dominance of Catholic religious education is clear. Overall, in the school year 2006-2007, 84.3 per cent of all children at elementary school attended Catholic religious education. This high proportion does however not completely correspond with statistics on belonging to the Catholic denomination. As shown in Table 3 (based on the ESS-survey 2006-2007), Catholicism is indeed the main religion in Flanders, but only 40.87 per cent of Flemish people declared themselves as belonging to the Catholic Church at present. Within this group of Catholics, less than 10 per cent attend Church weekly.

Table 3: Current religious or denominational affiliation

<i>Catholicism</i>	<i>40,87%</i>
<i>Islam</i>	<i>2,04%</i>
<i>Protestantism</i>	<i>0,35%</i>
<i>Not belonging to particular religion or denomination</i>	<i>55,50%</i>

Source: ESS 2006

Consequently, we might at first sight expect that transmission of the Catholic faith at home is far from evident or happens beyond the grasp of the Catholic Church. Empirical research in Flemish secondary schools (Pollefeyt et al., 2004), which mapped the beliefs of pupils attending Catholic religious education, however shows more ambivalent results (see Table 4 and 5).

Tables 4 & 5: Religious affiliation of secondary school pupils

<i>Do you identify yourself as believing?</i>	25,43%
<i>Are you baptized?</i>	96,32%
<i>Did you receive your Confirmation?</i>	92,89%
<i>Are you brought up Catholic/Christian?</i>	82,35%

	NEVER/SELDOM	SOMETIMES	REGULARLY/ EVERYDAY
<i>Praying</i>	67,70%	21,10%	11,20%
<i>Visiting religious places</i>	50,61%	32,38%	18,01%
<i>Receiving/Giving the sign of the cross before sleeping (as a child)</i>	52,75%	11,83%	35,42%
<i>Reading the Bible</i>	96,93%	2,86%	2,21%
<i>Talking about belief with parents</i>	69,15%	22,40%	8,45%
<i>Talking about belief with teacher of religion</i>	21,09%	31,41%	37,50%

Source: Pollefeyt et al. 2004

Interpreting these results, we can conclude that following Catholic religious education is considered by the pupils as part of their Catholic or Christian education. Minimally, this Catholic or Christian education is made manifest by taking part in Catholic rites of passage (such as Baptism or Confirmation). By comparison with church attendance, the relatively high proportions indicating that they pray, visit religious places (pilgrimage, cemetery etc.), receive or give the sign of the cross before sleeping are also remarkable. Talking about belief with parents is done less frequently, while Flemish teenagers very rarely read the Bible. Talking about religion is confined to interaction with teachers of religion.

In sum, Catholic belief is primarily expressed in ritual actions which are part of the strongly devotional, social-cultural heritage of Flanders. Billiet and Dobbelaere (1976) have called this phenomenon ‘social-cultural Christianity’. According to them, the label ‘Catholic’ or ‘Christian’ no longer refers to certain tenets of belief or church membership, but rather to its bond with family values. The same interpretation also applies to Christian rituals. Catholics appreciate these rituals less for their Christian meaning than for their capacity to express their cultural and familial bonds (Dobbelaere 2003, p.18; see also Van Meerbeeck 2001).

### **3.3. Management and funding structures**

In the school year 2006-2007, the overall Flemish education budget amounted to 8.8 billion euro, which amounted to 40 per cent of the total Flemish government budget. Of this budget 2.8 billion euro was allocated to elementary education (= 32%). In 2007, expenditure was 4078 euro per pupil in regular elementary education, and 12545 euro per pupil in special elementary education. Most expenditure went on salaries paid directly by the Ministry of Education and Training (more than 80%). The salaries of teachers of religious education are also paid by this Ministry.

As regards the distribution over the educational networks, the subsidised privately-run educational networks receives more than 50 per cent of the overall elementary education budget. As stipulated in the School Pact, the freedom of school choice legitimates the financing *a rato* of the large number of pupils in free, mainly Catholic, schools.

### **3.4. The role of the school in the local community**

Since the establishment of a participation council in each school (Decree of 23 October 1991), the trend towards greater parental involvement has been apparent in Flemish educational policy. With the new participation Decree in April 2004, parents, students and staff could now establish their own council which has an official legislative *raison d'être* (Dom & Verhoeven, 2006, p.568). The establishment of such a council is compulsory if at least 10 per cent of the parents in the school demand it. Once established, members of this council also represent parents in the mandatory school council. In particular, the VSKO, the umbrella educational network of Catholic schools, had objected against the mandatory participation proposed in the enactment. They preferred a 'participation right', which protects the freedom of parents and Catholic schools, instead of a 'participation duty' (Dom & Verhoeven, 2006, p.569).

In their research, Dom and Verhoeven (2006, p.589) found, however, that encouraging parental participation does not automatically lead to an actual increase in parental participation. A process of negotiation between the actors remains necessary. In this process the *school head* is of primary importance: "The school head determines to a great extent the school's functioning and his or her role is central to understanding the micropolitics of the school. Moreover, the school head influences the actions of teachers... We see that stable and secure leaders who share their power

form a partnership with parents and so move to creating more effective schools (Dom & Verhoeven, 2006, p.589-590).”

*Teachers* also play a significant role. Dom and Verhoeven (2006) have observed that several teachers distanced themselves from parents by referring to their ‘professional expertise’, claiming their professional autonomy.

Finally, *parents* themselves are important actors. In particular, the social background of parents is predictive of their degree of involvement: “Middle class parents are more visible in the school, have better communication skills and are more self-confident in their relations with teachers than working-class parents... The data show some aspects of inequality in parents’ participation. We see that mainly white, middle class parents who are well educated, well informed and articulate become involved in parents’ associations (Dom & Verhoeven, 2006, p.591).” Furthermore, they find that parents are only involved in substantive matters when their children attended a school with a clear presence of underprivileged children. Parents in other schools tend to prefer the status-quo in the school.

An initiative which also aims to develop constructive relations with parents and the surrounding local community, is “the multiservice school” (Brede School). Derived from the needs within the local community, the “multiservice school” involves close collaboration with other partners such as youth movements, cultural organisations, sporting clubs, neighbourhood organisations, and welfare organisations. In addition, parents and children themselves play crucial roles in such schools. Together with these partners, the “multiservice school” tries to foster the integral development of personality among all children. From this perspective, school is not therefore experienced as a closed system, but as one part of a “life-wide” learning process (Pirard et al., 2004).

Based on an analysis of current practices, Leclercq (2006, p.27) has distinguished five profiles of “multiservice schools” in Flanders:

1. *Deprivation or equal opportunities profile*: these multiservice schools, aimed towards preventing educational deprivation, are mostly located in underprivileged or immigrant neighborhoods.
2. *Integrated development profile*: these schools give all children a broad pallet of in- and out-of-school experiences, mostly in the field of sports, culture and leisure activities.

3. *Caring or service profile*: these schools are developing links with institutions which provide educational services outside schools. Here, the emphasis is on caring for children within and surrounding the school.
4. *Neighbourhood profile*: these multiservice schools emphasise the role of the school in improving the social cohesion of the neighbourhood.
5. *Nursery profile*: these schools address the growing need for nursery and leisure possibilities after school hours and during holidays.

An alternative classification is found in the study of Pirard et al. (2004). They distinguished three different agendas among multiservice schools: improving opportunities for underprivileged groups (cfr. type 1 above); meaningful leisure activities (cfr. 2); and life-wide learning in which cooperation with family and neighborhood is stimulated (cfr. 3-4-5).

## **4. Curriculum of Religious Education**

Because of the dominance of Catholic religious education in Flemish primary schools, this report logically starts with an explanation of this curriculum. Next, the curricula of non-confessional ethics, Protestant religious education and Muslim education are compared with the Catholic religion curriculum. In general, children attending primary schools have two or three teaching periods of religious or non-confessional ethics weekly. In official primary schools, religious education is taught by specialist teachers, while in Catholic schools this subject is normally taught by the class teacher.

### **4.1. Curriculum of Catholic religious education**

The main bodies involved in writing the curriculum are the representative bodies for Catholic religion in Flanders, namely the Catholic bishops, who have their own educational department and inspectors. By law, the state has no authority in the development of the curriculum.

Historically, the curricula of (Catholic) religious education have been strongly influenced by the Catholic Church. Until Vatican II, the curriculum had an overtly catechetical design. Religious education in primary schools was considered as an instrument in sustaining and transmitting Catholic belief. The dogmatic content was central, with “learning from religion” being the only option (Bulckens & Roebben, 2002, p.29). In 1963 the stress on dogma was replaced with an emphasis on love. Religious education was now understood from a modern development psychology

perspective and became more dynamic. In primary school, the most widely used handbook for Catholic religious education, which is called “Midden onder U” (“Amidst You”), echoed this new perspective (Bulckens & Roebben, 2002, p.30).

Concerned by declining church attendance and the rapid secularisation of Flemish society, in 1994, the Flemish bishops appointed different working groups to rethink the design of the curriculum, resulting in an opinion text (1996, included in Leerplan (2000) p.13-17) which addressed the question: “Which Catholic religious education is currently needed to remain truthful to the Church’s assignment?” The bishops accepted the text and used it afterwards for the development of new curricula which were published in 1999-2000. These curricula covered primary and secondary schools across all educational networks. Several experts (teachers, lecturers, inspectorate, theologians and representatives of the bishops) worked on developing these curricula.

Central to these curricula is the recognition of the radically changed situation of religion in Flemish society. Based on the opinion text of 1996, the current curricula state that the school population is now characterised by pluralism, individualisation, modernisation and multi-religiosity. Consequently, the composition of a school class reflects the enormous religious diversity which can be found in society.

Given this context, the objective of religious education is to create an open and communicative atmosphere in which children become acquainted with Jesus and Christian beliefs. In primary schools, the term “catechesis” is replaced by terms as “religious education”, “communication” and “the child as centre stage”. Regarding the pluralist situation, the curricula propose a two-track policy.

Firstly, for children with non-believing or other-believing parents, a catechetical design assuming that pupils are already Christian in belief, is considered inappropriate. The more general term ‘religious education’, which is oriented to guiding children in the development of their philosophical or religious identity, is preferred. The main objective of this religious education is to make children receptive towards a religious approach to reality instead of the solely academic, rational approach which is, according to the curricula, normative for Flemish education. In primary schools, this approach involves creating awareness of good and evil and of the symbolism and language of faith, rituals and celebrations (Leerplan, 2000, pp.72-73). Furthermore, an introduction to Christian stories and tradition is meant to help children make choices regarding their *own* identity development, assuming that these

stories can play a crucial, meaningful role in this process. In this respect, the curricula explicitly permit that Catholic religious education at school can have a different impact on children. In sum, religious education is considered as a workshop in which children learn to think personally and to discuss their own philosophical or religious identity in a respectful and tolerant dialogue with the Catholic tradition and other children (Nascholingsinstituut LevensBeschouwelijke Vakken, 2003, p.16). Developing a specifically Christian or Catholic identity is thus no longer seen as necessary.

Secondly, the catechetical design must however be preserved for children brought up in the Catholic belief at home. Here, the objective of religious education is the reinforcement of identity, faith transmission and Church initiation.

In primary schools, the curriculum centres on the following subjects or themes: basic experiences, diversity, systems of influence, Bible, Church, Christian-inspired actions, prayer, celebrations and sacraments, and images of God and Jesus. Interestingly, the themes for the third cycle (10 to 12 years) strongly refer to preparing for the sacrament of Confirmation celebrated in the year in which the children reach the age of 12. Both main themes, namely, “growing in strength” and Spirit, and some secondary themes (including ‘being moved’ and ‘beginning to move’ (engagement) / Confirmation and Fire / Working of the Spirit) reflect this orientation. Furthermore, a stronger development psychology perspective applied to religious themes is apparent. For the third and final cycle of primary school, the curricula stress the theme of the future, responsibility and engagement centred on the question: “What kind of person do I want to be?”

#### **4.2. Catholic religious education in Catholic primary schools with Muslims**

In terms of percentage, Catholic schools include fewer Muslim children than the official schools of the Community educational network (GO!). In 2003-2004, 5,2% of the mothers and 5,6% of the fathers whose children were attending the first year of a Catholic primary school were Muslim (SiBO-survey, see tables 6 & 7).<sup>7</sup> However, some schools situated in metropolitan areas such as Brussels or Antwerp as well as in the former mining region (Beringen and Heusden-Zolder in the province of Limburg) are attended by a large number of Muslims. How to deal with this situation has been

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<sup>7</sup> The SiBO-survey is an ongoing longitudinal research study of the school career of children, from pre-school until the end of their primary education.

the subject of much discussion. Opinions differ greatly, especially regarding the design of religious education.

*Table 6: Religious affiliation of mothers within the different educational networks*

	GO! (Community education)	Education of Flemish Cities and municipalities	Catholic Education
<i>Christian</i>	47,01%	64,38%	77,15%
<i>Free-thinking</i>	21,58%	16,54%	7,46%
<i>Muslim</i>	12,52%	5,96%	5,24%
<i>Non-believing</i>	8,09%	5,96%	3,88%
<i>don't know</i>	5,97%	4,17%	3,84%

Source: SIBO-survey 2003

*Table 7: Religious affiliation of fathers within the different educational networks*

	GO! (Community education)	Education of Flemish Cities and municipalities	Catholic Education
<i>Christian</i>	41,43%	58,72%	71,23%
<i>Free-thinking</i>	22,93%	16,99%	8,23%
<i>Muslim</i>	13,29%	7,15%	5,58%
<i>No belief</i>	7,71%	7,60%	6,22%
<i>don't know</i>	10,60%	6,71%	6,31%

Source: SIBO-survey 2003

According to the decree of 1997, Catholic primary schools may organise Islam religion courses. In contrast to the situation in official education (community, provincial and municipal schools), they are however not obliged to do so. The final decision on this matter is vested with the Church and the bishops. Until 2000, there was no general policy, with bishops and schools deciding autonomously. In the diocese of Limburg, for example, the bishop agreed to the introduction of Islam courses in Catholic primary schools, aimed at dealing with the inflow of Muslim children into primary Catholic schools during the 1990s (De Standaard, 13 March 2006, p.2). Fifteen primary Catholic schools participated in the project.

With the implementation of the new curricula, this situation was revised. In a policy note for schools with a large number of Muslim children, the Church (2000) stated that the new curricula, in which the catechetical design of Catholic religious

education had been left behind, offered Muslim children sufficient opportunities for developing their own religious identity. In schools with a large number of Muslim children, this evolution must be addressed in dialogue with the Christian tradition, with broad attention to the background of Muslim children, and by making relevant comparisons between the Muslim and Christian religions. Furthermore, the bishops believed that the stress on communication and religious diversity would automatically temper the necessity of providing Islam as a separate school subject. Therefore, the policy note recommended Catholic primary schools with a large number of Muslim children to offer in principle Catholic religious education only. Teachers of religion were however allowed to enlist the support of Muslim teachers (just support, not by teaching Islam!) and to find thematic connections between their own curricula and the curricula for Muslim religious education in Flanders. Finally, the note formulates a position regarding pastoral activities in schools with a large number of Muslims. In general, these schools are asked to respect the personal freedom of Muslim children who should in no way be obliged to participate actively in Christian prayers or sacramental preparations for Confirmation. In the note, the bishops proposed three acceptable forms of joint prayer:

1. Christian prayers: Muslim children are present, but do not have to participate.
2. Assisi model: Christian and Muslim children pray in turn and in accordance with their own tradition.
3. Interreligious celebration based on themes which appear as central in both religions.

Muslim rituals and prayers were however not seen as possible, due to absence of the context and conditions to properly perform these activities.

Nearly a decade after the publication of this note, the majority of Catholic schools, which had once offered Islam courses, have followed the recommendations of the Church. Some stopped such courses immediately, evoking considerable protest from Muslim parents, while others gradually extinguished Islam courses. However, a minority of Catholic schools still offer Islam courses. The primary school “The Horizon”, which is situated in a neighborhood of Beringen with many Turkish families, is one of them. In an interview, the principal defended this decision not only as a pragmatic one: “Without Islam courses, the school would have closed its doors”, but also as a Christian-inspired action: “The children are centre stage. For them it is important to attend school in their neighborhood. If that means giving Islam courses,

we have to do so...Many people told me that if Turkish children want to attend a Catholic school, they should reconcile themselves to the Catholic values. I do not agree. What do you want? Clinging to your own religion for dear life? Or by starting from your Catholic belief, deciding that the children of your neighbourhood deserve good education?" (De Standaard, 13 March 2006, p.2)

Even now, the umbrella organisation of Catholic schools (VSKO) is still discussing this subject. In 2006, Mieke Van Hecke, secretary-general of the VSKO, admitted that she favoured the implementation of Islam courses in Catholic schools in some circumstances. According to her, these Catholic schools must have a high number of socially disadvantaged Muslim children, the Islam teacher must be loyal to the Catholic school ethos and the content of the Islam course must be evaluated (Verreyken, 2007, p.9).

### **4.3. Comparison with other curricula**

In general, the objective of all optional philosophy or ethics courses is to better understand, place, accept and serve oneself and others, departing from one's own experiences and reaching a personal orientation to life and lifestyle. Each philosophy of life aims to achieve this objective by presenting its own perspective and view on life, humanity and society (Nascholingsinstituut LBV, 2003, pp.3-4). Table 8 shows the most important goals, basis for authority fundamentals and approaches within each curriculum (Catholic, non-confessional ethics, Islam and Protestant religious education).

Table 8: Comparison of different religious and philosophical curricula

SUBJECT	STARTING FROM	ULTIMATE GOAL	BASIS FOR AUTHORITY	APPROACH
<i>Catholic religious education</i>	<i>Initial situation of the child – development psychology perspective</i>	<i>Twin-track policy (different impact) Minimum: making children receptive towards a religious approach to the world Maximum: deepening of Catholic identity, faith transmission and Church initiation</i>	<i>Christian stories (tradition, Church and Bible)</i>	<i>Dialogical (communicative hermeneutical)</i>
<i>Non-confessional ethics</i>	<i>Experiences and views of the individual child</i>	<i>Developing a searching, discerning and rational attitude</i>	<i>Science Humanism</i>	<i>Dialogical</i>
<i>Islam</i>	<i>Muslim authorities</i>	<i>Knowledge of the principles of belief, praying and authorities</i>	<i>Qorân Haddies</i>	<i>Doctrinal</i>
<i>Protestant religious education</i>	<i>Developmental psychology of the child</i>	<i>Educating children to a Christian philosophy of life</i>	<i>Bible</i>	<i>Dialogical</i>

Compared to Catholic religious education, the design of Islam instruction and Protestant religious education is more oriented to transmitting belief to pupils (“learning from”, catechetical design). Islam teachers must teach the children the Arabic transcription, the most important doctrinal points, the knowledge as to how to pray correctly, the moral principles and the rules to open up the Muslim ‘authorities’ (Qorân, Haddies). The curricula pay little attention to the experiences and views of the child. The didactical methods used are therefore not dialogical, but instructive.

The Protestant curricula have integrated a development psychology perspective into an overall design in which educating children to a Christian philosophy of life is the ultimate goal. In this process, the Bible is the exclusive standard and benchmark.

In the curricula of non-confessional ethics, values such as human dignity (with a focus on stress on equality, tolerance, solidarity) and freedom to think and act form an important core. Such values are not based on a religious worldview, but on the

principles of a free-thinking humanism, in which pupils are encouraged to develop a searching, discerning and rational attitude. The scientific method is used as the most important tool to reach this objective.

## **5. Teachers and teacher preparation**

In the school year 2006-2007, Flemish primary schools employed 41 416 administration and teaching staff members, mostly in subsidised privately-run schools (25 540). Nearly 80 per cent of the primary teachers are women. This high number of women is however not matched in the management levels. Among this staff, only 45 per cent are female, although since 2000 the statistics have shown an upward trend (in 2000: 30%). There are no differences between official and Catholic primary schools regarding the number of women in primary education. In Catholic primary schools, the management staff is somewhat more likely to be male.

Research has explained the female character of Flemish primary education in different ways. According to Sabbe et al. (2004, p.364), the existing and sometimes unconscious associations between teaching as a vocation and ‘nurturing’ are the main causes.

### **5.1. Preparation of (religion) teachers and teacher recruitment**

In general, primary school teachers of religious education are educated in colleges of higher education and follow a bachelor’s course mainly geared towards professional practice. At the end, students are expected to have gained “general and specific knowledge and competencies that are necessary for an autonomous exercise of one specific profession (Ministry of the Flemish Community, 2005, p.27)”. Therefore, after three years of education, a student can immediately embark upon his or her career. Furthermore, each college of higher education is associated through inter-institutional cooperation with one university and one or more other higher education colleges. These associations “improve interaction between education and research in the academic bachelor courses and master courses provided at colleges of higher education (Ministry of the Flemish Community, 2005, p.25).”

Teachers of Catholic religious education in community schools and subsidised official schools for primary education have received a specialised education in Catholic religion, in the context of a Catholic college of higher education . In Catholic

schools, however, the class teacher teaches religion, thereby expressing the philosophy of the Catholic educational network that Catholic primary schools must integrate the religious and educational dimensions. Therefore, the subject of religious education is not set apart and not taught by a specialist teacher.

While teaching religion, the class teacher is considered an assistant of the bishop, who gives consent by means of a mandate. To receive this mandate, the class teacher has to comply with the following conditions: to be baptised and to have qualified in a Catholic college of higher education. Consequently, as a general rule, free-thinking teachers and class teachers with a Muslim background cannot be employed in a Catholic primary school. This practice causes a lot of problems and ambivalent attitudes, particularly towards Muslim teachers. Lecturers in Catholic colleges of higher education have pointed out that these conditions constrain the career opportunities of Muslim students. As a result, many Muslim students do not opt for teacher training college or pull out of these colleges (Commissie voor Onderwijs, Vorming, Wetenschap en Innovatie, 2006, p.5).

Interestingly, the Catholic educational network takes an ambivalent position in this debate. Mrs Van Hecke, director of the VSKO, describes herself as a supporter of teachers with an immigrant background because of their value added, both for the teaching staff and the pupils. She also believes that schools can find a solution for teaching the subject of religious education (Goethals & Horsten, 2008). Whether these solutions are actually found remains the question.<sup>8</sup> It is in effect the bishop (and not the school or the VSKO) who has the final say in this matter.

In community schools or subsidised official schools, the recruitment of teachers with a Muslim background has also caused tensions. In 2006, for example, the board of a *community education school decided to fire two teachers of Islam religion who refused to take off their headscarf outside the religion class. Later on, this decision was overturned by the Supreme Court of Belgium and was followed by a policy debate in the newspapers. Finally, the Board of the community education schools decided that the headscarf is not accepted in any other context than in religion class.* Every school is free to make its own decision *regarding the wearing of external religious symbols by pupils.* For staff members, wearing external religious

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<sup>8</sup> Exceptions are actually made in some cases by redistributing tasks among a team of teachers, or by combining part-time assignments of Catholic and non-Catholic teachers, depending on the discretion of the bishop.

features, for example headscarves, is not tolerated. Teachers of Islam religion are however free to wear a headscarf, except when they carry out other pedagogical orders, for example as a general class or subject teacher.

## **5.2. Profile of teachers**

In a document, the representatives of all Recognised Institutions for religious or non-confessional education indicated the job description for teachers of philosophical courses (2004). In general, teachers of religion have to be qualified to help and to prepare pupils to take their place in the multicultural society. By the end of the course, pupils are expected to possess a personal philosophical or religious conviction and engagement.

This objective is firstly fulfilled by teaching in a pedagogically and didactically well-considered manner. Like others, teachers of religion have to plan and prepare their lessons and are asked to use a year planner, a school diary and written preparations. The curriculum for his or her subject should be employed as a guide.

Secondly, the teacher must have the competences to transpose the specificity of his or her religion or philosophy of life into the children's environment. To this end, the lessons have to build on day-to-day experiences which are well-adapted and recognisable for pupils.

Thirdly, the teacher is considered as an integral part of the school. He or she has to integrate him/herself in the school system by cooperating with other teachers and creating possibilities for contact with parents.

Finally, the teaching process and content is evaluated by the competent inspector-advisor. The school board is just allowed to control whether a teacher sticks to the required documents (diary, year plan etc.), to keep in touch with the inspector-advisor and to cater for practical issues (such as financial arrangements, conferences etc.).

## **6. The role of religion in mutual acculturation patterns between ethnic and religious groups: work hypotheses for further research**

Bourhis et al. (1997) have developed a useful framework, called the interactive acculturation model, to analyze the interactions between immigrants and local communities of the host country. To this end, three components are integrated within a common theoretical framework: the acculturation orientations of immigrant groups; the acculturation orientations of the host community towards specific groups of immigrant groups and “the interpersonal and intergroup relational outcomes that are the product of combinations of immigrants and host community acculturation orientations” (Bourhis et al. 1997, p.381).

From the perspective of the immigrants, Bourhis distinguished between the following possible attitudes:

1. Integration: “the desire to maintain key features of the immigrant cultural identity while adopting aspects of the host majority culture” (Bourhis et al., 1997, p 377).
2. Assimilation: these immigrants “relinquish their own cultural identity for the sake of adopting the cultural identity of the host majority” (p.377).
3. Separation: “desire to maintain all features of the immigrant cultural identity while rejecting relationships with members of the majority host culture” (p.377).
4. Anomie: “problematic identification with both the group of origin and with the host majority” (p.378). Or
5. Individualism: “Individualists reject group ascriptions and prefer to treat others as individual persons rather than as members of group categories” (p.378)

According to Bourhis et al. (1997, p.378), studies have pointed out that the majority of migrants endorse an integration orientation. This is also the case for Muslim migrants living in Flanders. Although legally tolerated, these migrants have not founded their own educational network, but have instead tried to find their way within the existing educational system.<sup>9</sup> We assume that Muslim migrants, who are

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<sup>9</sup> As already explained, a number of factors might explain the lack of Flemish Muslim schools. See p.12.

seeking support to maintain the religious identity of their children, opt for official schools and Islam as a school subject. A significant part of Muslims children however attend Catholic schools. What does this choice signify? Are the parents of these children willing to put the stress on their religious identity aside – which would boil down to an assimilation strategy? Do these Muslim parents prefer Catholic schools because these schools put more emphasis on a religious worldview? Or do other non-philosophical reasons prevail (distance, better ethnic balance, etc.)?

Furthermore, research findings have also signalled the integration orientation of some Muslim children and youngsters by pointing at the construction of wider and more complex or flexible (religious or cultural) identities (Saroglou & Mathijssen, 2007; Spotti, 2007).

At the same time, the presence of Muslim children in Flemish schools has challenged schools and the educational networks to take a position vis-à-vis immigrants. Referring again to Bourhis et al. (1997, p.380) we can distinguish between five possible acculturation orientations of the host community, mirroring the attitudes of the immigrants:

1. The integration orientation: “host community members accept and value the maintenance of the heritage culture of immigrants and also accept that immigrants adopt important features of the majority host culture” (p.380).
2. The assimilation orientation (or absorption): “host community members expect immigrants to relinquish their cultural identity for the sake of adopting the culture of the majority host society” (p.380).
3. The segregation orientation: host community members “distance themselves from immigrants by not wishing them to adopt or transform the host culture, though they accept that immigrants maintain their heritage culture” (p.380). They prefer immigrants “to remain together in separate community enclaves.
4. The exclusion orientation: host community members “are not only intolerant of the maintenance of the immigrant culture but also refuse to allow immigrants to adopt features of the host culture” (p.381).
5. Individualism: “host community members define themselves and others as individuals... and tend to downgrade the importance of maintaining the

immigrant culture or adopting the host culture as a criterion of successful acculturation” (p.381).

On the basis of this report and the literature review, we can analyse the acculturation orientations of Flemish school communities, the patterns underlying the curriculum of Catholic religious education, the different school or educational network policies and the attitudes of host community parents to the presence of Muslim children in Flemish schools. In documents and interviews, most host community members declare themselves openly in favour of integration. However, other orientations seem to affect their actual behaviour.

The School Pact of 1958 has actually established a separation between the different philosophies of life and religions, which has been maintained until today. The integration efforts of some Muslim immigrants who have chosen a Catholic school or developed multiple and flexible (religious) identities, have not led to any structural changes in the educational landscape.

Admittedly, the curriculum of Catholic religious education has been adapted in favour of the integration of Muslim children by dropping the catechetical design. The development of a clear-cut, single religious identity by every student remains, however, the ultimate objective. In this regard, the balance seems to tilt over to segregation. Muslims are allowed to maintain and indeed deepen their religion as long as they do not question the host religion or practices. This policy prevails even in schools with a high proportion of Muslim children.

The policy of schools and educational networks differs with regard to pupils and teachers. As regards pupils (for example, in the case of wearing the headscarf), school positions vary from integration to exclusion. This difference across schools can be explained by the freedom of individual schools to determine their own policy, even if this policy tends to exclude Muslim girls wearing a headscarf. As regards Muslim teachers, the official schools tend to go for individualism. None of the class teachers in primary schools are allowed to express their religious identity. Catholic primary schools have chosen a recruitment policy which is oriented to segregation (only Catholic class teachers can receive a mandate to teach the Catholic religion) but which leads in fact to exclusion (Muslim teachers are not accepted as class teachers).

Free school choice also grants the parents of the host community the power to express their position towards (Muslim) migrants. Whereas some parents consciously

select multicultural schools for their children, a substantial number of parents appear to prefer 'white' schools and to avoid schools with a high proportion of migrants, thereby expressing their segregation orientation.

In sum, the dominant acculturation pattern of the Flemish host community regarding the religious identity of Muslim migrants actually seems to be segregation. In practice, this orientation contributes to an ethnic and social segmentation across schools: most migrants and host community members do not attend the same schools. The idea of the Flemish school as a mirror of the multicultural society should therefore be questioned seriously.

Bourhis et al. (1997) go on to combine the attitudes of immigrants and host communities into a joint framework, which turns out extremely flexible and useful in interpreting different patterns of integration and conflict, depending on a multitude of determinants. This overall framework is summarised in Figure 3 below.

Surprisingly, the framework shows that some patterns may be much more 'viable' than one would expect a priori. For example, assimilation is usually seen as a forced pattern of acculturation, characterised by the dominance of the host country's culture over minority cultures. However, the authors argue that assimilation may well be desired by immigrants. As long as both parties agree on the preferred pattern, there is no reason for conflict and the acculturation turns out successful. A similar outcome may occur when both parties adopt similar 'individualistic' attitudes towards each other.

Figure 3. Interaction between acculturation attitudes of immigrants and host community (Bourhis et al., 1996)

		IMMIGRANT COMMUNITY				
		INTE-GRATION	ASSIMI-LATION	SEPAR-ATION	INDIVI-DUALISM	ANOMY
HOST COMMUNITY	INTE-GRATION	Consensual	Problematic	Conflictual	Conflictual	Conflictual
	ASSIMI-LATION	Problematic	Consensual	Conflictual	Conflictual	Conflictual
	SEGRE-GATION	Conflictual	Conflictual	Conflictual	Conflictual	Conflictual
	EXCLUSION	Conflictual	Conflictual	Conflictual	Conflictual	Conflictual
	INDIVI-DUALISM	Problematic	Problematic	Problematic	Consensual	Conflictual

On the other hand, the will of one party to ‘integrate’ appears to be insufficient for the development of a peaceful multicultural society. Segregational or exclusionary attitudes of the host community, according to Bourhis et al., always give rise to conflicts, irrespectively as to whether immigrants try to integrate or not. Similarly, if immigrants tend to live separately, rejecting the host culture, efforts of the host community to integrate them may generate conflicts rather than peace.

Note also that acculturation patterns may differ between groups of immigrants within the same host country, depending on the historical, geographical, cultural, economic... context of all parties involved. This probably explains the complexity of relationships across countries and groups.

The relevance of this analytical framework in the context of religious / philosophical socialisation of children in Flemish education is obvious. Our observation that segregation seems to be the dominant pattern on the part of the host community may help explain the poor performance of immigrant children in Flemish schools as well as the tensions surrounding the ethnic composition of schools. Religion can be seen as a catalyst of these intercultural frictions, particularly in the relations with the Muslim community.

Note that the picture sketched in this section remains rather hypothetical and needs to be further tested empirically.

## **7. Summary and conclusions**

Historically, the provision of religious or philosophical education as a school subject was a contested topic, which aroused considerable political tensions, especially between Catholics, liberals, and subsequently Socialists. With the School Pact (1958), a new balance was found by reformulating the freedom of education principle, which has since then received a sort of ‘immovable’ status in the Belgian school system. Regarding religious education, this principally means that education is organised in such a way that a match between religious education at home and at school can easily be achieved. Three legal stipulations guarantee this match:

1. Along with ‘official’ schools, free confessional schools are recognised and can be subsidized.
2. Parents have the freedom to choose the school that best matches their (religious or philosophical) values.
3. Official schools are obliged to provide the religious or philosophical education of the parents’ choice, if this religion or philosophical orientation is recognised. Children, socialised in a non-recognised religion or philosophical orientation (for example, Jehovah’s Witness), can however be granted exemption from following one of the philosophical subjects offered.

Furthermore, once the minimum conditions are respected, the state has no authority over the content of religious and philosophical education. The state assigns this authority to the main bodies of the recognised religions, which are responsible for the curricula, the recruitment and the evaluation of their teachers.

In sum, in practice, the “freedom of education principle” has resulted in an educational policy that respects the different philosophical backgrounds of pupils *by separating* them into different types of schools or into distinct classes of religious or philosophical education within official schools. Furthermore, it is important to notice that the current legal framework based on the School Pact (1958) is not neutral, but conceals some underlying presuppositions regarding philosophy of life and religion. Firstly, the framework assumes that each parent considers himself or herself as belonging to one philosophy of life or religion. Secondly, it is assumed that belonging to a religion is institutionally embedded (‘pillarised’). The official institutions (such as

the Church) are therefore seen as the main representatives of the parents' philosophy of life. Thirdly, it is taken for granted that children are socialised by their parents (and religious institutions) into a particular, singular and fixed philosophical or religious identity. Consequently, the educational system is organised in a way that this socialisation is supported and deepened by the school. And fourthly, the negotiators of the School Pact have obviously not anticipated the shift in religious practice, nor the rise of other religious groups in society.

Since 1958, however, the religious landscape in Flanders has changed dramatically. Are the educational system and its presuppositions regarding philosophy of life and religion still congruent with the current landscape? In our view, the analysis of official statistics, the current debate and the existing research literature (used in this report and the literature review) raise serious doubts regarding this congruency. In this regard, we want to look firstly at parents with a Catholic background and secondly at parents with a Muslim background.

Firstly, after 1960, many Catholics lost their close bonds with the Church. In other words, contrary to the assumptions on which the educational system is based, their belief was no longer institutionally embedded and their belonging to Catholicism became less evident and less intense. Although Catholic schools and Catholic religious education still suit them best (in comparison with the alternatives and for other non-philosophical reasons), the question remains to which extent the current educational system, which assumes a clear philosophical identity among parents, and the authority of the Church as their main representative can be preserved. In practice, it is clear that the assumptions described above only apply to a small proportion of convinced Catholic parents.

Secondly, following the migration waves since 1956, the children of a significant number of migrant families with a Muslim home background have entered the Flemish school system.

In their interactive acculturation model, Bourhis et al. (1997, p.383) have combined the host community and immigrant acculturation orientations within a single conceptual framework predicting that, regardless of the immigrant acculturation orientation, a separation orientation among the host community will always lead to implicitly or explicitly conflictual relational outcomes. It would be interesting to examine not only the nature of current philosophical tensions and conflicts in Flemish schools, but also the relational outcomes of interactions between

host community members and immigrants who both adopt an integration acculturation orientation.

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