

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE FIELD OF LITERACY AND BASIC EDUCATION

State of the art in Belgium

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Table of Contents

1	Introduction	2
2	Development of Literacy and Basic Education in Belgium	3
2.1	Overview on development	3
2.2	Policies, systems and action plans at the level of the French Community	4
2.3	Policies, systems and action plans at the level of Flemish Community	5
3	Concept of Teaching Literacy and Basic Education	8
4	Good practice in the Field of Teacher Training	10
5	Prevailing problems and challenges	12
6	Conclusions and recommendations	13
	Bibliography and references	14

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1. Introduction

The following report has been compiled as a part of the TRAIN “Professionalization of Literacy and Basic Education – Basic Modules for Teacher Training”, an EU Socrates Grundtvig funded project, in collaboration with partners from Germany, Ireland, Cyprus and Slovenia.

Belgium is a federal state, composed of three communities (based on language and culture) and three regions. Being closely connected to language and culture, the literacy movement is principally a “Community” affair, subject to different policies in the Flemish Community and in the French Community. The Communities and Regions are directly responsible for adult education in general and literacy in particular.

This report details the background of adult literacy policy and national strategy in Belgium for the professionalization of adult literacy teachers. The information contained in the report has been compiled mainly from a number of stakeholders’ presentations and publications in the adult literacy and basic skills sector and texts from governmental leaders and academic researchers in the field. The drafting of this report was also based on many documents realised by the main structures in the field of adult literacy in the French and Flemish Communities.

Finally, the websites of many structures and latest events in the field enabled us to find various documents and to update the information collected.

2. Development of Literacy and Basic Education in Belgium

2.1 Overview on development

In the 1970's the economic crisis in Belgium raised the problem of retraining for unemployed people and consequently the question of "refresher courses" for all those whose so-called "basic" skills were not sufficient to enable them to obtain new qualifications without assistance.

Reports on persistently high levels of academic failure (10% of youngsters were leaving the compulsory education system without any sort of certificate of achievement) and on the fact that public adult-education organisations offered very little to those with low scholastic achievement, led worker movements to create voluntary organisations for social and professional integration which designed, created and developed a network of organisations for professional training and basic-education courses, for adults with little or poor schooling.

These years also revealed the persistence of both total and functional illiteracy among the Belgian population, in spite of the fact that school attendance has been compulsory since 1919. Previously, the majority of literacy educators were unable to imagine that any Belgians could be totally or functionally illiterate.

Therefore, in 1983, based on the experience of the literacy associations (principally the Literacy Collective) and of "ATD – Fourth World", the voluntary organisations of the worker movement created the *LIRE ET ECRIRE* (Read and Write) co-ordination. This consists of an effective literacy network over the territory of the French Community of Wallonia–Brussels. The tasks and the missions of "*Lire et Ecrire*" have been affirmed and consolidated. This has made it possible to define the following founding elements for literacy and for the combat against present-day functional illiteracy:

- A wide and solid base in the voluntary sector, a patchwork of various citizen initiatives arising from needs expressed or encountered in different places, by very varied populations, with a variety of different objectives, and very variable resources.
- Involvement of the worker movements
- Actions including both "illiterates" and "functional illiterates", French-speakers and non-French-speakers, Belgians and immigrants, etc.

The Flemish Community presents figures which seem to show an alarming situation. According to IALS Survey, no less than approximately 15-18% of Flemish adults lack the basic language and numeracy skills necessary to be able to cope adequately with the challenges of modern society (ie level 1). It also indicates that some groups are facing higher risk of illiteracy than others (low qualified people without a certificate of secondary education, older people, women, unemployed people and low-literate workers)

According to PISA survey (dated 2002), some groups present a real literacy and numeracy problem. 31% of pupils in mainstream secondary education attain the highest level while only 5% of pupils in technical and vocational secondary education attain this level. One third of pupils attending vocational education only perform at the lowest level or below.

As far as the labour's market is concerned, the demand for literacy is striking:

- 42% of unemployed Flemish people only attain the lowest skill level (quantitative scores).
- The relationship between a low literacy level and unemployment is very alarming.
- Only 6.7% of Flemish people aged 25 to 64 participate to one or other training programme.

2.2 Policies, systems and action plans at the level of the French Community

Education for Social Promotion is the largest adult-education system. It is operated by the Ministry of Education. Some of their schools organise literacy courses and basic education courses, leading to the initial Certificate of Study, i.e. the 1st level of the official certificate of completion of primary education.

However, although there are some literacy and basic education programmes in this context, these represent less than 0.1% of the adult-education courses offered by the public sector! Meanwhile, many of these schools offer courses in French as a Foreign Language designed for foreigners who already master one language and wish to learn a second or even a third language.

The Cultural sector recognises and finances in a structural fashion, voluntary organisations in the field of "Permanent Education". In order to be recognised for this activity, a voluntary organisation must have as its objective "*development of critical analysis of society, stimulation of democratic and collective initiatives, development of active citizenship and the practice of social, cultural, environmental and economic rights, in the perspective of individual and collective emancipation, with emphasis on active participation and cultural expression*". Lastly, some projects, still only occasional, may develop with the sector of public readings, museums, theatres, expression and creativity centres, etc.

Para-state organisations run courses intended for employment seekers, and, in a lesser measure, for workers. These organisations work in partnership with the voluntary sector for education for those with little schooling. These policies of social and professional integration are developed on the basis of decrees which explicitly recognise the issue of literacy, illiterate employment seekers having the same rights of access as any other employment seeker.

Several actions are also organised in connection with the policies of social action and integration for immigrants. Social integration programmes enable the Regions to subsidise voluntary organisations for a range of activities, including literacy courses. However, immigrant integration policies have made no provision for reception and integration of applicants for regularisation and the present "new arrivals".

At present, some 200 voluntary organisations of very different types, organise literacy courses. This term covers not only the acquisition of basic skills: speaking, reading, writing, calculating, etc., but also history, geography, economics, artistic expression, science, and so on. Some 500 unpaid volunteers and 600 paid staff are engaged in this activity.

Literacy training is not organised on a specific basis. It is almost invariably integrated into other activities. The target population is very varied, and literacy is not seen as an

end in itself, but rather as a means of coping with daily life, achieving a personal project, obtaining the initial Certificate of Study, helping one's children, finding work, getting out of the home, and so on. Three policies are of capital importance for the recognition and the development of literacy training in the voluntary sector:

- The Decree on “Permanent Education”, which sets literacy training in a cultural and political framework. Within the perspective of permanent education, the primary objectives of literacy courses are: comprehension of the world around us, development of one's capacity for critical analysis, participation in the transformation of social, economic, political and cultural relations, all in the perspective of a more equitable and more democratic society. Some sixty voluntary organisations are recognised in this context.
- Unemployment-reduction programmes which finance, in structural fashion, over 50% of educator posts, in the form of permanent employment contracts.
- Decrees on social and professional integration, which recognise literacy as a basic element of the integration process. Forty or so voluntary literacy organisations are recognised in this context, which enables them to apply for ESF funding.

However, in spite of these efforts, supply is still not equal to demand, geographic coverage is very irregular in country districts, and some populations are barely reached. The statistical report on literacy compiled every year by *Lire et Ecrire* is an important tool for analysis and development of the sector. Concerning learners, it reveals that:

- The percentage of workers and of people receiving unemployment benefits is decreasing, while that of people without income or dependant on welfare assistance is increasing.
- The number of people of foreign origin is increasing in comparison with the Belgian population, which also leads to a slight rise in the initial school-levels of the learners.

2.3 Policies, systems and action plans at the level of the Flemish Community

In Belgium, some fields of competence of the Federal State are also connected to literacy: justice (literacy courses in prison), immigration policies (reception of new arrivals), etc. Reducing low literacy levels is one of the operational policy objectives in the framework of lifelong learning, governed by European guidelines and indicators. Studies and research are then necessary to outline policy and practice issues in order to develop adequate pathways.

Informal literacy practices are of prime importance for the acquisition, maintenance and development of literacy. The development of a strong educational policy is going hand in hand with the promotion of networking between the providers of language and mathematics training programmes and various welfare organisations and the socio-cultural sector. Whenever possible, the training provision is embedded in other settings (prisons, training institutes, neighbourhood development projects).

There are 29 adult basic education centres in Flanders today. From 2008 onwards, they will be reduced to 13 regional centres. These centres reach some 3200 to 3500

course participants enrolling in the training provision of Dutch as mother tongue and 1000 to 1500 course participants enrolling in the maths provision.

A literacy policy should go beyond a mere educational policy and should be built on a broad and cross-departmental approach, closely linked with socio-cultural, welfare and employment policy objectives.

Although the key responsibility for providing education lies with the education department, and especially with the basic education centres, the fight against low literacy is an issue for which many administrations and departments have a crucial responsibility (e.g. the compulsory education administration, the welfare, public health and culture department, the economic affairs, employment, home affairs and agriculture department and associated local authorities and VOIs (Flemish public bodies)).

An operational plan to improve literacy in Flanders was launched in 2005. 14 objectives and some concrete actions are described below:

1. Phased and systematic literacy screening: The VOCB (Flemish Adult Basic Education Support Centre) and the VDAB (Flemish Service for Employment and Vocational Training) finalise, in mutual consultation, a Quicksan tool to detect literacy risks in job-seekers as well as a tool for placement in learning pathways in adult basic education centres. The Education Department will take also the initiative to develop a tool for in-depth literacy screening to be used for placement in education and training and in the local or regional social policy.
2. Partnership with companies, sectoral training providers and trade unions: The literacy issue is incorporated into the model agreements that the Flemish Government uses for sector agreements. Good practice examples are inventoried and disseminated on a permanent basis. The barriers to participation in literacy training are looked into. A systematic information action is set up to provide information about the significance of basic skills in the workplace.
3. Fostering networking and organising dual pathways: The Education Department will perform research into success factors for networking between adult basic education centres, socio- cultural workers, welfare workers and other education and training actors. On the basis of the study outcomes, indicators and instruments will be defined that are relevant for networking.
4. Detecting specific needs and learning difficulties: The education authorities will examine, through research, how education and training can help increase the literacy level of adults with learning difficulties and with reduced learning abilities and of the mentally disabled.
5. Supporting awareness-raising action: A goal-orientated and differentiated communication strategy is developed on several tracks. The actions for the public at large will be attuned to the communications actions of the Flemish Community with the written and audiovisual media. The terms are further looked into. The actions for intermediaries are to inform intermediaries and organisations about the significance of literacy and to raise their awareness about their possible contribution through screening and referral and to encourage them to organise courses.
6. Use of simple language: Government partners and education and training actors involved in the literacy plan commit themselves to increasing their efforts to make public information more accessible.

7. Systemizing activation and signposting: The concepts of activation and counselling are further optimised. After the analysis of relevant practices, indicators and criteria will be established in order to define whether or not and to what extent activation activities are effective. With a view to mutual referral the cooperation between adult basic education centres and various other actors is organised on the basis of formal cooperation agreements.
8. Modularising and certifying learning pathways: The education authorities will finalise the training profiles for adult basic education courses. They introduced the complete modularisation of adult basic education courses on February 2006 and they will provide information on organisation models for a flexible and modular provision as well as of good practice.
9. Adult basic education for underprivileged groups: The objective is to improve the participation of Dutch-speaking low literates in language and mathematics courses in adult basic education. The actions will be oriented towards two priority target groups: low literate mothers and participants in associations where poor people do the taking. Through the Flemish Network a direct consultation is organised in organisations of poor people. Good practices examples are inventoried and disseminated on a permanent basis.
10. Integrating new technology into learning pathways for low literates: The education authorities will develop standards for ICT basic skills in consultation with the other actors involved. They will examine to what extent e-learning can be applied for low literates. The continuing education administration and actors involved will pursue a promotion policy which is aimed at enhancing the use of ICT in learning pathways for low literates
11. Reducing unqualified school leaving: Minimum literacy skills are part of the initial qualifications that education should offer. The education authorities will examine whether the literacy aspect is given sufficient attention in the curricula and the attainment targets in vocational education. The mechanisms leading to unqualified school leavers obtaining poor literacy scores must be identified and analysed through more detailed scientific research.
12. Integrating literacy into local social policy: An addendum is added to the sector agreement concluded between the Flemish Government and the association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities (VVSG). The VVSG commits itself to participating in the awareness raising actions. It will reinforce information actions for intermediaries and target group.
13. Growth path for literacy training: The education authorities will examine how available instruments and a growth path can be outlined to provide sufficient training places for language, mathematics and ICT within the framework of the literacy plan.
14. Monitoring: The education department gives the order to develop a monitoring instrument and a set of indicators. An annual progress report will be provided in the 2006-2010 period about the inflow in courses and the results of the actions.

3. Concept of teaching Literacy and Basic Education

3.1. The situation in French Community of Walloon Région

Supported by the Ministry of the French Community of Wallonia-Brussels (in charge of schools, culture and permanent education), the voluntary literacy organisations, in the first place *Lire et Ecrire*, as a representative organisation, are concerned about training for educators, both paid staff and unpaid volunteers. From the beginning, internal training courses have been organised by the Literacy and basic education centres to enable educators to acquire techniques and reach professional standards.

The educators have a background in education or social work, or in some cases, industry and services. They have a variety of knowledge, skills, experience, but no real training to teach adults, native-speakers or non-native speakers, functional or total illiterates.

The training courses are not developed haphazardly, but rather in constant interaction between methodological and didactic issues, aimed at taking into account the experience and priorities of the learners and preserving strong ties with the social, cultural and political context.

Over the years, *Lire et Ecrire* has been obliged to adapt its organisation to the federal structures developed in Belgium. In this way, at present, it has no fewer than eight regional organisations in Wallonia, with a Walloon co-ordination which is the representative for the Ministry of the Walloon Region (responsible for employment, professional training and social action in favour of immigrants). Lastly, there is a "Community co-ordination" dealing with educator training for any organisation providing literacy courses both in Wallonia and in Brussels.

Concerning the educators training, the regional organisations and the zone centres organise 'initial' training courses for people who are either already involved in literacy teaching or who want to become involved, or who are simply interested in the problems of illiteracy. This course is intended both for unpaid volunteers and for paid staff. Depending on the cases, it takes 6 to 20 days per year, and deals with subjects concerning:

- The causes and consequences of functional/total illiteracy;
- Analysis of the populations concerned;
- A first approach to the pedagogy and the means available to tackle this problem.

In the logical continuation of these 'initial' courses, 'continued' training courses are also organised. These take 3 to 8 days per year and are intended for people actively involved in literacy teaching and who want to develop their skills and improve their practical work.

The emphasis is on tactics and methods, on the acquisition of skills in connection with oral and written expression, reading, history, mathematics, on the value of creative and intercultural activities, on group management and leadership abilities, on attentive listening and perception, etc.

This wide range of courses is largely based on a study carried out by a group of educational counsellors (from both the Brussels and Walloon regions) who, after several months of work, in June 2004, drew up a reference document entitled "The Profile of a Literacy Educator" which covers all the knowledge, ability and behavioural skills which should ideally be combined by all literacy educators. Beyond the *Lire et Ecrire* network, the Community Co-ordination, every year since 2004, organises a University of Knowledge and Skills intended for anyone involved in adult literacy. To give an example, during the reference year 2005 - over all types of courses - more than 1000 persons attended some 30,000 hours of training. Furthermore, several studies managed by this co-ordination are under way, including:

- A general reflection on overall training policy both for educators and for other staff;
- The tasks and responsibilities of educational co-ordinators;
- Harmonisation of initial training courses.

Since the academic year 2005-2006, two Social Promotion schools have added to their curriculum a course of 1,620 hours leading to the qualification of 'Literacy Educator'. The courses are led by teachers and experts in the literacy field (See details in next page).

To finish this overview, we must mention the Training Institute in Adult Education Science (FOPA: *Formation en Sciences de l'Education pour Adultes*) of the Catholic University of Louvain, which since the academic 2004-2005, has included in its 3rd-year curriculum a 60-hour module entitled: 'Analysis of courses available in the field of Training-Integration-Literacy '.

3.2. The situation in Flanders

The teaching staff in adult basic education is mentioned in the national policy regarding quality assurance. The teachers are supported by the "VOCB (The Flemish Support Agency for Adult Basic Education (VOCB). Even if the qualification as a teacher is not required and the status is different from status of a teacher, an in-service training is obligatory for the educational collaborators.

The obligatory training should enable teachers to implement the guidelines defined in the national priorities and the strategic plan (2005). They recommend a pedagogical guidance services. The new decree concerning adult education (2007) contains 2 main innovative guidelines among others:

- Modularisation of the curriculum (training routes) – more flexibility and tailor made training (on demand) → training profiles (Flemish government) → programmes of study → educational praxis inside/outside classroom (incl. open learning classes)
- Pathway guidance: 1) preselection, intake and placing; 2) follow up of the progress; 3) feedback after assessment and advice about possibilities after the training

4. Good Practice in the Field of Teacher Training

Higher pedagogical course for social promotion of short type, organised by the Roger Guilbert Institute in association with Lire et Ecrire Brussels.

The diploma "LITERACY EDUCATOR" issued is validated and recognised by the French Community of Belgium.

Objectives:

A wide network of French-speaking voluntary organisations and schools takes part in the combat against illiteracy within the Wallonia-Brussels Community. As well as the "traditional" voluntary organisations which have become specialists in the organisation of literacy courses for adults, a variety of initiatives have also sprung up, attempting to fight illiteracy on a voluntary basis. It is to support the teaching activities of this sector that this training course for literacy educators was set up in 2005. It will enable educators or future educators to acquire a solid professional qualification. This course includes modules on construction and evaluation of specific programmes, together with work placements for practical experience of integration and educational methodology.

Target groups

This course is intended for a wide range of participants, qualified or not, whether or not they work in basic education.

Duration

The course consists of 1620 course periods (p.). It is recommended that these be organised in progressive fashion over 3 years of study:

1st year: Modules 1 to 5

2nd year: Modules 6 to 9 and Module 12

3rd year: Modules 10, 11, 13, 14 and 15

Curriculum

1- Introduction to adult literacy teaching (80p)

- ◆ Initiation to the profession
- ◆ Approaches to functional and total illiteracy
- ◆ General methodology of adult education

2- Practical immersion placement (120p)

The principal purpose of this immersion placement is to discover the profession of literacy educator with the assistance of professionals.

3- Methodology and didactics of learning -1 (180p)

Methodology of the learning of reading and writing, of elementary mathematics and of oral language.

4- Illiteracy, literacy education (100p)

- ◆ Analysis of illiteracy
- ◆ Intercultural dimension of literacy education.
- ◆ Organisation of literacy education in Belgium

5- Communication adapted to the professional context (120p)

Learning how to produce written and oral material appropriate for the professional context, in particular by use of ICTE (Information and Communication Technologies adapted to teaching and education) is the principal objective of this module.

6- Insertion placement (200p)

The purpose of this placement is to enable insertion into a team of literacy educators by working together with professionals and in this way to analyse the application of a pedagogical project and to lead a sequence of activity.

7- Methodology and didactics of learning -2 (180p)

- ♦ Theory and didactics of learning—advanced
- ♦ Theory and didactics of differentiation
- ♦ Methodology and didactics of use of written material

8- Methodology and didactics of learning specific languages (80p)

- ♦ Methodology of use of ICTE
- ♦ Methodology of use of artistic languages

9- Communication adapted to literacy learners (80p)

The literacy educator must be able to render accessible material which is difficult to understand without impoverishing it, and in this way produce structured written and oral material for literacy learners. In the context of literacy teaching, the contribution of ICTE and of artistic languages is an indispensable component for construction and leadership of learning sequences.

10- Construction and evaluation of specific programmes (100p)

This module will make it possible to develop a programme of activities and of learning and to evaluate these in relation to a specific population, taking account of the institutional and organisational context.

11- Integration placement (200p)

The purpose of this placement is to enable integration into a team of literacy educators by working together with professionals and in this way to criticise constructively the application of a pedagogical project and also to organise, manage and evaluate teaching activities.

12- Group leadership and conflict management (80p)

Any educator must be able to lead a group and chair a meeting, taking account of the mechanisms which affect group dynamics, and to apply techniques of conflict management according to the situation.

13- Assistance with social and cultural integration (40p)

The literacy educator must be able to guide the learners in their projects of professional, social and cultural integration, projects which will be adapted to the learners' objectives and to the realities of their environment.

14- Professional ethics (20p)

Using a variety of practical situations, the future literacy educators will be made aware of the ethical aspects of their future positions and thus enabled to adopt appropriate professional attitudes.

15- Integrated assessment (40p)

On the basis of development of a project of activity as literacy educator, the future educators will demonstrate that they possess the skills required for this position. They will also show their knowledge of the populations concerned as well as of the organisational and institutional framework of the course locations and will put into practice their specific pedagogical and methodological skills for the teaching of illiterate adults.

5. Prevailing problems and challenges

The stakeholders in the French Community underline the prevailing problems and challenges below:

- To continue with efforts to develop literacy training everywhere, corresponding to the needs of the various groups, by the means of an integrated literacy policy, supported and financed by all levels of authority.
- To take account of the diversity of situations and therefore of the necessary diversity of courses offered, and which above all would have the effect of “parking” the target people, stigmatising them and permanently excluding them from actions of other types.
- To move companies to play part in the teaching of literacy and of basic skills.
- To work in real partnership between the public sector, which has sole responsibility for general access to literacy, and the voluntary sector, which has the expertise to achieve this objective.

The government in Flanders elaborates and carries out the strategic plan aforementioned to promote literacy. The stakeholders in adult basic education in Flanders are involved in an “Activation Framework”. It covers a full process, a systematic and well thought-out deployment of methodology, strategy and activities resulting in the intake into education. It deals, more particularly, with the intake of people who do not spontaneously know their way about, who are not very eager to participate. People who are so-called, hard-to-reach target groups.

In a narrow sense, activation deals with specific short-term educational programs, which the adult basic education centres organize to make people feel comfortable with learning; the ultimate goal is to have them enroll in a course. The process comprises various parts:

- Segmenting and selecting the target groups
- Detecting the target group segment, contacting persons from the target group to provide information and to stimulate the decision to participate through
 - networking with organisations or referral bodies
 - direct contacts
 - confidential advisors/course participants...
- Developing a specific activation programme
- Achieving transfer to regular course programmes
- Participating to regular course programmes: intake, coaching new course participants, adjusting the literacy program itself

The target groups of Flemish origin taking part in the Dutch as a mother tongue and mathematics courses delivered by the centres are very diverse: adults having serious learning difficulties, adults with reduced learning abilities, the mentally disabled and functional illiterates. Groups at risk that were identified by IALS Survey re only weakly represented in the training provision of the basic education centres.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

At the dawn of what may one day be called the “knowledge society” the situation is far from idyllic and many are still excluded from the right to education. But the right to literacy for all is principally - and firstly - the right for all to real economic, social, cultural et political participation. For without such participation there are no reasons for learning.

The means of action granted for adult literacy should aimed three main lines, the axis of literacy like:

- a vector of “social and professional integration” and of “social advancement”;
- a vector of “permanent education”;
- a vector of “reception and social integration for people of immigrant origin in particular”.

While the intentions and the determination to support literacy are clearly presented, the various stakeholders need to make quite sure:

- That the necessary means for developing literacy are in fact included in the budgets,
- That the policies developed guarantee a true right to quality literacy for all, i.e.:
 - The right to literacy without any discrimination relating to gender, to age, to nationality, to legal status, etc.
 - The right of all persons to the respect of their free choice of a type of training corresponding to their expectations and to their needs
 - The right to continue with this training for as long as they consider necessary to achieve their objectives
 - To be able to find close to home a literacy programme taking into account one’s experience, knowledge and skills, one’s abilities and rhythms of learning, one’s culture and one’s Community
 - The right to learn not only to read and write but also to question and reflect, the right to imagination and creativity, the right to read and write one’s own history, and so on.

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