Country Report: Flemish Community – The Dawn of Philosophy Education in Flanders

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General information about the Flemish Community and its educational system

The Belgian education system consists of three levels: (1) elementary school, which includes nursery school (ages 2.5-6) and primary school (ages 6-12), (2) secondary school (ages 12-18), and (3) higher education (ages 18+). Education (but not school attendance) is compulsory up to age 18. Because of the active freedom of education in Belgium, schools are free in the way they teach their pupils (Claes, Henkens, Simons, Wittens 2020: 24, 30).

Since 1989, almost all aspects of Belgian education policy fall under the competence of the governments of three communities: the Flemish Community, the French Community, and the German-speaking Community (Claes et al. 2020: 36). In this report, I shall concentrate specifically on philosophy education in the Flemish Community, focussing on Dutch-language schools both in Flanders as well as in the bilingual (French-Dutch) Brussels-Capital Region. (For philosophy education in the French Community, see Herla 2020 in the previous volume of this journal.) The Flemish government formulates attainment targets, which describe *what* students have to learn. Due to freedom of education, these attainment targets do not describe *how* (using which methods and didactical approaches) students have to learn.

In the Flemish Community, schools belong either (1) to 'official education' established by the government (e.g. 'GO! schools', established by the Flemish community) or (2) to 'free education', set up by a private organisation and consisting almost entirely of catholic schools (catering to 72 % pupils in secondary education) (Claes et al. 2020: 13–17).

Secondary education consists of three stages, each spanning two years. In the second and the third stage, there are four forms of education: (1) general (aso, 37.6 % pupils in the third stage, prepares for higher education), (2) technical (tso, 32.2 %, prepares either for higher education or both higher education and the labour market), (3) artistic (kso, 2.5 %, also prepares either for higher education or for both higher education and the labour market), and (4) vocational (bso, 27.7 %), which prepares for the labour market (Onderwijs Vlaanderen 2021). From the second stage onwards, pupils have to choose a specific study-field, such as Latin-Mathematics, Building and Wood Sciences, or Tourism. Currently, the Flemish community does not organise central exams but plans to do so in the future.

Past and current situation of philosophy in primary education

In nursery and primary schools, philosophy is not embedded in a structural manner, yet there are a few scattered initiatives for philosophizing with children led by enthusiastic school directors, teachers, and parents. Some Teacher's Training programmes for nursery and primary education contain either an optional or a mandatory (part of a) course in guiding a philosophical conversation with children. Sometimes a philosophical conversation leader is invited to a class to lead a discussion. University College Odisee sets up small-scale projects to stimulate critical

thinking and philosophizing in schools, for example, about nature, science, and technology, or media communication. Educational organisations that promote sustainable development or (world) citizenship in schools use philosophical thinking as one of their methods.

Past situation of philosophy in secondary schools
Philosophy as an optional course
Until 2021-22, philosophy has never been part of the curriculum implemented by the government. Since 1974, it has been organised as an optional subject in a few schools, under the names 'Contemporary Philosophical Currents' (1974-1992), 'Philosophical Currents' (1993-2004), and 'Philosophy' (from 2005 onwards) – mainly in aso- and kso-schools. 'Optional' enables two choices: some schools decide to organise philosophy as a subject in the part of the curriculum that they can freely fill in, but pupils are obliged to take the subject; in other schools, pupils can freely choose among several electives, of which philosophy or philosophizing is one. In 2019-20, 38 schools offered philosophy as a subject, and, in addition, some schools organised projects on philosophizing. The learning plans, compiled in the 1990s, had a thematic approach but encouraged teachers to also incorporate a historical dimension: mainly philosophical anthropology for the catholic schools and several sub-disciplines for GO! schools. As the learning plans are rather outdated and teachers are free to determine what they teach in an optional course, the plans are mostly not in use anymore (Galle 2020: 61–67).

Philosophy as part of the subject 'Cultural Sciences'
From 2002-03 onwards, philosophy has been a part of 'Cultural Sciences', a subject that is organised only in the aso-study-field of Human Sciences. With ca 4,500 fifth-year pupils (predominantly girls) receiving three hours per week of philosophy over about half a year, this was the most widespread form of philosophy education until 2020-21. The learning plans for Cultural Sciences in the catholic schools contain the following themes: 'what is philosophy', 'man and society', 'science and technology', and 'good and evil'. Some teachers of Cultural Sciences have studied philosophy, but most have a degree in another area of the humanities or the social sciences. As a result of educational reforms, Cultural Sciences has been replaced by other subjects, among which is philosophy (cf. infra), starting in 2021-22, in the third year (and in 2023-24, in the fifth year) (Galle 2020: 67–70).

Current situation of philosophy in secondary schools: Philosophy as a mandatory subject in study-fields concerning man and society
As a part of educational reform, new **attainment targets** for secondary education have been approved by the Flemish government in February 2021. Attainment targets for philosophy have been formulated for the first time in the history of education in Flanders. As these attainment targets are specific, they apply solely to particular study-fields, namely fields focusing on man and society. From the 2021-22 school year onwards, students in the aso-study-field of Human Sciences, the aso-study-field of Rudolf Steiner Pedagogy, and the tso-study-field of Social and Welfare Sciences (which prepares for higher education in the social, pedagogical, and medical domain) will follow either one or two compulsory hours of philosophy per week from the third

to the sixth year. Based on current student-numbers in these fields of study and adding up the number of students in all four years, it can be estimated that approximately 46,000 pupils will follow philosophy annually (Galle 2020: 71–73, Onderwijs Vlaanderen 2021).

The attainment targets stipulate that pupils learn to apply the basics of logic and argumentation theory as well as reflect on theories associated with the sub-disciplines of philosophical anthropology, ethics, and political philosophy. With regard to these sub-disciplines, they are expected to discuss philosophical concepts and theories, compare and interpret theories, and cultivate philosophical skills in order to learn developing a well-reasoned argument (skills such as asking philosophical questions, reading texts, arguing either in favour or against a view, criticising one's own view, participating in a Socratic conversation, etc.). For pupils in Human Sciences, the sub-disciplines of ontology, epistemology, and philosophy of science are added, along with the requirement that attention is paid to the tradition of philosophy and that pupils learn to write texts with a philosophical dimension (Vlaamse Regering 2020, attachment 7: 51–56, 207–210). As the attainment targets specify only certain concepts (e.g. being and becoming, a priori and a posteriori, justice) and theories (e.g. monism and dualism, utilitarianism and deontological ethics, empiricism, and rationalism) that are to be taught and do not either isolate specific philosophers or prescribe particular methods, they offer a lot of freedom to the teachers for choosing their own topics and methods (Galle 2020: 72–73).

Schools of the 'official education' work with the attainment targets outlined above. The few schools that organise Rudolf Steiner Pedagogy write their own attainment targets, which are required to be equivalent to the official ones in order to be approved. Catholic schools use **learning plans** with objectives written by the umbrella organisation 'Catholic Education Flanders' and which order the content-based objectives according to the four Kantian questions. Compared with the attainment targets, these learning plans contain their own formulations, accents, and additional objectives, as well as suggestions related to themes, philosophers, and methods. For example, they make explicit that pupils are expected to connect philosophical questions, concepts, and theories to their own life world and society, and ask also that attention be paid to reflection on truth, on a happy and meaningful life, and on the future of society. They suggest that besides the traditional teaching methods, teachers may use dilemma conversation, thought experiment, debate, philosophical conversation, concept analysis, definition conversation, and close reading (Galle 2020: 74–76; KOV, 2020a, 2020b).

Three Flemish educational publishers have already compiled **textbooks** and accompanying teacher's guides for the new subject of Philosophy and plan to publish additional textbooks for the higher years in the near future: *Agora* by publisher Van In, *Filosofie* and *Filosofie Concreet* by Pelckmans, and *Antropia* by Averbode. The textbooks are in workbook format (one version for Human Sciences and one for Social and Welfare Sciences) and have been put together by one or several teachers. All textbooks are organised thematically and combine theory and exercises, resulting in tasks such as applying philosophical ideas to various cases, participating in philosophical discussions either in pairs or in a group, carrying out thought experiments, and answering questions concerning a short philosophical text.

As the contours of this new subject of Philosophy are yet to be shaped within teaching practice, it is not currently clear which **didactical approach** will be dominant. Yet, indications

of a possible didactical approach can be found in the attainment targets, the learning plans, the textbooks, the training organised for teachers during the year 2020-21, and in the fact that some Flemish teachers have followed training in and have experience with philosophical conversation. I suspect that the eventual approach will be problem-oriented, with a strong link to pupils' experiences, and that it will be thematic rather than historical (albeit with some historical lines). I foresee furthermore that learning about philosophical theories and training in philosophical skills will be integrated into the approach, with reading of excerpts from primary philosophical texts included (but not emphasised), and that there will be room for philosophical group conversations.

Philosophical themes and skills in other study-fields concerning society
The educational reform also includes specific attainment targets for philosophy in the fifth and sixth year related to other tso-study-fields in the domain of society and welfare: Defence and Security, Health Care, Education, and Guidance, as well as Wellness and Beauty. These targets, which will be introduced over 2023-24, concern philosophical anthropology and ethics. As these study-fields prepare not merely for higher education but also the labour market, the philosophical concepts and theories will be chosen in accordance with the study-field and will always be discussed in an applied way (e.g. analysis of ethical cases with regard to patient autonomy). Here, too, students will need to acquire certain basic philosophical skills (Vlaamse Regering 2020, attachment 7: 56–55, 228–229). These targets will most probably be realised as a part of a mandatory course that is not solely devoted to philosophy (Galle 2020: 73–74).

Philosophizing in citizenship education and philosophy as an optional subject
In most schools of GO!, a new subject 'Citizenship Education' has recently been created in order to reach the new attainment targets on citizenship competences introduced by the government to respond to recent tensions in society. In the learning pathway for this subject (which consists of three competencies: philosophizing, value education, and sustainable living together), philosophical conversation plays a key role in teaching pupils to dialogue respectfully and to empathise with another viewpoint (Galle 2018: 131–132). One could see a parallel here with the subject 'Philosophy and Citizenship', offered within the French Community of Belgium (Herla 2020).

In most study-fields, philosophy is not a mandatory subject, but freedom of education implies that schools have the opportunity to set up optional philosophy classes. Some schools have included a subject or module 'Philosophizing' in the first grade or have added the subject 'Philosophy' to the curriculum of some study-fields.

In order to stimulate philosophy education, Ghent University organises the 'Belgian Preselection of the International Philosophy Olympiad', the University of Antwerp provides guest lectures on philosophy in secondary schools, and KU Leuven invites pupils of the sixth year to participate in a Junior College, which features teaching material, videos, and classes on themes such as truth, happiness, beauty, and science. Several educational projects of university colleges – which support teachers in learning how to lead a dialogue about sensitive topics, stimulate reasoning skills, or initiate a reflection on the nature of science – include philosophical

methodologies.

Factors that have influenced the position of philosophy as a school subject

The fact that in the past philosophy only occupied a minor place in school curricula can be explained by various factors. (1) Among the general public, philosophy has often been perceived as being too difficult and other-worldly. (2) As Flemish education is dominated by an instrumental-functional view on education, humanities subjects are usually valued less than the STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) subjects. (3) It has been argued that philosophy is already integrated in other subjects, which, in fact, is not the case. (4) Because the Belgian constitution safeguards the right to a moral and religious education at the expense of the community, all schools have to organise classes in *levensbeschouwing*, based upon one of the six officially recognised religions and/or upon non-confessional ethics (*zedenleer*), which promotes free-thinking and atheistic-humanistic values. Philosophy is sometimes seen as a threat to these courses which currently engage pupils for two hours a week and occasionally also discuss philosophical themes. Fears that these courses would be replaced by philosophy have been fuelled by a proposal that has received a lot of media attention over the last few years: to replace the courses in *levensbeschouwing* with a subject that combines a neutral, scientific study of different life and world views (*levensbeschouwingen*) with moral education, ethics, and philosophy (Galle 2018: 122–125). GO! schools have recently been allowed to replace, in the third grade, one hour of *levensbeschouwing* with 'Dialogue between Life and World Views' (*Interlevensbeschouwelijke dialoog*), yet not by 'Philosophy and Citizenship' (as in the French Community) or by 'Philosophy'.

Which factors could have influenced the fact that as a result of educational reform, philosophy has been successful in obtaining a structural place in the curriculum of some study-fields? (1) The association 'VEFO' (*Flemish Network for Contemporary Philosophy Education*), founded in 2002, has been aiming at more and better philosophy education in the Flemish Community. VEFO advocates the introduction of philosophizing with children and adolescents as a didactic method to be integrated in all primary- and secondary-school subjects. It demands introduction of philosophy as an autonomous subject in secondary education and training of (future) primary and secondary school teachers to become competent facilitators of a philosophical conversation. Over the last twenty years, VEFO has developed several initiatives: supporting research projects (e.g. concerning philosophical thinking in bso and tso), making contacts with policymakers in politics and education in order to promote philosophy education, participating in debates concerning the new attainment targets, supporting philosophy education by means of publications, arranging conferences and 'intervisions' (peer-led group reflections) among philosophy teachers, advising schools, communicating about philosophy education by means of a website (www.filosofieonderwijs.be), newsletters, and Facebook, as well as publishing opinion articles in Flemish media (Galle 2019).

(2) The arguments that have been employed to attempt to convince policymakers of the necessity of a mandatory course in philosophy mostly rely on the formative value of philosophy and philosophizing, such as the fact that it introduces pupils to the fundaments of Western culture, stimulates a critical-reflexive attitude, and promotes several other skills. These

arguments moreover relate to the lifeworlds of adolescents, which feature existential questions, and to the heterogenous social context with its demand of democratic literacy. In addition, they point to educational context (for instance, to the fact that Flanders lags when compared with surrounding countries that organise philosophy courses and that philosophy could strengthen the study-field of Human Sciences). (3) Philosophers have been prominent in the social debate for the last few years, with regular opinion articles and interviews on TV. (4) Philosophizing with groups is becoming more and more popular. (5) As a consequence, there is a growing interest for philosophy in Flemish society (Galle 2020: 57–60).

Current situation of teacher training in philosophy

In order to obtain the 'required certificate of competence' to teach philosophy in the second and third stages of secondary schools, students are currently required to follow an educational master's programme. Students with an academic bachelor's degree in Philosophy and/or Moral Sciences (180 credits) follow the entire track of the educational master's programme (105 or 120 credits), half of which consists of content-related (i.e., philosophy) courses and the other half of a teaching component. Students with a master's degree in Philosophy and/or Moral Sciences only follow the teaching component (60 credits), which takes one year but may optionally be spread over two or three years. Half of the teaching component is theoretical and includes general didactics, didactics in philosophy, and a small educational research project; the other half is practical, with experimental lessons and internships, including a minimum of 40 hours of teaching practice in a class. Didactics of philosophy include theoretical courses on approaches to philosophy, attainment targets and learning plans, philosophical teaching formats, etc., as well as courses on guiding a philosophical conversation within a group.

Holders of an educational master's degree in any field whatsoever (e.g. sciences, history) may obtain the 'required certificate of competence' to teach philosophy provided they have taken 30 credits of academic philosophy courses, follow the 'Didactics of Philosophy' course, and do a few hours of internship. Students who have studied Moral Sciences and have followed 'Didactics of Non-confessional Ethics' automatically obtain the 'required certificate of competence' for philosophy.

In order to teach a school subject, teachers do not necessarily need the 'required certificate of competence' in the subject concerned. If the school headmaster considers teachers to be competent, it is possible for them to teach a subject in which they have no or only limited academic training. As philosophy has almost never been taught in Flemish secondary schools in the past, some teachers with a background in philosophy have been teaching subjects such as Dutch, catholic religion, or non-confessional ethics. Conversely, new philosophy courses will often be taught by teachers who did not study philosophy, because such teachers could either obtain a full teaching assignment by opting to teach philosophy or because they were teaching one of the subjects that have been replaced by philosophy due to education reform. Hence it will be important to support teachers by providing training in philosophy and philosophy didactics and by supplying quality teaching materials and pedagogical guidance adapted to the specificities of the study-fields (Galle 2020: 77).

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