

Policy brief: Improving teacher qualifications for equitable teacher workforce in Flemish - Belgium education

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Abstract

This policy brief addresses persistent challenges in the Flemish-Belgian education system, including quality improvement, teacher shortages, student guidance, institutional capacity, and secondary school duration. Despite increased funding, the ongoing exodus of educators remains concerning. To achieve equitable learning outcomes, the brief advocates for enhancing teacher qualifications, aligning training with diverse learner needs, and providing continuous professional development. Additionally, it recommends bolstering educational leadership, promoting teaching as a respected profession, establishing a teacher career structure linked to certification, and improving data collection for accurate monitoring of teacher supply and demand. These measures aim to address teacher shortages, foster inclusivity, and ensure all students have equal access to quality education. Collaborative efforts among organizations like UNESCO, OECD, and EUROSTAT are highlighted for improved data collection, essential for informed policy decisions and resource allocation in the Flemish education sector.

Keywords: Flemish education, quality, educator scarcity, funding, teacher skills, teacher career

Introduction

The policy brief on "Improving Teacher Qualifications for Equitable Learning in Flemish Belgian Education" is guided by the acknowledgement of five key challenges recognised by future minister-president Jan Jambon during the press conference to announce the coalition agreement (Chini, 2019). These challenges in the education sector include enhancing the quality of education by addressing teacher shortages, strengthening educational leadership, and consolidating the education system's capacity. In response to these challenges, the policy brief underscores the critical importance of enhancing teacher qualifications as a central strategy for promoting teaching as a sustainable career choice among the Belgian population and fostering equitable and inclusive learning outcomes within the Flemish-Belgian education system.

Educator quality is a pivotal factor in shaping students' educational experiences and achievements. Acknowledging the evolving landscape of global education, the policy brief emphasises the necessity of aligning teacher preparation programs with contemporary teaching methodologies and diverse student needs. It proposes the implementation of comprehensive and targeted teacher training programs that integrate cultural sensitivity and innovative pedagogical approaches. The policy brief highlights the value of continuous professional development to empower educators in addressing the multifaceted challenges highlighted by Jambon (Chini, 2019). By

facilitating knowledge-sharing networks, collaborative platforms, and creating relevant skill-building opportunities, the policy brief envisions a more proficient and adaptable educator workforce.

Through a multifaceted approach that encompasses improved teacher qualifications, the Flemish-Belgian education system can effectively respond to the challenges outlined by Jambon, as well as education minister Ben Weyts (Chini, 2019). This approach aligns with the broader goal of enhancing education quality, fostering equitable learning experiences, and nurturing the holistic development of students in the region (OECD, 2017).

Framing the issue in the Flemish-Belgium context

Flemish-Belgium's education system demonstrates higher compulsory annual instruction time than the OECD average, with variations among its communities. While learning environments receive positive feedback, there remain challenges related to attracting and retaining new teachers. Despite comparatively favourable teacher salaries and student-to-teacher ratios, concerns about teacher shortages and inadequate qualifications persist. Initiatives such as professional development and teacher training reforms have been introduced to address these issues (OECD, 2017). However, the system grapples with the need to ensure an adequate supply of qualified teachers, particularly in the face of demographic shifts.

To shed a light on the problem, research conducted by Walker (2022) posits that in the last school year (2021-2022), the number of people switching careers from teaching or working in schools rose sharply. A total of 4,398 people in the region made the switch to the private sector from the education system (+50%), Flemish Minister of Education Ben Weyts announced on Teacher's Day. The Dutch-speaking Education Minister Ben Weyts declared that he is freeing up a record budget for school buildings this term, amid an exodus of teachers, however, the question is whether there will be enough staff members to fill the classrooms.

The primary concern remains significant teacher shortage, prompting a need for comprehensive reforms. Firstly, educator qualifications must be redeveloped to align with evolving demands. Education degrees must begin to focus on training educators for challenges like diverse use of technology, classroom management, and engaging with challenging guardians.

Moreover, enhancing school leadership is crucial (Nusche, 2015, p. 32). Equipping leadership personnel with competencies and integrating leader appraisal into self-evaluation ensures effective quality enhancement. Thirdly, the profession's image needs improvement to attract skilled talents. Changing stereotypes through campaigns that highlight teachers' positive impact can elevate teaching's status. Fourthly, the absence of a teacher career structure undermines recognition.

Implementing a common career structure linked to certification processes can offer distinct roles and responsibilities based on expertise levels, promoting continuous growth. Finally, data utilisation is critical. The lack of a concrete understanding of the shortage underscores the need for better data collection and analysis systems to monitor teacher supply and demand trends (Pauwels, 2022, p. 6).

Addressing these aspects collectively would lead to a more sustainable, qualified, and motivated teaching workforce, ultimately enhancing the quality of education in the Flemish Community of Belgium.

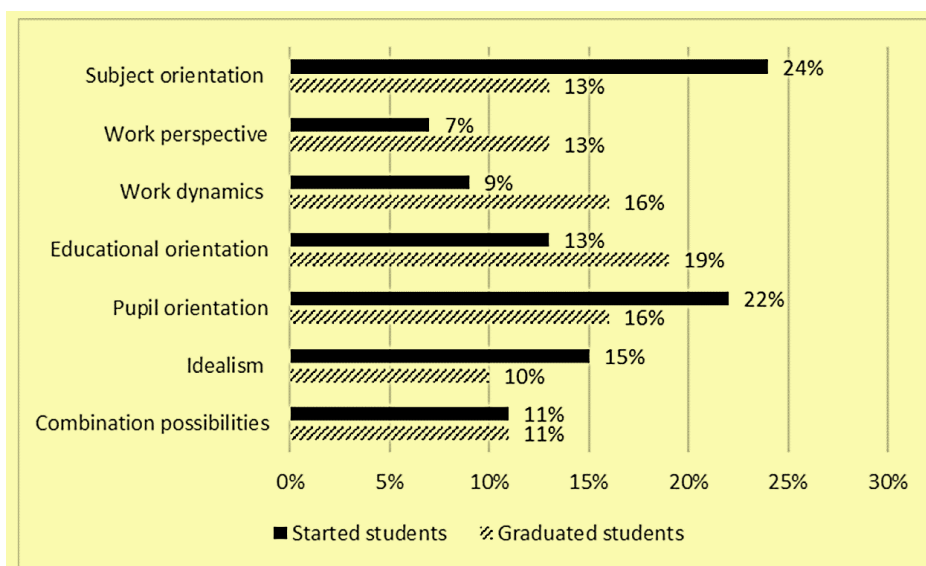
Comprehensive recommendations for enhancing Flemish education

1 Redeveloping teacher qualifications

As a fundamental approach for tackling teacher shortages, educational programs must shift their emphasis towards equipping educators with the necessary skills to address the evolving requirements of the teaching role. This includes addressing challenges like classroom management, utilising a wide range of technology, effectively handling difficult parents or guardians, and meeting the diverse needs of students, which are the reasons many educators are exiting the profession (OECD, 2019).

Incorporating pedagogical training, cultural competence is vital given the changing demographics and societal needs. Based on the results of a teacher motivation study conducted by Nusche (2015), in Figure 1, motivations of student teachers at different stages of their course indicate a transition from idealistic pupil-oriented incentives to more practical, educationally oriented perspectives among graduates. Positively, this shift aligns with insights by Eurydice (2015) on evolving professional identity and suggests a need to support this transition. To improve Initial Teacher Training (ITT) outcomes, programs should emphasise practical experience, provide enhanced mentorship, and offer gender-tailored support, addressing the changing motivations and challenges student teachers face. Early exposure to real-world teaching scenarios for 'teacher in training' (TiT) students can foster idealism and combat declines in pupil orientation and work perspective.

Figure 1: Motivations of student teachers during teacher course



Source: Nusche (2015)

2 Strengthen leadership and provide ongoing professional development

In the Flemish Community, there is no mandatory requirement for teachers to engage in professional development (Nusche, 2015, p. 10). However, legislation mandates that individual schools create conditions for their teachers to undertake professional development, an expected duty of teachers. Schools receive funding for teachers' professional development, which can originate at the school, network, or government level. The principle is to ensure schools and teachers retain autonomy in decision-making regarding professional development (Nusche, 2015). Nonetheless, due to the absence of a mandatory requirement, schools often allocate the training budget to other areas, leading to missed opportunities for teacher development. This situation is compounded by the lack of equipped leadership and ongoing professional evaluations, resulting in a weakened teaching workforce.

While there is a requirement for school leaders to appraise their teachers every four years, the analysis suggests that teachers lack sufficient opportunities for regular professional feedback. To strengthen school-based teacher appraisal, enhancing pedagogical leadership in schools is crucial. This involves improving school leaders' skills for effective observation, feedback, and coaching. A more systematic use of existing teaching standards could provide a common basis for school-based teacher appraisal, increasing consistency across schools. Presently, school leaders' involvement in teacher appraisal and coaching remains limited, particularly in elementary education, often due to time constraints and administrative support.

Flemish school leaders have a high level of autonomy and responsibility, including ensuring that staff receive formal and informal opportunities for feedback and professional learning. Leithwood et al. (2004) emphasised that efforts to improve school leader recruitment and career advancement, including appraisals and ongoing professional development, are cost-effective measures for enhancing teaching and learning. Recognising this, the OECD review team recommends prioritising the capacity-building of school leaders in the Flemish school system. Shewbridge et al. (2011), in an OECD review of school evaluation in the Flemish Community, proposed a national strategy for strengthening school leadership, which includes establishing leadership competencies, developing new leadership roles, refining leadership training, and providing accessible resources. Further development of school leader performance appraisal is also recommended to facilitate external feedback and targeted support for improvement.

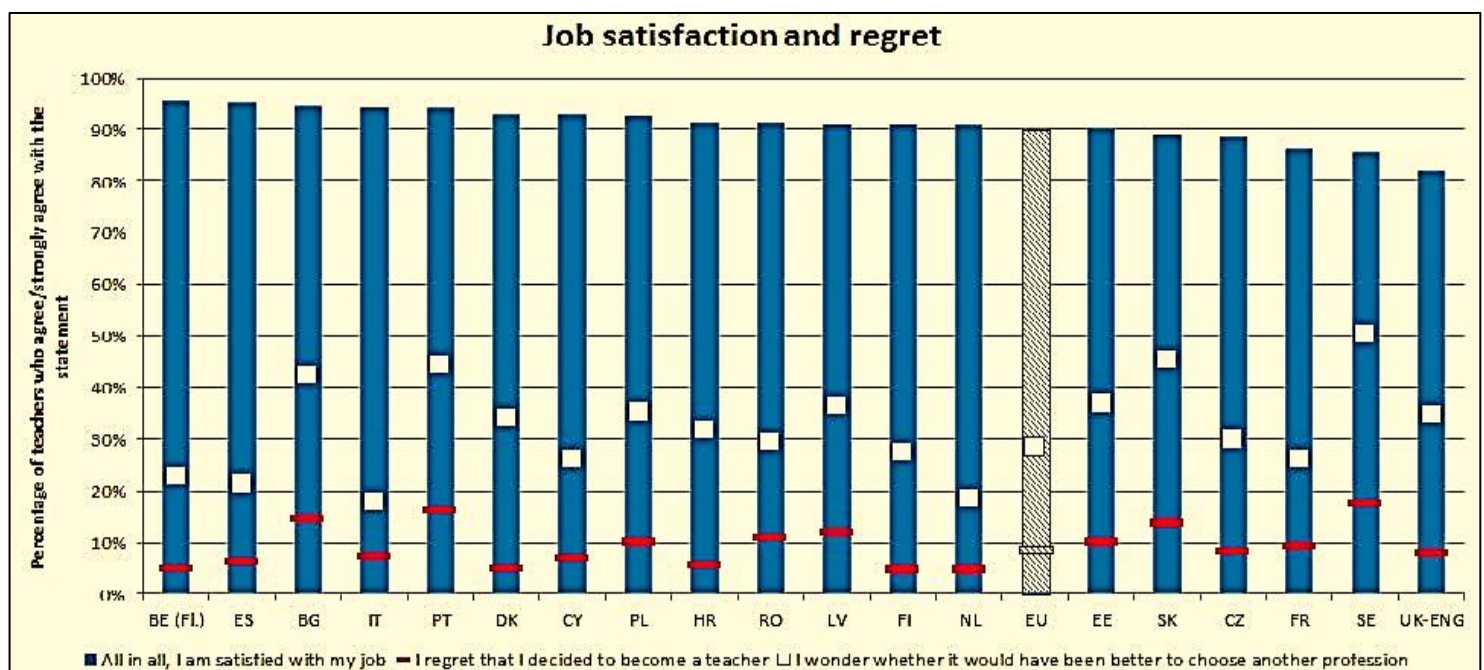
Addressing this challenge includes ongoing and targeted professional development programs for current teachers to enhance their skills, keep them up to date with best practices, and address evolving challenges in education. Furthermore, it is imperative to encourage collaboration and sharing of effective teaching strategies with mentorship programs that pair new teachers with experienced educators. This helps new educators navigate the challenges of their first years and provides a support system for their professional growth.

3 Promoting teaching as a profession

Although there are challenges regarding the attractiveness of the teaching profession, from the perspective of international comparison, the satisfaction among Flemish educators is higher, as shown in Figure 2.

To enhance the experience of initial teacher education course for capable graduates coming from secondary education, several approaches can be explored. These strategies encompass presenting comprehensive knowledge and guidance to prospective teacher candidates to facilitate informed enrolment choices. Additionally, procedures that calculate whether individuals aspiring to become teachers possess the requisite motivation, skills, knowledge, and personal attributes (specific assessments) could be applied. Financial incentive proposals targeted at employing applicants with advanced proficiencies, such as higher education grants or loans featuring favourable terms can be implemented (Nusche, 2015). Additionally, flexible program frameworks should incorporate initial school exposure within the curriculum and allow pre-service teachers to transition into alternative courses should their interest towards teaching change to another direction. The OECD (2019) recommends that formulating strategies to invite males and individuals from immigrant backgrounds into initial teacher education is crucial as well to ensure a teaching workforce that aligns better with the characteristics of the changing student demographic.

Figure 2: Job satisfaction and regret statistics within pre-service teachers



Source: (OECD, 2020)

4 Revolutionising education: A proposition for a unified educator career path and data-driven decision making in teacher certification

Globally, teaching as a career lacks a sustainable and appealing career track. The OECD review team suggests a metamorphic approach to teaching by instituting a unified educator career path connected to teacher certification processes in the Flemish education community. The current absence of a structured career trajectory impedes in the acknowledgment of educators' roles within autonomous schools. To address this, the approach urges a multi-tiered career structure, offering discrete steps aligned with roles and expertise levels. This framework would be designed to voluntary advancement based on evaluations, fostering motivation and professional growth (Nusche et al., 2015).

Implementing a teacher certification or registration system would also ensure and measure competence and job security. Educators would be conditionally registered after initial education, obtaining permanent status after completing a probationary period and meeting certification criteria. Although a challenging expectation, intermittent re-certification would reinforce ongoing high performance (Nusche et al., 2015).

As a measure of success, a parallel to the Pact for Excellence in Teaching in the French Community Government can be drawn, which aimed to enhance education quality through a multi-stakeholder initiative (OECD, 2017). Similarly, redefining of priorities and investment themes must be considered for long term horizon in the Flemish education system (OECD, 2017).

Furthermore, in relation to teacher shortages, Walker (2022) identifies the lack of a centralised database as a key issue in collecting accurate data regarding teacher deficiencies, leading to an inadequate estimation of the problem's severity. The Flemish education sector requires a more efficient data collection and analysis system to monitor teacher supply and demand trends. This information guides informed policy decisions, resource allocation, and adjustments based on evolving educational needs and must be dealt with seriously (Walker, 2022). There is collaborative effort among three organisations to collect educational statistics, namely the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the Statistical Office of the European Union (EUROSTAT), however processes of collection must be improved (UOE, 2021).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this policy brief underscores the urgent need for comprehensive reforms within the Flemish-Belgian education system. Addressing the multifaceted challenges outlined including teacher shortages, institutional capacity, and equitable learning outcomes demands proactive measures and collaborative efforts. By prioritising initiatives such as enhancing teacher qualifications, promoting teaching as a respected profession, and establishing a structured career pathway linked to certification processes, the brief aims to mitigate the detrimental effects of educator scarcity and foster inclusivity in education. Moreover, improving data collection and analysis systems, along with strengthening educational leadership, are crucial steps towards informed decision-making and resource allocation. Ultimately, the proposed recommendations are designed to ensure that all students in the Flemish education system have equal access to quality education and opportunities for success, laying the foundation for a thriving and equitable society.

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