

# History education in Belgium/ Flanders since 1945 between a national and a global scope: whose past, what for, and for whom?



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In Flanders, the northern, Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, secondary school education is currently being reformed. The previous standards were more than 20 years old, and needed to be adjusted to the evolved societal circumstances, requirements and challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, among which ICT-skills, processing large amounts of information... and dealing with increased ethno-cultural and socio-economic diversity in a metropolitan context. The latter immediately raises the issue of inclusive education, and how it can be achieved through various school subjects. This contribution will focus on history education, and how this subject has aimed (or not) to be inclusive with regard to ethno-cultural diversity in particular. This issue is examined in a long-term perspective, since the end of the Second World War, when Belgium became a country of immigration rather than of emigration, leading to a significant increase of ethno-cultural diversity.

The main question is how history education in Belgium/Flanders has been dealing with ethno-cultural diversity since 1945. The expression Belgium/Flanders is used because from 1963 onwards, control over educational policy was gradually transferred to the three regional 'Communities', who started to make different choices concerning educational policy. This process was completed in 1989 with the formal and complete handover of all educational matters to the Dutch, the French and (the very small) German Communities (Lobbès & Wils, 2019). The way that ethno-cultural diversity has been dealt with in history education is examined from content-related and from student perspectives. On the level of the subject matter, the question raises to what extent history education (in particular curricula and history textbooks) has been inclusive, in terms of its spatial focus, and in



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terms of the attribution of agency to various agents. On the level of the student population, it is examined whether the ethno-cultural diversity of the classroom has been taken into account and acknowledged when designing history education. Both issues relate to the main goal(s) of history education. For history education is not only about the past. It reveals a lot about (power relations and attempts to do social justice in) the present and contributes to shaping the future. As Orwell (1949) states: "He, who controls the present, controls the past. He who controls the past, controls the future". It is then worthwhile to examine to what extent the history curriculum provides inclusive education in this respect via thematizing the presence of various ethno-cultural groups in terms of, for example, setting specific identity markers, transmitting specific values or instigating intergroup and intercultural dialogue.

In the analysis, developments and debates in the broader political sphere and in society at large are taken into account. Besides, viewpoints and actions of the various educational networks are included as well, as these are also important agents in educational debates and reforms. Each network enjoyed a strong autonomy throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, up until today (Van Nieuwenhuyse, 2018a). This resulted from the very liberal Belgian constitution of 1830, establishing freedom of education. That freedom attributed the different ideological groups within society (Catholics as well as non-Catholics) the right to establish their own educational network. As a result, several private educational networks (of which the Catholic was and is the largest in terms of numbers) have been in existence beside the state network from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards.


The presented (mainly content) analysis leans on both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources consist of history curricula and standards, history textbooks, policy notes, parliamentary proceedings, decrees approved in the parliament, and testimonies of stakeholders involved in the reforms. The secondary sources are peer-reviewed published research studies addressing history education and its development, stemming from the history of (history) education and history education research.

This contribution examines how ethno-cultural diversity has been dealt with in history education in Belgium/Flanders since 1945, in terms of content (what content is addressed and what not? Who is attributed agency? Whose perspectives are in/excluded?) and of student perspectives (is the multicultural composition of classrooms thematized? What identity markers are set? Is intergroup dialogue fostered?). In what follows, four periods are distinguished which will be examined chronologically. Each period coincides with four major reforms within secondary (history) education, containing opportunities to discuss and adopt an inclusive education approach.

## The national orientation of history education under pressure (1945-69)

After the end of the Second World War, the main aim of history initially remained, as it had been since the establishment of Belgium in 1830, to foster Belgian patriotism and support a Belgian identity construction process. Beside Eurocentrically oriented Western-European history, the content focus was mainly on Belgian history (that was taught apart from Western-European history) and the pantheon of alleged Belgian heroes passed in review, meant to enable young people to learn from those heroic *exempla* for present and future (Wils, 2009). By the end of the 1940s, however, the position of the national past in history education and the aim of fostering Belgian patriotism came under attack. On the one hand, proponents of regionalism on both sides of the linguistic border opposed what they considered to be an anachronistic re-projection of a Belgian nation's feeling in the past. These voices became louder as regional parties (e.g. the Flemish-nationalist *Volkspartij* and the Walloon *Rassemblement Wallon*) gained political weight. On the other hand, international institutions such as the Council of Europe and Unesco criticized patriotism as a cause of war and an impediment for international reconciliation. Moreover, the problematic national memory of the Second World War II caused additional difficulties. Because of the widespread collaboration with the German occupier, particularly within Flemish-catholic circles, this memory became very ideologically-charged and communitarian, and further stirred debate on the position of the national past in history education. A consensus slowly grew in both educational networks and among politicians to no longer address Belgian history in a separate manner, yet to embed it in a larger international framework (Lobbes, 2017).

Two visions competed, however, on how precisely this international framework should look like. On the left side of the politico-societal spectrum, partly in line with Unesco's views and under the influence of the Peace Movement during the Cold War and decolonization movements worldwide, pleas were launched to orient history education towards a global and a contemporary perspective, aimed at peace education, at encouraging attachment to universal human rights and at stimulating pluralism, global citizenship and a global identity, instead of a national identity (see for instance Maurette, 1949). History education was supposed to contribute to students' understanding that all philosophies of life are equal, and should be able to coexist (Duedahl, 2011; Lobbes, 2017; Pingel, 2010). As they could not accept that their faith was put on par with other philosophies of life, many Catholics considered this a bridge too far, and rather adhered to the vision as developed by the Council of Europe. Along with the right side of the politico-societal spectrum, they aimed for the creation of a European identity through an emphasis on a (Western-)European approach to the past and on Christianity. In this approach, any interaction between Western people and people from other continents in the past remained largely absent (Lobbes, 2017).



Although the state educational network claimed to adhere more to the Unesco vision, while the Catholic educational network rather sympathized with the Council of Europe vision, in practice, the history curricula of both networks were oriented in a very Eurocentric way. They paid particular attention to the history of Western Europe and the West; Africa and Asia were only sporadically mentioned, mostly in the framework of colonialism and imperialism. The same finding applies to the history textbooks for secondary education. Not only did they mostly address Western history, they also attributed agency almost solely to European and Western people, presenting indigenous Africans and Asians as passive objects of Western agency (Van Nieuwenhuysse, 2018b, p. 162-163). De Baets (1994), who examined the historical representation of non-Western cultures in history textbooks between 1945 and 1985, concluded that these accounts were very Eurocentric, both in the attention they paid to Western history as well as in their use of the West as the standard to judge other societies upon. One textbook author wrote for instance: "In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the European states managed to conquer and colonize most parts of Asia, Africa and Oceania, thanks to their surplus of population and their victorious technique. But the yellow, brown and black race successively come to self-awareness and independence, the way the white nations demonstrated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century" (Dierickx, 1956, p. 5-6). The West was clearly presented as the example to follow. Furthermore, history textbooks testified to social evolutionism, meaning they tended to see only Western peoples as pioneers of history and ignored the traditions and achievements of non-Western peoples.

In so doing, history education gradually ceased to support a national, Belgian identity and Belgian patriotism, yet started to foster a Western identity, centered around the values of Enlightenment (Lobbès, 2017). This evolution coincided with an increasing labor migration from North Africa (particularly Morocco) and Turkey, as a result of which, certainly in several big cities and coal-pit regions in Belgium, the classrooms' composition became more and more multicultural. This did, however, not influence the history curricula, nor the textbooks. Neither the history of the aforementioned regions nor the history of migration or intercultural contacts were included as new content. How to deal with the increased multicultural presence in the classroom was not addressed either, but rather ignored. The curricula, for instance, did not include pedagogical suggestions for the history teacher on how to deal with multiculturalism, nor did they acknowledge the changing composition of history classrooms.

Critical voices nevertheless started to raise their voice. A left-wing group of influential history educators and inspectors in public education hatched on an alternative during the 1960s. One of its leaders, Leopold Flam, state inspector for history education, stated for instance the following: "We wish to contribute with all our existence to the concrete, real emancipation of mankind. The best and only way to realize this is to foster the reflective atmosphere of a school in which our students, by means of, among other things, history lessons, learn intimate and sincere respect for others, whatever their color, faith or conviction may be" (see Lobbès, 2017, p. 163). This group aimed to raise students to



self-conscious, emancipated, democratic, critical and responsible citizens. In the same vein, they proposed a so-called “planetary” view on history, combined with a societally relevant and contemporary orientation for history education. The study of the past needed to be at the service of the present, by provoking reflection and societal engagement.

Flam and his group of like-minded thinkers, started experiments in state education, later on followed by certain educators within catholic education. From the idea that “the child’s environment encompasses the whole world and all times” (Lobbes, 2017, p. 175), the group stated that history teachers, rather than thinking Eurocentrically, had to think globally. In this respect, they defined four spatial spheres: the Atlantic, the communist, the former colonies, and developmental countries, and developed accompanying lesson series. In other words, on a content level, experiments started to include some historical ethno-cultural diversity in history lessons, even though this should not be exaggerated: the content focus was still on the Western (Atlantic) sphere. However, these continued to be designed with a homogeneous western classroom group in mind. Identity construction support remained Western focused; non-Western presence in the classroom was not thematized and ethno-cultural intergroup dialogue was not fostered.

### A reformed secondary (history) education with global ambitions (1970-89)

The experiments of the 1960s were the predecessor of a big reform of secondary education. In 1970, the so-called “Reformed Secondary Education” introduced a series of structural and pedagogical innovations. It was inspired by a democratization paradigm: more young people had to be enabled to attend secondary education for a longer period of time. Moreover, they had to make their choice of study according to their capacities and interests, not according to their origins (Henkens, 2004). History education came under attack in this Reformed Secondary Education. Critics considered history lessons to be antiquated, even outdated and anti-modern, and of little social or civic use, as they were not sufficiently oriented towards global history, and towards explaining the present-day world and encouraging societal responsibility-taking. It was suggested to replace history education by social studies. In the end, history education was not dropped, yet considerably reduced, and in order to safeguard it as a school subject, it was oriented in a very presentist and moral way: the students had to be taught respect for Enlightenment values, human rights and democracy, had to reject and even combat discrimination and racism, and had to draw lessons from a wrong past, for a better future (Van Nieuwenhuysse, 2018a, 2020; Wils, 2009).

In terms of content, the attention for non-Western and global history increased throughout the 1970s. Contrary to what one might suppose, however, this shift in attention was not prompted by a need to address the increasingly multicultural class groups, nor by a need to broaden the historical significance attribution of both autochthonous young people and those with migration roots.

Rather, the common idea was that autochthonous students had to learn about other cultures, yet these were considered to be situated in the non-Western world, instead of in their own changing society and living environment (Lobbès, 2017). The attention for non-Western history hence increased, but that continued to be studied through a purely Western lens.

De Baets (1994) found that in the course of the 1970s, cultural relativism increased a little in history textbooks, although Eurocentrism and social evolutionism persisted to underlie the textbook narratives. *Janus 1*, claiming in the introduction to start with snapshots of the world in different moments in time (e.g. 1880, 1920, or 1942-43), for instance recounted the following for the global snapshot of 1880:

Industrialization caused a hunt for raw materials and markets. This explains why the African nut was shelled, and the closed Asian gate was battered down, in order to allow Westerners to trade. Political and economic interests made access to the open seas attractive. Russia penetrated until the Pacific, in search for ice-free port, and tried to reach the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. That was prevented by the British, whose position, especially after taking control over India, remained unassailable. In Africa, England had to share with France, which did not happen in a friendly way (Morren *et al.*, 1976, p. 34).

This snapshot only addressed European and Western states, and their mutual relations. The perspective as well as the agency attribution was a pure (Western-)European one. The West also remained the standard to judge other societies upon. *Janus 3B* wrote for instance: “German rule propagated the cultivation of commercial crops such as sisal, coffee and cotton. The indigenous farmers, however, were technically not sufficiently developed for those cultivations” (Morren *et al.*, 1978, p. 332). The indigenous peoples were clearly described as behind, inferior and weaker than the Europeans.

The identity history education supported throughout its lessons was a Western and a European Enlightenment inspired one. The students were not asked to take into account multiple and non-Western perspectives, nor were they encouraged to deconstruct identity-building processes, yet rather were they immersed in a Western perspective (Van Nieuwenhuysse, 2018b).

In the 1980s, moreover, the socio-political climate changed. In line with fierce debates about multicultural society and migration in other Western countries, discussions were held in Belgium about the position, orientation and content of history education. In the center and at the right of the political spectrum, pleas were made to reinstate history education's Western(-European) focus. Liberals wanted to emphasize the realizations of Enlightenment, while many Catholics continued to reject the idea that all cultures (including non-Christian ones) were equally valuable. As a result, global history was scaled back in favor of Eurocentric history; the national past continued to evaporate. Respect for democracy and human rights was presented as a characteristic Western value; the concern and attention for the global South and the Developing-World disappeared into the background (Lobbès, 2017).

At the same time, an identitarian debate was held. This, however, was not due to tensions related with the growing multicultural society (after the





decolonization, and due to growing labor migration), yet was connected to the federalization of the country and the ever-evolving Community divide between the Dutch- and French-speaking communities (Lobbes, 2017). The increasing multicultural composition of classrooms and the presence of young people with a migration background adhering to other or additional identities was not taken into account in these debates, that focused on regional or national identities. In the new history curricula of the 1980s, no guidelines were provided for history teachers on how to deal with the multicultural character of their classrooms.

### Attention for non-western cultures (1989-2019)

In 1989, education was formally and completely transferred from the Belgian to the regional level in 1989. 'Belgian' education ceased to exist: each of the communities became able to make completely autonomous choices, including with regard to history education (Lobbes & Wils, 2019). The regional authorities immediately encountered serious challenges for their education policy, as they were being confronted with increasing globalization and intercontinental migration flows leading to ever more multiculturally composed classrooms and changing societal and socio-economic expectations towards education. In the mid-1990s, the Flemish government decided that new standards had to be drawn up for each school subject, including history education – that came to belong to the basic curriculum for secondary education (meaning the subject was compulsory for all students).

In this respect, a development committee for history standards was established, composed of three academics responsible for the history teacher training program at their respective universities, educators, (history) inspectors and members of the different educational networks. This committee was able to function without experiencing political pressure. When, in 1996, its final results were presented to the Flemish Parliament for approval, most politicians were satisfied. The standards contained no 'leftist indoctrination', contributed to critical citizenship, and focused on building a European/Western historical frame of reference, which avoided the necessity to discuss the national versus regional issue: the national past further evaporated almost silently in history education. Three members of parliament of the Flemish-nationalist opposition party *Volksunie* tried to instigate a debate on the inclusion of a regional identity, yet this fizzled out as the other political parties did not go along with them (Van Nieuwenhuyse, Jadoulle, & De Paepe, 2021).

The Flemish history standards set a double main goal for the subject, which provided several opportunities for (ethno-cultural) inclusive education. On the one hand, it had to introduce students to history as an academic discipline. As taking into account multiple perspectives is at the core of the history discipline, this might encourage including non-Western content, perspectives and agency in secondary school history education. On the other hand, the history standards put forward a fourfold function with regard to "students as members of society". Apart from the development of 'historical consciousness'

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and training in social resilience (with the aim of forming socially responsible citizens), these also contained cultural training (with a special focus on 'the way in which people from European and non-European societies perceived their reality and on the basis of their perception of that reality shaped it further') and identity-building (both individual and social identity, with a focus on recognizing the existence of different identities, and relating one's own culture to other cultures, yet without putting forward a specific identity) (Van Nieuwenhuyse & Wils, 2012). Particularly the latter two related well to addressing the issue of ethno-cultural diversity.

As regards the specific historical content, the history standards barely prescribed any content; their focus was rather on skills and attitudes. The historical frame of reference they proposed was Western-oriented. The national past further vanished and was almost completely absent in the standards. In order to counter the Eurocentric approach that had characterized history education since long, and to instigate a somewhat more (ethno-cultural) inclusive education, the history standards imposed that attention had to be paid to non-Western societies in the past. The curricula of the different educational network translated this into the requirement that in each year of secondary education at least one non-Western society had to be addressed (Van Nieuwenhuyse & Wils, 2012, 2015).

In the practice of history textbooks, however, this requirement proved to be overshooting its goal. For the textbook authors did often not connect the non-Western societies to developments within the Western world, yet addressed them in a separate way, as if they were an exotic curiosum. When they did make the connection, this was often done in a Eurocentric way, with the West as the standard. A lesson dedicated to 'Japan under the Meiji: a rule of conservative modernization (1867-1912)' started for instance with this sentence: "In 1850, Japan still was a feudal state" (Van de Voorde, 2008, p. 95). Particularly through the use of "still", the Eurocentric judgment and 'backward' characterization of Japan at the time came to the fore. Furthermore, non-Western peoples and individuals were almost attributed no agency. In accounts on the modern imperial past, for instance, the main agents were still mostly Western ones. Compared to previous decades, nevertheless, a slight change arose, and at least some indigenous and non-western actors (such as local rulers trying to use the European powers and their mutual rivalries for their own benefit) were attributed some agency (Van Nieuwenhuyse, 2018b).

While non-Western history was mentioned in standards and curricula, the increasingly multicultural composition of the history classroom was again not thematized, nor were suggestions made to deal with it. History teachers were not provided with suggestions on how to connect the content of their history lessons with the multicultural presence in their classroom, or how to support identity-building in an open way. This 'silence' combined with the Eurocentric orientation of history education had its consequences on students' identification and sense of belonging. At least some young people in Flanders, belonging to the white majority group, got the idea that 'their' culture was and still



is superior to any other culture (hence giving rise to feelings of superiority), while students with migration roots did not feel themselves and their history acknowledged, giving rise to feelings of alienation (Van Nieuwenhuysse & Wils, 2015).

## Intercultural contacts and deconstruction of identity-building processes (2019-)

From 2019 onwards, a new (history) curriculum is gradually being implemented in secondary education. When from 2014 onwards, this new reform of secondary education was announced and being prepared, it was put to the fore that the secondary school programs had to become more aligned with the needs of metropolitan diversity. This explicit guideline was influenced by both the metropolitan multicultural reality itself and postcolonial migrant groups starting to raise their voice in public debate and pleading for recognition. Until then, their voices had remained largely absent in societal debate (Goddeeris, 2015). In the beginning of 2018, a committee entitled to develop standards for history education was established. This committee was composed of officials of the Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, representatives of the (various) public and private educational networks, history teachers and academic history education scholars. It functioned without experiencing political pressure. The committee put historical thinking to the fore as main aim for history education.<sup>1</sup> From the start, it decided to direct history education towards more (ethno-cultural) inclusive education. Various motivations influenced this decision. In line with the aim of the previous standards, the new standards aimed to introduce students into the academic discipline of history, and hence bring them to a better understanding of the past and of history (the construction of historical knowledge). Therefore, the need was acknowledged to go beyond a Eurocentric approach of the past (in terms of content and perspective). Furthermore, the committee acknowledged the need to address the multiculturally composed history classrooms, by enabling students to critically reflect on processes of identity construction and group formation, and by fostering intercultural dialogue and understanding via taking into account multiple perspectives (Van Nieuwenhuysse, 2020).

In developing concrete history standards, the committee continued the policy not to enumerate specific historical content, nor to impose what past societies had to be addressed. It nevertheless took into account the experience of the previous history standards and the way those had been translated into textbook accounts. For instance, the traditional Western historical frame of reference was still used as a starting point. But the new standards, however, now require that students are able to name and explain alternative types of periodization, and also understand the possible consequences of an unreflective dealing with that traditional Western periodization (such as fostering ethnocentric perspectives on the past). History teachers can freely choose which societies from the past to study, yet the standards list historical key (substantive) concepts to address throughout this study, such as migration, and multicultural

<sup>1</sup> The concept was defined as follows: "Historical thinking is first and foremost about understanding and organizing information about the past, with the aim of describing, comparing and explaining historical phenomena (people, groups, events and developments from the past) in their historical context and in a long-term. It is important, in this respect, to understand that past and present are fundamentally different. Therefore, historical thinking is also about an understanding of and a reflection on the complex relationship between past, present and future. This can, among others, be done by drawing analogies between the past and the present, in search for similarities and differences. Historical thinking hence requires an understanding of both the past and historical practice, which are inextricably bound up with each other. For one needs to know how knowledge of the past is constructed, and one needs to understand the tentative character of historical knowledge. Only then, one can start thinking critically of (representations and uses of) the past" (Agency for Higher Education, Adult Education, Qualifications and Study Grants, 2017).

society. Furthermore, these historical key (substantive) concepts are kept very generic, enabling their application to any society and the comparison of societies. The standards mention for instance 'layered society', which covers the (Western-European medieval) society of rank and order, class society yet also the caste-system. This relates to the fact that the standards require that both Western and non-Western societies be studied and compared, as well as the intercultural contacts between these societies. In so doing, students can build an understanding of the diverse character of those contacts (peaceful or violent; (un)equal power relations; reciprocity and exploitation; cultural mixing or dominance; mutual perception and impact, including the role of homogenization and us-them-thinking). In order to avoid that (the various agency within) intercultural contacts be studied purely from a Western perspective (hence encouraging Eurocentric thinking), the standards prescribe that the students must take into account multiple perspectives (Flemish Government, 2018b).

In including ethno-cultural diversity, the standards are not limited to the content level. They also provoke students to take into account multiple perspectives in the present. For example, they prescribe that students must be aware of their own positionality and that of others in building substantiated historical representations. At the same time, students are expected to reflect critically on historical significance attribution and on collective memories (and their role in group and identity formation and the transfer of values). In so doing, they are encouraged to deconstruct identity-building processes rather than being supported in constructing a specific identity. The standards thus stimulate students to think historically about the complex relationship between past, present and future, to burst through generalizations and stereotypes, and, by considering multiple perspectives and entering into intercultural dialogue, to respect different perspectives and respect (and nuance) the otherness of (human beings in) past and present (Flemish Government, 2018b).

The standards for the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade of secondary education have meanwhile been approved by the Flemish parliament at the end of 2018; the vote on those of the 9<sup>th</sup> till the 12<sup>th</sup> grade is scheduled for 2020. This means that the translation of the standards into curricula, history textbooks and classroom practice remains to be done, and nothing can be said about that yet (Flemish Government, 2018a).

## Conclusion

History education in Belgium and Flanders always had a very Eurocentric approach. In terms of content, Eurocentrism was accompanied by a strong national focus until the end of the 1950s. From then onward, awareness of this focus increased, and requests arose to do something about it. Different paths were taken in this respect. Pleas were made for global history, and later for the explicit addressment of non-Western societies. These alternatives, however, did not really succeed in going beyond Eurocentrism, since the perspective taken remained a Western one, and agency was almost solely attributed to Western agents. Moreover, non-Western societies were often treated as separate from

'regular' history. Therefore, the new standards also require the study of intercultural contacts between Western and non-Western societies, from multiple perspectives.

The multicultural composition of the classroom group has for a long time not been thematized. The student profile that was envisioned when writing curricula and standards concerned the autochthonous student. He had to become familiar with a global perspective on the past, including non-Western cultures, but not the ethnic-cultural diversity in his own region. The perspective or the needs of students with migration roots were not taken into account. Intercultural dialogue and a critical view of identity construction were therefore almost not discussed in curricula and standards. The opportunities the standards from the mid-1990s created in this respect, were not seized, which illustrates the struggle educators experienced with the establishment of a truly inclusive approach towards ethno-cultural diversity. Throughout various curricular changes, the West continued to function as the standard. The newly established standards make a new attempt to change this. Building on earlier evolutions within history education, they attempt to provide an answer to the current challenges posed by the ethno-cultural diversity within society, in terms of inclusive education, among others by focusing on intercultural exchange and multiperspectivity in both past and present. Since the new standards were only introduced in September 2019 in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade, and are being built up gradually towards the 12<sup>th</sup> grade in 2024, it is still too early to assess their implementation in history textbooks and classroom practice. The same applies to examining possible effects of the standards on students' understanding of the past, and their attitudes towards intercultural and self-understanding.

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