

08_Inclusive Education in Flanders (anno end of 2020)

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This tutorial gives an outline of the ‘duty of care continuum’ of all teachers and the transition from special schools to inclusive schools in Flanders.

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Belgium is the most urbanised country in the world.

Education policy in Belgium has been regionalised.

The tutorial is about the policies on inclusive education for all pupils in the Flemish Community of Belgium, which is the northern Dutch-speaking part of Belgium.

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The purpose of this module is to sketch the development in the last decennium from a segregated education system into an inclusive care-continuum approach system in mainstream education for all students.

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We will discuss the challenges teachers and schools have to address and overcome.

How is it different from the past?

How are teachers in mainstream schools going to be able to do right by all their students?

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The module is divided into 3 parts:

- First it will discuss briefly how the law has been used to promote inclusive education.

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- Then it will look at the implementation of special needs legislation and policies through creating learning environments that not only focus on academic knowledge and skills but also on the social and emotional competences and well-being of all students through the implementation of the care continuum approach in mainstream schools.

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- And finally, it will conclude with the challenges the new care continuum approach in inclusive education has to address and overcome to make it effective.

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How has the law been used to promote inclusive education in Flanders?

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There has been a long tradition in the education system in Flanders of segregation of pupils with disability in special education schools.

Regrettably, the law has buttressed it.

Consequently the experience of many student with disability has been one of exclusion from mainstream education.

But towards the end of the 20th century, the law started to redeem itself somewhat by enacting anti-discrimination and equal education opportunities legislation to safeguard the rights of students with disabilities .

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In two thousand and nine, the Flemish Parliament ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with disabilities .

Following a long debate, it legislated for the integration of all students from special needs schools into mainstream schools.

The measures-decree on pupils with specific education needs of March 2014 twenty fourteen became fully operational on September 2015 twenty fifteen.

It reinforced the right of students with special education needs to be enrolled in mainstream schools if the requested adaptations for their integration are reasonable.

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Today every child with special education needs in Flanders has the right to enroll in a mainstream school on the condition that reasonable adaptations can be made.

Inclusive education is the first option and less pupils are referred to special schools.

Qualitative special schools are available for those pupils for whom no reasonable adaptations can be made by a mainstream school.

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The measures-decree obliged schools in the Flemish Community to take measures to include pupils with special education needs who, due to disabilities cannot simply attend classes in a mainstream school without special measures to accommodate their needs.

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In cooperation with the teachers, the parents and the pupil guidance center, the school adopts reasonable adaptations to support a pupil with specific education needs to allow him to follow the lessons in a regular school.

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The student can follow the common curriculum if he meets the admission requirements for regular education and if he has a motivated report.

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Or he can follow an individually adapted curriculum if he has a report for access to special education. Support is provided by teachers and paramedical staff from special schools.

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Reasonable adaptations can consist of providing specialist EQUI(W)Pment, such as specific software for students with dyslexia or employing a sign language interpreter for deaf students.

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The aim of reasonable adaptations is to remove the barriers that students face with special education needs in a mainstream environment.

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There is no list of what is "reasonable" and what is not. That consideration is made by the school in cooperation with the teachers, the parents and the pupil guidance center. They decide for each individual student the measures that should be applied in a particular case.

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Mainstream schools can only refer a student to special education if all such reasonable adaptations have been tried and have proven to be NOT successful.

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The decree describes refusal to provide reasonable adaptations as prohibited discrimination.

In the end, it is for the judge to assess what constitutes reasonable adaptations in a particular case.

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Today, access to education institutions for Pupils with special needs disputes focus typically on such questions as

- whether the mandatory requirement of consultation with the parents was followed and

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- what are reasonable adaptations for students with special needs and

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- why the school considers reasonable adaptations for students with special needs not pedagogically feasible,

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- whether pedagogical-based standard have been met and

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- why requirements by the parents are educationally not necessary,

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- whether the alternative proposed by the school is an equally feasible alternative.

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I will now look at how special needs legislation and action plans have contributed to the care continuum approach in mainstream education.

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In 2018, the Flemish Parliament approved the Decree on Student support.

Each school has to develop an appropriate care policy for all the pupils.

(Decreet betreffende de leerlingenbegeleiding in het basisonderwijs, het secundair onderwijs en de centra voor leerlingenbegeleiding; 27/04/2018; B.S.25/06/2018)

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Schools must develop a care continuum of three stages to provide pupils with the support they need: basic care, increased care and expansion of care.

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If basic care and increased care are not sufficient and expansion of care is required or if a pupil follows an individually adapted curriculum, a mainstream school can attract extra expertise for the guidance of pupils with special educational needs through cooperation with schools for special education.

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The school team develops a qualitative policy for student support and care continuum with the support of the pedagogical counseling Service.

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Schools must also sign a cooperation agreement with a pupil guidance Center.

The pupil guidance center identifies potential problematic situations at the school.

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The school can then appeal to the Pedagogical Counseling Service to adjust its student counseling and care continuum policy.

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A care continuum consists of 3 layers:

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Phase zero is the broad basic care offered to all students.

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Phase one is increased care. The schools takes extra measures to ensure that the student can continue to follow the common curriculum.

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Phase two is expansion of care. The pupil guidance center is actively involved in investigating the support to be provided to the pupil, teachers and parents, and prepares a motivated report for an expansion of care. With the report, the school can approach an external support network or experts from a special school.

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If phases zero to two have been completed and if it is not feasible to follow the common curriculum with reasonable adaptations, the pupil guidance centre prepares a report for access to a special school or for an individually adapted curriculum in mainstream education.

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To be admitted in special education schools, the pupil needs to submit the report of the pupil guidance centre.

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I will now conclude with the challenges the care continuum approach has to address and overcome to make it an effective policy of inclusive schools.

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The worldwide movement towards the integration of all children into mainstream schools is apparent. Legislation is just the beginning. It requires political will to make it happen. The challenges to be addressed are complex and require significant resources to implement the targeted strategies in the field of education.

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Through the 2018 (twenty eighteen) Decree on student support, mainstream schools are obliged to identify students with problems and give them extra care and support. The number of students who are legally entitled to specific help, has increased significantly.

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More cash is needed for educating students with special needs in mainstream schools. The numbers of students with special needs in mainstream schools have increased, partly because technology has allowed more students with disabilities to be supported in mainstream schools.

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Generating awareness and capacity of teachers is primordial. Students with special education needs - from dyslexia through behaviour dysfunction to severe medical conditions are now educated in mainstream classrooms rather than in special schools.

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However, teachers are not trained for the widening range of conditions defined as educational disabilities . A growing number of pupils are autistic or have behavioural problems, and hence are disruptive. Teachers who are not trained in special needs are struggling to help children with disabilities including pupils with learning problems.

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What should be avoided is that pupils with special needs are suspended from mainstream schools in the first place.

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In March twenty nineteen 2019 twenty nineteen, a letter of a teacher in the third year of primary education in a Flemish journal attracted a lot of attention. She described the composition of her class and the need for training to provide adequate care to the pupils in a mainstream school.

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Maxim has attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

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Henri and Renzo have developmental coordination disorders (DCD) and both have an Remedial DCD plan: all worksheets and tests must be copied in A3 format, the agenda must be completed under supervision, tests must be taken orally, and so on ...

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Brent and Janne also have developmental coordination disorders (DCD) but in a slightly different form, and have a Remedial DCD plan providing for adapted writing material, an adapted chair and table, work with headphones, help with organizing their bank and bags.

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Lien was diagnosed with dyslexia and has a Remedial DCD plan with spelling and reading measures including reading comprehension texts beforehand at home, adaptation of the sentence dictation to an interpretation dictation, use of the speech therapist's tools for writing assignments ...

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Marie has autism spectrum disorder and needs a lot of structure

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Habiba has a serious concentration problem due to a very difficult home situation with a contact ban because of radical(ai)zation risks.

Slide 54

Tim has low self-esteem and comes to school almost every morning with stomach a(K)ches and needs a lot of positive feedback to feel good.

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Ilyano, Marco and Demi are very strong and smart children, who sometimes get boed and need challenges.

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Luna is highly sensitive.

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Arne also has a very difficult home si(TSJ)tuation due to the fighting divorce of the parents.

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Three students are repeating the year.

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Nico has a genetic disorder and is regularly absent during the winter months and therefore needs to get assistance again and again when he returns.

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The teacher receives support from a care coordinator and the network support staff who all need a feed back email during the weekend to allow them to prepare for the coming week.

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This class situation has become the rule, not the exception in Flanders. Teachers feel that "running" a class requires training in special education needs, in order to avoid a feeling of "trying to keep all heads above water" because of the lack of adequate training.

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Teachers are supported in various ways.

- The pedagogical counseling services employ competence counselors who help teachers to broaden their competences to deal with students with specific education needs. They encourage cooperation with expert(i)Se and support networks.

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- For pupils with specific education needs and a motivated report in a school for mainstream education, the school can apply for support from a special education school.

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The school can apply for resources for special teaching materials for students with a functional disability.

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Integrating students with special needs into schools also requires the involvement of parents.

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Students with physical disabilities or milder learning problems can thrive in mainstream schools. Others are unhappy, especially at secondary level and prefer special schools.

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Redefined inclusion like in Italy could be a solution with the provision of special units located within mainstream schools so that pupils with special needs can mix with the others for some lessons but be protected from the chaos of school life for others. This is an expensive system and cash may prove king to keep the doors in mainstream schools open for students with special needs.

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The (w)hole care continuum approach requires political support.

From the first of September 2022 twenty twenty two, a new decree on 'learning aid and support' will regulate the support of students with special needs in mainstream schools in Flanders.

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To conclude

I have explored the development and the factors of the development from a segregated education system into a care-continuum approach system in the Flemish Community of Belgium and the challenges it has to address.

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Law and action plans have been used to promote first inclusive education, and then a care continuum approach for all students.

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This is not without challenges.

If teachers are trained and supported, if parents of disabled students and the pupils with disabilities are well informed and supported, if support structures are well-funded and are closely cooperating with schools and teachers, and if they get political support, the implementation of the inclusive and care continuum approach could be effective.

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There's a lot of things we need to do to support our teachers and then hope they will in their turn give ALL their pupils the best education in mainstream schools.