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Integrative RE in Flanders: a decade later

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Introduction

In Flanders, RE is organised in a (semi-)confessional way (Derroitte et al. [2014](#); Loobuyck & Franken [2011a](#)). While Roman-Catholic RE is a compulsory school subject in state-funded Catholic schools (70% of all the Flemish schools), ¹pupils in state schools (30% of the schools) ²have the constitutional right (art.24, §1 of the Belgian Constitution) to take confessional RE in one of the six recognised religions (Roman-Catholic; Protestant-Evangelical; Orthodox; Anglican; Islamic; Jewish) or in Non-Confessional (NC) ethics. The RE courses are autonomously organised and controlled by the recognised religious communities and, for NC ethics, by the recognised humanistic freethinkers. The state pays the wages and retirements of the teachers, but does not interfere into the content, teacher training, inspection and appointment of teachers.

In state schools, pupils are, during RE classes (2 hours a week), separated according to their (parents') religion/worldview. In 2018–19, 49 per cent of the pupils in secondary state schools were enrolled in NC ethics, 24 per cent in Roman-Catholicism and 22 per cent in Islam. The remaining students were enrolled in other RE subjects, or they were exempted (1 per cent of the students). For primary schools, the numbers were similar, with the exemption for NC ethics, which was taken there by 33 per cent, and Roman-Catholic RE, which was with 41 per cent the main RE subject. ³

Triggered by the challenges of secularisation and increasing religious diversity, and inspired by some evolutions towards non-confessional RE in Europe and elsewhere, we argue since 2009 for the introduction of a common, non-denominational and compulsory subject about religions, ethics, citizenship and philosophy in the Flemish school system (Loobuyck & Franken [2011b](#), ; Franken [2014](#); Loobuyck [2014](#)). We called the proposed subject, which gained much attention in the public debate, ⁴ 'LEF': Levensbeschouwing, Ethiek, Filosofie or 'Worldviews, Ethics, Philosophy'. The subject is in line with Tim Jensen's plea for religious studies based RE ([2008](#), [2011](#)) and with what Wanda Alberts ([2007](#)) calls integrative RE: teaching about religion, based on the academic study of religion (and not on theology), in an 'objective, critical and pluralistic way'. ⁵ Following Alberts' recommendations, the subject would not be based on segregation along religious lines, but pupils with different religious and non-religious backgrounds would be educated together about different (non-)religious traditions. Its purpose is not to convert or to convince pupils, but to inform, to contextualise their own (religious) background, and to prepare them for active citizenship in liberal-democratic and multicultural societies.

Today, more than 10 years later, LEF does not yet exist as a school subject, but several initiatives have been taken in order to improve the Flemish RE system from within. In this article, we describe these initiatives and evaluate them from the perspective of our preference for non-denominational and integrative RE for all.

2009–2019: the societal and political context

Islam: a new RE trigger

Ten years ago, we argued that the main triggers for changing the Flemish RE system were secularisation and increasing religious diversity. Although these factors still remain, it seems that, over the past decade, another element was the main catalysator for change and evolution within the Flemish RE system: the fear for Islamic radicalisation as well as the expansion of pupils enrolled in Islamic RE (IRE). The number of pupils enrolled in IRE increased in state schools from almost 13 per cent in 2008 to 22 per cent in 2018–19 (primary and secondary), but the school subject has several deficiencies (cf. *infra*). In addition, external factors such as the 2016 terrorist attacks in Paris, Nice and Brussels as well as the occurrence of approximately 500 Belgian IS foreign fighters have put (I)RE on the political agenda. In relation to these events, a public discourse on common democratic values and citizenship education came to the fore and several politicians pleaded for explicit education about democracy and shared values in all schools (cf. *infra*).

Political discussions

Triggered by the abovementioned challenges and by the public discussions about *LEF*, several political parties pleaded for a modification of the Flemish RE system. Although the Flemish government agreement 2009–2014 (Christian-democrats, social-democrats and Flemish-nationalists) contained some ‘small’ steps for improvement, a profound change remained absent. According to the agreement, collaboration between the different RE courses and NC ethics should be encouraged in order to realise, next to the existing choice, ‘a common programme of worldviews’ in state schools. In order to prepare this common programme, stakeholders and experts were invited by the Ministry of Education, to give input for content and implementation. However, in 2012, the official authorities for RE and NC ethics signed a joined declaration wherein they engaged themselves for more collaboration (cf. *infra*). This initiative was approved by the Minister of Education (a social-democrat), who put the previous work on hold. Meanwhile, the umbrella organisation of the state schools of the Flemish Community (*Gemeenschapsonderwijs* or GO!)⁶ started with a working group reflecting on the implementation of ‘a common programme of worldviews’, as mentioned in the government agreement.

At the same time (2011–12), the Flemish Parliament discussed a proposal of the liberal party to include more ‘teaching about’ different religions and worldviews in the existing RE courses and in NC ethics. This proposal, however, would have important consequences for the autonomy of the recognised religions and worldviews (and the related RE classes) and for the separation of church and state. This was one of the main reasons why the initiative did not succeed.

In their programmes for the elections of 2014, the green party, the liberals and the social-democrats were in favour of *LEF*. Quite surprisingly, however, the Flemish government agreement 2014–2019 (Flemish nationalists, liberals and Christian-democrats) did not mention the issue of RE anymore. The new Minister of Education

was a Christian-democrat and she decided, in line with her party programme, to continue with the existing RE system and to focus on the improvement of the quality of the RE courses. Hereto, she supported interreligious collaboration between the existing RE courses as well as initiatives to improve IRE. In addition, she emphasised that RE should always be in line with human rights and liberal democracy.

At the federal level, there has been a discussion in the Belgian Parliament (April 2019) in order to open article 24 of th

e Constitution, which would be a necessary step for amending this article during the next legislation. The aim of this initiative was the elimination of the constitutional RE requirements, so that the Flemish, French and German speaking Communities could decide autonomously how to organise RE (cf. Loobuyck [2019-20](#)). However, even though the proposal passed in the Chamber of Deputies, there was no majority in the Senate. As a result, RE will not be part of a political discussion on the Belgian (federal) level during the next legislation.

On the level of the Communities, however, one might expect some further discussions as there are two sentences about RE in the Flemish government agreement 2019–2024 (Flemish nationalists, liberals and Christian-democrats):

In the last year of secondary education, schools of the Flemish Community (*Gemeenschapsonderwijs*) can switch from two hours RE to one hour RE and one hour interreligious dialogue, wherein (cross-curricular) aims of citizenship can be realized. We will enter into dialogue with all the [stakeholders] involved in order to offer a meaningful option for exempted pupils.⁷

These two sentences are rather vague: it is not clear what is meant by ‘interreligious dialogue’; who has to take the initiative for the reform; whether and how citizenship can be integrated in RE subjects; and what – if any – the role of the recognised religions and secular humanists will be in the organisation of an alternative for exempted pupils. Besides, the initiatives of the present government are, compared to the initiatives discussed during the negotiations before the coalition, rather weak. In these negotiations, the proposal has been discussed to diminish the existing hours of RE and NC ethics from two to one and to organise a compulsory, LEF-like course in the remaining hour.⁸ This proposal would still accord within the constitutional framework because the constitution does not mention how much time schools have to spend on RE and NC ethics. Moreover, triggered by a court case about exemption,⁹ this idea has been put into practice since 2016 in primary state schools and since 2017 in secondary state schools in the French-speaking Community. During the hour freed up, a compulsory course ‘Education in Philosophy and Citizenship’ (EPC – Education à la Philosophie et à la Citoyenité) is organised and exempted pupils are required to take two hours of this new course (Cf. Delgrange [2018](#); Sägesser [2017](#), [2019](#)). In line with this evolution, the current government agreement of the French speaking Community (socialists, liberals and the green party) mentions the establishment of a working group to examine if and how the EPC course could be extended from one to two hours for all the pupils in state schools. Compared to these evolutions, the Flemish government agreement is more modest, as it only focuses on schools of the Flemish Community (and thus not on all state schools) and only on the last two years of secondary education (and thus not on all grades).

Interreligious competencies (ILC)

One of the critiques of the Flemish RE system is the separation of pupils in RE lessons in state schools, which seems not to be the most appropriate way to foster interreligious dialogue and to prepare pupils for multicultural citizenship (cf. Loobuyck and Franken [2011b](#), [2013](#), [2018a](#)). In order to meet this critique, the organisers of RE and NC ethics took an initiative that would stimulate cooperation, interreligious dialogue and interreligious competencies. This resulted in 2012 in the text *Interreligious competencies within the framework of dialogue and cooperation between religions at school*, which was presented in the Flemish Parliament. In 2016, the respective RE organisers officially confirmed their view and commitment and formulated the following interreligious competencies (ILC)¹⁰ as displayed in Table 1:

Table 1: Competencies interreligious dialogue (IRD) and interreligious living together (IRL)	
Me and my worldview	
<i>Knowledge</i>	<i>Skills and attitudes</i>
The pupil explores and articulates 1. the religious characteristics of the own developed identity 2. the particularity of the worldview the student is enrolled in at school 3. the internal plurality of the worldview the student is enrolled in at school	The pupil 4. articulates, from within the own worldview and in an open and thoughtful way, thoughts, emotions, experiences, norms and values 5. handles the particularity of the own worldview in a respectful and open way 6. handles the diversity within the own worldview in a respectful and open way 7. develops a positive image of him/herself and takes initiative, based on the experience of the own worldview
Me, my worldview and the other's worldview	
<i>Knowledge</i>	<i>Skills and attitudes</i>
The pupil explores and articulates 8. the particularity of other worldviews 9. the particularity of a worldview, as presented by a privileged witness or a relevant representative of this worldview 10. similarities and differences between worldviews 11. the internal plurality in different worldviews	The pupil 12. recognizes and articulates his/her own as well as others' religious perspective ('colouring') of thoughts, feelings, experiences, values and norms 13. respects the existence of worldviews 14. listens empathically to peers with another worldview 15. [is able to] move into the religious perspective of others 16. is constructive and critical towards his/her own as well as others' worldviews 17. handles the particularity of other worldviews in a respectful and open way
Me, my worldview and the society	
<i>Knowledge</i>	<i>Skills and attitudes</i>
The pupil explores and articulates 18. the differences between stereotypes about a worldview and the inside of a worldview 19. challenges and opportunities for IRD and IRL	The pupil 21. distinguishes religious stereotyping from religious identity 22. handles in a constructive way with challenges and opportunities for IRD and IRL

20. the role of worldviews for oneself and for the society	23. exercises IRD and IRL as a necessary skill for living in the reality of a multi-religious society 24. recognizes and applies agreements and rules that are necessary for interreligious living together
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The formulation and purposes of the ILC are rather vague and it is not sure how to measure, examine and control them. At present, teachers and inspections are still searching how to implement the ILC and make them more concrete. In order to do so, RE teachers started with common projects (e.g. about human rights, sustainability, rituals) wherein – in the case of state schools – teachers and pupils of the different RE subjects work together, or wherein – in the case of Catholic schools – witnesses of different (non-)religious traditions (e.g. an imam or secular humanist) are invited. One of the prevailing ideas of these projects and of the ILC is that dialogue with the other will not only stimulate knowledge, tolerance and mutual understanding, but also strengthen one’s own religious identity. Hence the emphasis on dialogue and cooperation on the one hand, and on the ‘own’ tradition on the other hand:

The distinct religions/worldviews are a *conditio sine qua non* in order to give interreligious projects some depth and in order to create a place that meets the quality requirements of the school context. Explicitly exercising interreligious cooperation and dialogue will therefore always, within a school context, be limited to some well-chosen projects, to assure that the distinct curricula of the different religions/worldviews can still contribute to personal development. (Commissie Levensbeschouwelijke vakken [2012](#), 3)

The introduction of ILC is in line with some ideas behind LEF, such as dialogue and a better understanding of the other. Therefore, the ILC are often used now by the defenders of the current RE system as an argument against LEF. This is incorrect for several reasons. First, LEF aims to be a full-fledged and compulsory school subject, which is different from the ILC, which are not required for exempted pupils and are only recommended for six hours a year. Second, LEF would, like any other regular school subject, be supervised by the state and not by the religious communities, which is another important difference with the ILC. In Catholic schools, there is also the problem that only Roman-Catholic RE is organised and that, as a result, cooperation between *different* RE teachers (as in state schools) is not a realistic option.

Another aspect of critique has to do with the prudent way teachers are required to deal with religious plurality. As stated in the ILC, it is not recommended

... to start with projects about delicate or explosive issues, but (to start) from common and generally human themes such as celebrating, emotions, sadness, happiness, mourning, suffering, love ... Starting from themes where we can build bridges and not from that what we cannot bridge (Commissie Levensbeschouwelijke vakken [2012](#), 7).

Because religion is a sensitive and polarised issue, this prudence is comprehensible. But from a pedagogical perspective it may be questionable whether this is always the preferred way to deal with plurality in the context of education. Although it can be important to learn that many (non-)religious traditions and interpretations share

common values and ideas, it is equally important to recognise substantial differences, to reflect on these differences, and to learn how to deal with them in practice. Given this prudent approach, the ILC-framework seems to be limited to a safe space wherein tensions, hard cases such as respect for homosexuals, fundamental discussions and critical confrontation are avoided. Hence the ILC-framework is no guarantee for a deep and critical reflection about the tensions between modernity, democracy, basic liberties, science and the theory of evolution on the one hand and certain (non-)religious worldviews and interpretations on the other hand. It seems that the ILC-framework considers 'intellectual safety' as an essential part of 'dignity safety',¹¹ which is not the case in LEF. Although every pupil has a right to *dignity safety* (which should therefore be protected by the school), it is not up to the school to guarantee *intellectual safety* as well. Those who admit to the latter do not adequately train young people for open-mindedness and critical citizenship.

Finally, the ILC take it for granted that RE should be organised from an insiders' perspective, while LEF is conceived from the outsiders' (objective, critical and pluralistic) perspective. Given the fact that many parents and pupils in Belgium do not longer adhere to a particular (recognised) religion, nor to freethinking humanism, this presupposition is problematic. Since an increasing number of pupils no longer have any affinity with a particular (non-)religious tradition, the main purpose of RE cannot longer be to 'socialise' children in their 'own' religious tradition.

To summarise: the introduction of the ILC is a good and welcome initiative within the existing RE system, but it is only a moderate step, which is still far away from integrative and religious studies based RE for all. Moreover, as the ILC have often been used as an argument against LEF, it is not clear whether these competencies are the result of an unambiguous positive intention to foster more dialogue, or rather of a defensive reaction to hinder the implementation of LEF. As far as we can see, the ILC are the result of both.

Improvement of curricula

A second important evolution is an adaptation of several RE curricula in order to improve religious literacy and to engage with the ILC. Over the past decade, curricula have been updated for Anglicanism (2010), Islam (2012), Orthodox Christianity (2013), NC ethics (2017), Roman-Catholicism (2019) and Protestant-Evangelical RE (2019). Conform a proposal in the Flemish Government in 2018,¹² all the RE curricula were also made available online, which makes them more transparent.¹³ In the subsequent paragraphs, we will discuss the most popular RE courses: Roman-Catholicism, Islam and NC ethics.

Islam

In 2012, the curricula for Islam in primary and secondary schools¹⁴ were updated (see xxxFranken [2017](#), [2018b](#); Franken & Sägesser [2021](#) – forthcoming) by *Centrum Islam Onderwijs* ('Centre for Islamic RE'), which is supervised by the Executive of Muslims in Belgium (the official recognised representative body of Muslims in Belgium). Compared to the previous curricula, more attention is given to religious diversity, to fundamental rights and freedoms, and to the dangers of religious fanaticism. In

addition, the status of women within Islam, internal diversity in the Islamic community, the tension between religion and science, and the importance of text interpretation are no longer excluded. The main part of the curriculum, however, is still dedicated to Islamic doctrine, Islamic decency, Islamic worship, Life of the Prophet, the Quran and (Islamic) religion and culture.

Furthermore, as in other RE classes, religion and especially the 'own' religious tradition is mainly presented as positive, while the programme remains silent about its more ambiguous and potentially negative sides. In IRE, religion is studied from the inside and there is little room for insights based on religious studies, history, text critique, sociology and psychology. Hence IRE remains, in spite of its update, far away from integrative RE and LEF. In 2019, *Centrum Islamonderwijs* announced on its website that the 2012 curricula will be further 'actualised', considering some of these critics, but thus far no concrete steps have been taken.

NC ethics

In Flanders, NC ethics is not a neutral subject, but a secular-humanist subject, organised and controlled by the recognised humanistic freethinkers. Accordingly, the school subject emphasises and promotes the values of rationality, science, democracy, separation of church and state, human rights, and ethical positions based on self-determination, free enquiry and a-dogmatic critical thinking.

In 2017, the curricula for NC ethics were updated. The main process aims in primary and secondary education are now (1) autonomy, (2) moral thinking (3) humanisation, (4) responsibility and (5) meaning. In order to realise these aims, core themes of the subject are (1) identity, (2) freethinking humanism, (3) living together, democracy and citizenship, (4) different worldviews: identity in dialogue, (5) economy, (6) science, (7) environment, (8) arts, and (9) communication and media.

Compared to the previous curricula, there is more attention for religious diversity and interreligious dialogue, especially in secondary education. However, even though several teachers argue that NC ethics is (therefore) in fact similar to LEF, the differences are still obvious. Like the RE classes, NC ethics is not a 'neutral' subject, but a subject based on and organised by the secular-humanist worldview. Even though a part of the new curriculum is based on teaching about religion (and thus resembles the religious studies based methodology of LEF), there is also a tendency to see religion as something irrational, outdated, and potentially dangerous. Religion and orthodoxy on the one hand, and autonomy, self-determination and free enquiry on the other hand, are presented as two opposing and irreconcilable views.

Another difference with LEF is that the student groups in NC ethics are not diversified since most pupils enrolled are secular. Even though NC ethics, like all RE subjects, is principally open for pupils with different religious affiliations, it seldom happens that devout Muslims or Christians attend this school subject. Hence the subject is not integrative but separative and reaches only 12 per cent of all pupils in Flanders. Finally, being secular and a humanistic-freethinker is a necessary condition to teach NC ethics, which is not the case for integrative RE or LEF.

Roman-Catholic RE

In 2016, the Belgian bishops announced an update of the Roman-Catholic RE programme for secondary schools. The dialogical approach, which was introduced in the 1999 curricula, had to be complemented with more cognitive content about the Christian tradition. As a result of secularisation and religious diversity, an increasing number of pupils – also in Catholic schools ¹⁵ – does not have any affinity with or basic knowledge about the Catholic and Christian tradition and in order to cope with this situation, the new curriculum would focus more on the improvement of the pupils' religious literacy.

In order to do so, a working group, containing Roman-Catholic RE teachers and teacher-trainers, theologians, and inspectors and chaired by the general vicar, has been established. In the new curriculum, which was launched in 2019, four aims are mentioned: (1) improvement of the pupils' religious literacy; (2) integration of ILC; (3) self-positioning of the curriculum within the project of the Catholic Dialogue School ¹⁶; and (4) adaptation to the context of pluralism. The new curriculum starts from an interplay between the 'Christian faith', the 'pluralistic context' and the 'pupil's multi-dimensional identity'. This interplay is applied to seventeen 'domains' (e.g. 'nature', 'spirituality', 'personal development'), which are not substantially different from the domains of the previous curriculum. Remarkable are the so-called 'bible-spiritual horizons': biblical quotes teachers can connect with the aforementioned domains. Another new item are the 349 'ingredients': core concepts of the Christian tradition (e.g. 'Kingdom of God', 'monastic life') as well as key concepts we can find in a plural context (e.g. 'human rights', 'norms and values') and/or which can be related to the identity formation of the pupils (e.g. 'volunteer work'; 'freedom and responsibility').

Compared to the other RE courses and NC ethics, Roman-Catholic RE could be quite similar to LEF: the curriculum is not catechetical and teaching into religion is not the main purpose. Moreover, especially in Catholic schools, where pupils with different (non-)religious backgrounds take a common RE subject which is organised in an open and pluralistic way, the difference between Roman-Catholic and integrative RE seems to be quite small. ¹⁷ In some cases, the introduction of LEF may even be a regularisation of what already happens in the classroom.

There are, however, still important differences between LEF and Roman-Catholic RE. First, the latter is not organised by a neutral institution, but by the Church. Second, despite the focus on learning from and teaching about religion, the Christian (Roman-Catholic) tradition is still the main point of reference. 'Other' religions and worldviews are not approached from an impartial religious studies based perspective, but from a Christian theological perspective. This (semi-)confessional stance is not in line with the fact that most pupils in Catholic schools prefer a pluralist school over a Catholic dialogue school, ¹⁸ and with the fact that many teachers are secularised. According to the aims of Roman Catholic RE, however, teachers are not only supposed to be experts and mentors, but they are also supposed to be witnesses of the Christian/Catholic tradition. Especially in Catholic primary schools, where the 'regular' (mostly secularised) schoolteacher is also supposed to teach RE, is this an important challenge. This is – again – different from LEF, where the teacher is committed to an attitude of impartiality and does not have to believe in or witness from a particular religious tradition.

Quality improvement of Islamic RE

IRE is organised in state schools since 1978, but there were no inspectors appointed before 2005. For a long time, there was also a problem with the teacher training and as a result, many IRE teachers were not adequately educated – neither theologically, nor pedagogically. In 1998, Islam was for the first time organised in an official teacher training programme in Brussels and last decade, the number of these programs increased significantly. Today, there are Islamic teacher training programs in five Flemish university colleges and since 2014–15, there is a master of Islamic Theology and Religious Sciences at the Faculty of Theology of the Catholic University of Leuven. According to the latest statistics, however, most of the (Islamic) RE teachers are still insufficiently trained.¹⁹

In 2016, the Flemish Minister of Education signed a ‘Statement of engagement for qualitative IRE’.²⁰ Its aims are, among others, ‘the improvement of IRE and the investment in training and refreshing courses for the teachers.’ The Statement mentions four points of action: (1) teacher training; (2) an actualisation of the present teacher degrees for IRE; (3) the appointment of an extra inspector; and (4) a reorganisation of the *Centrum Islamonderwijs*. Conform this statement, a new inspector was appointed in May 2017 and at the same time, the criteria for IRE teachers became more stringent: in the future, teachers for primary schools and lower secondary education will need a bachelor degree in Islamic education, while a master in Islamic theology will be required for teachers of the higher grades of secondary education. In addition, new teacher-training programmes for IRE were established.

The political attention for IRE is part of the focus on Islam and Muslim integration in the context of the discussion about the foreign fighters, Islam terror in Europe and ‘radicalisation’ more generally (cf. *supra*). This is also the context wherein the Minister of education launched in October 2015 an educational network of Islam experts (*‘netwerk islamexperten’*) and a coordinator of this network who is paid by the Ministry of Education. The aim of this network is to explain how to deal with religious diversity and with concrete religious cases in a school context, and to explain ‘how’ and ‘why’ several youngsters radicalise. In order to do so, members of the network can be invited in schools for trainings, lectures and coaching (of pupils or teachers) about Islam and (de-)radicalisation.²¹

Citizenship education

In addition to religious literacy, ethics and philosophy, citizenship education was also an essential part of our plea for LEF (see Loobuyck & Franken,; Franken [2014](#); Loobuyck [2014](#),). Although citizenship education was, up until 2019, a cross-curricular achievement that was integrated in different school subjects, the time dedicated to citizenship education was often low and its aims were not always reached in practice. In order to improve the situation, the Flemish Parliament agreed in 2018 to introduce educational goals for ‘citizenship including competencies in living together’ (Loobuyck [2018-19](#)). Citizenship became an important ‘key competency’, wherein special attention will be given to multiple identities; respect; prejudices, stereotypes and abuse of power; discrimination and intolerance; participation, engagement and

decision-making at school; sustainability; democracy; human rights and the rights of the child.

The educational goals for citizenship do not necessarily result in a separate subject for citizenship, as they can also be achieved through other subjects such as history, geography or languages. This is for instance the policy in primary schools of the Flemish Community (*Gemeenschapsonderwijs*). In its secondary schools, however, there is an intention to organise a separate school subject 'citizenship'.²² In order to facilitate this, the schools developed a framework for citizenship education (*leerlijn actief burgerschap*),²³ a handbook citizenship education (Gellens, Deweerdt, and Enckels 2018), online teaching materials, and in-teacher training programmes. In addition, the Flemish umbrella organisation of Catholic schools introduced a new school subject *Mens en Samenleving* (People and Society),²⁴ in September 2019, wherein some of the new learning aims for citizenship will be implemented.

Interestingly, the new citizenship education programme seems also to interfere with the existing RE and NC ethics courses and ILC and it is therefore not a surprise that the organisers of these courses themselves proposed to implement these new learning aims into their school subjects. It is, however, not taken for granted whether this proposal will be accepted because the present RE aims are, different from the aims for citizenship education, not inspected by the state, but by the religious communities. If RE and citizenship would be connected, it is still a question whether and how the achievements of citizenship education can be controlled by the state, without infringing on the religious autonomy and on the separation of church and state.

The challenges of the multicultural society and religious radicalisation were an important incentive for the stronger emphasis on citizenship, which we consider a good evolution. However, notwithstanding the similarities between the aims of 'citizenship education' on the one hand, and of LEF on the other hand, there are still no learning aims approved by the government for religious literacy and philosophy²⁵ (the 'L' and 'F' in LEF) in order to guarantee the right on objective and critical information on religions and worldviews for all pupils in all schools. Accordingly, the overall aim of LEF still seems a long way to go.

Conclusion

More than ten years after the proposal to organise integrative and non-denominational RE in Flanders, several initiatives have been taken in order to improve the RE system: introduction of ILC; actualisation of RE curricula; improvement of Islamic RE; and more emphasis on citizenship education. Although these initiatives are in line with some ideas and aims of LEF, it is still waiting for a more radical – and thus constitutional – change of the system. Integrative RE, based on a religious study approach and given in an objective, critical and pluralistic manner is still not guaranteed for all the pupils in Flanders.

Notes

1. Most Flemish schools are Catholic schools, funded and recognised by the Flemish Ministry of Education. In addition to these schools and the state schools, there are also

a few Jewish and Protestant schools, as well as schools with a particular pedagogical project (e.g. Steiner and Freinet), which are free to organise their own kind of RE.

2. The majority of state schools are schools established and funded by the Flemish Community: *Gemeenschapsonderwijs* or *GO!*. Other state schools are established by the municipalities, cities or provinces.

3. Numbers obtained at *Statistisch Jaarboek Onderwijs 2018–19*, online available at <https://onderwijs.vlaanderen.be/nl/statistisch-jaarboek> (accessed 2020-02-05).

4. For an overview, see <https://www.kuleuven.be/thomas/page/discussies-levensbeschouwelijk-vakken/> (accessed 2020-02-11).

5. The European Court of Human Rights argued several times (e.g. in the cases *Kjeldsen, Busk Madsen and Pedersen*; *Folgerø v. Norway*; and *Hasan and Eylem Zengin v. Turkey*) that compulsory school subjects should be conveyed in “an objective, critical and pluralistic manner”.

6. See footnote 2.

7. Regeerakkoord Vlaamse Regering 2019–2024, p. 22. Online available at <https://www.vlaanderen.be/publicaties/regeerakkoord-van-de-vlaamse-regering-2019-2024> (accessed 2020-01-31).

8. This was put on the agenda by the Flemish liberals but was also supported by a part of the Flemish nationalists. The Christian-democrats were, like the Catholic school network, against this proposal. The reduction of the hours RE from two to one was also part of the memorandum the schools of the Flemish Community (*GO!*) had written before the elections.

9. Council of State, *de Pascale* nr. 5885, 12-03-2015.

10. Online available at <https://www.levensbeschouwelijkevakken.be/interlevensbeschouwelijke-competenties/> (accessed 2020-02-05).

11. For this terminology: Callan (2016).

12. <http://docs.vlaamsparlement.be/pfile?id=1361109> (accessed 2020-02-05).

13. Available at <https://www.levensbeschouwelijkevakken.be/leerplannen-en-sites/> (accessed 2020-02-05).

14. Available at <https://www.centrumislamonderwijs.be/leerplannen.html> (accessed 2020-02-04).

15. At the age of six, more than one third of the children in Catholic schools is not baptised and according to a large survey between 2008 and 2015, less than 50% of the pupils in catholic schools identified themselves as ‘catholic’. (<https://www.kuleuven.be/thomas/page/onderzoek-katholieke-identiteit-scholen/>).

16. Flemish Catholic schools officially identify as ‘Catholic Dialogue schools’ (katholieke dialoogscholen). Christianity is still the basis of its pedagogical project, but pupils with different worldviews are explicitly welcomed and “challenged to think about their own identity and to dialogue about this identity with fellow students”. For more information, see <https://www.katholiekonderwijs.vlaanderen/katholieke-dialoogschool> (accessed 2020-02-05); see also Pollefeyt and Bouwens (2013); Boeve (2019).
17. In state schools, where Catholic RE is part of the segregated RE system, the situation is different. As a result of the possibility to choose a particular RE subject or NC ethics, RE classes in state schools are less diverse – and thus potentially further away from an integrative RE class – than the RE classes in Catholic schools.
18. See <https://theo.kuleuven.be/pollefeyt/dialoogschooltertio.pdf> (accessed 2020-02-05).
19. On February 4th, 2020, the Flemish Ministry of Education announced, in a reaction to a Parliamentary question, that only 40% of all the Flemish RE teachers have the required certificate. For IRE teachers in primary schools, this number is only 10%.
20. See <https://onderwijs.vlaanderen.be/nl/engagementsverklaring-voor-een-kwalitatief-islamonderwijs> (accessed 2020-02-11).
21. <https://netwerkislamexperten.be/onze-missie/>(accessed 2020-02-11).
22. <http://www.g-o.be/actief-burgerschap/>(accessed 2020-02-11).
23. <https://pro.go.be/blog/Documents/LEERLIJN%20ACTIEF%20BURGERSCHAP%2027062018.pdf> (accessed 2020-02-11).
24. <https://www.katholiekonderwijs.vlaanderen/secundair/modernisering-so-2018/mens-samenleving> (accessed 2020-02-11).
25. A few students in Flanders have philosophy on their curriculum.

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