



SIRIUS - Policy Network on Migrant Education

MULTI-COUNTRY PARTNERSHIP TO ENHANCE THE EDUCATION OF REFUGEE AND ASYLUM-SEEKING YOUTH IN EUROPE – PERAE

Refugee Education in Flanders (Belgium)

2018

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**“Multi-country Partnership to Enhance the Education of Refugee and
Asylum-seeking Youth in Europe” is funded by Stiftung Mercator**

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1 Introduction

This research report is part of the 'Multi-country Partnership to Enhance the Education of Refugee and Asylum-seeking Youth in Europe' (PERAE) established within the SIRIUS Network, a European policy network on the education of children and young people with a migrant background. The aim of PERAE is to propose a partnership between eight European countries to address inadequate access to quality education for asylum-seeking and refugee youth throughout the European Union. This specific research report aims to map the integration process of newly arrived migrant children in Flemish education, as in the past decades Belgium has undergone several constitutional reforms dividing the power of the state. In the current federal state of Belgium, asylum procedures and immigration law are federal authorities, while integration and education policies are regulated by the three communities (Flemish, French and German-speaking). In this report, we will therefore focus on integration in Flemish education, and more specifically in Flemish secondary education.

Similar to their adult counterparts, newly arrived migrant minors are also a target group of the Flemish integration policy. The group of newly arrived migrant minors comprises all minor foreign-speaking newcomers in Belgium and is thus not limited to only refugees or asylum seekers. Unlike the adult newcomers, minors do not enter the integration programs organized by the integration centres. Integration of minor newcomers mainly takes place through the education system. In Flanders, minor newcomers are grouped together into specific reception classes that mainly focus on language acquisition. The overall objective of this so-called reception education is to integrate minor newcomers as fast as possible in mainstream education by first focusing on Dutch language acquisition and social integration.

The number of newly arrived minor students (NAMS) in full time secondary reception education in Flanders is rising. At the end of the past school year (2015-2016), the amount of NAMS in reception education has increased by 62% compared to the previous school year (2014-2015) (AgODI, 2016). This is a strong rise, knowing that this same amount decreased with almost -15% between 2011 and 2012 (AgODI, 2015). The recent drastic increase in asylum applicants will probably place more pressure on Belgium and other EU member states to develop strategies for effectively integrating newly arrived immigrants into society.

The Flemish government has taken measures and is designing specific policies for the educational integration of these newly arrived minors. In 1991, Flanders introduced reception education with specific classes for minor newcomers promoting both language acquisition and social integration. The legal framework on these reception classes has been modified several times since then and currently also includes guidance and follow-up programs after the reception year.¹ Next to these longstanding legal frameworks on reception education, the federal and Flemish government have recently taken a number of new measures due to the high peak in asylum applications in 2015. These traditional and more recent policy measures will be discussed in the next chapter to provide an overview of the legal and institutional background on refugee education in Flanders.

Despite the measures taken, research shows that the integration process of newly arrived minor newcomers in Flanders is encountering several problems, some of which are linked to structural features of the Flemish education system. Minor newcomers are, after their initial schooling in reception classes, largely overrepresented in vocational education tracks (i.e. full-time school-based and part-time work-based vocational education) (Sterckx, 2006). Furthermore, there is a large socio-ethnic gap in school performances between migrant students and their native peers (Danhier et al.,

¹ Omzendbrief SO 75 van 30/06/2006 'Onthaalonderwijs voor anderstalige nieuwkomers in het voltijds gewoon secundair onderwijs'. Consulted on, 13/04/2016 via: <http://data-onderwijs.vlaanderen.be/edulex/document.aspx?docid=13123>

2014; Jacobs et al., 2009). It is to be expected that refugee and asylum-seeking youth encounter even more difficulties given their complex and difficult background and trajectory.

Since education is one of the main keys to civic participation and integration of minor asylum seekers and Belgium is faced with a strong surge in refugee influx, it is crucial to investigate the current educational integration process of refugee youth in Flemish education. This report will explore how the integration process of newly arrived minors in Flemish education is officially organized and regulated and how it is perceived by the actors involved (i.e. refugee students, school principals, teaching staff, NGO and government representatives and an integration officer working in a reception centre). The report particularly aims to investigate the difficulties and obstacles observed by different stakeholders and to understand the specific challenges that asylum seeking and refugee youth face while integrating in the Flemish education system. The project aims to identify good practices in addressing those challenges and to examine cooperation between different actors. All of these issues will be studied while taking into account the impact of the recent refugee influx.

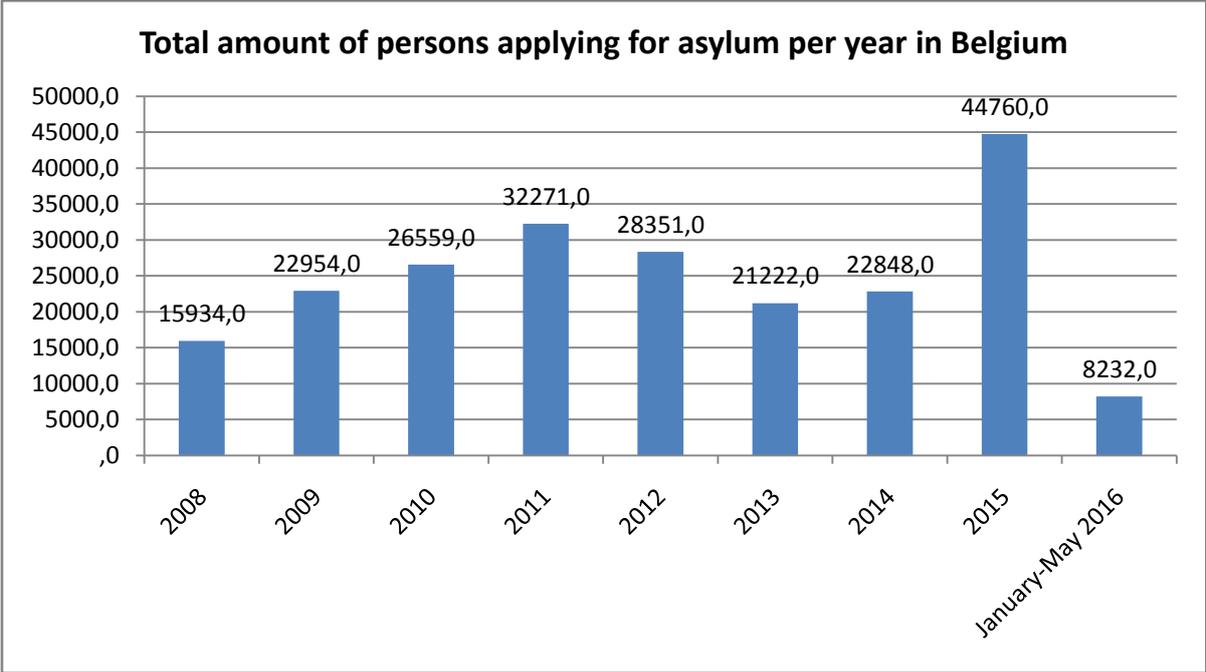
After this short introduction, the report will continue with a second chapter that provides an overview of the evolution of the amount of refugees and asylum seekers in Belgium. The second chapter will describe the legal and institutional setting of educational integration of newly arrived minors during three different phases of their stay: first arrival (0-2 months in Belgium), reception education (2-12 months in Belgium) and transition to mainstream education (more than 12 months in Belgium). The literature study in the third section summarizes the state-of-the-art on refugee education in Belgium. The fourth chapter will briefly discuss the research methodology while the fifth chapter comprehensively covers the research results of the empirical study. Finally, the sixth chapter will conclude the report.

2 Situating education for asylum-seeking and refugee youth in Belgium (Flanders)

2.1 Asylum seekers in Belgium in numbers

Before focusing specifically on refugee students, we will first provide an overview of the evolution in the amount of asylum seekers in Belgium. The graph below visualizes the evolution of the total amount of persons applying for asylum in Belgium over the past eight years.

Graph 1: Total amount of persons applying for asylum in Belgium per year



Source: Asylum Statistics 2015 - 2016, Immigration Affairs, modified by CeMIS.

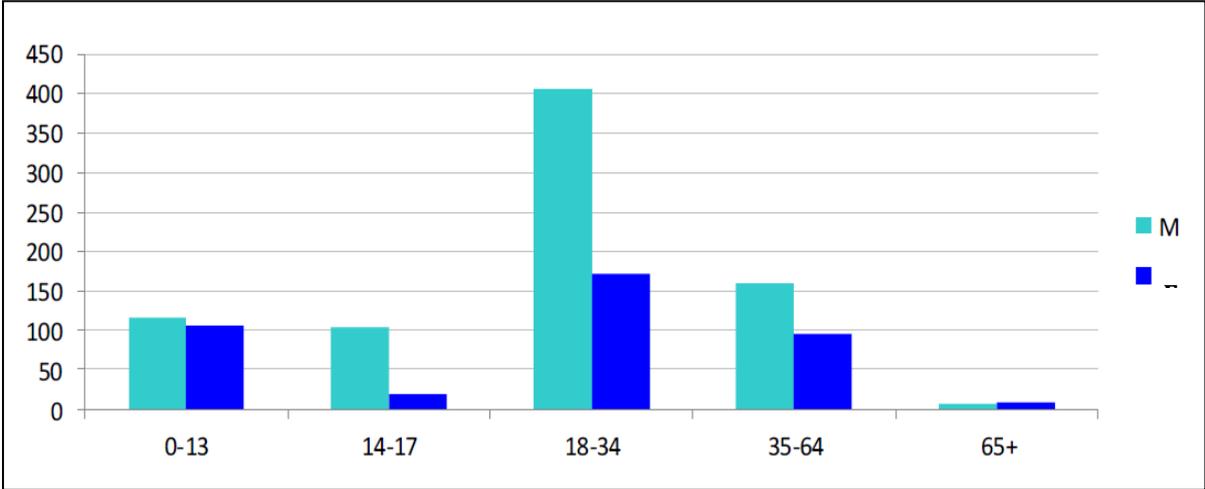
In 2015, there has been a strong increase in the amount of people applying for asylum in Belgium. Compared to the year before, the amount of refugees was almost twice as high. From January until May 2016, 8,232 persons applied for asylum in Belgium. In May 2016, 1,193 persons applied for asylum in Belgium. This is the lowest monthly number registered in eight years. Compared to the second half of 2015, this decrease is significant. In the last five months of 2015 the monthly average asylum seekers was 5,885, in the following first five months of 2016 the average decreased until 1,646 (AgODI, 2016).

The government itself claims that the recent drastic decrease in asylum applications is a result of the migration deal that was established between the EU and Turkey. According to the Secretary of Migration, the decrease demonstrates that the EU-Turkey deal has proven to be successful (Francken, 2016). However, this is contrasted and criticized by figures such as Amnesty International, the Red Cross, etc. The decrease in asylum seekers has led the federal government to make some changes in its migration policy. During the peak in asylum applications in 2015, the federal government introduced a 'spread plan' which obliged cities and municipalities to host a number of refugees according to certain quota, resulting in 34,000 extra reception places in Belgium. However, due to the recent decrease in asylum applications, the government has now decided that the 'spread plan' will not be activated and that it will be put on hold in case activation will be needed in the future (Paelinck, 2016). Moreover, in June 2016 the federal government announced the closure of

thirty reception centres for asylum seekers in Belgium. This decision is part of a phasing-out plan to reduce capacities but maintaining a buffer of 7.500 extra reception places (Francken, 2016).

Up until 2016, the official statistics of Immigration Affairs in Belgium did not make a distinction according to age. As a consequence, statistics on the age of asylum seekers are only available for the year 2016 (up until the month of May).

Graph 2: Age (per sex) of the persons applying for asylum in Belgium from January until May 2016



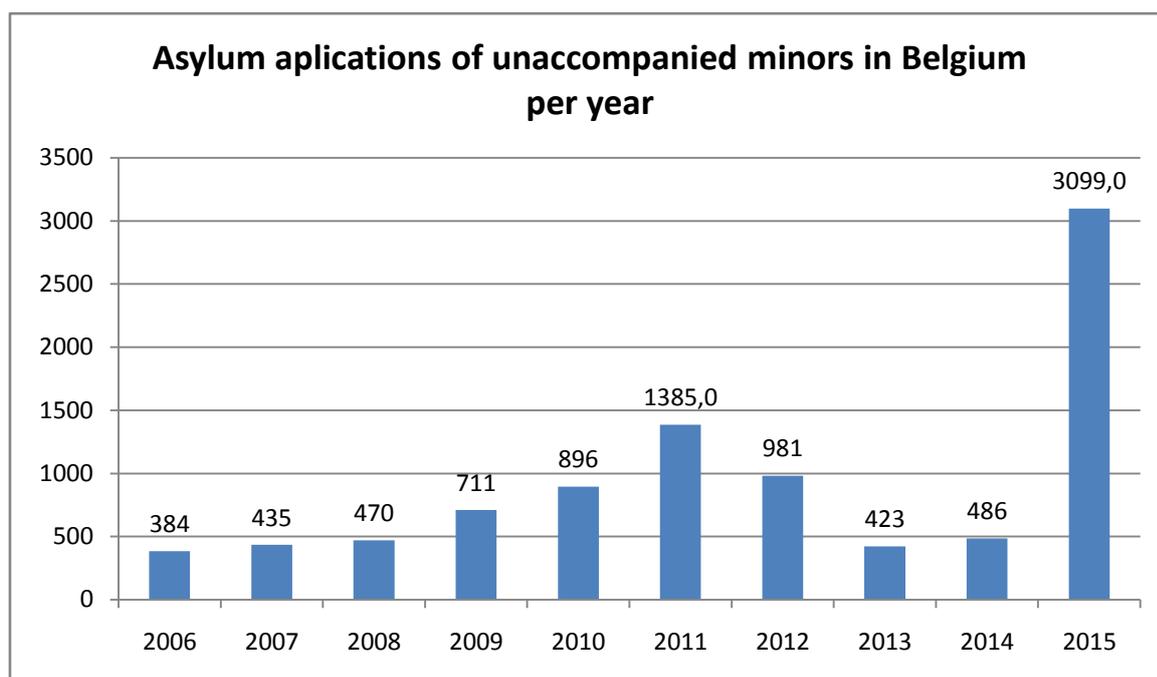
Source: Asylum Statistics 2016, Immigration Affairs.

As demonstrated in graph 2, most of the persons applying for asylum in Belgium from January 2016 until May 2016 were 18 to 34 years old. Approximately 210 asylum seekers were minors of which at least 100 were subject to compulsory education. The minors included in graph 2, are refugee youngsters that have applied for asylum in Belgium accompanied by a legal guardian. However, a great deal of minor refugees applies for asylum in Belgium without the presence of their parents or other legal guardians, which we discuss now.

2.1.1 Unaccompanied minors

The number of unaccompanied minors applying for asylum Belgium has known a very sharp rise in 2015 as visualized in the graph below.

Graph 3: Amount of unaccompanied minors applying for asylum in Belgium per year



Source: Asylum Statistics 2015, Immigration Affairs, modified by CeMIS.

In 2015, 3.099 unaccompanied minors applied for asylum in Belgium. This is more than five times the amount of the previous year (CGVS, 2015). Just like the number of general asylum applications, the amount of applications of unaccompanied minors fell sharply in 2016 as well. The monthly average of unaccompanied minors applying for asylum in Belgium during the first five months of 2016 was 118. This is a sharp decrease compared to the last five months of 2015, when a monthly average of 511 unaccompanied minors applied for asylum (CGVS, 2016).

After briefly discussing the evolution in the amount of asylum applications in Belgium over the past years, the report will now continue by describing the legal and institutional setting regarding refugee education in Flanders.

2.2 Legal and institutional setting

2.2.1 General legal and institutional setting

Through six constitutional reforms the unitary state of Belgium – originally founded in 1830 – has been regionalized into the present federal state comprising three communities (Flemish, French and German-speaking) and three regions (Flemish Region, Walloon Region and Brussels Region). The legislative and executive power is thus no longer the exclusive preserve of the federal government and the federal parliament. Today, the federal (or Belgian) power exists alongside the powers of the communities and regions.

Immigration legislation and asylum policies are federal competences in Belgium. Reception of migrants, youth care, integration and education policies on the other hand are decentralized and regulated by one of the three communities: Flemish, French and German-speaking. In this research project we focus on the Flemish situation. In Flanders, community and region are joined together.

Freedom of education

The constitution guarantees freedom of education in Belgium. Every natural or legal person has the right to organize education and establish institutions for that purpose.

A key concept in Flemish education is the governing body or school board. The school board is responsible for one or more schools. School boards enjoy considerable autonomy. They are free to choose teaching methods, they can compose their own curricula and are allowed to base their education on a certain philosophy or educational view. Schools that want government recognition or funding must meet a number of basic preconditions (e.g., adhere to curriculum targets, sufficient teaching materials, safety provisions, hygiene standards, etc).

Education that is organized by the government (community, municipal and provincial education) is called official education. Schools that are not established by the government belong to the free education sector.

There are three educational networks in Flanders:

- GO! Education is the official education organized by the Flemish community. Under the constitution, this education network is required to be neutral and to respect the religious, philosophical or ideological convictions of parents and pupils.
- Subsidized public education comprises municipal and provincial education. The governing bodies of this second educational network are united in two umbrella organizations: the Educational Secretariat of the Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities (OVSG) and the Flemish Provincial Education (POV).
- Subsidized private education is organized by a private person or organization. Privately run education mainly consists of catholic schools. These catholic schools are associated under the umbrella body Flemish Secretariat for Catholic Education (VSKO). Furthermore, there are also schools of other religions (Jewish, orthodox, Islamic, etc.). In addition to these denominational schools, there are also schools that have no affiliation with a particular religion but for example adopt a particular educational method. These schools are also known as 'method schools' (e.g., Freinet schools, Steiner schools, etc.).

Levels and type of education

There are three levels of education in Belgium: primary education, secondary education and tertiary education.

Primary education comprises both nursery education (accessible for children from 2,5 to 6 years old) and mainstream elementary education (targeted at children from 6 to 12 years old). Aside from mainstream education, there also exists primary education for children with special needs (e.g., physical or mental disabilities, serious behavioral or emotional problems or severe learning disabilities).

Secondary education is organized for minors from 12 to 18 years old. Secondary education is organized in a uniform structure comprising different stages, types of education and courses of study. There are three cycles in secondary education: cycle 1 (year 1 & 2), cycle 2 (year 3 & 4) and cycle 3 (year 5 & 6). The first cycle provides a broad general basis and is divided into an A-stream and B-stream. The A-stream is accessible for students that have obtained a certificate of elementary education. The two first years in A-stream prepares pupils for enrolment in general secondary education, technical secondary education and secondary education in arts. The B-stream is targeted at pupils that have not obtained a certificate of elementary education, but also pupils with a certificate for elementary education can be oriented towards to B-stream. After a first year in B-stream, pupils can enroll in the second year of the general A-stream or continue in the second year of the B-stream, preparing them for vocational secondary education. This makes that – de facto – the

educational tracking of pupils into different educational pathways starts already from the first year of secondary education.

From the second cycle onwards, five different types of education are offered:

- General secondary education (ASO): this type of education focuses on broad general education. It does not prepare pupils for a specific profession, but provides a foundation for continuing on to tertiary education.
- Technical secondary education (TSO): this type of education places emphasis on general and technical-theoretical subjects. After TSO, youngsters may practice a profession or move on to tertiary education. This type of education also includes practical classes.
- Secondary education in the arts (KSO): this type of education combines a broad general education with an active practice of art. After secondary education in the arts youngsters may practice a profession or pass on to tertiary education.
- Vocational secondary education (BSO): this type of education is practice-oriented. Youngsters receive general education but the focus primarily lies on learning a specific profession.
- Part-time work-based vocational education (DBSO/Syntra Leertijd): from the age of 15 (or 16 when successfully finished the first cycle of secondary education) students can choose for vocational education that is partly based in a workplace. This is always combined with one or two days of school-based education. Students in these dual learning tracks are also primarily prepared for a specific profession.

Within one of these forms of education, pupils opt for one particular course of study. Pupils obtain a diploma in secondary education after successfully completing six years of ASO, TSO, or KSO or seven years of BSO. As in primary education, special needs education is organized in secondary education as well. There also exists secondary education for youngsters with special needs.

Compulsory education

Newly arrived migrant minors in Belgium – with or without legal residence – have a right to education and are subject to the legal framework of compulsory education. Although education is a community competence, legislation on the starting and end age of compulsory education are still set by the Federal Government. The act of 29 June 1983 on compulsory education specifies that minors, Belgians and foreigners alike, are subject to compulsory education for a period of 12 years.

Nursery education is not mandatory in Flanders. However, it is strongly recommended. Children at the age of 6 can enrol in elementary education when they have attended a minimum of 220 half-days in Flemish nursery education in the previous year. In case the child has not attended any nursery education, the council of teachers of elementary schools decides whether the child is capable of enrolling in their elementary school or whether the child needs to attend one year of nursery education.

Compulsory education starts in the school year in which the child turns 6 and ends when the individual is aged 18 years. When a pupil is 15 or 16 years old he or she may enter part-time education. All youngsters in part-time education are obliged to a minimum of 28 hours a week of learning and working.

Compulsory education does not mean compulsory school attendance. To comply with compulsory education, there are two options: parents can register their child in a school or they may choose home schooling for their children. Home schooling is subject to a number of minimum requirements

and is regularly inspected by the education inspection. Students are obliged to take part in exams organized by the exam commission. Last school year, 468 pupils in Flanders were individually home schooled in secondary education.

Pupil Guidance Centre

An important institutional element of Flemish education which needs to be mentioned in this report on refugee education, is the existence of pupil guidance centres (CLB). In Flanders, there are 72 CLB's across the three different educational networks. The government finances the CLB's which belong to the education of the Flemish community (GO!) and subsidizes the CLB's which belong to subsidized public education and subsidized private education. Pupil guidance centers can work across networks and support schools which belong to another educational network.

The pupil guidance centers have the task to contribute to, and enhance, the well-being of students. Parents, teachers, pupils and school boards can turn to a pupil guidance centre for guidance, information or advice. The services provided by the centres are free and are situated around the following four domains:

- *Learning and studying*
- *School career*
- *Preventive health care*
- *Socio-emotional development*

A pupil guidance centre is multidisciplinary and can comprise various professions depending on the local needs (e.g., doctors, social workers, psychologists, psychological assistants, nurses, speech therapists, physiotherapists). The pupil guidance centers work together with other external services within their network such as welfare and health institutions.

Equal opportunities in education

In 1991, the Flemish government launched the migrant education priority policy ('Onderwijsvoorrangsbeleid ten aanzien van migranten' - OVB) to provide extra care for migrant children and to increase the integration and educational success of migrant students. In 2002 this policy was transformed into the Decree on equal opportunities in education ('Gelijke OnderwijsKansen' – GOK).² The main purposes of this decree are:

- 1) to offer all children, without exception, the best opportunities to learn and develop;
- 2) to avoid exclusion, segregation and discrimination; and
- 3) to enhance social mix and social cohesion.

The decree on equal opportunities in education consists of three major provisions:

- The right to enrolment: each pupil has the right to enroll in the school of his/her (parents') choice. Only in a strictly limited number of cases, a school can refuse an enrolment or refer a pupil to another school.
- The establishment of local consultation platforms (LOP) responsible for the following tasks: ensuring the right to enrolment, acting as an intermediary in case of conflict and cooperating in implementing a local policy on equal opportunities in education.

² Decreet van 28 juni 2002 betreffende gelijke onderwijskansen-I.

- Providing extra support for additional needs provision in schools: schools with a number of pupils who meet certain socio-economic indicators can receive additional teaching periods or additional teaching hours per teacher.

Reception education for foreign-speaking newcomers

Up until recently, there were no specific policy measures supporting foreign-speaking minors under the age of five. However, due to the increasing amount of foreign-speaking pre-schoolers in Belgium, the Flemish government has introduced a temporary policy measure in the school year of 2015-2016 providing extra resources for nursery schools per foreign-speaking infant under the age of five. These extra resources should be invested in language support. The resources can be used to hire new personal members. The measure also applies to the upcoming school year (2016-2017) providing nursery schools with extra teaching hours.

In elementary education, minor newcomers are integrated in mainstream regular classes with optionally a few supplementary hours of Dutch language education. When elementary schools register a certain number of minor newcomers they receive additional funds to offer extra support for these children.

In secondary education, the integration of minor newcomers is realized through a specific reception education program. In this report, we focus on the integration of newly arrived minors in secondary education. As mentioned above, in 1991 the Flemish government launched the migrant education priority policy (OVV) to increase the integration and educational success of migrant students. This OVV has not only resulted in the creation of a policy on equal opportunities in education, but also entailed the establishment of a reception year in secondary education, known as Reception Class for Foreign-Speaking Newcomers (Onthaalklas voor Anderstalige Nieuwkomers – OKAN). The curriculum of these reception classes is strongly focused on language acquisition. Reception education is aimed at enhancing the language proficiency and the social integration of foreign-speaking minor newcomers in order to enable them to enrol in mainstream secondary education the subsequent school year. Reception education is not limited to a reception year but also entails support, guidance and follow-up of former newcomers in mainstream secondary education. This paragraph only briefly discussed reception education in Flanders. In ‘2.2.3 Reception education’, we will elaborate in detail on the objectives, conditions and curricula of reception classes.

After this general national and Flemish institutional setting, we will now further elaborate on the integration of newly arrived minors by discussing the legal and institutional setting within three different stages of the integration process of newly arrived minors in Flemish (secondary³) education: 1) first arrival (0-2 months in Belgium), 2) reception education (2-12 months in Belgium) and 3) transition to mainstream secondary education (more than 12 months in Belgium). Each phase represents different durations of stay and thus different levels of second language acquisition and experience in the respective educational systems. In Belgium however, there is an overlap between the first and the second phase.

2.2.2 Phase 1: First arrival (0-2 months in Belgium)

Children with a foreign nationality residing in Belgium are subject to compulsory education from the sixtieth day after their registration in the foreigners register, waiting register or population register of the municipality. Children without official residence documents also have the right to register in a school. A school does not have the right to refuse them on those grounds.

³ As the research part of this project is primarily directed towards integration in secondary education we will also mostly focus on this educational stage for the three phases of the integration process.

After submitting an application to the Immigration Office in Brussels, asylum seekers are referred to Fedasil's Dispatching Service. In case asylum seekers do not have a place to stay, the Dispatching Servicetries to allocatethem a reception place that same day. From the moment the application is submitted until the moment the asylum procedure is finished, asylum seekers have the right to material aid and reception. This entails 'bed, bath and bread', medical, linguistic, legal or social guidance and education. Belgium has fifty collective reception centres for asylum seekers managed by Fedasil, the Red Cross or other partners. In June 2016, the federal government announced the closure of thirty so called 'emergency centres' of the Red Cross, due to a decrease in the influx of asylum seekers (Francken, 2016).

Just like all minors in Belgium, children who live in a reception centre are obliged to attend school. They usually go to a school in the neighbourhood of the centre that offers reception education. The choice of school is made in consultation with the parents.

When foreign-speaking minor newcomers arrive in Flanders, they and their parents can turn to their local Integration Centre to find all the information they need about the Flemish education system. Consultants at these offices create a preliminary profile of the youngsters on the basis of their cultural background, experiences and academic level. The Integration Centre is assigned the task of supporting newly arrived minors and their parents in finding an appropriate school. Integration Centres refer foreign-speaking newly arrived minors to secondary schools that provide reception education. If necessary, they will also be referred to welfare and health care facilities.

This first chapter described the legal and institutional setting for the education of foreign-speaking newcomers during the first phase of their arrival in Belgium. The next chapter will cover the setting of the overlapping second phase in which foreign-speaking newcomers enrol in reception education and thus have arrived more than approximately two months but less than one year.

2.2.3 Phase 2: Reception education (2-12 months in Belgium)

After students find their way to a secondary school during the first phase of their arrival, via reception centres, an integration centre or independently, the next step is their enrolment in reception education. As mentioned before, we will focus on reception education in secondary schools. It has to be mentioned that NAMS in reception education are not necessarily refugees. The group of NAMS can also include foreign-speaking minors that have migrated to Belgium under the EU Freedom of Movement Framework, for the purpose of family reunification or other motives.

Conditions for reception education

A student is considered a foreign-speaking newcomer and can participate in reception education when he or she meets all of the following conditions:

- who is aged twelve to eighteen years old (for secondary education) on 31 December following the start of the school year;
- who is a newcomer, this is with a stay of maximum one year without interruptions in Belgium;
- who does not have Dutch as mother tongue or home language;
- who hasn't adequately mastered the language to participate in regular classes;
- who has enrolled up to nine months (holiday months of July and August not included) in a school with Dutch as a language of instruction.

Schools can request an exception on the above mentioned conditions by submitting a motivated request to the Agency for Education Services. Reception education generally lasts one academic year. Extensions also have to be motivated and requested to the Agency for Education Services.

For children residing in a centre for asylum seekers, only the age condition stands. These children are considered foreign-speaking newcomer and can participate in reception education when they meet the age condition and can submit a certificate from the asylum centre where he or she resides.

Determining whether a student is considered a foreign-speaking newcomer and can participate in reception education is done on basis of a written declaration of honour, dated and signed by the parents or by a person who cares for the minor newcomer.

School principals are responsible, with consultation of their teachers, to determine whether or not the minor newcomer has inadequately mastered the level of Dutch required to successfully participate in mainstream education.

In order to qualify for organizing reception education, schools have to meet a set of organizational conditions. The request to organize reception education needs to be submitted by the school community and approved by the Flemish government. When approval is granted, schools receive extra teaching hours per school community or per school that is not part of a school community. Schools receive 2,5 hours per foreign-speaking newcomer in reception education. The allocation of extra hours is thus calculated per foreign-speaking minor newcomer and is recalculated for every four additional newcomer. School communities decide how these extra hours are distributed among the schools that offer reception education. Every time the amount of foreign-speaking newcomers increases or decreases with four students, school communities have to request a recalculation of teaching hours.

In October 2015, the Flemish Government introduced a temporary policy measure allowing schools to submit a request to organize reception education during the course of the entire school year instead of only on the 1st of September. Furthermore, the Flemish government is obliged to decide on the approval or denial within two months. This policy measure was introduced due to the recent surge refugee influx and to make schools more flexible to respond to the changes.

Students in secondary reception education

The amount of students in secondary reception education in Flanders has fluctuated over the last seven school years with a significantly sharp rise in the past school year (2015-2016).

Table 1: Amount of students in Flemish secondary reception education on the first of February

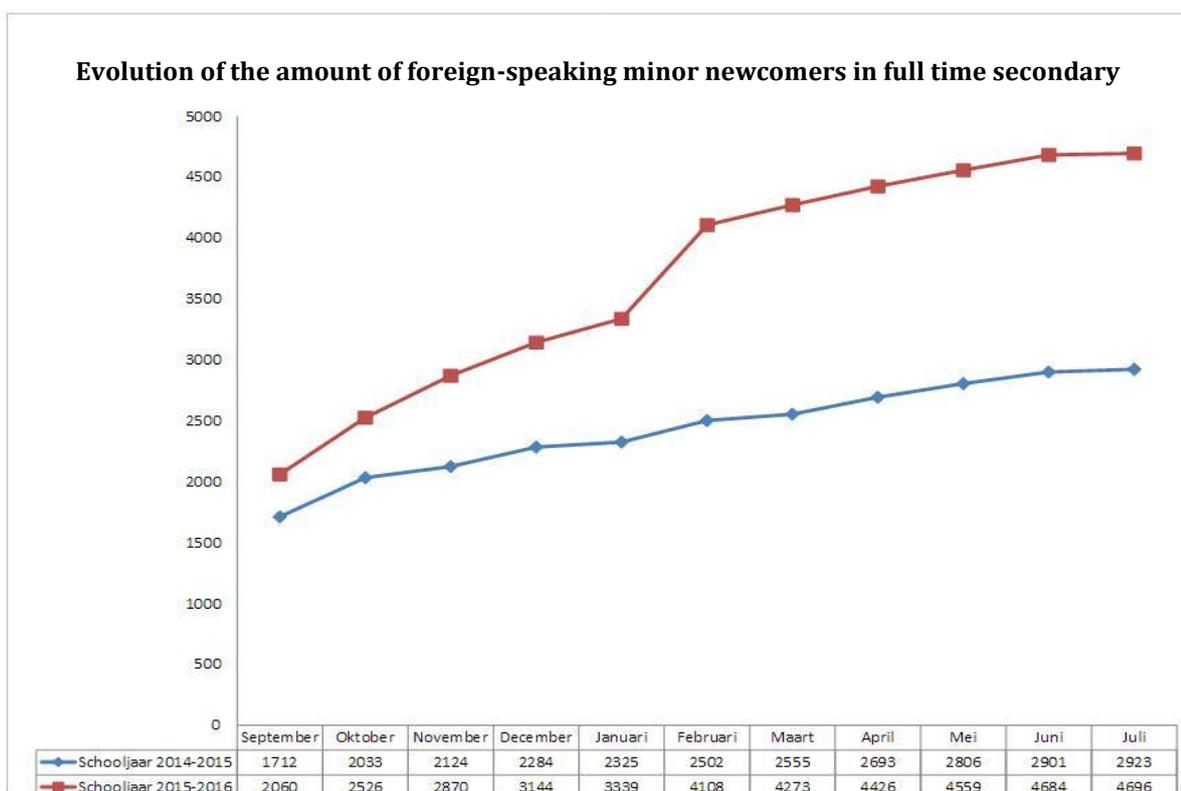
2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014	2014-2015	2015-2016
2.324	2.597	3.120	2.665	2.291	2.502	4.108

Source: AgODI, modified by CeMIS.

Up to the school year 2011-2012, the amount of students in secondary reception education gradually increased. In the following two school years (2012-2013 and 2013-2014) the amount of students decreased. The table shows a slight increase in the subsequent school year (2014-2015). Remarkably, the amount of students in secondary reception education during the past school year (2015-2016) increased sharply with more than 64% in one year.

The amount of NAMS in Flemish secondary education has particularly peaked in the second half of last school year (2015-2016), as illustrated in the graph below.

Graph 4: Evolution of the number of NAMS in Flemish fulltime secondary education



Source: AgODI.

Graph 4 provides a more detailed overview of the monthly increase in the amount of students in secondary reception education in 2014-2015 and 2015-2016. The graph shows a significant increase in the school year 2015-2016, especially during the last five months.

Diversity in reception classes

Classes in reception education are generally very heterogeneous and consist of students with different ages, religions, nationalities, languages and schooling backgrounds. At the start of reception education in Belgium in the mid 90's, reception classes mainly consisted of Turkish and Moroccan migrant children (Balci, 2012). Today, there is a lot more diversity in reception education.

Over the past five school years, Moroccans and Turks are mostly still enlisted in the top 10 of most common nationalities in reception education. However, they no longer represent the largest population in reception education as visualized in the table below.

Table 2: Overview of the top 10 most common nationalities in reception education

2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014
Afghanistan (242)	Afghanistan (268)	Afghanistan (502)	Afghanistan (422)	Afghanistan (203)
Marokko (169)	België (155)	Bulgarije (151)	België (156)	Polen (176)
België (147)	Kosovo (152)	Polen (143)	Polen (141)	Ghana (116)
Bulgarije (123)	Bulgarije (147)	België (149)	Bulgarije (137)	Bulgarije (113)
Irak (114)	Rusland (123)	Irak (140)	Marokko (124)	Roemenië (109)
Kosovo (99)	Irak (123)	Marokko (118)	Irak (113)	Spanje (103)
Rusland (97)	Marokko (114)	Turkije (114)	Turkije (104)	Marokko (101)
Polen (91)	Macedonië (101)	Roemenië (100)	Roemenië (103)	België (84)
Turkije (89)	Armenië (100)	Servië (98)	Spanje (83)	Irak (82)
Armenië (85)	Servië (94)	Rusland (88)	Ghana (81)	Turkije (68)

Source: Year report on reception education of AgODI, modified by CeMIS.

Each year, the composition of reception classes changes. For the academic years represented in Table 2, Afghans were the largest population in reception education in Flanders. Most recent numbers on the evolution of nationalities in reception education are only updated until the school year 2013-2014. However, in 2015 the top three nationalities of asylum seekers in Belgium were: Iraq (21,8%), Syria (21,3%) and Afghanistan (20%) (CGVS, 2015). It is highly plausible that this will also have an impact on the composition of nationalities in reception education in Flanders.

Development objectives and content of reception education

The learning program of reception education aims to integrate newly arrived minors into a regular education type according to their individual capacities as fast as possible. Minor newcomers are offered intensive language courses for a period of maximum one school year in special reception classes. As mentioned before, this period can be extended through a motivated request. Since September 1st 2010, the Flemish government has introduced specific 'development objectives for reception education'. These objectives need to be attained for each student at the end of the reception year. The objectives are mainly divided into language objectives (specific levels of understanding, listening, writing and speaking), general objectives (e.g., self-reliance, social integration, etc.) and attitudes (e.g., being able to reflect on their capabilities, developing a positive self-image, etc.). Schools are obliged to follow these objectives, but they are free to choose their own teaching methods.

The curriculum of reception education is strongly focused on acquiring Dutch. The amount of hours in the weekly curriculum may vary between 28 and 32 teaching hours (including religion/non-confessional ethics/own culture and religion/cultural philosophy) of which a minimum of 22 hours should be invested in learning the Dutch language (Balci, 2012). A maximum of four hours per week may optionally be used for purposes other than teaching Dutch.

Schools are asked to set out individual trajectories for each student in reception education. These trajectories can change during the course of the year taking into account the learning potential and pace of the student.

When NAMS terminate reception education, they receive a certificate of regular school attendance. The time frame in which students receive their certificate and are ready to enrol in mainstream education varies from student to student and is dependent on their individual trajectories. Students can receive this certificate during the course of the first reception year, at the end of a first reception year, during the course of a second reception year (for which approval is needed) or at the end of a second reception year (for which approval is also needed).

2.2.4 Phase 3: Transition to mainstream secondary education (more than 12 months in Belgium)

At the end of the reception year, the 'class council' formulates an advice regarding the orientation of the student. Depending on age and learning potential, students can choose to enrol in secondary education, adult education, other training initiatives or the labour market. In this project, we focus on the transition to secondary education. Depending on the range of courses offered, students can enrol in secondary education within the same school of their reception education or they can enrol in a different school.

When former foreign-speaking newcomers make the transition to regular secondary education, it is the 'admission class council' of the school of secondary education that decides on the admission of the student. This decision has to be made after 25 days of regular class attendance. For this decision, the 'admission class council' is obliged to take into account general admission conditions as well as the advice of the 'class council' of the school in which the student followed reception education.

To guide former reception students and teachers in secondary education in this transition process, the Flemish government foresees specific teaching hours. Up until recently, every school community that consists of schools offering reception education was offered 22 teaching hours to support students during and after the transition to mainstream education. The 22 hours were thus allocated per school community, regardless of the amount of NAMS subscribed in the different schools within one community. The school community is responsible for the allocation of these 22 hours to the different schools. These extra hours should be spent on so-called follow-up coaching. Teaching hours for follow-up coaching should be used for guiding, supporting and following up former NAMS in secondary education. The hours also need to be invested in sharing knowledge and expertise with secondary education regarding the former NAMS. This should be achieved by coaching teachers in secondary education. Furthermore, follow-up coaches are responsible for ensuring a better information flow concerning the former NAMS and keeping contact with former NAMS.

In June 2016, the Flemish Ministry of Education has changed the regulation on the amount of teaching hours for follow-up coaching. As of September 2016, each school community will receive 0,9 teaching hours per pupil that was enrolled in reception education the previous year. The Ministry stated that this measurement is necessary to respond to the increasing amount of pupils in reception education. Due to the new measurement, an extra 141 follow-up coaches will be deployed in the upcoming school year (2016-2017). This is more than four times the amount of follow-up coaches that were deployed in the past school year and brings the total amount to 175 coaches. To introduce this measurement, the Flemish Ministry of Education will invest 7,7 million euro (Crevits, 2016).

After discussing the legal and institutional setting, we will now continue with the current state of literature on refugee education in Flanders.

3 State of literature

3.1 Flemish reception education in a European comparative perspective

In 2013, the European Commission published a comparative study executed by the Public Policy and Management Institute (PPMI) on educational support to Newly Arrived Minor Students (NAMS) in 15 member states of the European Union (PPMI, 2013). The study distinguishes four types of educational support policies that facilitate the integration of NAMS in education systems: linguistic support, academic support, outreach and cooperation and intercultural education. Based on different combinations of these supporting policies and the general education system of the countries, the PPMI study distinguishes five different educational support models. The models below are based on analysis of policy inputs and educational support processes and rely on policy mapping as well as analysis of policy implementation through case studies which were carried out in 10 selected countries.

Comprehensive support model

In the comprehensive support model, all types of support policies are well developed. The general education system can be described as inclusive. Denmark and Sweden were the representative countries of the comprehensive support model. Within this model, NAMS receive continuous teaching support and assistance in transferring to higher levels of education. The education system is decentralized and schools have a high degree of autonomy. Intercultural learning is mainstreamed into education and there is a strong focus on outreach to parents and local communities (PPMI, 2013).

Non-systematic support model

Countries representing the non-systematic support model have no clear distinct educational supporting policy for NAMS. There is a lack of a systematic approach and the support provided is very fragmented. Countries that are attributed to this group were: Italy, Greece and Cyprus (PPMI, 2013).

Integration model

The strongest aspects of the integration model are academic support, outreach, cooperation and intercultural education. The representative country for this model was Ireland. The linguistic support provided in Ireland is limited to extra support without offering it as a second language. Strong emphasis is placed on intercultural education which is integrated and promoted in the curricula and in daily school life (PPMI, 2013).

Centralized entry support model

The major components of the centralized entry support model are academic support and intercultural education. The main representative countries within the sample were Luxembourg and France. Both countries show many similarities, but Luxembourg appears to be more tolerant to diversity than France. The latter is keener to promote French values and enhance the assimilation of migrants (PPMI, 2013).

Compensatory support model

The most important features of the compensatory support model are: linguistic support, outreach and intercultural education. However, they are not as strongly applied as in the comprehensive model. Austria and Belgium (Flanders) were seen as representatives for the compensatory support model. In these countries, strong emphasis is placed on acquiring the language of the host country.

Both countries mainly apply measures that are described as compensatory and are aimed at incorporating NAMS into the existing system without adjusting the system itself. These measures thus address the gap between NAMS and native students rather than the reasons that cause these gaps. Austria and Belgium are countries with early ability tracking, separating students in groups for all subjects or curriculums by academic ability. According to the PPMI (2013) study, this leads to less equality between migrants and their native peers and has a negative impact on migrant students' educational outcomes. Furthermore, both Austria and Belgium have federal governments which can result in regional differences in educational support to NAMS (PPMI, 2013).

The PPMI (2013) study argues that the effectiveness of targeted support measures is strongly dependent on the inclusiveness of educational environments. An integrated approach to the inclusion of NAMS is expected to have the best results. This integrated approach entails reforms to make the education system more inclusive combined with targeted measures providing comprehensive support to NAMS aiming at eliminating their educational disadvantages (PPMI, 2013).

After placing Flemish educational support to NAMS in a European comparative perspective, we will now continue with academic literature on a number of challenges within the integration process of refugee students and other NAMS in Flemish education.

3.2 Challenges in the integration of NAMS in Flemish education

3.2.1 Access to quality education in Flanders

One major component regarding the integration of refugee students and other NAMS in education systems is their access to quality education. Access to quality education entails access to schools providing quality education as well as access to promising educational trajectories (PPMI, 2013). The PPMI study (2013) claims that access to quality education is strongly related to the characteristics of a country's education system. More specifically, the age of first ability tracking and the level of school segregation are put forward as influential factors. We will now discuss both indicators in Flanders.

Early tracking system

Education systems that make use of ability tracking separate students by their abilities into groups or classes for all subjects. In Flanders, tracking begins after elementary school. During the first two years of secondary education, a distinction is made between more academically oriented (A-stream) and vocationally oriented (B-stream) education. After these two years, the tracking system continues into several other study courses. At an early age, students enter a hierarchic system of different educational tracks. Furthermore, the Flemish education system works as a 'waterfall' depending on school performances (Jacobs et al., 2009). There is a hierarchy of social appreciation between the educational tracks with general secondary education at the top and vocational secondary education at the bottom. Ability tracking may disadvantage immigrant children since language barriers can hinder the adequate assessment of students' abilities (PPMI, 2013). OECD data indicate that students with an immigrant background are more likely to end up in vocational education (OECD, 2010). In the (Flemish) system of early ability tracking, NAMS are most vulnerable within the group of migrant children (De Clerck et al., 2014). Students that have completed one (or more) year(s) in reception education are overrepresented in (part-time) vocational education (Sterckx, 2006).

Segregation

Another important element with regard to quality education is school segregation. School segregation is also intertwined with ability tracking since different schools offer different tracks (PPMI, 2013).

Research has shown that school segregation is very high in Belgium, both in Flemish and in French education (Jacobs et al., 2009). The concentration of immigrant students in certain schools has a negative impact on their educational trajectories and outcomes (Wauters et al., 2015). Jacobs (2009) conducted research based on analysis of PISA and OECD data. The author concludes that both socioeconomic and ethnic segregation are strongly present in the education system of Belgium. Belgium chooses to cope with the heterogeneity in schooling performances of students via a 'separation model', using early ability tracking. Furthermore, segregation in Flanders is fuelled by the freedom of school choice in Belgium (Jacobs et al., 2009). This leads to an uneven spread of migrant students among Belgian schools (Wauters et al., 2015). Migrant students are more often enrolled in schools with a low average of school performances and with a school population with higher proportions of socioeconomic disadvantaged students. This education system has resulted in schools with homogenous populations and a lack of social mix in schools (Jacobs et al., 2009).

The segregation in Belgian schools is an important factor in education inequality. Jacobs (2009) argues that Belgian schools reproduce inequality. Even when taking into account the individual socio-economic background of immigrant students, the language spoken at home and the type of education (secondary or vocational), immigrant students still find themselves in a disadvantaged position compared to their native peers. Institutional factors play a crucial role in this phenomenon.

3.2.2 Absenteeism in reception education

The proportion of students in reception education with notifications of problematic absenteeism has increased over the past years as visualised in the table below.

Table 3: Overview of amount of notifications of problematic absences (PA) in secondary reception education

	Amount of notifications of PA in reception education	Amount of students in reception education	% of PA in secondary reception education	% of PA in general secondary education
2009-2010	141	2.324	6,1%	0,8%
2010-2011	204	2.597	7,9%	0,9%
2011-2012	212	3.120	6,8%	0,8%
2012-2013	259	2.665	9,7%	0,9%
2013-2014	236	2.291	10,3%	1%

Source: Year report on reception education of AgODI, modified by CeMIS.

Problematic absences are absences that are not legitimized by law or by the school. The percentage of students with notifications of problematic absences in reception education has continuously risen over the last five years until more than 10% in the school year of 2013-2014⁴. The proportion of students in reception education on the total amount of problematic absences varies between 4% and 8%. This percentage is significantly higher than in mainstream secondary education knowing that students in reception education only make up 0,54% of the school population in secondary education (AgODI, 2015). We can conclude that there is an overrepresentation of a relatively small group (Balci, 2012). The problematic absenteeism among this relatively large part of students in reception education can have several diverse causes. Apart from the causes that are frequently linked to

⁴ This is the most recent data based on the year report on reception education of the Agency of Education Services.

absenteeism in secondary education (e.g., school fatigue, family problems, etc.), students in reception education are often confronted with other specific issues (AgoDI, 2015). A lot of these youngsters are dealing with traumatic experiences or precarious living environments. Some of the students have lived in war and are trying to adjust to a foreign country and culture. It is important for teachers and caregivers to pay attention to the difficult living environments of some of the students in reception education since these factors can impact the educational trajectory of students (Balci, 2012).

3.2.3 Increasing diversity in reception class

School personnel in reception education express the need for specific expertise to provide individual guidance and respond to the needs of the diverse population in reception classes. Wauters et al. (2013) argue that Flemish education policy still takes too little account of the specific character of reception education and the expertise it requires from teachers. In reception classes, students with different schooling backgrounds, native language, age, literacy level, and socio-emotional wellbeing are grouped together. In addition, teachers in reception education are confronted with a continuous in- and outflow of students over the course of the entire school year. There are no specific diploma requirements for the deployment of teachers in reception education. Teachers in reception education often have different backgrounds without specific knowledge on, or experience in, language education, psycho-sociological guidance, or migration and diversity themes. Working with minor newcomers does not only require particular pedagogic/didactic skills from teachers, but a much broader expertise (Wauters et al., 2013).

3.2.4 Transition from reception education to mainstream education

The transition from reception to mainstream education forms a big challenge in Flanders (Balci, 2012). The table below provides an overview of the trajectories of students after completing reception education.

Table 4: Overview of trajectories of students enrolled in secondary reception education the previous year

	2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014
	Percentage of the total amount of students enrolled in reception education the previous year				
Fulltime secondary	65,3%	60,8%	61,3%	61,2%	67,3%
Part-time secondary	8,0%	8,9%	11,2%	12,1%	8,8%
Special secondary	2,9%	3,3%	2,6%	3,5%	3,1%
Elementary	0,1%	0,2%	0,1%	0,1%	0,1%
Special elementary	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,1%
Syntra (adult education)	0,0%	0,6%	0,1%	0,3%	0,3%
Early school leavers	23,7%	26,3%	24,6%	22,9%	20,3%

Source: Year report on reception education of AgoDI, modified by CeMIS.

Table 4 represents the most recent data of AgODI on the evolution of trajectories of students one year after their enrolment in reception education. The amount of students that flow into fulltime secondary education varies between 60% and 67%. 8% to 12% enrol in part-time secondary education and 2,6% to 3,5% end up in special secondary education. The percentage of early school leavers after completing one (or more) years of reception education varies between 20% and 26% (AgODI, 2015).

When taking a closer look into students' enrolment in mainstream fulltime secondary education after completing reception education, we get the following division:

Table 5: Overview of trajectories of students enrolled in fulltime secondary education after completing reception education the previous year

	2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014
	Percentage of the total amount of former reception education students enrolled in fulltime secondary education				
Reception education	34,2%	25,6%	25,8%	21,5%	28,7%
First grade secondary	32,9%	35,8%	33,6%	33%	32,1%
General (ASO)	5,5%	5,7%	4,8%	6,8%	4,8%
Vocational (BSO)	19,8%	24,9%	23,4%	25,5%	21,8%
Art (KSO)	0,5%	0,6%	0,5%	0,7%	0,9%
Technical (TSO)	7,1%	7,4%	11,9%	12,4%	11,7%

Source: Year report on reception education of AgODI, modified by CeMIS.

Of the total amount of students that were enrolled in reception education and flowed into secondary education the following year, the percentage of students that re-entered reception education varies between 21,5% and 34,2%. The percentage of students that flowed into the first grade (year 1 & 2) of secondary education varies between 32,1% and 35,8%. From those who enrolled in secondary education, the majority ends up in vocational education.

Approximately half of the students that have terminated one (or more) year(s) of reception education continue their educational trajectory in mainstream education within the same school. These students generally have better chances of ending up in general education rather than vocational education. To enhance the transition process, schools offering reception education often organize so called 'introduction internships'. During these 'internships', reception education students participate in a number of courses in mainstream education to allow them to become acquainted with the school and the courses (Balci, 2012).

One of the main issues in the transition from reception education to general education is the large gap between the skills and knowledge newcomers acquire in reception education and the expectations in mainstream education (Ramaut, 2002). When newcomer students terminate reception education, they are no longer perceived as 'former newcomer' in their new trajectory in general education. They are expected to be able to follow and keep up with their class (De Clerck et

al., 2014). However, newcomers often need extra guidance and support after reception education. This particularly applies to extra support in language acquisition, but also on a socio-emotional level. Extra support doesn't necessarily suggest a separate approach for former newcomers in mainstream education. Strong learning environments with extensive interaction, active participation and attention for language proficiency will not only benefit former newcomers, but the entire class population. Furthermore, students with stronger learning profiles can take on a leadership role and support weaker students (Ramaut, 2002).

Another challenge identified within the transition from reception to general education is the lack of clear information on the education and labour market system in Flanders/Belgium. Information to students and parents is very fragmented and provided by different channels. Research has shown that the follow-up coaches responsible for the guidance of students during the process of orientation and transition, are dealing with a heavy workload. There are not enough resources available per school to provide intensive guidance to all newcomer students during and after the transition from reception to general education. There also appears to be a lack of cooperation between follow-up coaches and members of the pupil guidance center (De Clerck et al., 2014).

Furthermore, there is a need to inform and professionalize teachers in general secondary education on how to guide and support former newcomers. Research has shown that teachers and other school personnel in secondary schools find it very challenging to work with former newcomers as these teachers often lack the experiences, teaching methods and skills to provide the right information and support to former newcomers (De Clerck et al., 2014).

Students aged 16 and older that make the transition from reception education to part-time work-based vocational education, other vocational training initiatives or adult education generally encounter the same difficulties. In addition, they experience some specific difficulties. In part-time work-based vocational education former newcomers find it difficult to find a good internship. In adult education, the high cost of the courses and the higher degree of independence that is requested from students pose a challenge to former newcomers (De Clerck et al., 2014).

Wauters et al. (2013) point out another issue regarding the schools in which former newcomers are enrolled. As explained in the legal and institutional setting above, the 'admission class council' in the school that offers mainstream education decides whether or not a former newcomer is capable of following the chosen study program in general education after completing reception education. According to the authors, this regulation empowers school boards to be selective in the profile of students they allow to enrol in their schools. This has fuelled segregation in the Flemish education system as there appears to be division in schools that are willing to subscribe former newcomers and schools that are unwilling to accept former newcomers.

3.2.5 Socio-emotional support

The large percentage of early school leavers and the overrepresentation of NAMS in vocational education have complex and diverse causes. Besides school-related causes, several societal, family and/or individual factors can impact the educational trajectories and outcomes of migrant students. Negative stereotypes regarding migration, difficult socio-economic and/or financial situations at home, insecurities about asylum procedures, traumatic experiences or dealing with grief and loss are all factors that can complicate the social and educational integration of newcomer students. In addition to the need for a differentiated teaching approach, in which teachers set out differentiated educational trajectories for students to respond to the heterogeneity in reception classes, there is also a strong need for an integrated approach in reception education. De Clerck et al. (2014) indicate that there should be a larger focus on connecting the different life domains of newcomer students. The authors argue that schools work too isolated and that there is a lack of cooperation with other important factors and actors (leisure time, youth care, employment, integration) that play a crucial

role in the educational and social integration of NAMS throughout their entire integration process (De Clerck et al. 2014). Wauters et al. (2013) claim that too little is invested in learning and integration outside of school. Supporting and guiding newcomers should not only be a task taken up by schools but also by other organizations that can play a role in the integration process of these youngsters (Wauters et al., 2013).

Young foreign-speaking newcomers often have a small social network that is limited to their family members and some fellow students from reception class or in the neighborhood. As a result, NAMS have fewer possibilities to turn to an inner circle for support which can cause them to feel lonely. Research has shown that extra guidance in leisure time could result in a lot of opportunities for newcomer students. It allows them to construct a social network, to acquire language skills in an informal way, to develop other competences and to relax and interact with peers (De Clerck et al., 2014).

Wauters et al. (2013) have identified a number of presuppositions in the official regulations and objectives concerning reception education in Flanders. The authors state that in these official objectives, the assumption is made that one year of intensive language learning for newcomers is sufficient for attaining a successful educational trajectory in general education. Official reception education objectives assume that a personalized approach, in which teachers set out a differentiated and individual trajectory for each newcomer student, is feasible in practice and that school personnel possess the necessary resources and expertise for such an approach. Official statistics and numbers on educational trajectories and outcomes of newcomer students seem to indicate that it is not simple to achieve the reception education objectives set out by the government. This leads Wauters et al. (2013) to question whether the theoretical presuppositions that underpin the reception education policy framework and objectives should be taken for granted and whether they are feasible. The authors advocate an increase in the attention and support for former newcomers both in length (by providing support to former newcomers after they have completed reception education) and in a broader and more comprehensive manner (by including support from other organizations on different life domains in and outside of school).

After elaborating on the legal institutional setting of refugee education in Flanders and summarizing the existing literature on the subject, the next chapter will briefly discuss the research methodology.

4 Research methodology

4.1 Objectives

The objective of this report is to map current practices and challenges in the integration of refugee minors in the Flemish education system. As explained above, refugee children are enrolled in reception education together with other NAMS. The recent rise in asylum applicants has placed increased pressure on European member states to develop strategies for effectively integrating new arrivals into society. This country report aims to examine how this has impacted on the Flemish education system and what strategies have been developed to cope with possible increased pressures or new challenges. This research aims to discover challenges and obstacles in this integration process and how they can be overcome in order to enhance the integration process and the educational trajectories of and outcomes for refugee students. Furthermore, we aim to map the cooperation and communication between the different actors involved in the integration process of refugee minors.

4.2 Research methods

For the empirical study, most of the data was collected in the city of Antwerp. The Province of Antwerp – in which the city of Antwerp is located – is the province with the highest amount of schools offering reception education in Flanders and in Belgium. The two schools involved in this research are both urban schools located in a multicultural neighbourhood. Both schools have an almost exclusive population of students with an immigrant background. More than 90% of the school population in school 1 complies with the required (in)equality indicators to be entitled to receive extra teaching hours in order to enhance equal education opportunities. This school has been offering reception education for 16 years. School 2 exclusively offers reception and transition classes. The school describes itself as a ‘holistic school’ (or ‘brede school’ in Dutch). This means that the pedagogic and didactic function of the school is framed within the social context taking into account the needs of the students and his/her environment.

The research design of this study consists of the following qualitative research methods:

- In-depth interviews: interviews were conducted with two local school authorities, two national policy makers, a reception centre administrator responsible for integration, two employees of a NGO supporting refugees in Flanders, one employment sector representative, two school principals, two teachers in reception education, one follow-up coach, one educational trajectory guide and one student counsellor (N=15).
- Participatory observations: the observational study was conducted in several reception classes of different levels, from a class for illiterate students to a reception class for students close to acquiring the learning levels needed for regular education. Observations were also conducted in transition classes and in classes within mainstream education with several former newcomers. All observations were conducted in the two Antwerp schools involved in this study.
- Focus group discussion: a focus group discussion was organized with eight students that were enrolled in reception education the previous school year or the year before that and are currently enrolled in mainstream secondary technical education. The students are aged between 14 and 17 years old and originate from a diverse range of countries: Nepal, Ghana, Guinea, Turkey, Morocco, Congo and Syria (N=8).

5 Research results: practices and challenges in the integration of refugee students in Flemish secondary education

The research results of this country report will be structured according to three different stages of integration in Flemish education that a minor newcomer goes through when arriving in Flanders: 1) first arrival (0-2 months in Belgium), 2) reception education (2-12 months in Belgium), 3) transition to mainstream secondary education (more than 12 months in Belgium). Per stage, we will discuss the main practices and challenges in the integration of refugees in Flemish secondary education as they were put forward during the field work of this study. Some challenges or stages overlap one another. Certain practices or challenges discussed within one phase can thus also form an issue in other phases. Before elaborating in detail on the specific challenges within each phase, we will first discuss some general issues that are related to the educational integration of refugee and asylum seeking students in Belgium.

5.1 General issues

5.1.1 Impact recent increase in asylum seekers

As illustrated by the official statistics in the first section of this report, the number of asylum applications in Belgium and the number of NAMS enrolled in Flemish education has risen sharply over the course of the past school year. The recent increase in asylum seekers has impacted the schools under study in various ways due to the changed profiles of newcomers in reception classes.

First, several respondents referred to the changed class compositions. The learning profile, experiences and backgrounds of the students seem to have gotten more diverse. Several school personnel members have indicated that the differences and gaps between the students in school have become larger. One of the school principals explains that the changing profiles of the students combined with the fact that newcomers flow in and out of the school year more randomly, can be challenging for teachers and other school personnel.

“The profiles of the students; a couple of Syrians. If they have received a good education at home, that is something different than an Afghan unaccompanied minor that hasn’t had any education at all. [...] The differences are getting larger. They all end up in your classroom. There are also Moroccans from Spain. The differences in the classrooms are getting larger. This is something that we will have to keep an eye on. How will we deal with this in the future?” (School principal, Antwerp school)

Second, school personnel have indicated that the recent increase in refugee influx has also impacted the composition of nationalities within the school population and in reception classes. Whereas the two schools traditionally were experienced in teaching Moroccan students that mostly migrated for family reunification, the arrival of many young Syrian, Afghan, Iraqi and Eritrean asylum seekers calls for a different approach according to several respondents. Despite a strong increase in these last four nationality categories, one of the teachers explains that the number of different nationalities still remains high and reception classes remain very diverse in ethnical terms.

“In reception education, we feel where it burns in the world. At the moment, we get a lot of students from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. But we remain very multicultural, each year about 30 different nationalities. There are also a lot of economic refugees.” (Teacher and follow-up coach, Antwerp school)

Third, several school personnel members argued that they have noticed a sharp rise in the amount of unaccompanied minors in reception classes over the course of the past school year. An NGO supporting refugees argues that accompanied minors are vulnerable and need specific guidance.

“We notice that this is a lot more difficult. They are very vulnerable and require specific guidance” (Staff member NGO supporting refugees).

Fourth, school principals and some of the teachers argued that the group of unschooled and illiterate students has increased steeply. Some of the interviewees have indicated that, in order to adequately educate these unschooled students, specific teachers and teaching methods are needed.

Finally, the increase in asylum applications has had an impact on the capacities of the schools. One of the school principals explains that, to respond to the increased influx, he has extended the number of reception classes in school. Due to the continuing inflow over the course of the school year, the principal introduced an extra reception class after Christmas break. As demonstrated in the beginning of the report, statistics show a decrease in the number of refugees applying for asylum in Belgium in 2016. However, one of the local school authorities expects that the number of NAMS enrolling in reception education in large cities such as Antwerp will still remain high the upcoming school year. He explains that, once the asylum application of refugee students is approved, they will move from the reception centres and schools in suburban areas to big cities such as Antwerp.

To cope with the surge in asylum seekers and inflow of NAMS in reception education in Antwerp during the past school year (2015-2016), a ‘reception education network day’ was organized. In June 2016, the ‘municipal education of Antwerp’, the ‘local consultation platform’ and the ‘pedagogic working group reception education’ organized this network day for school personnel (principals, teachers, student counsellors, follow-up coaches, etc.) of different schools in Antwerp that offer reception education. The invitation stated that the goal of the day was to discuss a number of new challenges that schools face due to the recent surge in asylum seekers and refugees in schools and to exchange ideas and good practices on how to overcome these challenges. During the network day, one of the organizing members gave an introductory key note on why the network day was organized. She explained that schools offering reception education have a lot of questions concerning the changing vulnerable profiles of refugees entering their classrooms and how to adequately support them. However, it appears to be difficult to find answers to their questions. She argued that the government is mostly concerned and active around urgent matters such as sheltering refugees. But that less is being done or said about substantive questions on how to receive and support these young refugee students in school. She claimed that schools seem to be thrown on their own resources.

5.1.2 Societal problem

During the field work of this study, three interviewees (local school authority, school principal and teacher) referred to the role of Flemish society in the challenges that refugee students and other newcomers encounter. Both of the local school authorities claim that segregation is huge in Flanders. One of the local school authorities argues that the language deficiency and/or learning disadvantages of refugee students or other newcomers are seen as ‘their’ own problem and that many people refuse to work with these youngsters. One of the interviewees refers to a rightward shift in Belgium and argues that a mind switch is needed in our society. He feels that majority parents and students do not seem to know much about the cultural background of the ethnic minority groups, which creates many prejudices among the majority population in Belgium. One of the local school authorities relates these issues with the rise of radicalization that we are witnessing today.

“Today we are surprised that youngster radicalize, but all of this [the above mentioned societal issues] also has to do with it. How welcome am I [as a refugee student] in this country? Is this society sincerely concerned about me?” (Local school authority, Antwerp)

The above mentioned interviewees stress the fact that newcomers can contribute a great deal to our society and economy. A school principal states that society should accept and take into account the presence of these minority groups and that it should be our goal to integrate them in a valued

manner. He claims that these youngsters need comprehensive guidance, support and prospects on work and integration for the future. However, today, he feels the government seems to act in a different manner.

“Rules are getting stricter, trajectories are getting shorter, educational opportunities are getting more limited and the amount of reception centres is being reduced. Everything has to evolve faster and faster.” (School principal, Antwerp)

One of the local school authorities points out the fact that multiculturalism is a reality that will only increase in the future. He foresees that in 2025, 75% of the Antwerp school population will have an immigrant background. He claims that we need to adapt to this reality and that schools can make this their asset.

One of the teachers in reception classes expresses it as follows:

“I think newcomers can bring us a lot of warmth and interesting worldviews from other countries and that we should cross-fertilize each other and let something beautiful grow out of it. We should not focus on each other’s weaknesses. We should not let misunderstandings develop into prejudices or conflicts. To me, this is the biggest challenge [in the integration of NAMS in Flemish education]” (Teacher, Antwerp school).

The next chapter will discuss the educational integration of refugee minors during approximately the first two months after their arrival.

5.2 Phase 1: First arrival (0-2 months in Belgium)

The first stage for most of the refugees arriving in Belgium is their allocation to a reception centre. A staff member of the NGO supporting refugees explains that when refugees apply for asylum in the Immigration Office in Brussels, they are asked whether or not they have a place to stay. If not, asylum seekers are usually appointed to a reception centre that same day. Among the newly arrived newcomer students in reception education, a number of students are refugees residing in reception centres. The reception centre under study in this research report has existed for more than 15 years, is part of the NGO Red Cross and has a capacity of around 230 persons. An integration officer of the centre explains that they work together with one nearby school that offers both primary and secondary (reception) education. The centre only hosts refugee minors that are accompanied by their family. Unaccompanied minors are taken on by a separate reception centre.

Within the first two weeks of their arrival, the reception centre informs the students and their parents about the rights and obligations within the Flemish education system. The integration officer of the reception centre explains how the centre guides the students during their first steps towards Flemish education.

“We do a ‘school-intake’, especially with children in primary education, we tell the parents what is expected of them and what it’s like to go to school in Belgium. With students in secondary education we close a ‘contract’: this is expected of you, we pay the expenses, but at certain conditions” (Integration officer, reception centre).

The staff member continues by explaining that in this contract, students commit themselves to abide by certain rules regarding their education. These rules consist of: daily school attendance, consulting the doctor in the reception centre in case of sickness, etc. After signing the contract at the reception centre, the students and their parents go to the city centre together with a staff member to buy school supplies. The interviewee explains that the centre tries to subscribe the students in a school within the first two weeks of their arrival and that a staff member always accompanies the parents and the student when subscribing in the school. She adds that students can be referred to schools

through reception centres but also through local integration centres, family, friends, independently or via other organizations.

An NGO supporting refugees argues that refugee reception in Belgium is very fragmented:

“It all depends on the policy of each centre. Refugee reception is very fragmented (private organizations, the Red Cross, etc.) The size of the centres also makes a difference. The bigger the centre, the more difficult it is, I think, to provide qualitative care. There are some rules set out from above [from the government], but how centres spend their budget or what kind of activities they organize is different in each centre” (Integration officer, reception centre).

Moreover, the refugee NGO argues that nutrition is very important for students but that not all reception centres seem to pay enough attention to this.

“Nutrition is crucial for the concentration of children. However, not all reception centres take this into account. Some children go to school with an empty lunchbox or with very little or unhealthy food. They cannot concentrate and are hungry in class.” (Integration staff member, refugee NGO)

As mentioned above, second language provision or teaching in reception centres in Belgium is not mandatory or organized by the government. The reception centre under study in this research report organizes homework support every Tuesday and Thursday evening. The integration officer from the centre explains that during one hour, volunteers come to the centre to help students with their homework. According to this interviewee this has proven to be helpful since parents cannot help their children due to their language deficiency. To motivate the students to attend homework support, the centre uses an incentive system.

“They get a stamp card. If they attend the homework supporting class, they get a stamp and when their card is full, they can come and pick out a small gift. It stimulates them. They appreciate the individual attention. They even ask for it: ‘will you come and help me? Will you come and sit with me?’” (Integration officer, reception centre)

School attendance is closely monitored by the reception centre. The staff member indicates that some students are reported ‘sick’ more often than others. When absenteeism becomes problematic, there is close communication with the school. Sometimes the pupil guidance centre will be notified. The interviewee explains that in case of problematic absenteeism, the reception centre will talk to the parents. Furthermore, she states that weekly allowances are also used as incentives to stimulate school attendance. Minor teenagers attending secondary school receive €7,40 weekly allowance (the amount all adults receive). When these students are regularly absent from school, their weekly allowance is cut back to €4,50 (the amount all children receive). She adds that all allowances are given to the parents. She nuances however that most of the time, the centre does not need to use this incentive system as students are generally happy to attend the reception classes in school. Regarding the possible reasons for these absences and other difficulties newcomer students encounter in their educational trajectory, please see ‘5.2.1 Specific profile and situation of newcomer students’.

Another aspect in this regard was pointed out by the staff member of the NGO. She stated that absenteeism is also linked to the accessibility of the schools.

“A lot of reception centres are located in distant areas and schools are not well accessible. As a result, some school-aged children do not attend school. These are signals we are receiving.[...] It’s about mobility, but also capacity. When the nearest school is full” (Integration staff member, refugee NGO).

Concerning interaction and cooperation between the different actors involved in this first phase, one of the school principals explains that there is some interaction with other stakeholders, but not to a large extent. The school tries to do a lot itself.

“We don’t have a lot of students that reside in a reception centre. We do maintain contact with the legal guardian of unaccompanied minors. The philosophy of our school is to pay attention to the social context of our students. We don’t hesitate to call the parents. We try to keep in contact with their world. We also have good contacts with the Pupil Guidance Centre, but we do a lot in the school itself. We are very experienced with reception education and we have an experienced team. It works really well.” (School principal, Antwerp school)

Another school principal argues that the interaction between the school and the reception centre is mostly demand driven.

“When students are absent, we contact them. But it’s more demand driven: when there is a problem, we go to the centre or somebody from the centre comes to the school. There are a lot of authorities involved around these youngsters: a guardian, their private network such as siblings, aunt, uncle. You have to take into account the whole network” (School principal, Antwerp school).

A student counsellor from the same school agrees and explains that they try to involve all the stakeholders involved with the student.

“We try to involve all stakeholders involved and to rely on all the existing networks. Sometimes we organize a meeting in school and invite the student, his or her parents, the social worker, etc.” (Student counsellor Antwerp school).

The next chapter will focus on the enrolment of refugee students in reception education as a second phase in their educational integration in Flanders.

5.3 Phase 2: Reception education (2-12 months in Belgium)

5.3.1 Organization of reception education

Organizing reception education in secondary schools

Several staff members of the schools under study argue that organizing reception education in schools is not an easy task. As mentioned before, the two schools under study in this study both have extensive experience with reception education and educating NAMS. Several respondents among the school personnel indicate that starting the organization of reception education was difficult and that the school has grown extensively and has built up a lot of expertise in reception education.

“We started with nothing 16 years ago. [...] We started without any experience. We succeeded, but it wasn’t easy” (Teacher and follow-up coach, Antwerp school).

One of the school principals explains that the permanent inflow of NAMS over the course of the school year calls for a great deal of flexibility and that this can be challenging for the organization of reception education.

“The permanent inflow and flexibility puts pressure on the teachers and the organization. [...] New students arrive on a continuing basis, new classes need to be formed, and curricula change every two months. It’s inherent to the system. But it is difficult to keep adapting” (School principal, Antwerp school).

On a local level, a local school authority argues that transparency among schools is an important factor to pursue when organizing reception education. Antwerp’s local integration centre is responsible for the equal distribution of NAMS across the different educational networks in the city. Within these educational networks, schools are free to choose how they will distribute foreign-speaking minor newcomers over the different schools. The local school authority claims that communication and open dialogue between all schools across different educational networks

enhances the organization of reception education and eliminates friction - about the amount of students and the resources allocated to the schools - between schools in the city of Antwerp.

The local school authority explains that this transparency in Antwerp was built up over the years. During the 90's, Antwerp schools worked very isolated and were not even aware of the amount of students enrolled in each school. He claims that since 2004, communication and openness among school principals has improved extensively across the different networks and that this has had a positive effect.

“The allocation of NAMS to schools and agreements regarding reception education are discussed openly. This financial and pedagogic transparency eliminates friction and is crucial to enhance the organization of reception education in schools. This system should be implemented in all municipalities in Flanders.” (Local school authority, Antwerp school).

Ability grouping between reception classes

In addition to the importance of transparency on a local level, the use of ability grouping between classes on the level of the school was put forward by several interviewees of the school staff as being crucial for the organization of reception education. The two schools under study more or less use a similar approach in their organization of reception education. A school principal explains that within the first couple of weeks after minor newcomers have arrived in school, an in-take conversation between a student and a teacher is organized. The goal of this conversation is to obtain a first impression on the learning background and potential of the student as well as their socio-emotional situation. Based on this conversation, students are divided into preliminary different level groups according to their learning capabilities.

Another school principal explains that during the first two week of the school year, a lot of attention is paid to welcoming the students and letting them get acquainted with the school, the students and the neighbourhood.

“During the first one or two weeks, we work with a reception program using different basic themes. We make them feel welcome, we let them get acquainted with our school, with other students and with the neighbourhood. We organize a sports day.” (School principal, Antwerp school).

The two principals explain that, during these first weeks students are still transferred from one level group to another until teachers feel that the student is enrolled in a class according to his or her level. Students can also proceed to a group of higher learning potential in line with their evolution during the course of the school year.

A teacher and follow-up coach that has been working in one of the schools from the first day they started organizing reception education, explains why ability grouping benefits the students.

“In the beginning we didn't divide the students into different groups. We only used differentiating teaching approaches. But students can feel that they evolve and learn slower than other classmates. Therefore, we decided to start working with different ability level groups in reception education.” (Teacher and follow-up coach, Antwerp school).

According to one of the school principals, ability grouping does not only benefit the students, but the teachers as well. The school principal claims that teaching personnel can obtain expertise and become more specialized in targeting and educating a certain group of students. This causes teachers to feel more satisfied and confident in a particular group level. This argument was also put forward by a teacher and follow-up coach in reception education:

“It is better for the wellbeing of the students, but also for the teachers. The teachers become more specialized. In the beginning [when this school did not work with ability level groups] this was not the

case. I have been a teacher in an advanced class for years now. Teachers specialized in primary education teach the weaker class groups. A lot of teachers feel better teaching a certain level. In our teacher team, everyone has found his or her thing [level] that they feel good about.”(Teacher and follow-up coach, Antwerp school)

One of the local school authorities disagrees with the above quoted interviewees and explains that there are pro’s and con’s to the use of level groups and to the isolation of newcomers in separate reception classes in general. He prefers to integrate newcomer students in regular classes.

“Receiving them in separate classes creates a warm atmosphere where they feel safe. Teachers only take care of these students and the children are all in the same situation. [...] However, I prefer to integrate them in mainstream education from the beginning.” (Local school authority, Antwerp school)

The interviewee claims and criticizes that the Flemish education system can only work well with homogenous groups.

“In Flanders, when groups become more diverse, the level decreases. We have a label for each student. When students cannot keep up in a certain level, they are enrolled in a group of a lower level. [...] The same thing happens with newcomers. ‘Oh, you are a newcomer, here, a separate class for you’. It’s a typical Belgian solution to a problem. The problem is: we are dealing with migrant students, the solution: we put them in a certain box, we divide them in a separate class and the problem is solved” (Local school authority, Antwerp school).

According to this local school authority and former school principal, this homogenization has contributed to the undermining of the autonomy of teachers.

“Teachers are not being challenged to deal with problems such as dyslexia or other problems/labels of students. By organizing a parallel structure, we undermine the autonomy of the teacher and don’t challenge him/her to think innovative.” (Local school authority, Antwerp school)

Furthermore, he argues that the formation of concentration schools with migrant students and the separation of newcomers in separate classes impacts the language proficiency of students.

“You learn a language in daily interaction. When a migrant child enters a school now, unfortunately mostly in concentration schools with other students with a migrant background, nobody speaks Dutch. That is a problem. Luckily the teacher speaks Dutch so that they are still obliged to use the language on a daily basis.” (Local school authority)

Coping with diversity in reception classes

Even when NAMS are divided in different ability groups according to their learning potential and pace, several interviewees argue that the composition of class groups in reception education is still very diverse and that a differentiated teaching approach is still necessary. One reception class teacher explains that it takes a lot of experience to be able to cope with diversity in class.

“In the beginning, this was really difficult, but we have gained a lot of experience now. There are large age differences in reception classes. Sometimes, you can divide them up in separate groups within the class and you circulate through class to assist the groups where needed. Eighteen year olds work very independently. When we notice that one of the students really does not understand the theory, we take them apart for a couple of minutes to guide him or her individually.” (Teacher and follow-up coach, Antwerp school)

Another teacher explains that her school allocates extra teaching hours for specific guidance to students who encounter particular difficulties.

“For example; when a student encounters difficulties with grammar, he can be isolated from class for a couple of hours a week to work on this specific issue until he or she reaches the level needed to be able to keep up with the level of his or her class group.” (Teacher, Antwerp school)

Students that enrol in reception class over the course of the school year, and not in September, are also supported via extra teaching hours until they reach the level of their reception class. During the participatory observation, differentiation was observed when a Chinese student was taken out of the class to follow speech therapy with a speech therapist for one hour. The teacher explained that Chinese students found experience difficulties with articulation and pronunciation.

In order to provide students with extra support and to enhance their social integration simultaneously, one of the schools under study works together with an institution of higher education in Antwerp on the project ‘tutor at home’. The teacher responsible for the organization of this project explains that undergraduate students enrolled in the bachelor of teacher education at the institution of higher education, engage themselves for a period of one year to tutor a student in reception education. Once or twice a week these undergraduates visit the students at home to provide them with homework support. The teacher claims that the project has had excellent results.

As mentioned above, the recent surge in asylum applications has changed class compositions and increased diversity in reception classes. During the discussions on the ‘reception network day’ in June 2016, it was mentioned that today, an estimated one in four foreign-speaking minor newcomers is illiterate or has not experienced much or even any schooling. Several participants expressed that this increasing diversity is a serious challenge for schools and teaching staff. The participants agreed that there is a need for more specific training for teachers in reception education to learn how to adequately work with this changing target audience.

Some interviewees pointed out that diversity does not only take place in the form of different learning profiles, but also in the forms of different social background and psychological trauma’s or difficulties. One of the teachers argues that after a while, teachers in reception classes often become the trustee of newcomer students. She explains that it can be difficult to set boundaries as a follow-up coach or teacher.

“Students often turn to teachers, follow-up coaches or student counsellors with issues such as trauma, financial problems or housing difficulties. Besides these specific problems, NAMS are also just adolescents in puberty. A lot of these students turn to us with these problems. I find it very difficult to set a boundary. How far am I taking this in? Personally, I took it to personal in the beginning. Now I have learned to set boundaries. You let the children tell their stories and you assure them that they can always come to talk to you. We try to help them where we can. But when they are facing really difficult problems (e.g., abuse at home, trauma), we contact the pupil guidance centre or other institutions or organizations for help. At this point, you need to let go as a teacher and let the professionals handle it. You cannot carry every problem from every student. We always accompany the students during a first visit to the Pupil Guidance Centre.” (Teacher and follow-up coach, Antwerp school)

Reception education in rural and suburban areas

While this study focuses on two schools in the large and multicultural city of Antwerp, reception education is also organized in schools in rural areas or smaller cities. As mentioned in the legal and institutional setting above, in 2015, measures were taken by the Ministry of Education to respond to the sharp rise in asylum applicants and the amount of minor newcomers in Flemish education. These measures aim at flexibilizing the regulations concerning the organization of reception education to simplify the process of launching reception education in schools. This was seen as necessary to offer reception education in schools nearby the reception centres as well as in schools in smaller

municipalities that are also confronted with a surge in influx of minor newcomers. One local school authority refers to this as ‘pop-up reception education’.

The organization of reception education in schools in these suburban or rural areas is an issue that was brought up by several respondents. School personnel and local school authorities in the city of Antwerp, that has a lot of experience with reception education, claim that this policy can become problematic and might have negative consequences for the education of refugees. Some respondents (local school authorities and school principals) feel that schools offering ‘pop-up reception education’ do not possess the expertise that the two Antwerp schools under study have built up over the years. One of the local school authorities argues that these schools are not able to assess the learning potential of the students when they first arrive in school.

“It can be problematic when an inexperienced school needs to perform an intake and estimate the learning potential of a newcomer student. They cannot assess the background of these children. They have no knowledge and experience on the education system in Uganda or Romania. That know-how is missing.” (Local school authority, Antwerp school)

He continues by explaining that, since it is often only a smaller amount of foreign-speaking minor newcomers enrolled in reception education in rural schools, these schools don’t have the capacity and the resources to divide the newcomers in different classes according to their schooling level. One of the local school authorities argues that teachers in the multicultural schools of Antwerp are specialised in teaching a class group of a certain level, have experience with children in difficult social contexts and are able to educate and guide refugee students more individually. Therefore, he criticizes the spread plan and claims it would be better for newcomer students to enrol them in urban schools that are experienced.

“The spread plan? It’s hopeless, the children will carry the consequences. [...] It would be better to bring them to large cities that are experienced. [...] It would be better if they came to Antwerp because here, we can receive and educate them with expertise.” (Local school authority, Antwerp school)

The two local school authorities point out that (former) newcomer students enrolled in reception education in rural or suburban areas spread over Flanders, will eventually move to bigger cities such as Antwerp where they have more social networks or employment opportunities. Therefore, one of these authorities foresees that the influx of refugee students in Antwerp schools will continue to exist the upcoming school year due to the rise of newcomers that were enrolled in schools in rural areas or smaller cities the past school year and have moved (or will move) to Antwerp.

One of the school principals claims that to a limited extent, there has been an exchange of expertise and know-how between schools in the city centre of Antwerp with experience in reception education and schools outside of Antwerp that have recently introduced reception classes.

5.3.2 Specific profile and situation of newcomer students

Socio-psychological difficulties

An important aspect to take into account when investigating the educational (and social) integration of refugee children is the socio-psychological element. Several interviewees (NGO supporting refugees, student counsellor, teacher, follow-up coach, school principal) argued that refugee students are dealing with many socio-psychological difficulties and that there is strong need for socio-psychological support for these students.

“The current offer is very limited and not easily accessible for students with language deficiencies. This has to change urgently. Nobody really knows who to turn to.” (School principal, Antwerp school)

One of the principals points out the important reception function of schools offering reception education. The principal claims that it is difficult at times to find a balance between the reception function and the didactic function of a reception school. A lot of time is invested in projects to enhance the socio-emotional wellbeing of refugee children and other NAMS. The principal explains that it is important to approach NAMS from a broader perspective and not solely from a didactic point of view.

“We depart from a very strong socio-emotional perspective. This means we invest a lot more in elements such as pupil guidance or follow-up coaching than in mainstream education. We want to approach students from a broader point of view, not only on didactic matters, but also freedom, health, etc.”(School principal, Antwerp school).

The socio-emotional issues that refugee students often face can have a negative impact on their educational integration and trajectory. The following testimony of a female Syrian refugee aged 16 years old tells what socio-emotional difficulties she, as many other refugee students, endures and how this impacts her education. This student has been in Belgium for two years now.

“I arrived alone with my two sisters. I had to leave my mother in Syria. I miss her. That was difficult. It is still difficult. My mother is still in Syria. My father is already ten years in Belgium but I don’t really know him. I was five years old when he moved to Belgium and that was also weird for me. That was also difficult” (Refugee student, Antwerp school).

The Syrian girl explains she failed mathematics in mainstream general education, after completing one year of reception education, due to stress related to the fact that she was obliged to leave her mother in Syria. Eventually this has caused her to end up in vocational education even though she scored high grades for language courses in mainstream education. When she suffers from stress, she is referred to the Pupil Guidance Centre. However, the girl argues that the conversations with the counsellor from the Pupil Guidance Centre only helps her for a short period of time before she gets stressed again.

“In the beginning I couldn’t talk about how I got here. Because I didn’t come by plane, I came on a boat. That was difficult for me. I couldn’t tell everything to others. But now it is better. But not everything, because otherwise I think about other things as well” (Refugee student, Antwerp school).

Several interviewees, working directly with these students in a school context, argue that many of their refugee students have experienced traumatic experiences such as this Syrian girl. They argue that strong psychological guidance is of the utter importance in the education process of refugee students and there is a need for more resources to offer support. This need was also one of the major challenges discussed during the ‘reception education network day’ in Antwerp. The participants concluded that the current offer of psychological guidance is insufficient and that there should be a stronger cooperation between social services, youth care and education in Antwerp. More specifically, there is a lack of crisis and intervention support.

Impact asylum procedure

Aside from traumatic experiences as described above, several school personnel members claim that the asylum procedure of refugee students and their families also has an impact on their wellbeing and can by consequence influence their educational performances. The NGO supporting refugees, the integration of the reception centre and one of the teachers argue that parents are strongly focused on the evolution of their asylum procedure. It is their main priority and can be a large stress factor in some families. A teacher in reception education explains that children feel this stress and uncertainty from a very young age and that they carry it with them to school. A trajectory counselor and follow-up coach explains that it is every staff member’s job to address these uncertainties. In

order to help the students with uncertainties concerning their asylum procedure, she feels it is important to provide the students with information they understand.

“It is everyone’s job to deal with these problems. We’re not only here to teach these students Dutch. Students are only able to learn when they reach a certain level of wellbeing. It’s important to bring clarity in such situations. We are able to do that. In order to clarify their situation, we can read the letters, contact the parents, potentially contact a lawyer. The next step is to discuss what their situation entails for their future and speak out of experience: ‘usually this means that’. [...] Our job is to map their situation and to put a timeframe on it by explaining to them when they will receive an answer” (Trajectory counselor and follow-up coach, Antwerp school).

One of the teachers points out that in some cases, students already know that their asylum application is a lost case and that they will eventually be asked to leave the country. The interviewee shares the story of an Albanian student that had received many negative decisions regarding his asylum application and knew that he could not stay in Belgium.⁵ This resulted in very difficult and problematic behavior in class to such a degree that the student was expelled from school.

“I am convinced that this was due to the fact that the student had a future with no prospects at all. He could not work, because he had no documents. (...) Eventually he ended up on the streets in a bad environment. He was arrested by the police and had to wear an ankle monitor.” (Follow-up coach, Antwerp school)

One of the school principals explains that the uncertainty about their asylum procedure and/or the fact that a lot of refugee students reside in reception centers can build up tension in school. The principal claims that after years without any serious conflicts in school, the amount of fights has risen over the past year because these youngsters are living in tension. He explains that, in reception centers, refugee students often have to live with six people in one small room and in school they are confronted with 200 people. The principal argues that, currently there is a lot of friction between Arabs and Afghans in reception centers and that these tensions also manifest themselves in his school. The principal explains that these uncertainties and tensions have an enormous impact on refugee students and that it is crucial to invest in guidance and to ensure that there is always a counselor or another staff member that students can turn to. Another teacher points out that a great deal of refugee students does not want to be here. She argues that the decision to leave their country of origin and apply for asylum in Belgium is never the choice of the children. It’s always the decision of the parents. The teacher explains that a great deal of students is really unhappy and cries a lot at the beginning of the school year. Teachers try to comfort students by motivating them. According to her experiences, these unhappy feelings disappear relatively fast once the students feel comfortable within the reception class.

During the focus group discussion, several refugee students expressed the difficulties they faced when they first arrived in Belgium.

I: “How did you feel when you first arrived in Belgium?”

R1: “That was really difficult.”

R2: “I wanted to return to my country. I told my father that I wanted to go back.”

I: “What did you find difficult about it?”

R1: “Difficult because of the Belgian culture. You have to interact with people you don’t know and you don’t know the language. You don’t know anybody here except for your family so that is difficult.”

R3: “For me, it was also difficult. When I first arrived, I stayed inside the house for two months Without doing anything.”

(Focus group discussion, refugee students, Antwerp)

⁵ When minor newcomers receive a negative decision regarding their asylum application, they can stay in Belgium and attend school until they are 18 years old.

The NGO supporting refugees argues that the fact that newcomers are engaged in an asylum procedure often results in them having to move several times during and after their procedure. The interviewees of the NGO explain that refugees first reside in a collective reception centre. During this phase, minors have to attend school in an educational institution near the center. After a period of four months, asylum seekers can request to move to an individual reception facility. Later on, when their application is approved, refugee students and their family have to move again and find a residence within two months.

“The process of moving several times is hard for the children. Sometimes they really don’t understand why they have to move to another reception centre.” (NGO supporting refugees)

The interviewees of the NGO pinpoint that the language border in Belgium makes it even more complicated. They explain that sometimes refugees are allocated to a collective center in the French Walloon region and move to the Dutch region of Flanders after a couple of months. The NGO argues that housing can form a problem and that this should be taken into account by limiting moving especially across the language border. The interviewee indicates that there is limited capacity in the housing market and that refugees face discrimination and exploitation. Therefore, the NGO requests more guidance towards housing for refugees.

Other difficulties

Besides difficulties related to psychological-traumatic experiences and uncertainty about their asylum procedure, one of the teachers points out that refugee students, and other students with a migrant background, are generally faced with more difficulties in life than their native peers.

“We are very realistic with them. We tell them that, as sad as it is, some day they will probably be confronted with racism. It’s a reality. We also tell them they should never accept that. We tell them they cannot start fighting, but they should never accept it. Life is more difficult for them.” (Teacher and follow-up coach, Antwerp school)

She continues by explaining that refugee and other migrant students carry a lot of responsibilities that can cause stress or frustrations.

“These students often have to do a lot of things at a very young age, that we never had to do. Their parents do not speak Dutch. If they need to go to a hospital, the town hall or the doctor, the children need to accompany them. They carry a big responsibility, more than any native child here. This can cause frustrations at times.” (Teacher and follow-up coach, Antwerp school)

During the focus group discussion one of the refugee students indicated that she is responsible for cooking dinner. She lives alone in Antwerp with her father.

“I am alone with my father. That is difficult. I have to cook dinner. My father works” (Refugee student, Focus group discussion, Antwerp)

5.3.3 Interaction with others

Parental involvement

Another important factor in the education of refugee students, aside from schools and reception centres, is the role of the parents. A staff member of the reception centre under study, who is responsible for integration and is in close contact with refugee students and their parents, claims that it can be difficult to involve parents in the schooling of their children due to the language barrier and the fact that they are concerned with the status of their asylum procedure.

“The language barrier is a big issue. The parents are not able to help their children. [...] When parents receive a letter from school or notice a message in their children’s school diary, they don’t know what it says. [...] In addition, they are strongly concerned with their asylum procedure” (Integration Officer, Reception Centre).

The reception centre involved in this study, tries to involve parents as much as possible. The interviewee explains that parents are expected to join the student and a staff member of the centre when subscribing the children in school. Parents are also stimulated to attend the parent’s night in the school accompanied by one of the reception centre staff members.

During the focus group discussion with refugee youth, (the lack of) parental involvement was also mentioned. When asked what might have made the process from their first arrival in reception education to their enrolment in mainstream today easier, one of the students answered:

“If my mother and father would be able to speak a little Dutch. My father speaks a little Dutch, but he is always working” (refugee student, focus group discussion, Antwerp).

Student-student interaction

Regarding the student-student within reception education, one of the school principals and one of the teachers claim that the creation of separate reception classes rather than integrating NAMS in mainstream education right away, fosters a warm atmosphere in class.

“Children truly find each other in reception class. There is very warm atmosphere. Students bond across religious differences. We have never experienced any difficulties because of religion. There is a lot of mutual respect” (Teacher and follow-up coach, Antwerp school).

Students in reception education are usually enrolled in a school that also offers regular education. One of the teachers, that has been working with newcomer students since the school started organizing reception education, explains that interaction between students from reception education and students from mainstream education (which are almost exclusively students with a migrant background in this particular school) has evolved over the years. She tells that when the school had just started organizing reception education sixteen years ago, there was a large divide among the two groups of students and that for some years, reception students were really bullied by a great amount of mainstream students. She claims that the school tries to overcome these problems by organizing activities and games at the beginning of each school year to let the students get to know each other. The following quote demonstrates how this enhances the social cohesion in school.

“These projects have been very helpful and effective. A lot of prejudices disappear just by talking to each other. In the first couple of months of each school year we organize ‘speed dating’ with mainstream students on one side of the table and students from reception classes (who have mastered a minimum level of Dutch) on the other side. We have seen great results from this project. Today, our students are used to it. In most of the classes in mainstream education, there are former reception students.” (Follow-up coach, Antwerp school)

Social integration outside of school

Schools not only stimulate interaction between students within their schools, they also invest energy in stimulating social integration outside of school. One of the teachers explains that in his school a couple of teaching hours are preserved to guide refugee students and other NAMS in leisure time. The teacher claims that there is very high demand among students to start a hobby or join a club. However, it is a very big step for the students and their parents to approach a club. Another teacher argues that starting and maintaining a hobby can be particularly difficult for NAMS. She claims that some students find it hard to arrive on time or to continuously attend the club on a weekly basis. The teacher explains that in order to guide students towards leisure time, a staff member (usually one of

the teachers) of the school passes by all the reception education classes and conducts a survey among the students. When students express their interest in starting a certain hobby, the staff member contacts their parents and helps the student subscribe in a club.

In the literature study above, the strong segregation in Flemish education system was discussed. One of the schools in this study puts effort into organizing activities to enhance social integration and to bridge the gap between their students (with almost exclusively a migrant and/or refugee background) and students of other Antwerp schools (with almost exclusively native students). At the time being, the school has an ongoing project with two 'native' schools where students do an exchange. This year, a number of students from the 'native' schools are attending reception classes in the school with a large migrant population. Next year, it will be the other way around. The teacher responsible for this exchange project argues that the project has known great success.

"It's fantastic (...). For our students as well as for them, because both are living in a rather small world. After the project, some students said that they were much more alike than they thought."(Reception education teacher, Antwerp school)

Furthermore, the school organizes a project in which students in reception education stay with a Flemish family for one weekend. One of the teachers explains that the goal of this project is for both the family and the student to learn about different cultures. The teacher states that NAMS can sometimes be perceived as impolite by Flemish people. However, according to her this not their intention at all and she frames it as just a cultural difference.

"For example, we eat together with our family at the table without using mobile phones. In other cultures, children take a plate of food and sit and eat alone in front of the television. It's just different. We wanted to show people that cultures differ. Not in an educating way like 'this is how it should be'. Last year this project was a huge success. This year almost 50 students wanted to participate."(Follow-up coach, Antwerp school)

The reception centre under study also organizes activities to enhance social integration of minor refugees. The integration officer of the centre explains that teenagers seem to be building more friendships through school than students in primary education. She feels that this has to do with the fact that teenagers are more independent while elementary pupils are more dependent on their parents for play dates with classmates. She explains that occasionally, the centre organizes larger activities where they try to involve classmates of the minor residents in primary education. Staff members create invitations for students to pass out among their classmates. The interviewee feels however that there is a threshold since most of the times, none of their classmates in primary education (that can be either other newcomers or native students) attend these activities.

Notwithstanding the fact that schools and reception centres put effort in organizing activities to enhance the social integration of NAMS, refugee students seem to encounter difficulties in making contact with peers outside of class and outside of school and building true friendships, as illustrated in the following quotes from the focus group discussion with refugee students:

R1: *"I've been here for two years and I haven't got any friends outside of this class."*
(...)

I: *"Is it more difficult for you to make friends here?"*

R2: *"To make best friends, yes. Because not everyone is the same. You can say: 'this is my best friend', but afterwards they don't do anything."*

R3: *"Then they start acting weird. They have two faces. In front of you and behind your back. I hate that."*

R4: *"Gossiping."*

All: *"Yes"*

R5: *"Those are not good friends."*

(Focus group discussion, refugee students, Antwerp)

The discussion continues on the subject of 'trust' and why some participants find it hard to trust people they haven't known for a very long time.

R1: "I think, you don't have like one best friend. But if you can really trust the person then you can tell him or her private things. But a random person in or outside of school. I think, I could be friends with this person but not best friends. Because you don't know anything about this person"

R2: "You can trust people that you have known your entire life and that you grew up with."

R3: "Yes, you can trust them because you have known them your entire life."

(Focus group discussion, refugee students, Antwerp)

In this regard, one of the follow-up coaches states that it takes a long time for refugee children to trust the coaches. She argues that refugee children, especially those that originate from Sub-Saharan Africa, are often told in their country of origin that they shouldn't trust white people in the country of destination.

After discussing the main practices and challenges in the educational integration of refugee minors during their enrollment in reception education, we will now continue by discussing the third phase: the transition from reception to mainstream education.

5.4 Phase 3: Transition to mainstream education (more than 12 months)

The field work has shown that the transition from reception to mainstream education is problematic. Several interviewees (NGO supporting refugees, local school authorities and school personnel) indicated this as the main barrier in the integration of refugee students and other newcomers in Flemish secondary education. Most stakeholders argued that education policy makers and mainstream education should do more in order to enhance the educational success of newcomers.

5.4.1 Transition classes

To overcome the barrier between reception and mainstream education, a number of schools in Antwerp organize transition classes. A teacher in transition education explains that reception classes are organized for students that have completed one year of reception education but need extra support before enrolling in mainstream education. He tells that usually these are students that were illiterate and low- and/or unskilled before entering reception classes. Students can choose between general transition classes or several vocational transition classes targeting different professions. The interviewee explains that one year of transition education corresponds to the first and second year of mainstream general or vocational education. At the end of their transition year, students obtain the necessary certificate to flow into a third year (start of second cycle) of general or vocational education in mainstream education. One of the schools involved in the research exclusively offers reception education and transition education. The principal stresses the importance and added value of transition classes which benefit the educational trajectories of NAMS:

"Transition classes have proven to be an added value for a significant part of our students. It allows us to prepare them in a more targeted manner towards a trajectory after reception education. There is a permanent focus on language proficiency while also including more specific courses towards general or vocational education. In transition classes, more attention is paid to certain terminologies in line with students' educational prospects next year. This extra year after reception education also allows students to discover their possibilities and constraints. A lot of students have unrealistic prospects for the future. In reception classes we try to adjust their expatiations to realistic possibilities which ultimately benefits their chances at successful educational outcomes."(School principal, Antwerp school)

One of the local school authorities claims that more schools within the school community of Antwerp are declaring to be interested in organizing transition classes. He suspects that more schools will start offering transition education in the upcoming school year. One of the school principals explains that, to comply with official regulations, transition classes are administratively enlisted as reception education.

5.4.2 Follow-up coaching

Several interviewees have stressed the importance of the follow-up coach in the transition from reception to mainstream education. As mentioned before, up until June 2016, the Flemish government allocated 22 teaching hours per school community for follow-up coaching. Local school authorities, school principals as well as teachers found that this was problematic and that the amount of hours far too little to provide qualitative coaching. Moreover, the allocation per school community and not per foreign-speaking minor student was said to be unfair. Especially the two local school authorities, who are in close contact with all the school principals of the city, criticized this policy. They claimed to have requested to reform this policy measure for a number of years now.

“My school community consists of 7.000 students of which 440 NAMS. One follow-up coach (22 teaching hours) is responsible for coaching and guiding all of these students in different schools. The expectations are too high and there is a clear framework is lacking.”(Local school authority, Antwerp)

According to the interviewees, the need for close follow-up of former NAMS in mainstream education is crucial. A local school authority explains that follow-up coaches are responsible for a large number of different tasks: supporting and guiding students during the transition process, following-up on students until two years after they completed reception education, maintaining contact with all schools in which former NAMS are subscribed, intermediating in case of difficulties, etc. Another local school authority (and former school principal) stresses the importance of providing continuous support and encouragement to these students.

As mentioned before, in June 2016 the Flemish government has decided to change its regulations concerning follow-up coaching. As of September 2016, the government allocates 0,9 teaching hours per pupil that was enrolled in reception education the previous year to each school community. Since this new regulation was announced by the federal government after the field work for this report was conducted, it is unclear how the interviewees view the new regulations and whether this solves the problem and lack of resources for qualitative follow-up coaching.

5.4.3 Lack of know-how in mainstream education

Several interviewees (local school authorities, teachers in reception education and one follow-up coach) argue that a major issue for the transition of students from reception to mainstream education is the language barrier. A follow-up coach explains how the language deficiency of former NAMS really complicates their schooling in mainstream education.

“The beginning is really hard, but it gets easier as time passes by. We try to prepare them for it and tell them that during the three first months they will have to fight with everything they have. (...) You have to understand that, other students just acquire the knowledge by studying the courses. Our students first have to translate everything before they can start studying.”(Follow-up coach, Antwerp school)

A local school authority explains that educational success is much higher when students can transfer from reception education to mainstream education within the same school. He argues that schools offering both reception and mainstream education possess a lot of know-how that is being shared among teaching personnel. The interviewee claims that know-how is not existent in schools that have no experience with reception education. One transition education teacher argues that lessons

should be made more accessible for everyone and that the transition and connection between reception and mainstream education should be better and more fluent.

“We notice that some former pupils who come back for a visit, they say: ‘it was so good here, everybody was so sweet and we learned so much’. In the new school they often feel neglected.”(Teacher in transition class, Antwerp school)

A local school authority explains that in order to better integrate former reception education students in mainstream education, it is not necessary to use separate individual trajectories. He feels that a general approach would benefit all students and that teachers in mainstream education should pay more attention to language by formulating clear and correct sentences.

“They should pay more attention to, and verify, whether the students understand the used terminology. They should use well constructed and clear sentences. Formulating clear questions on exams is also important. These elements benefit all students, it should be a generalized approach.”
(Local school authority, Antwerp school)

The need for a more integrated language policy and language focused vocational education was also an important item during the ‘reception education network day’. An interesting initiative that was presented during this event is the project Nodo+. Together with the public employment service of Flanders (VDAB), Nodo+ offers language coaching in vocational study programs offered by schools or other training organizations. A Nodo+ expert explained that the goal of the project is to assist schools and other training programs to combine specific course objectives within vocational education with language objectives. The system works as follows: a Nodo+ expert from VDAB comes to the school/training institution to train a future language coach during 12 to 15 weeks. This language coach is a personnel member of the institution (e.g., a teacher). When the language coach has completed his or her training given by the Nodo+ expert, he or she can start training and assisting other vocational teachers within the vocational study programs of the institution. The language coach will educate all other teachers how to teach students in such a way that will allow them to acquire the necessary vocational knowledge and practices while also enabling students to develop their language skills. A school can receive specific teaching hours to spend on language coaching of vocational teachers within the school. Nodo+ has been introduced in a number of Flemish schools so far. During the network day, a lot of participants from different schools showed a lot of interest in the project.

5.4.4 Need for more flexible trajectories in mainstream education

A trajectory counsellor explains that after completing reception education, a follow-up coach and/or trajectory counsellor guides the students in choosing a study program within mainstream education according to their interests and capabilities. Parents are also involved in this process. Several interviewees (local school authorities, the employment sector representative, a teachers and one of the follow-up coaches) argue that a great deal of students from reception education end up in vocational education. Several school personnel members feel that a great deal of these students are more interested in, and/or capable of, following a study program in general education. These statements are supported by the official statistics in table 5 (pg 21) that show an overrepresentation of former NAMS in vocational education after completing one year of reception education.

In this one teacher, the student counsellor, school principals and local school authorities stressed the need for more flexible educational trajectories in mainstream education. According to these interviewees, students (former NAMS) should be given the opportunity to follow irregular trajectories within regular education. One local school authority explains that a great deal of (former) newcomers obtain good grades for all courses in mainstream education except for Dutch. As a result, they need to repeat a grade or flow into technical or vocational education. Other former reception education students need to repeat a year because they experience difficulties with French or

mathematics. Several educational interviewees as well as the NGO supporting refugees criticize this policy and indicate that mainstream education should be more open to flexible trajectories where curricula can be adapted according to the profile of the students (e.g., by getting an exemption for French and investing those hours in extra support for Dutch). One local school authority argues that this flexibilization is not supported by teaching staff in mainstream education.

“Such flexible trajectories do not fit into the minds of our teachers. They think it is unfair and that curricula should be exactly the same for all students.” (Local school authority, Antwerp)

A trajectory counsellor points out that in administrative terms, schools have the possibility to introduce individual adapted trajectories. She claims that Flanders should think about how to develop such a system even though it is very difficult for schools in organizational terms. One of the schools under study has conducted experiments where students in reception education attended courses in technical mainstream education for several months. The trajectory counsellor explains that such initiatives never seem to stick around because they are insufficiently supported by teachers in mainstream schools.

During the focus group discussion with former students from reception classes, one Syrian refugee student aged 16 years old, has experienced the issues discussed above. She had finished one year of reception education, six months of transition education and flowed into general mainstream education in January. The student explains she wants to become a writer or interpreter since she has good language skills. In general mainstream education, she even obtained higher grades for language courses than her native classmates. As she has testified earlier on in this report, this student experienced difficulties with mathematics and suffered from stress from leaving her mother in Syria (as mentioned earlier on) which made it hard for her to concentrate and study. As a result, she had failed mathematics and flowed into vocational education. She will start in technical education next school year. The case of this Syrian student exemplifies the possible outcomes of the waterfall system in Flemish education and the lack of flexible trajectories in mainstream education.

Another issue related to the ‘waterfall system’ was raised by one of the local school authorities. As explained in the legal and institutional setting in the beginning of this report, when students make the transition from reception to mainstream education, the ‘admission class council’ in the school that offers mainstream education decides whether or not the student is capable to follow the chosen study program in general education. The council has to decide on the approval of the student at the beginning of the school year when the student has completed 25 days of regular school attendance. According to the local school authority, this quickly results in more mechanisms of exclusion.

“During summer break, these students have not spoken any Dutch. This puts them in a difficult position for the evaluation of the admission class council. This council decides, but it quickly results in exclusion mechanisms. Students need more time before the first class admission council decides. We request to postpone the decision to six or seven weeks after the beginning of the school year.” (Local school authority, Antwerp school)

As the paragraphs above suggest, several interviewees seem to feel that there is a structural problem in the Flemish education system. One of the local school authorities argues that Flanders needs to escape from the waterfall system because it causes students to drop out of school or to enter in study programs beneath their academic capabilities. The interviewee argues that Flemish teachers are trapped in this particular way of thinking. He claims that homogenization in Flemish schools which creates a waterfall effect, is the core of the problem.

“We have an education system that can only work fantastic with homogenous class groups. (...) We grew up in homogenous groups. If you cannot follow in one group you are transferred to another one. The amount of study programs in Belgium is enormous. For each little label, there needs to be a different study program in order to maintain the homogeneity. You start at the top (in general

education) and then the waterfall begins. In the third year you are enrolled in technical education. If you can't keep up, you go to education in the arts. Children are being labeled and therefore end up in vocational education.” (Local school authority and former school principal, Antwerp)

During the ‘reception education network day’, the difficult transition from reception to mainstream education and the need for flexible trajectories was discussed as one of the four major challenges in refugee education. During the discussions on this networking event, it became clear that schools are intensively searching for creative and innovative manners to establish flexible trajectories. Some schools are experimenting with more flexible curricula in mainstream education (e.g., by subtracting teaching hours from certain courses from the curriculum and investing those hours in extra Dutch lessons). However, several participants argued that schools are still too hesitant to take initiative, to step away from the traditional curricula and to allow for flexible and student tailored teaching.

5.4.5 More difficulties for 15+ students

Several interviewees have indicated that the previously discussed challenges that refugee students encounter when proceeding from reception to mainstream education, pose even more difficulties to students above the age of 15. A local school authority and follow-up coach argue that the group of NAMS older than the age of 15 encounter more difficulties in integrating in our education system.

“Until the age of 15, I think students mostly end up in educational levels according to their capabilities. Older students often flow into study courses beneath their capabilities.” (Follow-up coach Antwerp school)

A local school authority points out that for certain courses, particularly French, native students aged 16, 17 or 18 years old have already made a very strong progression. He feels that this enlarges the gap between (former) NAMS and their native peers and that these educational disadvantages are very difficult to overcome for former reception students at an older age.

According to one of the follow-up coaches, the fact that students sometimes feel they are too old to flow into educational levels in line with to their academic capabilities also plays a role. She illustrates this by discussing one of her students for which this was the case:

“For example: a very intelligent Afghan student, he was schooled in Afghanistan until he was 15 years old, but he has lost so many years. First, he spend more than one year to flee from his country to Belgium. Then he spent six months in Wallonia and was taught in French. He started here at the age of 16-17, now he is 18 years old. Normally he should flow into third or fourth grade of technical or general secondary educating [students in these grades in Belgium are generally 15 or 16 years old]. But he doesn't want to because then he will only graduate at the age of 22.” (Follow-up coach, Antwerp school)

The follow-up coach proposes a possible solution for the challenges and difficulties that this specific older age group encounters: the organization of general transition classes at the end of the second cycle (the fourth year in secondary education). Currently, the curriculum of general transition classes after reception education corresponds to the 1st and 2nd year of general secondary education. When completing the transition class, students thus obtain their certificate of the first cycle and can flow into the second cycle starting with the third year. This interviewee feels that a transition class at the end of the second cycle, preparing students to flow into the third cycle (5th and 6th year) could be very helpful for this older target group.

During the ‘reception education network day’, one of the major challenges discussed was the difficulty to set out a trajectory for NAMS older than 18. During the discussions, some of the participants argued that the current offer for students formerly enrolled in reception education above the age of 18 is limited, fragmented and not well adapted to the needs of this large group of

young adults without much schooling. Currently, they are mostly referred to the public employment service of Flanders (VDAB) which guides them towards employment or further training. However, during the network day some participants claimed that these young adults still feel the need to be in a place where they feel at home. Currently, these young adults often disappear after the school year ends. During the network day, a possible solution for this problem was proposed. Clustering all young adults (18+) that were formerly enrolled in reception education in Antwerp, into a post-reception class could be very helpful to prepare them more intensely for the labour market. Participants felt that this could prevent them from 'disappearing' without any specific prospects for the future.

5.4.6 Transition to the labor market

The major issue in the integration of (former) refugee students in the labor market seems to be the language deficiency of the students. A representative of the employment sector, representing businesses and companies in Antwerp, claims that educational institutions insufficiently take up their responsibility to ensure a sufficient language level among the students that is necessary for their integration into the labor market. The employment representative argues that a certain level of language proficiency is crucial to be able to work in teams but also for safety regulations. Furthermore, there seems to be a problem with the range of study programs in Flemish education. Certain study programs (e.g., trade or administration on vocational level), in which a disproportionate large number of newcomer students are enrolled, do not offer any prospects on the labor market. The interviewee states that some schools in Antwerp have adapted their study programs to better respond to the demand from the labor market. According to the respondent, there is a lack of flexibility within Flemish education.

6 Conclusion

Education is one of the most important paths to the structural integration of young asylum seekers and refugees. Despite this need, there is currently insufficient understanding of the challenges that these youth face and inadequate transnational sharing of knowledge regarding potential solutions. As part of the 'Multi-country Partnership to Enhance the Education of Refugee and Asylum-seeking Youth in Europe' (PERAE), this country report aims at investigating the challenges that refugee and asylum seeking youth face in accessing and succeeding in education in Flanders, as well as highlighting some of reception practices of these newly arrived minor students.

The review of the literature on equality in Flemish education shows that immigrant students often find themselves in a disadvantaged position compared to their native peers. Since Flanders is faced with a sharp rise in the amount of foreign-speaking newcomers in its education system, it is crucial to analyze how the integration process of refugee students and other newcomers works, what the main obstacles are and what strategies Flemish schools use to overcome these challenges.

During the first months of their arrival in Belgium, refugee students mostly reside in reception centers spread over the country. In this phase, students are enrolled in a school nearby the center that offers reception education for foreign-speaking minor newcomers. Reception education was launched in the beginning of the 90's and aims at integrating newly arrived minors as fast as possible into mainstream education by mainly focusing on language acquisition. Schools appear to be dependent on themselves to find methods and ways to adequately teach and support refugee students. The vulnerable profiles of refugee minors in the recent influx increases the challenges in this task. There is no coordinating central approach. The government has only set out some basic conditions and rules on reception education. This raises concerns regarding reception education that is being organized rapidly nearby the shelters. Schools in rural areas or smaller cities often do not have experience with reception education and refugee students, whereas schools in large multicultural cities such as Antwerp do. These experienced schools for example argue that because of the many wide disparities between the levels of prior schooling and literacy among newcomers, it is important to work with ability grouping as well as to differentiate in class.

Next to their didactic function, schools that offer reception education pay attention to the social integration of newcomers both within and outside of school. Activities are organized to stimulate interaction between foreign newcomers and their fellow students in mainstream education as well as with native students outside of school. Despite some efforts to stimulate social integration outside of school and bridge the gap between foreign newcomers and natives, segregation is still persistent in Flanders. Refugee students find it difficult to build networks and start friendships outside of school. Newcomers (and other migrant students) and native students seem to be living in two separate worlds.

The recent refugee influx consists of many refugee minors dealing with trauma's and other socio-emotional difficulties. Currently, there is a strong need for more resources to offer more psychological support and guidance to these vulnerable youngsters. In addition to possible traumatic experiences, refugee students often feel very stressed due to uncertainty about their asylum procedure. These psychological issues can have a significant impact on the educational performances and outcomes of refugee students.

Based on the fieldwork in this study, we can conclude that the main stakeholders involved in our study point out that the major challenge in the integration process of refugee students in Flemish education system is the phase where they make the transition from reception to mainstream education. Generally, refugee students and other newcomers follow one year of reception education. Some schools offer so called 'transition classes' to bridge the gap between reception and

mainstream education. In these transition classes, (former) newcomers are prepared towards general or vocational study programs while maintaining a strong focus on language acquisition.

The obstacles that refugee students and other newcomers face when making the transition from reception to mainstream education can be attributed to two important factors. First, there is a lack of know-how in mainstream education on how to teach and support former newcomers with a language deficiency. There is a strong need for a general integrated language policy in mainstream classes which can benefit all students. An interesting initiative that has had positive effects is the deployment of language coaches in schools to train teachers in mainstream education how to combine specific course objectives with language objectives.

The second important factor that hinders successful transition and educational performance in mainstream education is the lack of flexible trajectories and curricula in the Flemish education system. As statistics in the first section of this report proved, refugee students and other newcomers are strongly overrepresented in vocational education. Several interviewees testified that (former) newcomers often drop out of school or end up in vocational education even though they are more interested in, and/or academically capable of, following a study program in technical or general education.

The overrepresentation of migrant students and former newcomers in vocational study programs is a result of early ability tracking in Flemish education. From an early age on, students in Flanders are separated according to their abilities into homogenous groups. This creates a waterfall system where students start at the top in general education. When they cannot keep up with this level, they start to stream down the waterfall and often end up in vocational training at the bottom.

To overcome these structural problems, some stakeholders argue that former newcomers should be given the opportunity to follow irregular trajectories within regular education. Some schools are experimenting with introducing flexible curricula in mainstream education (e.g., by eliminating French from the curriculum and investing those hours in extra Dutch lessons). However, several participants argued that school staff are still often too hesitant to take initiative, to adapt their use of language in class, to step away from the traditional curricula and to allow for flexible and student tailored teaching in mainstream education.

The transition from reception to mainstream education appears to be particularly difficult for newcomers aged 16 and older. This is due to the fact that their native peers have already made a very strong progression for a large number of courses which enlarges the gap between (former) newcomers and their native peers. The educational disadvantages seem harder to overcome for this older group age. Extra transition classes for students between the age of 16 and 18 and post reception classes for young adults above the age of 18 could be helpful to provide extra support and enhance educational success and a more positive transition to the labour market.

The recent surge has enlarged the pressure on reception education. This study has shown that this has created a stronger request for more resources and more specialised support. However, some of the major challenges refugee and asylum seeking youth face in succeeding in education in Flanders, seem to be structural obstacles within the mainstream education system of Flanders. This conclusion strengthens the European PPMI study results that categorize Flemish education towards NAMS as 'compensatory'. In a 'compensatory model' policy measures are mainly aimed at incorporating NAMS into the existing system without adjusting the system itself. The current provisions seem to primarily focus on learning deficiencies of (former) NAMS that do not allow them to make a successful transition to mainstream education, rather than considering making structural adaptations to enhance a better integration of (newly arrived) migrant students.

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