

# **The Age of the Scouts: Being a Boy Then and Now! The Triumph of Coeducation and Adherence to Traditional Paradigms in Flanders**

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*This paper analyses the current position of boys' education in Flanders. The text focuses on the situation in the Flemish community, taking a brief account of the historical development in Belgium as its starting point. The most important structural policies in the Flemish educational system are outlined and the position of boys in this system is elucidated. This analysis is taken as a starting point for demonstrating gender-specific aspects in the Flemish primary school as well as for pinpointing standards and practical educational approaches to working for and with boys. The final part of this text addresses boy-specific leisure-time behaviour in Flanders and the significant role that is played by the youth movement.*

This study is divided into the following sections:

1. The historical development of Belgium and boys' education in Flanders
2. Boys in the Flemish educational system
3. Gender-specific aspects in the Flemish primary school and practical boy-specific approaches for primary school teachers
4. Inventory of leisure-time amenities for boys and youth movements in Flanders
5. Development trends

Suggestions for further independent study of the topic

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## **1. The Historical Development of Belgium and Boys' Education in Flanders**

Belgium is situated on the crossroads of the Germanic and Roman civilisations where Dutch and French are spoken. Belgium is a federal country as a result and as such is unique in the European Union. Dutch is the mother tongue of approx. 60 percent of Belgians and French is the mother tongue of approx. 40 percent. There is thus no question of one or other minority if the German community which comprises approx. 70,000 German speaking Belgians are

disregarded. Three communities have thus developed in Belgium: the Flemish community, the French community and the German speaking community. In addition to the formation of the three communities, Belgium has witnessed the emergence of three regions: the Flemish region, the Brussels region and the Walloon region. The following expositions relate solely to the situation in Flanders. The Flanders region constitutes the northern part of the Belgian Kingdom and borders on the Federal Republic of Germany, the Netherlands and France. The mother tongue of this population, which comprises around 5.5 million Flemings, is Dutch.

An attempt to discover and outline a historical development of boys' education in Belgian invariably results in disappointment. Historical components of the developments in the Netherlands must be used instead for the Flemish area of Belgium and historical components in France for the Walloon area. Flanders has thus undergone a similar development to that in other European nation states. The traditional image of masculinity – the triad of the provider, protector and procreator – has given way to a pluralist image. A man is now also an understanding friend, lover or object of sexual desire. This has a substantial impact on male socialisation and identity finding processes. Apart from the biological factors that genetically determine gender and the concomitant physical characteristics, there are psychological factors that demonstrate how gender-typical behaviour is acquired.

Moreover, sociological aspects that illustrate the extent to which gender-stereotypical behaviour is determined by society must be taken into consideration. Particular attention must be paid to these sociological aspects in order to enable gender-specific and gender-friendly action. Boys adopt gender-typical roles in the process of male socialisation that reflect a variety of instances of socialisation such as the family, school or peer groups and stages of life in a variety of ways. Each of these three stages of socialisation have a substantial impact on boys' development. Although they are chronologically and spatially separable, the patterns of interaction and identification models that are experienced and witnessed are interconnected with the various stages and are interdependent. Events that are experienced negatively and/or positively in one stage of socialisation have an effect on the experience and interaction in the other stage.

## **2. Boys in the Flemish Educational System**

Belgium's federal structure is reflected in the country's educational system. The Communities are responsible for Belgium's educational policy and educational system.

There are three different teaching networks in Flanders:

a) Community teaching: this covers teaching that is organised by the Flemish Community's teaching system. It is bound to neutrality by the Constitution. The religious, philosophical or ideological convictions held by parents and pupils must be respected. In school year 2005/06, primary schools in this network totalled 390 institutions with 59,500 pupils, 30,585 of whom were girls and 28,915 boys.

b) Official subsidised teaching: it covers municipal teaching organised by the local governments and provincial teaching organised by the provincial administrative authorities. In school year 2005/06, this network totalled 543 institutions with 91,457 primary school pupils, 43,803 of whom were girls and 47,744 boys.

c) Subsidised free teaching: subsidised free teaching is based on a private initiative by a private individual or a private organisation. The free teaching system mainly comprises Catholic schools. The majority of children of primary school age attend these local free schools (1,571 institutions). This was 264,679 children in school year 2005/06 with 130,899 girls and 133,780 boys.

(Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming 2006)

Almost all primary and secondary schools are coeducational institutions. A clear-cut demarcation between coeducational institutions and all girls' and all boys' schools is not observable in Flanders. Girls and boys attend school together. All girls' or all boys' schools are now only encountered in exceptional circumstances. In such cases, they are usually schools that form part of a diocese or follow an educational reform or denominational direction, as is the case with the all boys' schools of St. Jozef, Don Bosco and the Schipperschool of Klein Willebroek. Girls and boys are generally taught together in classes with their peers. It is the task of the primary school to promote „the development of individual pupils, taking their individual personality into consideration, to integrate them into the life of the community and society and to play an active part in their education; to impart basic knowledge and skills (and) to offset their learning difficulties and development deficits“ (European Commission, 1995).

Compulsory education up to the age of 18 has been in force since 29 June 1983. A study on „Gender relations in primary and secondary education in Flanders“ demonstrates the differences between boys and girls in the educational system since that time and examines their general situation in the context of the population as a whole. It is also interesting in this context that the principle of equality currently reflected more than ever in the „Gelijke Kansen Beleid“ (Equal Opportunities Regulation) does not make reference to any specific differences. One possible reason for this is that boys and girls are treated equally and are

taught as a homogeneous class. A distinction is made in secondary school. The cited study reveals enormous differences between the two genders in the secondary school sector.

The following table shows the situation with respect to nursery and primary school attendance in 2005/06:

	<b>Boys</b>	<b>Girls</b>	<b>Total</b>
<i>Nursery</i>			
General	118,706	114,003	232,709
Special	1,230	591	1,821
<b>Total Nursery</b>	<b>119,936</b>	<b>114,594</b>	<b>234,530</b>
<i>Primary School</i>			
General	195,409	193,564	388,973
Special	16,700	10,053	26,753
<b>Total Primary School</b>	<b>212,109</b>	<b>203,617</b>	<b>415,725</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>332,045</b>	<b>317,211</b>	<b>650,255</b>

(Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming 2006)

It is evident that at nursery as well as at primary school 62% of all children who receive special education and training belong to the group of boys. Almost half (48%) of these boys have a slight, moderate or even serious mental impairment or handicap. Although this text aims to analyse the situation of 6 to 11 year-old children and hence the primary school sector, mention should still be made of the fact that this trend continues in the secondary school sector. The result of the above-mentioned study also highlights the fact that boys are far more likely to commence secondary school education with difficulties than is the case with girls. In 2006, 15 percent of all boys of Belgian nationality began secondary school education with learning difficulties. This is in comparison to 14 percent of girls for the same period (Ministry of the Flemish Community 2006, p. 104). In comparison, 46 percent of all boys of a different origin began secondary school education with learning difficulties. This is in comparison to 44 percent of girls for the same period (Ministry of the Flemish Community 2006, p. 105). Of the 16,700 boys (compared with 10,053 girls) in special schools and schools for handicapped children:

- 5,880 boys with slight mental handicaps;
- 2,153 boys with moderate or serious mental handicaps;
- 1,486 boys with behavioural disorders;
- 597 boys with physical handicaps;
- 6,008 boys with speech and language impediments, amongst other things.

The PISA study (Program of International Student Assessment) which tested 15-year-old pupils on their skills in their mother tongue, mathematics and natural sciences in 2000, 2003 und 2006 draws attention to this fact in many European countries, including Belgium. Why is it that boys are usually society's biggest worry? A glance at the daily routine of life in Flanders reveals that boys see themselves confronted with three specific social, emotional aspects and problems:

- a) Boy Code: boys must comply with the values and norms associated with "being a boy". It is important not to yield! Emotions are concealed.
- b) Putting on a false front: some boys hide behind a mask This provides them with a self-defence mechanism and is a consequence of the Boy Code. Boys hide low self-esteem behind this mask.
- c) Shame: boys are often ashamed of their behaviour. The Boy Code does not allow this, however. Suppression of emotions and presenting a hard front to the world are the consequences of this behaviour. Future situations permit the display of emotions even less.

It is not only parents, family and friends, but also schools that are responsible for this situation by meeting the demand for equality. But equality is not always the solution to the problem. It is a matter of giving due consideration to the two genders without losing sight of equality. This requirement is not met in a satisfactory manner. Schools in Flanders fall short in this connection:

- Studies show that boys have more difficulties learning to read and write than girls. This is forgotten at many schools or insufficient attention is paid to it. Boys' self-confidence is decreasing due to poor academic results.
- Teachers and schools frequently fail to adopt a positive attitude to the emotional and social failings of boys. Problems that are specific to boys are often not perceived and understood as such.
- Teachers have a more negative attitude to boys than to girls. The reason is that boys argue more, more frequently engage in activities that are not allowed, brawl or are more aggressive. All of this is seen to be breaches of discipline and the root cause of this specific behaviour is not addressed. The outcome is poorer academic results, lower self-esteem, behavioural disorders or other emotional problems.
- Lastly, very few schools in Flanders have appropriate teaching material that focuses on the specific interests and needs of boys. There are none or scarcely any materials that encourage children's creativity.

The latter point in particular is evident from a perusal of the primary school syllabus in Flanders. This covers the following subjects: religious education or ethics, general knowledge, Dutch, mathematics, drawing, handicrafts, physical education, musical education and writing tuition (European Commission 1995, p. 49). French tuition begins in earnest in the third or fifth year. All pupils are taught the same subjects. The focus in this context is also on the educational aims that concern equal opportunities for all children. This phenomenon conceals a fundamental dilemma. On the one hand, enormous importance is attached to equal opportunities, thereby meeting the current challenges in the educational system. On the other hand, there is a distinct feeling that the experiences of other countries are disregarded in Flanders in favour of adherence to traditional paradigms.

### **3. Gender-specific aspects in the Flemish primary school and specific practical approaches for dealing with boys for primary school teachers**

„De kwaliteit van het onderwijs staat of valt met de kwaliteit van de man of vrouw voor de klas.“ (The quality of teaching depends on the quality of the man or woman in front of the class.) (Dolle-Willemsen 1997)

Studies show that the ‚correct‘ teaching methods are able to create a good atmosphere in the classroom, a good teaching climate and a positive attitude towards boys and their development in terms of behaviour and activities. Such a school helps boys to achieve better academic results, a positive self-image and a strong and healthy image of their masculinity. Schools that are unable to do this are usually not in a position to make full use of the intellectual, athletic and artistic capabilities of boys. The potential consequences of this in boys are „letting off steam“, depression, addictions, unhealthy sexual development or a readiness to resort to violence. There is consensus about this in theory and practice. But what can the Flemish primary school do to build and create a school in which a boy can „be a boy“ without having to confront the Boy Code, putting up a false front and shame.

#### **a) Development of improved awareness and increased sensitivity**

One of the requirements for dealing with boys is to possess prior knowledge of the Boy Code and putting on a false front. Only someone who has this background information is able to categorise a boy’s specific behaviour or action appropriately. Teachers need to be aware in this connection that the boys’ behaviour is much more influenced by their environment than by their nature. The teacher should also be aware that he is indeed in a position to influence and prompt boys’ behaviour. Teachers need to be aware that there is more to a boy than meets the eye! Boys have just as much intuitive understanding as girls, but teachers have a

duty to show boys that that they are allowed to be sensitive on the one hand, and how to be sensitive on the other hand. Boys are generally far better at attracting the attention of teachers to themselves than girls. The best known journal for teachers in Flanders „Klasse“ was able to show on the basis of studies that boys are involuntarily given priority over girls in the classroom. Teachers ask boys different questions, usually give them more encouraging feedback and stimulate their thought processes to a greater extent. There are, nevertheless, teachers who treat boys and girls equally. According to Tine Symoens, this difference in treatment occurs for the following reason: „It is a social phenomenon. Boys and girls are already differentiated when they enter the classroom. They learn how to integrate into society using role models (...) Boys are also given more encouragement physically. They must be able to solve problems themselves, they must become independent more quickly.“ (Klasse 2000)

#### b) Improved teaching

Appropriate teaching materials must also be available if teaching is to be improved. The imitative of individual teachers does not suffice in this regard. It is much more important to have material available that is suitable for specific topics and ages. It has already been established that there are different types of boys that consequently also require different material. For boys of primary school age active learning with numerous opportunities to solve problems and be creative is a much greater challenge than for girls. Teachers should take this into consideration when planning and organising their lessons. (Physical) activities play a more important role for boys than for girls. But apart from physical activities visualising and a „hands-on approach“ is of particular importance. The Boy Code and putting up a false front may be left behind for instance if boys have the opportunity to express themselves freely by organising discussions and debates, group work, outdoor activities or handicrafts or to express their feelings through role plays.

#### c) Pace of teaching and learning

Boys do not learn to read and write as quickly as girls. In any event, it is not easy with the current class sizes to set an appropriate pace of teaching and learning. Teachers should be aware that frustration and aggression cease to play a role if boys are given the opportunity to keep up with the girls in learning through a balanced pace of teaching and learning.

#### d) More men in the primary school

The „Gender relations in primary and secondary education in Flanders“ study already cited shows the following distribution of men and women in the teaching system:

	<b>Men</b>		<b>Women</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	2000	2006	2000	2006	2000	2006
<b><i>Nursery and Primary School</i></b>						
Number	9.707	9.410	34.399	42.664	44.106	52.074
Percent	22	18	78	82	100	100
<b><i>Secondary School</i></b>						
Number	25.032	25.950	28.492	34.558	53.524	60.508
Percent	47	43	53	57	100	100

(Ministry of the Flemish Community 2000 & 2006)

Four women and a man: this ratio is the staffing reality at Flemish primary schools. The comparison also illustrates the continued decline in male teaching staff. The Flemish Ministry of Education is aware of this situation. To date, it has not been possible to break with the traditional paradigms, according to which men – if they enter the teaching profession – teach at secondary school where greater importance is attached to the educational aspect than to the aspect of upbringing. This says a lot about men and masculinity! An improvement in the situation is not expected at the present time. Over 60 per cent of students in teaching training courses in the academic year 2005/06 were women.

#### e) Different cultures

One of the distinguishing features of our society may be summarised in the process of globalisation and/or internationalisation. Cultures increasingly come into contact with each other in this process. Immigrants from different countries and different cultures have lived in Belgium for several generations. Interestingly, the school as an institution shows that 84 percent of boys with Belgian nationality attend primary schools that provide a general education for example, whereas this is the case for only 54 percent of boys from other backgrounds. The Moroccans are the largest of these minority groups. Their cultural background is different to that of the Dutch, French or German speaking Belgian boys. It is of particular significance that not only are we able to cope with these different cultures, we also use them for the purposes of European integration and globalisation. Teachers need to know about the cultural backgrounds of the pupils with whom they work. The upbringing and process of socialisation that a Moroccan boy receives is different to those of a Belgian boy. They grow up in the same country and in the same geopolitical area. They are so similar and yet so different.

#### f) More space for boys

A frequently expressed demand – with which to end this series of potential practical approaches – is the call for more space. From an educational perspective, it is also a matter of skilfully and discreetly creating niches and space in which boys can 'be boys'. They need – as do the girls – a safe environment and an extra degree of freedom. A new educational



approach may be created by entering into symbolic agreements or contracts to give boys the opportunity to firstly break through the Boy Code and secondly, not to have to put on a false front, and thirdly, not to develop a false sense of shame. (Van Engelen 2001)

#### **4. Inventory of leisure amenities for boys and youth movements in Flanders**

Flemish boys are no different to their contemporaries in other European countries, as far as leisure-time activities are concerned. Sports and handicrafts and media-based activities are preferred. Children and young people do not have a great deal of leisure time. This is already evident from the way the school day is structured. The youth movement has a long tradition in Belgium generally and especially in Flanders. Particular attention will consequently be given to this movement.

One study provides background information on the subject of leisure-time activities undertaken by children and young people in Flanders. This study was published in 2004 and makes reference to current empirical findings. A total of 35,542 test persons participated in this study, 17,945 of whom were boys aged from 10 to 17; 8,098 of these boys were 10 or 11 years old. This is equivalent to 45 percent of all male children and young people interviewed and gives a good overview of the target group of 6 to 11 year olds.

The study reveals the following selected results with respect to gender-specific leisure-time activities:

- Sporting activities: boys are more interested in skateboarding, playing football, basketball and BMX biking, whereas girls show more interest in cycling, volleyball, tennis, badminton and swimming. A surprise revelation is the fact that girls are more interested in activities on the street than is the case with boys.
- Commercial leisure-time activities: boys are more interested in sitting in cafés, whereas girls prefer to go to parties, go shopping or go to the cinema. There is evidence that these activities are age related. Cafes and parties appear to play the most important role for boys at primary school.
- Unstructured leisure-time activities: boys show more interest in having a job (top up their pocket money); girls prefer to go to parties with their friends. Girls also feel that they are not able to undertake these activities often enough.
- Creative leisure-time activities: participants were questioned about their interest in playing music, dancing, acting and creative activities. Girls are more interested in all these activities than boys. Interestingly, boys justify this limited type of leisure-time

activity as being too expensive, they are not sufficiently proficient, they do not know anyone to practice this activity with or their parents are not that keen on them doing it.

- ICT activities: girls surf and chat on the Internet or text each other. Boys want to surf on the Internet and play more computer games. (Steunpunt Jeugd 2004)

Belgium recognises a broad spectrum of youth movements, as does Great Britain as well for example. There is evidence that every second Belgian is confronted with the youth movement in some form, whether through actual membership, honorary activities or similar. Jacques Defourny (university lecturer at the University of Lüttich) has estimated that voluntary and honorary activities to help children and young people in Wallonia save the Community around 200 million euros annually. The sum would be even higher for Flanders since there is evidence of an even larger number of voluntary helpers there. A saving of at least 300 million euros is made annually in the Flemish community. Hans Bouwen, Director of the Chiro movement believes that these estimates are too low since the arrangements made by parents are disregarded.

The youth movement aims to create a shared experience and action as well as interaction and communication. Children and young people are normally organised into different groups and associations that are usually subject, age and gender specific. The cited study reveals that of the 35,473 girls and boys who were interviewed, 12,036 are members of youth movements and 9,529 have been members of a youth movement. This is equivalent to 60.8 percent of all test persons. More than every second child actively participates or has participated in a youth movement.

It is also interesting that numerous groups within the youth movements are solely designed for boys. The two largest movements are the „Chiro“ (96,000 members in Flanders) and „Scouts en Gidsen Vlaanderen“ (73,000 members in Flanders). A total of 228,274 children are members of one of these larger youth movements in Flanders. Almost 50 percent of them belong to the group of 6 to 12 year olds.

In 2004/05, Chiro had a total of 985 groups, of which 374 were coeducational groups, 334 girls' groups and 277 boys' groups.

- 10,405 children belonged to the group with the youngest children (Ribbels).
- 19,030 children were between the ages of 6 and 9 (Speelclubbers)
- 18,409 children were between the ages of 9 and 12 (Rakkers, Kwiks, Rakwi's).

Boys between the ages of 8 and 10 joined the Scouts en Gidsen as „Cubs“ for example. The Cubs was originally designed for the group of 7 to 11 year olds. The subgroups have continued to branch off to date so that children up to the age of 7 for example belong to the „Kapoenen“ (no gender separation) and the 11 to 13 year olds to the „Jongverkenner“ (boys), „Jonggidsen“ (girls) en „Jonggivers“ (mixed group). „The Cubs“ (originally „Cub Scouts“) were founded by Robert Baden-Powell on 1 August 1907. The Scouts and Girl Guides movement is so successful today that there are even waiting lists.

The centenary of the „Scouts en Gidsen“ was celebrated at the end of April of this year in Brussels. Around 90,000 children and young people from five different Belgian Scouts organisations took part:

- Scouts en Gidsen Vlaanderen
- FOS – Federatie Open Scouting
- Les Scouts
- Les Guides Catholiques de Belgique
- Les Scouts et Guides Pluralistes.

Even Belgian Crown Prince Filip belonged to the Cubs. With a membership of 160,000, the Scouts in the Kingdom of Belgium are in fourth place in Europe.

It thus only needs to be stated that in addition to the co-educational learning, training and leisure-time opportunities for children in Flanders, there is a range of gender-friendly leisure-time activities. Parents, families and the children themselves are consequently spoilt for choice in this respect which naturally does not make their decision as such any easier.

## **5. Development trends**

Coeducational or mixed lessons are perceived as being a great step forward in equality of children and young people. Critics, nevertheless, maintain that they wish to return to the position where the genders are educated and trained separately. Is this the potential solution for boys falling behind girls at school? Some schools have already begun teaching the genders separately in individual subjects. This first and foremost relates to subjects in which boys are not able to achieve such good academic results as girls. Advocates of this model see it as an opportunity for the teacher to enable boys to adapt better. Moreover, there is no distraction by the girls. Lastly, good academic results will not be experienced as and associated with „feminine“ values. The fact is that these initiatives in which the genders are taught separately in some subjects, albeit in a coeducational institution, have not produced

better academic results. The danger of relapsing into traditional paradigms is virtually non-existent. The issue of „coeducation: yes or no?“ remains controversial all the same.

One aspect is clearly of immediate importance in the debate as a whole: boys need to be accepted with all their gender-typical behaviour, with all their strengths and weaknesses, with their abilities and inabilities: equality is not the solution, it is the acknowledgement of a dual gender.

### **Suggestions for further independent study of the topic**

1. This paper only provides a brief outline of some aspects of the history of boys' education in Flanders. Research specific examples of all boys' schools and explain the aspects of gender-specific action! How and where are specific practical approaches reflected in the educational work with and for boys?
2. Demonstrate activities of the Flemish youth movements which show evidence of educational action that is specific to boys!
3. Where do you see opportunities in the coeducational institutions in Flanders for greater involvement in gender-friendly education and training? Provide specific examples!

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