



From class project to successful business

How can secondary education stimulate entrepreneurship even better?

Many young people already show entrepreneurial behaviour from a young age. They are creative, actively seek ways to earn money, lead others, or dare to depart from the prevalent norms. By tapping into, strengthening and encouraging that entrepreneurial behaviour, secondary education can stimulate entrepreneurship even more effectively.

“Young people who create value are also more often creative, take charge more readily, and dare to follow their own insights more quickly.”

THE INITIAL EFFECTO STUDY

Dozens of projects attempt to stimulate the entrepreneurial sense in secondary education students: mini-enterprises, simulation programmes in which youngsters manage a virtual company, company visits, inviting a business leader to the classroom... An initial large-scale study in Flanders by the Flanders DC Knowledge Centre at Vlerick Business School, called EFFECTO, has shown that these initiatives are both useful and necessary:

- > Education in entrepreneurship increases the entrepreneurial sense in students. It also has a positive effect on their attitude towards entrepreneurs. Students have more desire to travel abroad, achieve a better insight into their talents, and are more self-confident. In particular, long-term, intensive projects have this effect.
- > Remarkably enough, creativity and the entrepreneurial sense do not influence or reinforce each other.
- > Students in the vocational training curricula and economics students show the greatest interest in heading their own business. Students in General Secondary Education, without economics courses in their curriculum, show the least interest in entrepreneurship. Furthermore, in all types of education, girls are less inclined than boys to start their own business later on.

The follow-up study in primary education of this initial large-scale research project by the Flanders DC Knowledge Centre at Vlerick Business School confirms, reinforces and deepens the above findings specifically for secondary education, with new insights that are relevant for policy, the educational system and the general public.

WANTED: ENTREPRENEURIAL YOUTH

Actions speak louder than words

Many studies assess entrepreneurial *intentions* to measure the impact of entrepreneurial education. However, this is not a fool-proof predictor of entrepreneurship in later life: youngsters often indicate that they would like to become entrepreneurs without actually ever doing so. For that reason, this study opted for another line of approach: assessing the entrepreneurial *behaviour* of young people.

When we ask entrepreneurs how they behaved when they were 15 years old, three kinds of behaviours stand out: *creative behaviour*, *leadership* and *creating value*. *Non-conformist behaviour* was added to the list, because researchers Jacob Vermeire (Vlerick Business School) and Wouter Van den Berghe (Tilkon) have found that daring to deviate from prevailing norms and rules also increases the chance that someone will become entrepreneurial.

Methodology

The first part of the study consisted of questionnaires filled in by more than 300 students in the third cycle (year five and six). These students attend the General, Vocational and Technical Secondary Education curricula in five schools in East Flanders, both within and outside the city centre.

In addition to the questionnaires, youngsters who scored high on one or more of the four behaviours being studied – creative behaviour, leadership, creating value and non-conformist behaviour – were invited to attend several focus group sessions in which they were questioned further. This allowed Vermeire and Van den Berghe to determine what these young people associate with the concept of ‘entrepreneurship’. It became evident that they see a connection between entrepreneurship on the one hand and creativity, leadership and being involved with money (creating value) on the other hand. In other words, the way in which the questionnaires assessed entrepreneurial behaviour is very much in line with what this behaviour signifies for the youngsters themselves.

How entrepreneurial are our young people?

The questionnaires showed significant differences in entrepreneurial behaviour. In general, the focus groups confirm this.

- > Girls are more involved with what are considered traditional **creative activities** (such as music, writing, art, dance, handicrafts or design and decoration).
- > About as many boys as girls take on **managerial positions** in the classroom, at school, in a sports team, club or youth organisation.

“For a project in India, I did a whole bunch of things in order to bring in as much money as possible: washing cars, organising a tombola, baking and selling waffles... I learned a lot from that, including that I actually really like taking the lead, and that it’s not at all bad to work a lot when you really like what you’re doing.”

Also, on average, youngsters with entrepreneurial parents take the lead more often. The boys in the focus groups are more inclined to associate leadership with entrepreneurship. They prefer to be ‘the boss’. Girls, on the other hand, tend to see the negative aspects of leadership more quickly.

- > Most of the young people (more than 70%) are involved with **creating value** in one or more ways. They sell things, raise money for a good cause, look for bargains, trade, negotiate over prices, or have weekend and vacation jobs.

“My parents wanted me to do a weekend job to get a better sense of the value of money.”

- > With regard to **non-conformist behaviour**, boys more often dare to colour outside the lines, in both positive and negative sense. A third of the boys indicate that they have already deviated from the prevailing norms.

“My best friend died in a car accident. Life is finite, but it’s mine. So why follow a useless rule?”

A number of young people score high on all four kinds of entrepreneurial behaviour and high on entrepreneurial intentions. The intention to engage in entrepreneurship refers to the readiness to start your own business later on. The research results indicate that young people who are creating value are also more creative, more into leadership, and more inclined to follow their own insights. Therefore, when stimulating entrepreneurship, dealing with (earning) money should be given a prominent place. In fact, learning to create value not only leads to entrepreneurship in the narrow sense, but possibly to entrepreneurship in the broad sense of the word:

being creative, daring to depart from the norm, and taking command.

The connection is weaker between creativity and non-conformist behaviour on the one hand and entrepreneurial intentions on the other. Nevertheless, in adult entrepreneurs there is a clear connection between creativity and entrepreneurial intention. Thus, it is possible that youngsters in the age group being studied do not yet know what entrepreneurship means exactly, and therefore do not yet link it to creativity.

WHERE IS THE ENTREPRENEURIAL TEACHER?

Entrepreneurs are strongly influenced by role models with whom they can identify. In addition, young people do not only learn from school books, they are also strongly influenced by social experiences in the home or school environment.

The focus group participants mostly name their parents as their primary role model. Parents play an important role in stimulating entrepreneurial behaviour, even when they themselves are not entrepreneurs.

“I’m studying Beauty & Wellness, so I have a small room at home where I can receive clients. My mother lent me the money to buy the things that I need, and I’m paying it back bit by bit. I also do my own bookkeeping. I invest the money that I make in new equipment and products.”

It is surprising that none of the participants named a teacher as role model for entrepreneurial behaviour. This can perhaps be explained by previous research from the Flanders DC Knowledge Centre at Vlerick Business School in which it was shown that teachers, like other types of employees, do generate lots of ideas and thus display innovative working behaviour. However, the research report shows that they often receive little support from management to turn those ideas into reality. Thus, on the face of it, for students as well as for teachers, the school environment appears to be not the most suitable biotope for the development of entrepreneurial behaviour. However, when the school’s management supports the teacher’s entrepreneurial plans, this can have an especially stimulating effect on the students.

“(At our school) we have to obey the rules for five years. Only now, in the final year, are we suddenly allowed to do a lot more.”

NOT EVERYTHING SHOULD BE GIVEN A MARK

Two important factors hinder effective entrepreneurship education. The first one is the excessive demands on schools and teachers. Stimulating the entrepreneurial sense is only one of the many things demanded of teachers. Moreover, nurturing an entrepreneurial spirit is not the exclusive responsibility of education. The environment – and the parents first of all – play a large role in this as well.

The second inhibiting factor is a lack of clarity about the concept of entrepreneurship education itself – which should sharpen the sense for entrepreneurship as well as instil the required competences. Some of these skills are already taken up in the cross-discipline attainment targets. Still, it is clear that entrepreneurship education could be more effective by daring to opt for stimulating entrepreneurial behaviour – and especially creative behaviour, leadership, creating value and non-conformist behaviour – within the school walls.

Some successful tactics:

- > **Not everything should be given a mark.** Achieving good marks is extrinsic motivation, often with harmful consequences. Creativity, leadership and non-conformism are often not explicitly graded –and should stay that way! This should also be the case for dealing with money and creating value.
- > **Involvement and choice are important.** First of all, allow young people to actualise their own interests and values. Show genuine appreciation for the opinions of students. At the same time, avoid too much freedom of choice, because that leads to chaos.
- > **Explain why certain activities, subjects or assignments are meaningful.** Even a student who is studying horticulture needs to have some understanding of mathematics to be able, for example, to do his/her own bookkeeping later on.
- > **Offer optimally challenging tasks.** Make learning activities fit with what students are (just) able to handle, so that they can acquire further skills.

Finally, it is not only a matter of stimulating entrepreneurial behaviour. Many young people do not know what entrepreneurship entails. To get them interested in a life as an entrepreneur, there is need for a **clearer image of entrepreneurship** itself.

Young people should see entrepreneurship as a *future possible self* – a role that they can take on in the future. This increases motivation and clarifies which competences the young person still needs to acquire. It also gives youngsters a lot of freedom in defining and re-defining who they want to be. Young people do not have to fulfil other people's expectations, nor opt for security – we can also let them dream.

Just like parents, teachers can serve as role models in this – even without being entrepreneurs themselves – and thus strengthen their students' belief in their own abilities. Those who believe that they are good in creative activities, leadership, creating value or non-conformist behaviour will more quickly be inclined to begin an entrepreneurial undertaking.

Intrinsic motivation comes into play when students want to do activities spontaneously – out of genuine interest, without a view towards reward or punishment – and in the way that they so desire. The long-term effect of intrinsically motivated behaviour is much stronger than that of extrinsic behaviour (driven, for example, by the rewards of money, power or prestige). Therefore, by stimulating entrepreneurial behaviour, one emphasises intrinsic goals: for example, through the entrepreneurial activity, you can give free rein to your creativity and decide for yourself what you will do and how you will organise your work.

- > **Give appropriate feedback.** The intention must always be constructive, a challenge when dealing with non-conformist behaviour. In that light, students are also allowed to fail, as long as they experience that this is not fun and know where they went wrong and how to succeed in the future. Be specific and do not make it personal; make possible suggestions for situations in which this behaviour is appropriate. The best feedback is informative and supportive, not authoritative.
- > **Foster belief in one's own abilities.** Have youngsters take part in positive experiences. Seeing how another succeeds or fails also has an indirect impact on how a student assesses his or her own abilities. Encourage students to set goals themselves, and give regular feedback during, and immediately after, the desired behaviour.

Reference

Stimuleren van ondernemerschap in het secundair onderwijs: een verdieping van EFFECTO (Stimulating entrepreneurship in secondary education: a deepening of EFFECTO), by Jacob Vermeire, Wouter Van den Berghe, Jan Lepoutre and Miguel Meuleman (Flanders DC Knowledge Centre at Vlerick Business School), 2012.