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Zit de nieuwe Steve Jobs in de klas? Naar een betekenisvol stimuleren van ondernemingszin in het basisonderwijs

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Is there a new Steve Jobs in your class?

Stimulate children's entrepreneurial behaviour in and outside the classroom

Steve Jobs, the driving force behind Apple, was an entrepreneur par excellence. As a result, Apple's turnover today is nearly the size of Belgium's gross national product. Perhaps there is a new Steve Jobs sitting at a school desk somewhere amongst us – but his or her entrepreneurial talent is not being stimulated by his environment. Yearly, only 4% of our country's population starts a new venture. Even though we were all active entrepreneurial pre-schoolers at one time. What went wrong, and how can the situation be improved?

“To contribute productively as an adult in an unpredictable world, it is necessary that children be creative, dare to do things *and* develop entrepreneurial behaviour.”

In a class of seven year-olds, a little girl who does not do her school assignments very well is sitting in the back. They have sat her at one of the desks in the rear of the class precisely because her schoolwork is not very good. One day, the teacher asks the children to draw something. They are allowed to draw whatever they want to. The teacher comes past the little girl's desk and asks what she is drawing. “I'm drawing a picture of God,” she says. The teacher frowns: “But nobody knows what God looks like!” Without a moment's hesitation, the little girl says: “Then, we *will* know in just a minute.”

This anecdote was once told by creativity expert Ken Robinson in one of the most widely viewed TED Talks. In that talk, he demonstrates how seriously the Western educational system undermines children's creativity. Robinson says that we make children study in order to get diplomas. Being obedient, nodding assent, parroting back the subject matter, and always colouring within the lines suffice to achieve that end. But to contribute productively later in an unpredictable world, it is necessary that children be creative, dare to do things, *and* develop entrepreneurial behaviour.

How to do that? In an Effecto study, the Flanders DC Knowledge Centre at Vlerick Business School examined the current theories and conducted a written survey of 150 Flemish pupils.

It is not always in the genes

Are you born an entrepreneur or not? Search on the internet, and you will find statements like: “I learned a lot about entrepreneurship from my father”; “My father was a small entrepreneur”; or “She credits her mother for her entrepreneurial spirit.” Perhaps entrepreneurship really is a family trait. Not entirely true, as we learn from scientific research. Your innate DNA determines only a part of your future. Among boys, by the way, the genetic influence is generally smaller than among

girls. It is more important that the environment stimulates or supports entrepreneurship. So, parents serve as career models and can indirectly influence their children's vocational interests. Children observe and imitate them. Another interesting finding: research shows that the entrepreneurial mind-set of first-born children is stronger than that of the younger brother(s) or sister(s). That might be the case simply because the parents set the bar higher for the eldest child.

Shakespeare can do better in language

We can already develop children's entrepreneurial sense at a very young age. Not only that, the older the child gets, the more difficult it becomes. But a curious child will not automatically become an entrepreneur. An environment is needed that stimulates the child to develop an entrepreneurial personality. That environment is composed of three groups: teachers, family and peers.

People in education play a large part in the process of instilling children with the sense of entrepreneurship. But it is not always easy for teachers. Suppose you have Shakespeare in your class. According to the educational regulations, you must discipline him now and then. Can he please express himself a bit more clearly! And it does not always go perfectly smoothly with a Picasso sitting at a desk either. He can draw beautifully when he wants to – but for heaven's sake, why is he always drawing those peculiar birds?

And yet there are possibilities. Primary schools in Flanders are not empty-handed when it comes to stimulating the entrepreneurial mind-set. They already have several programmes in place: think of ‘De Droomfabriek’ (The Dream Factory) and ‘Kid@Bizz programma’ (Vlajo) and the ‘Koffer vol ondernemingszin’ (Trunk full of entrepreneurial sense) from Unizo.

When it is not allowed, can it be done another way?

As a teacher, use these programmes to foster the core of the entrepreneurial sense in children. You can stimulate four crucial behaviours in children that forecast entrepreneurial behaviour: leadership, being creative, selling and exchanging (so-called transactional behaviour), and non-conformist behaviour. In a general sense, this set of behaviours is also important for the general education of children in our society. But school regulations obstruct some of these behaviours. During the heyday of the Pokémon cards, many schools forbade the children to bring them to school and exchange them with their friends. But such moments can really help children develop their transactional skills. The cards and marbles campaigns of the past few years at the Delhaize supermarkets only confirm this. Children who wanted to complete their collection had to approach people and create exchange moments. Ideal for developing entrepreneurial behaviour.

Non-conformist behaviour is still a thorny issue. Someone who does not conform to the rules is quickly viewed as a dissident. The last resort for a school is to expel such a pupil. Paradoxically enough, several highly productive entrepreneurs were expelled from school in their youth.

Involvement, support, learning from mistakes and free play are of great importance. Free play often leads to non-conformist behaviour, but it can be stimulated positively. You can forbid children from having a snowball fight on the playground –or, you can hold a brainstorming session with them in which they can come up with an alternative activity. For example, building a snowball pitching booth. This channels and encourages non-conformist behaviour in a positive way. You can also apply this approach to new trends that ‘do not belong on the playground’.

So teachers play a large role in providing the vital impetus: the stronger the entrepreneurial classroom practice, the greater the children’s belief in their own capabilities. This way, they are motivated intrinsically and develop standards for entrepreneurial behaviour.

Let children do ‘dangerous’ things

The Effecto 2012 study by the Flanders DC Knowledge Centre at Vlerick Business School refers explicitly to the book *Fifty dangerous things (you should let your children do)* by American authors Julie Spiegler and Gever Tulley.

These two authors argue that we protect our children in their upbringing so anxiously that accidents happen when they have to step out of their comfort zone later. So, they encourage teachers and parents to let children do or make ‘dangerous’ things. Have them lick a 9-volt battery, teach them the art of throwing the spear (so that they develop strong voluntary movements), give them the assignment of walking home from school, have them climb a tree and let them play with fire.

Spiegler and Tulley let children do these things. The children have scrapes and bruises, and their clothes and hair are dirty. But they have been allowed to explore and experiment, even with things that at first glance seem dangerous or unusual.

As a teacher or parent, you have dozens of opportunities to create projects that fire the imagination and to organise activities with alternative materials. This broadens the children’s viewpoints, they learn from each other and they have the chance to develop their talents. This is not only good for their entrepreneurial sense but also for their development overall. In brief, they become better able to hold their own in the world – they become more human.

Some more ideas for instilling children with entrepreneurship

The researchers of the Flanders DC Knowledge Centre at Vlerick Business School offer even more ideas with which teachers in the classroom and parents at home can continually encourage the entrepreneurial sense in children.

Provide structure

Make your expectations clear by providing the children with the most important rules and boundaries. Give them positive feedback with frequent, sincere pats on the back. They encounter difficulties? Offer tips instead of solutions. In other words: explain how they can grow in what they are doing, and work in small steps.

Support autonomy

Grant children time to express their opinions and let them talk. Listen attentively to what they say, do not constantly silence them. Sound out their personal interests and values. Put yourself in the children’s perspective and allow them the time to try to solve problems independently. Encourage them to persevere. Offer them choices that enable them to realise their own interests and values.

Encourage their belief in their own abilities

Give children enough information about the complexity of certain behaviour, the circumstances in which the behaviour can take place, and the various steps that are needed to perform the behaviour. Also explain how they can turn a certain situation to their advantage.

Create situations in which children can practice the several steps that are necessary to display certain behaviour. This can be done in the form of active learning as well as by observing role models.

Give children feedback about the way in which they are behaving and how they can improve themselves.

Let them associate with their peers

Organise company visits with the class or with other parents and children, go to a company's open day, attend youth camps and focus on entrepreneurial activities. Indeed, recent studies show that it is enormously important that children do these entrepreneurial activities together.

Although parents and teachers are important parties, association with peers has a larger influence on changes in the child's personality. The interaction with classmates and peers strongly determines the entrepreneurial sense. It even works in the opposite direction: when the stimuli from school or parents are not accepted by the peers, they will have little effect.

Create role models

Everyone has talents. Stimulate children to experience learning from each other. Place entrepreneurial children on a pedestal and thus create role models that less entrepreneurial children can emulate.

Promote transactional behaviour

Stimulating transactional behaviour may not be self-evident in a primary school. But you can create opportunities by bringing children together with others in a transactional situation – for example, by organising exchange marts and flea markets at school. This keeps the transactional behaviour real (but teachers or the directorate can provide more guidance if there are abuses). Working with transactional games in the classroom can help the students become more familiar with larger sums of money and learn how to handle loss.

Encourage talent

Unique talent is often expressed in non-conformist behaviour. Everyone is good at something, has a unique talent, which in this sense is not 'normal'. Often these unique talents do not come into their own in a school environment.

Therefore, create a permanent place at school where students can show their own interests, create more time for special talents in the classroom, create a recognition system for extra-curricular activities, or organise 'abnormal' days: for example, a 'crazy cap day'. On that day, the children may come to school with a 'crazy cap' that they have made themselves. They can tell about it, exchange them with the other children, or even make cap combinations. Such an approach is non-conformist, but is creative in a positive way. Try the crazy cap day – because it is truly worth the effort!

Appeal: paths instead of projects

The ideas presented here are useful only when you can apply them continuously. Not only in school, but also at home and in the free-time environment. The current entrepreneurship programmes at school are a good starting point for stimulating entrepreneurship in children. Nevertheless, they could be more effective if converted into long-term projects that stimulate the entrepreneurial mind-set in children throughout their education.

Conclusion

Let us strive for paths instead of projects. Only then can the Steve Jobs of tomorrow develop his unique talents.

Reference

Is the new Steve Jobs sitting in your class? Towards a meaningful stimulation of the entrepreneurial mind-set in primary education, by Jan Lepoutre, Jacob Vermeire and Eva Cools (Flanders DC Knowledge Centre at Vlerick Business School), December 2011.