

>> BY MEANS OF PROJECT METHOD AND INTEGRATION OF SUBJECTS

Preparing Students to Teach General Subjects in Secondary Vocational Education in Flanders

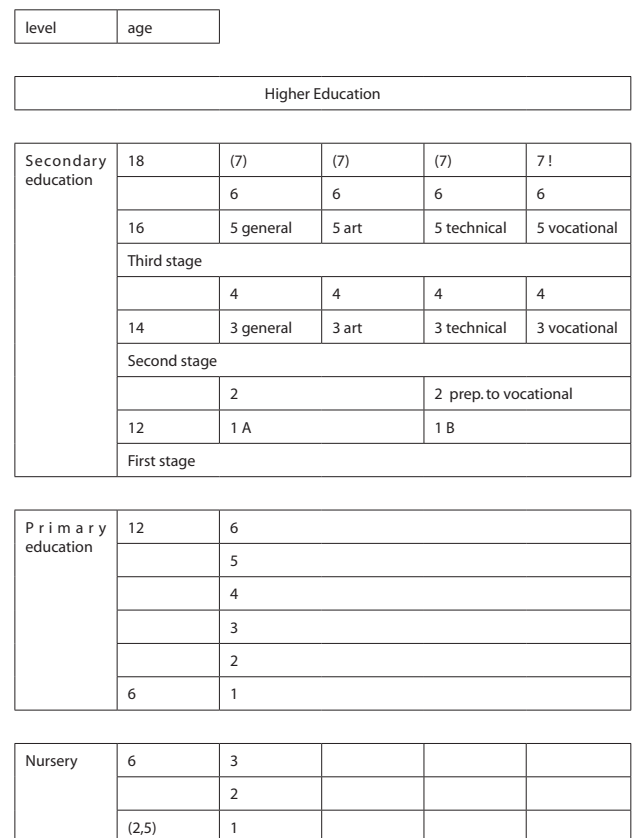
Ronny Smet, Karel de Grote Hogeschool, Belgium

Introduction

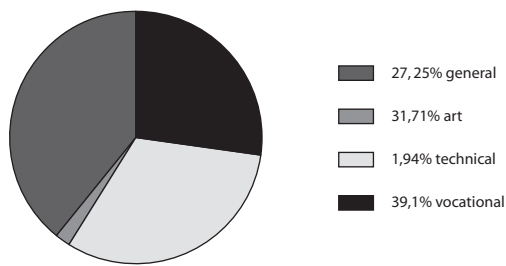
For some years now, in the teachers' training course at Karel de Grote College students have been able to opt for the training component General Subjects Project (GSP). GSP is a cluster subject – in fact an integrated working method – which is only offered in secondary vocational education (SVE). In this paper I want to give a description of what GSP and GSP training entail. In order to put everything in a clear perspective, I first give an overview of the secondary education system in Flanders and the position of secondary vocational education. Subsequently, I explain the development of GSP and try to elucidate what GSP means concretely. We then focus on the GSP training at the Karel de Grote College as currently offered. Finally, I would like to invite you to react to a number of considerations and questions at the end of this presentation or after reading this paper.

I SVE in Flanders

Diagram of the secondary education system in Flanders



Percentage of pupils in the four different types of secondary education in 2003-2004 (second and third stage)



SVE is practice-oriented education that mainly teaches young people a specific occupation. In the second and third stages of secondary education these pupils have 36 hours of lessons a week, including at least 16 hours practice. They also have practical work experience. With a SVE certificate, pupils cannot go on to higher education, unless they do a so-called seventh homologation year.

The courses within SVE and TSE (technical secondary education) are divided into 26 study fields: cars, building, chemistry, decorative techniques, photography, glass techniques, graphical techniques, commerce, wood, jewellery, clothing, cooling & heat, agriculture & horticulture, leather processing, maritime courses, mechanics/electricity, musical instrument production, optics, orthopaedic techniques, personal care, reed & basket work, shoes, dental techniques, textile, tourism and nutrition.

The group of pupils in SVE has an extremely heterogeneous composition. This heterogeneity is the result of differences in school career, whereby especially in the 2nd and 3rd stage the SVE has a great influx of a lateral intake from TSE and GSE (general secondary education) (the waterfall effect). Furthermore, there are differences in age, a wide variety of social, cultural and economic backgrounds, and differences in the characteristics of the chosen course (with 'stronger' and 'weaker' courses) etc.

This heterogeneity can also be found at class level, which has important consequences for the pedagogic-didactic approach. Not only this actual given of enormous diversity, but also the presence of factors such as demotivation, learning disorders, mental and psychomotoric problems in pupils and the influx of foreign speakers make a teaching task a real challenge, especially in an urban context.

What is GSP?

Development

So far, the secondary education system in Belgium for GSE and TSE courses is still based on the traditional subject-oriented model, in spite of the many trends which have been propagating integrated upbringing and education for years. Teachers in secondary education are mainly monodisciplinary teachers, specialised in the learning content and didactics of two or three subjects.

However, modern society expects the school to educate and bring up the total person. In order to meet these expectations, the authorities have prescribed cross-subject attainment targets for secondary education (education in citizenship, environmental education, health education, etc.). Schools are therefore obliged to take initiatives for cross-subject work. This generally happens by means of occasional projects, which however do not yet break through the traditional separation

of subjects. An exception to this subject separation can be found in SVE in the shape of GSP.

In 1983, compulsory education was increased from the age of 14 to the age of 18. For many pupils in secondary vocational education, this had far-reaching consequences. Until then they obtained a qualification after the 4th year, could take a completion year and then went on to the labour market, sometimes as early as at the age of 15 or 16 years.

Prolongation of compulsory education obliged education providers to reflect on the meaningful filling in of an extended curriculum for pupils who are generally less motivated with regard to general subjects. From the viewpoint of teaching psychology, in which the added value of integrated education, the added value of offering coherent cross-subject curricula are pointed out, the authorities decided to make it possible to offer the traditional general subjects (Dutch, mathematics, history, geography) in an integrated form in SVE courses under the term GSP.

From then on, every school could incorporate GSP structurally and systematically in the weekly lesson timetable.

The subject – is it still a subject? – can be organised from the first stage of SVE. However, in the first stage, most education providers opt for retaining the separate subjects Dutch, mathematics and social studies to take care of specific learning deficits in a remedial way.

In the second and third stage, the teaching periods for Dutch, mathematics and social studies are either or not clustered integrally into the subject GSP. In the second stage, 6 periods of GSP a week are generally included in the timetable and 4 periods in the third stage. Sometimes, separate Dutch or mathematics lessons are retained, depending on the specific requirements of a particular course.

Convinced of the added value of a coherent curriculum, the government promotes clustered presentation in the shape of GSP. However, it leaves education providers completely free to realise the attainment targets for the second and third stage of SVE by means of separate subjects or through thematically integrated work. With clustered presentation, the government only wants to increase the chance of a coherent curriculum, among other reasons because it appears that pupils are better motivated for general subjects. Whatever the education provider opts for, the syllabus will contain objectives based on the same attainment targets. For that reason, it was ensured that the attainment targets not only serve the purpose of GSP, but can also be allocated to separate subjects. Meanwhile, we notice that most SVE school directors are convinced of the added value and have opted for the integrated approach.

Specifics

As a GSP teacher one gives instruction on certain mainly social themes in which the content of the various subjects comes to the fore in a concrete and functional way. Any theme can be broached, pupils are in fact often involved in choosing. Drugs, advertising, law, tourism, elections, film, Halloween, pirates, hip hop, transport, etc. are all possible, as long as the pupils are interested and the theme offers the possibilities to incorporate language, mathematical and social skills. There is calculation, communication, working with maps and timelines, topical items are discussed, etc. Within the subject GSP, the pupils process the subject matters as one entity, so that they experience reality as one entity too. Standard functional skills get full attention here.

Moreover, pupils' autonomy and responsibility is pursued by using project-based working methods. The teacher employs active ways of working such as group work, personal work, portfolio, research tasks, discussions, interviews, surveys, situational play, role-playing, excursions, guest speakers, etc. The emphasis is on DOING. However, not every pupil has

to have the same task. Classes are consciously kept as small as possible (15 to 20 pupils) in order to give the teacher the chance to differentiate and deal positively with diversity and heterogeneity.

The focus is on the concern to guide SVE pupils in their individual personality development and in their education for active and responsible citizenship. The main objective is and continues to be making pupils self-sufficient in their personal and professional life and in their participation in a multicultural society. This presupposes the acquisition of skills and attitudes on the basis of functional knowledge and insight. Here, evaluation is not an objective as such, but a means to help pupils to learn. In GPS, alternative forms of evaluation are given every chance.

Functional objectives

The authorities opted for a well-selected bundle of functional skills for all pupils, whatever the course. Functional means that the skills have to be applicable in social situations and in vocation-oriented situations. Six so-called 'fundamentals' were selected, for each of which concrete objectives were defined:

1. Having functional language skills.
2. Having functional mathematical skills.
3. Functionally acquiring and processing information.
4. Having organisational skills.
5. Being aware of time and space.
6. Being socially and ethically aware, efficient and responsible.

The search was for objectives that can motivate pupils. Pupils have to experience them as meaningful, useful and pleasant. This means that one starts from recognisable situations from their environment and strives for application orientation. In addition, the problem situations have to be sufficiently challenging and arouse their curiosity.

Exercising these skills can be realised by means of various themes. These themes are not consciously described within GSP. The authorities give the teacher full responsibility for selecting relevant, topical and motivating subjects. This should enable the latter to play on the interests and perception of the pupils in his or her class. In the first place, the theme is a catalyst of learning processes, a stepping-stone, a medium and not an objective as such.

It may be clear that the learning objectives of GSP can only be realised if a powerful learning environment is constructed. Active, dynamic didactics and adequate material support are absolute prerequisites to fully exploit the enormous wealth of opportunities.

GSP training at the Karel de Grote College

A subject like any other?

In the professional bachelor secondary education, students acquire a teaching qualification for two or three subjects in the first and second stage of GSE and TSE and in the first, second and third stage of SVE. There is a shared component, a specific component (the teaching qualification subjects) and a practical pre-service training component. The educational subject GSP has been offered as a subject 'in its own right' among the other subjects as from the academic year 1997-1998. For example, a student may opt for the subjects of mathematics, physics and GSP, or Dutch, English and GSP or physical education and GSP, etc.

Previously, attention was paid to SVE and GSP only during project weeks. However, it soon became clear that superficial initiation was far from adequate and that GSP should get a

full place in the option landscape of initial teacher training. Moreover, the field of activity and the secondary education guidance services wanted the construction of a GSP course, which adequately prepares future teachers for their task in SVE. Karel de Grote College undertook to work this out. A steering group was established which adjusts and surveys the lines of force concerning objectives and the course curriculum.

Because of the integration principle, GSP seemed at first to be the odd one out among the other subject specialisations. The project-based integrated approach was actually at right angles with 'thinking in boxes' and the fragmented option landscape. The 'apartheid structure' of initial teacher training courses (and of secondary education) is exactly what GSP tries to break through.

In addition, together with the Katholieke College Kempen (Catholic Kempen College), Vorselaar Campus, we were the first teacher training course that resolutely opted for implementation of the GSP subject as part of the course in its own right and we could not fall back on examples or previously acquired expertise from other teacher's training courses. This pioneering role meant that a tradition of self-reflection and self-evaluation developed from the outset. For example, we still find it very important to give our students sufficient participation and to evaluate the GSP course critically with them on a regular basis.

It is no sinecure to give the GSP course form and content. Students have to have ample knowledge in many subjects and at the same time profound insight in subject-didactic principles that underpin project-based and integrated working methods.

Although the objectives and content for the GSP course have been developed by and large, our course should remain open to topical developments and be able to integrate them in a flexible way. It is therefore important to check regularly whether or not it is not sailing under false colours.

Therefore, throughout these eight academic years the GSP course has had many facelifts. Undoubtedly there will be more. We do not expect that in the end these changes will render our course virtually 'perfect'. No. It is just a guarantee. As long as we remain flexible enough to anticipate the needs of students, innovation, actuality, questions from the field or the guidance in the short term, there is no risk of fossilisation.

The lines of force of the GSP course:

Practice and experience orientation

Profound introduction to vocational education is a permanent component. From the start of the training, course students are sent into the field. Schools are visited, teachers and pupils are interviewed, GSP lessons are attended, practice rooms are explored, etc.

Furthermore, students are involved in field projects. In that way, they learn to fill in GSP

didactics in concrete contexts. They supply didactic material, assist in working out themes, give language support to non-Dutch-speaking newcomers, provide home counselling for pupils, work out informative plays for themes, etc.

Wide training and professional knowledge

A GSP teacher has the simultaneous function of language teacher, mathematics teacher, history teacher, geography teacher and more (depending on the theme tackled...). These components are therefore also manifestly present in the training course. Students are expected to display sound basic knowledge in all these domains. In addition, alertness and sensitivity to topical social themes are a must and students have to be able to acquire in-depth knowledge of these

themes in the short term.

Didactic skills and knowledge of the subject

Project-based integrated education implies adapted working methods. The very special didactics of the GSP subject are thoroughly explored. Here too, the training course tries to work in an experience-oriented way. Didactic methods are clarified and tried out. Completely in the spirit of GSP, students are involved in the training course in an (inter)active way: the "teach what/how you preach" principle.

Furthermore, we attach a great deal of importance to cooperative learning through group work.

Spread over the three years, all kinds of tasks and projects are gradually incorporated, which evolve from:

- small-scale defined contents to complex ones
- under clear guidance to independent work
- from working individually to cooperation in groups
- external evaluation to self-assessment

Attitudes

The above lines of force imply the presence of a number of essential attitudes: creativity, empathy skills, sense of responsibility, accuracy, commitment, preparedness to cooperate, enthusiasm and inquisitiveness, organisational talent, discipline, respect, etc.

A great deal is expected of a GSP teacher. (Perhaps too much even?) Students have to get the chance to grow. For this purpose, reflective learning is stimulated by means of discussions, reporting, self-assessment, inter-vision, etc.

Evaluation

I have already mentioned the fact that finding a relevant training route is not self-evident, and finding the right recipe for achieving a satisfactory evaluation model was not easy either.

Besides, for a 'subject' such as GSP we saw little benefit in the traditional exam system. At first we actually packed in all the exams and employed the principle of permanent evaluation. Slightly over-ambitious as it turned out. Our influx was clearly not familiar enough with such an approach – and therefore not prepared for it either.

So in those first years this meant searching, experimenting, trial and error, and essentially it is still the same today. In fact, that may be the essence: awareness that any form of evaluation is relative and that it can always be adjusted (and perhaps for the better?). From this awareness, we also think it extremely important to involve our students in this quest, to get feedback from them by means of the thorough annual evaluation discussions at the end of each year of training.

Meanwhile, the foundations started to take shape. A number of cornerstones of the evaluation method within 'our subject' appear to prove their soundness year on year.

For the training course component, GSP students are not only evaluated by means of traditional exams. The total score for GSP is the sum of a great deal of partial marks. Exams are actually taken, for in the end every teacher to be has to be able to prove that he/she more or less masters the learning contents of his/her subject, but this appreciation figure is only a small element in the sum total of marks. In each of the three years of training there is in fact ample attention for tasks and projects that focus on skills and attitudes. Generally, all kinds of process evaluation carry a great deal of weight here.

Students are invited to report and to reflect on their approach. In group tasks, the necessary attention is paid to group dynamics and individual task roles.

Our intention may be clear: to have GSP students experience that evaluation is more than just testing knowledge of the subject matter. GSP indeed wants to be the catalyst to offer all opportunities for skill training and attitude development within vocational education.

All too often pupils in the SVE are judged on their knowledge of cognitive theme subject matters, while the evaluation of functional transferable skills and competences are treated poorly in many a GSP project.

We can only hope that if in their training students become aware that apart from cognitive contents many other growth processes are evaluated as well, they will give the necessary attention to skills and attitudes later on.

Considerations and questions

To my knowledge the Flemish GSP - alternative for vocational schools is quite unique in Europe. It would be interesting to find out more about similar approaches in other countries.

Please notify me when you have examples in your country. It would be interesting to compare.

ronny.smet@kdg.be

GSP-teachers are expected to be much more than just 'teachers'. The integration of subjects, the pedagogical (even psychological) competences needed for mentoring and coaching pupils in vocational education with all kinds of problems and backgrounds, the required insight in and creativity using thematic and project methods almost requires a 'superteacher'. To what extent can we train students to become 'superteachers' in initial teacher education?

Last but not least: what qualities/competences could be expected from the 'superteacher' trainer?

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