

Guidance in Flemish Education

Gerard Wulleman

Guidance provision in Flemish education is closely associated with the mental health and well being of pupils. Three years ago, a new system of Centres for Pupil Guidance (CLB) was created which invite comparison with the recent introduction of Connexions in England.

Individual well being and mental health

Mental health is a very important issue in school life, both for the individual and for the school as an institution. Schools are supposed to prepare students for adult professional and social life. To do so, in the old days, they only had to pass on knowledge and concentrate on cognitive purposes. Nowadays, what is expected of schools is spread over a much wider range of educational purposes. It is clear that support for personal development in present-day society is much more complicated, not only for parents but for schools as well. This challenge requires different pedagogical approaches in schools and the creation of a psychological environment that promotes feelings of wellbeing in students and teachers as well.

The school careers of European children take about 10 years during which a lot of social behavioral patterns are initiated. School life, for example, gives social structures to which pupils have to conform. By doing this pupils learn that social life brings rights and duties with it. School structures are also different from family structures that rely on affective relationships and from peer group structures that rely on power relationships. For some children, school structures are the only stable ones while the experience of other structuring depends on emotional attitudes and impulses.

To cope with increasing educational requirements, schools have to develop systematic guidance, which is an important tool to match the educational ambitions of the school with the individual educational needs of the pupil.

Wellbeing is not enough for mental health but is an important foundation for it. Mental health also implies personal responsibility and self-reliance. Students should not only learn subjects but they also have to explore their real strengths and weaknesses, and the expectations of the outside world. Guidance should protect students from threatening or curbing frames of reference from parents or teachers and arm them against self-delusion. Therefore, guidance should develop two different but complementary strategies: an emancipatory strategy and a safety-inducing one. Both strategies help to stimulate positive attitudes and

promote mental health during pupils' school careers and into adult life as well.

Emancipation and emotional safety

The emancipatory strategy works towards an optimal development of personality strengths and towards a reduction of the harm caused by personality weaknesses. Guidance activity tries to encourage and push the pupils towards identifying and exploiting their real talents, not the talents that are attributed to them by themselves or their parents or peers. The same goes for their real limitations.

The second strategy tries to help pupils explore their identity and strengthen their self-concept and self-confidence. This identity must ensure a comfortable psychological feeling which arms the pupil against continuous and threatening challenges.

Emancipatory ambitions and a well-balanced emotional safety are necessary to enable creativity, which is necessary in a continuously changing world, and to protect the person from the pressures of the outside world.

Both guidance strategies complement each other and should not be separated. An over-strong emancipatory strategy might threaten the identity and wellbeing of the individual whereas an over-strong safety strategy might lead to the avoidance of challenges and result in passivity. Schools show their emancipatory concerns in their educational approach and didactical methods and their concerns about emotional comfort in their efforts to create a favourable social and emotional climate.

Support for guidance in schools

The Flemish government strongly encourages schools to develop a guidance policy and provides them with supplementary educational help, particularly those with a lot of underprivileged children.

In order to assist schools in their guidance policy, the Flemish parliament reformed pupil guidance by integrating the former centres for medical school inspection and the former centres for educational assistance and vocational guidance (PMS-centres) into new "Centra voor Leerlingen Begeleiding" (CLB; i.e.: Centres for Pupil Guidance). 75 of these new centres were created in September 2000.

All children and pupils from nursery school up to the threshold of higher education belong to the target group of the CLB which means a population of about 1,350,000 pupils. Particular attention and special guidance, however,

must be focused on disadvantaged pupils who are threatened in their learning and development especially because of their social background.

Important operational principles are:

- Guidance is free and is demand-driven, i.e. it is given at the request of pupils, parents and schools. The CLB works independently and has to act in a multidisciplinary way.
- The CLB is required to work with the parents and schools. These are explicitly defined in the Parliament Act as carrying the primary responsibility for upbringing and education. However, pupils from the age of 14 years can ask for help themselves even when the parents do not agree. The work of the CLB is focused on supporting the tasks of the parents and the schools and is therefore subsidiary. This is a very important principle which calls not only for a close cooperation but for a commitment as well. Some schools were not used to calling for external help in their own educational organisation and this is what they should do now.
- Schools have the final responsibility in guidance policy but the centres offer them guidance services which the school can accept or refuse. Each school is obliged to discuss a guidance policy with the CLB of their choice and sign an agreement with them. The mutual agreement between the school and the centre and the way the collaboration is organised must be laid down in a guidance policy contract. This contract also includes the offers that were refused by the schools
- Some services of the centres are compulsory for the schools especially in the field of preventive health care and in the case of frequent truancy.
- The CLB must cooperate with other services in the health care and welfare sectors.
- The CLB must develop a high-quality policy in a structured way.

In the decree concerning the new centres their mission is defined as follows:

contribute to the wellbeing of pupils now and in the future. ... so that they can acquire and strengthen throughout their school career, the competencies which shape the foundation for their current and the permanent development and for their social participation.

To carry out this mission the guidance of the centres takes place in the following domains:

Learning and studying

School and vocational career

Preventive health care

Emotional and social behaviour

Both prevention and remedy are aims of guidance activities of the centres, except for the health care domain where medical treatment is not allowed.

Guidance can be organised at school level, at group level and at an individual level. Problems can occur in more than one domain at the same time and threaten the well-being of pupils at school. Moreover, one could expect problems in one field to interact with the other domains too.

Learning and studying

In the learning and studying domain, guidance is concerned with improving the capacity to learn in every respect. At the school level the CLB may improve and support didactical processes, help teachers to assess the initial educational levels of pupils and help teachers to stimulate positive learning attitudes.

At class or group level the CLB can shape the acquisition of appropriate learning habits and at the individual level, among other guidance activities, CLB workers examine individual learning problems by psychological testing, cooperate in making a plan for remedial teaching and refer pupils to special needs education

Educational and vocational career guidance

Educational and vocational career guidance focuses increasingly on lifelong learning and adjustment. When considering career planning, the perception of a profession by the young people is nowadays much more incorporated into a career concept that includes other dimensions such as a career as a partner, a career as a parent, as a consumer of leisure time, as a participant in culture, and so on. That is why career guidance is integrated in the overall guidance of young people's personality development. Career guidance relates to health aspects, cognitive attitudes, emotional and behavioural components and helps the person to respond to changing professional and social expectations. These aspects are of course important issues in achieving mental health.

At the school level, CLB supports career education and provides adequate information about the educational offer and the labour market. At class or group level, the CLB can train pupils to evaluate themselves and to make choices while at the individual level career counselling or individual assessment or testing can be provided.

Preventive health care

The educational approach is at least as important as the medical approach in preventive health care. In this domain, however, the centres have some concrete obligations. The CLBs have to carry out medical examinations in some classes and guarantee differentiated sensorial, biometric and medical examinations of specific groups if required by specific health or educational situations.

The compulsory general consultations aim to establish a general overview of the health of pupils, while the specific consultations are limited to specific aspects (e.g. growth, noise levels of workshops in technical schools which might cause hearing problems, etc.)

The CLB also have to supervise the vaccination condition of the school population and to administer vaccinations. When an infection occurs in a school the CLB should take prophylactic measures. The compulsory activities not only allow the detection of factors threatening the individual health situation but are also a tool for risk analysis in the population and a base for health education themes. However, these medical assignments, especially the vaccination programmes laid down by the Health Authorities, take much more time of the medical and paramedical staff members of the CLB than was expected in the beginning.

At the school and/or class level, health education and guidance includes support in developing addiction prevention programmes, advice concerning hygiene, safety, etc. At the individual level, the guidance may consist in changing bad eating habits with children and youngsters with obesity, in improving the personal hygiene or specific hygiene aspects such as dental hygiene, etc.

Emotional and social behaviour

There is an ever increasing demand by parents and schools for guidance in respect of pupils' emotional and social behaviour. Psychosocial and behavioural problems often create tensions and put schools, classes and groups and parents under pressure. The CLB support the schools in reducing stress factors in their socio-educational organisation and in reducing pressures caused by learning demands and examination requirements.

At group or class level, CLB usually help with relationship and sex education programmes, with anti-bullying programmes and with training pupils in social and communication skills. They also help teachers cope with disturbing behaviour. Children with psychosocial difficulties are given individual guidance or they can be referred for special therapy. Usually, pedagogical assistance to their parents is incorporated in the guidance. CLB can provide special group sessions for pupils with a specific problem, e.g. for pupils with an embarrassing fear of failure.

Interdisciplinary teamwork

The activities of the centres reflect a holistic vision of pupil guidance, in which interdisciplinary teamwork is essential. The multidisciplinary approach is crucial to the functioning of the CLB. Each CLB consist of teams which are assigned to one or more schools, and a team is made up of a medical doctor, a psychologist or pedagogue, a paramedic worker and a social worker. A staff member can belong to more than one team. There is also a small clerical staff.

The calculation of the number and types of personnel is based upon the pupil populations in the schools which have a contract with the CLB. In addition, every pupil has a weighted coefficient and this coefficient is fixed between 1 to 7 depending of the type of education, and in line with the expected educational demands of specific pupil groups, e.g. a pupil in special need education receives a weighted coefficient of 7. Other elements with an impact on the number of staff members in the CLB are the proportion of underprivileged pupils in the population and the distance between the school and CLB. In 2002, more than 2,500 staff members were employed in 75 CLBs. The CLB-budget for the same year was 116,330,000 euro.

These centres have now been functioning for three years and the new structure really offers the possibility to provide a wide range of guidance. CLBs and schools have learned to look ahead and work together in elaborating a vision of guidance which takes into account the characteristics of the pupils in each school.

For correspondence

Gerard Wulleman
School psychologist
Inspector of the Flemish Ministry of education
Kortrijksestraat 343
B-8870 Izegem
Belgium
Tel. 051 301362
Fax 051 320456
Email: gerard.wulleman@planetinternet.be