

World Education Learning for Tomorrow (WELT) and the role of geography¹

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By making citizenship the connecting element in the school curriculum, one can work purposefully on both civic competences and the general quality of education. That is the starting point of World Education Learning for Tomorrow, a team teaching method rooted in critical pedagogy that recently became official policy in the Antwerp Municipal Education System. In this article we introduce the WELT projects and clarify the role of geography in this.

1. Citizenship as the connecting element

In Flemish education, citizenship is no longer a cross-curricular competence for which schools only have to make an effort. It is now one of the 16 new key competences that have to be realized. This change has a lot to do with the very poor results of Flemish pupils and schools on national and international citizenship tests. This showed, among other things, that less than half of our pupils are interested in political and social topics and that at the end of their school career more than half feel that they are insufficiently prepared for citizenship.²

Yet although the result obligation for citizenship is to be welcomed, it is not a good idea to fulfill it by delegating all the building blocks of that key competence³ to a single (new) school subject. Since that would isolate the theme and would ignore many opportunities to improve the quality of education. After all, citizenship at school is influenced by factors that together affect almost all parts of the school⁴ and it can be approached more interdisciplinary than any other theme. Combining these insights into professional transversal projects can therefore realize different pedagogical goals at the same time, such as⁵:

¹ Translation (and a few adjustments) of Saey, M., & Heyrman, R. (2021). [Wereld Educatie Leren voor de Toekomst en de rol van aardrijkskunde](#), in: [Jaarboek de Aardrijkskunde 2021](#), VLA. Main author Mark Saey is a lecturer of world-citizenship and ethics at AP University College Antwerp dep. Education and Training. He coordinates the Flemish Citizenship Olympiad and the WELTCenter ; Rita Heyrman is a lecturer of geography at the same university college and the president of the Flemish organization of geography teachers.

² See Saey, M. (2020). [Citizenship in Flemish secondary education](#), CivicLab, in which an overview and comparison are made of the most recent research data. Also from this article: barely 55% of Flemish students would still vote if compulsory voting was abolished, 25% do not believe that democracy is the best system (for the first voters with a BSO (vocational) diploma, this rises to 57%), only 60% would allow immigrants to keep their culture. For citizenship education and participation at school, Flanders is in 3rd last place in the international ranking (as a region among 18 countries) of the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study from 2016.

³ The building blocks of the key competence citizenship are: 1. Identifying the dynamics and stratification of (own) identities, 2. Dealing with diversity in society and collaboration, 3. Entering into a dialogue with each other informed and substantiated, 4. Actively participating in society, taking into account the rights and obligations of everyone, 5. Critically approaching the mutual influence between social domains and developments and the impact on (global) society and the individual, 6. Interpreting democratic decision-making at local, national and international level, 7. Frame democratic principles and democratic culture within the modern constitutional state.

⁴ School factors that influence citizenship are relevant content in the curriculum, values and attitudes of teachers, purposefulness of school policy, participation, (in)equality. See Saey, M. (2014). *Jongeren worden wereldburgers* (Youth become world-citizens), Gent: Academia Press, p.22-31.

⁵ The following list is partly based on Lauwers, J., & Saey, M. (2021). [Handleiding vakdoorbrekend projectwerk in het secundair onderwijs. Transversaal werken aan actief burgerschap](#) (Manual for cross-disciplinary project work in secondary education. Working transversally on active citizenship), Antwerp: AGSO & AP, p.5-7.

- Including the new competences in a coherent vision of the aim of education that is also clearly visible in school practice.
- Strengthen the effectiveness of the learning process: abstract political issues are translated into concrete issues that encourage exploration and action; students gain a greater sense of what and why they are learning and see more coherence between the school subjects.
- Strengthen the team spirit: the appreciation of teachers for each other's subject knowledge increases; 'meeting to meet' is averted thanks to collective projects that appeal to the mastery of the team.
- Create more opportunities for the development of the community or extended school: especially in the urban context, the learning process can be strengthened by collaborating with socially engaged civil society organizations, so that students can better see how society works, what problems there are and how others are making efforts to solve them.
- Increase efficiency at school level: by involving cross-curricular project work, a school can gain a better idea of how much time is spent on transversal competences and how much time still has to go more subject-bound competences.
- Bring more structure to the horizontal and vertical curriculum: teachers who teach the same pupils make connections between their subject contents, and with a plan for projects across the years, the school can avoid double themes and obtain a clear learning path.
- Support the classic curriculum of knowledge transfer: by including experiential, project-based, cooperative, differentiated, and participatory work in transversal projects, a positive impact of the educational innovation of the last decades can be generated at a higher level than the individual subjects, where those methods can often be very time-consuming.⁶
- Cross-curricular projects on citizenship that are well structured can also include many transversal competences and incorporate or harmonize smaller projects (such as the research competence paper, integrated professional test, inter-religious projects, or STEM (science, tech, math) projects), so that the workload can be divided more equally in the team.

This enumeration also clearly shows why citizenship gets more weight (becoming much more important for pupils, teachers, and principals) when it functions as a connecting element in the curriculum than when it is limited to a single subject.⁷ And it shows what can be achieved by

⁶ This is comparable to the research competence paper that provides an answer to problems of scientific questioning in different subjects, or to the integrated test that encourages students to combine knowledge and skills from several subjects. This way not every teacher should be constantly working on this in their own school subject(s). In Schmidt, H., et al. (2019). *Is ons onderwijs gebuisd?* (Is our education flawed?) Nederland: Borgerhoff & Lamberigts, the introduction explains that this educational innovation is not a 'fun pedagogy', but a scientifically supported response to the challenges of the multimedia information flow, the attention crisis and the increasing diversity and coarsening in society. These challenges also cause problems with discipline, which can also be better addressed when teachers act more as one team.

⁷ However, organizing transversal projects on citizenship is not necessarily contrary to setting up a new 'citizenship' subject, such as the public educational system GO! (with the subject Active Citizenship) and the Catholic Education System (with the subject People & Society) and also some schools in the Antwerp Municipal Education System have done. WELT only states that citizenship education, to have maximum results, needs to be

making the overall goal of education more tangible for both pupils and teachers. But this does not yet show how to do this.

2. WELT

Perhaps experienced teachers will have recognized elements of Freinet or Steiner pedagogy or perhaps they thought global or world-citizenship education must have inspired this. And that would be correct. However, the recommended approach in the above-mentioned manual for cross-disciplinary project work (see endnote 5) is more specific. On the basis of figure 1, we will first discuss WELT in general and in such a way that the above-mentioned pedagogical objectives are clearly recognizable. We then describe the role of geography by means of an example.

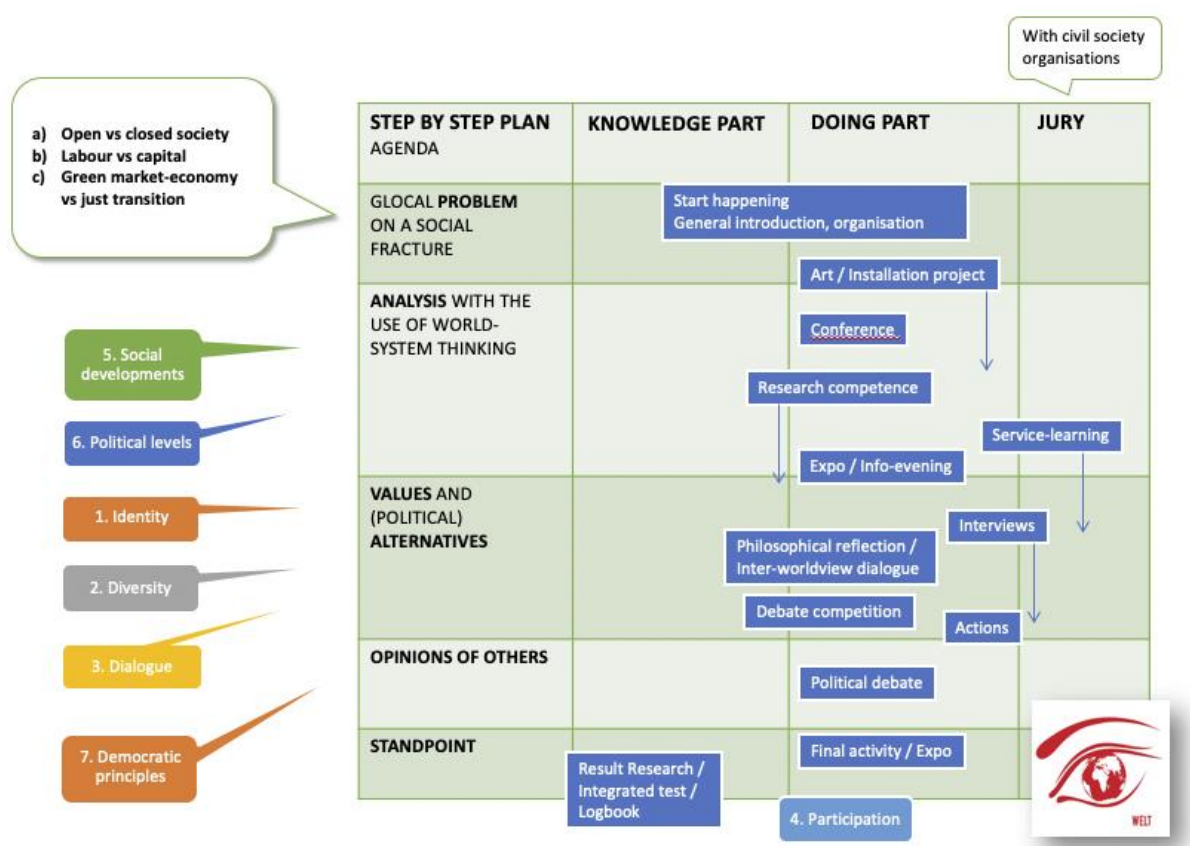


Figure 1. WELT scheme. From Saey M., World-Citizenship Education, Syllabus AP University College

The following aspects are characteristic of WELT

1. Working on a WELT project means working on a 'glocal' problem (a local problem with a global dimension) that divides society.

more than organizing one school subject on the theme, it needs to be the connecting (project) element in the curriculum for 10% of the schoolyear.

This simplifies the practical organization since the problem is or has effects in the neighborhood. It makes the method experiential and problem-oriented, teaches students to view social issues through a critical and global lens.

Several issues can be a topic for a WELT project, but in order to build learning lines and maintain a focus on key issues, WELT (over the years of secondary education) focuses on clarifying three major social fault lines:

- The fault line between proponents of a more closed or authoritarian society and proponents of a more open or democratic society (diversity and racism issues, the extreme right, freedom of expression)
- The fault line between labor and capital (inequality and the distribution of power, wealth, (social) security)
- The fault line between proponents of a green market economy and proponents of a just transition (climate change, loss of biodiversity, the finiteness of raw materials)

The overall objective is to teach students how to position themselves politically – make a political choice - on these major (global) fault lines. The first two years of secondary education one can focus on the local level and civil society goals (humanitarian initiatives, SDG, ...), the next two years on the regional/national level and left-right differences, the last years on the international/global level and ideological positioning. This way WELT helps to overcome political apathy and has a (re)politicizing function.

2. The collaboration between the participating courses is organized with a step-by-step plan for (moral) reasoning, a knowledge part, and a doing-part.

The step-by-step plan ensures that the team works almost automatically on the various building blocks of the citizenship competence (indicated in figure 1 with speech bubbles in color). The knowledge and the doing parts contain the more theoretical and the more practical subjects, respectively. The standard sub-projects (indicated in figure 1 by the blue rectangles) form the integrated exercises for the development of various transversal competences on which the team wants to focus.⁸

The step-by-step plan has the following structure and dynamics:

- The introduction of the Problem and a first overview are best done in co-teaching with as many participating subject teachers as possible. Involvement is stimulated here and it is made clear to the students that they can participate in the decision-making process about the input and details of possible sub-projects.
- During the Analysis of the problem, the knowledge section mainly focuses on scientific courses that help describe and/or explain the problem, with increasing attention over the years to the (world) systemic factors and the relevant political levels or scales. At the same time, the standard component 'Art or Installation project' starts in the doing

⁸ Because of the combination it makes between the subject-related competences, citizenship and transversal competences, WELT is also used in the Antwerp Municipal Education System as a handy tool for the current modernization of the Flemish curriculum.

section, possibly linked to internship components or a 'Service learning' component, that can also be integrated into the WELT project. If (for projects in the last years) the pupils have been sufficiently introduced to the problem, one can try to deepen the learning competences by attending a lecture or even a congress in the standard component 'Conference'. If some provisional results of the Art or Installation project can also be shown, the analysis phase can be concluded with an interim 'Expo' or 'Info Evening'. The Jury (consisting of participating teachers and partner organizations from civil society) can also go through the 'Logbook' (portfolios with reflections) of the students and the subject-related evaluations for the first time. Here one also connects to parents, friends, and local residents – invite them to participate. The latter sub-projects can best be carried out in co-teaching. In most WELT projects, this phase of scientific substantiation together with the next phase is the most comprehensive.

- Only after the students have a good understanding of the problem does the third phase Values and Alternative Solutions pay more attention to its ethical components. Here in the doing section, the language subjects can play an important role by integrating an 'Interviews' component (with possible victims of the problem), which often helps to maintain the involvement of the pupils in WELT projects that take place over several weeks or months. Philosophical subjects can also play a role here by organizing a 'Philosophical reflection (research conversation)' or an 'Inter-worldview dialogue' subproject that examines the moral aspects of possible solutions to the problem: how do they relate to fundamental values, human rights and democracy, how can I support these in or with my ideology, how can I contribute to this as a citizen? At the end of this phase, the already acquired knowledge and insights can be taken up again, possibly back in front of the jury, and bundled together for a 'Debate Competition' around well-chosen propositions. By making a clear distinction between the analysis phase and this third phase of alternatives, one avoids scientism as well as technocratic and populist views of politics.
- In the Opinions of others phase, the democratic content of the working method is assured. By giving the students sufficient time and space during the project, in as many parts as possible, for their own input and reflection, indoctrination is counteracted and participation is increased. But also, by inviting experts whose work or opinion has not yet been discussed, or by organizing a 'Political debate' with (young) politicians or activists, democracy is given its full poundage.
- During the last Standpoint phase the jury is assembled for a third time to attend the final presentation at which the students (increasingly over the years) self-directed present the learning path of their project and the results of their sub-projects, arguing for their own opinion.

WELT can be used for both project weeks (where one lets go of the normal timetable) and longer-term projects (which are realized via rotation for the subjects in the normal timetable, with or without specific project hours).⁹ It goes without saying that not every project can realize all the mentioned sub-projects. However, properly implemented, the method ensures that involvement is retained in the doing part, while sufficient distance or insight is built into the

⁹ The WELT operation amounts to max. 10% of the annual school time. It is not the goal that all key competences or the entire curriculum is provided by WELT. WELT is only intended to support and not to replace the classical curriculum. Doing so would not be wise since theoretical learning cannot be limited to problem-oriented and experiential learning (or that would be too time-consuming to teach the same curriculum).

knowledge part – so that the students can come to a wise decision. It is also of educational importance that going through the 5 phases creates a span, from the first confrontation with the issue or the problem to the final determination of position, which is not run through in one subject, but in which each subject or subject teacher, according to his or her expertise, occupies a somewhat obvious position, ideally: scientific and social science subjects in the knowledge section of the analysis phase, civic/philosophical/religious courses in the values and alternatives phase, language and practical courses in the doing section.

3. The role of Geography

Geography is preferably always part of a WELT project. Understood as the study of the social structuring of space geography can, in the phase of analysis, function as the integral science that can provide the students with the full picture of the problem. Definitely when the geography courses are informed by world-system thinking the problems relating to the social fault lines will be viewed from a global and critical perspective.¹⁰

Let's take an example. We present the synopsis and didactical scheme of the WELT project 'In the footsteps of Malcolm X' and illustrate the part and role of geography.



Project summary: The life and work of Malcolm X is a good guideline for a WELT project that can be used to make clear to young people the importance of collective action, the danger of extremism, and the risks of segregation. With the book Malcolm X by Fikry El Azzouzi and the film of the same name by Spike Lee in mind, the students learn about various examples of racism from their own region, about Nazi Germany, dig deeper into the history of colonialism, are introduced to the geography of racism, interview the older generations about what Malcolm meant to them, debate with politicians about racism in the city and incorporate their insights and feelings into slam poetry.¹¹

¹⁰ The application of world systems thinking (world systems analysis) in geography has already been advocated in our own country in Saey, M., & Saey, P. (1995). *Een transdisciplinair kader voor de geografie-beoefening* (A transdisciplinary framework for geography), in: Tijdschrift van de Belg. Vereniging Aardrijkskundige Studies – BEVAS 1995-1.

¹¹ This summary is also from Lauwers J. & Saey M., *ibid.* The text has been slightly modified. For the full coherence text, see [here](#).

WELT (3 rd grade) open-closed society In the footsteps of Malcolm X			
	Knowledge	Doing	Jury / Evaluation
Problem	Intro	Start happening Start portfolio	Guest speaker Reflections
Analysis	Confronting the other Racism in Flanders Germany in the 20th century Geography of racism Stagnation Looking back	Text 1 Malcolm X Preparation interviews Extra muros Africa Museum Text 2 Malcolm Preparation slam poetry Info-evening	Studio Globo organisation Course exercises and tests Portfolio
Values & Alternatives	Racism and citizenship Worldview and political engagement	Malcolm interviews Debate-competition	Course exercises and tests Atlas organisation Reflections
Other opinions	Preparation political debate	Presentation interviews Political debate	Peer evaluation Reflections
Standpoint	Finishing portfolio	Expo at Youth City Hall moment	Parents, principal, team, neighbourhood, Atlas, Studio Globo

Table 1. Didactical scheme 'In the footsteps of Malcolm X'. From Lauwers J. and Saey M., 2021, p.13

Thanks to the knowledge build-up in the previous parts and the increased learning motivation, geography can use as teaching material a relatively difficult article on the geography of racism to work on the competence spatial awareness, and link this to components of building blocks 5 and 6 of the key competence citizenship.

The scientific article by Kesteloot C. and Dedecker P., *Territories and migrations as geographical factors of racism* from 1992¹², has not lost any of its relevance to understand why in Flanders, both in the cities and in the more affluent suburban fringe, the extreme-right can grow electorally. First and foremost, primary racism plays a role, which as an excuse for international exploitation is linked to the spatial structure of the capitalist world-system. This makes racism a permanent potential source of electoral success in the modern world. On the smaller scales, urban desperation racism and distancing racism also play a role in connection with migration flows. In the city, the settled people of the poorer neighbourhoods are

¹² Kesteloot, C., & Dedecker, P. (1992). *Territoria en migraties als geografische factoren van racisme*, in: Deslé, E., & Martens, A. (1992). *Gezichten van hedendaags racisme* (Faces of Contemporary Racism), Brussels: VUBPRESS, p.69-108. For the sake of clarity, we have simplified the content of this article in the text.

confronted with newcomers who work in the same sectors, and in the outskirts the inhabitants of the villages, who rarely come into contact with immigrants, do not want these bearers of urban problems to come into their rich neighbourhood. But although this way spatial policy on these scales comes into view as a contributing factor, Kesteloot and Dedecker remind us that, given the history of the migratory flows, these racism mechanisms must have been present there for decades, but then did not give rise to the electoral successes of the far- and extreme-right. This is explained because at the time the welfare state was being constructed and it would take the next downturn of the world-system and a well-organized far-right political party that would make populist use of the existing racism before we would see the fast-growing electoral success.

Not only can the geography teacher, using teaching methods that make use of the insights from this article, nicely frame the knowledge from the previous parts of the project, he or she can also show the students the importance of geography for their project, and more generally for citizenship. At the same time, he or she also gives the students points of reference for the following phases, which are covered by other subjects and in which alternative solutions are discussed. Would the same approach to racism have the same effect in different places? What should be done to remove the potential of primary racism?¹³

4. Concluding remarks

Following in the footsteps of Malcolm X was one of the three school projects of 'Youth City Hall', the name for the new generation WELT projects where schools also work together. The sub-project on the ecological fault line would become the theme of the acclaimed documentary film *Youth City Hall*.¹⁴ These projects were also the subject of a research project by AP University College. This showed, based on surveys, semi-structured interviews and analysis of reflection reports, that the implementation of WELT in schools positively influences the school factors and the pedagogical objectives that we listed at the beginning of this article.¹⁵ Some excerpts from the analysis of an interview with the headmistress of the school where the Malcolm X project was carried out underscores this: "A number of young people came to say that they finally understood why subjects such as history, geography, science, mathematics,... which are otherwise seen separately from each other, were important in order to be able to analyze a certain problem in society. The principal thought this was very valuable (...) Because everything formed a whole and the students were absorbed in the material, it was suddenly important to understand everything properly. In addition, this project-based approach elicited positive reactions from the parents. According to the principal, the parents literally said: 'This is what we are looking for in a school!' (...) A major advantage of this project was that there were many activities (...) Everyone found something they liked (...) The principal

¹³ By passing on links for the other components, we also want to indicate that a WELT project does more than thematic clustering of subjects and their competences. In a WELT project, all subjects work together on a problem to clarify an issue or social fault line in such a way that students learn to take an informed position or critical point of view.

¹⁴ The official movie page can be found [here](#). Among the awards for Youth City Hall was Best Youth Education Film at the Helsinki Education Film Festival International.

¹⁵ Saey, M. (2020). [PWO Het Jeugdstadhuis](#) (Youth City Hall).

would immediately advise other secondary schools to also start a WELT project (...) (she) says that they will certainly embed it in their policy.”¹⁶

In 2019, another school in Antwerp won the Most Social School 2019 award. The jury noted in the report: “In secondary education, there is one laureate who surprised us. The winner Most Social School 2019 convinced us because of the depth of their vision on digital citizenship and the groundbreaking Welt methodology they use in educational practice. Cross-grade collaboration, attention to digital inclusion, equal (online) opportunities and parental involvement are central to this project. This is not an obvious approach for a school in a metropolitan context that has a lot of pupils with a foreign language or vulnerable background.”¹⁷

Of course, preparing and developing a WELT project presupposes more than what we could indicate in this article. However, schools can submit an application to AP University College for the preparation of WELT projects, tailored to the school and up to the level of lesson plans. The students of the Educational Bachelor have been acquiring the necessary competences for a few years now by learning to draw up these projects systematically in interdisciplinary teams. Next to that there’s also a training course for teachers and researchers, to disseminate the pedagogy and didactics. Hopefully geography teachers will also enlist. Accepted as official policy by the Antwerp Municipal Education System, we now look for partners to set up international WELT and Erasmus+ projects.

¹⁶ From Bachiri, A. (2020). *De diverse school* (The diverse school), bachelor proef AP Hogeschool, p.43-46.

¹⁷ See [here](#) for an online report.