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balancing between autonomous institutions and a steering government

Author(s)
Snoek, Marco

Publication date
2011

Document Version
Final published version

Published in
European dimensions of teacher education

European Dimensions of Teacher Education – Similarities and Differences

Edited by
Milena Valenčič Zuljan and **Janez Vogrinc**

Ljubljana 2011

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Edited by	Milena Valenčič Zuljan and Janez Vogrinc
Reviewed by	Barica Marentič Požarnik, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia and Pavel Zgaga, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia
Proofreading	Romina Plešec, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia
Publisher	Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia and The National School of Leadership in Education, Kranj, Slovenia
For the publisher	Janez Krek, Dean and Andrej Koren, Director
Cover designed by	Roman Ražman
DTP by	Igor Cerar
Printed by	Dravska tiskarna

300 copies

The publication was financed by the European Union from the European Social Fund and the Ministry of Education and Sport of the Republic of Slovenia.

CIP - Kataložni zapis o publikaciji
Narodna in univerzitetna knjižnica, Ljubljana

37.091.12:005.963(4)(082)

EUROPEAN dimensions of teacher education : similarities and differences / edited by Milena Valenčič Zuljan and Janez Vogrinc. - Ljubljana : Faculty of Education ; Kranj : The National School of Leadership and Education, 2011

ISBN 978-961-253-058-7 (Pedagoška fakulteta)

1. Valenčič Zuljan, Milena

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TEACHER EDUCATION IN THE NETHERLANDS

Balancing between autonomous institutions and a steering government

Marco Snoek

School of Education, University of Applied Sciences Hogeschool van Amsterdam, The Netherlands

1 Introduction

The Netherlands has a long-standing tradition in teacher education. The first structured forms of teacher education date from the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the first institutions for the education of primary teachers were established (Swennen & Beishuizen 2005). A broad range of part-time courses were created at the beginning of the twentieth century, offering the opportunity to get a teaching qualification for secondary education. In the 1970s and 1980s, the wide variety of courses and institutions were harmonized and brought into the system of higher education. This resulted in a coherent system for teacher education in The Netherlands. There are three main types of teacher education courses:

- Teacher education for primary education (pabo)
- Teacher education for lower secondary and vocational education
- Teacher education for upper secondary education.

While the general policy of the Dutch government is focused on deregulation and increasing the autonomy of schools, this does not seem to be the case in the area of teacher education. Over the years, there has been strong government interference in teacher education, motivated by the special responsibility of the Ministry of Education for the quality of education in Dutch society. As this quality largely depends on the quality of the teachers, this justifies a strong interest in teacher education, an interest that has been translated into numerous policy initiatives and government-initiated innovation programmes focused on improving the quality of teacher education.

The first part of this paper will start with an introduction of the general context of the education system in The Netherlands. This is followed by a presentation of the general characteristics of the teacher education system, of the balance between school autonomy and government control, and of the general policies concerning teacher quality. The second part will give an elaboration of the system of teacher education by introducing five major developments that have shaped teacher education in the past twenty years, and by giving a more detailed description of each type of teacher education. In the third part, I reflect on the role of the government in steering innovations and quality improvement in the area of teacher education.

2 The educational system in The Netherlands[1]

In McKinsey's report on the world's best performing educational systems, the Dutch system was ranked among the top 10. This ranking was based on the outcomes of PISA 2003. In the PISA 2006 and TIMMS 2007 studies, The Netherlands ranked fourth in Europe. Dutch students also outrank students in many other countries in Mathematics. And it is not only in school results that Dutch children perform well: a recent study conducted by UNICEF concluded that children in The Netherlands ranked the highest with respect to child well-being (UNESCO 2007).

Although these outcomes could justify deep satisfaction with the educational system and the quality of schools and teachers in The Netherlands, opinion leaders and newspapers continuously express their concern that the level of education and the skills of pupils with respect to Mathematics and the Dutch language are deteriorating and that strong policy actions are necessary (e.g. Parliamentary Committee for the Evaluation of Curriculum Innovations 2007; KNAW 2009).

Both the high performance of Dutch pupils and the concern about the ability of Dutch schools to maintain this performance have to be seen in the context of an educational system whereby the school career of most children in The Netherlands starts at the age of four, when they first attend primary school. The first two years are mainly dedicated to the

[1] See also: Ministry of Education, Science and Culture/Eurydice (2007). The Education System in The Netherlands 2007. Eurydice, Brussels.

development of creativity and motoric and social skills. Cognitive skill development in these first years is focused on counting, comparing and oral language. The systematic schooling in reading, writing and arithmetic starts in year 3 of primary school. Schools follow a national curriculum but can choose which pedagogical approach to use. While this creates a large degree of freedom and leads to a wide variety of schools, the focus on learning results tends to uniform the actual teaching, as the development of children is monitored through standardized tests.

At the age of 12 (after 8 years of primary schooling), all pupils take a national exam, the outcome of which is decisive in defining the type of secondary education they can follow.

In The Netherlands, secondary education is split into three types:
- Pre-vocational secondary education (VMBO) (ISCED 2), which takes four years and prepares students for secondary vocational education;
- Senior general secondary education (HAVO) (ISCED 3), which takes five years and prepares students for higher professional education;
- Pre-university education (VWO), which takes six years and prepares students for university education.

After leaving primary school, around 60% of pupils enter VMBO or special needs programmes.

Students at all secondary schools conclude their schooling by taking national exams. Passing these exams is conditional to entering tertiary education.

After finishing VMBO, students can enter secondary vocational education (MBO) (ISCED 3), which prepares them for professions at various levels or can allow entry to higher professional education.

The higher education system consists of two types of institutions (ISCED 5A):
- Universities of applied sciences (*hogescholen*), which provide higher professional education. These institutions offer 4-year, profession-oriented bachelor's programmes.
- Research universities, which offer academic studies consisting of a 3-year bachelor's programme (BA or BSc) followed by a 1- or 2-year master's programme (MA or MSc).

The introduction of the Bologna structure did not create many problems within the Dutch education system, as it did not require a fundamental change in the general structure (the traditional 4-year *doctoraal* studies at the research universities were split into a 3-year bachelor's programme and 1-year master's programme).

Research was traditionally not part of the portfolio of the universities of applied sciences. In 2003, research funding was made available for the hogescholen, which gave the opportunity to create research groups that could focus on practice-oriented research. These research groups are centred on *lectoren* (professors at the universities of applied sciences).

3 Autonomy and government control

In The Netherlands, a centralized education policy is combined with the decentralized administration and management of schools. Over the last twenty years, a gradual process of deregulation took place in which the autonomy in management and organization of schools increased. The central government focused its role on creating enabling conditions for education through legislation and financing systems, which apply to both publicly and privately run institutions. At the same time, the role of the central government is to safeguard the quality of education through constant monitoring. The Inspectorate (for primary, secondary and vocational education) and the Dutch–Flemish Accreditation Organization (for higher education) play an important role in this monitoring process. Additionally, the outlines of the content of the curricula, the number of teaching hours and the qualification requirements for teachers in primary and secondary education are defined by the government.

School boards are financed through a system of block grant funding, implying that school boards can decide how they spend their money. This gives them freedom in defining the pedagogical principles underlying the teaching in school, the structure of the curriculum, the organizational structure of the school, the personnel policies, etc. Schools can differ considerably in these areas. During deregulation, much attention was paid to the development of professional leadership and competent school authorities. However, the roles in the process of deregulation and the growing autonomy of schools are not always clear,

leading to discussions and negotiations between the minister and the national councils for primary, secondary or higher education. The responsibility of the minister of Education for the quality of education can easily lead to direct measures from the minister in areas where school boards consider themselves responsible.

A parliamentary committee that recently evaluated innovations in education over the last twenty years concluded that there has been too much government influence on the actual teaching in the classroom. The main advice from the committee, which was supported by the main political parties, was that the government should decide on the content of education (the 'what') and allow schools to decide on the way in which they want to teach this content to their students (the 'how') (Parliamentary Committee for the Evaluation of Curriculum Innovations 2007).

The division of roles and responsibilities between school boards and teachers has also led to intensive discussions. The growing autonomy of school boards leads to stronger pressure on school leaders to account for the teaching in their schools. As a result, school leaders are pressed to take decisions in areas that were traditionally the domain of teachers. Therefore, teachers feel that the growing autonomy of schools has led to a decrease in the professional autonomy of teachers. This has been expressed by a teacher pressure group that conveys the opinion of many teachers to the media (Verbrugge & Verbrugge-Breeuwsma 2006).

As a result, advisory reports from both the Dutch Education Council and the national Committee on the Teaching Profession have emphasized that teachers should have a stronger role in developing school policies (Dutch Education Council 2007; Committee on the Teaching Profession 2007).

A consequence of the growing autonomy of schools is that schools must have leeway to set their own policies and cannot be forced into policies defined by others. This has consequences not only for the relation between schools and the government, but also for the relations between schools and other actors in the educational infrastructure, such as teacher education institutions (TEIs), school support institutions and developers of learning materials. In 2002, the minister of Education declared that schools should be considered the core of the education infrastructure (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science 2002). The needs of

individual schools should be leading for the programmes and support offered by the support institutions. In many of the initiatives from TEIs and other support institutions and in applications for project funding, schools need to be an explicit partner as a condition for funding. This has recently also resulted in new research funds[2] that are focused on research questions that explicitly concern the needs of schools.

4 Teacher quality

4.1 Teacher policy

As the Ministry of Education is responsible for the quality of education and teachers are the most important factor influencing the learning of students, governmental policies pay special attention to the quality of teachers.

A policy focusing on improving the status of the teaching profession and reducing the professional isolation of teachers has emerged since 1993 (Committee on the Future of the Teaching Profession 1993; Committee on the Teaching Profession 2007). The main elements of this policy are:

- Developing professional profiles for teachers that emphasize the professionalism of teachers;
- Developing career paths for teachers and incentives for lifelong learning;
- Focusing on teaching as a collaborative profession and on schools as learning communities;
- Increasing the attractiveness of the profession by raising salaries;
- Developing coherent human resource policies in schools, including the involvement of schools in initial teacher education;
- Supporting novice teachers by redesigning teacher education in order to reduce the praxis shock and by introducing induction programmes;
- Strengthening the profession by creating professional bodies that take responsibility for the quality of the profession by developing professional standards and a professional register.

[2] Research programmes Durven, Delen, Doen (Daring, Sharing, Doing) and Onderwijs Bewijs (Education Proof).

Considerable steps have been taken in some of these areas, while other areas are still in an embryonic phase.

4.2 Competence profiles for teachers

In the area of teacher profiles, national standards have been developed in a number of steps, with close involvement of teachers and teacher educators. In 2004, a new law on the teaching profession was enacted (Dutch Parliament 2004). This law defines the minimum requirements for teachers: teachers at all levels (primary and secondary) need to be 'not only qualified, but competent'. Seven key competences that all teachers are expected to meet were identified (SBL 2006). These competence requirements focus on:

1. Interpersonal competence in creating a pleasant, safe and effective classroom environment;
2. Pedagogical competence to support children's personal development by helping them to become independent and responsible;
3. Subject knowledge and methodological competence that demonstrates substantial knowledge of their subject and appropriate teaching methods (including pedagogical content knowledge);
4. Organizational competence in organizing curricula that support student learning;
5. Competence to collaborate with colleagues and thus contribute to a well-functioning school organization;
6. Competence to collaborate with those in the school environment who also play a role in students' well-being and development (i.e. students' parents or guardians, colleagues at educational and youth welfare institutions);
7. Competence to reflect and to develop as professionals over the long term.

The competence requirements act as a frame of reference for teacher education programmes, for personnel policies in schools and for teachers in their lifelong learning.

4.3 Lifelong learning and career opportunities

Lifelong learning of teachers is the responsibility of both teachers and school boards. Given the autonomy of schools, there are no national

programmes for in-service learning. However, schools have to keep track of the professional development of their teachers in competence dossiers. Schools can decide on school-based schooling programmes for staff teams, mostly in connection with development themes that have priority within the school. As a result, course-based and individual subject-oriented in-service learning have virtually disappeared, and in-service training is offered by a very wide variety of commercial and non-commercial institutions in an open market. Individual professional development wishes of teachers need to be negotiated with school leaders, as they decide on professional development budgets. Examples of in-service courses are courses on special educational needs, pupil counselling, leadership, new activity-based teaching methods and the use of ICT in education. Some of these courses are linked to a formal master's qualification. Professional development and qualification in these themes can in some cases lead to new roles within the school as an SEN teacher, pupil counsellor or head of a subject department.

Apart from such specific roles in schools that are related to special salary scales, professional development activities are not stimulated, as they do not lead to an increase in salary or status. This lack of an incentive for teachers to get involved in professional development courses and the lack of career paths for teachers are recognized as a problem in the Dutch educational system. Teachers can change from school type (from primary to lower secondary or from lower secondary to upper secondary), from generalist to specialist (as special needs teacher or counsellor) or from teacher to school leader, but career paths within the teaching profession within one school type hardly exist. A recent proposal to create stronger incentives by linking teacher salaries to qualifications (Commissie Leraren 2007) was rejected by the school boards, as they felt that this would interfere with their autonomy in personnel (and salary) policies.

To reduce the dependency of teachers on the willingness of their school leaders to support their professional development ambitions, the government recently created a bursary system whereby individual teachers can apply for a grant to take master's courses (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science 2007).

Initiatives have recently been taken to create some possibilities for teacher career paths by introducing job profiles at different levels that are

linked to different salary levels. In 2010 schools are still working on criteria that they can use to select and nominate teachers for those different levels.

One of the criteria could be the qualification level of the teacher. New master's programmes have recently been developed in order to enable teachers to become experts in their primary role as classroom or subject teachers. The government-funded master's programme Learning & Innovation has created new opportunities for career development and professional development for bachelor teachers in primary or lower secondary education. The development of these masters' programmes fits in with ambitions to raise the quality of teachers, not by upgrading initial teacher education to the master's level, as is done in some other European countries, but by stimulating teachers to qualify as master during their career (AOb 2006; LPBO 2006; HBO-raad 2006). These master's programmes also give schools an objective criterion for selecting teachers for higher job profiles.

Again, the dichotomy of the system balancing government initiatives and school initiatives can be recognized in this area. In 2008, the national board for secondary schools established the Dutch Institute for Master's in Education (NiME[3]). The institute invited TEIs to submit proposals for master's programmes that met a clearly defined set of demands. From the proposals, the NiME selected four master's programmes that are supported and funded by the schools. This initiative reverses the traditional roles whereby the TEIs were held accountable by the government, as in the NiME case the TEIs are also held accountable by the schools.

4.4 Teacher induction

The dilemma of government steering versus school autonomy is also visible in the area of supporting novice teachers. Coherent and systematic induction programmes are seen as essential in supporting novice teachers in the first years of their careers and in retaining them in the teaching profession (European Commission 2010). Within the Dutch context, induction programmes are seen as a part of the personnel policy of schools and therefore are part of the autonomy of institutions.

[3] www.mastersineducatie.nl

However, the extent to which individual schools take that responsibility varies.

This has led to a situation in which coherent system-wide induction programmes are lacking and not all teachers have access to induction programmes of high quality. The involvement of TEIs in induction programmes is also limited, as the funding of induction programmes (as part of the funding for personnel policies of the school) goes to the schools. As a result, the feedback loop that uses the experiences of novice teachers to improve the quality of teacher education curricula is weak.

In the Dutch education system, it is not fitting for the government to introduce nationwide induction schemes, so it can only use indirect steering measures by creating incentives for schools to implement coherent induction programmes and by strengthening the role of the inspectorate to evaluate personnel policies in individual schools.

4.5 Development of a professional register

The creation of professional bodies that take responsibility for the quality of the teaching profession by developing professional standards and a professional register is intended to increase the professional self-awareness of teachers and strengthen the balance between autonomous school boards and teachers as employees of the schools. The proposals made in 1993 by the Committee on the Future of the Teaching Profession resulted in a professional standard and professional register for teacher educators, but not in a professional body, standard or register for teachers. The 2007 Commission on the Teaching Profession took up the proposals from 1993, and professional standards for subject teachers are currently being developed by associations of teachers. An important question in this process is how a quality system that is maintained by the teacher profession itself relates to the autonomy of school boards in matters of staff policy.

5 Teacher education in general

Teacher education in The Netherlands is part of the higher education system. Within this system, there are three main types of teacher education courses:

- Teacher education for primary education (pabo): a 4-year bachelor's programme that is offered by the universities of applied sciences (hogescholen) and that prepares class teachers for 4- to 12-year-old pupils;
- Teacher education for lower secondary and vocational education: a 4-year bachelor's programme that is offered by the universities of applied sciences and that prepares teachers for a grade-2 teaching qualification in one specific subject;
- Teacher education for upper secondary education: these courses prepare students for a grade-1 teaching qualification in one specific subject. This can be obtained by taking a 1-year postgraduate MSc/MA programme at a research university in combination with a subject master's, or, for teachers who already have a grade-2 teaching qualification, by taking a 3-year part-time postgraduate Master of Education at a university of applied sciences.

The number of applicants entering each type of teacher education is indicated in the table below.

Table 1. Applicants entering teacher education in 2009 (SBO 2010).

Applicants in 2009 entering:	No.
Primary teacher education	8940
Lower secondary and vocational teacher education	7672
Upper secondary teacher education (universities of applied sciences)	2082
Upper secondary teacher education (research universities, 2008)	606
Special educational needs (post-initial master's)	3214
Learning & Innovation (post-initial master's)	150
Other	263

The acceptance rate of students applying for teacher education is 100%. The only selection criterion for entering teacher education is that students need to have the proper qualification: students entering teacher education at universities for applied sciences need to have finished their

secondary education successfully. Students entering the upper secondary teacher education programme at research universities must have completed their bachelor's programme and must follow a subject master's programme at the same time. Students applying for upper secondary education at universities for applied sciences need to have a teaching qualification for lower secondary and vocational education and at least three years of experience working in schools.

When students have finished their study, they are fully qualified. There is no probation period.

The design of teacher education programmes can vary between institutions with respect to the approach and learning concept that is used and to the actual structure and planning of the curriculum, given the autonomy of the institutions.

The quality assurance is organized through accreditations that take place every 6 years. These accreditations are organized under responsibility of the Dutch–Flemish Accreditation Organization (NVAO).

The following five developments have strongly influenced teacher education in The Netherlands.

1) The need to close the gap between theory and practice

The concern to reduce new teachers' 'practice shock' has become the focus of substantial changes in the curriculum of teacher education in The Netherlands (Verloop & Wubbels 2000).

The didactic approach in teacher education in The Netherlands can be characterized as a 'realistic approach', whereby the key idea is to bring relevant theory into the curriculum in such a way that it is closely related to the particular concerns that new teachers have as they begin to practice teaching (Hemmerness, Tartwijk & Snoek 2010).

The learning goals for student teachers have been linked more closely to the future profession by defining competences that are related to the tasks and working context of teachers. The importance of the involvement of student teachers in an authentic and realistic learning environment has been emphasized (Korthagen et al. 2001). As a result, great emphasis has been put on teaching practice in schools and even on school-based teacher education, in which a considerable part of the

curriculum takes place in the school. This intensive confrontation with the future profession stimulates the learning focus of students, helps them to relate the content of the curriculum to the reality of the teaching profession in schools and helps them to develop a professional identity as teachers. This process starts already in the first year of the teacher education curriculum.

An important development is the introduction of a 6-month independent teaching practice at the end of their study. During this teacher-in-training phase (*Leraar-in-opleiding; LIO*), students work within a school with almost full responsibility and are considered full members of the staff team (and are sometimes paid a salary by the school). They are supported by a supervisor, who keeps his or her distance. This LIO phase closely resembles the future profession, thus bringing the practice shock into the curriculum of initial teacher education, where support from both teacher educators and trained mentors is available.

2) Shared partnerships with schools

The need to bridge the gap between theory and practice is an important reason for TEIs to seek close cooperation and partnerships with schools. In these partnerships, new roles and responsibilities are developed. Experiences with partnerships between schools and TEIs in The Netherlands have shown that stronger, structural partnerships covering the pre-service education of new teachers, the in-service education of school staff, the innovation of the curriculum and research vitalize both schools and TEIs (van der Sanden et al. 2005).

The benefits for schools lie in the new ideas and energy that student teachers bring with them. This promotes the professional development of the teachers who are already at the school, introduces new challenges for senior teachers (e.g. in mentoring student teachers and novice teachers), and increases the capacity for innovation and research. Teacher educators working alongside teachers can use their expertise to contribute to curriculum innovation, and student teachers can be seen as additional capacity for school improvement and research activities. Especially in situations where students spend a considerable amount of time in the school, their contributions are seen as worthwhile (Bergen et al. 2009).

At the moment, 25% of the bachelor's programme of hogescholen and 50% of the master's programme at research universities take place in schools. Although the involvement of schools in the education of new teachers has increased in the last few years, the formal responsibility for qualifying teachers remains with the TEI.

As the school environment is such an important part of the learning environment of students, special attention is paid to the quality of this learning environment. The responsibility for this quality is shared between school and the TEI. Quality criteria have been established (e.g. Kallenberg & Rokebrand 2006; NVAO 2009a) and schools that want to gain the formal status of training school (*opleidingsschool*) have to undergo a formal accreditation procedure with the Dutch–Flemish Accreditation Organization. Schools that pass that accreditation receive additional funding from the ministry, provided that 40% of the teacher education curriculum will be school based.

Many schools do not have the formal status as training schools. In those cases, the safeguarding of the quality of the training school is element in the partnership between the school and TEI, but ultimately the latter has to account for the quality of the learning environments of the schools that are used for teaching practice. As the offering of training places by schools is not regulated by law, and schools do not receive additional money for offering practice places, TEIs have no means to enforce high quality training places at those schools that do not have formal status as training schools.

The quality criteria apply not only to systemic conditions but also to the teachers and teacher educators involved in these partnerships. As the involvement of schools in the education of teachers increases, mentors in schools need more knowledge in the area of teacher learning (van Velzen & Volman 2009). Many schools and TEIs have developed courses for their mentors. In The Netherlands, mentors in schools who support student teachers are considered 'teacher educators'. Mentors in schools can even apply for listing in the professional register of teacher educators of the Dutch Association for Teacher Educators (Snoek & van der Sanden 2006). In most schools that have a close cooperation with TEIs, one or more of their mentors are registered in the professional register for school-based teacher educators. These school-based teacher educators usually team up with teacher educators from the university to

coordinate the activities that take place within the training school. Those school-based teacher educators often work not with individual students, but with groups of students, while they support those mentors who are mentoring individual students.

Although the governmental push for a stronger responsiveness of TEIs to the needs of the schools could have been seen as threatening the autonomy of teacher education, most TEIs in The Netherlands were proactive in their response and started partnerships, also because they believed that it would reduce the practice shock for novice teachers and increase the quality of the teacher education curriculum. This has led to exciting partnerships with schools, to new roles and responsibilities, to fascinating experiments with new models for teacher education, and to a renewed trust of schools in the contribution and quality of TEIs (Dietze & Snoek 2005).

Verloop and Wubbels concluded in 2000 that The Netherlands still had a long way to go before TEI–school partnerships would meet the criteria of Professional Development Schools, which are characterized by a sense of self- and mutual interest, mutual trust and respect, shared decision making, clear focus, a manageable agenda, commitment with top leadership, fiscal support, long-term commitment, a dynamic nature and efficient communication (Robinson & Darling-Hammond 1994). Now, ten years later, these criteria have largely been met in today's accredited training schools.

3) The need to meet a growing shortage of teachers

The involvement of schools in the education of new teachers has been stimulated by the severe shortage of teachers resulting from the retirement of a large group of 50+ teachers (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science 2008b). By 2014, about 75% of the present teachers in secondary education will have left the profession through retirement or attrition (Commission on the Teaching Profession 2007). Serious teacher shortages are predicted, because the influx of new teachers from TEIs will not be able to compensate for the substantial attrition. To cope with this expected shortage of teachers, schools have become increasingly aware of their qualitative and quantitative needs with respect to school staff. In many schools, the awareness of these needs has led to active policies for recruiting, developing and retaining teachers. As

a former Dutch minister stated: teacher education policy must be a part of a school's human resource policy (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science 2000). As a result, schools have become much keener on cooperation with TEIs and on the placement of students teachers in their school.

The shortage of teachers has also led to new government policies to attract new groups to the profession. Special attention has been paid to workers in other professions who might be interested in a mid-career switch to teaching. For these groups special flexible tracks have been developed with tailor-made programmes based on the outcomes of an assessment (Ministry for Education, Science and Culture 1999; 2000; see also Tigchelaar, Brouwer & Korthagen 2008). Such programmes have led to a growing diversity of programmes that focus on various target groups (Brouwer 2007).

4) The need to strengthen the knowledge base of teachers

As mentioned in the introduction, there is general concern about the quality of education in The Netherlands. In the past few years, this concern has changed into criticism of the quality of teachers. Newspaper headlines state that the quality of teachers is questioned by national committees, student associations, the inspectorate, parents, etc. The general impression is that teachers lack basic language and Mathematics skills and do not make efficient use of the available learning time. Teacher education is partly blamed for this. The Dutch–Flemish Accreditation Organization concluded that on the whole the institutions for primary teacher education show a lack of quality (NVAO 2004). This has resulted in the government initiating a number of quality improvement programmes to ensure the quality of teacher education (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science 1995; 1998; 2004; 2005; 2008a). An important element of the most recent quality improvement programmes is the focus on strengthening the knowledge base of novice teachers. To support this process, the TEIs within the universities of applied sciences have been pressured to develop explicit knowledge bases for the various subjects. These knowledge bases were presented in December 2009 (e.g. van Zanten et al. 2009; van der Leeuw et al. 2009). The next step in strengthening the transparency in the knowledge of novice teachers will be the development of national knowledge tests, in order to safeguard the level of knowledge and skills of each new teacher.

5) Focus on the quality of teacher educators

In The Netherlands, teacher educators are seen as a separate profession. Teacher educators have organized themselves in a professional body: VELON (Association for Teacher Educators in The Netherlands). The main aim of VELON is to support the professionalism and the professional development of teacher educators. The main instruments to achieve this aim are national conferences, a professional journal, publication of professional books (e.g. Willems et al. 2000; Gommers et al. 2005; Bergen et al. 2009) and the development of a professional standard for teacher educators. This standard is the basis for a professional register. Through a process of peer assessment, teacher educators can opt to be registered in the professional register of VELON (Koster & Dengerink 2008). At the end of 2009, about 300 teacher educators were included in the professional register. These teacher educators represent about 10% of all teacher educators.

VELON has also become a formal partner in policy processes concerning teacher education, where the initiative is taken by either the ministry or VELON itself (Snoek & van der Sanden 2006).

6 Teacher education curricula for primary education and lower secondary and vocational education

The curriculum that prepares teachers for primary education and the one that prepares teachers for lower secondary and vocational education are both offered by the universities for applied sciences. Both curricula have more or less the same structure, as both are at the bachelor's level and offer a 4-year integrated programme, combining both the pedagogical and didactic competences as a teacher and the knowledge and skills related to the content of the school curriculum.

6.1 General characteristics

Reflection based

Most curricula in primary teacher education are reflection based. In group mentoring sessions, students are supported in the development of

meta-cognitive reflection skills, which focus on self-knowledge and the development of a professional identity. These meta-cognitive skills are developed in a number of ways in the programme, often during frequent meetings with supervisors. During this process, students reflect on their professional development in relation to the seven national key competences that are expected from qualified teachers. These reflections are documented in a personal portfolio and are supported by evidence (such as pupil assessments and videos of lessons) that demonstrate the classroom teaching or subject teaching of the student teacher. This portfolio plays an important role in integrative assessments, during which students have to show that they have mastered the necessary level of competence.

Most institutions have an optional part in the curriculum that allows students to deepen or broaden their knowledge. Such minors are typically worth 30 ECTS credits and may focus on inter-cultural education, special needs education, school leadership, international education, youth care, science and technology in primary schools, ICT in education, mastering a second subject, etc.

The universities for applied sciences have recently started to implement a research component in the curricula at bachelor's level. This research component is focused on introducing students to the outcomes of education research and to the methodology of practice-oriented research that is relevant to schools. Examples of research types are action research, design research, etc. In their fourth year, most TEIs expect their students to do a research study that is linked to their LIO placement.

School-based training

About a quarter of the curriculum is dedicated to practice-based learning within a school setting, through internships and a final independent teaching practice. In their first two years, all student teachers spend one day a week in school, working on their assignments, observing and giving lessons. In the third year, students are in school for a day and a half each week. In the fourth and final year, all student teachers are in school full time for six months, or spend three days a week throughout the year for their LIO phase. Students are placed in different schools each year.

The design of the school-based training mirrors the underlying concept of realistic teacher education and the need to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

The gradual increase in complexity and responsibility during the internships is designed in such a way that the students get the opportunity to be involved with real tasks in school, while at the same time getting a step-by-step introduction to the complexity and responsibility of the tasks that teachers have to perform in school.

Teacher educators at universities of applied sciences

As primary teacher education and lower secondary and vocational teacher education are part of the universities of applied sciences, the main focus for the teacher educators is on teaching student teachers. Given this focus, teaching competences are the main criteria for selecting teacher educators. Therefore, some teacher educators have only bachelor's degrees, the majority of staff within the departments responsible for primary teacher education have master's degrees, while a very small minority of the teacher educators have qualifications at doctorate level.

As research has only recently been added as one of the tasks of TEIs, teacher educators are now stimulated to engage in doctoral studies in order to earn PhDs. This, however, is a slow process.

6.2 The curriculum in primary teacher education

In The Netherlands, some forty universities for applied sciences offer initial courses for primary teacher education. These courses provide students both with a bachelor's degree (Bachelor of Education) and with a teaching qualification for primary education, which is a precondition for working in a primary school. The study covers 240 ECTS credits over a period of 4 years, during which students are prepared as classroom teachers.

Students entering primary teacher education have just finished their secondary school. This can be five years of general secondary education (havo) or vocational education. No other entry requirements before starting primary teacher education exist. However, given the concerns about the language and Mathematics skills of teachers, the need was felt to guarantee the skills level of students by introducing a language and

Mathematics skills test at the end of the first year of the study. Students who do not pass this test before the end of their first year have to abandon their study.

As students will get a teaching qualification to teach 4- to 12-year-old children, the programme has to cover a wide variety of topics: both the pedagogical and didactic competences as a primary school teacher and the knowledge and skills related to all contents of the primary school curriculum. As this creates an overloaded programme, the students have to specialize as teachers either in lower primary education (4- to 8-year-olds) or in upper secondary education (8- to 12-year-olds). This specialization starts during the second year of their study.

The curriculum is focused on the seven national competences. The focus in the primary teacher education programmes is both on the acquisition of the knowledge and skills of the disciplines to be taught in the primary school and on the acquisition of the general and specific knowledge or skills of the teaching profession. Both elements are programmed parallel throughout the curriculum and at intervals integrated in projects, tasks and assignments.

About 40% of the curriculum[4] is dedicated to learning the content of the primary school curriculum (e.g. reading, writing, Mathematics, Social sciences, Natural sciences, Physical education and Music, Arts and Creative education). This includes the pedagogical content knowledge that is related to those subjects, focusing on learning problems with specific complex disciplinary concepts, alternative approaches to teaching Mathematics, etc. The disciplinary content is based on the knowledge bases that are nationally defined for teachers for each of the school subjects.

About 25% of the curriculum is dedicated to pedagogical and didactic/methodological courses and practices. This part of the curriculum is focused on the acquisition of general knowledge and skills of the teaching profession, including pedagogy, learning psychology, classroom management, methods of assessment, teaching in multicultural classrooms, educational use of ICT, etc.

[4] Percentages are subject to local variation, as institutions are autonomous in the design of their curriculum.

6.3 The curriculum in lower secondary and vocational teacher education

Seven Dutch universities for applied sciences offer initial courses for lower secondary and vocational teacher education (grade 2). These courses provide students both with a bachelor's degree (Bachelor of Education) and with a teaching qualification for one specific school subject in lower secondary and vocational education. This qualification is a precondition for working in a secondary school, although schools are allowed to temporarily employ an unqualified teacher if they cannot find a qualified one.

The study covers 240 ECTS credits over a period of 4 years, during which students are prepared as subject teachers.

Students entering lower secondary and vocational teacher education have just finished their secondary school. This is typically five years of general secondary education (havo). No other entry requirements before starting lower secondary and vocational teacher education exist. However, given the concerns about the specific subject that the student will study, in most cases the student applying for a specific course will have passed the exam in that subject.

The focus in the lower secondary and vocational teacher education programmes is both on the acquisition of the knowledge and skills of the subject to be taught in the school and on the acquisition of the general and specific knowledge or skills of the teaching profession. Both elements are programmed parallel throughout the curriculum and at intervals integrated in projects, tasks and assignments.

As students will get a teaching qualification to teach one specific subject, the programme has to provide an extensive understanding of this subject. About 40% of the curriculum[5] is dedicated to learning the content of the subject. This includes the pedagogical content knowledge that is related to those subjects, focusing on learning problems with specific complex disciplinary concepts, alternative approaches to teaching the subject, etc. The disciplinary content is based on the knowledge bases for teachers that are nationally defined for each of the school subjects.

[5] Percentages are subject to local variation, as institutions are autonomous in the design of their curriculum.

As the pupil characteristics and the teaching approaches in general lower secondary education and in vocational education differ considerably, students have to specialize either in general lower secondary teaching or in vocational teaching. This specialization starts during the third year of their study.

About 25% of the curriculum is dedicated to pedagogical and didactic/methodological courses and practices. This part of the curriculum is focused on the acquisition of general knowledge and skills of the teaching profession, including pedagogy, learning psychology, classroom management, methods of assessment, teaching in multicultural classrooms, educational use of ICT, etc.

7 Teacher education for upper secondary education

Seven Dutch research universities offer postgraduate master's courses for upper secondary teacher education (grade 1). These courses provide students both with a master's degree (MA or MSc) and with a grade-1 teaching qualification for upper secondary education. This qualification is a precondition for working in a secondary school, although schools are allowed to temporary employ an unqualified teacher if they cannot find a qualified one. The study covers 60 ECTS credits over a period of 1 year, during which students are prepared as subject teachers.

The seven universities of applied sciences offer part-time courses for those students who already have a grade-2 teaching qualification for lower secondary and vocational education and who wish to upgrade that qualification. These courses provide students both with a master's degree (Master of Education) and with a grade-1 teaching qualification for upper secondary education. The study covers 90 ECTS credits over a period of 3 years, during which students are prepared as subject teachers.

Entry conditions

Students entering the postgraduate master's courses at research universities need to have a master's degree in their subject (MA or MSc) or to study for such a degree while doing their teacher education master's. Students entering the part-time master's courses at universities

of applied sciences need to have a grade-2 teaching qualification for lower secondary and vocational education.

Curriculum

The two curricula for upper secondary teacher education are structured around six teacher roles: subject teacher, classroom manager, *pedagoog* (educationalist), member of the school organization, colleague and professional. Although they both lead to a grade-1 teaching qualification, the two curricula have fundamental differences as a result of the different profiles of the students applying for the courses.

The curriculum in research universities focuses on pedagogical and methodological/didactic competences. No attention is paid to subject knowledge, as students already have a master's degree in their subject. However, attention is paid to the pedagogical content knowledge related to teaching and learning a subject.

Half of the curriculum is dedicated to teaching practice, which starts in the very first week of the course with small teaching and observation assignments, and culminates in an independent LIO phase. The other part of the curriculum focuses on educational theory, classroom management skills, pedagogical content, knowledge, inter-cultural education, etc.

Within the curriculum in universities of applied sciences, the focus is on subject knowledge, as grade-1 teachers are expected to have a higher level of knowledge and skills in their subject, and they already have the teaching skills based on their grade-2 teaching qualification. The curriculum includes no teaching practice, as the part-time students are already working as (grade-2) teachers in school. However, part of the curriculum is focused on teaching methods that fit the age group of upper secondary education, thus stimulating a stronger active involvement of students.

Given the focus on the master's level, both curricula pay substantial attention to the development of research skills (12–20 credits). In both curricula, students are expected to prepare a thesis based on research in their school.

As in the bachelor's courses, the curriculum in the master's courses is reflection based, whereby the six teacher roles provide structure for reflection. These reflections are documented in a personal portfolio and

are supported by evidence (such as student assessments and videos of lessons) that demonstrate the subject teaching of the student-teacher.

8 Balancing between autonomous institutions and a steering government

As indicated in the first part of this text, there is a delicate balance between institutional autonomy and government control. In the deregulated policy context of education in The Netherlands, the government tries to restrict its role to the 'what' – defining learning goals, competence profiles, etc. – and to give schools the freedom to define in what way they will help pupils or students to achieve these goals.

However, teacher education seems to have a unique position. The minister of Education feels a special responsibility towards teacher education, as the quality of teachers is considered crucial to the quality of the whole of the education system. A recent report from the Dutch Education Council (2009) states that there may not be any doubt in society about the quality of newly qualified teachers. This justifies interference by the minister in the curriculum of teacher education.

This interference can concern three elements of the teacher education system:

- *The qualifications of the students who graduate from teacher education*
  This interference takes the form of the pressure exerted by the ministry on the development and implementation of the knowledge base that teachers need to have mastered upon graduation. The next step in the process to make the knowledge base of teachers more explicit will be to develop national tests to assess whether students have indeed mastered this knowledge base (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science 2008a).

  The development of this knowledge base was initiated by the universities as a result of pressure from the minister. As a result, the involvement of teachers themselves in defining their knowledge base has been minimal. However, Korver (2007) emphasizes how

important it is that such a knowledge base be defined and owned by teachers: if the knowledge base is developed by persons other than the members of the profession, it will not only have a negative influence on the quality of education but will also mark the end of the pretence that the teaching profession is a 'real' profession.

From this point of view, it is positive that VELON – as the professional body of teacher educators – has decided to develop its own knowledge base to underlie and support the professional work of teacher educators.

– *The quality of the curriculum*

Government interference is felt in the plans to create a national examination council to evaluate the quality of exams in the various institutions (Dutch Education Council 2009). The minister thus plans to interfere with the traditional autonomy of the universities.

A second way to reduce any possible doubt about the quality of teacher education is to intensify the accreditation procedures. The regular accreditation procedures carried out by the Dutch–Flemish Accreditation Organization in order to check the quality of higher education programmes have been intensified for teacher education programmes by extending the site visits and the number of students and theses that are evaluated. Although the Dutch–Flemish Accreditation Organization recently concluded that the primary teacher education institutions have drastically improved their curricula and meet the quality criteria (NVAO 2009b), the minister has suggested that the regular six-yearly accreditation procedure should, in the case of teacher education, be repeated every three years.

– *The quality of teacher educators*

The third possible area of government interference is the quality of teacher educators. As teachers are generally considered the most important factor influencing the learning of pupils, it seems reasonable to assume that teacher educators are the most important factor influencing the learning of student teachers (Snoek, Swennen & van der Klink 2009). Therefore, explicit policies on the quality of teacher educators could help to stimulate the professionalism of

> teacher educators and therefore the quality of teacher education. From that point of view, the Dutch government has supported the development of the professional standard and registration of teacher educators by VELON. In recent policy papers issued by the ministry, the intention is expressed to have the master's level as the minimum requirement to be appointed a teacher educator (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science 2008).

The strong pressure from the government has put the TEIs (especially the universities for applied sciences, which suffer the strongest effect of society's criticism of the quality of teacher education), in a reactive position. The board of the universities of applied sciences (the HBO-raad) is forced to take measures to counter the criticism, to keep the initiative and to prevent direct measures being imposed by the government.

This has resulted in intensive measures, such as the development of the knowledge base and the development of the first-year test on language and Mathematics, and in measures within the institutions to make quality criteria much more explicit. This in itself is a positive effect. The risk, however, is that the driving forces in this process will stimulate a limited perspective on teacher quality, based on the concerns of politicians and the media about the knowledge level of teachers (VELON 2008). The quality of a teacher is a rich and complex quality, one that cannot be reduced to lists of subject knowledge. The present emphasis on the knowledge base of teachers might easily lead to a restricted view on the profession of a teacher. The complexity of schools and the multifaceted expectations that a rapidly changing society has of teachers call for teachers who are change agents in their schools and who have an extended professionalism.

This is not something that can be regulated by government measures and through extensive knowledge bases. In that respect, the Dutch education policy seems to be based on the implicit view that society and its educational system can be constructed through government measures that can reduce any doubt about teacher quality and that can ensure the quality of teacher education. This can be recognized in the way in which the competences of teachers in The Netherlands are described. While other countries have defined the competences that are expected of teachers in formal documents of one to six pages, in The Netherlands

they are defined in a formal document that is twenty-one pages long (Snoek et al. 2009). The new knowledge bases for teachers add a large number of pages to this. Thus, although the Dutch policy seems to be based on deregulation and autonomous institutions, it appears that this deregulation is based on extensive control through long lists of criteria that teacher education programmes have to meet.

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