

A new perspective on professional space in education

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The professional quality and expertise of teachers both creates and demands a certain professional space, which is free of the influence of government and also, to a certain extent, of the hierarchical (employment) relationship with the governing body and school management. This professional space does not come free of obligation or duty, but must at all times be geared to benefiting educational quality. Notwithstanding policy aimed at optimising this professional space, there are signs that it is being eroded by factors such as teachers' sense of being under too much pressure of work and having too little say. The central question addressed in this report is therefore: How can an optimum professional space for teachers be created, utilised and justified?

The Education Council believes that a new perspective is needed on the concept of professional space, in which a one dimensional policy formulation and implementation is replaced by a more integrated approach. Such an approach can be found in the concept of power to act, where people are given a say in shaping their own work by bringing together and dovetailing three dimensions: competences, structure and culture. Power to act is thus concerned not only with what teachers should themselves contribute and do (competences), but also with the conditions under which they work (structure and culture). These conditions warrant attention in both policy and implementation. The Council believes this is insufficiently the case in the present situation, in which attention is focused primarily on developing the competences of individual teachers through training.

To strengthen the power to act, the Council recommends more and better collaboration in school teams and increased attention for structures and a culture that support the power to act. The team can offer a structure and culture within which teachers can develop. Teams also offer social support, which can be used to guard against a sense of excessive work stress. Finally, there is scope within teams for horizontal control and accountability, reducing the need for vertical, top-down control by school management and government. Strengthening the power to act with a view to boosting educational quality is primarily an organisational matter; the government needs to remain at a judicious distance on this point. The main role for the government is to facilitate and promote team leadership and team development within schools.

Recommendation 1: Further reinforce teacher competences based on the strength of the team

Team collaboration occurs more naturally in some sectors and schools than others, but improvements are possible and necessary across the board. To achieve this, the Council first recommends that collaboration and peer review be more firmly embedded in day-to-day practice. Second, the Council recommends making more use of material and non-material incentives and instruments for team development. Finally, the Council stresses that teachers and school teams could themselves adopt an active attitude and look for opportunities to strengthen and realise teachers' power to act. Teacher training has an important role to play in instilling this attitude.

Recommendation 2: Take professional governance as a starting point for structures and culture

Teams do not function in isolation, but require supporting structures and culture. The Council recommends that a different management philosophy be employed for this from what is currently the norm in Dutch education. Professional governance places the primary focus on the teacher and his or her team. Reasoning from this philosophy, power to act is supported by structures that set boundaries (offering safety and clarity), by coordination between structures (within and outside the school) and by flexible structures that support team leadership. Power to act is also bolstered by a culture which is based on trust, respect and a learning attitude.