

Broadening the scope for teachers

A new perspective on the teaching profession

7 November 2018

The teaching profession is receiving much attention in the Netherlands at the moment, both from policymakers and in the media. That attention is justified, because teachers are crucial for good education. The profession is under pressure, however, partly due to growing shortages of teachers. The Dutch Parliament asked the Education Council of the Netherlands to investigate how changes to the training and employment structure might contribute to ensuring that there are sufficient, good-quality teachers.

In response to this request, the Council has published the report *Ruim baan voor leraren. Een nieuw perspectief op het leraarschap* ['Broadening the scope for teachers. A new perspective on the teaching profession']. In the report, the Council puts forward a new vision of the profession which would result in radical changes to the training and employment structure. This document is a public summary of the report.

What

A proposal for ensuring sufficient, good-quality teachers

Many of the measures aimed at tackling the urgent shortage of teachers are focused on quantity and the short term: how can teacher numbers be increased in the shortest possible time? The solutions chosen, as well as failing to achieve sufficient impact, also appear to be applied on an ad hoc basis. Moreover, quantitative measures can undermine the quality of education, for example if they lead to classes being taught by teachers who are insufficiently qualified, or if trainee teachers cannot be given adequate support. The Council believes it is high time for a new perspective on the teaching profession, which will ensure a sufficient supply of good-quality teachers over the long term. This perspective is fleshed out below.

At the heart of the teaching profession, in all subjects and all educational sectors (preschool, primary, secondary or senior secondary vocational education), are the same basic principles: teachers prepare their students for a follow-on programme or for an occupation, and play a key role in their socialisation and personal development. To do this, every teacher develops teaching courses, delivers lessons and evaluates progress. Didactic and pedagogical skills form the basis of the profession. In addition, teachers need substantive knowledge to enable them to operate in a specific educational context or teach a particular subject. Against this backdrop, the Council recommends the introduction of broader teaching qualifications – applicable across several sectors and several (related) subjects – alongside the creation of opportunities for specialisation. Combined with the broader qualifications, the Council also advocates stronger incentives for professionalisation and career development at the workplace. New teachers and teachers with a newly acquired specialisation must be given full in-school support to develop their knowledge and skills further.

In practical terms, this approach implies a change in the current training and employment structure. At present, the training pathways lead to clearly defined qualifications to teach in a specific educational sector or a specific subject. In the approach proposed by the Council, this would be replaced by a generic basic qualification for all teachers, combined with a clustering of teaching qualifications (e.g. covering several educational sectors or several related subjects) plus one or more specialisations (e.g. for a specific subject). The Council stresses that

subject knowledge will continue to be crucial in this new perspective. There will be much greater emphasis than at present on systematic in-service professionalisation activities. Schools will develop their staffing policy, training approach and task descriptions based on this focus on professionalisation.

Why

Positive effects on the teaching profession

The Council believes that this new perspective will deliver four positive and closely interconnected effects: greater opportunities for teacher mobility; a more attractive profession; more opportunities for educational quality and innovation; and a better start for new teachers.

At present, teacher mobility, both between and within educational sectors, is low. Switching currently requires training to obtain additional qualifications, and there are salary differentials. Under the Council's proposal, it would be easier for teachers to switch between educational sectors or subjects. Their broader employability could make it easier to accommodate shortages in specific sectors or subjects.

Teachers will also have greater choice and better career prospects under the Council's proposal, making teaching a more attractive profession. At present, there are virtually no career development opportunities in teaching. The legally enshrined qualification standards for teachers provide no help here, because they do not indicate any gradings or levels, but rather set minimum standards such as 'the teacher has a command of the content of his/her subject'. The new approach suggested by the Council would encourage teachers to continue developing. The Council believes this would keep current teachers motivated to teach and prompt more people to choose teaching as a profession. Research has shown that career prospects and professional development are important 'push factors' in choosing to become a teacher.

Improved opportunities for professionalisation would result in better utilisation of the expertise present in teaching teams and thus boost the quality of education. A specialist maths teacher could for example teach arithmetic and maths subjects to students throughout the whole school, not just his or her class. Experts in a particular subject could develop continuous learning pathways, or establish smoother links between subjects. It would also be simpler to introduce a new subject into the school because teachers would not have to completely retrain in order to be able to teach it; 'bolting on' a specialisation would be enough.

Distribution of tasks across teaching teams would give new teachers opportunities, for example enabling them to broaden their range of tasks step-by-step or to obtain better support and supervision from senior colleagues. This is sorely needed, because on average a quarter of new primary and secondary school teachers leave the profession within five years.

How

The training structure: not a blueprint, more a general outline

The Council does not wish to provide a definitive blueprint for the clusters of teaching qualifications and the combination with specialisations, but rather to suggest the contours of a new structure. It recommends the setting up of a committee to work up the precise details of the new training structure.

The contours suggested by the Council can be sketched as follows.

- The **basis**. Every teaching qualification is underpinned by a broad, generic basis or foundation. Completion of this foundation programme does not yet qualify the trainee to teach; that happens only when they have combined the generic basis with one or (in many cases) more of the clusters listed below.
- A **cluster** consists of a group of related educational sectors or subjects. The following are examples:
 - 'The young child' (preschool education and primary school years 1 and 2);
 - '10-14 year-olds' (upper years at primary school and lower years in secondary school);
 - 'Sciences' (physics, chemistry, biology, mathematics);
 - 'Social sciences' (geography, history, economics, social studies);
 - 'Care and welfare' (disability care, social care, nursing).
- A **specialisation**. This is needed to be able to teach in the senior classes of general secondary/pre-university education (HAVO/VWO) or in specific vocational subjects in preparatory vocational or senior secondary vocational education (VMBO/MBO).

Under the new structure proposed by the Council, a qualified teacher who wishes to teach a different subject or switch to a different sector will no longer have to undergo complete retraining, but will follow a supplementary course which broadens and/or deepens the existing knowledge and skills he/she acquired in obtaining their earlier teaching qualification.

Examples of teachers' careers

Career 1. Supplementary specialisation: sciences + social sciences

After completing a supplementary specialisation programme in social sciences, a science teacher working in the cluster '10-14 year-olds' would be qualified to teach:

- science and social science subjects in the upper years of primary school;
- science and social science subjects in the lower years of secondary school.

Career 2. Supplementary specialisation: sciences + physics

After completing a supplementary specialisation programme in physics, a science teacher working in the cluster '10-14 year-olds' would be qualified to teach:

- science subjects in the upper years of primary school;
- science subjects in the lower years of secondary school;
- physics in the upper years of general secondary/pre-university education.

Career 3. Supplementary specialisation: care and welfare + disability care

After completing a supplementary specialisation programme in disability care, a care and welfare teacher in the cluster 'practical subjects' would be qualified to teach:

- practical care and welfare in preparatory vocational/senior secondary vocational education;
- disability care in preparatory vocational/senior secondary vocational education.

Career 4. Supplementary specialisation: sciences + social sciences + history

After completing a supplementary specialisation programme in history, a science and social sciences teacher working in the cluster '10-14 year-olds' would be qualified to teach:

- science and social science subjects in the upper years of primary school;
- science and social science subjects in the lower years of secondary school;
- history in the upper years of general secondary/pre-university education.

Changing the system of teaching qualifications has far-reaching consequences. One is that the creation of clusters could lead to the emergence of new 'silos', for example with a teacher who opts for the cluster 'the young child' no longer being qualified (without a supplementary specialisation) to teach in the upper years of primary school. The Council believes that the consequences are predominantly positive, but also acknowledges that there are risks which require careful thought. For example, attention needs to be given to the precise knowledge and skills teachers are required to possess in order to be allowed to teach a subject; clear standards are essential to ensure that quality remains high.

The workplace: professionalisation and career development as basic principles

To encourage teachers to engage in continuous development, schools need to develop a strong vision on professionalisation, as a basis for their staffing and training policy. In many schools, this policy is currently focused on practical matters rather than on career development and opportunities. Elements of a revamped approach could be personal development programmes – and in particular creating the time for them – better induction programmes and a focus on team learning and cooperation.

Finally, the Council stresses that this proposal can only succeed if the financial consequences are accepted. Precisely what those consequences are will become clearer when the proposal is worked up in more detail. The proposed changes in teaching qualifications will in any event necessitate a rethink of the Collective Labour Agreements for teachers in the preschool, primary, secondary and senior secondary vocational sectors.