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Contribution

Reconsidering the Tension between Bureaucracy and Professionalism in Publicly and Privately funded Schools in the Dutch VET Sector.

Drawing on a recent quantitative and qualitative study in the Dutch Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector, this paper reveals the need to reconsider and re-examine the often assumed tension between professionals (teachers) and bureaucrats (school administrators) (see e.g. Hanson, 2001, Hoyle, 1980, 1986, Mintzberg, 1979). The Dutch teaching profession never really established its own professional control nor its occupational closure (Abbot, 1998, Karsten, 2000). Teachers operate in a strongly controlled and regulated organisational context which may weaken both their service ideal and their professional autonomy (Wilensky, 1964). This brings us to the so-called 'natural tension' between organisational control and professional control (Mintzberg, 1979). The models of Hoyle (1980; 1986) and Hanson (2001) illustrate how the tension between bureaucracy and professionalism is being dealt with in schools, namely mainly by negotiation between the school management representing bureaucracy and teachers representing professionalism, thereby avoiding a command structure. However, an important question arises here: do school managers really and only represent bureaucracy? This question stems from the fact that, also in The Netherlands, it is customary in education to appoint former teachers as educational managers (Freidson, 1984). Such managers are called 'professional managers' which means they have not been trained as managers, but are qualified professionals. Professional managers contrast with 'lay managers', who have often been trained as managers, but lack expertise and qualifications in their subordinates' profession or discipline. The phenomenon of professional managers in education implies that educational managers are former colleagues of their subordinates (teachers). Thus many potential conflicts in the schools are not between bureaucracy and professionalism but between competing professional judgments'. (Hoyle, 1986, 83). The aforementioned notions reduce the importance of the professional 'bureaucracy clash in schools. Therefore, it might be more suitable to speak of a clash within the profession between professionals who differ in task and rank. Data collected in 2005 on the

organisational behaviour of teachers and middle managers in the Dutch VET sector provided the opportunity to investigate the interplay between teachers and professional and lay managers from a comparative perspective since the data had been collected in publicly and privately funded schools. The data show that 87% of the managers in publicly funded schools are professional managers, in contrast with 55% at privately funded schools. The following research question has been formulated: 'Does the interplay between teachers and middle managers in publicly and privately funded schools differ, and if so, in what terms?'

Method

The findings reported in this paper are the qualitative and final part of a study on the organisational behaviour of teachers and middle managers in Dutch schools for VET, which has been reported in Honingh & Karsten (2007), Honingh (2008) and Honingh & Oort (2009). This study examined and compared attitudes, behaviour and perceptions of teachers and middle managers in publicly and privately funded schools. To verify whether the outcomes in the quantitative study concerning the interplay between teachers and middle managers at publicly and privately funded were correctly ascribed to the independent variables and predictor variables, a member check was carried out in 2007 (see Firestone, 1993; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Swanborn, 1996). The member check involved 11 middle managers working in 6 different schools and 7 teachers from 2 schools. The middle managers and teachers were interviewed in two separate round-table discussions.

Expected Outcomes

Comparing the interplay between teachers and middle managers in publicly and privately funded schools reveals differences between both school types. Moreover it offers a framework to re-examine the tension between professionals and bureaucracy. In publicly funded schools middle managers (in most of the cases professional managers) and teachers are both involved in management tasks as well as in teaching and teaching-related tasks. Consequently, these schools lack a structure in which a strict division of tasks and responsibilities between middle managers and teachers exists. Often teachers feel uncertain about their duties and scope of autonomy. Whereas privately funded schools have a more traditional command structure in which management (professional as well as lay managers) and educational tasks are strictly separated. This division and formalisation of tasks gives teachers a precise overview of the tasks they are expected to fulfil. Furthermore, teachers are offered professional autonomy to follow their convictions and preferences.

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