

Some Do's and Don'ts in Teacher Education

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1. Introduction

Being a teacher in pre-university education (and, for that matter, secondary education in general) is no popular job in the Netherlands. The profession of teacher has a relatively low status, it is associated with hard work, and the salary (although, perhaps, not low as such) is considered too low in relation to the strenuous character of the job. As a result, within Dutch universities the number of students who choose to become a teacher is low.¹ It is absolutely clear that this unpopularity of being a teacher in the Netherlands ties in with a large number of socio-cultural and societal forces. Consequently, the Dutch Institutes for Teacher Training can by no means be held responsible for the fact that so few students want to become a teacher. At the same time, however, this does not imply either that the way in which teacher training in Dutch universities is given shape is completely irrelevant in this connection. In my view, a system change is in order.

This paper is based on a number of strictly personal observations made in 2014 when I was a member of the National Evaluation Committee which assessed all Institutes for Teacher Training in the Netherlands. However, the stand I take in this presentation has nothing to do with the official stand by the Committee, in general I will broach issues which were hardly (or not at all) discussed during the assessment procedures because they have no direct bearing on the accreditation process.

2. Problems in Dutch teacher education

Essentially, teacher training in the Netherlands faces the following two problems. First, more often than not, programs for teacher training provided by Dutch universities are not popular as such, and, second, the drop-out rate of starting teachers is high (25% within 5 years).

In this presentation I will take the line that both problems, at least in part, relate to the way in which teacher training in the Netherlands is given shape.

3. Problem I

At present, teacher training in Dutch universities is nearly always completely separate from the primary study a student has chosen. Students have to finish their 'regular study' first (both BA and MA, together at least 4 years of study) and it is only after having finished their MA that they may start with the program of teacher training (which, again, takes one year). This latter program has the status of a second master, meaning that in the Netherlands academically trained teachers have two master, a master related to the subject they have chosen as their original study (French, Mathematics, History) and an 'educational master'.²

Clearly, this structure is not particularly attractive. Students consider it odd that they have to do a second master, in a department that is completely separate from the department where they did their BA and first MA. Generally speaking, there is no or hardly any connection between the Institute for Teacher Training and the Department where the students have finished their original study. More often than not, the staff members of both institutes hardly know each other.

What is more, this strict separation of the first study (BA and MA) and the second study (the educational master) results in a situation in which the programs of both masters are set up completely independently, meaning that there is hardly any or even no inter-departmental discussion of the programs.

However, there is a much more fundamental problem associated with this 'double master' approach. The second, educational, master seems to suffer from at least two general shortcomings. First, there is strong doubt, also expressed by many insiders (!), whether this second master is a 'real' academic master. Since the teacher training programs involve an apprenticeship of 6 months, students spend half of their time in a school where they are trained on the job. Clearly, from this fact alone it follows

¹ In the Netherlands, teacher training comes in two types: (1) academically trained teachers who have finished their academic studies at a regular university, and (2) teachers who are trained at a Polytechnic and who have a strictly professional training.

² These two masters may be integrated into one MA of two years. This, however, is a little exploited possibility.

that it is very much doubtful whether educational masters conform to the standards of academic masters. Second, as a consequence of the fact that educational masters rank as academic masters, students must do 'some' research, however limited. However, it is absolutely clear that in the teacher training programs there is hardly any time to do actual research, since the students spend half of their time in school and in the other half of their time they have to follow all kinds of courses. To make things even worse, not infrequently the students are more or less forced to do research with the help of techniques originating from the social sciences. Clearly, for many students, particularly those who have studied Arts, this is a completely new paradigm that they are totally unfamiliar with. Since they not only have to master these techniques in a short time, but they also have to do their actual research in a short time, the results of the research performed by these students are little impressive, to say the least. Not surprisingly, many students are very well aware of this and, consequently, they consider this part of their curriculum worthless.

4. Problem II

As was pointed out above, in the Netherlands the drop-out rate of young teachers is high. In my view, this cannot but mean that teachers are not sufficiently prepared for the job they have chosen. As was pointed out, the actual, in-school teacher training program takes no less than half of the curriculum that the educational master consists of. Apparently, the apprenticeship is either inadequate or insufficient – clearly, it may e.g. mean that the apprenticeship is not given at the right moment – which implies that Dutch Institutes for Teacher Training do not offer their students a thorough preparation for the job they have chosen.

To sum up, in my view the above is tantamount to the following:

- The way the programs for teacher training are given shape is unattractive. When the BA/MA structure was introduced in the Dutch system of higher education, the Institutes for Teacher Training have opted for a master-after-master structure, in which teacher training is situated in the second master. Since the second master is, strictly speaking, no real academic master, and since all students participating in these programs do have an academic master already, this structuring of the study is counter-intuitive and not attractive.
- Notwithstanding the fact that half of the educational master is spent in a school, the students are, apparently, not sufficiently trained, since far too many young teachers stop their career within 5 years. In my view, the conclusion must be that the long apprenticeship fails in actually preparing the students for their actual job in school. Clearly, if this is correct this implies that the curriculum of the teacher training programs should be structured in a completely different way.

5. Implications

In my view, the preceding discussion has a number of far-reaching implications.

The Dutch system is far too rigid: it starts from the idea that there is only one kind of academically trained teacher. In conformity with this, all teachers are trained in exactly the same way. My suggestion is: admit that there are different kinds of teachers and admit that there is not necessarily one way to become a teacher. Put differently, define different ways to become an academically trained teacher. In this way, Teacher Training Programs may become much more attractive.

Personally, I am not at all in favor of the actual master-after-master solution that Dutch Institutes for Teacher Training have embraced, particularly not in the way this is actually given shape. As said, the second educational master does not conform to the standards of academic masters. In my view, this master-after-master solution suffers from a number of shortcomings:

- (a) there is no integration of the subject the student has chosen (German, Biology, Geography) and the educational training,
- (b) in the educational master students have to do some 'educational research' (otherwise it is no master at all), but in many cases this research primarily relates to education science, something which is fundamentally different from teacher training. In addition, many students simply do not have a background which enables them to do this kind of research in a well-founded way,
- (c) because of the apprenticeship of 6 months, there is not enough time left for a program that deserves the status of academic master,

- (d) not surprisingly, the actual program consists of all kinds of introductory courses (Introduction in Didactics, Introduction in Pedagogy, etc.) which illustrate that a large part of the program is on a BA level rather than on a MA level.

To remedy the above shortcomings, define integrated masterprograms (of two years) in which the study of a specific subject (say, Chemistry, or History) is combined with the training of being a chemistry or history teacher. Of course, in such integrated programs education science, pedagogy, and didactics cannot be left out, but I would like to emphasize that programs of teacher training are fundamentally different from studying education science.

In my view, the above scenario according to which the teacher training program is integrated in the MA is not the only way to establish an intimate relationship between the teacher training program and the BA/MA proper. Such an integration can also be established on the BA level. In the latter case, one may think of an 'educational minor'.

More in general, I have strong doubts as to programs according to which teachers are trained to become some sort of in-school researchers. I am perfectly aware that my position goes against the present-day trend, but in my view being a teacher is completely different from being a researcher of educational phenomena. Studying feed-back, for instance, may be highly relevant (and teachers should no doubt know about the results!), but the actual study of the effects of different kinds of feed-back should be performed by education scientists and not by the average student of French or Chemistry who has chosen to become a French or Chemistry teacher. No doubt, it is only education scientists who are trained to do that kind of research in the right way and with the help of the right techniques.

In my view, the essentials of teacher training programs can be taught in a much shorter time-span, in my view 6 months suffice. As said, one way to do this, is to set up educational minors which can be incorporated in the BA, another way is to define integrated educational master programs. Essential to this curtailment of the educational part of the academic program is, that this abridgement should be compensated by a substantial

6. Induction stage.

In my opinion, students who have just started with their job should be coached and supported much more intensely and for a much longer period of time than is the case at present. At the moment, such an induction stage is missing, whereas, in my view, the training on the job of beginning teachers should even take several years.