

# A Dictionary for the Collaboration between Schools and Arts Centres

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## **Abstract**

*The future of education is social and creative. Everywhere, governments are stimulating programmes fostering the creative development of children and supporting the collaboration between schools and societal partners. In this paper, the main conclusions of a qualitative analysis of interviews with art teachers and generalist teachers will be presented in the form of a dictionary, explaining the different interpretations and associations the teachers have of crucial aspects such as content, creativity, didactics, learning, safety, space, and structure.*

*Keywords: arts education, collaboration, professional identity, creativity, school organisation, professional development*

## **1. Introduction**

This paper presents the first results of an analysis of the collaboration between generalist teachers and arts teachers in primary schools in the Netherlands. Participants were active in a government-sponsored programme aimed to improve the quality of arts education in schools. Such professional and institutional collaboration is dependent on many factors. [1] This paper asks the question: Which factors determine successful collaboration between regular teachers and arts teachers? It does so by evaluating their personal experiences in the programme.

## **2. Methodology**

Based on a qualitative study of a state-sponsored programme stimulating the collaboration between primary schools and community arts centres in the Netherlands, this paper presents the results of a discourse analysis of interviews with generalist teachers and arts teachers on their professional identities and in-class interaction. Eight pairs of participants were interviewed three times during one school year on their assignment and role within the organisation (interview 1), their collaboration with the other (interview 2), and their self-perception and perception of the other (interview 3).

The resulting 24 hours of audio recordings were transcribed and analysed using Atlas.ti. The transcribed interviews were repeatedly coded, starting with in-vivo coding and building up to more abstract codes. These codes were subsequently analysed on groundedness (code occurrence frequency) and density (code co-occurrence frequency). Some codes turned out to be common in both lists, such as (understandably) 'the arts' and the code 'normal'. Other codes are not very grounded, yet are strongly related to other codes. This applies largely to the definitions of self and others, in sentences such as 'I am just a teacher'. In the following, five code groups that connect the vast majority of individual codes will be discussed: colleagues, failure, identity, space, and structure.

### 3. Findings

#### 3.1 Colleagues

There are few things teachers talk about as much as their colleagues. Of the slightly over 200 times the code 'colleague' appears in the interviews, it co-occurs more than 130 times with words like 'good', 'success', 'satisfied' and 'beautiful'. Moreover, it co-occurs more than sixty times with 'nice'. It seems clear that colleagues are an essential condition. At the same time, however, they the greatest risk for the success of collaboration in arts education.

The colleagues mentioned are often connected to the collaboration between the school and the arts centre. Because the involvement of colleagues is very important for the quality of arts education, this requires constant attention. According to the interviews, a good arts teacher can work wonders with a beautiful workshop or inspiring sample lessons with the teaching team. If that does not tile the necessary results, which also occurs, the effect will be limited to the one teacher with whom they work. In that case, the goals of the government programme will not be met.

A strong turnover in the team prevents the creation of an 'effective learning community'. Watson [2] emphasizes that in a heterogeneous setting, a shared vision and system of values is lacking almost by definition. Identifying and naming the underlying values is therefore crucial in this context.

#### 3.2 Failure

Arts teachers and generalist teachers often stress the role of failure in arts education.

Collaboration therefore requires trust. McAllister [3] distinguishes two forms of trust: trust based on cognition and trust based on affect or feeling. The first, more rational form is based on trust on formal grounds, such as diplomas; the second is based on personal experience. Although the two forms of trust clearly differ, McAllister did discover that a certain degree of cognition-based trust is a precondition for the development of affective trust.

Interviewees indicate that while the official discourse is that failure is accepted, teachers feel that it is not actually tolerated. This strongly determines the teachers approach to teaching and learning. Fear of the reaction of parents is also sometimes mentioned as a reason to be reluctant in overly creative ways of teaching, assessing, and task design. The fear is thus both internal and external. The internal fear is closely related to the professional identity of the teacher, who has learned to deal with teaching content, working methods and pupils in a certain way. This way is often at odds with what arts teachers have been taught.

The external fear is more difficult to remove by an individual arts teacher, or a collaborating team of generalist teacher and arts teacher. They do not know to do with a "culture of fear", as mentioned in one of the interviews, and feel that they are struggling to meet the expectations and demands of parents and society. Pupils can also be afraid to do something new, but in that case, the discussion is about the didactic question of whether it is possible to create a learning environment that is safe enough.

#### 3.3 Identity

In the interviews, teachers not only talked about themselves, but also about others.

The second interview focused primarily on their collaboration. The word that occurs most often under the identity code is 'just' or 'only' (as in: 'I am just a teacher'). The differences are self-evident for both parties. While recognising the existing differences, interviewees also express a need for overlap: a generalist teacher who dares to experiment and an arts teacher with strong pedagogical skills.

The way a teacher teaches has everything to do with her identity as a teacher. In research, more and more attention is paid to the role of emotion, passion, commitment and daring in teaching. Professional identity is multiple, discontinuous and social in nature. Identity changes, not gradually but step-by-step, it is contextual and social. [4]

Participants in the research also see a common ground. Generalist teachers and arts teachers often share a vision and ambition. The challenge lies in balancing the expertise and goals that can be achieved through collaboration; this is a quest that requires both parties to be open.

### **3.4 Space**

Interviewees mention 'space' over three hundred times, often metaphorically. It is invariably about a lack of space, a lack of time and a lack of freedom. According to Biesta *et al.*, [5] learning and teaching is 'situated' and requires agency. When the context determines the teaching and learning process, a teacher must constantly adjust his or her own actions.

Space is also perceived as limiting in a physical sense. For art classes, especially the performing arts, teachers are obliged to move to the gymnasium, the corridor, or the kitchen. Little wonder that arts teachers regularly complain that they would like to have their own space in school.

The arts teachers express longing for their studio as a space to work in. However, a studio is also a way of thinking. Studio Thinking is a way of approaching the subject matter and of teaching, learning and collaborating. [6] Arts teachers indeed associate the studio with not only their personal freedom, but above all with that of the student.

### **3.5 Structure**

The classic image of the orderly, tranquil and uncreative teacher is still regularly reflected in the interviews. The word 'order' is invariably mentioned with words like 'rule', 'rest' and 'structure'. Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory indeed states that a sense of autonomy and stable relationships are a prerequisite for good professional practice. [7]

The image of the arts teacher is the opposite. Arts teachers indicate that they have learned a lot in this area from the teacher with whom they work. As one teacher points out, the focus on order also has to do with the fact that the group teacher works with the children all day, every day, and the arts teacher always comes for an hour.

Structure plays a role on all levels of collaboration. At the macro level, it is about the structure of education and standardised testing. At the meso level, it is about the way in which the school itself is organised. At the micro level, the personal beliefs and preferences of teachers play an important role. In addition, the professional identity of the teacher comes into play.

One way of researching the place of art in education from this perspective is to consider the school as an ecosystem. A change in that ecosystem, such as integrating art and culture education into the curriculum, depends on different levels within the school's ecosystem. At the micro level, it is about the convictions and values of the teachers. At meso level, the mutual interaction within the school team and the involvement of team members in the change process play a key role. At the macro level, social conventions determine what is seen as desirable and successful.

## **4. Conclusion and Discussion**

What does a word mean for a schoolteacher and what does it mean for an arts teacher who comes from outside to the same school? How would that arts teacher use

this term in his or her own professional, extracurricular context?

By speaking with the arts teachers and the generalist teachers together, we have tried to gain insight into the encounter between both world and self-images. Successful collaboration, it may be tentatively concluded, depends on mutual understanding and recognition of differences in professional approaches. It requires overcoming the limits of one's way of 'reconfiguring' the world. That is the boundary where learning begins. In this research, I have tried to capture this boundary of what might be called 'mutual amazement'. This implies the ability and willingness to explore the borderland between the worlds of school and the arts.

The three rounds of interviews clearly showed that the connecting factor between the different aspects of working together is how generalist teachers and arts teachers look at themselves and each other. This is the key to successful and fruitful interaction in the classroom and at school. This is not only true for the single pair of generalist and arts teacher working together in a classroom, it is equally true for the team in the school and in the Centre for the Arts. It is also true for the way in which governments look at arts education and the assumptions and expectations regarding the professional identity of the generalist teacher and the arts teacher that are hidden in a funding scheme.

It is important to think about the narratives about art and culture in education and the roles that generalist teachers and arts teachers must and want to play in this, from the moment the subsidy scheme is drawn, up to the moment when the first lesson starts.

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