Dutch Dilemmas: decentralisation, school autonomy and professionalisation of teachers

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ABSTRACT   *The policy of decentralisation of the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science is aimed at increasing the autonomy of schools. This policy is also considered an appropriate strategy for the revitalisation of the teaching profession. Decentralisation, school autonomy and professionalisation are issues which are strongly interwoven in recent educational policy in the Netherlands. This strive towards decentralisation has also created a fundamental dilemma for the Dutch Government: on the one hand the Government is responsible for the quality of education and on the other hand increasing the autonomy of schools is desired. The question, however, is whether or not a further increase in autonomy and professionalisation of the teachers represents an adequate solution to this dilemma. The conclusion of the article is that the desirability and necessity of decentralisation should receive critical consideration on both political and ideological levels.*

Introduction

The policy of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science in The Netherlands has been recently oriented towards an increase in the autonomy of schools after a long period with a strong centrally steered educational system. This tendency towards a more decentralised policy is not just a Dutch phenomenon; it is an international tendency. Within this restructuring, increased attention to the role and position of the teacher within the educational system is taken as self-evident. For example, an increase in the participation of teachers in major decision making processes is viewed as a means of making schools more professional organisations (Nyberg & Farber, 1986; Hill & Bonan, 1991; White, 1992).

In this article the relation between development towards a more decentralised educational policy and the functioning of teachers within the school will be considered. This relation is described in terms of the field of tension between the social tasks of the Dutch Government, on the one hand, and the policy functioning of the school organisation, together with the role of the teacher within this organisation, on the other hand. A short sketch of recent policy developments with regard to Dutch education will first be presented, followed by an analysis of the motives for decentralisation. Thereafter, the recent plea in The Netherlands for the revitalisation of the occupation of teacher will be considered. In particular, the role of teachers in

the policy functioning of schools will be considered in detail. This article will be concluded by observing that the desirability and necessity of decentralisation should be more ideologically reflected on.

Dutch Educational Policy

Towards the end of a coalition government run by confessionals and socialists, regulation by a central government was continuously criticised by the opposition conservatives, who asked for the decentralisation of educational policy at the same time. The pleas for decentralisation increased over the years and the conservatives came into power in The Netherlands in 1982. Since this political shift, the decentralisation of educational policy has stood central and is, among other ways, expressed by an increased market orientation and by the implementation of a new system of lump-sum financing for schools.

In order to understand Dutch educational policy, two types of decentralisation should be recognised: the political and non-political. The first type involves the actual transfer of decision making authority from higher to lower levels of public authority. When this is the case, the control of policy usually lies with the Dutch Parliament. In education, however, this type of (political) decentralisation is simply not possible: Article 23 of the Dutch Constitution states that education must be a source of constant Government concern and that the legislative authority/responsibility in this area cannot be delegated to a lower echelon. In the field of education, the non-political type of decentralisation is therefore usually pursued. This involves the delegation of executive tasks and work to lower levels in the educational system without the redistribution of any genuine authority. In Dutch educational practice this usually means a welcome reduction in the number of central government regulations and bureaucratic rules. The policy of decentralisation is strongly focused on the deregulation variant of non-political decentralisation and the question is what motives play a role in the plea for (further) decentralisation?

Rationales for Decentralisation

McLean and Lauglo (1985) distinguish three rationales for decentralisation.

  (a) Administrative motives concern the question of which means should be used to achieve a specific goal; the most efficient means and not the ends stand central here.
  (b) Political motives concern the distribution of political power.
  (c) Ideological motives are the most fundamental and include both personal and social conceptions/opinions.

In the following, the three types of motives will be briefly elucidated in light of the Dutch situation.

(a) Administrative Motives

Characteristic of this type of approach is the observation that the efficiency of a centralised system of regulation leaves little to be desired. Centralised government regulation—as the argument goes—only leads to widespread bureaucratisation and inefficiency. The pleas for decentralisation in The Netherlands are largely dictated by

this critique of government regulation. It is expected that increased school autonomy will lead to increased flexibility and efficiency in the educational system. As a result of these changes, moreover, the quality of education in The Netherlands can be expected to increase as well. Empirical evidence in support of these assumptions is—to our knowledge—lacking. In particular, the relation between the quality of education and the increased autonomy of schools appears to be dictated by political desirability rather than hard facts.

(b) Political Motives

An important political motive for decentralisation stems from the position of the modern state. One of the fundamental problems confronting the modern state is the increasing 'delegitimisation of authority'. According to Weiler (1990), decentralis-ation can be used as a political strategy in order to compensate for the loss of legitimacy. According to this author, the problem of legitimacy confronting the modern state lies at least in part in her overly centralised character, distance from the foundations of the political system, structural incapacity to react to the significant variation within a society and the impersonal, forced and inhumane character of the governmental bureaucracy. From such a perspective, all those factors that might help produce a state that is less centralised and more sensitive to the different needs and conditions in a society can also be seen to help prevent the erosion of the state's legitimacy. From this perspective, decentralisation has an added value—namely the solution of the problem of legitimacy confronting the modern state.

Developments in the direction of decentralisation and deregulation are also strengthened by the transformations of the political system produced by the modern-isation of society. In the modern society, the centralised state structure is increasingly viewed as an obstacle to further democratisation (Weiler, 1990). The reasoning is that a decentralised system gives the different cultural, political and social groups found in a society the opportunity to express their own identity and thereby influence and/or control—for example—educational policy. Increasing the social participation of various groups of citizens erodes the power of central political institutions. This diminuition in the significance of the central political institutions within a society is referred to by the sociologist Beck as the administrative risk and is seen as one of the risks of the welfare state (Beck, 1992).

(c) Ideological Motives

This type of motive is broader than the previously mentioned administrative and political motives. Ideological motives often concern conceptions of or opinions regarding the development of the individual, the society and knowledge. The ideological motives are more fundamental and remain largely more implicit than the other motives for decentralisation. They are, in fact, the foundation for the administrative and political motives.

The stride towards decentralisation and increased autonomy is, as already said, an international phenomenon associated with the rise of conservative politics resulting from an alliance of neo-liberals with neo-conservatives. Apple (1993) describes the developments towards decentralisation in UK and the USA in the following manner.

In essence, the new alliance in favour of the conservative restoration has

> integrated education into a wide sort of ideological commitment. The
> objectives in education are the same as those that serve as a guide to its
> economic and social-welfare goals. These include the expansions of the
> free market, the drastic reduction of government responsibility for social
> needs ... the reinforcement of intensely competitive structures of mobility,
> the lowering of people's expectations for economic security, and the
> popularization of what is clearly a form of Social Darwinist thinking.
> (Apple 1993, p. 227)

This growing market orientation should be seen in the light of a process of
reorganisation that includes such factors as privatisation, modularisation and the
increase of corporatism in decision making (Wexler, 1987). In The Netherlands, the
introduction of market forces appears to be rather moderate relative to the situation
in the UK following the introduction of the *Education Reform Act* in 1988 (see
Apple, 1989; Ball, 1993; Grace, 1993; Hillcole Group, 1993; Meade, 1993).

The preceding insights also explain why the pleas for increased autonomy and
decentralisation in the Dutch educational system occurred precisely in the 1980s. As
previously mentioned, there was a shift at this time to a middle-right cabinet of
Christian Democrats and neo-conservatives. Increased autonomy in the educational
system was part of a more general policy in which confinement of the role of the
government constituted an important starting assumption (Leune, 1994).

From a political perspective, this development towards a more decentralised
government has also created a major dilemma for the same government. On the one
hand, the Dutch Government must maintain its control over the educational system
as a result of its constitutional obligation to maintain the quality of education in this
country. On the other hand, the Government must decentralise in order to compen-
sate for the growing loss of legitimacy. Widespread increases in the autonomy of
schools is a potential policy solution for this dilemma and examination of recent
policy documents in The Netherlands shows the establishment of the most indepen-
dent conduct of schools as possible to clearly constitute a central assumption in this
policy. This policy choice implies heavier demands on the professional functioning
of teachers however. Put differently: the professionalism of teachers is of central
importance for the successful realisation of the policy of decentralisation in the
educational system (Berg, 1989). Viewed from this perspective, increased autonomy
and professionalism are clearly related. The question, however, is whether or not the
further increases in autonomy and professionalisation of teachers needed for this
represent an adequate solution to the dilemma sketched in the above.

Teacher Professionalism

Increased democratisation and the increased social participation of those involved in
this process raise on a central level the administrative risks highlighted in the above.
The dilemma of a decentralised government, which has not—in our opinion—been
sufficiently recognised in Dutch relations, can also be couched in these terms.
Elsewhere in the world, this dilemma has been clearly recognised and stated:

> We are entering a period of reduced state support for education overall,
> together with increasing state control over what remains ... (Hargreaves &
> Reynolds, 1989, p. 2)

The recent pleas for the widespread professionalisation of teachers are illustrative of the trends associated with increased democratisation. Widespread decentralisation and the increased autonomy of schools—as the reasoning goes—are conducive to the professional development of teachers, which means that teachers can insure their interests as a professional social group with respect, for example, to the government.

This attention to the professionalisation of the occupation of teacher is a reaction to the erosion of the professional image that has occurred over the past few years as a result of various social and institutional developments. The image of the autonomous person practising the profession of teacher, the boss in the classroom setting and the one responsible for not only the content but also the course of the educational process has been replaced by a damaged self image in which the bureaucratisation of the profession, the experience of stronger control and stagnating salaries predominate. All sorts of educational developments are also being more strongly directed at the improvement, in terms of efficiency, of the educational process and the outcomes of this process by splitting the practise of teaching into clearly measurable competencies. This shift has clearly influenced the self-conceptions of those within the teaching profession. In the framework of the professionalisation of teachers, it should be noted that the teacher as the expert with regard to the educational process has in some sense been forced aside in the last 10 years by other educational experts, who have concerned themselves with the character, content and structure of education both as a process and system. Under the influence of these external experts, the expertise and independent decision-space of teachers as autonomous professionals has been largely removed. It is no wonder that the meddling of these well-paid, so-called experts in the educational process is not always valued by the teachers in the workplace. In fact, the clear de-professionalisation of the occupation of teacher or what some have referred to as the de-skilling of teachers (Apple, 1982; King, 1993) is visible here. The social status of the teaching profession also does not compare with that of other professional practitioners, such as lawyers and doctors, as a result of this de-professionalisation.

Increasing the autonomy of schools is considered an appropriate strategy for the revitalisation of the teaching profession in The Netherlands. The idea behind this strategy is that increased school responsibility will make the teaching profession more diverse and thus more attractive. To the degree that schools have access to autonomy, the teachers will experience more grip on the situation and, as a possible consequence, experience the profession as more attractive. In the Anglo-Saxon literature, one speaks of 'teacher empowerment' or the involvement of teachers in their own professional existence by giving them the power to participate in decision making (Brandt, 1989). This gives teachers not only the opportunity to view themselves and others with respect and dignity, but also to practice their profession with greater self-confidence (Kirby & Colbert, 1992). The substantial professional contribution to decision making of schools imposes other and heavier demands on the professionalism of teachers. More than at present, this professionalism will have to develop in the direction of 'extended professionality' (Hoyle, 1975, 1989), which means a teacher who takes decision making and policy at both the subject-specific and more general levels to be of critical importance for a good educational design.

A Profession with Perspective?

The thoughts contained in this section are clearly expressed in the report of the Future Teaching Committee (Commissie Toekomst Leraarschap, 1993), which was published under the title 'A profession with perspective' ('Een beroep met perspectief') in 1993 in The Netherlands. This committee, which was appointed by the Minister of Education and Science in 1991, was given the task of advising the Ministry with regard to the long-term role, position and appreciation of the teaching profession and examining the possibilities for making the profession more attractive. The committee provided a clear diagnosis of the current and most worrisome situation surrounding the teaching profession and proposed a number of concrete measures intended to encourage talented young people to choose a career in education in the future (p. 73). A professional school organisation with, among other things, a powerful capacity to conduct policy and stronger personnel management was then pleaded for, i.e. an organisation more prepared to invest in the teacher (e.g. with the aid of human resource management). In order to make the profession more attractive, elements such as task and function differentiation, career ladders, performance rewards and increased mobility among teachers (i.e. job rotation) were also mentioned.

This report was received with approval by the educational system and the Minister of Education, who nevertheless placed the emphasis in the 1993 policy reaction (entitled *Vital Teaching*) (Ministerie van Onderwijs en Wetenschappen, 1993) on the division of responsibilities between the government and the educational system (which is clearly a sign of the dilemma confronting the government with regard to a policy of decentralisation). In the remainder of the policy reaction, the most important recommendations of the committee were adopted, which shows the position of the teacher to stand high on the political agenda in The Netherlands.

This development is, in principle, positive for a threatened professional group, but not without its problems. There is still very little research in The Netherlands into the question of whether or not decentralisation and increased school autonomy actually have a positive effect on the policy functioning of school organisations. The consequences of such changes for the professional functioning of teachers are simply unknown and the pronouncements of committees and ministers with regard to this issue are, without sufficient empirical evidence, not much more than plausible speculations at this time. We do know from research in The Netherlands whether schools are capable of conducting their own policy or not and whether they actually do this in practice or not (Sleegers, 1991; Sleegers & Wesselingh, 1993; Sleegers *et al.* 1994). The question is whether this research supports the assumptions underlying the reports (and policy notes) referred to in the preceding.

Schools appear to differ in the degree to which they are prepared to conduct policy independently. Put differently: schools differ in their policy making capacity. On the basis of empirical data, Sleegers distinguishes three types of schools: schools with a hierarchically oriented policy making capacity (with the school leadership predominating); schools with a colleague oriented policy making capacity (with the teachers predominating); and schools with a reduced colleague-oriented policy making capacity (which represents an intermediate form with the colleague-oriented aspect nevertheless predominating) (Sleegers, 1991; Sleegers *et al.* 1994).

It is interesting to observe that the differences among the schools with regard to

policy making capacity are determined largely by the degree to which the teachers in these schools participate in the decision making process. The teachers in schools with a colleague-oriented policy making capacity are more involved in decisions regarding administrative and educational tasks than in schools with a more hierarchically oriented capacity. This result suggests that the teachers in a school with a colleague-oriented policy making capacity operate as 'extended professionals'. Such teachers appear to have an eye for not only their own subject, but also for the policy and identity of the school as a whole, which is demonstrated by their involvement in tasks other than teaching. In schools with a hierarchically oriented policy making capacity, in contrast, the teachers can be characterized as 'restricted professionals' (Hoyle, 1975).

In short, the preceding results suggest that the participation of teachers in school decision making processes and the policy making capacity of schools are related. The possibilities for the independent conduct of policy by schools increase to the degree that the teachers feel more involved and more responsible for the functioning of the school as a whole. Earlier studies of the functioning of school organisations in The Netherlands have also shown the participation of teachers in school decision making processes to lead to stronger school policy functioning (Giesbers & Sleegers, 1994). In turn, the policy functioning of the school as a professional organisation appears to be a clear prerequisite for adequate implementation of the policy of decentralisation and increased autonomy currently being stimulated by the Dutch Government.

Conclusion: dilemmas for the Dutch Government

The preceding results are of importance for an educational policy that strives towards decentralisation and increased autonomy, because they illustrate a number of the as yet unsolved dilemmas associated with such a policy.

Stimulation of the policy making capacity of schools appears to be desired for success of the decentralisation policy. The widespread establishment of autonomy in schools and the associated professionalisation of the teaching profession represents a possible strategy for doing this. With such a policy, however, we also confront a fundamental question: what are the boundaries on the autonomy of the schools on the one hand and the boundaries on the Government steering of educational policy on the other? This question is more frequently being posed in policy circles, and—in the light of the current autonomy debate—a clearly thought through answer would be most welcome. It stems from and strongly depends on the dilemma that the Dutch Government has created for itself and in fact concerns the position and role of government in society today. This question can be answered from a number of different perspectives. Two lines of argument will be considered in particular in the following, namely the judicial and the political perspectives.

Decentralisation implies a decrease in administrative intervention by the government and thus a thinning of the government tasks as well. In the Dutch situation, however, this does not mean the total exclusion of government regulation; the government retreats but does not resign. Constitutional Article 23 prescribes that the quality of the education in The Netherlands should continue to be a governmental concern. In such a way, an important obligation and supervisory role for the government is also established. The legitimatisation of this government meddling is two-fold: first, the educational system fulfils important social functions (qualification, allocation, selection) and, second, education in The Netherlands is predominantly

supported by public funds (Sleegers & Wesselingh, 1993). The autonomy of schools is always relative and thus also limited. In such a way, moreover, a first formal answer to the question of the boundaries on the government steering of educational policy has also been found.

The question of the autonomy of schools is also a political issue. Choosing for or against an autonomous school is choosing for or against a number of the social functions fulfilled by education and thus choosing for or against (certain elements of) the current social order. The function of maintaining the current social order implicitly defines the school as a mechanism of social control: the school is the servant of the existing power structure. Such an imposed subservience, however, clearly shrinks the room for school autonomy (Leune, 1970). Viewed from this perspective, moreover, the stride towards decentralisation and increased autonomy is more or less in conflict with a certain degree of government regulation and the dilution of the political tasks of the government represents an ongoing threat. The government is in danger of denouncing her public tasks with the increasing market orientation of its policy in the area of education. One of the risks of too much autonomy for schools is also that private interests will have to compete with universal values. Put differently, the interests of the school may be in conflict with the general interest (Leune, 1994). The question in an educational system with highly autonomous schools is whether or not issues of social justice will receive the attention that they deserve; issues concerned with the education of modern citizens are becoming increasingly more important and may therefore win (Wesselingh, 1994). The preceding considerations bring us back to the fundamental dilemma facing the Dutch Government: responsibility for the quality of the education in The Netherlands, on the one hand, and the desire to increase the autonomy of schools, on the other hand. Reconciliation of these two conflicting goals is one of the most important tasks and challenges of the modern state (Weiler, 1990). This suggests the need for a profound analysis of the role of the government in the light of current social developments (Lingard, 1993). According to Sleegers & Wesselingh (1993), moreover, the desirability of the policy of decentralisation currently being pursued by the governments of several countries should continue to receive critical consideration on both political and ideological levels. Arguments for the greater decentralisation of education should also be continually analysed in relation to the legitimacy of the modern state.

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