

Matters of concern: the issues that occupy culture coordinators in schools

Edwin van Meerkerk

Arts education in the Netherlands is, despite many attempts from the government, a marginalized phenomenon in primary schools. On the whole, both the number of teaching hours and the number of teachers is low, as a result as well as a cause of the low status of the school subject in relation to the ‘core subjects’ language and mathematics (Van Meerkerk & Ildens, 2018). In order to strengthen the position of the arts in school, the national government launched a program stimulating the appointment of a so-called ‘Internal Culture Coordinator’ (ICC) in each school. A certificate training was started to qualify candidates for the task. The program was flanked by subsidies for visits to cultural institutions and hiring artists for workshops and individual classes. As a result, many schools have appointed a culture coordinator to act as an intermediary between the school and arts teachers and cultural institutions, as well as to act as an ambassador for the arts within school. These culture coordinators act as an intermediary, balancing the interests of their colleagues and arts teachers, in addition to their ‘real’ job as a teacher. How do they manage? What is on their minds as they work to integrate arts and culture into their school curriculum? These are the questions that this paper seeks to answer.

The vast majority of primary schools in the Netherlands do not employ an arts teacher. Moreover, the arts occupy only a marginal position in the training of generalist teachers. As a result, schools rely on external arts teachers and on a coordinator to facilitate this collaboration. Meanwhile, the Dutch government supports arts education programs in primary schools through a series of subsidy schemes originating in the 1980s (Hage-naars, 2020). One of the policy programs was the appointment and training of culture coordinators in elementary schools mentioned above. This initiative proved very successful, resulting in some 90% of all schools appointing a culture coordinator and the same percentage of coordinators completing the certification program. Culture coordinators are always one of the regular teaching staff, receiving between four and eight hours weekly for their task. With the increasing attention for the value of creativity in education, as well as well-rounded concepts like ‘Bildung’, the arts have received more attention in the curriculum, without, however, becoming a formal part of the program. Indeed, arts and cultural education are funded by the culture department, rather than the education department (Van Meerkerk & Ildens, 2018).

Similar positions to that of the Dutch ICC exist elsewhere, for instance in the US and Canada (Van Meerkerk, 2022). Despite differences in the formal demands and the cultural, social, and political context, the role of culture coordinators in school as an in-

termediary remains the same. It is surprising that hardly any specific research on their role and position exists, especially regarding the whole of their tasks, in spite of the existence of research on partial aspects of their work (Stankiewicz, 2001; Hanley, 2003; Theriot & Tice, 2009; Miszka, 2013; Bowen & Kisida, 2017; McKinley Hedgecoth & Major, 2019; Carter & Roucher, 2020). Previous research has indicated that the personal, affective side of teachers and artists working together is of crucial importance (Purnell, 2008). The same is true for the position of the arts in school, which depends strongly on the person advocating the value of the arts in education (Miszka, 2013). This paper is the result of a first attempt to catch a glimpse of the everyday life of a culture coordinator in school. Based on weekly logbooks written by seven coordinators during one year, this paper focuses on the participants' answer to the question what concerned them most, both as a coordinator and as a teacher, at that moment.

Theoretical framework

In this article, the culture coordinator is observed acting as an intermediary between the school and its cultural environment and between the school management and the team of teachers. As such, the coordinator has to deal with differences on an institutional level as well as with differences in views on the purpose, form, and intended outcomes of arts and cultural education (Van Meerkerk, 2022). Research by Penuel et al. (2009) has shown that it is important to look beyond the composition of these professional communities. In order to gain insight into the change process and its results, the researcher should look at all forms of network and social interaction. That means including parents and pupils as well as their personal lives.

Konings and Van Heusden (2014) investigated the conditions for collaboration between schools and cultural institutions. They found that the nature of the collaborative relationship and the formalization of agreements and responsibilities are of great direct importance, but that in addition, the goals set and the shared frame of reference indirectly influence the mutual trust that underpins collaboration. In other words, while contracts and other documents serve to anchor a collaboration, it will only be fertile and sustainable when both parties trust each other, based on mutual understanding. These findings are in line with an earlier study by Strand (2006) who researched success factors in the collaboration between schools and extracurricular art teachers. She distinguishes between the mission of the organization, the personal characteristics and goals of the teacher, the support from the organization and the degree to which the process, and not the product, is central to the education. Purnell (2008) also stresses that teachers and artists value pragmatic, personal forms of collaboration, thus underlining the importance of personal contact and value-based collaboration.

The culture coordinators are working at the heart of the networks that enable arts and cultural education in Dutch primary schools. It is their (implicit) task to bring together the frames of reference of their colleagues in school and those of the arts teachers

from outside the school. The coordinators have to find their way between the priorities of various subsidy programs, collaboration agreements, mutual financial dependence, public demands, and school rankings. In this neoliberal context, where arts education is reduced to a marketable good (Gielen 2012), the culture coordinator is asked to act as a tradesperson. In order to understand this process of interaction and the ‘ecology of agency’ (Biesta & Tedder, 2006), this article asks the question which topics concern the coordinators most, in order to bring to light the conflicting priorities within which the coordinators are operating.

Methodology

Following up on an earlier research project on arts education, this research used logbooks for data collection. Logbooks, or research solicited journals are a tool originating primarily in medical ethnography. Their purpose is to catch glimpses of the everyday life of participants, without direct intervention by the researcher. Especially in research where experienced time and repetitive tasks play a role, logbooks help to bring to light those aspects of work or daily life that are only rarely reported in interviews (Sheble & Wildemuth, 2009; Van Meerkerk, 2017). The short interval between activity and report, the repetitive nature of the logbook, and the absence of the researcher on site prompt participants to share events and activities they would normally find too uninteresting to share in an interview – if they remember them at all.

In this project, all seven coordinators sent in their logbooks, using a semi-open format, every Friday during one year, i.e. forty school weeks. The coordinators were recruited by snowball sampling from the author’s network. The logbooks were coded by the author in several rounds. The present paper focuses on the final field of each log: ‘What concerns you most at this moment?’ The participants were given two fields to answer this question: one as a teacher and one as a coordinator. Other than that, there were no restrictions, either regarding the form and style or the content of their entries. These answers were coded and analyzed using ATLAS.ti software (version 9), working with open and axial coding to discover the underlying patterns in the answers (Saldaña, 2016).

Results

The participants were free in their answers to the question what concerned them most at that particular moment. Several times they wrote no answer, sometimes the answer was a list of topics, but most of the time the participants used full sentences to explain their concerns. Examples from the latter two types are:

- The culture co-ordination task is too time-consuming
- School production takes more time than planned – will I be ready in time?
(Coordinator D, 9-15 January 2017)¹

1 All quotations from the logbooks have been translated by the author.

Relieved about the course of the parents' evening, facing this group next Monday with fresh courage. However, I am struggling with the fact that, once again, I am [coming] home worn out on Monday and in the evening, while working on the calculations test with the toddler, I notice how much pleasure this gives me. I want to do something with this, to be continued. (Coordinator B, 20-26 November 2017)

The last quotation is typical for the way participants mixed emotions with both professional and personal events in their entries, feeling free to share details of their home life and personal struggles.

Overall, the entries for coordinator-related concerns contain nearly exactly the same number of words as the entries for teacher-related concerns. This is taken to be an indication of the importance attached to each task, as topics of little importance are likely to receive less attention when reflecting on the ongoings in the past week. Viewed per week, however, this differed greatly, reflecting the everyday issues in the school. Over the course of the year, the occasions that mark the school terms are clearly visible: exams and reports, holidays, and parents' evenings occupied the participants. When teachers' unions organized a national protest against workload and underpayment, most participants mentioned that as well, paired with their personal hopes and frustrations:

What is wisdom in education? It seems that not all demands made by [the teachers' union] will be met. I think a choice will have to be made between prioritizing salary or workload reduction. Personally, I would choose a reduction in the workload, probably also because my partner is overworked at the moment. Reducing the workload should be achieved by employing more people in a school so that they can be deployed flexibly. Unfortunately, it will be difficult to find such people if the salary remains as it is. In other words....tricky circle! Glad I'm not in politics. (Coordinator B, 2-8 October 2017)

The analysis of the other logbook entries (Van Meerkerk, 2022) revealed that the position of the culture coordinator depends strongly on the relationship with the school director, far more than on other colleagues, arts teachers or representatives from cultural institutions. Both in frequency of reference and in familiarity (indicated by first name use), the director stands out as a decisive figure. This is indicative of the focus on the school as well as of the bureaucratic nature of the work of a coordinator. The analysis of the logbook entries also show that teaching tasks influence coordination tasks far more than the other way around. All in all, the intermediary role of the culture coordinator turns out to be heavily focused on the school, rather than finding a balance with the relationship with the cultural field supporting the arts in schools. This triggers the question whether this bias is also found in the answer to the question what concerned the coordinators most.

Coordinator concerns

The concerns that participants listed under the headings of their role as coordinator and as a teacher differ greatly. Where one of the participants reflects on her activities as a coordinator “It gives energy to be involved with the workshops, hopefully this also has a positive effect on colleagues”, another writes as a teacher that “bonding with the children in the class” is a prime concern. In each role, a subset of codes emerge that are uniquely mentioned in one of the two categories. I will first treat the concerns that appear in only one of the roles. These are, coincidentally, five for each category. Unique coordinator concerns clearly reflect the core of this task: Cultural activities, Institutional collaboration, Coordination in general, The school’s cultural policy, and Finance and subsidy. The mentions for ‘Cultural activity’ are generally very brief, such as this one: “Excursion visual arts lesson: wood.” (Coordinator F, 2-7 October 2017). Entries regarding institutional collaboration are usually somewhat longer, reflecting the need for negotiations and the various preferences of the teachers:

I am very curious which adjustments Museum A still manages to make. I have tipped off my colleagues about this exhibition and contacted [the museum educator] about planning the visits, I would feel bad if it is as disappointing as it was for us. A visit to Museum B would perhaps have been more fun and meaningful. (Coordinator C, 16-20 January 2017)

Mentions of coordination tasks in general are lengthier than those in the participants’ role as a teacher. These entries are often related to the consequences of the school’s cultural policy, as this coordinator indicates:

The school plan states that, with regard to art subjects, we focus on visual arts and music. The culture working group (led by the culture coordinator) decided last school year to hold school-wide workshops on Fridays every month. The dates have already been planned. The details have not yet been arranged. (Coordinator G, 21-25 August 2017)

These entries reflect the ongoing work of a coordinator in keeping the activities in line with the school’s policy (which they wrote themselves, often in collaboration with the school’s director). The school policy itself is often only very briefly (though frequently) mentioned: “Update culture plan.” (Coordinator E, 24-28 May 2017) The code ‘Finance and subsidy’, finally, shows a balance between concerns for the restricted funds available, such as the sigh of concern by Coordinator C that museum visits should be made cheaper, “or free, like in many countries around us.” (9-13 October 2017), and the urgency felt when new funding is being announced and has to be applied for: “Plans for the music funds have been approved!” (Coordinator F, 27 February-3 March 2017)

The other concerns that were mentioned, such as parents, colleagues, and teaching materials are nearly all mentioned more often in the field for teacher-related concerns,

with the exception of school activities, that are indeed logically related to the role of a culture coordinator. Finally, positive or negative emotional connotations of the codes were analyzed. Comparing these between teacher concerns and coordinator concerns reveals that the former represent a mixed image, whereas the issues that busied them as a coordinator were generally positively connotated.

Refresher courses

The item that was mentioned equally in the entries for both teacher concerns and coordinator concerns were refresher courses and trainings. This an item where many of the tasks of a culture coordinator come together. As a teacher, they often understand that their colleagues have some reservations about extra trainings, as they are all busy enough with their daily tasks. As a coordinator, trainings and workshops are often the only way to reach all teachers and make them see the importance of integrating the arts in the curriculum:

Extra training takes time and energy, but I hope that it also gives people energy when we can look ahead again. It would be great if there were more colleagues willing to commit themselves to the workshops and cultural education. But for the time being, I am happy that we are starting to look forward instead of backward. (Coordinator C, 3-7 April 2017)

In spite of its nearly even distribution between coordinator concerns (48%) and teacher concerns (52%), the code for Refresher courses is one of the least mentioned teacher concerns (only school activities are mentioned fewer times), while being a relatively average concern in the role of coordinator. The fact that half of the issues that concern a coordinator also concern them as a teacher, but that their teaching concerns them more in these matters may be a result of a hierarchy between the two roles. This is understandable given the fact that the allocated time for the coordination task is quite small, compared to their teaching. In order to get a clear picture, we will zoom in further.

When refresher courses are mentioned as a coordination-related concern, it refers to two types of training. One are specific training modules or workshops for the coordinator, which are nearly always referred to as inspirational and energizing. The other are workshops the coordinator wants to organize or has organized for the other teachers. The latter are often a source of frustration:

I notice that the partly culturally filled planning of the study days that I had discussed in broad outline with the director before the holiday has been somewhat compromised by other subjects that are also important. (Coordinator B, 18-22 September 2017)

When refresher courses are mentioned as a teacher concern, on the other hand, are partly due to two of the participants also taking courses in management, as part of a

personal ambition to make a career in school management. The other mentions deal with team building issues within school.

Teacher concerns

The codes that are unique for the teacher concerns are Start and end of term, Personal circumstances, Class management, Pupils and class, and Class schedule. These, like the unique coordinator codes, clearly reflect the core business of a teacher, with the exception of 'personal circumstances', which might just as easily have been felt to influence the work as a coordinator: "What occupies me most at the moment are things that have nothing to do with school." (Coordinator C, 20-24 February 2017) The question is, then, why the coordinators all felt that such personal issues were more of a concern to them as a teacher than as a coordinator? A tentative answer is that teaching remains their core professional identity and that being a coordinator is a task, the way being responsible for cleaning up the school yard might be.

The other teacher-related concerns remarkably often come to issues regarding teaching methods, lesson series, and specific subjects:

I am glad that the themes for the entire coming year have already been decided. This was also the intention last year, but due to circumstances, this did not happen and a new theme was chosen on an ad hoc basis, which had to start after the weekend, so to speak. (Coordinator C, 5-9 June 2017)

An interesting difference between the emotive codes and the two tasks is that the coordinators associate their coordinator tasks more often with positive emotional expressions, while they use both positive and negative emotional connotations when discussing their teacher concerns. Positively connotated expressions (such as 'happy', 'good', 'always fun', 'nice', 'great', 'looking forward to') refer most often to cultural activities, colleagues, task allocation, meetings, training, and teaching. Interestingly, both colleagues and training are also connotated negatively. This is explained by the fact that participants tend to complain about colleagues reacting negatively on trainings or not participating as well as hoped for:

I am greatly frustrated that every study day ends with the same discussion (initiated by the same person(s)). The criticism is always that the direction is unclear, that pupil care is compromised, the pressure on the schedule, and general work pressure. (Coordinator C, 25-29 September 2017)

In the codes mentioned less often than 'Refresher courses', 'Teaching' stands out with a higher absolute number of mentions. These expressions very often refer to experiences of arts lessons with pupils: "What fun it is to do this with a few students!" (Coordinator F, 9-13 October 2017), but also "It was beautiful, but it made a mess in the classroom." (Coordinator F, 17-20 July 2017).

Conclusions

The tasks of a coordinator and of the teacher are, it may be concluded, clearly divided along quite logical lines. As a teacher, the participants were concerned with many issues that influence their work in the classroom, from schedules and task division to pupils and personal circumstances. Likewise, the concerns they had as a coordinator are clearly different from their task as a generalist teacher: budgets, policy plans, and collaboration. The influence between the two tasks is clearly one-directional: their work as a teacher is dominant – even though they used almost exactly the same number of words describing their weekly concerns.

These results confirm some of the conclusions from previous research, that the effects of arts partnerships on the quality of arts education are doubtful (Hanley, 2003), that much energy is needed to develop and maintain partnerships (McKinley Hedgecoth & Major, 2019), the crucial role of school directors (Miszka, 2013), This study also showed that the “general managerial routines” (Theriot & Tice, 2009), development of expertise among teachers and everyday issues such as scheduling (Stankiewicz, 2001), that are a prerequisite for engaging with the content of arts education often are the only things that can be done by school coordinators, thus begging the question of whether the content and quality of arts education receive enough attention.

It may be concluded from this analysis that the task of a culture coordinator is under great pressure. Many of the teacher concerns influence the work as a coordinator, a task for which the teachers have only little time available. Meanwhile, their responsibilities as a coordinator are great: they have to obtain the budget for school-wide activities, (co-)write the cultural policy, represent the school at cultural institutions, and keep their team engaged and committed. Not entirely coincidental, the major concerns for the culture coordinators are in line with the concerns for arts education in schools in general: low priority, low budgets, difficulty in formulating a convincing mission, difficulty in persuading generalist teachers, and difficulty in building sustainable partnerships with arts teachers and cultural institutions.

The answers to the question what concerned the culture coordinators most confirm the previous assumptions: the influence of teaching-related tasks is strong. This weakens the position of a coordinator, both in their single reliance on support from the school management and in the lack of time and attention for maintaining a balanced relationship with arts teachers and cultural institutions. Despite all these concerns, the clear enthusiasm of all participants for the work they do and the joy they express in witnessing the children in school working with arts and culture subjects are the best foundation we have for building a stronger arts education.

➡ References

- Biesta, G., & Tedder, M. (2006). *How is Agency Possible? Towards an ecological Understanding*. Learning Lives. Learning, Identity and Agency in the Life Course working paper 5. The University of Exeter.
- Bowen, D.H., & Kisida, B. (2017). The Art of Partnerships: Community Resources for Arts Education, Arts & Music in School. *Kappan Magazine*, 98(7), 8-14.
- Carlisle, K. (2011). Arts Education Partnerships: Informing Policy through the Development of Culture and Creativity within a Collaborative Project Approach. *Arts Education Policy Review*, 112(3), 144-148. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10632913.2011.566088>
- Carter, B., & Roucher, N. (2020). In their own Words: Lessons from Community Arts Partnership Leaders. *Arts Education Policy Review*, 121(1), 23-29. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10632913.2018.1530712>
- Colley, B. D. (2008). Partnerships and Local K-12 Arts Education Policy Development: Significant Beginnings. *Arts Education Policy Review*, 109(5), 9-18. <https://doi.org/10.3200/AEPR.109.5.9-18>
- Davis, J. (1994). Beyond School Walls: Challenges to Collaborations between Public Schools and Community Arts Centers. *Arts Education Policy Review*, 95(5), 12-14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10632913.1994.9936382>
- Gielen, P. (2012). Artistic Praxis and the Neoliberalization of the Educational Space. In P. Gielen & P. De Bruyne (Eds.), *Teaching Art in the Neoliberal Realm: Realism versus Cynicism* (pp. 15-32). Valiz.
- Griffiths, M., & Woolf, F. (2009). The Nottingham Apprenticeship Model: Schools in Partnership with Artists and Creative Practitioners, *British Educational Research Journal*, 35(4), pp. 557-574. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920802045492>
- Hagenaars, P. (2020). *Opdracht & onmacht. Cultuuronderwijsbeleid van Den Uyl tot Rutte-III* [Instruction & Inability. Cultural Education Policy from Den Uyl to Rutte-III]. PhD thesis Erasmus University, Rotterdam.
- Hall, C., & Thomson, P. (2007). Creative Partnerships? Cultural Policy and Inclusive Arts Practice in One Primary School, *British Educational Research Journal*, 33(3), 315-329.
- Hanley, B. (2003). The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: Arts Partnerships in Canadian Elementary Schools. *Arts Education Policy Review*, 104(6), 11-20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10632910309600975>
- Konings, F., & Heusden, B. van. (Van Heusden, B.) (2014). Evaluating Partnership, or how to Evaluate the Contribution of Cultural Institutions to an Integrated Curriculum for Culture Education in Primary Schools. *International Yearbook for Research in Arts Education*, 2, 66-78.
- McKinley Hedgecoth, D., & Major, M. (2019). Revisioning and Reinstating: Music Education after the Great Recession. *Arts Education Policy Review*, 120(4), 198-207. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10632913.2018.1468838>

- Van Meerkerk, E. (2017). Teacher Logbooks and Professional Development: A Tool for Assessing Transformative Learning Processes. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1). 1-8. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917735255>
- Van Meerkerk, E., & IJdens, T. (2018). Arts Education Policy: Its Justification and Organisation. In Q.L. van den Hoogen & E. van Meerkerk (Eds.), *Cultural Policy in the Polder. 25 years Dutch Law on Specific Cultural Policy* (pp. 169-194). AUP.
- Van Meerkerk, E. (2022). Networker and Intermediary: the Role of the Culture Coordinator in Schools. *Arts Education Policy Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10632913.2022.2076270>
- Miksza, P. (2013). Arts Education Advocacy: The Relative Effects of School-Level Influences on Resources for Arts Education. *Arts Education Policy Review*, 114(1), 25-32. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10632913.2013.744245>
- Penuel, W., Riel, M., Krause, A., & Frank, K. (2009). Analyzing Teachers' Professional Interactions in a School as Social Capital: A Social Network Approach. *Teachers College Record*, 111(1), 124-163.
- Purnell, P.G. (2008). *The Collaboration of Teacher/Artist Teams: A Qualitative Analysis of Selected Interpersonal Components Influencing a Partnership-Model Artist Residency*, PhD thesis Indiana University of Pennsylvania.
- Saldaña, J. (2016). *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. (3rd ed.). Sage.
- Sheble, L., & Wildemuth, B. (2009). Research diaries. In B. Wildemuth (Ed.), *Applications of social research methods to questions in information and library science* (pp. 211–221). Libraries Unlimited.
- Stankiewicz, M.A. (2001). Community/Schools Partnership for the Arts: Collaboration, Politics, and Policy. *Arts Education Policy Review*, 102(6), 3-10. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10632910109600024>
- Strand, K. (2006). The Heart and the Journey: Case Studies of Collaboration for Arts Integrated Curricula. *Arts Education Policy Review*, 108(1), 29-40.
- Theriot, S., & Tice, K.C. (2008). Teachers' Knowledge Development and Change: Untangling Beliefs and Practices. *Literacy Research and Instruction*, 48(1), 65-75. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19388070802226287>