Beroepsonderwijs tussen publiek en privaat: Een studie naar opvattingen en gedrag van docenten en middenmanagers in bekostigde en niet-bekostigde onderwijsinstellingen voor middelbaar beroepsonderwijs

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Summary

Due to major educational reforms, institutions within the Dutch vocational education and training (VET) sector have experienced a blurring of the boundaries between the public and private sector. Consequently, both publicly and privately funded schools nowadays have to cope with governmental regulations as well as with quasi-market mechanisms. Against this background a comparison was drawn between teachers and middle managers in publicly and privately funded schools, focusing on the institutional context of schools and its influence on the organizational behavior of middle managers and teachers. The key question examined in this study was the following: ‘What is the relationship between the institutional context and the organizational behavior of teachers and middle managers in the Dutch VET sector?’

To answer this question, the origins of hybridity in the Dutch VET sector were studied from a historical and administrative perspective. Then, a theoretical and an empirical approach were applied.

Historical perspective

The historical overview reveals distinctive phases marked by different degrees of governmental interferences in both types of schools providing vocational education. Furthermore, the historical overview illustrates that developments in the past, such as the abolition of the guilds in 1798, the relatively late incorporation of vocational education in the legal Dutch school system in 1919, and the secondary education act (1968) still influence and mark current educational policy. Moreover, the historical overview indicates that governmental interference with privately funded schools only started in 1973, which is rather late. As the government decided against inspection in privately funded schools in 1946, these schools developed their own quality assurance systems. Until 1973 they operated relatively autonomously. In 1973 a first act regulating the inspection of private (distance) education came into effect. After about a decade, this act was expanded covering a wider domain of education, becoming the so called Recognized Educational Establishment Act. Since 1996, the worlds of publicly and privately funded schools have been given some common points of reference in the Adult and Vocational Education Act, which incorporated publicly and privately funded schools to a certain degree within the same legal framework.

Administrative perspective

The analysis of educational policy over the last two and a half decades from a political administrative perspective illustrates a process of blurring boundaries between publicly and privately funded schools in the Dutch VET sector. Since the beginning of the 1980s, Dutch educational policy has been marked by an ongoing process of deregulation, upscaling processes, and increased autonomy at school level. Educational policy concerning the VET sector in particular, has emphasized the role this specific type of education could play to revitalise the economy and to stimulate economic growth. Consequently, developing tailor-made courses and improving the alignment of school curricula with the labour market were placed at the centre of governmental education policy. The act of 1989 allowed publicly funded schools to provide commercial contract-based activities within
their school organisation. Combining public and private activities in one context seemed worthwhile. Consequently, a large number of publicly funded schools became hybrid organizations by combining public and private funding within one organization.

The Adult and Vocational Education Act of 1996 also changed the framework of privately funded schools. They have been allowed— and can be licensed — to offer the same curricula as the publicly funded vocational institutions (ROCs). The privately funded schools have to comply to rules on registration of courses, quality assurance, educational organization and consumer protection in the same way as publicly funded schools. As a consequence these privately funded schools can too be considered as hybrid organizations. The incorporation of publicly and privately funded schools in one legal framework is a unique characteristic in Dutch educational policy.

The educational reforms in the 1990s followed New Public Management (NPM) ideas, and can be characterized by four types of changes: changes in ownership, in funding and financial management, in accountability and in up-scaling. In particular the required mergers into large Regional Training Centres (ROCs) caused major changes in the sector since the number of public schools for vocational education and training fell dramatically from about 350 in 1986 to 40 in 2005. (This compares to 120 much smaller institutions providing privately funded courses in 2004-2005). Given the incorporation of privately and publicly funded schools in the same legal framework, the combination of government regulation and the logic of the market incorporated in both publicly and privately funded schools, both types of institutions can to a certain degree be characterized as hybrid organizations operating in a complex environment.

Central variables

The central variables in this study were selected based on comparative studies on public and private sector organizations and on the basis of prior research on school organizations. Comparative studies on public and private sector organizations reveal that combining features of public and private organizations also means embracing public and private values and different organizational cultures instead of legal status and finances alone. Prior research on educational institutions shows that these organizations can be characterized as professional bureaucracies in which teachers and managers operate in their own domain. For this reason, teachers as well as middle managers were involved in the current study. Aspects on the organizational behavior of teachers that are relevant in this context are their attitudes to education, their perceived identification and their perception of the school climate. At the level of middle managers the following variables were selected; attitudes to education, entrepreneurship and contact with stakeholders. Since disciplinary branches in the vocational education and training have their own specific external environment, three sectors, catering and tourism, health and social care and economics and administration, were involved in this study to account for differences depending on the disciplinary branches.
Central in the study are comparisons between teachers and middle managers in publicly and in privately funded schools. Both teachers and middle managers were approached to complete a questionnaire. Both questionnaires were especially designed for this study based on existing questionnaires. As the aspect attitude covers a person (student)-oriented attitude and a task-oriented attitude, there were four distinctive concepts to measure on the teacher and management level. The teacher questionnaire consisted of 15 subscales with Cronbach's alpha's ranging from .70 to .88. The management questionnaire consisted of 15 subscales with Cronbach's alpha between .71 and .86.

Since we were interested in the organizational behaviour of teachers and middle managers responsible for the provision of education in the fields of economics and administration, catering and tourism, and health and social care in senior secondary schools, all middle managers in the Dutch VET sector responsible for education in these three fields were contacted. 119 of them agreed to fill in our questionnaire. Between April and June 2005 we received 83 completed questionnaires (after correction 79 were usable). The middle managers approached their teachers to complete a different questionnaire. In total 1459 teacher questionnaires were distributed from which 765 were completed (after correction 730 were usable). As the numbers of teachers in privately funded schools are generally much smaller than in publicly funded schools, the resulting sample of teachers consisted of two groups of unequal size: 705 teachers from 35 publicly funded schools and 25 teachers from 8 privately funded schools. The sample of middle managers consisted of 68 middle managers from publicly funded schools and 11 middle managers from privately funded schools. This sample is less unequal than the teachers’ sample.

Analyses and results

The effects of state funding and other predictor variables on teachers' organizational behaviour were investigated through multilevel regression analyses. In this way it was possible to account for dependencies in data that came from teachers working in the same disciplinary units of publicly funded schools. In privately funded schools, either the teachers did not operate in disciplinary units, or the disciplinary units were much smaller, so it was not possible to distinguish variance between disciplinary units from variance between teachers within disciplinary units (see Roberts and Roberts, 2005 for explanation of such models). To answer the key question on management level analyses of variance (Anova and independent sample T-test) were carried out. The executed analyses showed that teachers in publicly funded schools report a less task oriented attitude, show a lower sense of identification, and perceive a less supportive school climate than teachers in privately funded schools. The public-private dimension also indicated that funding did not have an effect on the extent to which teachers have a student-orientated attitude. In addition, the analyses showed significant effects of teacher characteristics, the disciplinary sector, and affiliation characteristics on teachers' organizational behaviour.

Comparing the attitudes to education of middle managers in publicly funded schools with those in privately funded schools revealed significant differences in the extent to which the middle managers in the two sectors had a student oriented attitude to education and
focused therefore on the social tasks of the school. Middle managers in privately funded schools placed less emphasis on the social tasks of the school, so access and encouraging citizenship behaviour were less of an issue for them than for their colleagues in publicly funded schools. The extent to which middle managers in publicly and privately funded schools paid attention to pupils’ performance did not differ significantly. Examining the subscales of this component revealed that middle managers in privately funded schools placed significantly more emphasis on exam pass rates than middle managers in publicly funded schools. The independent sample T-test comparing middle managers with and without teaching experience showed that teachers did not differ significantly in their attitudes towards education.

**Member check**

In addition to the quantitative analysis, a qualitative analysis was carried out to increase the internal validity of the results. Teachers as well as middle managers were invited to participate in a round table conversation discussing the survey results. Based on the conversations with teachers, we had to nuance the positive effects of executing general organizational tasks on teachers’ identification and their perception of the school climate. Teachers illustrated that negative emotions could be seen as the basis to fulfill organizational tasks and that the execution of these tasks could also evoke negative emotions. In contrast with the survey, both round table discussions indicated that middle managers with teaching experience differ from middle managers that do not have teaching experience. These differences can be found in the interrelationships and communication between middle managers and teachers. Furthermore, the conversations uncovered possible explanations, such as working on contract basis, clarity about the fulfillment of tasks, and the relation between teachers and managers for the differences that were found between teachers’ sense of identification and perception of school climate in publicly and privately funded schools.

**Reflection**

Given the characteristics of providing education and the complex environment in which publicly and privately funded schools in the Dutch VET sector operate, teachers’ and middle managers’ attitudes to education were investigated in this study. The comparisons among teachers and among middle managers in publicly and privately funded schools revealed a mixed picture of differences and similarities. The small differences between teachers in publicly funded and in privately funded schools with regard to their focus on the socialization of pupils indicated that teachers’ ideas about their professional duties are so stable that it is not affected by the context in which they are working. Obviously, there is a common invariable segment in the teaching profession that is independent of public or private contexts. The results indicate that providing education and the social development of students are inseparable in the eyes of teachers. Since the public-private dimension, as indicated by the presence or absence of public funding, does not affect the teachers’ attitudes in this respect, we have to conclude that working in education has its own unique dynamic regardless of its context. This can also be concluded based on the identification teachers perceive with their profession. Teachers in publicly and privately funded schools both perceived a stronger sense of identification with their profession than with the organization, their team or with their career.
In contrast with teachers, differences were found in the extent to which middle managers had a person (student)-oriented attitude. The middle managers in privately funded schools focused significantly less on socialisation of pupils than their colleagues in publicly funded schools. In addition, middle managers in publicly and privately funded schools did not differ significantly in the extent to which they focused on pupils’ performance. The only subscale in which significant differences were found was the one measuring the extent to which middle managers stressed exam pass rates.

Considering the differences that we found in attitudes, identification, and school climate between teachers, we should note that it is not clear whether our results may have been affected by uneven sampling characteristics. Our sample consisted of 705 teachers from 35 publicly funded schools and 25 teachers from 8 privately funded schools. The particular multilevel regression model that we used to test teacher differences does take such design effects into account. The multilevel regression analyses show that funding, as an indicator for the public-private variable, does have a substantial significant effect on some aspects of teachers’ organizational behaviour. However, it is difficult to decide whether it is state funding or personal characteristics underlying some of the differences between teachers in publicly and privately funded schools. The design used can not answer questions of causal relations. The question whether teachers choose a school because it has a certain climate that suits their person or whether the organization influences the teachers’ behaviour, needs a different research design than used in this project.

The quantitative and qualitative analyses in this study reveal differences as well as similarities in the organizational behaviour of teachers and middle managers in publicly and privately funded schools in the Dutch VET sector. The differences illustrate that publicly and privately funded schools still have their own identity. In addition, the results seem to indicate that the educational reforms have only affected the organizational behaviour of teachers and middle managers up to a certain extent. One of the most striking findings in this respect is the stable identity of the teaching profession.