



Students' voice on literature teacher excellence. Towards a teacher-organized model of continuing professional development



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HIGHLIGHTS

- A CPD-model that is managed by the professional community of teachers itself is introduced.
- Dimensions of literature teacher excellence are reliable and broadly supported by students.
- Students felt it is important for teachers to motivate them for the subject literature.
- Students and teachers have complementary concepts of an excellent literature teacher.
- Involving students in designing teaching standards increases the ecological validity of standards.

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ABSTRACT

This study contributes to the development of empirically based, domain-specific teaching standards in upper secondary education. It is part of a Dutch project to develop ecologically valid teaching standards and to find a teacher-organized model for continuing professional development. A previous study about teachers' perceptions of what constitutes an excellent teacher of literature resulted in a set of six domain-specific teaching standards. In this study, an exploratory factor analysis was performed to find out which dimensions or characteristics of an excellent teacher of literature could be gleaned from the students' perspective. We found four similar and two complementary dimensions.

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1. Introduction

This study was prompted by the ongoing discussion about the professional development of secondary school teachers. As in many Western countries, the Dutch government opted in the early twenty-first century for general teacher standards linked to a registration system for continuing professional development. It is now known, however, that teachers themselves often do not accept government regulation of teacher quality and professional development (Day & Sachs, 2004; Ingvarson, 1998; Sachs, 2003, 2011; Santoro, Reid, Mayer, & Singh, 2012). In the Netherlands too, teachers were highly critical of the professional standards (BON,

2010). This was especially true of teachers in upper secondary education, because the generic standards were not aligned with their discipline-based focus on education and their pedagogical content knowledge (Grossman & Schoenfeld, 2005; Howard & Aleman, 2008; Shulman, 1986). In the face of so much criticism, serious doubts were raised about the ecological validity of these generic standards (Blanton, 2006; Kagan, 1990). The essence of ecological validity is the design of the research representative of what happens in everyday life (Brewer & Crano, 2014). The importance of this type of validity will increase because teachers become more and more the agents of their own professional development (cf Franzen & Wilhelm, 1996). Teachers were also critical of the standards-based professionalization programmes, which failed to meet their needs. This prompted the Dutch Ministry of Education to initiate the Quality Agenda for Excellent Teaching, which includes projects designed to explore and stimulate pedagogical excellence within specific domains.

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One such project – excellence in literature teaching in upper secondary classes – is the subject of our study. It had a dual aim: (1) to increase the ecological validity of teaching standards and (2) to create a productive match between the professional development needs of teachers and the courses available at teacher training institutes. There are three phases in the project. In the first phase we investigated teacher perceptions of the competences of excellent teachers of literature in secondary education. This resulted in a coherent set of six domain-specific teaching standards (Witte & Jansen, 2015). In this article we report on the second phase of the project in which we seek to further increase the ecological validity of the teaching standards by introducing student voices. We share Hattie (2009) conclusion that teachers need to know about the visibility of learning from the students' perspective so that they have a better understanding of what learning looks and feels like for students. Teachers are very responsive to feedback from their students (e.g. Wubbels & Brekelmans, 2005). We therefore decided to follow up our search for the qualities of an excellent teacher of literature with a study of student perceptions. Our chief interest is the extent to which teacher and student perceptions of excellence coincide. In the third phase we will gather self-assessments in the national database so that we can improve the model by adding developmental benchmarks and analyses of teacher professional development needs. To these ends we proposed a teacher-organized model of continuing professional development (CPD).

In order to place our study of student perceptions of excellent teachers of literature in context, in the following section we examine the discussion about government regulation versus teacher regulation. This forms the background for the proposed teacher-organized model of CPD and our contribution to the discussion on teaching standards and continuing professional development (Section 2). From Section 3 onwards we report on our study of student perceptions of literature teacher excellence and how these relate to the perceptions of the teachers themselves.

2. Context

International comparisons and rankings of student performance such as PISA and PIRLS have created a situation in which governments focus heavily on educational outcomes. Research shows that teacher expertise can account for about 15–30 percent of the variance in student learning – more than any other single factor, including student background (Hattie, 2009, 2012; Hilton, Flores, & Niklasson, 2013; Lingard, 2005; Rhoton & Stiles, 2002). Teacher quality is therefore given high political priority. Higher expectations about teaching quality call for teachers who are well qualified, highly motivated, knowledgeable and skilled, not only at the point of entry into teaching but throughout their careers. Continuing professional development (CPD) is therefore no longer optional but is expected of all professionals (Day & Sachs, 2004; De Vries, Jansen & Van de Grift, 2013b). Thus governments and other educational stakeholders have for some time been preoccupied with the question of how they can improve and safeguard teacher quality.

2.1. From government regulation to teacher regulation

Since the 1990s, we have seen governments all over the world seeking to boost the continuing professional development of teachers and monitor their quality by means of a registration programme. In addition to curriculum standards, teaching standards appear to be the most appropriate policy instruments for this purpose (Beck, Hart, & Klosnik, 2002; Darling-Hammond, 1999; Ingvarson, 1998; Kennedy, 2014). Standards are seen as a way to both improve the teaching profession and control teacher practice. These government measures brought an end to the traditional

post-war model of the autonomous professional, in which decisions about the curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment were the province of teachers (Day & Sachs, 2004).

However, since their introduction, both the standards themselves and the way they tend to be developed and implemented have been the universal subject of debate. The main criticism is that the standards are imposed and implemented by the government, and are not recognized by the community of teachers (Day & Sachs, 2004; Ingvarson, 1998; Ross & Bruce, 2007; Santoro et al., 2012). Smith (2005) cautioned that the lack of consensus renders these government standards invalid and that they often lead to a one-sided view of teaching and learning.

Teaching standards are often the result of negotiations between the government, school management and unions, which means they have more of a political foundation than an empirical one (Witte & Jansen, 2015). Another feature of government standards is that they are worded in very general terms in accordance with the one-size-fits-all principle. Domain-specific knowledge and skills are missing, despite the fact that teachers in secondary education tend to derive their professional identity and sense of pride from their own subject (e.g. Beijaard, 2006; Borg, 2003; Day & Sachs, 2004; Gess-Newsome, 1999; Grossman & Schoenfeld, 2005). Several studies demonstrate that teachers' skills and understanding are directly related to the degree that professional development experiences focus on subject-matter content (Cohen, Hill, & Kennedy, 2002; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, and Suk Yoon (2001); Kedzior, 2004; Ross & Bruce, 2007; Shulman, 1986; Van Veen, Zwart, & Meirink, 2012). This generalization of professional standards has led to a situation in which large groups of teachers do not acknowledge and recognize them (Witte & Jansen, 2015), despite the fact that ownership of the professional development process is a condition for learning and change (Fullan, 2007; Ryan & Deci, 2000a, 2000b).

The lack of ownership also explains why teacher professional development programmes usually fail to gain traction. A standards-based view of teacher development often goes hand in hand with a skills-based view of teaching, whereby teacher training programmes provide teachers with an opportunity to update their skills in order to be able to demonstrate their competence (Borko, 2004; Kennedy, 2014). The government funds and standardizes the training courses on offer and school management tells the teachers which courses they can or should take (Kennedy, 2014; Sachs, 2003). This top-down standardization of training opportunities overshadows the need for teachers to be proactive in identifying and meeting their own developmental needs in their subject (Borko, 2004; Van Veen et al., 2012). A situation in which there is a mismatch between supply and demand, but where teachers are urged to take courses for which they have no immediate need, leads to resistance (passive or otherwise) among many teachers and ultimately to apathy, a response that bears a close resemblance to student reaction to external motivational stimuli (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). This points to a stalemate in the professional infrastructure (Witte & Jansen, 2015). Teachers' adverse reactions to top-down regulation is a recurring theme in many implementation studies: educational policy cannot be successfully implemented unless it ties in with the experiences, concerns, knowledge and needs of teachers (Broekkamp & Van Hout-Wolters, 2007; Kennedy, 1997; McIntyre, 2005; National Research Council, 2002; Van Veen et al., 2012; Verloop, Van Driel, & Meijer, 2001). Moreover, government regulation of teacher professionalism goes against the need for autonomy felt by many teachers.

Fullan (2007), Ingvarson (1998), Sachs (2003, 2007, 2011) and many other specialists believe that the failure of government regulation of professional development is linked to the low level of teacher control and participation. Sachs (2011) concludes that

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