

## **Researching, teaching and professional development - contributions to the improving social quality**

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### **Summary**

Adult and continuing education requires continuing the education of educators, a highly self-referential issue. In this article we focus on “urban educators,” a very extensive group of those involved in urban educational programmes (school, parental education, living environment, vocational preparation and the like). Due to an increase in the number of problem areas in large Dutch cities, urban and social renewal is high on the political agenda. A lot of money is invested in the physical sector, while the social sector is lagging behind. The two sectors fail to cooperate, even though the social sector should be involved from the beginning, in order to better coordinate urban development and social policy. Despite the fundamental differences between the physical and social domains, cooperation and multidisciplinary professionalism are essential.

At the moment, professionals are not yet properly trained for this multidisciplinary approach to meet these requirements. Universities of professional education can make a major contribution to solve this problem. Students must be prepared for an integrated and encompassing look on various urban living determinants, since segmented knowledge is no longer sufficient. They need to be prepared for a comprehensive professional approach.

Rotterdam University has introduced a number of fundamental innovations to its curriculum in order to support this integrated approach. One of these is the master’s course in Urban Education, which expresses a new approach to complex urban problems.

In the next decade, billions of euros will be spent on the urban and social renewal of post-war housing projects in the Netherlands. Local governments, housing associations, health centres, social services, schools, and banks have not yet succeeded in making a *combined* social and physical investment plan for the neighbourhoods in question. The social agenda remains particularly unclear, especially when each of the sectors act as if they are separate and unconnected pillars supporting the community. As a result, social institutions fail to become partners in the process of urban (and social) renewal. Professionals are unfamiliar with the specific wishes and needs of current and prospective residents, and social investments are lagging behind. In fact, successful examples are rather rare.

Rotterdam University (RU) recognises this situation as a *knowledge* problem. The vocational preparation of urban designers, investors, and social and educational professionals are separated and stand too far apart. By establishing multidisciplinary research programmes, such as “Growing up in the City,” “Labour and Health,” “Transitions in Care,” and “Transurban,” the students of about 80 vocational training courses of RU are offered opportunities to look beyond the narrow boundaries of specialised areas of expertise.

Teachers and trainers work with multidisciplinary groups that (1) study the physical, economic and social aspects of urban problems, (2) develop with the help of urban professionals new insights and methods, tailored for the field, and (3) apply the results within the curriculum again. The time span of these *knowledge-cycle-programmes* is typically at least four years.

By offering these multidisciplinary research programmes, RU hopes in a couple of years to be educating more well-rounded professionals, competent in combining knowledge of the broad social domain with knowledge in the physical and economic domains. It is to be expected, moreover, that students who are capable of making connections between expertise areas in the domains of social work, transport, housing, and teaching, might well have better job opportunities in the future. In Rotterdam, and not only in that city, there is a great need for professional *generalists*; professionals who are capable of combining the knowledge of the various disciplines that are important for urban renewal.

This paper gives an overview of the problem of uneven approaches to urban renewal from the different sectors involved. The changes that are needed with regard to short- and long-term responsibility for learning will be elaborated. A description will be offered of the consequences involved in these changes for study and career paths.

## **The problem**

The Dutch Social and Cultural Planning Office (SCP) has carried out research into neighbourhoods with a high degree of socio-economic poverty and a high percentage of ethnic residents. The SCP report concludes that “American circumstances of ghettos” do not exist in the Netherlands. However, the number of so-called *concentration areas* where many residents live in poverty and experience neighbourhood problems is increasing. “In the concentration areas of big cities, tensions occur between the various population groups. There is hardly any social cohesion in these areas, whilst criminality and the degradation of the physical environment are emphatically present and the unemployment rate is high. Drug use and trade are manifest, and right-wing extremism occurs relatively frequently” (Tesser et al, 1995, p. 473).

According to Engbersen (2001a, 2001b), an increasing number of areas targeted for special attention exist in big cities in the Netherlands. Although poverty in Dutch cities is a relative notion, it goes hand in hand with various problems of daily life, such as tensions between native Dutch and ethnic residents, survival strategies, and the resentment residents feel towards certain institutions. In Rotterdam, this kind of concentration can be found in districts such as Schiemond, Spangen and Afrikaanderwijk. For years, these neighbourhoods have been in the top ten of neighbourhoods with the highest rate of welfare recipients (50 per

cent or more of all households) and the lowest average incomes (around 10,000 euros annually).

In recent years, a lot of financial and other means have been invested in neighbourhoods that cope with the accumulation of physical and social problems. These tend to be post-war residential areas with mainly high-rise buildings that do not meet current standards, where a lot of anti-social behaviour on the streets and great inequities in social development exist. These neighbourhoods are taken up in the *urban renewal policy*, in which 50 neighbourhoods in 30 big cities have been prioritised. The policy for urban renewal aims at offering these neighbourhoods new physical, social and economic opportunities. Large-scale government investments are used to attract private parties, such as housing associations and project developers, in order to improve the neighbourhoods. In Rotterdam, this restructuring process is well under way.

Restructuring comes with unavoidable problems. In a *physical* sense, sufficient investments are being made in renewed housing. Larger, more spacious, and more attractive houses are being built, along with wider streets with good parking facilities. However, investments into public space and a higher standard of *social* facilities are lacking in terms of both scale and size. Good schools, meeting places and other social services, facilities for supported living, and playgrounds make a neighbourhood more attractive. Social investments in these areas are fragmented, since they are affected by a variety of financial regulations. Housing associations, important investors in restructuring projects, acknowledge the problem that social investments are lagging behind. They wish to involve other partners in the social restructuring programmes.

However, social partners are not easily attracted, as becomes apparent from daily practice (NIZW, 2003). Welfare institutions, health care centres, community schools, crisis and relief centres, and the like do not succeed in developing *a collective vision* of the neighbourhood. Social institutions tend to define their working field within their own narrow sectors, and fail to cooperate. Welfare institutions consider themselves to belong to the social sector, but schools, health care institutions, and crisis and relief centres often do not. These institutions do too little to gear their policy towards each other. They fail to reflect collectively on what they could contribute to restructuring processes. A comprehensive social vision concerning the community living in the area, and the relation between the area and the city as a whole is often not formulated, because social institutions fail to think along. Policymaking does not take place collectively. Regularly, consultants or research agencies are called in to formulate a vision for only one segment that is then turned into urban or district policy. As a result, the sector as a whole fails to come up with a collective social agenda. This, in turn, leads to social investments being carried out insufficiently, resulting in too little focus on “social wishes.”

According to the Urban Renewal Platform for Entrepreneurs, the *economic* sector is also neglected. An increasing number of supermarkets and merchants close their businesses, and housing associations complain that money is pumped in at the front, while it flows away at the back (Eenennaam, 2003).

Finally, the central government – four departments in particular: Internal Affairs and Kingdom Relations; Housing, Regional Development and Environment; Health, Welfare and Sport; Education, Culture and Science – admits that *the social sector is lagging behind*, and acknowledges the negative consequences that result from this. Therefore, assistance is given to districts and municipalities in order to achieve a more equal realisation of physical interventions and social objectives in the process of restructuring neighbourhoods. The ministries argue that the success of restructuring programmes depends on a social sector that plays an equal role in policy developments from the start, and on a social component that is not only expressed in policy development, but is also secured in an actual practice, which is called *the social neighbourhood vision* (Ouwehand, et al 2001, 2003). However, local governments that formulate such a vision only rarely realize it in practice, particularly its social component.

### **Some comments on the segmentation of restructuring processes**

The attention that is paid to an integrated approach to complex questions has reached a height with the area-aimed interventions that were developed within the framework of urban policy. This emphasis on an integrated approach is clearly visible in the policy for urban renewal. All within their own contexts, the Ministries of the Interior, of Housing, Regional Development and Environment, and of Health, Welfare and Sport address the physical, economic, and social pillars, as well as the physical, economic, and social “infrastructures” (Van Boxtel, 1998; Mr. Van Boxtel is a former Minister of Urban Renewal Policy). How these domains can be connected to each other is a subject that brings about a lot of discussion and too little progress. Fortuin and Foolen (2001) show that there are still a lot of snags involved in cooperation between institutions from the physical and social sectors. They explain that these sectors work with different kinds of logic. Urban development is related to space, while social processes are of a more transitory and less tangible nature.

Furthermore, physical problems have *a different time horizon* and need to be planned differently. Physical interventions must be planned a long time ahead, while social interventions are (or should be) more involved in the here and now of the daily life of citizens. These differences have consequences for the way in which professionals can apply a process-based approach. “In general, a physical infrastructure is planned, constructed and then used. The informal social infrastructure does not look like a neatly constructed road

system, but resembles forest trails made by animals. Forest animals tend to avoid the trails that have been constructed for them. They simply move, and, as a result, trails come into being” (Fortuin and Foolen, 2001, p. 43). In addition to this, the physical and social domains speak *different languages*.

What is more, people and institutions investing in the physical environment tend to exhibit *free-riders’ behaviour*: they are inclined to let others pay the social costs, while they are only getting better. One fear is that they will be unwilling to serve a collective interest, and would prefer to leave it up to the municipality. Another problem is that the required *professionalism* for further social planning and execution is absent, both with regard to planning, welfare work, social and educational institutions, and the municipality. There is no *multidisciplinary professionalism*, which is essential in order to formulate a social vision and to be able to adjust this vision during the process of planning, as well as to develop tailor-made facilities that can be applied to stimulate and retain the social quality in an area.

All in all, fundamental differences exist between a physical and social approach. Nevertheless, good cooperation is possible and will have positive effects, if the separate domains can preserve their individuality, and can work on collective goals. That said, not every problem requires a pillar-transcending solution. Most social problems ask for a social approach, and cannot be solved by economic investments or physical interventions in a neighbourhood. Social problems that have a non-material character in particular, such as loneliness, neighbours’ quarrels, child-raising questions, insecurity, and problems between different groups, can be tackled very effectively from within the social sector (Duyvendak, 2001). These kinds of problems do not require everyone to gather up around the conference table. Nevertheless, other problems do ask for pillar-transcending solutions. In what situations is this the case? What are the success factors for projects that operate across the domains? This is the area that offers challenges and questions, for which solutions have to be found.

### **European and Dutch higher education policy in progress**

Rotterdam University, one of the Dutch urban universities that offers professional education, wants to make a major contribution to untangling this jumble of questions. The Bologna Declaration (1999) in many ways provides a starting point for this project. The declaration is an agreement made by 26 European countries on standardizing higher education, and which strives for a broadening of the bachelor-level courses following the Anglo-Saxon model. Since the Bologna Declaration, higher education legislation in this field has been completely renewed. The accreditation criteria of fully or partially reconstructed professional master’s degree-level courses provide evidence of these innovations. In 2003, the Netherlands Flemish Accreditation Organisation (NVAO) embraced the so-called Dublin

master's descriptors. Master's-level students:

- must make an original contribution to the development and/or application of ideas, often by means of research;
- are able to apply knowledge and insight and problem-solving capacities to new or unknown circumstances within a wider (or multidisciplinary) context, and are able to integrate knowledge and deal with complex subject matter;
- are able to formulate judgments on the basis of incomplete or limited information, keeping in consideration the social and ethical responsibilities that are related to the application of one's own knowledge and opinions;
- are able to convey conclusions, in addition to the knowledge, motives, and considerations that form the basis of those conclusions, in a clear and unambiguous manner to a public of both specialists and non-specialists; and
- possess the abilities that enable them to enter an advanced training course that is mainly autonomous in character (cf. NVAO, 2003).

In a way, these master's criteria, which apply to government-financed education, enriched the standards that the Dutch Validation Council (DVC, 1997) formulated a couple of years earlier for commercial courses. These criteria are:

- being able to independently form opinions on the desired developments, based on a high level of knowledge;
- being able to work methodically and in a disciplined manner, employing theory formation and an multidisciplinary approach to problems;
- being able to analyse complex questions and apply the results in innovative contexts, partly by knowledge that is gained from fundamental and/or groundbreaking research, and being able to carry out research;
- being able to manage complicated processes in which complex problems must be solved or innovations must be prepared or implemented;
- being able to think towards policymaking;
- acquiring knowledge and skills independently and communicating about them with others; and
- acting professionally: being able to apply the above-mentioned competencies and stay informed about the latest developments (DVC, 1997).

Another interesting development is the initiative taken by the Dutch Association of Universities of Professional Education (in Dutch: HBO-Raad) in 2001 in order to open the doors of their professional education programs. In the time span of no more than a year, more

than a hundred professors (presently, nearly 300) were appointed to teach courses that stretch beyond the boundaries of the disciplines. Operating in so-called “Research and Innovation Centres,” their task is to:

- instigate and enforce knowledge circulation between the various disciplines and the professional practice;
- contribute to an integration of knowledge and skills that is aimed at the professional world;
- promote the practical research orientation of undergraduate and master’s-level students;
- develop and expand the required capacities and competencies of trainers, assistant and associate professors, and possible external professionals of the research and innovation centres; and
- contribute to the public debate on all these themes.

The Research and Innovation Centres – our centre is one of these – that were formed on the basis of this latter initiative, in the spirit of other innovative incentives, tend to be integrated in a matrix relation with the standing courses. Preferably, they are not exclusively connected to one or another course; by transcending and enriching the various courses, they shift attention beyond traditional boundaries. These innovations mean a true revolution for Dutch higher education. When fully implemented, they will add to a radically integrated preparation for the labour market.

Indeed, teaching and practising multidisciplinary knowledge and action is essential to improve everyday work practice. However, for most social professions multidisciplinary collaboration is not yet part of the standard professional procedure at all. Good cooperation begins with good communication. Van Hal (2001) names three competencies which professionals must possess in order to be able to work together successfully: communicative competence, willingness to cooperate, and collegiality. Sometimes a change of culture is necessary, something professionals should become familiar with in the course of their training.

### **An innovation practice of RU: urban education**

Let us return to the urban renewal issue. Our Research and Innovation Centre, “Growing up in the City,” is a fresh “good practice” of RU. It refers to the multidisciplinary focus that RU has chosen for all of its research and innovative practices. Growing up in the City is more than the sum of the separate courses of teacher training, child care and education,

socio-cultural work, youth care, and so on. A multidisciplinary approach aimed at innovation is rather an answer to the pleas for change that have been expressed by professionals and politicians for years – but it needs to be renewed continuously. And we succeeded in doing this as we formulated a wider perspective for multidisciplinary teaching and research. Master’s-level students in urban education must obtain knowledge that transcends their own area of expertise. Every highly educated social professional working in a city must be able to *communicate* with professionals from other sectors. They should have a clear comprehension of the differences between areas of expertise, and be able to transcend these differences. The ability to see beyond boundaries is becoming increasingly important.

At the moment, a huge renovation project in a district of the city of Rotterdam named Zuidwijk, is starting in which *all* physical, social, and economic aspects are simultaneously being addressed. A total of *nine* research and innovation centres at RU are endorsing the project. A monitoring instrument (Spierings and Keulers, 2003) studies the process of cooperation between community organisations, including RU, and the effect the multidisciplinary and integrated approach has on urban renewal and educational reform. The impact for vocational preparation, and mid-career education in particular, is being assessed.

In the next 15 years, with a planning horizon of five years, Zuidwijk, an early 1960s district of Rotterdam with 14,000 inhabitants, will be demolished, redesigned, and reconstructed as a fully modernised community. This initiative is being undertaken by VESTIA, a housing corporation which owns 75 percent of the grounds in Zuidwijk. VESTIA is not only responsible for rebuilding the housing, but also for all new public arrangements (including two community schools and a school campus for secondary vocational education), a good health infrastructure (basic health care, general practitioners centres, at-home nursing care, and the like), and for stimulating a positive district-economy and an attractive physical environment (both built and “green”). VESTIA’s ambition stretches over the creation of the urban determinants of a district with a high social cohesion, as it comprises answers on multidisciplinary themes such as:

- the relations between private and public space;
- strengthening the feeling of ownership inhabitants have for their space;
- increasing the feeling of safety among people in the district, a building a stronger social texture within a diverse and aging population;
- and, more generally, how can ‘pillarised’ (i.e. social, physical, economic) ways of thinking and policymaking be overcome? How to create and maintain a public-private-enterprise culture?

Finding answers on these kinds of questions requires, among other factors:

- dynamic planning models;
- the creation of flexible public provisions, such as those facilities that empower citizens to participate in society;
- investing in social cohesion;
- guaranteeing that individuals are included and engaged in society;
- the invention of demand-orientated instead of supply-orientated facilities – which implies a continuous consulting of the whole population, children and youngsters in particular.

### **A fruitful context: working on social quality**

The Zuidwijk project offers a fine example of engaging in an integrated attempt to improve social quality, a comprehensive approach that has been developed since 1997 by the European Foundation on Social Quality (EFSQ). This Foundation was established during the Dutch presidency of the European Union (EU), and it was responsible for framing the Amsterdam Declaration on the Social Quality of Europe, which set out some of the basic conditions for the achievement of social quality and basic human dignity in Europe. The EFSQ called on the EU to establish clear measurable benchmarks for each social objective contained in the EU's legal documents and to set a new agenda for the promotion of social quality in Europe, one that engages policymakers, scientists, and citizens. The Declaration has been signed by more than 900 social scientists.

“Social quality,” in fact, offers a set of diverse indicators for the social, economic, private, and political climates in the countries of the EU. In a so-called “social quality quadrant” a distinction is made – along two axes: “micro vs. macro,” and “institutions/organisations vs. communities of groups and citizens” – which results in four gradual components, or the extents of (1) socio-economic security, (2) social inclusion, (3) social cohesion, and (4) empowerment or competence (cf. Beck et al, 1997 and 2001; Notten et al, 2004, pp. 40-41; <http://www.socialquality.org/>).

“Social quality consists of the extent to which citizens are able to participate in the social and economic life of their communities under conditions which enhance their well-being and individual potential,” according to Beck et al (1997, p. 291). They elaborate the four components as follows:

- “Socio-economic security (versus insecurity) refers to the way the essential needs of citizens with respect to their daily existence are addressed at a macro-level by different systems and structures responsible for welfare provisions” (p. 286)
- “Social inclusion (versus exclusion) is not only connected with the principle of

equality, but also with that of equity as well. Both principles deliver bench-marks to discuss different forms of inequality – including unacceptable forms of poverty for millions of people – and discrimination. In particular it focuses attention on the structural causes of exclusion” (p. 287)

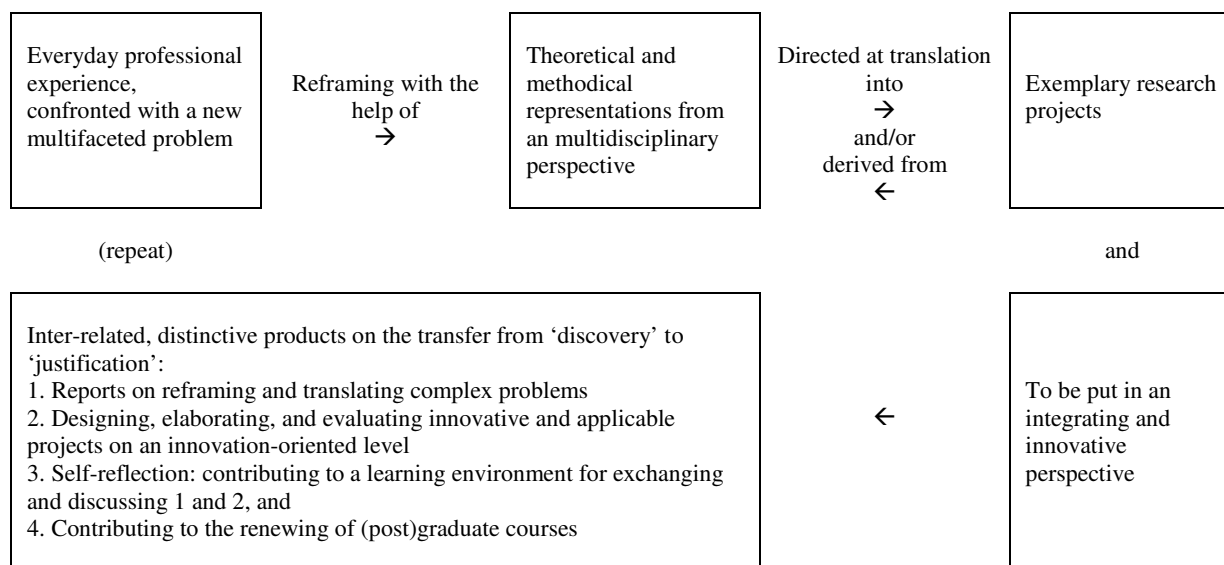
- “Social cohesion (versus anomie) concerns the macro-level processes which create, defend or demolish social networks and the social infrastructures underpinning these networks” (p. 288)
- “Empowerment to realise human competences or capabilities (versus subordination) primarily concerns the micro-level enabling of people, as ‘citizens,’ to develop their full potential. Thus this component of social quality refers to developing the competence of citizens in order to participate in processes determining daily life” (p. 290).

### **The RU-curriculum philosophy – a fruitful context for innovative practices**

Social quality, as defined along these (European) lines, raises the question of how it can be supported on a local level. At this moment, we only give some suggestions related to “working on social quality” by “researching, teaching and professional development.” RU wants to provide its master’s-level students with a better preparation and a more comprehensive view on their occupation as mid-career professionals in the social and educational field. Their reason for attending the master’s programme is twofold: they are looking for advanced training, but they also desire career advancement. Research has shown that these students are interested in relevant developments in social science, but above all they are oriented towards practice. What is more, as their academic career progresses, their attention shifts from the thirst for general knowledge about the state of affairs in social sciences to the more specific desire to be able to apply this knowledge to intervene in specific situations. Within this framework, most of the respondents are more interested in enlarging their socio-normative capacities (such as self-reliance, social skills, and mental flexibility with regard to organisational changes) than in the ones that can be labelled “technical-instrumental” (research and marketing skills, automation and bureaucratic competence, budget control and financial acumen).

The advanced education of these students allows them to leverage their practical experiences with classroom theory; their everyday work experience, when combined with new knowledge and competency development, in turn, makes their work environment a more effective learning environment. The didactic philosophy behind this arrangement stems from the conviction that a vivid and enriching two-way traffic offers good opportunities to strengthen both the students’ research skills and their reflective and innovative capacities.

Thanks to the size of the student groups, which tend to be small, an ideal cooperative version of teaching, research, and the related practise of feedback can be realised. This is why this kind of advanced studying can be labelled as a *research laboratory* for enriching professional experience, for applying (and restructuring) theoretical insights, and for developing innovative practices within a somewhat artificial and protective context. This professional master's programme is an opportunity for those in a mid-career position to support their "reflective practitioner's role" (Schön, 1983). One can picture this process as a cycle:



**Figure 1** – Enrichment of Professional Experience by Innovative Research

This very schematic representation is little more than an attempt to give a heuristic summary of our professional master's programme. Of course, these part-time master's-level students are reading literature, they regularly present their papers, they attend several courses, they are preparing a professional group visit abroad, and professors review each one's final thesis critically. But, as their ambition is tied to a desire for an enrichment of their professional experience through innovative research, they participate in several urban educational research efforts, and in innovative projects and activities involving schools, parental education, housing and living environment improvement, vocational preparation and the like – in short, they are trying to contribute to answering new social demands for appropriately educated urban professionals.

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