Internationalising the School Curriculum: International Competences for Teachers

Jos Beelen, International Office, Amsterdam Institute of Education, The Netherlands

Abstract

Internationalisation in Dutch secondary schools is increasing rapidly. Teacher education institutes can play an important role in preparing teachers for the international aspects of their future profession. The paper describes how the Amsterdam Institute of Education aims to do this. It is argued that the international competences of teachers should be described by schools and teacher education institutes together.

Keywords: internationalisation, teacher’s competences, partnerships between schools and teacher education institutes, international partnerships

Introduction

Internationalisation in Dutch secondary schools is increasing rapidly, at least judging by the number of international school projects and the rise in numbers of schools with bilingual streams. Yet, in many cases, internationalisation does not pervade the whole curriculum of those schools and is limited to project weeks. Schools for vocational education tend to lag behind when it comes to setting up school projects. Internationalisation in the schools is to a large extent dominated by the more experienced teachers. Teacher education institutes can play an important role in preparing future teachers for their job in an international school environment. In order to do this the international competences of teachers should be described by schools and teacher education institutes together.

Internationalisation in Dutch schools

Providing an international learning environment is commonly known as ‘internationalisation’. An increasing number of schools and teacher training institutes are active in this field. Although both involved in international projects, teacher training institutes and schools hardly collaborate in shaping their international activities and defining common goals. This is all the more remarkable since they have such close contacts in other fields.

Internationalisation

Many schools for secondary education in The Netherlands participate in internationalisation activities (e.g. a Comenius 1-project). There is a huge difference in the extent of participation between different school types. 80% of the schools for senior general secondary education and pre-university education engage in internationalisation activities. Only 20% of the schools for pre-vocational secondary education do so. Usually the internationalisation activities are referred to as ‘projects’, a significant term that keeps on being used, although the activities are repeated year after year. Apparently, these activities are experienced as short term, rather than being understood as a fully integrated element of the school curriculum.

Oonk (2004) researched the effects of the European integration process in secondary schools, focusing on ‘Europe’ as an engine for innovation. He concludes that there are considerable differences between schools in their degree of internationalisation. Much depends on the individual teacher. For schools, an international project has the additional merit of giving the
school an international profile to the outside world, which is useful when recruiting pupils. Parents, Oonk observes, offer considerable support for pupil exchanges, also financially. In the Netherlands, the EU-programmes for schools and teacher education (such as Comenius 1 and 2) are administered by the European Platform for Dutch Education, established in 1990 by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. Its mandate is “to introduce and integrate the European dimension in Dutch education and to support the internationalisation of education in the Netherlands. The general aim is to increase the quality of education through internationalisation.” The platform undertakes a wide range of activities to promote internationalisation in schools, such as the publication of materials to enhance EIO (European and International Orientation).

Bilingual schools
Bilingual education has increased rapidly in The Netherlands over the past ten years. This rapid rise is clearly a grass roots movement, since it has in no way been stimulated by the Dutch government. In 2005 there were 78 schools with a bilingual stream in English and one with a German bilingual stream. Twelve schools started their bilingual stream in 2006, with a further five planning to do so in 2007. In these schools, a number of school subjects are being taught in a second language, usually English. It is customary for these subjects to be taught in English for three years, usually from the age of 12 to 15. After that, the pupils continue studying the same subjects in Dutch until their final examinations, which are also in Dutch. The methodology most commonly used is that of CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning). Pupils improve their subject-related English by studying school subjects in English. Most of the schools with bilingual streams are schools for general secondary education and pre-university education. However, the first vocational schools are now opening bilingual streams. Because of their language skills, pupils at bilingual schools have better access to sources of learning in English. Whether this is effectively used as a means for an enhanced international orientation is not known. Some of the best schools in The Netherlands have bilingual streams, which led some schools to copy this for reasons of status or to distinguish themselves form other schools in the area in order to recruit more pupils. The European Platform for Dutch Education started a separate platform for the Dutch bilingual schools. This enables schools to mutually support each other but also to set standards for bilingual teaching. A standard for the competences of the CLIL-teacher will appear in the near future. This may be helpful for teachers and teacher educators alike in providing a common framework for the competences of teachers in bilingual schools.

The major-minor structure and its implications for internationalisation
Like all other teacher education institutes, the Amsterdam Institute of Education strives to equip teachers for their future profession. This profession will contain international elements. Although the teacher will most probably not be mobile on the European job market, there is every chance that he will have international professional contacts. When the Amsterdam Institute of Education was faced with the transition to a major-minor system, it was time to rethink also the way future teachers were being educated for the international aspects of their profession. In the major-minor structure, every student should choose one 30 credit minor within a 240 credit programme. The student can make a choice from a wide selection of minors, both within and outside their own institute. A considerable number of minors with international themes have been developed. This seemed an attractive solution to many people involved: students that would like to be involved in internationalisation would choose one of those
minors, while those who did not want this, would be able to avoid all exposure to internationalisation. This led to the risk that only a small minority of students, namely those that choose an international minor and students that go abroad during their study, would have an international experience in their curriculum. Therefore a policy plan has been adopted that outlines that every student should have an international experience in their major. The departments have been invited to describe the international aspects of teaching the particular school subject that they educate their students for. The curriculum elements that are based on these descriptions will ensure that all students will be exposed to the international aspects of teaching their school subject. This can be either a traditional mobility experience (study abroad or placement) or an internationally oriented module at home. Students that want to acquire more international competences may choose an international minor.

The minor ‘Classroom with a View’
The Amsterdam Institute of Education has introduced a 30 EC minor named ‘A Classroom with a View; International and Bilingual Education’ Aims of this minor are twofold: to prepare students to teach their school subject in English and to implement an international aspect into the school curriculum. Other institutes for teacher education in The Netherlands have set up minors that aim to prepare future teachers for their role as international coordinators in schools. The Amsterdam minor consists of the following sections:

CLIL
Students learn how to teach their school subject in English through CLIL, the method used in most bilingual schools is The Netherlands. The learning process involves micro teaching sessions and the preparation of English medium learning materials for pupils in secondary schools. Although a fluency course is included, the main focus is the methodology of bilingual education. How to teach your subject when both teacher and learners use their second language? This section of the minor is in fact an existing course at the Amsterdam Institute of Education. It was developed in the framework of a Comenius 2.1-project, together with The Stockholm Institute of Education, Aalborg Seminarium and Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridsky.

International projects
A special section of the minor is aimed at setting up and managing the international school projects mentioned above. This involves a.o. the development of skills for trans-national cooperation with colleagues and pupils, but also project management. Part of this section of the minor is the student conference ‘Teacher is Europe’. This conference has an eight year tradition in The Netherlands. For three days, students of Dutch teacher education institutes work in groups to write a project plan for the realisation of an international project for a school. This enables the participating students to gain experience in setting up such projects and writing proposals. It also introduces them to the essential aspect of defining and describing the added value of the proposed project, which usually constitutes the most challenging element of the conference.

Internationalisation at Home
The minor focuses on Internationalisation at Home (IaH) as an instrument to internationalise the school curriculum. Since the introduction of the concept of IaH in 1999, it has gained
considerable ground in higher education, but not beyond. In this minor IaH will be transferred to secondary education. IaH aims to provide an international experience to non-mobile students by using a number of means: international study materials, international guest teachers, incoming visits from international students and the international elements in the surroundings. Internationalisation at Home may be connected to diversity, in the sense that it draws on the international and intercultural potential within the student and staff community. Information and Communication Technology is an important tool for IaH. Many schools will already have activities that fall within the scope of IaH, but the conceptual approach of IaH enables an overall view and helps to see them in context.

The heart of the matter
The centre and most interesting part of the minor is the point where bilingual teaching, international projects and Internationalisation at Home merge into a sustainable, internationally oriented school curriculum. This requires teachers to be able to influence long term processes and to contribute to school policy plans. They should also be able to speak the language of the manager who focuses on planning, funding and results.

Organisation
‘Classroom with a View’ will be delivered jointly by lecturers of the programme International Degree in English and Education and by the International Office, in cooperation with teachers from internationally active schools. Foremost among these are teachers that recently graduated and are now working in a bilingual school. Participation is open to both home and international exchange students. Students of languages cannot be admitted, since language is the aim of their teaching and not the means, as in the CLIL-methodology. However, a maximum of thirty % of students of English is admitted. They will act as language coaches for their fellow students, a role that teachers of English perform for their colleagues in many schools.

Internationalisation competences of teachers
Common goals and joint international activities of schools and teacher education institutes require a shared framework of reference, i.e. an adequate description of teacher’s competences for internationalisation. Any attempt at a description of these competences entails finding answers to the general questions below. These questions fall within four different contexts that can be distinguished at school level: the teacher in the classroom, the teacher in the school, the school in its social environment and the professional development of the school teacher.

The teacher in the classroom:
- What will it take to implement a internationalised school curriculum in relation to the different school subjects and the learning processes of different groups of pupils?

The teacher in the school:
- What role do school teachers have in formulating an international school policy taking into account the different stakeholders, such as parents, local authorities etc.

The school in its social environment:
How can a teacher ensure that trans-national school projects contribute to the pupils becoming European citizens?

The professional development of the school teacher:

What is the framework that enables teachers to reflect adequately on their role as teachers providing international learning environments?

Creating an international learning environment for their pupils, requires teacher’s activities in the following fields:

- Multiculturalism: which elements of multicultural education are required for internationalisation?
- Global Education: how can global issues be integrated into internationalisation?
- European Citizenship: how can European Citizenship benefit from internationalisation?
- Internationalisation at Home: what is the methodology needed to integrate a European dimension into school curricula?
- Bilingual education: how can bilingual education support internationalisation?
- Project management and school policy: which skills are involved in project management and defining an international school policy?
- Scenario’s, trans-national curriculum and national identity: which developments in teacher training and schools with regard to trans-national curricula vs. national curricula can we foresee and how will this affect internationalisation and especially the competences for internationalisation of teachers and teacher educators?

The role of International Offices in Teacher Education Institutes

The International Office of the Amsterdam Institute of Education has a ‘broad’ definition of tasks, i.e. it is not just an administrative unit but it undertakes initiatives to enhance the institute’s internationalisation.

Even if an International Office has a more administrative role, it can still contribute to student’s learning by its knowledge of internationalisation policies and its skills in international project management. International Offices may have a vital role in linking the teacher education institute to schools and fuelling the debate on internationalisation competences for students in teacher education institutes. Through their international partners, International Offices may turn this into a discussion that crosses borders. The international offices have much to gain for themselves in doing this. The discussion, and the description of competences that may be the result, will provide them with a clearer picture of what the institute they are trying to internationalise is really aiming for.

At the closing session of the 30th Annual ATEE Conference in Amsterdam I pleaded for a more pronounced role of International Offices within ATEE. This paper is partly intended to repeat that plea.

1 The term ‘pupil’ is used here for learners in secondary education and ‘student’ for learners in higher education. When referring to both, the term ‘student’ is used.
References

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