*Schools' and Teachers' Involvement in Teacher Learning: Towards partnerships and learning communities*

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**Introduction**

Four stakeholders are involved in the education and professional development of teachers: the government, the school and its school leader, the teacher education institute (TEI) and the teacher him- or herself. In many European countries, the balance and relation between these four stakeholders is changing. The focus of this paper is on two elements of these changing relations, namely the changing institutional relations between schools and TEIs, which are leading to closer partnerships, and the changing relations between school leaders, TEIs and teachers in the field of in-service learning.

In the first part of this paper, I reflect on the role of institutional partnerships between schools and TEIs, conditions for effective partnerships, and the impact of such partnerships on curriculum innovation and school development. In doing so, I draw from experiences with partnerships that have developed in the Netherlands in the last seven years. The new opportunities that partnerships between schools and TEIs offer require the latter to take a proactive role and to be willing to redefine traditional boundaries, roles and responsibilities.

The focus of the second part of this paper is on the in-service professional development of teachers in schools and the role in this of professional learning communities. Again, I identify conditions for effective learning communities of teachers. Both in institutional partnerships between schools and

TEIs and in professional learning communities within schools, the involvement of schools and school leaders in teacher learning is increasing.

In the third part, I reflect on the involvement of teachers themselves in teacher learning. Europe needs teachers who have a professional commitment to the learning of their pupils, and who feel responsible for the quality of their teaching and the innovation of curricula in schools. It is therefore necessary to distribute leadership to teachers and to involve them in the design of their learning and in the development and management of learning communities. This can help to increase the ownership of teachers in processes of quality control and accountability, curriculum innovation and the development of practical knowledge of teaching and learning.

To stimulate the professional commitment of teachers, school leaders and governments must be willing to increase the autonomy of teams of teachers, while teacher education curricula should stimulate the professional self-awareness of student teachers and prepare them to assume increased responsibility with respect to quality control and accountability, curriculum innovation and the development of practical knowledge of teaching and learning.

**Schools' involvement in teacher learning**

Over the last decade, schools have become more and more involved in teacher learning. This involvement has been stimulated by two developments. The first is the increase in the autonomy of schools. There is awareness in many European countries that schools must give a professional response to the needs of pupils and take into account the needs of the local society. As a consequence, a one-size-fits-all approach can no longer be used: to be more responsive to the community, it is necessary to have a certain level of freedom to define a school's policy given the specific local context. This level of freedom varies between countries in Europe. Despite these variations, in all countries school leaders are confronted with the challenge of meeting increased expectations (see the EC's consultation on schools for the 21st century; EC, 2007a), developing a clear vision and of transforming that vision into a strategy that includes the development of curricula, the use of adequate resources, the professional quality of their teaching staff, etc. (see e.g. the mission statement of the European School Heads Association). As schools are complex organizations, all these elements (curricula, resources, teaching staff, etc.) are interconnected. Research shows that teacher quality is significantly and positively correlated with pupil attainment and that it is the most important within-school aspect explaining student performance (EC, 2007b; Hattie, 2007). As a result, schools must develop an active involvement in the professional development of their staff.

The second development is the shortage of teachers. A number of European countries face a severe shortage of teachers, or will soon do as a result of the retirement of a large group of 50+ teachers (EC, 2007b). To cope with this expected shortage of teachers, schools have become increasingly aware of their qualitative and quantitative needs with respect to school staff. In many schools, the awareness of these needs has led to active policies for recruiting, developing and retaining teachers. As a former Dutch minister stated: teacher education policy must be a part of a school's human resource policy (Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2000).

**Partnerships between schools and TEIs**

In many countries, the involvement of schools in teacher learning has led to the development of closer partnerships between schools and teacher education. Such partnerships can be defined as: 'working together towards shared goals with clearly defined duties and responsibilities of all partners.' Partnership cooperation involves 'shared perspective and shared commitment' (McCall, 2006).

The motivation for such partnerships comes not only from the schools, but also from the TEIs. The need to bridge the gap between theory and practice is an important motivation for TEIs to seek close cooperation with schools. This cooperation has been stimulated by views on teacher learning that emphasize the importance of the involvement of student teachers in an authentic and realistic learning environment (Korthagen, 2001). As a result, the emphasis is on teaching practice in schools, on competence-based teacher education and even on school-based teacher education in which the largest part of the curriculum takes place in the school.

In these partnerships, new roles and responsibilities are developed. The balance in roles and responsibilities depends strongly on the choices that are made in the partnership. There are many types of partnerships, ranging from TEIs being fully responsible for the education of new teachers, to schools being fully responsible for school-based teacher education (like some of the initiatives in the UK some years ago, in which no higher education institutes were involved).

Partnerships also differ in the focus of the partnerships. In many publications on partnerships between schools and TEI, the emphasis is on benefits, roles and responsibilities with respect to the initial training of student teachers. However, partnerships have a much wider potential. Collaboration between schools and TEI can also focus on processes of school development, curriculum innovation, professional development of teachers within the school and the development of knowledge on teaching and learning. Teacher educators can use their expertise to contribute to curriculum innovation and student teachers can be seen as additional capacity for school improvement and research activities. Especially in situations where students spend a considerable amount of time in the school, their contribution can be worthwhile.

For many schools and TEIs, the concept of the professional development school (PDS) is a challenging perspective (Teitel, 2004): networks between schools and TEIs whereby innovation of the curriculum, school improvement, the professional development of both pre- and in-service teachers, and the creation of knowledge through practice-based research and action research in school are interconnected and create synergy.

Dutch partnership models

In the Netherlands, experiments are running with primary and secondary schools that are trying to make classroom and school-based action research part of their daily routine, thus bridging professional development, innovation and research.

Experiences with partnerships between schools and TEIs in the Netherlands have shown that stronger, structural partnerships covering the pre-service education of new teachers, the in-service education of school staff, innovation of the curriculum and research vitalize both schools and TEIs (van der Sanden et al., 2005). For schools, the benefits lie in the new ideas and energy that student teachers bring with them. This promotes the professional development of the teachers who are already at the school, introduces new challenges for senior teachers (e.g. in mentoring student teachers and beginning teachers) and increases the capacity for innovation and research.

TEIs are increasing their sensitivity and responsiveness to the needs of schools, leading to innovation of the teacher education curriculum (Korthagen et al., 2002). Mutual understanding and trust have increased tremendously, resulting in a stronger acknowledgement of each other's expertise.

Conditions and lessons learned

Certain conditions must be met in order to create effective partnerships that can lead to such synergy. Kirk (1996) and McCall (2006) both identify a number of conditions for effective partnerships: there need to be shared goals and clearly defined duties and responsibilities of all partners. The partnership should be based on parity, mutual understanding and a long-term commitment, whereby all partners have a clear understanding of what their benefits are. Moreover, it requires entrepreneurship from both schools and TEIs.

The conditions refer not only to systemic conditions, but also to the teachers and teacher educators involved in these partnerships. As the involvement of schools in the education of teachers increases, mentors in schools need more knowledge in the area of teacher learning. Many schools develop courses for their mentors. In the Netherlands, mentors in schools who support student teachers are considered to be 'teacher educators'. Mentors in schools can even apply for listing in the professional register of teacher educators of the Dutch Association for Teacher Educators (Snoek & van der Sanden, 2005).

Additional conditions that became clear in the Dutch partnership examples show how important it is that:

- Teacher education in schools be grounded in the whole of the human resource and professional development policies of the school.
- The partnership also focuses on quality. Quality assurance is an important issue for both schools and TEIs. Schools are keen on attracting new teachers who fit their needs. TEIs are greatly concerned about quality control for accreditation purposes: if parts of the curriculum take place outside the direct influence of a TEI, it might encounter problems with accreditation processes. Therefore, in partnerships, it is essential to have a shared understanding of and to agree on quality aspects and the minimum level of quality that needs to be maintained (Kallenberg & Rokebrand, 2006).
- The design of the partnership takes into account the needs of student teachers: student teachers must be facilitated to work in a variety of situations and contexts, and the assessment of student teachers needs to be transparent and independent.

Finally, during a meeting of representatives from representatives from 10 EU members on relationships between teacher education institutions and schools, two additional conditions were identified (PLC Teachers & Trainers, 2007):

- The partnership model and the roles and responsibilities should fit the local context of the partnership. Therefore, the concrete structure of the partnership may vary. This has its consequences for national policies supporting partnerships, as they need to allow for some degree of autonomy so that partnership models can be designed according to local conditions and needs and give room for participants to own the design of the partnership
- The partnership should be based on mutual trust. This has consequences on different levels: trust between partners within a partnership and trust between stakeholders inside and outside the partnership.
  Trust can have different manifestations and should not only be based on formal contracts, but also on the relation and intentions of the partners (Byrk & Schneider, 2002).

The Dutch experiences also reveal several pitfalls (Dietze & Snoek, 2005):

- Short-term pragmatism might prevail over long-term vision and investments. If partnerships are based only on the need to alleviate the shortage of teachers, the partnerships will be threatened

after the shortage has been solved.

- If a partnership between a school and a TEI leads to teacher education curricula that focus too much on the specific needs of that school, teacher mobility might be threatened. There must be a balance between national standards that ensure the mobility and employability of new teachers, and standards that leave room for schools to be autonomous in educational and organizational policies.

- Competition for expertise and financial budgets (e.g. between schools and TEIs) might threaten the feeling of shared responsibility and the effective use of all expertise and capacity available. Schools and TEIs must find a balance between a relationship based on shared responsibility and a commercial relationship in which both schools and TEIs want to be paid for the additional activities they undertake.

Consequences for schools and teacher education

Shared awareness can develop only if the participants share the same feeling of responsibility and are willing to act according to this responsibility. This demands willingness to take new positions and to question traditions and routines.

In this process, traditional boundaries are challenged: when partnerships are strengthened and the education of student teachers is integrated in the human resource policies of a school, the strict distinction between pre- and in-service teacher education disappears. The involvement of schools in the curricula of teacher education also challenges the boundaries between public education and in-company training.

Schools must be willing to use the partnerships to their full potential, not only focussing on the initial education of student teachers, but also on the contribution that these partnerships can give to school improvement, curriculum innovation and the development of new practical knowledge.

TEIs must respond to the challenge to traditional roles. However, different types of responses are possible (Dietze & Snoek, 2005):

- Passive: TEIs can keep a distance from the problems in the educational labour market, focusing on their responsibility to 'defend quality' and on their monopoly on the education of teachers. However, this response might lead to a situation in which teacher education is in an ivory tower, and schools and governments will look for other solutions, ignoring TEIs.

- *Laissez faire*: in this response, TEIs are responsive but do not take the lead. They respond in an opportunistic way to the demands of schools. This might be a commercial response: satisfying every need as long as schools are willing to pay for their services.
- Proactive: in this response, TEIs are actively involved in solving problems in education. TEIs are partners in the debate, contributing from their own field of expertise: quality of teachers and teacher learning. TEIs can also try to lead the debate by creating bridges between the various partners and by investing capacity and expertise in the network.

In the first response, TEIs run the risk of disqualifying themselves and being pushed aside. In the second response, TEIs simply drift along, without any clear perspective or aim to be reached. The third response is the one chosen by most of the TEIs in the Netherlands. This has led to exciting partnerships with schools, to new roles and responsibilities, to fascinating experiments with new models for teacher education, and to a renewed trust of schools in the contribution and quality of TEIs.

**Learning communities within schools**

The involvement of schools in teacher learning is not restricted to the recruitment and education of new teachers; it also affects the way in which schools are involved in the in-service education of their staff. For a long time, continuous professional development has been the responsibility of individual teachers, supported by in-service programmes provided by the government or TEIs. Attempts are now being made to better align the professional development of teachers with school development. Educational leadership models emphasize the importance of developing a professional development programme that is linked to the school's vision and development.

Making the professional development of teachers a shared responsibility within the school has led to a strong emphasis on the collaborative learning of teachers and the creation of a culture of inquiry within schools (see Senge, 2000; Hord, 1997). Hord defines a professional learning community (or a community for continuous inquiry and improvement) as a school in which the administrators and teachers continuously seek and share learning in order to increase their effectiveness for students, and act on what they learn. The concept of the learning community is attractive, but it is difficult to create effective learning communities within the complex reality of schools. Susan Moore Johnson (2004)

reports a study on problems that new teachers face when starting out on their career. She identifies three types of school culture:

1. The veteran culture, in which experienced veteran teachers have the monopoly on their expertise, which is implicit and not available to novice teachers;
2. The novice culture, in which novices are actively involved in innovations and new approaches, but where veterans feel excluded.

In both cultures, the beginners do not learn from the experienced veterans, and vice versa. Both cultures lack a shared and explicit knowledge base of practical theories that guide the teaching within a school. This limits the way in which collaborative learning can take place within the school. Therefore, Moore Johnson advocates a third culture:

3. The integrated culture, in which the beginners and veterans are engaged in mixed groups, using and sharing each other's knowledge and inspiration.

Conditions for learning communities

Moore Johnson's study show that learning communities are not easy to create. Hord (1997, p. 24) identifies a number of conditions:

- The collegial and facilitative participation of the principal who shares leadership – and thus, power and authority – by inviting staff input in decision-making.
- A shared vision that is developed from the staff's unswerving commitment to students' learning and that is consistently articulated and referenced for the staff's work.
- Collective learning among staff and application of this learning to create solutions that address students' needs.
- The visitation and review of each teacher's classroom behaviour by peers as a feedback and assistance activity to support both individual and community improvement.
- Physical conditions and human capacities that support such an operation.

Verbiest and Vandenberghe (2002) add a further condition, as they warn that strong learning communities are not necessarily innovative, as a closed group of teachers can easily strengthen each other's opinions and hinder the use of new approaches. Therefore, external input in learning communities – for example through research literature, invited speakers, external coaches, internal diversity or brainstorming with people from outside the learning community – is an important condition for creativity and innovation within such communities.

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Learning communities create an interesting context for connecting the pre-service education of teachers, curriculum innovation, the in-service professional development of teachers and action-oriented research in schools. Such communities can comprise teachers, student teachers, teacher educators, educational researchers, etc. Especially the element of action-oriented research and the sharing of the outcomes of this research can help to create a shared and explicit knowledge base of practical theories that are used within the school. Making explicit the shared knowledge base (and the contribution that each teacher has made to it) can stimulate the awareness that each teacher can make a unique contribution to the shared expertise and skills within the school. This can help to acknowledge, accept and value differences between teacher profiles.

**Teachers' involvement in teacher learning**

In many countries, partnerships between schools and TEIs and the creation of learning communities within schools are high on the agenda of policy makers and school leaders. In leadership programmes, school leaders are made aware of the importance of their involvement in the learning and professional development of the teachers and future teachers within their schools and the competences that they need in order to manage and stimulate partnerships and learning communities. However, less attention is paid to the qualities that teachers need in order to participate in partnerships and learning communities.

<u>Teacher quality</u>
Teacher quality is an ambiguous concept. It has a wide range of definitions, each of which derives from the perspectives and goals of those who established the definition. For example, in the Common European Principles drawn up by an EC expert group, teacher qualities are grouped into three main areas (EC, 2005):

1. Work with others. Teachers should nurture the potential of every learner and be able to work with learners as individuals and help them to develop into fully participating and active members of society. Teachers should cooperate and collaborate with their colleagues on order to enhance their own learning and teaching.

2. Work with knowledge, technology and information. Teachers should be able to access, analyse, validate, reflect on and transmit knowledge, making effective use of technology, in order to build and manage learning environments. They should have a good understanding of subject knowledge and view learning as a lifelong journey.

3. Work with and in society. Teachers should promote mobility and cooperation in Europe. To encourage inter-cultural respect and understanding, they should stimulate social cohesion and be able to work effectively with the local community and to contribute to systems of quality assurance.

These competences reflect the way in which the teaching profession is seen in many countries, namely as a profession that focuses on the primary process: the interaction between teacher and pupil.

Teachers as change agents

In 2001, the OECD published six scenarios for the future of schooling. The first describes a future that is not much different from today. In this scenario, education is dominated by bureaucratic, institutionalized systems that resist radical change. The sixth is a doom scenario that can be seen as a result of the first scenario: a meltdown of school systems as a result of society's lack of willingness to invest in schools that were unresponsive to changes in society, leading to a decrease in the status of the teaching profession, which resulted in an exodus of teachers.

These two scenarios are pessimistic not with respect to the teaching quality of teachers as defined in the Common European Principles, but with respect to the responsiveness of teachers to changes in society. To obviate these pessimistic scenarios and a meltdown of schools, teachers need more and other competences than those described in the Common European Principles.

Many formal descriptions of teacher standards pay no or only limited attention to the ability to adapt to changing circumstances, to be a change agent within schools, to be part of a professional learning community. While entrepreneurship is one of the eight key competences in a recommendation of the European Commission and of the European Council on key competences for lifelong learning (European Council, 2006), this competence is absent from the teacher competences as listed in the Common European Principles. Nevertheless, the definition of entrepreneurship – namely an individual's ability to turn ideas into action, including creativity, innovation and risk taking, as well as

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the ability to plan and manage projects in order to achieve objectives and to seize opportunities – seems quite relevant to teachers.

The Common European Principles communicate a rather limited interpretation of the teaching profession, namely that it is a profession dominated by the implementation of proven teaching strategies. While the teaching profession is indicated as a profession in which cooperation, collaboration and professional development are important, this collaboration is not defined in terms of collaborative learning communities, that is, communities in which new knowledge is developed.

In general, the focus of teacher education curricula (and of the student teachers themselves) is on skills at the classroom level. Little attention is paid to the contribution of a teacher to the collective development of the school or to quality issues that transcend the level of the classroom. However, system thinking must be a part of a teacher's toolbox if he or she is to contribute to innovation processes within the school.

In many educational debates, the complaint is that teachers are reluctant to change. In today's rapidly changing society, schools need to adapt themselves to changing circumstances and we need teachers that can be change agents within their schools. These change agents must be entrepreneurs, must be focused on the collaborative development of shared knowledge in learning communities, and must master system thinking in order to transform new knowledge into effective teaching strategies and to implement them in the school curriculum.

Both the need for leadership competences and competences with respect to classroom-based research and the development of knowledge are emphasized in the recent communication from the European Commission (EC, 2007b).

Distributed leadership in schools
The qualities and roles of teachers in partnerships and learning communities are not self-evident. In the Netherlands, the autonomy of schools has increased considerably in the last eight years. However, this has not led to an increase in the autonomy of teachers. As a result of the emphasis on school leadership, many teachers in the Netherlands feel that their autonomy and professional freedom has been reduced as innovation processes are often initiated by school leaders (Verbrugge, 2006). This reduction of professional freedom is partly caused by the call for strong educational leadership in

schools. By regarding him- or herself as responsible for the change process in school, the school leader might hinder and frustrate the teachers and their involvement in the innovation process. This can be illustrated by comparing the relation between teacher and school leader with that between pupil and teacher.

Teachers often face the problem of how to motivate their pupils. In their experience, pupils are not always motivated, so teachers have to introduce measures that stimulate them, for example through the control of homework, tests, etc. This, however, reduces the ownership and involvement of pupils: they learn not because they are intrinsically interested or motivated, but because their teacher forces them to do so. As a consequence, their initiative is reduced, the teacher feels forced to introduce more external stimuli and control measures, and the pupils become even less motivated.

This vicious circle can also be observed in the relation between teachers and school leaders. When school leaders experience a lack of ownership of teachers in innovation processes, they tend to increase their steering measures in the change process. As a result, the ownership and involvement of teachers is further reduced, and the school leaders increase their steering activities even more.

This vicious circle is based on the assumption that the school leader is responsible for steering change processes within his or her school. This assumption is based on mental models regarding the role of the teacher and that of the school leader and regarding change processes (Biersteker et al., 2006) and is reflected in the limited professionalism of the teacher as presented in the Common European Principles. However, when the teaching profession is seen as a profession with an extended professionalism (Stenhouse, 1975), a different approach can be applied, namely one that uses the concept of distributed leadership (Ogawa & Boosert, 1995; Hargreaves & Fink, 2005). In this concept, the competences of teachers include those related to leadership and change. Leadership and change capacity are not restricted to the school leader. Each teacher must demonstrate leadership and capacity for change.

A change of leadership also has its consequences for teachers themselves. They need to take (collective) responsibility for their professional quality. In two recent reports to the Dutch Minister of Education (Temporary Advisory Commission Teaching Profession, 2007; Education Council, 2007), a plea was made for creating a strong professional body owned by teachers themselves, responsible for the definition of professional standards, the validation of professional development courses, a professional register for teachers and the development of a professional knowledge base. The importance of such

a knowledge based defined and owned by teachers is emphasized by Korver (2007): When the knowledge base is organized outside the members of the profession themselves, it will not only have a negative influence on the quality of education. It will also be the end of pretending that the teaching profession is a real profession.

## Conclusions and consequences

In this paper, we have looked at institutional partnerships between schools and TEIs, and at professional learning communities that can support innovation of the curriculum, school improvement, the pre- and the in-service professional development of teachers, and the creation of knowledge through practice-based research and action research in school. In both areas, changing positions will have consequences for each of the stakeholders. Partnerships between schools and TEIs can be developed only when both are given more autonomy to adapt their activities to the local context and needs of a school; and effective professional learning communities of teachers within schools can develop only when teachers are given more autonomy to define their collective learning needs and to arrange their learning activities accordingly.

Schools, governments, TEIs and teachers face the challenge of defining their stance with respect to their roles and positions on these issues. This stance could be identified on two axes: one identifying the freedom and autonomy of schools with respect to adaptation to local contexts and needs, the other identifying the freedom and autonomy of teachers with respect to their collective learning.
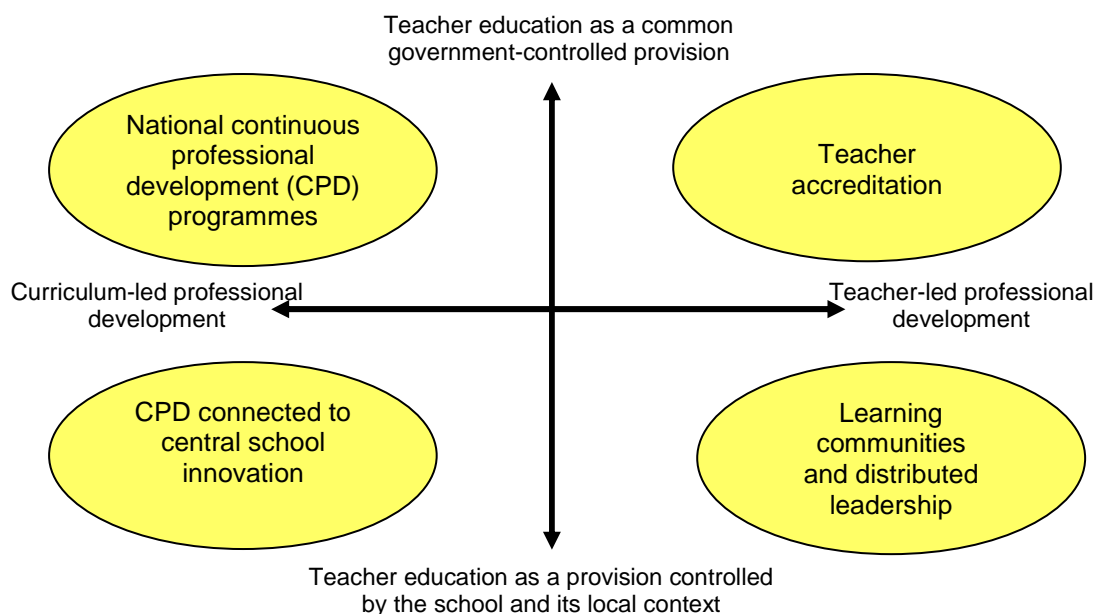
In this way, four scenarios can be identified, in which schools, governments, TEIs and teachers have to define their position. The first scenario is characterized by teacher education as a government controlled general provision whereby the in-service professional development of teachers is dominated by carefully designed curricula. In this scenario, continuous professional development (CPD) is organized through national CPD programmes, initiated by the government and delivered by TEIs.

In the second scenario, in which teacher education is a government controlled general provision but the in-service professional development of teachers is initiated by teachers or teams of teachers, the CPD model could be based on an accreditation system: teachers would be free to decide what CPD activity they want to undertake, but would have to perform a minimum amount of CPD activities in order to retain their teaching licenses.

In the third scenario, teacher education is integrated in the school policy, fitting with the school's view on teaching and learning and the local context and needs of the school, and where the in-service professional development of teachers is dominated by carefully designed curricula. In this scenario, CPD programmes are defined by the school leader in such a way that they contribute to the school development programme.

In the fourth scenario, teacher education is integrated in the school policy, fitting with the school's view on teaching and learning and the local context and needs of the school, and where the in-service professional development of teachers is initiated by teachers or teams of teachers. The CPD model is characterized by professional learning communities, in which teams of teachers share and investigate their practices, contribute to the shared knowledge base of the community, and apply this knowledge base in order to improve teaching and learning within the school.

In this paper, I have argued that both intensive partnerships between schools and TEIs and professional learning communities within schools (scenario 4) can make an important contribution to the professional development of teachers, school improvement, curriculum innovation, and the development of new knowledge on teaching and learning. However, the ambition to develop the fourth scenario has consequences for all stakeholders.

Consequences for schools

- Schools must develop their entrepreneurship, thus fostering creativity and innovation.

- School should use partnerships with teacher education institutions to their full potential, contributing not only to the initial education of student teachers but also to staff development, school improvement, curriculum innovation and knowledge development.

- Within innovation processes, schools must ensure that their teachers feel ownership towards the focus and process of the innovation.

- Schools must create the conditions for teachers to meet, both face-to-face and virtually, within learning communities.

- School leaders need to distribute part of their leadership to the teachers within their schools.

Consequences for teacher education

- Curricula in teacher education should cover qualities that teachers need in order to work in professional learning communities, take responsibility for the quality and innovation of their work and their professional development, and be willing to be held accountable for that.

Consequences for governments

- Governments must acknowledge that schools and their local contexts and needs are different. Just as teachers have to acknowledge that pupils are different and need adaptive teachers, schools are different and need adaptive governments.

- Governments must acknowledge that teachers are different. Quality indicators for teachers should reflect the collaborative nature of teaching by allowing room in professional profiles for flexibility, personal styles and variety (ATEE, 2006).

- Governments must acknowledge the need for the professional involvement of and ownership by teachers. Both national and European processes to formulate indicators to identify teacher quality should focus on teachers' involvement and ownership, as this is a necessary condition for quality indicators that will have a real impact on teaching (ATEE, 2006).

Consequences for teachers

- Teachers must develop their entrepreneurship, thus fostering creativity and innovation.

- Teachers must be willing to take the initiative in innovation processes, professional development and research.

- Teachers must be willing to share their knowledge and to be accountable for the quality and

improvement of their work.

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