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"Teachers in collaboration.

Working across disciplines on pupils' development opportunities".

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1. Introduction

A new lectorate¹ was established at Fonty OSO (Special Education
Training Centre of Fontys University of Applied Sciences) in October
2013 under the title: Teachers working across disciplines on their
pupils' development opportunities.

We anticipate that this theme will 'ring a bell' with all our students
and that knowledge development in this field will make an

¹ Lectorates are research groups, consisting of lecturers and led by a
lector, at Universities of Applied Sciences that connect higher
education curricula, professional practice and research on topics of
social relevance

important contribution to the curriculum of the Master of Special Educational Needs (SEN) that OSO is offering and may also provide input for other courses in higher professional education. With this theme the lectorate will develop and elaborate further on the themes of earlier OSO lectorates, such as the insights developed about interdisciplinary work, and about the dilemmas and professional values with which teachers are confronted (Jacobs 2011).

At the same time the new lectorate aims to make a contribution to the professional development of the academic staff and students of OSO in the field of practice-oriented research. This ties in with the outlook on scholarship and knowledge building as value-laden and dialogical, as expressed in the Research Programme of Fontys OSO 2010–2013 (OSO 2010). We have opted for a 'new style' lectorate in which all OSO staff and students will be involved as much as possible. The approach to be adopted will be theme-centred research, in which students and lecturers collaborate on their research and research themes.

2. Background and reason for the theme

I was closely involved in the design and detailed planning of the lectorate and was appointed lector (associate professor) on 1 October 2013. The theme of the lectorate is very close to my heart for a number of reasons.

First, because throughout my career I have always felt that it is important to work with clients, colleagues and other stakeholders. As a special education professional and clinical psychologist I have worked with my clients, their parents and other people who play a role in their lives, where my professional involvement with my clients gave reason to do so. In my collaboration with all these

parties, I tried to ensure that my relationship with clients remained purely professional at all times. Everyone has their own expertise – the young people themselves, their parents, other professionals, others in the young people's networks, myself – and we all have a contribution to make to clients' wellbeing and to resolving problems. I have worked in different environments: mental health care, youth health care, residential institutions, hospitals, my own private practice and higher professional education, as I continue to do now with the Master of Special Educational Needs.

I have had a variety of professional identities over the years, sometimes fulfilling more than one role at the same time: psychologist in mental health care, clinical psychologist, mediator, supervisor, teacher educator and researcher (both in traditional universities and in higher professional education). As well as that I am mother to three now grown-up daughters, which has inevitably brought me into contact with the usual professionals. I am no stranger to interdisciplinary collaboration therefore. Nevertheless, as my career progressed, I became increasingly fascinated by the role of the teacher, or more broadly, the role of the school in the lives of children and their parents. I became more and more convinced that the school's role and influence could probably be interpreted in a more deliberate and conscious way and utilised more effectively. I also became convinced that collaboration could be an important focus for this.

This chapter throws light on two subjects: the content of the lectorate's theme and how its research will be designed and why. As the lectorate is still in the development phase and because it is an important principle that our method and focus will be developed and interpreted in collaboration with those involved (consistent with one of the basic ideas behind the lectorate that knowledge is generated together), I will only outline general frameworks here.

The concluding paragraph will discuss the questions and decisions that are of current concern in this first phase of the lectorate and will invite the reader to respond.

3. Content of the theme

I will use a practical example to throw light on the kind of issues that the lectorate will specifically be focusing on.

It concerns an interview with a parent about the results of a psychological assessment carried out by a special education professional² on an 8-year-old boy (boy A). The context is a special primary school. The teacher, the special education expert and the mother are present.

Boy A is one of the pupils with special needs in the school and this psychological assessment results in a diagnosis of ADHD. There is also a suspicion that boy A may be dyslexic. The remedial teacher who gives A extra support needs more advice on how to deal with him. Referral for a dyslexia assessment is being considered.

When the discussion has more or less come to an end, the mother says that there is something else she would like to discuss. She tells the professionals that over the past few weeks A has witnessed the sexual abuse of his older brother, B. The perpetrator is a 'friend' of B and the son of acquaintances with whom the mother is on good terms. The special education expert remains outwardly calm, praises the mother for telling them about this and advises her to go

² The professional in this example is an 'orthopedagoog' a University degree that does not exist in most countries. In Germany the equivalent is 'Heilpädagog'.

to her GP, taking both sons with her if possible. Afterwards the teacher says that she was very glad that the special education expert was there during the mother's revelation and that she dealt with this matter. She, the teacher, was really upset by this story, fuming with anger and would probably have lost her temper with the mother because she had allowed the abuse and A's involvement in it to go on for a number of weeks. Her feelings were all the stronger because she has two young children herself of around the same age as these two boys. The case had a long and complicated aftermath. For our purposes it is worth mentioning that the GP contacted the special education expert after the mother had been to the surgery and Youth Care Services and other social services were brought in. The therapist offered therapy sessions with boy B on condition that the parents reported the matter to the police. They did not do that and as a result B felt that his parents had let him down.

Now back to the title of the lectorate. "Teachers in collaboration. Working together on pupils' development opportunities" expresses the idea that collaboration is a source of strength for learning and development and that, through collaboration, pupils have a better chance of developing their potential to the full. That is what it is ultimately about: creating the best learning and development opportunities for A. Boy A's teacher, the special education expert, the parents, the GP and the other parties involved are all working together to this end. Including 'teachers' in the title nevertheless indicates that the lectorate's focus is on A's teacher: participation in the kind of discussion outlined above generates many emotions, dilemmas and questions.

Many teachers will feel at a loss about what to do in situations like this. What line should you take, what should you say and do and what should you not say and do? Should you talk to A about this

meeting the next day? How confidential is this kind of information? Should you discuss it with colleagues and, if so, how and for what purpose? How far does your responsibility extend? Does it make a difference what type of school you are working in and what your specific role is? Does it make a difference, for example, if you are a subject teacher or a mentor in a secondary school; or in a primary school if you are an internal education and care adviser, a class teacher or school principal? What actions are you expected to take? The focus, therefore, is on teachers themselves, their competences and their professional attitude to collaboration, both formal and informal. Teachers learn from, through and about collaboration. The lectorate aims to contribute to the learning and professional development of teachers to equip them to develop this collaboration.

We chose to add "working across disciplines", using the definition developed in Hans Schuman's Lectorate in interdisciplinary working in the context of education and social care: Interdisciplinary working means that the different disciplines formulate a shared goal, speak a common language that is accessible and comprehensible to all, and see the others' qualities and perspectives as complementary and valuable (Tsakitidis and Royen 2009).

In the case of boy A, it is about his GP collaborating with mental health care personnel. They agree on an approach to dealing with A, its objectives and what each individual's role is in the plan. The lectorate will study how this collaborative approach works, the teacher's role in it, what initiatives she can be expected to take and what this means for her professional development. How do the various professionals experience the collaboration? Do they understand each others' language? What do they encounter when they step over the boundary of their own professional community?

How can all participants make optimum use of their own professional competences and their own perspectives?

"Working across disciplines" is used in a broad sense. In boy A's case, it could, for instance, involve collaboration with the swimming teacher or with a fellow remedial teacher from outside the school. Working with parents is not the lectorate's primary concern. The lectorate would not focus on the 10-minute interviews with A's parents or on parental involvement in general. In A's case, working with the parents fits into the theme in so far as it concerns the collaboration with external professionals: the GP, therapists, etc. and with the parents' cooperation in that 'external process'. Parents are always partners in child-rearing and education after all. They are their child's representatives at law, they spend a great deal of time with their child every day, and they are important people to their child. The teacher has to consider how and what to tell the parents and how to get them involved each time she has occasion to speak to them. What should she discuss with the parents; what words should she use; which information is confidential; what contribution can she make to coordinating A's pastoral care to achieve the best possible outcomes.

The subtitle of the lectorate 'With specific focus on the role, duties and responsibilities of the teacher as a professional' indicates that the lectorate's primary concern is not formal arrangements for collaboration, structures and forms of organisation. The lectorate aims to gain insight into the reality of day-to-day 'collaboration' from teachers' perspectives, insight into their professional role, their perception of their role, their duties and responsibilities and the dilemmas they face. In our example, boy A's teacher was confronted with her own emotions, values, identity and motives and it required tact and professional sensitivity to do the right thing in that situation (see e.g. (Jacobs 2010).

The lectorate is concerned with the special relationship between individual teachers and their pupils and often also between a school, its pupils and their parents (Manen 1994; Claasen 2013). The art is to acknowledge that special relationship and to use it, which requires due tact and sensitivity. Boy A's mother probably had such confidence in the school and in the teacher that it was there that she found the courage to talk about her other son's sexual abuse and A's involvement in it. She had known the school and the teachers for years which lowered the barrier for her and enabled her to disclose such a difficult situation. Personal values and choices play an important role when a teacher is deciding what to do and what not to do when it comes to collaboration.

These are all examples of questions and themes that the lectorate aims to study. We have decided to start with an exploratory phase of data-gathering using an open and inductive approach to explore what interdisciplinary collaboration means to those who engage in it. We expect this initial stock-taking exercise to produce a rich data set, from which our first themes can be selected for more in-depth research in phases 2 and 3.

The next section explains our research approach and Figure 1 presents the questions that the lectorate hopes to be able to answer in phases 2 and 3.

4. The research and the approach of the lectorate

The research in the lectorate will be practice-oriented and professionals will study their own professional practice. A broad field of practice is envisaged, covering the practice of teachers, students and the professional field. The research approach will be

cyclical, iterative, critical and participative and it will also be done in a number of phases. Phase 1 will be an explorative phase using an inductive research approach in the main. Teachers and students will be involved in the research and the students taking the Master of SEN (>1,200) will be asked to fulfil the role of respondents. Themes will be chosen at the end of phase 1 that the lectorate will focus on in more depth. We are thinking of using an on-line questionnaire for this first phase, followed by focus groups which will use narrative methods to explore issues in greater depth. Other research methods, such as action research and design-based research, will also be used in phase 2.

The table below shows the research questions and subquestions and the instruments and/or methods that will be used. Phase 1 will focus on question 1 and phase 2 will address questions 2, 3 and 4.

	<i>Question</i>	<i>Instrument / method</i>
1	How do teachers collaborate with professionals outside their own school and to what ends?	
1 a	Who do teachers collaborate with (outside the school)?	questionnaire network analysis
1 b	What does this collaboration involve? (For example, method of collaboration, nature and extent of participation of different professionals).	questionnaire logbook / narratives individual and group interviews
1 c	What considerations and/or feelings lead teachers to involve the pupil concerned and his/her parents in this collaboration and how do they collaborate?	literature study questionnaire logbook / narratives individual and group interviews
1 d	What considerations and/or feelings influence teachers' decisions on whether or not to collaborate with professionals outside the school?	literature study questionnaire / interview logbook / narratives
1 e	What competencies do teachers use in this collaboration?	literature study questionnaire / interview logbook / narratives
2	What factors facilitate or hinder this collaboration? (Subquestions may be formulated later based on the findings from phase 1).	literature study analysis of the findings from phase 1 analysis of MSEN products logbook / narratives individual and group interviews / peer review / member check
3	How can teachers design optimal collaboration with professionals outside their own school and how can the school facilitate this? (Research projects will formulate their own research questions within this general question).	literature study analysis of the findings from phase 1 action research comparative (international) research

4	How far should interdisciplinary collaboration be built into the curriculum in order to give students the best possible preparation for interdisciplinary collaboration and how should this be done?	further analysis of the findings from questions 1, 2 and 3 design-based projects
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Conferences which are an essential feature of the lectorate are organised three times a year. OSO teachers who are not members of the research group, students who are involved in the research and organisations from the field are invited. The conferences offer rich research data, contribute to the quality of the research and ensure that research and practice are linked. They provide opportunities for a parallel process in interdisciplinary collaboration, coordination, sharing experiences with critical friends, presentation of research plans and results, critical dialogue, member checking and peer review. They provide a communicative space and encourage research that focuses on problems that really matter. They encourage research in and with the professional field and rich and in-depth investigations from a variety of positions and perspectives (Kemmis 2005). They contribute to the credibility of the research and to specific aspects of validity that are relevant to practice-oriented research, such as:

1. outcome validity (the impact of the research on practice, the contribution to the solution or, where appropriate, reformulation of the problem);
2. process validity
3. democratic validity (the extent and manner of participation of all or particular stakeholders);
3. catalytic validity (research as a catalyst for sustainable change);
4. dialogical validity (the extent of joint knowledge construction by people working in practice and researchers) (Anderson and Herr 1999).

One of the challenges for the lectorate concerns the form of its organisation and the participative research approach. The lectorate will put the same interdisciplinary collaboration into practice that is the main theme of its research. The same processes will take place as in education practice. That creates research opportunities.

Members of the lectorate will keep logbooks on their experiences with collaboration and these will be analysed. Regular reflection on the collaboration within the lectorate will help to generate questions and to make implicit knowledge explicit. The challenge will be even greater in phase 2, when a number of groups will do research in different contexts within the overall theme. Groups of students may, for example, do theme-centred research under the guidance of research group members, conducting action research and design-based research on good practices.

All of these processes involve collaboration across disciplines which is at the same time the subject of research. In this way students and teaching staff learn from, through and about collaboration. Previous experience with collaboration at Fontys OSO led to the metaphor of 'collaboration as a patchwork quilt' (Swet, Armstrong et al. 2012) and to studies on the theme of 'critical friends' (Swet 2008; Swet, Roosken et al. 2009; Swet, Smit et al. 2009). These research studies described methods and identified areas of special interest for collaborative work, such as making clear agreements about who is leading a project and about who decides on the project aims and how; investment in developing relationships; being attentive to group processes, including matters such as trust and power; exploiting the diversity and specific expertise of participants; making expectations explicit; and sharing results.

5. In conclusion

There will be many opportunities within the frameworks outlined above in this initial phase of the lectorate and there are still many decisions to be taken. Given the lectorate's ambition to back up its talk with action and gradually learn from, through and about collaboration through collaborating, it is appealing to others to play a part in the thinking process and possibly make a contribution to the lectorate. We have a number of ideas on this.

It might be an interesting exercise, for example, to get students from other teacher training courses within and outside Fontys practising teachers and teachers abroad to fill in the student questionnaire used in the first exploratory phase of the research. After all, the students taking the Master of SEN are not representative of Dutch teachers in general and our understanding of the theme would be enriched by a broader group of respondents. We are aware of the importance of scrupulous attention to ethical guidelines and codes of conduct when students are involved in research. Students should feel free to participate or not, as they wish, and feel free to give honest answers. However, there has always been a certain inequity in teacher-student relationships in which power aspects play a role. We are not going to eliminate these difficulties and indeed see an opportunity to learn from them and to use what we learn for the benefit of our curriculum. After all, our students come across dilemmas like this all the time in their work, including in their research work.

We plan to analyse existing documents and policy plans and are considering using the curriculum of our Master of SEN for this purpose and possibly also the curricula of other courses, pieces of

work produced by students and documents on 'Passend Onderwijs'³, the transition in Dutch youth care, etc.

The research will be an iterative process of data-gathering and coupling of tentative insights to theoretical insights, for which further literature studies and other research methods will be necessary. Collaboration with other organisations and students on other courses will also be possible.

Naturally we will also be looking for partners in professional practice who would like to participate in the lectorate, perhaps organisations that would like to do their own research related to our theme. A partnership, for instance, might involve a number of Master of SEN students and investigate an issue together in the form of theme-centred research. Alternatively, other lectorates (both within and outside Fontys) and organisations that take part in our conferences act as critical friends and bring their own perspectives into the mix. A number of organisations are very keen and have already promised to take part, such as Fontys Fydes, the Municipality of Tilburg, the Eigen Kracht Centrale, the teachers' organisation Onderwijs Coöperatie and the special education organisation Stichting Biezonderwijs Tilburg.

We hope in this way to learn a lot about collaboration through collaboration and to be able to contribute to knowledge development on the subject. Our ultimate aim is to be able to make a contribution to the development opportunities of all pupils to give each one the best chance in life.

³ Translation of 'Passend Onderwijs' is 'appropriate education'. Appropriate education is a new policy initiative aiming at decreasing the numbers of students with disabilities in special schools and supporting their inclusion in mainstream schools.

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