Curriculum research: Veugelers and Zijlstra (2003)

Veugelers, W. & Zijlstra, H. (2003). [Networks of schools and constructing citizenship in secondary education.](https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED479172.pdf)(PDF 291KB)

This paper discusses the purpose and roles of networks in addressing the restructuring of upper secondary education in the Netherlands. It explores how one network of 20 secondary schools created a practice of change and the authors’ experiences and analysis of the critical elements in creating andsustaining networks.

The authors argue that there are two different theories on how best to implement educational policy and school reform (p 3). The first is the top down approach which involves a tightening of control with more courses, tests, mandatory curricular and accountability. The second, the bottom up approach, focuses more on teacher capacity and helping schools through changes to professional development and teacher education whilst also ‘infusing knowledge’ (p 3) and developing schools and teacher networks. The top down approach is seen as ineffective, however the authors ascertain that top down and bottom up approaches interact and can be parallel. This will be particularly pertinent as NSW schools begin to implement the role out of curriculum reform. Veugelers and Zijlstra maintain that it is more difficult for networks to survive in periods of top down movement. Experimentation may not be as possible and the focus may be more on supporting schools to support each other.

As academics Veugelers and Zijlstra started a ‘workgroup’ in 1988 by inviting schools they had worked with previously and schools that were their partners in teacher education at the University of Amsterdam. Their aim was to create a learning culture which was reflective and where communities could find joint experiences to support each other. At the beginning of the nineties they called themselves a ‘network’ as they now felt the group was ‘institutionalised’ and that educators experienced they had something in common and were able to assist each other professional and school development.

Together participants worked out the function of the network. This included interpreting and influencing government policy, learning from others experiences, sharing expertise across the network, developing new educational approaches and materials for schools and creating new initiatives.

The network meetings consisted of two representatives from 20 schools and were chaired by staff members from the Centre for Professional Development in Education. Meetings were held monthly and focused on how to implement the educational vision of the schools. Initially, there were also workshops on career education, moral and democratic education and self-regulated learning. Now the educators meet in groups of eight teachers from different schools six times a year. They still focus on the former topics but now focus primarily on curriculum content and pedagogical-didactical teaching methods. Additionally, there are two conferences a year with one of these having student panels from the network schools.

For networks to be successful six indicators are provided; a shared ownership and sense of belonging, an established tradition, continuity of participants being productive and constantly finding new challenge (pp 10-11).

In Veugelers and Zijlstra’s network only a few people from each school participate in the network. This is also the case in some specialist NSW Department of Education networks such as deputy principal and head teacher networks. The authors affirm that “… a network like we have supports, in particular, the most powerful people in the school” (p 11). These networks are seen as supporting ‘change agents’ in school. Additional forms of school and professional development are seen as being necessary.

Finally, the authors share a set of ‘rules’ (p 11) that they used for their network. A selection of rules are provided below;

6. Celebrating differences in ideas, experiences and concerns.

9. The network should enhance each individual educational practice.

13. Balance between theory and practice; between inside the network and the outer world: between reality and idealistic thoughts.

14. Communicating with the world outside the network by showing the ‘good practice’ from the schools and the network itself (by means of publishing books and articles, giving workshops, and participating in public education debate.

These ‘rules’ were formed over time and assist in the directing of the network. The full set are available in the article (p 11).

The authors espouse the use of networks in supporting schools, and in this article, focus on the advantages the university partners gain from the project - the opportunity to challenge their theoretical beliefs by putting them into practice in schools and for schools and educators the opportunities to reflect with ‘critical friends’, to become a reflective practitioner and to have a collective voice.

**Discussion and self-reflection questions**

1. Veugelers and Zijlstra argue that:

… a network has to be constructed; you cannot just declare a network. People have to experience themselves that they have something in common and that they can contribute to each other’s school development and professional development. (p 5)

When does a group of educators meeting become a network? How would you articulate the purpose of your network to someone who had not heard of it before?

1. Veugelers and Zijlstra provide a set of rules (p 11) they have used to assist in ‘directing’ their network. Clearly many of these rules have evolved out of this networks vision of purpose.

After reading through these rules reflect on the rules or guidelines you would like to see structure your network.

1. In Veugelers and Zijlstras’ network a major focus is supporting change agents in schools. As a network leader your role will be to support these ‘change agents’.

How will you become a catalyst for change? How will you identify the strengths, weaknesses and needs of your individual network members and their schools? How will you ensure their needs and expectations are met?