Social Professional Work and Education in The Netherlands

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(3000 words)

Background

The origin of social work in the Netherlands goes back to the years prior to WWII and the efforts of religious groups to relieve the poor. It is founded in the work of nuns, priests, brothers, vicars as well as middle class women doing charity work. Overtime, social work has developed into a predominantly female profession.

The real expansion of social work and social policy followed WWII. In the fifties, the Social and Christian Democratic coalition government increased state responsibilities for social welfare, which led to the shaping of a welfare state. Overall, the role of the government was mainly limited to the distribution of material compensation for the loss of income (e.g., unemployment, disability) and to the provision of a subsistence level. It subsidised efforts while Catholic, Protestant and socialist organisations implemented them. By the sixties, social policy and provision in the Netherlands had developed into a 'social democratic' welfare state (Esping-Anderson, 1993).

Today, the implementation of social policy is a shared responsibility between local and provincial governments, employers, trade unions, NGO's and the market; a development that has led to differences in the area of social provision. Although general social provision laws and regulations are still based at the national level, they are put into practice at lower levels of government and have a significant impact on client groups.

There is a focus on flexible social services as opposed to the former approach of fixed provisions based on fixed standards and procedures. Flexible services (e.g., multi-functional organisations for child and youth care) relate to the individual needs of clients and adapted care (e.g., client-linked budgets) is common in the provision of social services. Flexible social services also imply a more market-oriented approach promoting user involvement, user participation and client-centred social work as a way to ensure quality in the social system. In short, Dutch social policy places particular importance on employability, integration and privatisation.

The Emergence of Social Work Education

Social work education has a long tradition in the Netherlands. The first school of social work was founded in Amsterdam 1899 and is the oldest one in the world. The education of social workers was later concentrated in 'social academies' where curriculum focussed on intervening and improving the welfare of the poor. The main subjects concentrated on improving material conditions, supporting parents and children, decreasing illiteracy and promoting education. Altogether, the ultimate aim was to improve the mentality and moral standards of the poor.

These moral standards were related to the various religious and ideological movements that coloured the social and political stage in the Netherlands in the early twentieth century. Catholics, Protestants, Socialists and later Humanists were organised in 'pillars', a construction of Dutch society in which the various ideologies could institutionalise their interests at a social, cultural and political level. This pillarisation influenced social work education and led to the establishment of Protestant, Catholic and Socialist schools of social work in the 1920s.

More schools of social work were founded after WWII due to industrialisation and growing state interest in social policy. The number of students increased significantly in the sixties and seventies, resulting in about 40 independent 'Social Academies' in 1983 (Cornelissen, 1996). By the late eighties, a process of scale enlargement in higher professional education occurred. The Dutch government reduced the number of independent *hogescholen* (schools of higher professional education) from about 350 to 52. Today there are about 40,000 students in social work education at 23 *hogescholen* (HBO Raad 2001).

Social Work Education Curricula

The 1960s approach to social work education was limited to three traditions namely, case work, group work and community work. These approaches developed quickly into independent courses and programmes, which resulted in a huge diversity of curricula, and programmes based on the various social and cultural needs. Time has seen a decline in the traditional social work approaches, or theories (e.g., critical theory, behaviourism, psychosocial theory) and newer ones (e.g., systems theory) have emerged. Current social work theories embody a much more pragmatic approach to education based on the identification of targets and the means to reach them. The Dutch approach is typified by the notion that the client should be met in his/her natural environment. It focuses on measures of prevention and self-empowerment, which together allow for more evidence-based methods.

The significant restructuring of social work education in the nineties included a reduction in degree programmes. Currently there are six social work education programmes leading to a 4-year bachelor degree (HBO Raad 2001):

- Traditional social work (8,500 students)
- Social pedagogical work (14,000 students)
- Creative therapy (1,000 students)
- Community work (3,500 students)
- Social advocacy services (3,000 students)
- Personnel and labour management (10,000 students)

Social work education is open to individuals without a previous professional background in social work at the level of higher professional education. There are however successful *voortgezette opleidingen* (post-graduate courses) provided at some schools of social work. Graduates of social work programmes may continue with a doctorate degree at a university but their competitiveness is hindered by limited research skills since social work education's main emphasis is practice and, to as lesser extent, policy.

The first year in social work education is meant as a year of orientation, selection and consultation. It contains an introduction to the profession and relevant subjects: psychology, sociology, law, philosophy, social and economic history, creative play and other expressive work. The following three years continue with project-based work and include subjects like methodology and theory in the specific area of social work, economics, philosophy, law, social legislation, organisational development, research, statistics and information technology. The subjects provided are mostly integrated in the competence-based learning approach.

The Meaning of Social Worker

Unlike in some other countries in Europe, social work is not a contested profession in the Netherlands. It has its own rules and procedures as a profession, i.e., on distance kept from

clients, on objectives and outcomes and on added value thereof. The Dutch social worker is an intermediary between the vulnerable and their best possible level of participation in society. The social work profession is still mostly financed by the state (decentralised to local/regional governments) and provided by private, independent social welfare organisations. It is influenced by factors of modern society, i.e., quality control measures, increased case loads, competitive market mechanisms, outreach measures, generalist approaches, managerialism, and divided into six professional areas namely,

Traditional social workers
These social workers commonly form part of (private) social work oriented institutions financed by local governments. Quite often they are employed by institutions (e.g., child protection services, probation agencies, hospitals, schools, elderly homes) to investigate home situations, to assess support needs, to write-up reports on behalf of institution. Concerns about relationships, material matters, abuse and addiction are commonly addressed in this area of social work.

Social pedagogues
These social workers are largely based in residential surroundings such as psychiatric hospitals, homes for the mentally ill, child and youth homes, refugee centres and elderly homes. Lately, the move towards semi-residential settings (e.g., half way homes) and outreach work has brought these social workers closer to neighbourhoods and communities. The type of work done is largely related to organising the living conditions and the daily activities of a specific target group.

Creative therapists
These social workers are usually found in residential and institutional surroundings that include homes for children, hospitals, and prisons. They use creative arts such as music,

dance, theatre, painting, etc., as vehicles to address client needs. On occasion, these social work professionals may identify themselves as *therapists* rather than social workers.

Community workers
These social workers are found in government sponsored local and regional institutions to deal specifically with community development and work. Much of the work is project-based and targeted at specific groups. They aim to activate people in communities based on specific needs of the community and the current political interests in the area. They address issues like employment, public safety, neighbourhood development, etc.

Social advocates
These social workers focus on counselling in relation to social legal affairs. They are found in the office of the ombudsman, in legal aid services, in neighbourhood advice offices, and in government (e.g., social security departments). Although a relatively new social work profession, the playing field is expanding quickly to voluntary organisations, trade unions, housing corporations due to a combination of professional competences namely, legal knowledge and interpersonal communication skills.

Personnel and labour managers
These social workers deal mostly with personnel and labour relations within (large) public or private companies. The main aim is to optimise the company's existing work force and specific training in employment and career counselling is offered for this end. Although the profession has its roots in the social work sector, it has clearly shifted to the economic sector. The profession is commonly known as 'human resource management' in Economics and Business Administration programmes.

The Social Work Profession

Social work is a recognised and well-accepted profession in Dutch society. As a profession, it is in a natural state of change that accompanies social concerns as they appear and as they demand new approaches. Today, the social worker is going out to clients with the aim of working with them in their own environment. Working in the home and in the community are taking significant precedent over the residential settings of the recent past. There is a tendency to move towards more generalist approaches in the profession given the poor results yielded by interventions limited to one social aspect (Reverda, 1993). The social worker is in need of becoming a substantially versatile professional given an increasingly complex society; one that is multicultural and multidimensional, one that requires a multidisciplinary social work education in which competence-based learning is the outcome. Furthermore, the aim to establish an integrated approach to welfare provision is a challenge since it calls for on-going dialogue and co-operation with (local, regional) stakeholders, e.g., social workers, schools, the police, health care and local government.

The profession places significant attention on prevention. The task of the social worker is one to empower the client with instruments to gain confidence and to participate more optimally in society. Emphasis is placed on the development of actions that prevent personal, relational and social problems. Client groups are being 'activated' to optimise their strengths and to become enabled to move forward independently. Finally, the client's situational context is a focus. The previous focus on *the individual* to resolve a problem shifted towards *the individual's communication and interaction processes* as a focus for problem resolution.

From a legal perspective, Dutch law does not protect the social work profession. The interests and standards of social professionals are entirely covered by professional bodies such as the

Nederlandse Vereniging van Maatschappelijk Werkers (Dutch Association of Social Workers) and the *Nederlandse Vereniging voor Sociaal Pedagogische Hulpverleners* (Dutch Association for Social Pedagogue Workers). These associations uphold a professional code of ethics to which members automatically subscribe. They also have appropriate committees to address (client) concerns about social work professionals. Such concerns however need to be linked to the respective code of ethics.

The Social Worker and National Policy

Dutch welfare policy is put forward by Ministry of Welfare, Health and Cultural Affairs and generally aims to mobilise citizens, stimulate their participation and promote (re-) integration. The growing difficulties in the relevant sectors and the overall challenges faced in Dutch society have led to the restructuring of both care and welfare. The restructuring policy was formulated into interventions and characterised by van der Laan and Ploem (1998) as:

- The nature of care provisions changes from intense, specialised and individual service-oriented care towards a less intense generalised and network of care services approach.
- Care is brought closer to the community in terms of the service itself and the control thereof. Homecare becomes central.
- The needs of clients are parallel with the demands of consumers. The aim is to establish contracts between financiers and service providers with a sense of balance between supply and demand.
- Care management moves away from over-reaching state regulation towards a market orientation. Output budgeting is used to encourage care providers to fulfil policy aims.

Most social workers in the Netherlands work in the community as general, social workers. The approach works well in the decentralised system of service provision. Local authorities

look to social workers to tackle a list of local social concerns related to social exclusion, poverty, debt, crime, etc. The time and money spent to respond to so many *policy* challenges however is great and may call for a need to identify social work priorities rather than attempting to respond to all social policy interests (Van der Laan and Ploem, 1998).

The European dimension

The very nature of life in a modern European society implies a certain *europeanisation* or *internationalisation.* The target groups social workers encounter vary in ethnicity, history, and practices. These include people originating from Morocco, Turkey, Suriname, rather than the all-Dutch target group of the past. And, while the local context remains very important in the practice of social work, it is a context composed of several ethnicities. Furthermore, it is difficult to conceive that European states could be beyond the impact of supranational structures in relation to their own national social policies and practice. The current processes of modernisation and globalisation entail an undeniable degree of interdependence among states.

European programmes like Erasmus or Socrates enhance the European dimension in social work education. In addition, several efforts have been made to host foreign students wishing to conduct practical social research in the Netherlands. Further efforts include the establishment of modules like ‘international social work’ and the teaching of parts of a programme in English (e.g., an English programme in the fourth year in Amsterdam). Lastly, the introduction of ‘international weeks’ in curricula presents a specific occasion to focus on European issues and is quite successful at internationalising social work education.

The belief in the added value of a European dimension in higher social work education led to the development of a Master of Arts in Comparative European Social Studies (MACESS). The programme delivered by the Hogeschool Zuyd, Maastricht and validated by the London Metropolitan University was set up in co-operation with a Socrates network of 28 universities and colleges all over Europe. Most of its contributors are (teaching-) staff from the participating institutions and invited experts on specific subjects. MACESS is for graduate social professionals, e.g., social workers, social pedagogues and care workers and offers the opportunity to conduct European comparative research in social professional practice and/or social policy.

Current challenges

The history of social work in the Netherlands has developed gradually from its initial concentration on social problems like poverty, to dealing with individual psychosocial problems (rather than basic needs) during the prosperous welfare state years. Now the Dutch are in a *managed care* period where social work professionals are largely being told their aims and target groups. A great deal is determined by the organisation providing the funding for social work (van Riet 1999).

The continuously growing, complex social changes and challenges in Dutch society are creating situations where more people are at risk of social exclusion. The social worker needs to acquire new competencies to discover - alongside the client – the best way towards empowerment and a meaningful (re-) integration and participation in society. Social work competencies need to reflect today's market-oriented society and the dilemmas faced by the profession caused by this reality. Finding a balanced working approach that combines efficiency, effectiveness and assistance to those in need is no simple task. The social workers'

context is more complex and it becomes necessary to look beyond individual cases and towards a professional contribution to the well being of citizens and welfare on a whole.

Social workers need to learn continuously through practice and to move within a learning and information society. The ability to adapt working methods and to deal with change becomes critical to both practitioners and educators alike. Thus, increased co-operation between professionals in education and in social work practice can lead to more well-prepared social workers capable of mastering their profession in challenging times. Increased co-operation in the Netherlands has led to substantial experimentation in methodologies and approaches and has resulted in the implementation of project-based learning in social work educational programmes. The approach is very student-oriented and emphasises the students' ability to develop the competencies necessary to practice and develop the social work profession today and tomorrow.

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