

Ria from Germany

Freedom and boundaries

Ria is a 29-year-old teacher with five years of teaching experience in several age groups and schools. She teaches 6 to 10-year-olds four days a week in a German primary school, and also teaches several hours in a Dutch primary school. This year she is teaching a German year 3, with children aged nine and ten. At the German school she teaches mathematics, German, social sciences (geography, history and biology) and PE. Other subjects, such as swimming, music and religion, are taught by her colleagues. On the days she teaches at the Dutch school, her Dutch colleague teaches Dutch to Ria's year 3.

Context

Ria's school is situated in a village near the border with the Netherlands. The school has parallel classes each year. "I meet my colleague weekly. We discuss which themes we will use, what content will be taught and we set goals together". Since German primary pre-service teachers do not study all school subjects, teacher pairs in parallel classes complement each other in pedagogical content knowledge. "In Germany, one studies German, mathematics, or both, but majors in one of the subjects. My major was math and my colleague majored in German. She prepares the lessons for German, I'm responsible for the lessons for mathematics and social sciences. We come together, discuss the lessons, exchange ideas and adapt what we need to before the practical implementation. In general, this is how all teams cooperate". What is special about Ria's school is that the teacher pairs stay together for four years. They start with class one and stay with the same children until they leave school when they are ten. This is done to help build a positive pedagogical relationship between teachers and children and to stimulate children's social emotional development.

Aside from her parallel colleague, Ria cooperates with other experts in the area of German and social studies. Core goals are set by the regional government, but it is up to the teachers to decide on the order of topics, the didactic strategies and methods used. In that respect, Ria experiences more autonomy here than in the Dutch school where she teaches and in schools where she worked before. In her view, this freedom of action has pros and cons.

Organisational issues and power relations

One advantage of this autonomy is that a teacher can try out and adapt different didactic strategies. However, a disadvantage might be that continuous learning and development in the curriculum doesn't happen. Also, teachers with less autonomy are more easily seen as a team, instead of as a group of individuals. "In Duisburg for example, teachers were a unit,

with difficult parents as their clients. But they all worked together. They all had good relations with parents, and respected one another”.

The feeling of shared responsibility can also be strengthened by the headmaster, without taking all the autonomy away from individual teachers. “They had a very nice headmistress, who felt like a fellow worker. She asked if everybody was satisfied, if anyone needed assistance, if anything needed improvement. That was so nice (...). Everybody respected her, we really saw her professionalism”.

In Ria’s current work situation, fewer agreements are made and what has been agreed upon is not always followed up by all. This might lead to differences in didactic approach. “But with that, problems appear, just because expectations or the framework is not clear. In Emmerich, rules were straightforward, and they were accepted and adopted. Here, if you don’t get along very well, you just do your own thing. Classwork is not done under the common theme for example”. In addition to differences in didactic approaches, it might also lead to a greater diversity in how teachers interact with children and parents. “Here, many teachers come from the region. If they went to the same school as the parents, then there is little distance between them. Some teachers WhatsApp with parents, other use email or give their private number”.

Change

Two important changes have taken place in primary schools over the last five years, according to Ria: an increase in the number of children who need special care and an expansion of the pedagogical task. Both changes can give rise to a feeling of incompetence. Ria attended facultative courses in the university about children with orthopedagogical needs. She also did an internship in a special school in Dortmund, where she learned a lot about cooperation between special education teachers and teachers in regular primary school. However, her main subject was German. She was insufficiently prepared during her studies to deal with special needs in education, while there are more and more children with learning, social, hearing, or visual disabilities in her classroom and school. To increase her competence, she cooperates with institutions and professionals outside education. “In the afternoon, after my lessons, every now and then I consult several institutions, face-to-face or by phone, like a speech therapist, child psychiatrist or the pedagogical centre”. The conversations are mainly about how to support children in the classroom. “I ask if the pedagogues have any ideas, and discuss things with orthopedagogical experts”.

The pedagogical task, to guide children in their social, emotional and moral development, has also increased. “Socio-cultural changes are creating more needy people. There are more and more patchwork families, new problems arise, new approaches are needed. How am I going to deal with it, when a child comes to me, totally sad, and tells me that mummy and daddy are going to divorce. Nevertheless, I am still expected to lead the whole class, to organise my class management”. Daily events demonstrate that parents consider teachers to

be responsible for matters they were not responsible for in the past. “They simply shift responsibility to us. Not all of course, but some do not even know which assignments will appear in the test. They ask: “How come my child has not finished his homework yet? After my work ends at five, I still have to do homework, while they were in school the whole day. Why have they not finished yet? And children are trusted while doing their homework, but they need guidance”. Besides homework, some parents consider teachers to be responsible for the nurturing and upbringing of the child, such as taking care of the food. “Look in the backpack of my son, there are still leftovers of his bread.” Yes of course, I can help take care, but the final responsibility for the school bag is theirs. So please, check your child’s bag frequently.”

Professional values

In such a situation, with the increasing autonomy of the teacher and a changing context requiring a lot of teachers, several values are important to Ria: openness, responsibility and cooperation.

Openness

Ria sees openness and directly addressing each other, especially when you do not agree with one another, as important aspects of professionalism. However, she does not label this as professional feedback, but as criticism. “I am a human being, I am very open. I will ask for a talk and formulate friendly. Wouldn’t it be better to do it like this? What is holding you back? I sometimes have an idea, which I wrap up a bit”. Ria thinks that being open and direct is important among all those involved in the educational process. “Yes, it refers to everything and everybody. It refers to new methods and didactic strategies, it refers to working together with colleagues, it refers to cooperation with parents and being transparent in relation to children, also when you are worried. You do not have to know everything”. In the Dutch school, Ria was positively surprised by the symbolic open doors of classrooms. To her, these show there is nothing to hide: we all act, we all make mistakes, we all learn, preferably together.

Responsibility

Another important aspect of teachers’ professionalism, in Ria’s view, is to assign and accept responsibility. Responsibility starts with one’s own well-being. “Yes, that is simple. You need to take your health seriously and to remain balanced. You cannot accept all tasks. It should fit with your competencies. You carry responsibility for yourself, your children, your colleagues”. And last but not least, one needs to take responsibility for one’s own professional development.

Cooperation

According to Ria, cooperation is an important tool for individual professional development and also for curriculum development and to improve the quality of a school. "Teamwork, to be 'teamphähig', means that one is willing to develop together, to do peer- or team-teaching, in combination with openness. That you look at it together and enjoy it, and that you adopt new things from one another, that's what I like. Teamwork and collaboration with parents".

Professional dilemmas, successes and disappointments

Ria sees teaching as a vulnerable profession, in which judging takes place every day. "You are judged by the children. Is she strict? Is she nice? Is she lovely? Does she play nice games with us? You are judged by the parents, you are judged by your colleagues. With this one I would like to collaborate, he is super, but that one, no thanks. And you are judged by the headmaster". But expectations are sometimes contradictory and a teacher cannot meet all of them, which is a constant dilemma. "You can be loved by the children and by the parents when you are friendly. But do you also know and see the children and their educational development? Being judged can motivate you or break you down". The biggest professional disappointments were and are when Ria experiences limits to what she can do, either because she is not capable enough, or it is outside of her range as a teacher. "It is difficult when you encounter limitations. When you can tell that a child is having severe difficulties at home. Material stuff might be there, but the parents do not care. And I cannot do anything about it. My hands are tied. While you would like to strive for so much better. But you cannot take on all the problems and sorrows". According to Ria, the biggest professional successes are when something new was tried in order to help a child forward, and it worked out. And that despite everything, the judgements and the many failures, "children go forward with leaps and bounds. And you, as a teacher, become more competent and self-reliant all the time".