
Flipping the Educational System: putting teachers at the heart of teaching

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ABSTRACT This article describes an initiative led by two classroom teachers from the Netherlands to put teachers back at the centre of the educational process. The article argues that the educational system has become inverted, with those who are most influential (teachers) having the least opportunity to influence. The challenge is to 'flip the system' so that government and school leaders throughout the system are focused on supporting teachers.

In December 2012, Jelmer Evers, a history teacher from a progressive school, and I, a maths teacher with a more traditional approach to teaching, joined forces to write a book in which we wanted to articulate an alternative to the rise of neoliberalism in the Dutch education system. In the agenda of high-stakes accountability, privatisation and standardisation that our government was pushing we recognised a global trend of educational reform that had in general turned other educational systems for the worst. As other parties in Holland, such as the unions, were silent on the subject, we, as two teachers, decided to act. We began by securing the help of many other teachers and educational experts such as Andy Hargreaves, Howard Gardner, Gert Biesta and Paul Kirschner to contribute to our book. During the writing of this book, dubbed *Het Alternatief* in Dutch, a key concept surfaced, which turned out to be pivotal to our proposed alternative; we called it *flipping the system*. In this article I will discuss *flip the system* as a new paradigm for educational reform, and its potential for educational change and action on a global scale.

The Death of the Teacher

The last forty years have been interesting decades for education, and there have been a number of developments that have had a noticeable impact on teaching as a profession. First of all, there has been a rise in popularity of constructivist

theories that have given rise to a ‘learnification’ (Biesta, 2006) of education. Second, we have seen a postmodern critique of authoritarian forms of teaching and of the use of authority in general. Third, there has been a silent explosion of learning (Field, 2000) through the surfacing of modern technology, leading to an explosion of non-formal and informal learning. And last, but definitely not least, there is the impact neoliberal policies and politics of education have had on educational systems (also see Biesta, 2014). All these developments have more or less contributed, in a more postmodern sense, to the ‘death of the teacher’. The death of the very idea that the teacher has something to ‘add’ or to ‘contribute’, the death of the idea that the teacher is essential rather than accidental to education (Biesta, 2014).

In more recent years, we have seen the attention to teacher quality resurface. Take, for instance, the famous quote ‘the quality of an educational system cannot exceed the quality of the teacher’ coined by an influential McKinsey report. But rather than this having led to a revitalising of the teacher profession and an increased investment in teacher professionalism, it has actually led instead to an increase in *teacher bashing* and teacher *deprofessionalisation*. Teachers are blamed for flaws and failed outcomes in the educational system, wherein it has more often than not led to a decrease in the discretionary space of teachers – forcing teachers to employ evidence-based strategies that ‘work’, instead of leaving it to the professional judgement of teachers to decide what is the best course of action in their particular classroom situation.

Flip the System

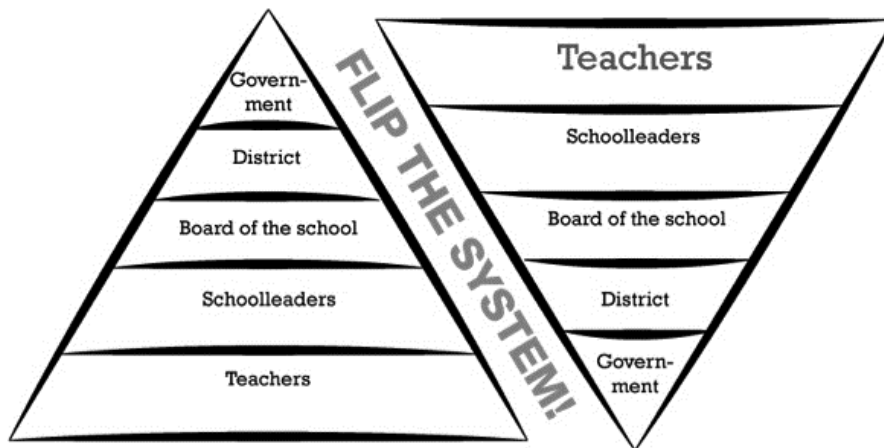


Figure 1. The flipped pyramid first appeared in Ed Dirkswager, Kim Farris-Berg & Amy Junge (2012) *Trusting Teachers with School Success: what happens when teachers call the shots*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Our proposed solution to many of these problems is to *flip the system*, as detailed in Figure 1. Whereas in the left pyramid teachers answer to every layer above them – where the question ‘what can the teacher do for me?’ resonates throughout the system - the pyramid on the right details the complete opposite situation. Here teachers answer to no one but themselves as a collective profession in their own right and on an even level with the rest of society. The questions that resonate throughout this flipped system are: How are you doing? What do you want? And, what can I do to support you?

The suggestion that we should place those who are shaping the primary process of education in the lead is in itself only mildly contentious. It is an idea we have heard echoed in the company of Richard Semler, software giant Valve Software, in teacher-led schools in the USA, and in the collective professional autonomy in education systems such as Finland. But what is problematic is that when we view a flipped system as a desirable outcome of system intervention, we have to consider how we would move there. Moreover, particularly problematic is that teachers have deprofessionalised to such an extent that they act as if they are ‘dead’, using the government pressures and regulations as a sort of ‘safety blanket’ to justify their lack of professional-ethical behaviour. In *Het Alternatief*, Thijs Jansen, researcher and founder of the Professional Pride Institute, likened this type of teacher professional behaviour to ‘voluntary slavery’, a term first coined by the 17-year-old Etienne de la Boetie in his essay *Discours de la Servitude Volontaire ou Contr’un* in 1549.

This is why the process of *flipping the system* should more resemble a process of emancipation than a ‘system intervention’, a process where the ‘voice’ of teachers is given a meaningful place, whereas it was first considered to be ‘noise’ (Rancière, 1999). But the process cannot originate from a starting point of inequality, where teachers attempt to overcome this inequality. It is rather that teachers act on an assumption of being equal, refusing to allow, and interrupting, the working of powers in the educational system, starting to generate a new ‘language of education’ or a ‘teachers’ language’ to strengthen education from outward forces, and beginning to lay claim to positions and a discretionary space that they had not been entitled to before.

To initiate this process, it is not simply a question of the government telling teachers to emancipate. Rather, it must be a question of teachers initiating this process themselves. This is why Jelmer and I approached Education International, the worldwide organisation of teacher unions, to spread the message of our lessons learned in order to develop a truly global ‘alternative’, an approach to flipping educational systems worldwide, because we believe that all teachers could benefit from teacher leadership in a globally connected fashion. An impressive array of experts and teachers have already pledged their contribution to this upcoming book. If all goes to plan we hope you will be reading all about it at the time of next year’s International Teacher Summit when our book *Flipping the System: the alternative* will be published.

References

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