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“THIS ONE IS STRONGER” SPOTLIGHTS ON THE LIFELONG LEARNING PROFESSIONAL-IN- ACTION

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ABSTRACT

“This one is stronger.” Spotlights on the lifelong learning professional-in-action

Around the world, lifelong learning is being promoted as a strategy for coping with the changing realities of life and work. The fourth Sustainable Development Goal, agreed in September 2015, reflects this: “ensure equitable and inclusive quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”. Despite its importance, doubts remain about the implementation of this goal in practice (Regmi, 2015; Van der Kamp, 2000). This article looks at the practice of lifelong learning from the point of view of the professionals involved, their actions and the way these actions are challenged, supported and further developed. Following Schön’s “reflection-in-action” (1983), the term “professional-in-action” is used to stress the role of the professional in making the difference on the ground. The leading question is: how can lifelong learning professionals be supported in their contribution to the surrounding society

and its citizens? The professionals-in-action featured in this article include professionals based in the Netherlands as well as in other, less privileged contexts. Meaningful experiences are used to build a story about challenges, the right to exist, commitment, recognition and room to manoeuvre. The experiences reveal the importance of interacting with the learner and the professional space that is necessary to achieve this. Professionalization in professional learning communities and practice-oriented research must accompany this professional space.

Keywords

Lifelong learning, professional, professional space, professionalization, practice-oriented research

SAMENVATTING

“Deze is sterker”. Spotlights op de leven lang leren professional-in-actie

Om te kunnen omgaan met de veranderende realiteit in leven en werk, wordt wereldwijd een leven lang leren aangemoedigd. Het vierde duurzame ontwikkelingsdoel, vastgesteld in september 2015, weerspiegelt dit: “het verzekeren van kwalitatief goed onderwijs en het bevorderen van de mogelijkheden om een leven lang te leren voor iedereen”. Ondanks het belang van dit doel, is er twijfel over de uitvoerbaarheid in de praktijk (Regmi, 2015; Van der Kamp, 2000). Dit artikel gaat in op de praktijk van een leven lang leren vanuit het perspectief van de professionals, hun acties en de ondersteuning en ontwikkeling daarvan. In navolging van Schön's “reflectie-in-actie” (1983), wordt de term “professional-in-actie” gebruikt om de rol van de professional in de praktijk van een leven lang leren te benadrukken. Leidende vraag is hoe professionals kunnen worden ondersteund in hun bijdrage aan de omringende samenleving en haar burgers. De professionals-in-actie in dit artikel omvatten professionals in de Nederlandse context, maar ook in andere, minder geprivilegieerde contexten. Betekenisvolle ervaringen worden gebruikt om een betoog op te bouwen over de uitdagingen, het recht van bestaan, de betrokkenheid, erkenning en professionele ruimte. De ervaringen tonen het belang van interactie met de deelnemers en de professionele ruimte om daar invulling aan te geven. Deze professionele ruimte dient gepaard te gaan met professionalisering in professionele leergemeenschappen en praktijkgericht onderzoek.

Trefwoorden

Een leven lang leren, professional, professionele ruimte, professionalisering, praktijkgericht onderzoek

INTRODUCTION

“This one is stronger”, concludes a little boy in Kindergarten, looking at the scales. It is autumn and the children have collected chestnuts, pinecones and acorns. They put them on the scales and look, estimate, try out and discuss. They discover that, if there is a pinecone on one side, then one chestnut on the other side is not enough to balance the scales. The observation “this one is stronger” is made by one of the children, whose command of the Dutch language is still limited. The teacher reacts with an encouraging “Well done!”. The classroom situation is recorded and when we view the video in class, the teacher, who is also my student, explains: “The boy should have said ‘heavier’, but I did not want to correct him because he expressed the right idea”. (Haarlem/Alkmaar, the Netherlands, 2014).

This story reflects an everyday situation in a Dutch Kindergarten. There is a boy with a certain background; there is teaching material enriched with materials from the environment; there are children interacting; there is a student teacher; and, of course, there is the setting of a classroom in a school in the Netherlands. The action of the student teacher supported the learning process of the boy and the other children, as she explained later on. The presentation of this primary school classroom situation may appear out of place at the start of an article on lifelong learning. Yet the learning process of children is one of many learning processes at the start of their lifelong learning career, which will extend throughout their lives both inside and outside educational settings (see Jarvis, 2007). The actions of a student teacher can influence this career in a decisive manner. That is why I have presented this story in the framework of lifelong learning and why I regard this student as a lifelong learning professional-in-action. The details of the action are important. As a professional, the student teacher interprets the boy’s statement, appreciates its value and acts accordingly. All this happens in seconds. She brings knowledge to the situation about mathematics, physics, classroom management and child development. This knowledge helps her to make judgments, but it does not tell her how to act. The situation does not allow for much time to reflect on which action should be taken. The action needs to be immediate in order to encourage the boy to continue to discover the world, find words for what he encounters and join in the game with the other children.

This example stems from my experience as teacher educator.¹ It is included here to show the importance of moments like this one in learning processes and the good (or bad) a professional can do in the heat of the moment. The student teacher could have corrected the words of the boy, discouraging him to express his thoughts on subsequent occasions and placing him outside of the group. Instead, she gave meaning to the boy’s observation in the context of the group’s activity.

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By doing this, she not only contributed to the learning process of the boy and his classmates, but she also took a stance in the theoretical and political debate on teaching and learning. Unlike the common interpretation of evidence-based education, in which test results are promoted as almost the only basis for action, the student uses data generated by observation and knowledge of the context to inform her action (Keijzer, Van der Linden, Bos-Vos & Verbeek-Pleune, 2011). Expanding on the notion of evidence-based education, she creates her own professional space to act in the way that she deems appropriate for that particular child in that particular situation (Hooerman, 2015).

Worldwide, lifelong learning is cited as a strategy by which to cope with changing realities in life and work. Following Jarvis (2007, p.1), lifelong learning processes are understood as:

The combination of processes throughout a lifetime whereby the whole person (...) experiences social situations, the perceived contents of which is then transformed cognitively, emotively or practically (...) and integrated into the individual person's biography resulting in a continually changing (...) person.

The formulation of the fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG4), which was agreed in September 2015, reflects this topicality. The goal reads: "ensure equitable and inclusive quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all".² Although the importance of lifelong learning is recognized, there is doubt about its implementation in practice. Authors such as Borg and Mayo (2005); Martin (2003) and Van der Kamp (2000) have identified a gap between lifelong learning policies and practice in the past. Referring to the new SDG4 and its significance for what he calls the "least developed countries", Regmi (2015) points at a similar phenomenon. This leads us beyond policies to practices in which teachers and other professionals encourage people to engage in learning. Authors like Biesta (2013) claim teachers play a crucial role in creating learning opportunities. On the other hand, Tonkens (2008) describes the hurdles that teachers and other professionals encounter, pointing out the challenges facing them, such as bureaucracy and marketization.

This article will take a closer look at the role of lifelong learning professionals, their actions and the way these actions are challenged, supported and further developed. Lifelong learning professionals support lifelong learning processes in the broad sense of Jarvis' definition (2007). Their professionalism is based on training and experience. As the opening story shows, they bring knowledge to the situations that they supervise, but they need to use their virtuosity in the

terms of Biesta (2013) to deal with the complexity of each situation (Kunneman, 2013). They are teachers, trainers, educators, social workers, coaches or the like. Their actions are always social in the sense that they relate to learners in their context. Thus, they may be regarded as social interventionists, whose actions are connected with values and views on education and knowledge development (Kunneman, 2013). Following Schön's (1983) "reflection-in-action", this article uses the term "professional-in-action" to stress the role of the professional in making the difference on the ground. The leading question is: how can lifelong learning professionals be supported in their contribution to the surrounding society and its citizens? This implies that we firstly must understand what the contribution of these professionals entails, and secondly how this contribution can be supported and further developed.

Throughout my working life I have witnessed many professionals-in-action such as the student teacher described at the opening of this article. I will present some inspiring meaningful experiences to build a story about challenges, the right to exist, commitment, recognition and room to manoeuvre. The experiences vary in terms of context, perspective and description. They can be regarded as "snapshots", each preceding a step in answering the leading question. The professionals-in-action featured include professionals based in the Netherlands, but also in other less stable contexts. As lifelong learning professionals, they do not work in formal education alone, but also in other types of education and learning including social work. The focus on their actions when interacting with learners will lead to the identification of key factors in their contribution to society and ways to support and develop this contribution. In the next section, we start our journey in a rural area of Mozambique in southern Africa and discuss professional potential and the difficulty of developing this potential.

CONTROL, ACCOUNTABILITY AND RESPONSIBILITY

In 2005 I sat in on a class about small business and entrepreneurship for adult learners, in the hills of Manica Province, Mozambique. The participants, all literacy learners, were squeezed into children's desks at a primary school. One by one they presented the product or service that they wanted to sell, referring to the niche in the market they had discovered. The products ranged from arts and crafts to crops and retail on a small scale; the services offered were refrigerator repair, tailoring and welding. The educator asked critical questions and guided the participants into developing their business plans. He used learning materials developed by international organizations but adapted them to the local circumstances in this province of Mozambique, relating the materials to the experiences of the learners. During the break, the

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district officer dropped in on his motorcycle and talked to the educator about the adaptations to the programme that were needed. (Manica Province, Mozambique, 2005)

The session described above was part of a vocational skills training course complementing an adult literacy course. Most of the literacy learners in Manica Province, which borders Zimbabwe, were already working in small businesses to generate income for their families. The training course was meant to improve on what they were already doing and to strengthen the strategies they had chosen. The materials for the course had been developed by an international organization and purchased at a high price. The educators were taught how to use them through training programmes. Together with a Mozambican colleague I was involved in the project as an evaluator. I witnessed the difficulties that the educators had in mastering the content of the materials. It was decided that only those who were trained adult educators would conduct the training course as a pilot. I was surprised by the knowledgeable dedication of the educators in Manica. As evaluators, my colleague and I observed that these professionals had a great deal of knowledge of the local environment, the infrastructure, the people and the local market, and yet they were approached as if they were merely there to apply pre-developed materials. “Decentralisation” was the slogan of the Mozambican government and of many other African governments at the time. Our recommendation to take this slogan seriously and build on the capacity of the local professionals was accepted by the Ministry of Education and Culture, but did not lead to further action. The energy and dedication of the professionals could have been put to much better use by enriching the learning materials, developing new materials on related subjects and reaching more literacy learners. But the small business course was repeated in the same way in other provinces. The same costly materials were used for small groups of people without making use of the available human and social resources and without building on the experience gained (Van der Linden & Manuel, 2011).

The use of pre-developed materials in this example can be seen as evidence-based practice: both learners and professionals benefit from the experience of others. For the (inter)national bodies in charge the use of these materials was a way to exert control. This is understandable in a country where most teachers lack proper training. On the other hand, the potential of the professionals involved was not fully utilized nor developed for use in the future. The complexity of each situation must be acknowledged (Schön, 1983), and professionals should be acknowledged for taking their responsibility and not shying away from this complexity (Kunneman, 2013). The use of pre-developed materials is not to be avoided altogether, nor is filling out forms, writing reports or following procedures, but when these dominate the professional-in-action, the complexity of the situation is denied. This may be characterized as the logic of bureaucracy, under which

professionals are merely executing what others have thought of. The logic of bureaucracy may exert control over the work of professionals to such an extent that they no longer feel trusted to do their job according to their own judgment (Biesta, 2010; Spierts, 2014; Tonkens, 2008). Professionals may feel pressure to mould every child, client or participant to the same frame. This pressure decreases their freedom to manoeuvre and endangers the professional's engagement with the learners in their specific context.

The solution is not to get rid of bureaucracy or control procedures, but to make use of these on a human scale (compare the professional bureaucracy of Mintzberg, 2013). Functional bureaucracy must be combined with professional responsibility. This is quite a challenging balance to achieve, as Lipsky (2010) describes in relation to "street level bureaucrats" in public service. In Lipsky's analysis, street level bureaucrats must negotiate the pressure of the bureaucracy to which they are accountable and the demands of the citizens they are serving (see also Schout, 2007). The first key factor is to acknowledge the way professionals assume the responsibility to act in complex situations and to search for appropriate ways to support them. Referring to the example at the start of this paragraph, recognition of the experiences of the adult learning professionals could have resulted in enriching the pre-developed materials with local knowledge and they themselves could have become the supervisors of new training courses expanding on what they learned during the pilot. The next example takes us to a girls' secondary school in a rural area in western Sudan and will help us understand more about the nature of the complexity on the ground.

CITIZENS, CONSUMERS AND CONTEXT

"Why do children in Holland not learn Arabic as a second language?" a girl asked me. I was accompanying a rural extension fieldtrip to a remote area in western Sudan and had been invited to give a guest lecture on the importance of learning English at a secondary school for girls. I thought I could demonstrate the importance by drawing a map of the world on the blackboard, then speaking Dutch while pointing at the Netherlands and speaking Arabic while pointing at Sudan. "Don't you think we need an international language to communicate?" I asked. The girl took me by surprise with her out-of-the-box solution and made me reconsider my own assumptions and biases. (Northern Kordofan, Sudan, 1997)

That girl was bright! She had considered my question from her own point of view, without going for the obvious answer. Arabic was probably already a second language for this girl, and she wondered why Dutch children would not go through the same effort of learning Arabic as

a language of instruction at Dutch schools. This would facilitate communication, just as using English as a common international language does. The girl was much more knowledgeable about her situation than I was and taught me a lesson I will never forget. Her question drew my attention to her perspective and to the difficult job of expressing oneself in a second language. The complexity in this case could be interpreted as an example of the way the global "North" imposes a northern perspective on development, ignoring the perspective of the global "South", as Preece (2009) states. The bright girl voiced the struggles of the students in her classroom and those of so many other students who are forced to express themselves in a second language. The language issue, as a power issue, also plays a role for the boy in the first example and for the literacy learners in the second example who had to learn Portuguese in addition to their mother tongue.

While the first two examples concerned the actions of professionals, this example puts the spotlight on a learner (and a blundering professional). It teaches us how important it is to listen to the participants and to learn from them. Participants deserve to be treated as citizens expressing the realities of the context in which they live, rather than as consumers who only process ready-made "bites" of education or other services as the logic of the market contends (Van der Laan, 2006). The use of standard methods, standard approaches and standard views can easily blind the user to the realities experienced by the learners. The story about this clever girl reflects the importance of identifying "the question behind the question", placing the learners in their context in order to understand their background and how they cope with this background. In this case, the context was a secondary school in a remote area of western Sudan. At the time, there was a war going on between southern and northern Sudan, adversely affecting the western region due to reduced investment in education and other essential goods (Lindijer, 2015). This context contrasts with that of the primary school in the Netherlands of the first story, where the blackboard is a digital whiteboard and resources such as scales are available to illustrate the subjects being taught. The challenge for professionals is to familiarize themselves with the context from the perspective of the "other" (see Kapuściński, 2008).

While Preece explores the Southern perspective and promotes it almost exclusively, I would take up the challenge of a dialogue that bridges different contexts (Zeelen, 2015; Zeelen & Van der Linden, 2009). The voice of the South is polyphone. Different contexts call for different actions and interventions. In (post-)conflict situations, rebuilding the educational system calls for appropriate policies and strategies, which make the most of the existing human and natural

resources (UNESCO, 2011). More stable conditions, in which people and institutions are on their way to recovering from past conflicts, call for fine-tuning and implementation. Everywhere, in the global “North” as well as in the global “South”, the challenge is not to take things for granted, unintentionally speaking the language of the ruling power. As Freire (1970) stated, the power balance can only be corrected if the mainstream view is identified as dominant and makes way for the view “from below”. What counts is how the perspective of the learners as citizens is sought and taken into account. Instead of approaching the learner as a consumer, according to the logic of the market, “the logic of the learner” must be followed in a similar manner to the logic of the client, as discussed by Van der Laan (2006). The second key factor relates to dealing with assertive citizens and market-oriented customers. It relates to the perspective of the learner: learning from the learners is imperative if we are to genuinely account for our actions and interventions. The following story takes us to Sudan again, to explore the role of professionals promoting learning processes in individuals and communities.

THE PROFESSIONAL'S RIGHT TO EXIST

While my companion went to seek help, I sat beside my car waiting for it to be repaired. A makeshift shed protected me from the heat of the Sudanese sun. A young boy appeared to keep me company under the shed. He said he had heard the whack of a burst tyre. We chatted a bit. I told him I worked at Ahfad University for Women in the Sudanese capital. The boy replied: “I know that university. The girls came to our village to talk about female circumcision”. I felt proud that the students of my university had played that role. Although I did not know the students who had visited that particular village, I had accompanied many students on rural extension fieldtrips to villages near and far from the capital. The harmful practice of female circumcision was always one of the themes to be discussed. This was done through role-play, discussions and other methods, prepared at the university but finalized in the field. (Northern Kordofan, Sudan, 2001)

The boy in this short story articulates the impression left by the visiting students on the closed society of a village, where a boy is sent to accompany a woman sitting beside her car. The students had the courage to discuss the topic of female circumcision and take a stance against this harmful practice, which is deeply rooted in tradition. The wording “female genital mutilation” supported their message through the language used. Although the girls, being university students, were regarded as outsiders, they were only relative outsiders concerning harmful traditional practices. Most of the students at Ahfad University had been circumcised themselves and were experts by

experience. They were highly motivated to fulfil the mission of Ahfad University to act as change agents in Sudanese society (Ahmed, 2006; Bedri, 2007). The university acted as a collective memory, building on the experiences of the girls and improving strategies and methods.

As professionals, the students interacted with the villagers and left an impression on the boy. Follow-up was needed to really change practices. In 2015 my former colleagues told me that cooperation with the villagers and their organizations had become a much stronger element in the fieldtrips. In this example we see how the professional's right to exist lies in connecting with the context and the power to realize change in that context, while continuously reflecting on and improving the interventions carried out. In the repressive Sudanese context, Sen's (1999) argument that people's quality of life not only benefits from economic development, but even more from freedom is all the more valid. Each individual has the right to live a life worthy of human dignity. Elaborating on this argument, Nussbaum's (2011) capabilities approach stresses that each individual is entitled to freedom, choice and basic social justice. She lists ten central capabilities, including life, bodily health, bodily integrity, emotions, playing and others. In the case of female circumcision the bodily integrity of women is at stake, as well as their bodily health, since many women suffer from complications as a result of this operation, which is often performed without proper hygiene and care. Sometimes their life, also one of the capabilities, is endangered. The capabilities list has universal value. Although female circumcision is tradition in some parts of the South, the rights to bodily integrity, bodily health and life cannot be bargained with.

While Nussbaum holds governments, laws and regulations, which indeed form an important base, responsible, the interventions of professionals are still needed. They strengthen the actions of citizens who break with harmful traditions and gain capabilities combined with the conditions to realize the integrity of their body. The right to exist of lifelong learning professionals lies in the way they contribute to availing citizens of freedoms and capabilities, always in cooperation with the people involved, making their voices heard, intervening and withdrawing when necessary. This comes close to what Spierts (2014) calls “activation”, but while activation can easily be associated with inactivity and passivity on the part of the people concerned, the role of the professional who starts from the logic of the learner is more modest and always connects with the voice of the people as citizens. The word “citizens” refers to participants in a community, in whose words the interest of the community echoes (Tonkens, 2008). The third key factor relates to the normative dimension of the interventions of the lifelong learning professionals, in all their modesty. They act in a way that is “virtue-based” (Biesta, 2013) as “normative professionals” (Kunneman, 2013). The goal is to improve the quality of life of the people involved. Interventions, methods and

results, which in some cases go against ruling norms and traditions, have to be accounted for in the light of this goal. The next example takes us to northwestern Uganda to explore the commitment of the professional to this normative goal.

PROFESSIONALS STAYING ON COURSE

In October 2013 I accompanied my former colleague Amy Flynn³ to northwestern Uganda where she supports a community development organization uniting a women's group and a youth group. Amy was born in southern Sudan, but fled from the war zone in that area to northwestern Uganda with her parents and sisters. She grew up there. She completed her education at Ahfad University for Women in northern Sudan and at the Institute for Social Studies in The Hague in the Netherlands, where she had to stay due to health reasons. We spent our days in Uganda in and around the building that was constructed after a great deal of hard work on the part of the local organization supported by money collected by Amy's organization from several sources in the Netherlands. I observed people lining up to discuss matters with Amy, ranging from the local news to family matters to the strategy of the organization. In her own words, Amy – with her background in the area and her knowledge of the Netherlands – acted as a “bridge” between the different contexts, cultures, expectations. (Koboko, Uganda, 2013)

This example shows how parties from different backgrounds can come together to make a difference for a community with a turbulent history. There is a local community development organization, in which women and youth from the community cooperate; there is Amy, who has strong ties to this community but now lives in the Netherlands; there are Dutch donor organizations; there are participants in the activities of the local organization; and there is the (local) government. Not all of these are mentioned in the example; they came into the picture when I talked to a range of people as part of a research project on the role of the diaspora in rebuilding education in the area (Van der Linden, Blaak & Andrew, 2013). This made me understand a lot about the conditions on the ground and even more about human involvement (Van der Linden, 2015). Amy showed a deep commitment to helping the region that had once hosted her and her family when they arrived as refugees from bordering southern Sudan. A local government representative, however, voiced her appreciation for what Amy was doing but coupled it with a fear that Amy might bring certain unwanted Western cultural elements to the local community. This revealed how much diplomacy and flexibility is required to play the role of “bridge”.

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Through their biography, people like Amy embody a bridge that requires heavy maintenance. They are the ultimate example of what Van der Laan calls the embodiment and experience of social work professionals (Van der Laan, 2006). He describes the involvement of the professional as a person with his or her own background and biography. Spierts (2014) refers to Van der Laan (2006) when he adds this aspect of personal involvement as an indispensable component of the professional, in addition to craftsmanship (being regarded as knowledgeable) and artistry (possessing the necessary skills). It is this personal drive that is needed in order to find the courage to enter the complexity identified by Kunneman (2013). Out of what he calls "amor complexitatis" ("love of complexity"), people act as crafts(wo)men in the "swampy" conditions of the current reality. In the case presented, this applies to Amy as a member of the diaspora, but also to the people of the organization on the ground. Trying to make a difference on the ground, they demonstrate their internal strength, which keeps them manoeuvring patiently to negotiate the needs of the different parties involved. Unfortunately, as the words of the local government officer indicated, they lack a firm base in the surrounding society, which could be regarded as an external strength (Spierts, 2014).

As authors like Van der Laan (2006), Kunneman (2013) and Spierts (2014) confirm, the main resource for professionals to rely on in complex circumstances is their own personal resource. Education and training help, but are only effective if they are connected to the personal desire to do the job well (Sennett, 2008). "Doing the job well" means understanding and encouraging individuals and communities to improve their quality of life. There is a risk, however, that professionals may turn into officials, disconnected from their personal resources and performing prescribed tasks according to predefined rules (Van der Laan, 2006). In the field of education and teacher training, competence-based education, which started out by analyzing the professional working process, can have the effect of fragmenting the work into learnable pieces or chunks (Research voor Beleid, 2010; Van der Linden & Mendonça, 2006). Resisting this kind of fragmentation and "mechanization", professionals almost have to work against the odds not to become deprived of their main resource. The fourth key factor relates to tapping into this personal resource, uncovering the internal strength of the professional and building on this to develop external strength. In the example described, this could result in the work of the community development organization receiving recognition from the local authorities and adding to the efforts of these authorities in the reconstruction of education in this war-torn area (Van der Linden, 2015). Searching for ways to build on the internal strength of professionals, the next example takes us back to Mozambique.

RECOGNITION AND ROOM TO MANOEUVRE

Close to Maputo, the capital of Mozambique on the coast of the Indian Ocean, is a village called Marracuene, where people live from fishing, agriculture and some tourism. My fellow researchers from Eduardo Mondlane University and I chose this village for a feedback meeting in the context of our research into literacy learning. We invited literacy teachers, their supervisors and district officers from neighbouring villages to share the preliminary results of our research and receive feedback. Around 40 “literacy professionals” took local transport on a Saturday morning and sat with us at the desks of a primary school to discuss their views and reflections. One of their day-to-day concerns, they told us, was encouraging people to continue attending classes when their neighbors insisted on them joining in work and leisure activities. After the meeting we walked to a nearby restaurant for a lunch of fish and rice. It took a long time for the lunch to be prepared, but that did not affect the good spirits. People shared chairs, plates and meals and finally there was enough for everybody before returning home. (Marracuene, Mozambique, 2004)

This experience lingered in my mind because of the enthusiasm of the participants, first engaging in discussions on their work and afterwards enjoying their time in the restaurant. In a country where workshops were usually organized in luxurious hotels and participants would only appear if they received high allowances and copious meals, this feedback meeting involved only very basic compensation (the participants each received less than a euro to compensate their bus fare). My Mozambican colleagues explained to me that literacy teachers, who only receive a small subsidy for their work, are not used to getting this kind of recognition, or to even being consulted at all. This was the situation at the time of the meeting in Marracuene in 2003 (Van der Linden & Rungo, 2006), and it continues to be like this (Manuel, Van der Linden & Popov, forthcoming).

Just as the internal capabilities discussed by Nussbaum (2011) can only turn into “functionings” if certain conditions are met, the professionals – with their personal involvement, skills and knowledge – need certain conditions to be met in order for them to function as professionals. Although it cannot be denied that there is a dire need for better material conditions for literacy teaching and learning in Mozambique, recognition of and support for professionalism may be just as important. What was recognized at the meeting in Marracuene was that the professional is a person who is dedicated and committed, and that knowledge stems from actions on the ground. This knowledge is not gathered through a single action, but through multiple actions. It is used and built on through every action taken, ranging from the selection and adaptation of materials

to interaction with participants and clients, planning with colleagues and negotiating working conditions.

The knowledge of professionals-in-action is mostly tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1967, in Schön, 1983), which requires recognition and encouragement in order to be communicated. The meeting in Marracuene can be regarded as a meeting to develop the right words to describe experiences and share meaning as professionals-in-action. It served as a professional space, carefully prepared and guided towards exchanging and documenting knowledge which usually remains hidden. Space coupled with interaction, not only with people in similar circumstances, but also with people who respectfully challenge the dominant views, allows for collective learning and the production of shared meaning, which strengthens the perception and action of the professionals and learners involved (Friedman, 2011; Zeelen, 2015). The fifth key factor concerns professional space, which should not be an isolated space fenced off from the outside world, but open to other views and perspectives of reality in order to enable learning. What is needed is a “conversational” space, in the terms of Van Haaster (1991), which serves to “make a coordination possible between the participants in order to generate not only individual improvements, but, especially, collective competence” (p. 245). More recently, Wenger (1999) introduced the term “communities of practice”, which inspired the initiation of professional learning communities in different domains (see also Fullan, 2016). The platform function of these communities allows for interaction with the surrounding society and stimulates the sharing of knowledge between professionals in different fields of action (Scholtens, 2015). The Marracuene meeting presented at the start of this section was designed to inform research. In retrospect it also informs the conceptualization of professionalization, as the next section will describe.

PROFESSIONAL SPACE AND PROFESSIONALIZATION

Taking stock, through the examples presented in this article, we have come to know several interesting people. Not all of them are professionals; some are participants, learners, citizens and community members. What makes them special is that they make observations, ask questions, act in unexpected ways and make other people think and question the way they understand reality. They act as change agents without imposing this change. They therefore play a decisive role in lifelong learning processes. Without denying that others can play this role, this is the professionals' commitment. Professionals must face sensitive issues and dig into the complexities of contemporary societies, lifting the smoke screen on the social and educational exclusion of vulnerable groups. The examples mentioned relate to education for young people and adults,

generating income, bodily health, and community and professional development. These are all complex issues that play an important role in developing the capabilities of individuals, groups, communities and societies at large (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1999). Complex as they are, they form the object of the professionals' actions.

The leading question of this article is the question how lifelong learning professionals can be supported in their contribution to the surrounding society and its citizens. The key factors that have been identified show that they are held accountable against evidence-based standards that facilitate fair treatment, and at the same time receive critical questions from citizens that challenge these standards. Their actions are motivated by their professionalism and cannot be informed by static standards. They need professional space with flexible standards to direct their actions, as well as an overarching standard by which they can measure these flexible standards. The development of the capabilities of their clients, pupils, students or participants can serve as the overarching standard against which flexible standards can be measured. The desire to continuously invent and develop flexible standards derives from the desire of professionals to do their work well. As they share this desire with their fellow professionals, learning communities can be formed. The type of professionalization needed begins close to the professionals-in-action and to the learning communities in which they participate. Professionalization should serve the development of professional communities as a conversational space and as a platform for the development of new approaches grounded in the experiences of the professionals, taking full account of the complexity of their work and their role as capability enablers. The learning communities in themselves represent a form of professionalization because they facilitate the development of experience-based standards for the professional-in-action. In this sense, professionalization – which forms the precondition for the autonomy of professionals, as Mintzberg (2013) explains – is linked to professional space and professional learning communities rather than to diploma-oriented, formalized education.

“Experience-based” professionalization, as described in the previous paragraph, challenges dominant epistemological beliefs because it implies the ongoing development process of science as an indispensable form of support for the professional-in-action. The separation between scientists as knowledge developers and professionals or practitioners as knowledge users is a false one, as Schön (1983) and Van Strien (1986) have already recognized. Knowledge cannot be developed by scientists and applied by professionals. Schön (1983) promotes “action science”, which is concerned with situations of uncertainty and instability and works through the cooperative inquiry of the professionals involved. Van Strien (1986) defends attention to problem solving in every day practice as the starting point of science. Although these approaches were developed some time ago and have

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not penetrated mainstream science, they have not lost their expressiveness and they keep returning in different guises. Flyvbjerg (2001) and Biesta (2013) refer to Aristotle's advocacy of "phronesis" as giving sense to social science. Kunneman (2013) speaks of rival models of complex systems which are all valid at once. He states that the professional must have the courage to abandon the idea of stable foundations for valid knowledge. This comes close to "action research", in which knowledge is derived from and built on (professional) action (see for example Boog, Preece, Slagter & Zeelen, 2008). All these authors propagate research that focuses on actions and interventions in social domains. It is this kind of practice-oriented research that places the professional at the core of the development of new knowledge through experience and reflection (see also Van der Kamp, 2002). Professional space and professional learning communities cannot do without it.

DISCUSSION

Starting with the lifelong learning professional in dialogue with a young child, we have used experiences from the lifelong learning practice and notions derived from theories to create a picture of the working conditions of lifelong learning professionals, the internal strength required to do their job well, and the way this internal strength can be developed. One could argue with the narrative approach of this article. Indeed, research methods such as stimulated recall (Stevenson, 2015) would contribute to the scientific rigor of this exercise, bringing together the dynamics of practice and the seriousness of theories. As it is, this article presents a personal learning history of the way in which professional practice and knowledge development can converge. This tentative reflection on how the relevance and adequacy of lifelong learning practice can be strengthened, in order to come closer to reaching the sustainable development goal in question, calls for a follow-up in professional learning communities and other embodiments of professional space linked to theory development. To challenge common epistemological beliefs, putting practice and theory onto the scales of the child in Kindergarten, the exclamation "This one is stronger" should refer to lifelong learning practice, which informs theory rather than the other way round. The spotlights on the lifelong learning professional-in-action will hopefully lead to lifelong learning research that supports, informs and is informed by professional learning communities of lifelong learning professionals.

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NOTEN

- 1 From 1993 until 1996 and again since 2006, I (have) worked as a teacher educator, training teachers for primary education in Amsterdam and Alkmaar in the Netherlands. Examples in this article are taken from this experience and from my experience as a lecturer/trainer in Ahfad University for Women in Sudan from 1996 until 2001 and as a lecturer/researcher in Eduardo Mondlane University in Mozambique from 2002 until 2006 and in the University of Groningen in the Netherlands, since 2007. This article is part of a PhD thesis on ensuring meaningful lifelong learning opportunities for groups at risk (Van der Linden, forthcoming).
- 2 <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org>
- 3 Pseudonym, respondent in Van der Linden (forthcoming).

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