

The Teacher's Voice - Video interview - Essentials

Annet Bakker was EPEA's chair for six years until 2021. But she is also a prison teacher in the Netherlands in the prison of Zaanstad. She teaches there fulltime (36 hrs) all subjects, since January 2019. She has a second-degree teaching qualification and has been a teacher in Dutch prisons since 1989.

- Annet, please tell us something about yourself. Who are you? What have you been doing since you left EPEA's chair?

1. After a short period of breathing, for the work in the EPEA Steering Committee can consume a lot of your energy and time. I wanted to take it easy, but that doesn't seem to suit me completely. I became active again in the EPEA-NL branch' steering committee (SC). At that time, this was in troubled waters and we managed to revive it with a few other enthusiastic colleagues. It is nice to see that with new board members a very nice path has been taken. SC-members come and go and I have a lot of respect for everyone who wants to take up a SC post for a few years. Of course, it brings you a lot; Your network is enlarged and with it your horizons. You learn and try to connect it with your own daily practice and that of colleagues, which is inspiring, but it also demands a lot from your family and your personal environment. But also, a lot of real friendships have developed and that is very valuable, especially in the niche world of prison education in which we all work. The effort in the national SC requires less of my free time and is at least as inspiring. My European (and beyond) experience helps me enormously to achieve results with less effort.

- Annet, how and when did you become a teacher in prison?

During my study I saw a call for interns in an Amsterdam prison (Bijlmerbajes) That immediately appealed to me, because it deviates from the beaten path. I was curious. I hoped there was more time for actual teaching than in the "factories" that schools sometimes seem to be. I graduated in 1990, but before that time I was already working as a teacher in a prison. After my internship from teacher training, the only teacher in that Amsterdam prison became pregnant and then I was then asked if I could replace her during her leave. After all, I was already trained. Later I finished my studies. My own subjects (second degree) are French & English, in Dutch prisons English is in the curriculum, but French is not.

- What do you like about your job? What is demanding?

Never a dull moment! I need to be challenged and inspired. Over the years, I always noticed that I didn't have to change jobs, because the job around me was always changing. Not the work as a teacher per se, but the organisation, the policy, the location. At one point there was policy focused on content and quality, later on 'minimum is maximum' became the slogan. The latter mainly concerned the financial investment and choices; not so much quality and content. In addition to the change I need, this was also a very big challenge. Education was no longer considered so important. I have changed my workplace (prison) a few times but also it's target groups. Short-

term prisoners require a different approach and educational offer than long-term offenders and/or those in a prison especially for prisoners with addiction problems.

- Compared to the other countries, what do you appreciate about education in the penal system in the Netherlands? Where do you still see potential? How is prison education integrated into the national educational system?

That's a lot of questions.

On paper education has a clear, recognized place in the national system of reintegration activities.

In the Netherlands, teachers are employed by the Ministry of Justice. That is an advantage, but also a disadvantage. During the Corona pandemic we were often one of the few countries in which prison teachers were allowed to teach. After all, we were 'prison staff'. In many countries, external parties were kept out. In the Netherlands, too, there was a difference in policy between the prisons; it was a local decision whether we could, and with how many at the same time, really have contact with our students.

Being disconnected from the regular education system is a major disadvantage; The teachers are not systematically trained in terms of subject matter and must keep up with developments on their own initiative and liking. We do not follow national curricula, and we offer a very limited curriculum (Dutch, English, Maths, Computer training, Health & Safety, Entrepreneurship) with a few extra possibilities according to the prison's local possibilities. Certification is therefore very limited. Our teaching is not monitored by school inspections. Many of you would embrace that, since I know that this is not always pleasant. It can be a handful, but it does aim to preserve a certain standard. We do not have that. Teachers seem to be their own standard. At the head office there is little to no knowledge about education in general – it's focus is on safety and security - and how prison education should relate to it. If you then know that there is about 1 teacher per 380 inmates, it is quickly clear that we have little leeway with our beautiful programs and facilities. Logistics are mostly in order, what I miss is a broader vision on prison education and consequent 'policy' but also 'implementation'

- What is the state of digitisation in the classrooms? What tools are at the disposal of teachers?

What we do have in our prisons is a national offer of the same educational programmes for a number of basic subjects. We sometimes get books for this, or else e-learning licenses that we can use in our lessons. In each class there are computers with limited (white-listed) internet access for the students. Still other computers do not have internet, but they do have the Office package. Recently, each prison also received one or more digital blackboards.

In cooperation with the prisons' workshops there is a possibility to also obtain official school diplomas, but in many prisons people are still looking for the way to deal with this properly. It's actually too much work for the few teachers per prison.

- Let's go back for to the job of a teacher in prison in general. What qualities should a teacher have when teaching in prison?

First of all, that person must be a driven and qualified teacher. The person must be able to multitask, switch quickly and think creatively. He/she must be able to conform to the level and wishes of the student and make an assessment of the feasibility within the prison setting. The teacher has to align with different disciplines and respect everyone's tasks within the system.

Furthermore, there are more and more foreigners in our European prisons and teachers must also be able to get those students on their way. Nowadays there are all kinds of tools for this, but teachers have to have them at their disposal.

- What advice would you give to a teacher who is new to correctional education?

Find fellow teachers, if necessary in other prisons in your country. Talk to them, use email, go see them and take home whatever you can use in your own setting. There is no training where you can be prepared for this kind of work. Your colleagues are your greatest wealth.

- Dear Annet, thank you for the interview.