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Identifying Teachers as Change Agents in Primary Education

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Introduction
Research problem
Research question
Theoretical background
Method
Analysis
Results
Conclusion
Further research

• Teachers themselves are key persons in realizing successful changes in education
• Responsibility for school reform/educational changes has increasingly shifted to the teachers themselves
• Using or creating ‘Professional space’ to exploit and enhance their expertise in favor of the quality of education at both classroom and school level
• In every school there are teachers who are ‘agentic’, teachers as ‘change agents’
The current literature about teachers as change agents is limited (see Lukacs, 2009).

Only fragmented notions exist of what characterizes teachers as change agents.

**Working definition**

Teachers who are regularly and actively engaged in educational change or development at both classroom and school level.

Focus on primary school teachers (children from 4 to 12 years old).

**Aim**

To obtain a broad and more coherent insight into characteristics that are important for teachers to be change agents at both classroom and school level.

**Research question**

What are the characteristics of teachers as change agents as attributed to them by themselves, their principals and experts?
In line with working definition, assumed important aspects for teachers as change agents

1. Lifelong learning
   Including being inquiry-oriented as a means to continuous learning

2. Mastery
   Being an expert with comprehensive knowledge and skills in teaching

3. Entrepreneurship
   Taking initiatives, dare to take responsible risks in changing and developing education

4. Collaboration
   Collaborative expertise and being aware of needing colleagues to enhance their teaching practice and to develop or change education

• Structured open interviews (n=20)
  (period December 2011 – April 2012)

• Interviews
  1) four external experts in leading and guiding change processes
  2) four principals of four selected primary schools (average size)
  3) twelve teachers, three per school, who are regularly and actively engaged in educational change or development at both classroom and school level

• Conversations recorded and transcribed verbatim
A characteristic operationalized as ‘A typical feature of a person consisting of observable behavior and attitudes’

The central part of the interviews set up around the previously mentioned aspects (Lifelong learning; Mastery; Entrepreneurship; Collaboration)

Each aspect was questioned regarding its behavior and attitudes

Table 1
Sample questions of the structured open interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topics</th>
<th>Sample questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lifelong learning</td>
<td>How does this teacher (do you) feel about professional development training and professionalization? (attitude)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mastery</td>
<td>How does this teacher (do you) behave in classroom/at school level? (behavior)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entrepreneurship</td>
<td>How does this teacher (do you) feel about trying out new, unknown things in classroom practice? (attitude)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>To what extent does this teacher (do you) make contact with or seek support of colleagues when he is (you are) changing or developing education in the classroom/at school level? (behavior)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• Qualitative analysis based on ‘phenomenografic’ approach
• Peer debriefing systematically applied

Data analysis steps:
1. Transcripts were divided in logical and meaningful text units per aspect (Lifelong learning; Mastery; Entrepreneurship; Collaboration)
   Meaningful text fragments were marked and coded
2. The coding system was reduced and reorganized
   All transcripts were coded with the renewed coding system
3. The coding system was discussed and adjustments were made
4. Final category system, Cohen’s Kappa of .90

• Analyzing 20 transcripts resulted in 861 coded text fragments

• Characteristics at both classroom and school level

• Category system consisting of four main categories, 11 characteristics and 28 elements
Table 2
Category system of attributed characteristics of teachers as change agents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main categories</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Number of coded text fragments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lifelong learning</td>
<td>Eager-to-learn</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reflective</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mastery</td>
<td>Giving guidance</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Accessible</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Committed</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Trustful</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-assured</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entrepreneurship</td>
<td>Innovative</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Responsible</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>Collegial</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For example

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main category</th>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Elements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Entrepreneurship</td>
<td>Innovative</td>
<td>- being open to new ideas, educational developments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- giving meaning to change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- participating actively in implementing innovations at school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- making a transfer from theory to professional practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- applying new educational developments into practice,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>experimenting at classroom level</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Representative quotes of being innovative

“It starts with being open for it and thinking ‘Gee, this could be something’.” (External expert)

“They can make significant steps towards putting that theory into practice.” (Principal)

“I am not afraid to let go. Things… not knowing in advance whether this is going to work out the way you have in your mind.” (Primary school teacher)

• Many elements can be distinguished pertaining to characteristics
• The characteristics can be interpreted as ‘dispositions’: behavioral patterns stemming from and guiding by one’s attitude
• Teachers as change agents demonstrate characteristics pertaining to (see Table 2):
Lifelong learning
(being eager-to-learn, being reflective)
Mastery
(giving guidance, being accessible, being positive, being committed, being trustful, being self-assured)
Entrepreneurship
(being innovative, feeling responsible)
Collaboration
(being collegial)
A coherent, differentiated and broad insight of characteristics of teachers as change agents could be provided

- Aspects from literature were confirmed and refined with characteristics and elements
- Characteristics and elements seem closely related and mutually reinforcing
- Little difference in characteristics at classroom or school level

Next research
- Large scale survey-research among primary school teachers using a digital questionnaire
- Related to personal factors, contextual factors and professional identity of teachers
Thank you for your kind attention!

Monique van der Heijden

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