Moving Beyond the Research-practice Gap:
Impact of Teacher Research on Professional Development and Knowledge Utilization in Schools

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Proposal Information

Teachers generally seem to have limited knowledge of, access to and interest in insights from educational academic research (Beycioglu, Ozer, & Ogurlu, 2013; Gore & Gitlin, 2004), even in settings that are assumed to provide a research-engaged environment for teachers such as Professional Development Schools (Vrijnsen-De Corte, Den Brok, Kamp, & Bergen, 2013). Accordingly, the impact of academic research on teaching practice seems to be disappointingly low. Debates, literature studies as well as empirical work on this gap between educational academic research and educational practice suggest that scholars examine problems that teachers in school perceive as irrelevant, want to publish in peer-reviewed journals instead of disseminate their work, and aim at generalization of insights rather than improving school practice (Vanderlinde & Van Braak, 2010).

Proposals on how to bridge the gap between academic research and practice concentrate on the need to build better lines of communication between researchers and practitioners, and encourage practitioners to get more involved in the research process. Vanderlinde & Van Braak, (2010) concluded that schools should create more opportunities to practitioners and researchers to collaborate, disseminate findings, co-construct ideas, and set research agendas. Cordingley (2008) argued that researchers should be encouraged to open up their research for practitioners, teachers should be encouraged to connect more with research texts, and intermediaries are needed to bridge the worlds of academics and practitioners. But these proposals are not new and in many instances interaction and communication between researchers and teachers are still problematic and both teachers and researchers stick to their "traditional" roles of knowledge user and knowledge producer, respectively (Schenke, 2015).

Another way to close this gap between research and practice might be research by teachers. Obviously, research by teachers solves the problem of academic research being irrelevant for

teachers and educational practice. Teachers might not only understand and redesign their practices by monitoring and evaluating teaching practices, but also develop their professional skills such as a critical reflection on their own practice as well as on the practice of their colleagues. And of equal importance, teacher research can be a valuable way to use insights from the knowledge base on teaching and learning as well as to add new insights to it (Admiraal, Smit, & Zwart, 2014; Thomas, 2012). Already two decades ago, Kaestle (1993) argued that researchers could link research and practice by involving practitioners in the design and implementation of research and that research training should be incorporated into the initial preparation of teachers and administrators. However, Gore and Gitlin (2004) reported that the teachers in their study told them very clearly that research produced by academics remained the dominant educational research discourse while 'teacher research' was an alternate (and largely marginalized) form of educational research.

In various policy actions of the Dutch government, an assumption is made that teachers who had carried out a master thesis are able to generate knowledge and stimulate knowledge utilization in schools (Ministerie van OCW, 2013). Yet evidence of positive effects of teacher research, either as part of a master's program or carried out by inservice teachers is minimal and somewhat ambiguous. The current study aims to answer the following research questions:
1. How is teacher research evaluated with respect to the professional development as teacher?
2. How is teacher research evaluated with respect to knowledge utilization in schools?

Methodology or Methods/ Research Instruments or Sources Used

A mixed-method research design has been used. First, a biographical study has been carried out on 36 teachers from primary education, secondary education and vocational education. The biographical study started Autumn 2015 and will continue until Summer 2017. Second, a questionnaire will be administered with 300 teachers from each of the three educational sectors mentioned above. The questionnaire study will start Winter 2017.

In the biographical study, for each participant data was collected for 18 months: 6-12 months during the master's program they attend and 6-12 months following the completion of their master's program, during their career as teacher. At the end of both periods, participants were involved in a biographical interview (Kelchtermans, 1993) using a story line method. In this interview, participants reflected on their development as teacher and teacher-researcher and indicated crucial events in this development. In addition, during the 18 months period, the participants completed a 2-weeks online logbook reporting and evaluating their activities to disseminate insights from their research to their colleagues in school. Finally, participants collected feedback from their colleagues in school twice on how they evaluated the knowledge utilization of the participants' research activities.

The questionnaire study includes a Q-sort questionnaire measuring belies about teacher research as a professional development strategy and knowledge utilization approach in school.

Conclusions, Expected Outcomes or Findings

The preliminary findings from the biographical study indicate that teachers felt competent with regard to an "Inquiry stance towards the teaching practice" already at the beginning of their master's program. Yet they also indicated that they learned to conduct practice-based research in a systematic and cyclic way, albeit that the participants are generally quite uncertain about these

research competencies. With respect to knowledge dissemination and utilization, the participants reported that they helped their colleagues with "Drawing on existing knowledge base". They also felt they have a stronger position in the team (as expert) and towards management (taken more seriously because of evidence-informed argumentation). In the paper presentation, these preliminary findings will be complemented with recent outcomes and the outcomes of the questionnaire study. Conclusions will be discussed about the potential of teacher research as approach for both teachers' professional development and knowledge utilization in schools.

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