The Strategic Role of School Leaders in Embedding Inquiry-based Working in the School Organization

Purpose of this study
Inquiry-based working of teachers (systematic reflection, using or reading research, conducting practice-based research) can be seen as a method to stimulate professional development of teachers (Earl & Katz, 2006; Handscomb & MacBeath, 2003). More understanding is needed of how to position inquiry-based working in the school organization (Marsh & Farell, 2015). These insights are especially required in the case of funded R&D projects initiated by schools and lasting for two or three years. When finishing such a project, the wish is to continue the method of working in school. The role of school leaders is considered to be crucial in these cases (Fullan, 2008). The purpose of this study is to better understand the strategic role that school leaders play in embedding inquiry-based working in their school and how they use funded research projects for this aim.

Theoretical framework
Literature on building capacity in schools and on how schools function as professional learning communities provides insights on how inquiry-based working can be positioned in the school organization (Stoll, 2009). In the context of the school as professional learning community, Sleegers, et al. (2013) offer a useful, multilevel framework of the school organization, distinguishing individual, team and organizational level.

Method
In a longitudinal multi-case study design, 19 funded R&D projects in Dutch secondary education were included. In the R&D projects, professionals from schools and educational research institutes were involved, including school leaders, teachers, and researchers, advisers, and supervisors. In the final year interviews with twenty-eight participants with managerial and leadership responsibilities in the projects were conducted. Transcripts were analyzed with coding schemes based on the literature (MaxQDA). Within-site and cross-site matrices were produced (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Results and substantiated conclusions
The results indicate that most of the school leaders were aware of the potential of the funded R&D project to engage more teachers in their school to learn from research knowledge. Two types of strategies of school leaders involved in the 16 projects could be distinguished: In the first strategy type the focus was on the individual level and during the project the attention was altered towards the team level, by disseminating results and involving colleagues. In the second strategy type the process can be characterized as the other way around: from collective learning towards growing awareness what research results mean to teachers’ own practice.

Scientific and scholarly significance of the study
The strategic role of school leaders in this study shows a resemblance to school leaders and principals in other studies in which capacity building is the main goal (see e.g. Stoll, 2009). This study shows that multiple paths can be followed and created along the way to foster school development. To value R&D projects and the efforts and approaches school leaders take to embed inquiry-based working in their schools, we need to be able to distinguish and study such pathways and the spin off they have.

Word count = 500

References


