

Together Continuously Improving Primary Schools: A transformation towards a sustainable Improvement Culture

Presenters: Sofie Rottiers, Ria De Sadeleer, Mieke Bogaerts (Odisee Hogeschool, Belgium)

Rationale

How can primary school leaders grow in their professional leadership? This question is central to a two-year practical research project (2023-2025) by Odisee University of Applied Sciences, within the context of the advanced bachelor's program in BanaBa School Development. The project follows five school leaders participating in the guidance program offered by Stichting LeerKRACHT.

Theoretical Framework

Establishing a sustainable trajectory for school and quality development together with the school team poses a significant challenge for school leaders. The Flemish education inspection's recent annual report emphasizes these challenges concerning schools' policy capacity. This highlights the necessity of adequate professionalization for school leaders and policy teams, as well as the importance of external support. Similarly, Brinckman and Versluys stress the necessity of enhancing support for Flemish school leaders in assuming instructional leadership.

Stichting Leerkracht (<https://stichting-leerkracht.nl/>), whose guidance program has been validated by the University of Utrecht¹ for primary and secondary schools, aims to create an improvement culture where the entire school team takes responsibility. Currently, over 1300 schools in the Netherlands have engaged in the program. Through an intensive four-step guidance process, the program helps school teams define clear ambitions and equips them with concrete tools to enhance educational quality at the classroom level.

Research design

This study examines whether participation in a validated guidance program, such as the one provided by Stichting LeerKRACHT, serves as effective external support that enriches the professionalization of school leaders, stemming from the school context. A mixed-methods design is used to answer the research questions. A literature study, semi-structured interviews with the five school leaders and team surveys are used to answer the main research question:

To what extent does the (shared) instructional leadership of the school leader change when participating in the LeerKRACHT program, with regard to the sustainable establishment of a learning culture? This question delves into the impact of the LeerKRACHT program on educational leadership practices, specifically focusing on the cultivation of a learning-oriented environment within schools.

Results

In the cases, we see the role of the school leader as crucial. Where the process makes a difference, you always see a school leader who provides direction and actively participates. That leader ensures time is available, facilitates discussions, supports the team, and at the same time keeps an eye on the classroom and the student.

Conclusion

This rich information provides us with an initial insight into the perspectives and learning experiences of the school leaders and teams throughout the change process. Furthermore, we aim to enhance the training to assist a greater number of schools in transitioning towards a learning school culture and to further professionalize their leaders. This study also provides insights into the practical implication of participatory leadership for a school team and the expectations placed on school leaders.