Teachers who make a difference:
an investigation into teachers as change agents in primary education

Summary Dissertation Monique van der Heijden – 13 juni 2017

This dissertation reports on four consecutive studies, which focus on the identification and deeper understanding of teachers as change agents in primary education. Teachers as change agents can be described as teachers who are able to cope with change and new, often external requirements related to the teaching profession. Today’s schools need teachers who are capable to function as change agents. However, the descriptions in the literature of teachers as change agents are very general and provide only a fragmented picture of these teachers. Moreover, limited research has been done on teachers who fit these descriptions derived from the literature. Little is furthermore known about the extent to which teachers perceive themselves as change agents, how they act accordingly in their educational practice, and by what personal(ity) and contextual factors these are influenced. This dissertation intends to contribute to knowledge of teachers as change agents by addressing these aspects.

Analyses revealed nine characteristics of teachers as change agents, namely:

- mastery: focus on students, focus on students’ learning, confidence in their own abilities, and work motivation;
- Collaboration: professional collegiality;
- Entrepreneurship: focus on innovation at the classroom level and focus on innovation at the school level;
- Lifelong learning: focus on their own knowledge development and focus on their professional skills.

Together these characteristics provide a detailed picture of how primary school teachers see themselves as change agents. Most teachers perceive themselves as being focused on students and being a professional colleague. To a lesser extent teachers perceive themselves as being innovative at the classroom and school level and being focused on the development of their own knowledge. Age and years of experience explain only a small percentage of the variance in the teachers’ scores on the change agent characteristics.

Teachers’ perceptions of themselves as change agents are related to both personality (The Big Five) and contextual factors. Openness to experience appears to be an important personality factor for all change agent characteristics, particularly for being innovative at the classroom level. The contextual factors participative decision-making, (school leader’s) vision building and teacher collaboration appear to be the most important factors for promoting the change agent characteristics.

Teachers differ in the way they see themselves as change agents. Four teacher profiles could be distinguished according to the varying degrees of teachers’ perceptions of themselves as change agents. The change agent characteristics are all and most manifested within the daily work of a specific category of teachers (profile 4 teachers) at both classroom
and school level. In particular the characteristics focus on students’ learning, focus on innovation at both classroom and school level, and focus on the own knowledge development play an important role in being or becoming change agents.

This dissertation may be used as a source of inspiration for re-thinking the (future) teaching profession for both teacher education and schools (and school boards). An important focus needs to be on preparing prospective teachers and empowering practising teachers to become (and sustain being) teachers as change agents (to a larger extent), in order to (be able to) meet the challenges of their (future) profession. For teacher education, it is therefore suggested to redesign at least parts of the teaching programs and learning environments to prepare prospective teachers to become change agents, in close cooperation with practice schools. For schools, it is suggested to use the change agent characteristics to obtain a differentiated picture of (teams of) teachers in the extent to which they (see themselves) act as change agents. It was furthermore suggested to aim both professional development policies as well as innovations at schools at fostering teachers’ skills to enhance students’ learning (which can be seen as a collective purpose) to encourage teachers’ engagement in innovative work behaviour and continuous professional development. The gained knowledge about promoting and hindering contextual factors may foster the debate among and provide direction for school leaders and school boards to empower (more) teachers to (be able to) act as change agents in their schools and through that building schools’ capacity for change.

A ‘special empirical validation’ of our research was described at the end of the dissertation. Namely, completely independent of the present research, one of the selected teachers in the fourth study (profile 4 teachers), thus a real change agent, was appointed ‘Primary school teacher of the year’. This is a national award for Dutch teachers who, as perceived by others, distinguish themselves through their high quality in teaching. In this particular case, the data in the jury report were based on the perceptions of her students and a colleague. This appointment illustrates that teachers as change agents really make a difference in everyday practice, which is emphasized in the title of this dissertation.