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### Developing teacher leadership and its impact in schools

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## INTERMEZZO 3

### A new design for a Master's program focused on boundary crossing<sup>7</sup>

#### 1. From transfer to boundary crossing

In the previous chapter, we examined the development of leadership competences in a post-initial Master's program for teachers and the impact from the application of these competences on the workplace. As a frame of reference, we used concepts from theories on learning transfer, focusing on the organizational transfer climate.

Our analysis shows a variation in levels of transfer and in the satisfaction of graduates of the Master's program. This variation is closely related to the schools' organizational transfer climate in terms of strategic alignment, situational cues, use opportunities, and support from supervisors and peers. In some schools, the Master's graduates may, through their leadership roles, inspire their supervisors and support and stimulate collaborative learning within their teams. Through these activities, some of the participants contributed to a change in expectations and an acknowledgement of informal leadership and redefined roles for formal and informal leaders in the school. In this way, they contributed to a change in the organizational transfer climate within their school. In other schools, the Master's program was viewed as a tool for personal development and not for school development. In these schools, the organizational transfer climate was not supportive, and graduates had few opportunities to use their leadership competences to change the climate.

These differences illustrate that the organizational transfer climate is not a static condition for effective transfer and that a complex and dynamic relationship exists between the application of the graduates' leadership competences and the organizational transfer climate. By studying the Master's program *Professioneel Meesterschap*, we found that within the context of a Master's program focusing on teacher leadership, a reciprocal process may occur: the ability to apply newly developed leadership competences at the workplace depends on the extent to which the organizational transfer climate supports and stimulates this application. Meanwhile, the application of these newly developed competences

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<sup>7</sup> This intermezzo is based on Snoek, M. (2013). Transfer en boundary crossing bij masteropleidingen voor leraren. *Tijdschrift voor Lerarenopleiders*, 34(3), 5-16.

by the Master's teachers may contribute to a change in the organizational transfer climate by creating favorable conditions for teacher leadership, thereby creating a climate focused on organizational learning.

This reciprocal process can be understood by using the concepts of boundaries and boundary crossing, as these concepts avoid the replicative conceptions that are implicitly associated with the concept of transfer (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011):

*'The literature on boundary crossing and boundary objects has a different focus than the literature on transfer in various ways. Although transfer is mostly about one-time and one-sided transitions, primarily affecting an individual who moves from a context of learning to one of application (e.g., from school to work), concepts of boundary crossing and boundary objects are used to refer to ongoing, two-sided actions and interactions between contexts. These actions and interactions across sites are argued to affect not only the individual but also the different social practices at large.'* (p. 136)

As illustrated in Chapters 1 and 2, the context of a Master's program for teacher leadership may be represented as two activity systems separated by boundaries with limited permeability; governed by different sets of values, norms and expectations; and dominated by different aims, tools, rules, communities, and divisions of labor. In many Master's programs, such as that examined in the previous chapter, the participant in the Master's program is the only boundary crosser, being a member of both activity systems and moving between these two systems. His or her challenge is to apply the theories and skills acquired in an academic setting within the day-to-day context of the school while at the same time bringing the reality of the school into the academic program. If he is not successful in this endeavor, he may adapt, as a chameleon, to the dominant rules and values of the activity system he is in. In such a situation, the Master's program might impact his personal expertise but will have little impact on the school as a whole.

## 2. Combining qualification and intervention

A Master's program focused on teacher leadership intends to reach beyond the individual expertise of teachers; it aims to change leadership practices within schools and to support the development of a culture of shared leadership (Hulsbos et al., 2012; Spillane, 2006). In the design of most Master's programs, the primary focus is on qualification. This focus is reflected in the way in which the Master's program is based on a formal contract between the university and the participant, without a formal role for the school. This primary focus on qualification is also reflected in the frameworks for accreditation of Master's programs that are focused on the effectiveness of the program in raising the competence level of participants as reflected by the Dublin descriptors. The impact of the program on the work practice or leadership practice in schools is not a formal criterion for the accreditation of a program. However, as the previous study shows, preparing and supporting teachers to develop qualities with respect to teacher leadership is not sufficient to bring about change in schools. When school culture and leadership

culture are not responsive to teacher leadership, and when these teacher leaders are isolated, they are hardly effective as change agents.

In school-development programs that aim to bring about change in the school, other design principles are used based on theories regarding organizational change or organizational learning (Boonstra, 2004; Hargreaves, Lieberman, Fullan, & Hopkins, 2010; Hoban, 2002; Rondeel, 2012; Verdonschot, 2011). In such programs, the focus is often on school-internal arrangements, with or without external support, with a focus on teams, commissioned by the school board and with the involvement of several organizational levels within the school.

When we wish to combine the qualifying and intervening ambition within a Master's program, a redesign of the Master's program is needed to strengthen its embeddedness in the school. To gain a better understanding of the design principles for a Master's program that could combine the qualifying and intervening ambition, we will try to redefine the Master's program using the concepts of boundaries and boundary crossing.

### 3. Boundaries and boundary crossing in Master's programs

Within the context of a Master's program on teacher leadership, the participants at the Master's program move back and forth between the two activity systems, the university and the school. At the school, they are teachers working with students; at the university, they are students who aim to obtain a Master's qualification. Each activity system has its own dynamics. Within the school, the teachers are members of an activity system that is focused on pupil learning (outcome) and governed by lessons and tests (tools). Teachers frequently operate in a culture where they work in isolation with limited professional cooperation, based on formal hierarchical structures and restricted by timetables and external pressure to find quick solutions to problems. At the university, they are part of an activity system that is focused on their learning (outcome), governed by lectures and assignments (tools), in a culture of academic rigor and careful analysis, and dominated by academic quality criteria and peer review.

In the Master's program, the participants act as *boundary crossers* moving across the boundaries between both activity systems. This boundary crossing may lead to *expansive learning* (Engeström, 2001). Expansive learning may be understood as a community process—not an individual process—and as a process in which *'the learners are involved in constructing and implementing a radically new, wider and more complex object and concept for their activity'* (Engeström & Sannino, 2010, p. 2). Through expansive learning, ideas from different cultures meet and acquire new meanings (Gutiérrez et al., 1999). This expansive learning influences not only the boundary crossers themselves but also their colleagues, as the boundary crossers act as 'brokers' introducing new elements from one community of practice to another (Tsui & Law, 2007; Wenger, 1998).

For this expansive learning to occur, the Master's program must act as an effective *boundary zone* (Miedema & Stam, 2008; Tsui & Law, 2007), where

elements of both activity systems are present and interact.

This expansive learning in a boundary zone may be facilitated by *boundary objects*, practices or instruments that encourage and facilitate interaction and exchange between the two activity systems (Star, 1989). In Chapter 2, we discussed future scenarios as an example of such a boundary object. Within the context of the Master's program, such a boundary object could be the participant's thesis research project. In such projects, dilemmas in the school are taken as an object for research, with the aim of finding new solutions and approaches that may be used in the school. A connection is made between the practical context of the school and research methods and academic theories from the university; another connection is forged between the participant in the Master's program, his or her colleagues and supervisors in the school, and the university teacher as research supervisor.

#### 4. Strengthening boundary crossing in Master's programs

To strengthen the potential of the Master's program to become a catalyst for interventions at the workplace and thus to improve the impact of the Master's program on the work practices and leadership practices within the school, the Master's program must be redesigned as a boundary zone. Within this boundary zone, boundary crossings between the school and university contexts are stimulated through the use of effective boundary objects that facilitate expansive learning.

One way in which to strengthen boundary crossing is through an increased quantity of boundary crossers. Compared to individual teachers who, acting as isolated boundary crossers, must try to convince and inspire colleagues and supervisors to engage in new work practices or leadership practices, a group of teachers who work at the same school and are enrolled in a Master's program encounter fewer obstacles in boundary crossing. In addition, supervisors may be invited to engage in activities that take place within the boundary zone, and university teachers may be invited to engage in activities within the school.

In addition, the program must be understood by both activity systems as a context that connects both teacher development and school development. Studies in the human resource area emphasize the involvement of the workplace in the learning arrangements of employees by focusing on the 'corporate curriculum': the organization's perspective on a learning design that aims at mutual effects at the individual and organizational behavior levels (Kessels, 1993). Kessels draws attention to 'external curriculum consistency, *'the homogeneity of the notions of parties involved on what the problem is and how it can be solved by means of educational provisions'* (Kessels, 1993, p. 27). Within the context of the Master's program, this definition implies a shared perception and alignment between the aims and design of the curriculum by school management and supervisors, participants, course designers, and teachers at the university. This alignment may foster closer

links between the formal Master's-level criteria and the school's strategic agenda. The NIME master *Professioneel Meesterschap* intended to create such a strategic alignment. However, the alignment was restricted to the university and the NIME board at national level. In this alignment a 'relational approach' at local level in designing the Master's program (Kessels, 1993) was missing. Through such a relational approach between university and local schools, university teachers and school management can cooperate in the design and implementation of the program to create a consistent curriculum based on a shared understanding of how professional development may contribute to local school development. This approach also implies a shared responsibility between the program designers at the university and the key stakeholders in the school with respect to the monitoring of the progress of qualifications and interventions and with respect to creating favorable conditions for the effective application of newly developed leadership competences in schools. Therefore, to create a Master's program that acts as a boundary zone between the school and the university, the design process itself should already involve boundary-crossing activities.

This focus on alignment between university and school leads to a broader understanding of boundary crossing, recognizing both its importance in designing the program and during the program.

## 5. A redesigned Master's program stimulating boundary crossing

Based on a reflection on the outcomes of the study presented in Chapter 4 and on the concept of boundary crossing, a new design for the Master's program *Professioneel Meesterschap* has been developed using six design principles intended to strengthen boundary crossing between school and university both in the design and monitoring process and in the program itself:

- Strengthening boundary crossing in the design and monitoring process:
  1. A strategic alignment between the university's program aims and the school's change agenda
  2. Joint ownership between university and school (e.g., through shared design and shared monitoring)
- Strengthening boundary crossing in the program itself:
  3. A connection between course content and school themes
  4. A collective design involving a larger group of participants from one school
  5. Boundary-crossing activities that engage supervisors and colleagues from the school in program activities
  6. Boundary-crossing activities that engage university teachers in school development activities within the school

In 2010, representatives from three vocational colleges and the Centrum voor Nascholing began to discuss the possibilities for adapting the Master's program *Professioneel Meesterschap* to suit teachers from vocational colleges. These

meetings resulted in an adapted design led by the above design principles. In September 2011, 42 teachers from the three vocational colleges started in the new program. These teachers were selected for new 'senior teacher' positions within their college, with an adapted salary scale<sup>8</sup>.

The key characteristics of the program were as follows:

1. Strategic alignment: The ambition of the schools was to make a connection between the appointment of senior teachers, their professional development, and the schools' development. The senior teachers were expected to become change agents within their units, and the boards of the schools realized that these senior teachers would need leadership capacity for this, which could be provided through the Master's program.
2. Joint ownership: The Master's program was designed by the team of university teachers in close cooperation with key representatives from the human resource (HR) departments of the three colleges. A monitoring group was created consisting of the university teacher staff team, the three key representatives of the HR departments of the colleges and one senior teacher/participant from each college with his/her supervisor. This monitoring group met six times during the two-year program.
3. Connection between course content and school themes: The content of the Master's program was adapted to consider issues related to vocational education. The participants were required to conduct a thesis research project focusing on an issue within their daily practice, resulting in an intervention within that practice. The boards of the colleges stimulated the senior teachers to pick research themes that were closely related to the strategic issues of the college and were of wider relevance to the whole of the college. In addition, each lecture resulted in an assignment through which teachers would relate the content of the lecture to the local school context.
4. Collective design: Within each college, 10 to 20 senior teachers participated, creating a group of teacher leaders within each college. The senior teachers were clustered into three mixed study groups to enable exchange between the three colleges.
5. Boundary-crossing activities among supervisors and colleagues: During the program, the supervisor of each participant and members of the colleges' administrative staff were invited to join the key lectures, which provided theoretical input for the participants. The supervisors were invited to several additional sessions in which progress in the thesis research was discussed.
6. Boundary-crossing activities by university teachers: The design of the adapted program did not consider boundary-crossing activities for university teachers towards the schools.

Through this design, which is characterized by close cooperation between university and schools and by intensive boundary crossing, a learning

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<sup>8</sup> Salary scale LD, which in the Dutch context is the highest possible salary scale for a teacher.

arrangement was created that fitted within the fourth scenario presented in Chapter 2: a network scenario. This design was expected to help the Master's program act more effectively as a boundary zone between the university and the school. This expectation is the focus of the study presented in the next chapter: To what extent did this redesigned Master's program, facilitating boundary crossing, combine the qualifying and intervening ambition of the program, resulting in both individual development and school development?