Good examples of practice and professional development

The notion "examples of good practice" has taken up a prominent place in the hit parade of popular educational concepts among policymakers, school administrators, teacher educators, etc. (Alexander, 1999; Dressman, 2000; Knight & Smith, 1989). The implicit assumption is simple: showing examples of a good (or even better: best) practice to colleagues from other schools or organisations will inspire them to engage in projects to change their practice in the direction of the normative example. It is supposed to be an effective strategy for educational reform and school improvement. Yet, although self-evident in a sense, there is still little empirical evidence to support the assumptions about the impact (Kelchtermans & Labbe, 2005). This paper reports on a study on the determinants and critical factors that affect the example’s impact on the practice (and therefore on the professional development) of practitioners in other contexts (Kelchtermans e.a., 2007). The theoretical framework of the study included theories on communication, on educational innovation and on teacher development and school development. In the first –reconstructive– part of the study we collected data from participants in conferences in which "examples of practice" were presented. Interviews were held with organisers, presenters and participants (audience), completed by document analysis. A second round of follow-up interviews were held one year after the conference to explore the impact and effective use of the examples over time. This part of the study resulted first of all in a definition of "a good example of practice". The change in the concept already indicates that the normative quality of the example lies not so much in the practice that is presented as such (thus becoming normatively inviting for others to ‘copy’ it), but in the way and the content of the presentation of the practice. A good example of practice contains the presentation of a particular practice (example), that reveals what actually is happening in the school (descriptive), but at the same time demonstrates (argues, shows) why things are being done at the school the way they are (explanation). Further the reconstructive part revealed a series of (hypothetical) determinants and critical factors, organised in two main categories: characteristics of the form of presentation and characteristics of the potential user (in his/her professional context), as well as the interactions between the two. These determinants and critical factors were the starting point for the second –constructive– part in the study in which a training programme was designed for educational consultants to help schools "write" good examples of their practice. Thus the constructive part...
acted as a validation of the reconstructive findings on the one hand, but also included the development of a methodology for the making of "good examples of practice" that can contribute to the improvement of practice as well as to the professional development of the practitioners who use them. Our study shows that merely taking cognizance of examples of practice doesn't make practitioners change their practice, nor contributes to their professional development. In order to achieve that result it is necessary that the content and form of the presentation meet certain criteria (characteristics of the presentation), as well as that the practitioners (potential users) can rely on supportive cultural and structural conditions in their schools (characteristics of the users and their professional context). Our data show furthermore that determinants and critical factors interact and influence each other within the particularities of the particular context. The implicitly taken for granted idea that presenting examples of good practice will effectively change/improve practices in other organisations turns out to be far too simple.

Expected Outcomes
The results of the study contribute to the empirical knowledge base on strategies for teacher and school development, as well as to the practical methodologies that can be used for it. They take the concept of "examples of practice" beyond the taken for granted and (empirically) document how it actually (may) work.

References

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