EAPRIL 2019 SUMMARY of "Participatory Action Research: effective for the joint development if a communal professional profile.
Casus: Dutch master education programs 'Learning & Innovation' (MLI)"

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Abstract

Masters Learning & Innovation (MLI-MEd) professionalize teachers in various educational sectors to take up a role as pioneer/forerunner in innovation processes. Nine MLI-MEd's, which developed from the same starting point over ten years, commissioned a study into widely supported communalities in their current profiles, to define their common ground and validate it with the workfield.

This study was designed as participatory action research (PAR) with five research cycles: clarification of research questions through literature review and professional dialogues with MLI-educators; survey amongst MLI-teachers, students and alumni (n=441); comparison with profiles of comparable masters; profile validation amongst domain experts. Finally, the acquired profile was also expressed as infographic.

Paper and presentation address the method and yields of delineated research, as well as the research process in which stakeholders from various educational institutes participated. The study shows how co-creation in research can be realized.

Discussion focuses on validity of the profile and transferability of the research approach for comparable research questions/situations. The unique initiative of the masters may inspire others to critically explore the properties of and support for their profile. Furthermore, PAR contributes to acquiring 'workable agreement' amongst stakeholders, which is vital to secure progress in complex processes of organizational development.

Theoretical background

Although the 'teacher leadership'-concept is not embraced amongst stakeholders, the study's theoretical background is based on this concept, since it holds ample similarities to the role of MLI-professionals. Main activities are located at the meso-level (Barth, 2001; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Lai & Chueng, 2015; Lieberman & Friedrich, 2010; TLEC, 2007; Verbiest, 2014; Van den Berg, 2016; Vangrieken et al., 2017) and concern three broad concepts. Firstly, improvement of learning of all participants in educational organizations (Lai & Chueng, 2015; TLEC, 2007; Wenner & Campbell, 2007; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Secondly, collective innovation directed at improvement of quality of education (Beachum & Dentith, 2004; York-Barr & Duke, 2004), and organizational capacity of schools to constructively deal with innovation processes (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). And thirdly, supporting practice-based research with stakeholders as a powerful approach to shape learning and innovation (Lee, Sachs & Wheeler, 2014; York-Barr & Duke, 2004; TLEC, 2007).

Research questions

Main question:
How can a broad MLI-profile be acquired that is widely supported amongst stakeholders?

Sub-questions:
1. Which aspects of the MLI-profile are widely supported amongst stakeholders?
2. To what extend does a profile comprised of these aspects differ from profiles of more or less comparable educational master-programs of different institutes ?
3. What is the validity of the MLI-profile according to domain experts?

Method

This PAR consisted of five cycles. In every cycle (subgroups of) stakeholders were included and intermediate results were discussed in the steering committee that supervised the study and represented all MLI's.
C1: clarification of the research question through literature review and a professional dialogue between MLI-educators. In the dialogue, stakeholders of various MLI's discussed central themes from relevant literature and their own practical experience in subgroups.
C2: survey. Respondents (mostly MLI-teachers, students and alumni; n=441) ranked tasks concerning learning, innovating and researching (derived from C1) in the order of importance to the MLI-profile.
C3: comparison of the prototype (derived from C2) with profiles of more or less comparable educational master programs. This led to small strategic adjustments to enhance profiling.
C4: the acquired profile (C3) was validated by experts in the work field through an online survey with open questions and interviews.
C5: the profile was also finalized as infographic.

Results

Yields are a profile description and infographic. The profile text reads: "*MEds Learning and innovation are forerunners in innovation and professionalization directed at promotion of a learning culture in their own organization. They are informal leaders who legitimize their role by peer acknowledgement of their teaching expertise in primary, secondary, vocational, higher education or HRD. They are curious, investigative, open to different perspectives, and exchange expertise with internal and external networks. They possess profound knowledge of knowing, learning, and (supporting) change processes. They aim to shape change as a joint learning process directed at shared meaning of stakeholders. They reflect critically on trends in the profession and on organizational processes, clarify practical issues in organizations, and design solutions based on scientific and practical insights. They do this explicitly in co-creation with colleagues and other stakeholders, and thus develop a supported vision, mission, and policy with respect to learning.*"

Conclusion & discussion

For the acquisition of shared meaning, PAR is a powerful approach. Therefore, this study is exemplary for how MLI-professionals can use research to foster collective learning and innovation processes in their organizations.

In line with our main conclusion, this research venture was made feasible through PAR. Crucial to the success however is to engage mandators (in this case the steering committee) in each step to 1) present, discuss and find explanations for preliminary findings, and 2) to decide on following step(s) in the process. This contributed largely to the shape of the end result and the extent in which stakeholders endorsed it.

In the research design, MLI-teachers, students and alumni were consulted as main users of the profile. This increased the practical usability of the profile.

Rankings steered respondents towards core tasks, where Likert-scale items failed to differentiate. Analysis of this type of data is however laborious.

The ultimate conclusion is also that PAR is suitable to construct common validated vision over different applied university curricula concerning their common profile they educate their students and put them in the market.

The value of our contribution to educational research and practice lies in the transferability of our findings and research approach.

The unique initiative of the masters may be inspiring for others to critically explore the properties and support for their profile. In terms of content, the study enlarges insight in a widely acknowledged profile in the Netherlands that can be viewed as an elaboration of a Med Learning and Innovator profile. We should note that the term Teacher Leader is not embraced in the Dutch context because of the embedded hierarchical notion, the exclusion of HRD-professionals, and the fact that it is an English term. That is why we prefer to use MEd Learning and Innovation.

In terms of process, we present an example of how participatory action research can contribute to acquiring 'workable agreement' amongst stakeholders, which is vital to secure progress in complex processes of organizational development and innovation.

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