Changing from within (or not): expansive learning in a change lab at school.

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Prologue

In the final interview with K she uses the typical Dutch word 'gezellig' a lot. It's a hard to translate word that can mean anything from cosy and intimate to gregarious and sociable. The interview is in the lounge-part of the team room at her school, after the classes, while we can see the students getting on their bikes to go home. One of them stares at K. for about 10 seconds and finally waves her goodbye. K immediately starts to talk about that student's group and how sociable they were during the project we are talking about. If the project resulted in anything, it was in closer and more informal contact with the students during school. 16 months earlier she and her team described the object for the project as to organise 'casual moments with students'.

Introduction

Recently in the Netherlands teachers are challenged by the ministry to engage in the school development process (Snoek, 2014). Initiatives are started to strengthen professional responsibility and sense of ownership of teachers towards the process of teaching and learning (Ministerie van OCW, 2011). At the same time the tone in which teachers in the Netherlands contribute to the national educational discourse has changed as well: from complaining and protesting to self-confident and optimistic (Snoek, 2015). Teachers are organising themselves in groups to take responsibility for their professionalisation (ibid). Globally there seems to be a similar tendency to emphasis the importance of teachers for school improvement, both in curriculum development as well as their professionalisation in learning communities (Priestly, Biesta & Robinson, 2016). The initiative of the Dutch State Secretary of Education to establish a platform for a national discussion on curriculum redesign (Platform Ons Onderwijs2032, 2016) is an example in which teachers are put forward as the agents for the proposed change:

> Teachers and school managers must be given the resources required to design and develop the educational programme as a team. The members of that team will contribute knowledge of educational science, good leadership and cooperative ability. Access to inspiring examples and (scientific) research is therefore an essential precondition. Teachers must be given the time to join their colleagues and other professionals, both within and beyond the school itself, to design a fully cohesive curriculum and to share knowledge with regard to all aspects of the educational process. (ibid, p.57)

It is in this national context that the group of teachers in this study decided that they wanted their own professional development programme that was different from that of the rest of their team. Whereas at school level their colleagues were trained in teaching strategies for differentiation in the classroom, they wanted more than just another set of teaching tools.

In this short paper I will analyse the developmental process of that group of teachers in pilot change laboratory (Sannino, 2010). The purpose of the study was to explore the potential of the change laboratory approach as a model for strengthening teacher agency. Since the intervention only took three sessions in about six months and one interviewee, the conclusions will be tentative.

Theoretical framework

In agreement with Edwards (2015) in this paper central to the definition of agency is the notion of action, i.e. actively taking responsibility for what one does and how one interprets the situation. Agency is always in some ways constrained by the environment, but what matters is how teachers interpret these constraints and take responsibility for their own role, their students and their colleagues. Furthermore, as Biesta, Priestly and Robinson (2015) point out, agency should be regarded as an emergent phenomenon. It is a process in which sometimes the needs and at other moments the demands of the actor foreground (Edwards, 2015). Therefore it "involves following the actor, focusing on their actions in activities in practices and trying to access their judgements, intentions and evaluations as they interpret and act." (ibid, p.781).

The change laboratory is a method developed by Engeström and others and for dealing with "with challenging changes by means of expansive learning" (Engeström, 2015). "Expansive learning means that subjects collectively and collaboratively move through a developmental process in an activity. That process then results in something that wasn't planned or known before and by which (the object) of the activity can be expanded or changed (Bakker, 2014).

Boundary crossing is defined by Bakker and Akkerman (2013) "as the efforts by individuals or groups at boundaries to establish or restore continuity in action or interaction across practices ." In this study that means that the teachers cross the boundaries between their subject-matter or knowledge domains by finding and sharing similarities. In the activity system the subjects develop and learn something that has meaning beyond the initial object of the activity. I this case, the initial teachers' object was to develop tools for creating 'casual moments' with students in a change lab. Using the concepts of expansive learning and boundary crossing, the question was wether or not this supported their agency.

Method

As the purpose of the study was to explore the potential of a change laboratory in a secondary school setting, a webpage was set up and a tweet was sent out to invite schools that would like to participate in a change lab pilot (see http://meesteronderwijsinzicht.nl/schoolontwikkellabs-oproep-voor-pilotscholen/)

The Corsendonck school reacted positively and after an intake session with K, the teamleader, it was decided that we would set up a three session pilot. In those sessions the teachers and I worked together to, in their words, organise 'casual moments with students' to improve teacher-student and student-student understanding. In the two hour sessions the group developed a thematic interdisciplinary project for students under guidance of the author. The sessions were video recorded and all working materials were collected to be analyzed. A year after one of the teachers was interviewed. The team consisted of four teachers: one teacher Dutch, one Geography, one Music and Expression and an English teacher.

The Corsendonck school writes on its website that it is a regional school for all levels for secondary education. It is a school with about 2000 students with a 'Technesium' and bilingual education. The school wants to offer high quality education and teaches, in the words of the teachers, in a 'traditional way'. In 2014 the school, supported by a educational consultancy, started a professionalisation trajectory called "tailored teaching". Purpose of that trajectory was to train the teachers in coping with the differences between the students (differentiation). One team of teachers, that regarded themselves well enough equipped for that and did not need just another set of tools for differentiation, participated in the change lab pilot. In addition to the professionalisation of the teachers, Corsendonck was anticipating what education will look like in 2020. The outcomes of the change lab could support that.

The data for this study consisted of video recordings of the change lab sessions, the researchers notes thereof, and a pre- and a post interview with the teamleader. In addition, from the materials developed by the students a selection of typical products was taken (selected by the teamleader).

In three change lab sessions I led, we used basically the model developed by Engeström and others (2015). However, there was only one fixed camera and no observing researchers were present during the sessions. Since there were only three sessions, there was no video used within the sessions to reflect upon. Consequently the analyses will be mainly based on my own notes and the video observations.

Analyses

As Edwards (2015) suggests, I like to analyse the change lab pilot at Corsendonck historically and find out what the needs and demands were that did or did not

strengthen the agency. Subsequently I will describe the process chronologically and point out the moments in which possible signs of agency did emerge. The focus will be on the (boundary) object of the activity during the change lab.

To start with, the way in which this pilot came about already shows that the team of teachers took action for their own development by participating in the change lab in the first place. By not agreeing to the demand of their school's management to join the trajectory, but inquiring further to find a project that might meet *their* needs for professionalisation, the teachers showed that they had their own ideas on what 'tailored teaching' was and took action for developing the means to achieve that. In the first lab session how to do is was the topic of discussion. In other words, in that session we were negotiating the object of the change lab by the contradiction between what the teachers thought that was necessary for improve their teaching and that what they ought to develop: tools for differentiation in the classroom. By the end of that session we agreed on the object as creating casual moments with students. This in turn would lead to a better understanding of the students, help teaching that meets the students' needs and finally even raise the school results. The latter was the reason for the management that the team thought was behind the professionalisation trajectory. In this session the team also asked me to write a short management report on how this object of the change lab would benefit both the teachers as the school.

In the second session we explored possible projects for the students that would create such casual moments. A musical, a new student hang out, and a 'cultural line' were brought about. I suggested a thematic project integrating the several subjects the teachers taught, by using the existing tools that developmental primary education already had developed (see van Oers, 2014 and Dobber, in preparation). In deciding on the type of project to design we took into consideration that the possible outcome should also be meaningful for the other teachers. In other words we were looking for a boundary object that would be of use both to the team as a way of improving their understanding of the students and hence their teaching, but also would help to convince their colleagues and management how tailored teaching could look like from their point of view. The decision on the project was made pragmatically. Since I would only be there for one next session and the project needed to start in within a month or two, a thematic project for students became the object in the change lab.

In the third and final session I introduced tools from developmental education to the teachers that would help them design the project (a 'theme planner', a 'goal circle').

Briefly I explained cultural-historical theory on which developmental education was based. The rest of that session was merely practical. We discussed how to plan and organise the project and which subjects and assignments it needed to consist of. The teachers named the project: "The Peel.[1] Fertile ground for development." The discussion on how to schedule the project showed the attention at least the teamleader had to have a boundary object as an outcome. She insisted that the project should be in the regular school schedule. This would potentially increase the power of the arguments to use for this kind of education on Corsendonck.

The students were introduced to the project with a short video introduction in English. Afterwards they could start immediately or first ask some questions. Then the students toured local companies and took pictures to use in their presentation to show in which way the Peel was fertile. The presentations were assessed by two teachers. The subject matter was graded by the subject teacher.

In the final interview K reports that there were no large deviations in grades from those of regular test, so the students at least had learned what 'they ought to.' However, she also reports that most students were more engaged, learned how to gather information and organise their projects. A year later some students still refer to it. Sometimes they call it boring, but also fun ('gezellig'). Even some students that did not participate in the project do know of the existence of it. Therefore it can be concluded that for the students it was a somewhat different, but just another school project.

For the project the team claimed their own room as their home base. From that room they organised the project. Although it seemed to K that there hardly was any interest from uninvolved teachers, sometimes a colleague would come in and ask for a cookie, meanwhile expression that he or she also would like such a project. Main outcomes for K where:

- the team worked more as a collective and that improved the bond and created more openness: "it was 'gezellig'";

- for the students the subject matter moved to the background and inquiry, collaboration and process became more important;

- the teachers got to know the students better.

K's conclusion was that the project had the intended outcome: a better understanding of the students, by creating casual moments. Moreover, the project

1 The Peel is the area of the school

was executed in the regular schedule and the grades did not differ. Hence, it could have been used as a boundary object to convince (or just illustrate) that a thematic project could lead to tailored instruction. However, a year after, K has no intention of starting such a project again. After the management has changed last year, the school's atmosphere has changed to. There is no room anymore for this kind of teaching. For that reason, two of the members of the change lab team have quit their job at Corsendonck. Therefore it can be concluded that although the project for the team was successful, the boundary between the team and the rest of the school has not been crossed. In other words, the project fitted the needs of the team, but dit not meet the demands of the school anymore. As an example K reports that even when an other project has started with integration of subject matter, they were not asked for help or information on how to do it.

Conclusion and discussion

Analysing the developmental process of the team using the concept of boundary crossing (Bakker & Akkerman, 2013), I conclude that the teachers in this group worked on an object that moved beyond the boundary of their personal daily practice. In an activity directed towards a shared ideal, they developed potential tools for change within the schools activity system. However, the school's management and atmosphere changed as after the project. Consequently the thematic project did not become a boundary object within the school. Although the teachers of the change lab team regarded the project successful and it supported their needs, the demands changed and thus the question remains whether or not the change lab strengthened their agency. From the start the team already showed some agency, as they took a different approach for their professional development. During the change lab pilot the teacher were focused on a boundary object to bring about change within their school. After the change lab, and after the change of management, again two of them showed agency by quitting. I conclude that the teachers in the team already were agential. A three session pilot of a change lab did not visibly strengthen that.

A three session change lab can be used to experience some of its potential. However, more sessions are needed to be able to explore more deeply the contradictions within the activity system and possible boundary objects. In addition, having video to critically analyse the practice would have enhanced the discussions in the lab session and might have led to a deeper understanding for me and the

teachers themselves of the object that they wanted to achieve: casual moments. What did they precisely mean by casual? Why didn't those moments exist already, or did they? Perhaps the answers on these questions might have shown that what a year later became apparent: the school's culture was not in line with the educational vision of the team.

Although this study is tentative because of the shortness of the intervention, it did however show that following the development of the (boundary) object, the emergence of teacher agency can be studied. The change lab model supports to make boundaries of the activity system explicit and hence show the contradictions between the needs of and demands on the teachers. I do agree with Edwards (2015) that extension of this kind of research to a larger scale cannot methodologically not be underestimated.

Epilogue

K. will be moving to Germany by the end of 2016. She travels along with her husband. She has quit her teaching job at Corsendonck with hardly any regret. The regret that is visible though is that of missing the students that she has worked with. She tells me that somehow they tell her sometimes more than she would expect. That it might be due to her way of keeping the classes 'gezellig'. She really wants and gets to know the students. And there is more than just the textbook. Now that the school's management has changed a new project like the one developed in the change lab will very hard to set up again. The school has changed. If she would not be moving to Germany, she would search for another school to teach. She is considering switching to primary education, since there she would teach a class in every subject and will have the full picture of every pupil.

The interview is hard to end. We keep on talking, although not many new issues are raised. It seems like we do not want to end the project for real, since then the casual moments are over at Corsendonck. But we do. As I walk to my car, I take the 'gezelligheid' with me in the form of the students project reports.

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