

Summary

This dissertation discusses descriptive research on the strategy and implementation of a school-community initiative in the city of Groningen: the Groningen community schools (Vensterscholen). In a community school, schools co-operate with healthcare and social welfare institutions to provide educational services, social services and cultural and recreational activities for children aged zero to fifteen and their parents.

Unlike other innovation projects in Dutch education, a bottom-up approach is being used to develop community schools. This means that community schools are being developed 'from the bottom up' by professionals from participating agencies. The form and content of the innovative programme depend on local settings and the situation in the neighbourhood.

In Groningen themes serve as guidelines for designing and developing activities and interventions. However, it is questionable whether practitioners and agencies are sufficiently equipped to introduce this particular innovation. More specifically, can the strategy that is being used to develop community schools contribute to successful implementation? Literature on educational change highlights the need for a fit between strategy and type of innovation in order to implement that innovation successfully. Literature shows that successful implementation concerns setting specific goals, consensus on those goals, the active involvement of participants, the realization of activities, a continuous development of activities and sustaining the innovation in the organization. Successful implementation should eventually improve outcomes for children (after a period of at least ten years).

This study examines the development of Groningen community schools. It addresses the question 'do Groningen community schools use an appropriate strategy to develop this particular innovation?' In order to answer this question we have examined implementation in relation to strategy.

We have studied the characteristics of the strategy that is being used by the Groningen community schools (research question 1). In order to determine whether an appropriate strategy is being used for developing Groningen community schools, this study examines:

- whether the goals and principles of the innovation have been specified in terms of detailed goals by the participants and whether consensus has been achieved on the goals of the innovation (research question 2)
- whether participants have become involved in the community schools (research question 3)
- whether community-related activities that are related to four core areas of activity (continuous education, a coherent care system, parent involvement and the extended school day) have been developed, and to what extent children and parents participate in these activities (research question 4).

A multiple case study was used for this study. Four cases were selected; these are community schools that started the implementation of the plan at the same time. Case studies in general make use of multiple sources of data. In this study, planning documents, annual reports, community school evaluation reports and interviews were used to obtain information about the goals, the strategy and the activities of the Groningen community schools in the period between 1998 and 2002. The group of informants consisted of persons who represent different organizational layers, namely policy officials, community school site managers, principals and professionals. Fifty persons were interviewed and four persons (principals) completed a questionnaire.

Annual registration figures were used to measure the participation of children and parents between 1998 and 2002. The results concerning the four research questions are as follows.

Research question 1

The Groningen community schools use a bottom-up strategy, which presupposes that the school/community workers know which interventions are appropriate. A municipal steering group stimulates the development of Groningen community schools and has laid down minimum criteria for the development of community school activities.

Several new consultative structures have been set up in and around the Groningen community schools. The consultative bodies on the community school level have no decision-making power. Hence delays in the implementation of new plans are fairly common.

For each community school, funding of plans was discussed with policy officials. Criteria have not been set for measuring the quality and success of community school activities. Although community schools use various formal and informal

methods to evaluate their activities, the evaluation of activities has not been carried out systematically.

The implementation of the innovation plan appears to depend on the time that is available for consultation, individual enthusiasm and motivation, and organizational matters such as staff turnover, personnel capacity and personnel absenteeism. The time that school community workers spend on community school activities depends mostly on the investments that the management of participating agencies are willing to make.

The co-operation between agencies in the community schools is considered as a means to improve children's development and education. The co-operation between the participants mainly concerns getting to know each other, making an inventory of one another's education services and referring families to each others' services. Co-ordination of services focuses mainly on organization and less on the content of activities.

The mutual benefits of the co-operation between agencies are expressed by the participants mainly in terms of organizational benefits. The high degree of autonomy for developing the innovation is esteemed for its function of gaining support and motivation. However, there is a need for more steering, co-ordination of activities and better communication between professionals in the community schools, so that consultation and co-operation between the participants is not confined to a small number of professionals.

Research questions 2 and 3

Regarding the goals of the innovation, it was found that a shift of emphasis has occurred. The goals, however, have not been made concrete. The goals of the community schools are discussed at the highest level (the city council). In contrast, the community schools themselves hardly discuss goals at all. Further, it was found that participants within different groups of participants (policy officials, site co-ordinators, principals and school/community workers) agree on goals. There are, however, some differences in beliefs on goals between these groups. School/community workers for instance, particularly focus on those goals that are important for their own fields.

Participating agencies actively involved in the community schools are those institutions that strongly depend on the community schools for reaching their target groups. Active involvement and commitment on the part of participants has not yet become visible in all core areas of activities, possibly since it has not been made clear what exactly is the aim, for which target group the goals are meant and in

what way the goals have to be achieved. This applies in particular to areas such as 'parent involvement' and 'a continuous education' (the link between primary and secondary education and between the school curriculum and after-school programmes). The principals are agreed that teachers' workloads should be reduced. However, some practitioners from a number of institutions believe that teachers should become more involved in community school-level consultations.

Research question 4

Groningen community schools provide a wide range of activities. The Equal Opportunities Policy (het Onderwijskansenbeleid) and its activities, as well as regular services that are provided by the participating agencies, have been re-established in the community school infrastructure. 'The extended school day' (i.e. after-school programmes) and 'a coherent care system' were the most strongly emphasized areas of activity in the period between 1998 and 2002. Since most of the participating agencies provide regular services to the community schools, local developments are not clearly visible. A comparison between the period 1998-2002 and the situation in 2004 shows that there have been few changes in activities. This applies in particular to two of the core areas of activity, namely 'parent involvement' and 'continuous education'.

All community schools showed a noticeable increase in children's and parent's participation in community school activities. The participation of children and parents in activities is related to the number of activities community schools offer.

The participation of parents has increased in two of the four community schools. Parents with average to high educational levels are more involved in activities than less educated parents and ethnic minority parents with lower education levels. A small number of parents are involved in decision-making and the organization of activities. Parents apparently do not much like being involved in such activities.

In conclusion we can say that the strategy that is used by the Groningen community schools has been functional for gaining support and reducing and preventing resistance in the starting period of the implementation. It was also found that the approach has accounted for the embedding of regular services and Equal Opportunity programmes in the community school infrastructure. More insight has gradually been gained into services that are being provided by the various agencies and gaps in the services provided are becoming more visible. However, much improvement is still needed with regard to the clarity and specification of goals, active involvement of participants and co-operation between agencies. In the current approach, the community school's success depends too much on random

conditions, such as organizational capacity, the willingness to co-ordinate their interests and the motivation and professionalism of individuals in the Groningen community schools. Apparently, the participating agencies do not focus automatically on clarifying goals and altering their regular services. Too much delay in making goals concrete can, however, lead to non-commitment in the implementation. This may also happen if participants themselves are not made responsible for problem solving and the evaluation of activities. Hence, it is expected that the strategy that is used by Groningen community schools will not be appropriate for the complete period of implementation.

To determine whether Groningen community schools are using an appropriate strategy, it would be useful to conduct further research into the outcomes of the activities and interventions for children. Together with the participants, an appropriate operationalization of 'improvement of opportunities' and 'social participation' will have to be found.

