

unfolding human potential



Chapter 3

‘You cannot be not committed. There’s no escape. You have to show and open up.’

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(day 2, transcript by Maartje Janssens)

Vulnerability, responsibility and curiosity

I really appreciated, and was kind of touched by what was shown in the videos, and the narratives we discussed. In the video of the Titus Brandsmalyceum was shown what vulnerability in leadership and school development means. In the video of Laterna Magica became very clear what responsibility means, and how important it is. And in the video of Singelijn was shown how important surprises are, so that means: curiosity. These three elements might give us hints about what is important in leadership in schools.

Spider in a web

I once interviewed a district leader, who was responsible for many schools. I asked her what leadership means to her, and she said: ‘The only thing I’m doing all the time, is connecting. I’m trying to get people together, make them learn. I’m like a spider in a web.’ Leadership might be foremost about fostering relationships, enabling growth.

Relationship

I would now like to discuss five reflections on educational leadership. Perhaps the first is for granted to you, but I’m working in a business school. Which means I’m all day working with professors, teachers and academics who are in economics, private firms, health and money, thinking about managing, governance and leadership. I always want to make very clear that if you talk about leadership and governance in education, it’s about a *relational* good. It’s about relations between teachers, parents, pupils, school leaders, stakeholders, people around. The quality of education lies in that relationship – which is, in terms of leading, monitoring, controlling, very complicated, because

it's not about producing something. You cannot produce education. It's something that occurs, emerges in a relationship. So we should stop using words like controlling, steering and so on in education.

Congruency

Secondly, congruency is very leading to educational organizations. Because in fact, everything will be mirrored. In educational teaching and learning processes, teachers and children are interacting, and something is meant to happen: learning, development, growing, initiative and so on. The relationship, and the way people treat, trust, respect each other, will be mirrored in the whole organization. Subsequently, these processes will be an example for school leaders, to be repeated at the school organizational level. And consequently, it appears to be important for school boards to mirror what's happening among school leaders and in those layers of the organization. So congruency – when you can feel, hear, smell and see the same culture or behavior throughout the whole organization – makes a leader happy, as Tom Brocks of the Titus Brandsmalyceum said. With congruency, it's clear to everyone why we're here, what we're doing and where we're going.

Connecting

If my colleagues from the business school would be here, they would say: 'this is all so very soft!' Leading and monitoring educational organizations is what we call 'soft'. It's about behaviour, language, modeling, building a community, bringing in your personality. If I would be your leader, I would share my whole life with you, my diaries and what drives me. Because then I would show my vulnerability. We both know, that will connect us. And I would love you to do the same thing, so we get to know each other. And if we know each other, we can take each other into account, respect each other and, most important, understand each other. I've always found it very hard that other people really have other convictions, and they really perceive things in other ways. Of course I've learned to say 'yeah, I understand', but in my mind I find it difficult to understand. I need the force and the imagination to bridge, and to be connected. So let's not talk too easily about connecting. It's hard work. And remember how happy you are when you have a spontaneous click with someone.

Educational leadership is not soft at all

So educational leadership is about personal drives and fears, about connecting and courage. All these things are 'soft', regarding to my colleagues from the business school. But then I would say to them: you're mistaken. This is not soft at all. Because, and I think this is shown in the videos as well, behind this softness, these behavioural, emotional things, this freedom, enabling, fostering, letting a kite fly – behind all this, there's a very strong, hard side. In the videos you can see very strong leadership that is shown. I saw Tom, Annette and Dominique, but also their colleagues, the teachers, and the children, being very strong, having a very clear drive, having strong convictions, their values quite clear, a strong commitment, normativity – don't be afraid of normativity, and don't be afraid of people who challenge that. You feel vulnerable, but then there's dialogue. Furthermore, the requirement of constant reflection – that's not soft. In general people find it very hard to reflect – it is very hard to reflect. Using all social resources, that's what I also saw in the videos. Making use of what children bring in, what teachers bring in, what you can bring in as a leader. That's not easy. You cannot be not committed. There's no escape. You have to show and open up. You have to make yourself vulnerable and let other people challenge you.

Structures and routines

Finally, if it comes to vulnerability of school organizations: if strong leaders – being there, fostering, modeling – leave schools, the whole climate, everything that was build, may fall down. And that's

why – according to organizational theory – not only culture and behaviour, but also structuring and organizational routines are very important. It's quite fashionable and appealing to talk about leadership like we do this morning, and like I just did. It's a bit boring to talk about structures and routines. But you need them in an organization, in a community, because it makes things easier and it organizes stability. So if you have a certain way of dialogue and connectedness, make sure that there are also structures in your school. So that even if you or other leaders would leave, the structures are still there and people can drive through them. Everybody needs routines. You need some stability to have some energy left to engage in new things.