

unfolding human potential



Chapter 3

‘What is man? What are we? What is it that constitutes us in a way?’

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(day 2, transcript by Maartje Janssens)

Basic needs of self-determination and belonging

We’ve talked a lot about values, and I would like to turn things a little bit round. I would like to talk about needs. I think that if our basic needs are fulfilled, we develop responsibility and values. I want to speak about the quality of interaction, the needs that we have and our refer to the newer results of evolutionary anthropology. My question is: what is man? What are we? What is it that constitutes us in a way?

You could start with the first hominids who went out of the woods, because of some ecological catastrophe. The only chance to survive against other animals who were stronger and who could run quicker, was to cooperate. And in order to work together, they had to develop strategies of coming together, of belonging to a group. We are wonderfully equipped with a lot of social psychological mechanisms to make that work. We have a wonderful system of theory of mind, of being able to imagine what you are thinking when you are looking at me and I have no idea.

I would propose there are two major strives that overlay everything we do. One is that we want to determine ourselves (self-determination theory). Second, we want to belong. And both doesn’t go along so easily, because it’s a paradox. So what we need is ways to adjust, negotiate, navigate. In other words: successful ways to fulfill these basic needs to self-determinate as much as we can, and to belong as much as we need.

Video 1: Belonging and shared responsibility

Looking at that, I would like to comment on the video clips – and they were very impressive. In the first clip, we see a principal in the school hall. He’s exposing himself, not hiding behind his desk in his

office. The children come and he says: 'Hi, good morning, watch your earphones, how are you?' It says: I see you, I perceive you. That is very important for us. Tom Brocks, the principal, gives a message, as he said in the video: to be an example. Well exactly, he *is* an example. He gives the children the message that they are welcome. And not only that, he brings them together in a group, and holds a school council with his students. He says: I can *physically feel* when it works. What he feels, is belonging. The belonging of the children to his school and *his* belonging to the school. It's his narrative of belonging. 'I came to the school without a qualification that a principal usually has, and the teachers were helpful, they made me belong.'

I would suggest to bring the student council down to the classrooms. These councils should not only discuss school and organizational questions. They are a room for students to discuss their private problems, if they want. Then you have a wonderful forum of negotiating and navigating. 'Why do you bully me? Why do you not like me? Why don't you play with me? These are the questions that the children have. The students don't go to school because they want to learn in the first place; they come to meet their friends. But what we do is bring children into schools and say: 'Forget your friends, you'll learn English'. Well, *first* the friends, the social contacts, the belonging. And then the English.

Finally, leadership is about shared responsibility. If the students bring up their questions, ask them: what would you like to do about it? *You*. It's your responsibility, but it's a *shared* responsibility, on three levels: *your* responsibility, *my* responsibility, and *our* responsibility.

Taking responsibility, helping, and positive peer culture

The second example is not about narrative, but grammar – and you need both. The grammar in that school is a system in which you do not *make* children responsible, but you provide concepts and structures that allow children to *take* responsibility. We see naturalistic learning: if you want to take care of the pigs, first of all you write a letter of application, then we have a test of cooperativeness, and so on. It's not enough just to love animals to take that job. You have to be responsible and be able to cooperate. And what I really like in this school is: the helping each other. There is nothing by which we can strengthen people more, than by having them in a position to help somebody else. Nothing makes us happier than to help another person. I think in education we should think much more about that. How can we put children, and particularly the children who we are most worried about, in a helping situation?

I work a lot with positive peer culture. The one major difference between classroom councils and positive peer culture is that we have no tribunal. When someone has done something wrong we don't have a group of children deciding what kind of a punishment is just. That would be totally wrong! The kids who do something wrong – very often the same kids – are already punished. We have to ask the group how they can be able to help this child to change his behaviour. So we make the children responsible.

I have a wonderful example of a group in second class, where a boy committed 'wrong behaviour'. The children discussed it in the group, and the boy showed shame, which helped the others to understand that he took responsibility for what he did. They asked themselves how to help him to get out of his shaming position, a question of dignity, in the sense of agency in the group. They spoke for the boy, because he was too ashamed to speak for himself, and concluded they had to watch him better, and include him in their break activities'. After the discussion I asked the boy what he felt like during this process. He said: 'They play with me again'.

Community

At the third school, it is said very clearly: 'We help each other, children take the lead, and they participate actively in their life'. If we do that, we change the idea of community of a school. Then the community of the school is not the teachers, students, and their parents. If we do what Dominique does in his school, then the school is a community *of* the students, *of* the parents, and *of* the teachers. The teachers then have the chance to take themselves a bit back, and think about how to solve the problems they have. A teacher who can do that, is in a moderating role, and he is extending his methodological instrumentarium.