Leading the Process of Reculturing: Roles and Actions of School Leaders

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Abstract

In this article, we focus on the role and actions of individual school leaders in initiating and governing the process of reculturing. First, we elaborate on the core elements of the process of reculturing, referring to a complex learning process of finding a new balance between cognitions and emotions both individually and collectively. We then review the literature for issues related to school leaders' roles and actions during reculturing. We argue that the role of leadership power largely has been left out of the picture so far while at the same time leadership power is so crucial for teachers' roles and actions in educational innovation processes. To illustrate our line of thinking, we analyse the stories of three school leaders about their roles and actions during successful processes of reculturing and retrospectively analyse the role of leadership power during these processes, building on a framework of Hetebrij (2006) for judging the quality of power use.

Introduction

Western society is gradually changing from a primarily industrial society to a primarily service oriented economy (Drucker 1993), asking for many more choices to be made in our public and private lives (Kuijpers & Scheerens 2006). Teachers need to prepare students for participation in this changing society, which asks for other professional skills than teachers are used to. Also, the role of teachers themselves in society and in the schools is changing. There is an appeal to teachers' self-directing abilities to act

upon their joint responsibility in stimulating and guiding students during their school career (Law, Meijers & Wijers 2002). Such changes have an impact on the professional identity of teachers (Day 2002). They ask of teachers to learn creatively – as opposed to reproductively (Illeris 2002). Geijsel and Meijers (2005) therefore argued that a model of identity learning is necessary to better understand the learning processes that teachers are or become involved in. Identity learning involves a relation between the social-cognitive construction of new meanings and individual emotional sense-making of new experiences.

Positive teacher identity learning only happens within schools functioning as strong learning environments, allowing for experiential learning and – at the same time – providing a communicative structure that invites the learners to reflect on their experiences (Geijsel & Meijers 2005, Sleegers, Bolhuis & Geijsel 2005). School organization as a learning environment in relation to educational change processes has been a research topic for over two decades now. This research has led to important insights, such as the paradigm of managed change (Louis 1994) and envisioning schools as professional learning communities (Toole & Loui 2002). This research has also shown conditions enhancing professional learning and educational change in schools, such as a collaborative culture and teacher participation in decision making accompanied by transformational leadership, to be significant driving forces (Sleegers, Geijsel & Van den Berg 2002, Geijsel, Sleegers, Stoel & Krüger 2007). Building capacity to change by creating these conditions is crucial for sustained educational change, as for instance was shown by an evaluation of large-scale innovation in England (Leithwood et al. 2004). Such capacity building is not so much about changing organisational structure but about changing professional culture within those structures (Smylie & Hart 1999, Rowan 1995). Fullan (1999) therefore refers to capacity building as 'reculturing': 'a process of increasing the focus on core instructional goals, processes and outcomes by improving the capacity of teachers and others to work together on these matters'.

There is, however, a 'fatal flaw' in the research: although we may know some of the important conditions, the research does not tell how to establish these conditions when they are not already existing (Fullan & Watson 2000, Fullan 2006). Also, it is not clear what respective roles teachers and school leaders have in building capacity. In this article we focus on the roles of school leaders. Empirical research has abundantly shown that the role of the school leader is indeed crucial, particularly by establishing three areas of leadership practices: setting directions, developing people and redesigning the organization (Leithwood & Riehl 2003, Leithwood & Jantzi 2006). It nevertheless remains unclear how school leaders or educational managers can operate and sustain these practices in relation to all other processes that are bound to or already do take place in and around the school.

Reculturing and the need for leadership

Reculturing involves a process of organizational change. In organizational change literature, connections between organization theory, change theories, learning theory and sense making theory are made to better understand change processes. This leads to a view of reculturing as the changing of action perspectives of the people involved as well as the processes of individual and collective sense making behind those perspectives (Weick 2001). This literature also shows that these changes start by situations of ambiguity and uncertainty in which the shared cognitive understanding that was useful for a while no longer appears to hold (Schön 1983, Weick 1995, Rogers 2001). Most individuals tend to avoid situations of ambiguity and uncertainty, not willing to negotiate the stabile social cognitive configuration that has been established (Markus & Zajonc 1985, Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld 2005). But a situation can be created where people no longer can or want to avoid the new situation of ambiguity and uncertainty. The resulting experience can be called a 'boundary experience' (Bühler, cited in Künkel n.d.). The leadership of an organization obviously can play a role in enforcing boundary experiences for its employees, and in most cases this happens when an organization needs to respond contingently to changes in the environment in order to survive.

The contemporary societal changes mentioned earlier may actually give rise to a boundary experience for many teachers when school management decides that the school organization has to react to those changes. The resulting needs for changes in the professional identity of teachers are normally not specified in a clear working agreement for the teachers; on the contrary, they appear to be hidden in educational policy and reform movements and concomitant school policy as understood and structured by the school leadership (Coburn 2004, 2005). Sense-making theory (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld 2005, Coburn 2005) interprets the ensuing process as an ongoing communication between school leadership and teaching staff, in which the school leader plays a key role in structuring the issues, but ultimately a shared view is achieved. In our view, this theory is overly rationalistic. It gives scant attention to the emotional side of the sense making process, and it overlooks the role of power issues, probably because power use is also seen as non-rational. In this text, we will concentrate on the issue of power, but first some words on the emotional side of the sense making process.

Some teachers view the upcoming changes as a challenge, but many face them at first as an experience of conflict, shortcoming or inability, and of uncertainty: a natural and human reaction (Hall & Hord 2001). Dealing with reforms entails differential cognitive-affective processes for teachers in which emotions play a key role (Hargreaves 2005, van Veen, Sleegers & van den Ven 2005). On the individual as well as the school level a new balance has to be created between emotions and cognitions

(Wijers & Meijers 1996, Fineman 1997, Höpfl & Linstead 1997). This can only be done by using, in a heuristic way, concepts and shared meanings that are available in the social environment: one must enter into an existing discourse (Bruner 1990, Hermans 1999). This discourse needs to entail a process of *'discursive meaning-giving'*. In this process, the individual tries to 'understand' what is happening to him or her. The result of this process is mutual understanding and shared values. Here, the school leader can play a crucial role by initiating this discourse or shaping the conditions under which this discourse can take place (Geijsel & Meijers 2005).

However, before this result is reached, an introspective dialogue has to be completed, which can be viewed as a process of *'intuitive sense-giving'* (Meijers & Wardekker 2002). In this process, the emotions that were evoked by the situation and that are initially not understood, must be made transparent with the help of concepts. This process is not about 'finding out the truth', but about the adequate articulation of feelings. To do so, individuals must seek for concepts that are useful for giving the boundary experience a meaningful place in their own life stories (Polkinghorne 1988). The individual will only find adequate concepts when such concepts will be handed over by others with knowledge of the individual's life history and respect for the individual's life story. Therefore, trust plays a key role in teacher learning and, once again, this places demands on the role of the school leader (Smylie & Hart 1999).

So, on a more collective level, reculturing is a process of co-creating new meanings to situations of ambiguity and uncertainty on the basis of dialoguing both with oneself and with others (Hermans & Hermans-Janssen 1995). This process takes place in a field of tension between the enforced boundary experience on the one hand and trust on the other hand. Managing this tension puts rather strong demands on the way the leadership operates (Fullan 2006). In the following section, we will focus more closely on leadership role theory.

The scope and incompleteness of leadership role theory

Leadership can be defined as an influencing process which affects: 'the interpretation of events for followers, the choice of objectives for the group or organization, the organization of work activities to accomplish objectives, the motivation of followers to achieve the objective, the maintenance of cooperative relationships and teamwork, and the enlistment of support and cooperation from people outside the group or organization' (Yukl 1994, p. 3). This definition makes clear that leadership is not only about the thoughts and actions of the leader as such. Leadership is relational: it is defined by its influence and is thus shown by its impact. Leadership will only lead to a stable situation if it is accepted by the members of the organization (Lukes 1981). So, according to this definition, it is the role of a leader to exercise influence.

Over the years, the role of the school leader has been studied starting from a classical bureaucratic perspective to a social system perspective and via contingency theory towards a transformational perspective (Hanson, 2003). Hence, educational leaders have been studied for their roles as heroes, motivators, goal achievers and transformers of school organizations and their members. In addition, most recently, the perspective of social cognitive distribution has gained interest, focussing on the distributed nature of leadership. This perspective no longer puts the person of the leader in the centre of research, but instead the interactions among leaders and teachers and the situation that they find themselves in (Spillane 2005). However, there is no research yet that has succeeded in applying this perspective empirically in order to study those interactions in detail (Spillane & Orlina 2005).

Nevertheless, school improvement is partly explained by the extent to which leadership practice is found distributed within the school organization (Leithwood et al., 2004). This distribution then refers to several persons at several levels in the organization that are jointly practising leadership. Notwithstanding, it is not just this distributed nature that matters; inherited from the years of research into school leadership from a more personalistic perspective, it is also known that the kind of practice matters. As already mentioned, three core sets of leadership practices have been found to contribute to educational quality and improvement in almost any case, but especially in the case of change and innovation: setting directions, developing people and redesigning the organization (Leithwood & Riehl 2003, p. 17-21, Leithwood & Jantzi 2006). *Setting directions* refers to initiating a vision for the school's future and helping a group to develop shared understandings about the organization and its activities and goals that support sense of purpose and vision (see also Hallinger & Heck 2002). *Developing people* refers to positively influencing the motivation and capacities of one's colleagues by modelling, offering intellectual stimulation, and providing individual support. *Redesigning the organization* refers to developing an effective organization that supports and sustains performance by strengthening the school culture, building collaborative processes, and modifying organizational structures accordingly.

Comparing these three core sets of leadership practices, one can notice some logical resemblance with the elements of reculturing that were mentioned in the previous paragraph. The need for setting directions appear logically connected to a boundary experience. The developing people practices seem obviously necessary to start and sustain the processes of discursive meaning giving and intuitive sense making. Redesigning the organization allows for shaping the conditions for discursive meaning giving and intuitive sense making.

These leadership practices are distributed because it is never just the leader himself or herself who is acting. Nevertheless, it is defended on the base of research inside and outside education that in the end, it is the role of the leader to be integrally responsible: to make sure that the necessary leadership practises become initiated and sustained (Leithwood et al. 2004, Locke 2003). The personality of the school leaders therefore still comes to the fore as important, though maybe less so because of their charismatic nature, but more because of their capacity to combine several competences in order to carry the burden or pleasure of integral responsibility. Nowadays professional development programs largely tend to focus on teaching and transferring competences to school leaders, such as taking firm decisions, or identifying with the position and problems of others. However, as Hallinger (2003) argues based on an international review of such programs, many of these development programs are based on rhetoric and policy logic. Inquiry based knowledge of school leadership competences remains scarce.

So, reviewing the contribution of school leadership research and theory building, we conclude that there is a movement from theories that emphasize the role of power, to an emphasis on communication, back to an emphasis on power. What is missing, however, is an adequate analysis of the role and nature of power use. Thus, we do have some knowledge of important leadership practices, but still there is as yet no firm theory enabling a full understanding of the leadership role in processes of educational change. In this article, we will not try to make up for this lack of complete theory. But we will try to deepen our understanding of the role of the school leader by focusing on the role of power.

The role of power

Our review started from the idea that both the role of the school leader and the role of the teachers in the context of school improvement and educational change appear to matter interactively. School leaders have a certain amount of power over the teachers, in that they can set goals, structure the issues, and create boundary experiences. The way they use this power will be 'answered' by the teaching staff, giving rise to a process that may include cooperative sense making, but also the use of power in other forms, for instance when teachers do not want to follow the leader at all, or when the leader is in the eyes of the teachers acting upon disputable assumptions or desires. Whatever form this process takes, there will always be a difference in power position: teachers are subordinate and thus depend on the power of the leader to a certain extent. It seems obvious that these differences matter during often disruptive processes of change, especially in the contemporary situation in which, as mentioned before, teachers' professional identity is at stake. In fact, researchers often point at the significance of power relations as an explanation for

their disappointing or confusing findings regarding school improvement processes (Datnow & Castellano 2001, Hopkins 2001). Nevertheless, the perspective of power is hardly ever applied to school leadership (see Hanson 2003), probably because power use is seen as undesirable and all problems should be solved by 'soft' communicative means.

Changing teachers' professional identity within the school as a learning environment cannot be considered a soft issue however. Teachers in Dutch schools can actually get fired when not willing to move in the direction of the educational innovations that school management, whether or not with accordance of the majority of the teachers, has decided upon; and in almost every innovative Dutch school, a number of teachers actually find themselves pressed to leave the organization at this very moment. So, for teachers, the power of management is very much part of their reality when dealing with the contemporary educational innovations. Building on Foucauldian ideas, Zembylas (2005) even argues that teacher identity is embedded in power relations (and ideology and culture) as inherent parts of their environment.

But for school leaders too, power is an essential part of their role in school improvement and educational change. When focussing on identity learning as a core process of reculturing, school leaders in fact have the power to impose boundary experiences on their teachers, or determine the moment at which an upcoming boundary experience can no longer be avoided. What we are interested in, however, is not the uncomfortable side of the power of management playing a role at the basis of reculturing processes. Instead, we are interested in how the exercise of power might be helpful for school leaders when enacting their roles as initiators, stimulators and designers of reculturing.

Power has been studied extensively in the field of policy and politics. With these studies, one has come to understand that power can only lead to sustained change of behaviour if it takes the form of influence, that is, power that is accepted by those on whom it is exerted (Lukes 1981). Earlier we defined leadership as exercising influence. So, to answer our question we need to know more about the conditions under which leadership power takes the form of influence.

We found in the work of Hetebrij (2006) a viable framework for analysing issues of power. Based on an interpretation of Habermas' theory of communicative action, Hetebrij developed a model of political actions in organisations in terms of influencing decisions, in which the categories of communication and power are crucial elements. Power and communication are both relational concepts: they point at different forms of relationship between people in an organisation, especially between leaders and subordinates. Communication is necessary for discussing visions, opinions, alternatives

before taking a decision, while power is necessary to make decisions in the face of differing opinions and interests, and to enable potential sanctions when a decision is not followed. Hetebrij specifies *trust* and *credibility* as conditions under which a leader can make adequate use of communication. Without judging the other trustworthy and credible, a person cannot rely on his or her information or arguments. Also, Hetebrij specifies three criteria for the adequate use of power: *effectivity, transparency,* and above all, *respectability.* Effective power means that timely decisions are taken and are actually carried out. For a strong organization, effectivity is not enough; the decisions also need to be accepted, that is, power needs to take the form of influence. Transparency is demanded: organization members need to know what is coming and it needs to be clear where and how power is used. Moreover, members need to know and accept why a decision will be taken: they need to determine for themselves whether what is asked of them is reasonable. Hence, power should be used in such a way that members can respect it. Fulfilling these criteria and conditions is not easy; and moreover, it is not always wise or right. Power and communication both are enacted in interaction with the (organisational) environment. For instance, other persons might act in a non-respectable or harmful manner during decision making processes, and to stop that, power might need to be used while disregarding quality criteria. Therefore, judging the quality of power can only be done in the end when choices have been accounted for.

Hetebrij's model, then, suggests that not only are both power and communication necessary elements in running any kind of organisation, but they should be used in an adequate balance. Moreover, the criteria for adequate use of power and communication show that these are not two independent processes, but they depend on each other. If power is to be respectable, this means that its respectability needs to be open to clarification in a communication process. If communication is to remain credible, it should not lead to the endless deferral of decisions and thus to loss of effectivity, in other words, it must make the use of respectable power possible.

The model is meant to be applicable to all sorts of decision processes in organisations, not just for innovation processes, and not just for schools. In using it for the role of school leaders regarding changing school organizational culture, one needs to pay attention to possibly necessary specifications and changes to the model. Due to the amount of professional autonomy at the level of teachers, for instance, school leaders need to mobilise a relatively large amount of power that is not in their own possession. This can put extra strain on the leader's strategy of handling power, especially when it concerns decisions that affect teachers' autonomy, such as is the case with educational innovation. According to Hetebrij's model, adequate use of communication will then be even more important.

This brings us to our research question: how do school leaders use their power in such a manner that processes of reculturing are initiated and continued? To answer this question exploratively, three cases will be presented of school leaders who have been successful in leading the process of reculturing.

Method

According to Kvale (1996), open-ended interviews are particularly appropriate for data gathering regarding a subject that is complex in nature and rather unexplored. For the purposes of our research on the management of reculturing, open interviews were held with three school leaders selected from a number of schools that are know in The Netherlands for the extent of innovation that has been achieved in the last couple of years. In these schools the ways of collaborating, communicating and decision making changed profoundly in the last couple of years, as for instance is evidenced by the prizes these schools have won over the last years.

The first interview was held with Pete Lanark[1], who is the director of a primary school situated in a small village in the south of The Netherlands. The school has about 700 pupils in the ages of 4-12 years, and fifty teachers. Both the curriculum and the didactics in this school have been changed fundamentally towards experiential learning, based on the concept of multiple intelligence. In its 2007 quality review the Dutch Education Inspectorate called this school 'exemplary' <www.schoolvoorbeelden.nl/portretten.php?id_thema=2>.

The second interview was held with Hank Reiber, director of a so-called 'City High School' in the eastern part of the Netherlands. This is a school for pre-vocational and general secondary education, counting 4100 students in the ages of 12 to 18 years and 550 teachers. This school has a national reputation for the implementation of team teaching in combination with an integrated curriculum. In 2004, the school was awarded the Education Award of the Province of Overijssel; in 2005, it was the founder of the Educational Innovation Corporation (a group of schools engaged in developing materials for 'inspiring learning') for which it got an award from the Department of Education see <www.durvendelendoen.nl>.

The third interview was held with Lizzy Fox, member of the College of Directors of 'Frisia College', a community college in the north of The Netherlands. In this school, 1150 teachers provide vocational and adult education for about 12.000 students that are mostly in the age of 16 to 22 years. The Frisia College has a national reputation as the forerunner of practice based learning. In 2007 the school won the Department of Education's National Innovation Award for professional education.

The three school leaders were interviewed in April 2006, each for almost two hours. Each interview had two main questions: "What problems have you encountered during the change process?" and "What role have you played in problem solving?". The first question meant to retrieve a description of the process of reculturing. The second question meant to investigate the leader's role in influencing this process: are the three core sets of leadership practices recognizable and does power play a role?

Each interview was tape recorded and transcribed. A report of the interviews has been reviewed and (with only small changes) approved by each school leader. The interviews were then analysed by checking fragments for their information regarding concepts from our framework regarding the leadership role and use of power. We started by labelling the interview fragments in three categories: setting directions, developing people and redesigning the organization. We then checked the resemblance that we expected with the elements of reculturing: boundary experience, discursive meaning giving, intuitive sense making. We also labelled fragments referring to personality issues of the school leaders that they mentioned as influential to their activities. We then labelled interview fragments that showed how power played a role in the operation of each of the three core practices. To deepen our understanding, we finally used the framework of Hetebrij (2006) to evaluate whether and how power took the form of influence.

Although only one researcher has executed the interviews, all steps in the analyses were discussed within a small group of researchers, to ensure the reliability of the findings.

Results

Setting directions

All three respondents indicate that exactly because of their function as a school leader, they were able to introduce a 'boundary experience' marking the beginning of the culture change, combined with initiating a vision for the school's future.

> The school leader is crucial during a change process. No school changes if the school leader does not want to change. As the school leader, I indicate what is possible. It is about avowing one's vision every day. (Lanark)

The school leaders of the two larger organizations (Reiber and Fox) make clear that marking the boundary experience is not just a matter of course; they felt that they had to draw a line and needed to push or force to a certain extent.

Some five years ago (I was) first confronted with sick leave permits from the company doctor indicating 'situational sick leave'. As a school leader, that had to make me think. Such things concern the work climate, the work environment. Two teachers resigned because they could not handle the kids any more. When I went into the classroom to observe what was the matter, I noted that the teachers were only producing and the students were only consuming, waiting for the break. Waiting for the teacher to finally keep his mouth shut so they could start on their homework and be free in the evening. It was clear to me that we were on the wrong road altogether. (…) Together with some colleagues who also felt we could not continue in this way, I went to a two-day conference (…) Those two days were extraordinarily inspiring. There, in our discussions, we formulated eight hard basic assumptions for our school. From that moment on, we used those eight points as the firm goals we wanted to work towards.

Often I have said to my associate directors, but also to the staff: if you touch those eight basics, you touch me; and then we'll have a problem, a personal problem. Once I also wrote in the staff magazine that I took into account I would have to let go some fifteen percent of staff, because I agree with many teachers that this new style of education does not fit everyone. Of course I added we would do our utmost to take everybody along, to provide all with support, schooling, and counselling. But that finally, if all else fails, a moment might come to take leave. And finally I have had to do that a number of times. Of course I will not be thanked for that. But still it is important to say it because you indicate there are limits to what you accept. (Reiber)

It's not just walking around in amazement. It is also about providing insights. You need to find out the meaning of those insights together. Taking responsibility for the mess. Having enough distance to be able to be amazed over and over again. As well as being committed to be able to say 'we are going to do something about it' over and over again. That is a coercive process; you need to tell people: 'You will need to view the meaninglessness of your own actions.' After that, you can smile and analyse to cool down all excitement. But… starting from those insights, something has to happen. And it really takes time before people move from new insights to new behaviour. (…) Affording clarity, standing for one's opinions, saying to somebody 'I fully oppose your thoughts or actions and this is not an open-ended, non-committal conversation.' That also is leadership. On the one side there is the soft and vague picture of creating opportunities and inviting and that kind

of action, almost therapeutically. On the other side there is the picture of 'You cannot cross that border, it ends here and now'. Both are true pictures of leadership practice. (Fox)

As the fragment of Fox shows, this school leader finds the shared understanding that was established no longer applicable ('view the meaningless of your own actions') and feels the need for dialoguing to create new meanings ('find out the meaning of those insights together'). She uses her own insights to create a boundary for her teachers ('you cannot cross that border').

Before school leaders can introduce a boundary experience, they often have had such an experience themselves. In the case of Reiber, this was the fact that the situation in which they had to work made his staff ill. With Fox, it was the experience – immediately after becoming the school leader – that students were hardly motivated for their course of study. This she felt as an attack on her professional identity which she had developed outside the sphere of education.

> If people say 'the student is central', I say, 'no, it's the learning process!' In my opinion, that is the school's foundation. I am not originally an educator, I come from youth care and psychiatry, as a creative therapist and a manager. My life motto is 'Nobody wants to hate their daily work.' So for me, important points are: 'Why is development stagnating? Why do people get stuck and what can we do about it?' (…) That is deeply anchored in my genes and in my career choice. The orientation to development and learning. You cannot have that natural amazement if you developed your professional identity here (inside the school). But you can make sure others catch that amazement and then something begins to happen. (Fox)

The other school leaders also use outside school experience to legitimize their vision and insights, relating their own vision to broader developments outside the school.

> I read all professional journals and the political and economical news in the papers, so I can pick up the tendencies. Just having a vision is not enough. You need to be able to connect the vision with current developments in politics and economy. That way you can translate societal or economical tendencies to your own situation. It's only then you can really develop a strategy and follow it through. (Lanark)

All interviewed school leaders experienced that it is not sufficient to introduce a boundary experience; it also needs to happen at the right place and time.

Timing is a very important feature of innovation. It is not a matter of planning when things will happen. It is the sense of the right moment for inspiring and mobilising people and the sense of how to do that. To get your timing right, you need to have experience. Learning that by falling down and standing up. And do not take for granted that all people will be reached. Too often I have strived after job satisfaction for all people in the organization. (…) You only learn by mistakes. But also only when there is a clear long-term vision. Building on that vision, one can view one's actions as a long-term learning process. Then you can make small steps in the right direction. Small steps produce small successes but also small mistakes. It might take a little longer, but then you can permit yourself mistakes. Without a clear vision, every mistake is one mistake too many. (Lanark)

Every Monday morning there is a newsletter for the teachers in which the main lines and the developments are made visible. The leader has to signalize the tendencies, to store them and bring them out again when the school, the teacher is ready for it. But he must also have the nerve to say to directives from the Ministry: 'mind your own business, we have our vision and we work on that basis'. (Lanark)

Summarizing, these fragments show that in each case the leadership role in the process of reculturing starts with individual experiences of the school leader where they recognize the ambiguity of the existing situation both within their school and its relation to the outside world. From this they are able to construct a vision of how things could change. That vision is then introduced in the school as a kind of 'positive' side of a boundary experience for the teachers: this is where they need to go. The 'negative' side is the current situation which is no longer held acceptable by the school leader.

The construction of a particular view of necessary changes, the promotion of that view and the selection of information for the teachers, were also described by Coburn (2005). However, there is more to it. The school leader in all three cases defines what is within the vision and what is not. Where teachers overstep that boundary, the leader takes action, which can eventually result in dismissal. But to make such actions respectable, the leader has to be able to defend the vision and to show its legitimacy in the face of current developments outside the school. It is important that the vision is something the leader personally strongly believes in – a merely bureaucratic stance will not be credible and will not inspire trust. Also, any actions of the leader must be well timed for teachers to be able to see their adequacy.

Developing people

After the boundary experience has been introduced, a school leader has to employ a different repertoire of actions in order to make the culture change succeed.

> Creating uncertainty and then forcing people to recognise that uncertainty, that is being firm. Being gentle then is to help them do it. Not saying 'I unsettled everything and now you figure it out for yourself'. You create a problem for them and then you need to do something personal as well. You can never know what people go through as a consequence of that problem. The only thing you can do is look very sharp at what you see and then judge, 'here much more intervision or supervision is needed; or here the instruments, the craftsmanship are lacking; or here different structures are needed because these people have been close for twenty years.' You cannot predict very much. But you can look and then intervene, guide. At the moment you think the old recipe is going to work again, I guess your culture change is a failure. For me that's the fun of it, being surprised every time anew. (Fox)

This task attitude holds that leadership is about maintaining a delicate balance between power and coaching. On the one side, the school leader tries to 'tempt' his subordinates into behaviour that fits the vision.

> I try to create an atmosphere in which people start to think for themselves. Take for instance the teachers visiting each other's classrooms, which happens now. I do not say a thing, I just listen. If people start saying 'we need to do this more often', it is them saying that, not me. That's what it is all about. I do not direct, I just push a little once in a while. I open doors, tickle a little, and then how great it is to see them go through that door by themselves. And if not one but more or even the whole team goes through the open door, we can make deals. As a school leader, you are a strategist with a good feeling for timing and a good feeling for people and with knowledge of the personal circumstances of the people. That feeling for people has developed during coffee hours. You just need to be a father! But … don't mention that aloud. One might say that the relation is identical to a father-child relationship. Being a good school leader is a matter of little things, hardly ever of big issues. (Lanark)

On the other side, this school leader has no fear of holding penetrating conversations with teachers that are not willing to change their behaviour and to confront those teachers with the question whether they had not better look for another job in

another place. Because the school leader is emphatically present at the shop floor, the teachers are confronted all the time with the fact that they do not live up to expectations. This psychological pressure, which is gradually increased, finally has resulted in teachers who do not fit into the new culture leaving voluntarily. Such a style of leadership seems only effective in small organizations; in larger organizations it seems impossible to create psychological pressure in this way:

> In any organization there are people that open doors. But you need to create the context in which these persons start doing that. Creating circumstances in which people feel invited to open doors. It cannot happen that in our big school organization only two persons open doors and force 1100 teachers through: ridiculous. Should one be proud of such a herd spirit? (Fox)

In a small(er) organization, the school leader can immediately see the effects of the boundary experience on the teachers, and use this by actively creating a 'zone of proximal development' (Vygotsky). The leader of the primary school therefore developed a style of leadership that entails continuous acting as a role model for his staff.

> Avowing one's vision means taking a stand among your people at all levels, from putting the garbage outside to acting in classrooms. Avowing means showing, leading the way, living your vision. Many school leaders can be found in their offices, but I am hardly ever in this room. It is so easy to feel important in this room, to take flight to one's computer or the curriculum. But the real action is outside this room. Outside is the trouble and that is where I need to be. I need to be on the shop floor and act and live what I believe in without dictating. There is a big distinction in that. (Lanark)

All three school leaders report their personal involvement as a crucial factor to show necessary empathy and to be able to react intuitively during the process.

> I think it is important for me to be recognizable as a solid person, who is also searching, who does not have all the answers either, who is creative and conceptual. You do need a number of such qualities. If you can only work in set patterns a culture change will not happen. I believe it's important to choose different points of view time and again, for people just are different. What I see is, in this whole repertoire of activities because people are appealed to different things, you still show continuously why you choose for it and what hesitations you have. (…) (Fox)

It's also just doing things on impulse and thinking: 'Hey, that went well.' I guess the power of the change is partly in wrestling with it yourself as much as anybody else and showing it. I'm afraid in an interview like this it all seems like well thought-out and balanced, but it just isn't that way at all. Sometimes you make decisions from a deep state of tiredness. You have spent an entire afternoon cursing an organisation, somebody makes a remark, and suddenly you say: 'Well, that's it, that's what we'll do.' At other times it is very well-considered. But I'm developing more and more doubts about the rationality of the process. Often that is what we make of it in hindsight. Then you organise it nicely, and suddenly the decision making and actions seem so sensible and rational. But maybe a part of the story is daring to exist in the organisation. *(How do you mean?)* That I can walk around here as Lizzy Fox, that I dare show much of myself and see eye to eye with myself. (Fox)

(…) You have to be enterprising, to be passionate, to be willing to take risks, not be scared to make mistakes. You have to have character. An uncertain person is not going to make it. I am absolutely convinced of that. He will not make it for he will go mad with the uncertainty and the worrying. (Reiber)

I'm here for them, and so I expect them to be here for me. I ask a lot of my staff, I expect a lot. But I'm also always ready for them and they know it. You have to really apply yourself and show a lot of commitment if you want to ask the same thing from others. (Reiber)

You need to know them so well you know of everybody what they are able to do. So you can tickle them, challenge without making them afraid. Not ask too much of them. You have to learn to accept each other, recognise each other's talents and capacities. It's important to know your team as a whole, in its coherence and relationships. (Lanark)

Summarizing, these fragments show the leadership role in the process of reculturing continues by helping teachers to start developing and implementing the vision. This involves balancing between being firm about the vision on the one side and coaching on the other side. All leaders emphasize the importance of personal involvement in this process. Here it appears that this involvement is not only with the vision, but also with the personal wellbeing and development of each of the teachers. Coaching, as a form of communication in the sense of Hetebrij, is not just a technique, but its success depends also on the personal relationship the leader is able to establish. On the other hand, there are limits to what can be accomplished by coaching, and leaders have to develop a feeling for when to take power measures. Although the leaders in

these interviews see this as a matter of personality, we think that a more theoretical insight in such processes (in terms of Hetebrij's model) could be advantageous.

Redesigning the organization

As we have seen, the three school leaders that we interviewed emphasized they themselves act as the strategic directors: they play a leading role in wording the strategic goals (the vision) and they draw boundaries that their staff have to respect. After this has been done, they confine themselves to guarding the strategy and they give their staff a lot of space to (a) make the strategic vision concrete in new products and methods, and (b) implement those new products and methods in actual practice. In doing so, a main task of the school leader appears to be to offer space and support to those who are able and willing to implement the strategic vision.

> Ultimately we got the school's Participation Council behind us by having a pilot study done at all school locations. Each focused on one of the eight basic principles. So people could choose which of those principles they wanted to begin with specifying, but they were not allowed to do things conflicting with the other seven principles. So they had to stay on the playing field we had defined. (…) We started the innovation of teaching with a strategic policy plan worded by the board of directors, and largely by myself. (…) That absolutely was a top-down process in which I myself clearly was in control. Of course then the teachers reproached us for that: why didn't we work more bottom-up. The core of my message was that in a few years teachers would no more be bosses in their own classrooms, but they would have to start co-operating. (…) We have forced teachers to co-operate in those projects. In that phase I accepted everything, whatever they did, if only they would co-operate. Everyone who was willing, within the eight principles, got all the space needed and mostly all the money too. That meant we had to invest on a large scale. Now we are some millions of Euros in debt, but it doesn't matter. (Reiber)

The school leaders also report changes in the organizational structures to allow for talking about uncertainties and emotions that come along with implementing the strategic vision.

> At the time we started with intervision, we also did it inside the management. It is awfully important to learn to speak about your uncertainties and about what you can do well or less well or not at all. Many staff members have resisted intervision but little by little it has become an accepted process. Now teachers organize their own intervision groups, without external support. Collaboration is possible

only when people are also prepared to talk about their uncertainties, to address others on what is going wrong. That is really learning. It is very difficult and even now it provokes tensions sometimes. In the end I force people to think seriously about how they can and want to do their jobs. (Reiber)

For keeping the innovation in motion there are two important instruments. Firstly, the yearly evaluations. Then, talking. I hold my associate directors responsible for that. They must pay attention that in their team meetings the innovation of teaching is a subject every time, but also the well-being of the staff and the students. (Reiber)

Providing the teachers with space means also allowing for bottom-up influence on the organizational design of the school, which helps to make teachers 'owners' of the innovation.

The leader has to be a strategist. He must pass the signals coming from outside through the filter of his vision and let his staff transform that themselves into something new. (…) Try to make the teachers the owners of their own teaching, the owners of their actions. That can be done by giving them a voice in any and all decisions and allowing them to design their own working environment. Give the teachers a chance to be proud of what they do. *(Interviewer: How do you do that?)* Make your own vision tangible, substantial. And within that vision, let teachers develop and make things themselves. Then they can be proud of them, and they are – proud as peacocks. Now they are working on developing a rich learning environment in which the teachers themselves develop elements, substantiate the vision and make it visible. For the parents too. By making it visible you offer a teacher the possibility of being proud of what he is doing. (Lanark)

Furthermore, to strengthen what is achieved in the school, school leaders take care to explicitly evaluate the progress of the innovation process. In Frisia College, this is done according to the concept of 'practice based learning' which forms the core of the school innovation. After experiences in practice have been made, a lot of time is set aside for reflection and for elaboration of the practice.

If you do not take enough time to adequately elaborate the practice you just keep reflecting together. No development becomes visible then. Managing culture change is in large part practice directed learning. There is something you want to do well. You reflect on it so you know what you want to do. During the ride you reflect on how it is going and when it's over you reflect on how it went. There are three aspects in all

that. First of all the person: 'how did I do myself?'. Then the content: 'where was I deficient?'. And lastly the learning strategy: 'how did I handle it?'. We do this with students and we also do it together looking at the organisation and looking at the teams. If you do not go through those phases consequently you will never go to a deeper level and you will change little. We choose an integral approach. So on the basis of the vision work out what sort of action is needed (culture) and then organise who does what (organisation) and what systems are needed (anchoring). (Fox)

In the City High School, the evaluation is carried out by professionals with a country-wide reputation, most of them university professors, which of course lends the results extra legitimacy both internally and externally.

For my co-directors it is often tempting to strike a compromise with their staff. At such a time there has to be someone who keeps saying they have to stay within the playing field. We do that together by executing a lot of evaluation studies. Every year all of the teaching is evaluated by a group led by an external expert. (…) Every year too, we evaluate the staff's task load, especially because my staff has agreed to have ten percent more contact time with students and be five hours a week more in the school than is normal. So now it is important to keep track of their task load. (Reiber)

To further secure space for the teachers, the school leaders report defending the staff's interests with external authorities such as the Ministry of Education or the Inspectorate.

Your staff has to be in the central position. You have to defend your staff when necessary. For instance, I have refused to carry out a new directive from the Department to make staff time keeping compulsory. For my people, that's an important signal: you don't just require them to do new things but you also stand up for them. In short, you ask for something but you also give something. You continually have to find that equilibrium. (Reiber)

The principal has to have the nerve to withstand the Department. For that, it is necessary to have a good story. Van der Hoeven [the current Minister of Education] herself tells the schools to look for the limits of the law. Dare to step outside the common boundaries. The law is for the easily scared to hide behind, an excuse to attempt nothing. (Lanark)

Giving teachers the space to actually realise the strategic vision and the goals derived from it entails, according to the school leaders, the danger that, unnoticed, they fall

back on old patterns. Next to structured evaluation, the 'all-seeing eye' of the school leader is essential to prevent this. The leader not only must check whether teachers stay within the agreed limits, but also must clarify the teachers' experiences for them, so they can learn from them.

> It should not be below you to walk around (on the shop floor) with your eyes open, and you should not be afraid to refrain from interfering. That's what I mean by saying 'walking around in the organisation with your whole being'. First of all I pay attention to the students. Do they know what they are doing? Are they involved in what they are doing? Are teachers around? How is the contact between teachers and students? You only need to sit with a student at their table for ten minutes and you already know whether they've been left to their own devices. The antenna feeling. Are superiors around on the floor? Keeping in contact, knowing what you pay attention to and selectively do something with that. I walk around with a few antennas. And of course with an understanding of practice-directed learning. All superiors should have such antennas. That's how you gather information, but you must do more with it than just mirroring it. I also need to conceptualise it, I need to recognise patterns. (Fox)

Summarizing, these fragments show how the leadership role in the process of redesigning focuses on the legitimation of the vision by its actual results. An important instrument to accomplish this is to provide a space for teachers in which they can develop concrete implementations. This space is defended both within the school (for instance by creating pilot projects and by assuring the voice of teachers is heard) and in relation to the outside world (for instance by taking a firm stance toward the Department and by providing money). At the same time, the leaders monitor and evaluate progress, and intervene when they think the vision is not being implemented optimally. Sometimes, they legitimize their actions by deferring to external experts.

Analysis: Evaluation of power use

Now let us look back from the interviews to the concepts and models mentioned in the theoretical introduction. Can we now understand the success of the three school leaders we interviewed, keeping in mind that we selected them because of their success?

Hetebrij specifies *trust* and *credibility* as conditions under which a leader can make adequate use of communication. In our material, the *credibility* of decisions that the school leader makes in a process of reculturing is primarily seen to depend on the

existence of and adherence to a clear vision of where the innovation process is going, what its goals are and in what way it will lead to better school results (however these are defined). This vision needs to be shared by at least some, but not necessarily all, of the teachers. Given the fact that the school has a history, it should be experienced as attainable for the present school with its present population of staff and students, it should not be in contrast with those elements of the school culture that most hold to be central and defining of the school's identity, but it should at the same time be a challenging perspective. Leaders need to hold on to and defend the initial idea, make it progressively clear, and point at what progress has been achieved. The vision must guide the whole change process. For processes of identity learning, the vision as such may serve as the conceptual framework that is needed to make emotions transparent.

The matter of trust has an important role in this regard. School leaders inspire *trust* when they are seen to be deeply engaged themselves in the process of realising the vision. They must be emotionally engaged both in the process itself and in the exertions of their staff and the difficulties staff have in adopting the new ways of working and realising the perspective. For instance, they will speak individually on a personal level with those teachers having trouble with the changes, referring to their professional biographies. At the same time, leaders may be open about their own doubts in making decisions, they must be open to suggestions for changes in the direction or pace of the change process, they must be learners themselves. They think they will lose trust when they are perceived to act as disinterested managers who either withdraw from the actual change process or are uninterested in the problems experienced.

On the other hand, the school leaders do not only *inspire* trust, they also *give* trust. The vision they defend is a *strategic* vision: it sets the goals for the whole change process (Weick 2001). But they trust their teachers to make the *tactical* decisions to implement the vision; in the implementation process, they interfere only when teachers seem to lose sight of the goals.

Governing the change process, however, can seldom be achieved by the use of communicative means only. In any school organisation, different people have different goals, opinions on what is good for the school itself and for the students. The use of power by the school leader is necessary to ensure that decisions will be implemented in the face of the processes of meaning giving and sense making taking place at the teacher level.

According to Hetebrij (2006), criteria for the adequate use of power are: *effectivity, transparency,* and above all, *respectability.* During reculturing in schools, the use of

power can never be *effective* when the school leader tries to make teachers do something they are not prepared to do. Because teachers are professionals with a great deal of autonomy when dealing with the primary processes of teaching and learning, they at least need to be willing to try and face their uncertainties. In such situations, the effective school leader needs to bring such teachers into a situation in which it becomes clear they need to change their minds and learn to participate, or quit – what we have called a boundary experience. Leaders need to mark clear boundaries of what they are willing to accept in terms of non-compliance, and enforce those boundaries. In such moments, the leader hopes to start an enforced learning process by bringing teachers to a realization of the insufficiency of their insight in the educational processes, so that a joint process of redefinition, of making new sense of the process and their own position in it, can start.

Decisions are *transparent* if it is clear to all teachers why a certain decision was taken. At the very least, it should be clear what the relation to the overall vision is. The leader may have to clarify this relation with the help of new or elaborated concepts. Reaching transparency may also mean that personal communication with some teachers is necessary.

The main condition for adequate use of power is *respectability*. This can only be achieved when the leader is able and willing to take responsibility for decisions and to justify them in such a way that teachers accept them. The three school leaders in our small study also seem to acquire respectability on the basis of their personal integrity. The power of the school leader appears to gain respectability if the school leader is able to provide the appropriate model and is willing to 'protect' the team against external agenda's that are unfavourable given the school's vision.

Any analysis of reculturing in schools has to take into account that schools are organisations with a history, operate under external and internal constraints, and have formal as well as informal structures of power, alliances, and communication. Capacity building is about improving those conditions that are less favourable to change processes. For instance, an unfavourable condition is present where there are a number of factions in the school who have over time come to distrust each other and do not communicate in an open way. Based on their credibility and trustworthiness, school leaders can in such a situation try to re-open communication channels; but if all else fails, they may have to revert to using 'raw power' even without due regard to the criteria (Hetebrij 2006).

There may be situations where it is impossible, or even inadvisable, to act according to the quality criteria mentioned above. Sometimes hard measures are called for even if they are not acceptable for every teacher concerned. But also in the best situations,

teachers will nowadays be less prepared than fifty years ago to just accept decisions made by a school leader without questioning them and possibly organising countermeasures. Therefore, it may be better to delegate power and authority, creating a structure of distributed leadership (Spillane 2005), thus making teachers co-responsible for tactical decisions.

From the above analysis, it appears that the ideal school leader combines a daring and firm stance with regard to the background vision and the goals of the proposed change process, with emotional engagement both with the school and with the teachers, as strategies to build capacity. Using those two sides at the right times requires a great deal of political adroitness, but above all, it requires keeping close track of the change processes in the school. More in detail: this might mean that the school leader needs to keep track of the various processes of identity learning that take place at the teacher level and adapt his or her steps to those processes or take these processes into account in the communication about his or her steps. The school leader needs to be aware of what is happening and of the changing positions of the teachers, and to reflect this awareness in an adequate mix of commitment with the difficulties teachers are experiencing and tenacity with respect to the underlying vision.

Perspectives

A number of ways to follow up on this pilot study suggest themselves. In the first place, of course, it will be necessary to include school leaders who have not been so visibly successful, and check whether we can analyse their positions and actions with the help of the categories we have found to be helpful in this study. Secondly, we should confront the perspectives of the school leaders with the perspectives of teachers. It is clear that different teachers experience the changes that are initiated in different ways – witness the fact that some leaders had to let teachers go who were unwilling to participate in the process; the question is: Why they were so unwilling? How did the proposed changes impact on their professional identities? What kind of identity learning process does this initiate, and what influence does that have on the process as a whole?

Thirdly, research can focus on the school leader as a learner. It would be especially helpful if we knew more about the emotional side of the identity learning processes that leaders are involved in, and about the interaction between the identity learning processes of school leaders and of team members. An important step in this learning process is probably to learn not to react automatically to difficult situations, guided by ingrained psychological patterns, but to consciously evaluate a situation and make reflected and justifiable choices. We do not suggest returning to the notion that

success as a school leader depends on stable character traits, but propose instead that we should focus on the school leader as a dynamic learner. Moreover, we understand this learning process as taking place in interaction with the staff and the environment of the school. In this regard, the perspective of distributed leadership (Spillane, 2005) indeed entails interesting new opportunities. We suggest however to include the perspective of power in that line of research.

Lastly, we suggest it is advisable to look at the way school leaders handle the interaction of change processes within the school with processes in the social and political environment. Schools are not isolated systems, but are at the same time a part of wider activity systems (Daniels, 2001). In the interviews, although this was not explicitly a topic, there are some indications that the school leaders keep track of what is happening in the educational and political context, and structure their actions to take account of what they see there. It is for this reason that school leaders feel they perhaps have to attend conferences even though this creates a dilemma for them because they feel at the same time that their place is in their school. In a sense, they more or less intuitively look for 'windows of opportunity' (Kingdon 1972) afforded by processes in the wider activity system to provide impulses for the change process in their school. Insight into this kind of interaction processes would improve our understanding of the roles and actions of school leaders in leading the process of reculturing.

Notes

[1] Names of participants and schools have been changed.

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