

# Foreword

## **What is so special about leading a learning school?**

School leaders face many challenges, complex situations and often the contradicting interests of students, teachers, parents, board members, the inspectorate, the Minister of Education and school leaders' associations. Personal growth, performance on learning outcomes, staffing, professional development, school economics, special needs and social inequality require extraordinary talents of the school leader to balance all these different focal points and for attention begging priorities, without getting lost in endless discussions, smouldering conflicts and risking a burn out.

The authors Loes van Wessum and Ingrid Verheggen offer a sound body of practical experience and theoretical wisdom when coming to grips with the multitude of goals and accompanying pitfalls of the day to day practice of running a school. Curious investigation and engaged collaboration of team members seem to be critical in becoming a learning community that is able to address the aforementioned complexities in a successful manner.

This new book convincingly builds the case of how to develop a school culture that focuses on collaboration, joint investigation and building a rich learning environment, not only for youngsters but equally for the staff members. It offers a framework for systematic analysis and for designing and implementing meaningful interventions. Above all, it makes clear that the school leader is not the lonely figurehead who should solve all problems for preoccupied teachers. The natural concern for healthy interactions among staff members, tapping into a rich reservoir of experiences and creative solutions, had a comforting effect on me when reading the various chapters. The meaningful case studies and unconventional approaches create a colourful platform for reflection, theoretical perspectives and practical guidelines.

However, throughout the text it becomes clear that there are no easy solutions and quick fixes to the intricate dynamics that are so characteristic for modern school life. Patiently building a sustainable learning culture in a professional community of dedicated staff members is indispensable for achieving high-stake goals. This entails facilitating the dialogue on meaningful questions such as: What kind of school do we want to be? What do the parents choose for? How do we prepare young people for an uncertain and risky world? How do we organise high quality education? What does this mean for my personal role?

This book convinced me that facilitation of the dialogue on questions regarding the learning school does not mean pushing for the right answers. School leadership is a permanent invitation to develop an inquisitive but joyful mind.

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# 1. To start with

## Why this book?

Schools work within a changing context which is becoming more multifaceted and dynamic each day. Education today is facing more and more complex, difficult and 'wicked' problems and issues. These are problems for which it is difficult to ascertain exactly what the problem is and for which no immediate simple solution can be found. Because of this, the interaction between the people involved with these problems becomes more difficult. It is therefore essential to have the proper interactions. School leaders and teachers need each other in order to do the right things. Collaboration between both teachers (and students) as well as between teachers and school leaders is essential to achieve improvements and innovations.

Research into successful school systems<sup>1</sup> and professional learning communities has shown that collaboration contributes to a child's more complex learning processes (for example, development of creativity), higher results, school development and the professional development of educational professionals<sup>2</sup>. Schools achieve better results when they have a collaborative learning culture. Teachers' professional collaboration is necessary for school and system performance. Analysing student work collaboratively gives teachers opportunities to develop a common

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1 Barber, M., & Mourshed, M. (2007). *How the World's Best Performing Schools Come Out on Top*. London: McKinsey and Company.

Mourshed, M., Chijioko, C., & Barber, M. (2010). *How the world's most improved school systems keep getting better*. London: McKinsey and Company.

Tucker, M. (2011a). *Surpassing Shanghai. An Agenda for American Education Built on the World's Leading Systems*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

Tucker, M. (2019). *Leading High-Performance School Systems: Lessons from the World's Best*. Alexandria, Virginia: ASCD.

2 Vangrieken, K., Meredith, C., Packer, T., & Kyndt, E. (2017). Teacher communities as a context for professional development: A systematic review. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 61(2017), 47-59.

understanding of what good work is, what common misunderstandings students have, and what instructional strategies may or may not be working and for whom<sup>3</sup>.

By assessing student learning processes, teachers get a better understanding of these processes and learn how they can contribute even more to successful learning processes. Collaboration and inquiry amongst teachers are both powerful strategies of professionalisation. We define inquiry as a systematic analysis of the situation and professional reflection. These are regarded as core activities for both individual and collective constructions of meaning<sup>4</sup>.

Most schools are not suitably organised to enhance professional collaboration amongst teachers and mutual enquiry. They do not provide a rich learning environment to teachers. This is a missed opportunity as we know that the teacher<sup>5</sup>, followed by the school leader<sup>6</sup>, makes the largest contribution to a child's learning and therefore to the quality of education and student's results. Informal and collaborative learning is an extremely powerful form of learning which is amply applied in successful school systems. Effective peer collaboration helps the professional development of teachers<sup>7</sup>. It is also in line with the learning requirements of teachers themselves; teachers prefer to learn with and from each other<sup>8</sup>.

Which leadership practices contribute to the development of a school culture which focuses on collaboration, inquiry and learning? That is the central question

3 Darling-Hammond, L., Hyster, M.E., & Gardner, M. (2017). *Effective Teacher Professional Development*. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.

4 Earl, S., Katz, L.M., & Jafaar, S.B. (2009). *Building and Connection learning communities*. California: Corwin/Sage.

5 Hattie, J.A.C. (2009). *Visible learning: A synthesis of 800+ meta-analyses on achievement*. Oxford, UK: Routledge.

Hanuschek, E.A., & Rivkin, S.G. (2010). Generalizations about Using Value-Added Measures of Teacher Quality. *The American Economic Review*, 100(2), papers and proceedings of the One Hundred Twenty Second Annual Meeting of the American Economic Association (May 2010), pp. 267-271.

6 Leithwood, K., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. (2008). Seven strong claims about successful school leadership. *School Leadership & Management*, 28(1), 27-42, DOI: 10.1080/13632430701800060.

Leithwood, K., Harris, A. & Hopkins, D. (2019). Seven strong claims about successful school leadership revisited. *School Leadership & Management*.

7 Sparks, D. (2002). *Designing powerful staff development for teachers and principals*. Oxford, OH: National Staff Development Council.

8 Van Gennip, H., Van Kuijk, J., & Van der Krogt, F. (2007). *Professionele ontwikkeling door werken aan onderwijs en loopbaan Onderzoek naar leerrelevante ervaringen van leraren in basisscholen. [Professional development through working at education and career. Researching learning relevant experiences of teachers in primary school]*. Nijmegen: ITS.

which is answered in this book. This does not mean that we give a standard recipe in order to develop such a culture. There is no ‘one size fits all’ approach possible when it comes to complicated processes which evolve during collaboration, inquiry and learning.

It is important to realise that as a school leader you do not need to have all the answers. It is tempting to do so if teachers ask you for advice. However, giving them answers is not the best way to help them, rather, you can help them more if you do not provide them with the answers but let them think for themselves. Maria Montessori’s famous quote “Help me to help myself” concerning children, is also valid for teachers. You help them by asking questions, so they can discover the correct answers themselves. Most likely the solution will be more suitable and will be implemented because it is the teacher’s solution. An anecdote about Einstein illustrates this. A journalist asked Einstein what made him such a smart man. Einstein responded, “That’s because my mother asked me the same question every day when I came home from school: Which questions have you asked today?” Asking questions prevents you from taking immediate action. It provides you with time and the opportunity to figure out what is really going on. It enhances learning processes. If you are exchanging and analysing problems together with your fellow school leaders, asking questions helps. Asking questions can benefit you to get a clear image of the problem, before coming up with solutions. That is why the title of this book is “Leading a learning school. Which questions have you asked today?”.

When individuals work together and learn from and with each other, an awful lot can happen in the interaction between people. Human interaction not only concerns content, but in relationships between people cultural, social, psychological and authoritarian aspects also play a role. This is why school leadership is such a difficult and interesting profession. What we can do, is describe ingredients, based on our practical day-to-day and theoretical knowledge. It is up to the school leader to, within the context in which he or she works<sup>9</sup>, and following on from the school’s teaching perspective, make appropriate decisions in order to develop the school culture. In order to make the right decisions it is, especially when it concerns a complex problem, sensible to take one’s time to analyse the problem correctly. As a result of day to day hustle and bustle however, it is not always possible to see exactly what the problem is before dealing with the situation. In

this book, we want to help school leaders to take a step back, analyse the situation and devise and implement interventions. We are doing this for, through and about day-to-day experiences. We present a framework of analysis which school leaders can use to analyse day-to-day problems, focused on interactions between professionals.

## **The structure of this book**

This book consists of two parts.


In the first part (chapters 2,3,4 and 5) we stay close to a school leader's daily routine. We present our framework of analysis and use this framework to analyse a case. In chapter 2 we introduce the questions in our framework of analysis. These questions are formulated in a general way so that they are applicable to various complex day-to-day issues but are focused on the interactions between teachers and school leaders. Subsequently, in chapters 3 and 4, we discuss a real-life case in two steps and analyse these from our day-to-day experiences, the practical knowledge we have built up through our own professional experiences which we use every day. Through this analysis we explicate our day-to-day tacit knowledge, which mostly remains implicit in our daily dealings. Our practical theory was also developed by studying literature. In this book, we clarify which theoretical insights have been taken from studying this literature. We do this by providing a theoretical review of the given case.

In the second part (chapter 6) we take a step back from the daily routine and discuss our general theoretical framework concerning some successful interventions used by school leaders to promote learning and collaboration in the organisation. What can a school leader do to stimulate learning processes in the school on all levels? What can a school leader do to stimulate the (collaborative) learning of teachers? What can a school leader do to arrange the organisation in such a way to facilitate learning? We connect this theoretical framework with the situation described in the case in the first part, so as to show how theoretical insights can be worked out in practice.

We hope that this book offers school leaders a way of thinking which contributes to the development of a collaborative, inquisitive and learning culture.

## How can this book be used?

This book can be used in various ways. The simplest way is by reading it (and if necessary, taking notes).

The second way is to use it as a study book. In the book we offer the possibility to actively get started by offering various didactic exercises. In these exercises we invite you to reflect upon your role and we raise questions which we hope will contribute to the reflection of teachers. Of course, it is up to the reader if she wants to make use of this proposal. You can identify the exercises by the  icon.

These didactic exercises can be done on your own, but you can also choose to do them together with teachers or fellow school leaders.

The third way is to use the offered framework of analysis working on your own day-to-day problems (what are the situations you struggle with?), preferably together with others (teachers, school leaders, the board of directors). By analysing these problems together, you get a deeper analysis – after all, the problem is approached from diverse perspectives – and several interventions can be thought of to solve the problem. Analysing issues from varied perspectives is a method used by excellent problem solvers to solve a problem<sup>10</sup>. By analysing problems together, your own tacit theories and mental models can be explained. By analysing problems together, you will give meaning to them. This will help you to understand the situation you are dealing with. This not only contributes to analysing problems but also to the learning processes of the participants. By explicating your own day-to-day theories, you will discover how you usually look at things. It might reveal your preferred perspectives and help you in developing an open mind and learning how to perceive issues using a different perspective. It can contribute to developing an inquisitive state of mind.