

Maite from the Basque Country

Innovative teacher in organisation working on autopilot

Introduction

In a small primary school in a rural area of the Basque country, Maite is both an English teacher and the headmaster. She has been a teacher for 11 years, and became headmaster only recently. Teachers in every year teach all subjects, except for English. Starting at the age of 6, children have two hours of English every week. Her tasks as a headmaster consist mostly of administrative work, for example organising the time-tables for the teachers and paperwork for the government. She is also responsible for organising folkloric events, such as Carnival day and Christmas. She and the director jointly make up the board of the school. The job of headmaster rotates among the staff every 4 years.

Change

For Maite, the biggest change in recent years involved her professional attitude, as her passionate desire to be the best she can be gave way to disappointment. 'I started working almost 10, 11 years ago, and I was very motivated. I wanted to teach and I loved it and I spent a lot of time studying for it. I mean after university, even when I was working, I was doing many courses because I really wanted to improve and be a good teacher. I started studying here in the faculty, I completed the Master's programme.' But then she started wondering who she was doing it all for, and she stopped. 'I was really happy because I was learning a lot, but then I realised that I was only learning for myself. I mean, it doesn't have any impact in the school where I work: nobody is interested in what I study! Nobody cares whether I am well prepared or not. I teach well, or not. I get the same salary, I get the same time-tables, the same prestige as others. That a person studies hard and wants to do his job well is simply not valued. We are valued the same: a person who finished university 30 years ago and doesn't study any more, or a person like me that is very interested in getting better -- and this makes you feel very disappointed.'

Organisational issues

A lack of appreciation for lifelong learning is not surprising in a structure where competence is measured only by the number of years of experience. Performance evaluations, any extra certificates, degrees and so on are not taken into account at all. Maite had hoped to be able to change this in her role as headmaster, but this also turned out to be a disappointment. 'At first, when I was elected headmaster, I felt it would be different. But I wasn't elected because I studied or I was well prepared: it's just a job that nobody wants to do. (...) In the beginning I felt that, as headmaster, I would be able to change things through methodology, that I could help the teachers adopt more modern methods, that I could do all sorts of things. But then you discover that that's not reality. What I need to do is a lot of paperwork for the government. And I have to organise time-tables and teachers, I'm like a staff leader:

when somebody's absent, when somebody's sick, such kinds of everyday things. And then I have to organise Carnival day, Christmas day; basically all folkloric events are my responsibility. This is my job. It doesn't have anything to do with teaching, with methodology. It's just organising the administrative work. So this is also a disappointment. I thought it would be different and that I could do more than what I'm doing.'

Power relations

Staff in each school is a mixture of civil servants and teachers who stay for one year. In Maite's school, the ratio is 14 to 6. Having 6 new teachers every year 'is fine because they bring new ideas. Normally they are young, which I like. I like having new people around. Also because they have worked at different schools, so they know things, they bring new ideas.' The teachers who are civil servants and have guaranteed positions have a lot of autonomy when it comes to how they do their job. When it comes to tests, for example, it is only until the children are in their 4th year, when they are about 9 years old, that they take a standardised test used throughout the region. Other than from those results, there is little way of knowing what goes on in a classroom, or how the children are performing. For Maite this works well, but she has also experienced how having all this freedom can backfire.

'I am the headmaster and I don't know what a teacher does in his or her class. Sometimes, parents come and complain. But I don't have the right to go and check what the teacher is teaching.' Neither does the director. 'If things get too bad we have to call someone who is more important than us. But it's very difficult to make that decision. We had one case last year: I was the headmaster, so last year I didn't give any lessons, and another English teacher came. But all the children disliked going to English class with him, we didn't know why. Parents were complaining, saying that he treated the children badly. It was such a mess that we called the government supervisor, and his answer was: well, talk to him and try to solve the problem. That was all we got. So it's very difficult to control the teachers on our part, and then we don't receive any help from the supervisor.' But then again, 'you think oh, he won't be here next year, he will be in another school, and they will have the same problems with him.' Which is exactly what happened: the teacher was transferred to another school, where the same problems occurred. Couldn't he be dismissed, then? Maite doesn't even know what it would take for that to happen. 'Something really bad, like doing something bad to a kid, or hitting, or something sexual? I don't know, the thing is that I never heard of a teacher of the public education system getting fired. Never. I suppose there are cases, but it's not common. There just isn't any control system.'