

Maria from Belgium

Daring to let go and to grow along ...

Maria works in education in Belgium. She is employed at a large primary school with 25 classes. She has a full-time job, working 50% as a care coordinator and 50% as the director's policy assistant. After working previously as a teacher in special needs education, she has been in her current job for four years. She meets with parents in case of a problem, but also consults external specialists such as a speech therapist or a psychologist. Every Monday she meets with the teaching staff to discuss urgent issues involving pupils. She is also responsible for things like the school's traffic safety policy (e.g. high-visibility vests for the children when going to and from school).

'We received notice that a mother has passed away, and I will assist the child in returning to class and also support the class in dealing with this event. I also talked to the child's grandmother. But I have also planned the schedules for the remedial teachers, for the coming months. And the children's parliament opened at 1 o'clock this afternoon, which is also something that I lead, together with the director. At the end of the day I make the planning for the next day. Now, for example, we have a lot of sick teachers, so classes need to be divided up or taken over. And throughout the day there will always be teachers popping in with a question.'

Context

Maria operates at the heart of the organisation. She works with teachers, external professionals, and also with the director. It's all about team work. 'We are a large team. And there are always teachers who are very attached to running their own class, so if a child has a problem and I propose to observe the class for a day, then they immediately say "oh no, that's not necessary, there's nothing more to see than what I am telling you now." So then I need to break through that attitude, gently but persistently, because I do want to get in to observe the class. But the majority of the team is very open to me, I can't complain about that. There is so much that teachers could learn from each other. Those opportunities are not utilised. So instead, they'll often be in their class trying to reinvent the wheel.'

In her position, she must carefully manoeuvre her way around the organisation while staying true to her own role and responsibility. She doesn't want anyone to feel neglected, and while she needs to interact professionally with the staff, she also wants to be able to have a casual chat during the coffee break. In terms of professional work she stresses the importance of treating all staff members equally, which she does by making sure not to have any favourites, but also by being deliberate and cautious in the interaction. 'It's important to not be too impulsive, in either a positive or negative way. You have to take the time to respond, and you should say so out loud: "OK, so this is what I've heard you say, now I'm

going to think about that for a bit and then we'll discuss it." Instead of reacting immediately, "yes, sure, that's fine", but then later having to backtrack, "well actually, no..." It's important for my position to do it like that. It prevents problems from arising.'

Professional tension

Maria gives the example of gifted children in the school. The director doesn't dwell on the issue, he thinks it's a luxury issue that doesn't deserve special care or attention. 'When parents ask for my opinion directly, with the director right there, then I find that difficult. Because I do think that it's an issue that needs to be addressed. So then I have to manoeuvre carefully. If I lean towards the parents' side, then I'll have the director on my case right afterwards. But if I'm not honest about it, then I feel I'm betraying a part of myself. So I often need to find a middle way. On the one hand the director gives me a huge amount of freedom in my work, much of what I do he approves of. On the other hand I shouldn't get in his way, for instance when I don't agree with his principles. Many teachers come to me to talk about their problems, he doesn't have much patience for that. But they know that if they come to me, that I will listen without immediately drawing some conclusion, and we can seek a solution together. It has a lot to do with leadership and power. But it depends on the person. I have also worked at a school with a director who really did relate to the staff members.'

Social pressures

Maria sees a difference with her previous job in special needs education. There, the goal was to create an optimum learning environment for every child. By providing each child with a specifically tailored education they can develop optimally, so that they can grow up to be proud, saying 'See, this is what I have achieved'. She adds that then she worked with ten pupils in the classroom, while now she has classes of 25 to 28. This includes children with learning difficulties. The government has decided that all children should remain in regular schools for as long as possible, to limit the outflow to special needs schools. At the same time, the secondary schools expect the primary school to continue delivering excellent pupils.

'There are teachers, especially in the highest class, who wonder whether they should continue working in education. Because the way things are going now, is it still something I want to do? (...) In those instances, I mainly want to lend a patient ear. After that I will stress as much as possible all the things that they do well, and to point out their personal competencies. Often it has to do with letting go. They need to let go of the goal of getting everyone to the same high level.'

Maria describes the pace of social changes and how that has an immediate impact on education. She finds it important to have discussions about those changes in school. For this, her position as care coordinator helps. 'It is an important motivating factor to be constantly

thinking along with all the changes taking place around us in society, and what do we take on board, what do we take into account. There's a lot coming at us, but we don't need to take it all on board and not all at the same time. We need to set our own priorities. That's what I find fascinating about education. And for me to be a part of that.'

Change

'I always have the feeling that I need to remain up-to-date, but sometimes I also get the feeling: if you follow so many courses, do you ever really do something thoroughly? So I've decided not to do any new courses for the time being. But that also frightens me a bit, because it means I won't be on top of the latest things. But then isn't it too much to expect of anyone, to always follow courses just to stay on top of things? You also need to apply in practice what you've learnt, but if you immediately start doing another course, the things you learned in the previous course get pushed to the background. And you just can't always manage to do a course, given your own life career. I mean, privately and personally.'

It is not just the pressure on the part of the government to monitor and improve children's performance, but parents' attitudes are changing as well. 'Parents are increasingly expecting the teacher to take care of everything. They no longer want to help the child with schoolwork at home. But just in a few cases, right, I know I'm putting it a bit bluntly now.'

Professional ideals

The most important goal of education is the optimum development of pupils. The children should be given every opportunity for that, and that you can contribute to this is the most beautiful thing about education. 'For me, a good teacher is someone who doesn't stuff a child with knowledge from the outside, but who draws it out from within. That's the core of education, in my view. If you can do that, then you're doing a good job. Nowadays people often say, "the method says this and that, and by the end of the schoolyear they need to know so and so. That was different in the special needs school: we followed the pupil, we looked at what he was ready for and where he had to get to... Teachers should not be afraid to let go. They should dare to grow along with the children and with the dynamics in the class.'