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“SKOOLLEIERSKAP EN DIE SKEP VAN PRODUKTIEWE LEERRUIMTES IN SKOLE” [SCHOOL LEADERSHIP AND THE CREATION OF PRODUCTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS IN SCHOOLS]

A book review by Prof Lynette Jacobs

This Afrikaans book, which stems from the first author, Johann Burger's, doctoral study, makes an excellent contribution to original research nationally and internationally. The book is divided into seven distinct chapters with Chapter 1 orienting the reader to the book and study itself while Chapter 7 rounds off the book and study with conclusions and recommendations.

Chapter 2 starts with a good introduction to leadership, leadership practices and management, and sets the tone for chapters 3 to 6, which each discuss how two school leaders intentionally reimagined and produced physical, mental and social spaces within their schools to the advantage of the school community and to advance productive learning. As the authors themselves state,

[h]ierdie boek is 'n poging om die konsep en belangrikheid van ruimte in 'n skoolopset te verduidelik, asook hoe dit geskep en tot voordeel van beide leerders en opvoeders aangewend kan word.

[this book attempts to explain the concept and importance of space in a school environment as well as how it is created and could be used to the advantage of the learners and teachers.]

The authors of the book argue that space is pivotal to our experience of the world, and report on two school leaders who regarded the creation of spaces within which formal and informal learning can flourish as seminal to their task.

In my opinion this book not only promotes original research that adds to the body of knowledge on school leadership, but it takes a refreshing approach to leadership, particularly to the leader as the creator of physical, mental and social space (theorised by Henri Lefebvre [1991]). Furthermore, the concept of space is understood as a lived space with interaction between the physical environment, the utilisation of the environment by people and the different social practices within the space. Transformative leadership is a key concept in this book and it resonates with distributive leadership and the importance of school climate and culture.

This book is very well written, the research methodology is explained in detailed and accurately and yet it does not give one the feel that this book originates from a doctoral thesis. The main argument is carried throughout the book and the structure conforms to that of the three spaces that form the focused framework of the book. Powerful narratives of the leaders put the reader in their context and thinking. Even though the authors write and describe the spaces so well that one can visualise it, the photos assist in supplementing the descriptions.

For me, the contributions of the book can be summarised in the following two quotes:

Die bevindings van ons studie dui daarop dat skoolhoofde wat oor transformerende leierskapsvaardighede besit, beter daartoe in staat is om fisiese, geestelike en sosiale ruimtes te skep, wat 'n direkte invloed op die skepping van produktiewe leeromgewings het, en wat invloed op die denke, gemoed, verbeelding, motivering, gedrag en dissipline van die gebruikers uitoefen, en wat op verhoogde geluksvlakke en verbeterde prestasies by die skole uitloop.

[The findings of our study indicate that principals who have transformative leadership skills are better able to create physical, mental and social spaces, which have a direct influence on the creation of productive learning environments, and that influence thinking, mood, imagination, motivation, behaviour and discipline of the users, and that results in increased levels of happiness and improved performance at the schools.]

...die doeltreffende benutting van ruimte deur middel van transformerende leierskappraktyke [kan] wel goeie leerderuitkomste behaal, ongeag of 'n skool landelik of stedelik, arm of middelklas, ruim of beknop, Christen of Moslem is.

[...the efficient use of space through transformative leadership practices [can] achieve good learner outcomes, regardless of whether a school is rural or urban, poor or middle class, spacious or cramped, Christian or Muslim.]

Although the primary audience for this book would be academics, specialists and practitioners in the field of educational leadership and management, this book also adds value to the wider field of leadership since the insights from this research have wider reach and relevance that just education.

Perhaps the only critique I have of the book is the use of some terminology such as that of “metropolitaanse kollegas” [metropolitan colleagues] and “metropolitaanse gebiede” [metropolitan areas]. These could be replaced with simpler terminology such as “stedelike gebede” [urban areas]. Overall however, this is an excellent book. I would recommend that the authors and publishers translate the book to other South African languages to make it accessible to a wider readership, including school governing body members of diverse schools. eBooks would suffice.

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