



Skip or captain? The changing perception of school management and leadership in Germany

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(Received: July-2022; Reviewed: August-2022; Accepted: September-2022;

Available Online: September 2022; Published: September 2022)



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ABSTRACT

A changing world needs schools that adapt to changes and support their students to thrive. All related developments are moderated, guided, and also implemented by principals. To do this, they need the support of their staff, but also administrative support from the system. In Germany, the system's support is based on a link between management and leadership through clear task descriptions. The following text asks, on the one hand, what school development means for school leaders. On the other hand, it asks whether school development is perceived differently when schools are at different levels of school development experience. In terms of methodology, qualitative interviews were chosen to provide the best possible insight into personal experiences. We interviewed six school principals and their deputies who are actively engaged in school development for at least five years. The analysis shows two diametrically different types of leadership: The Captain and the Skip. Their role descriptions show that the underlying attitude contributes to empowering those involved for necessary change or to restricting them in such a way that genuine, profound change is prevented. A shift in changing leadership might therefore need open-minded principals and deputies who inspire hearts and minds and let change happen.

Keywords: school leadership; school management; development; Germany

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the 21st century, the world changes fast. The commodity-driven industrial society is replaced by a digitalized knowledge society. Technological progress, global networking, and new digital communication channels have become increasingly sophisticated since the end of the 20th century. They are the driving force for this change (Trilling & Fadel, 2009). Knowledge becomes the new „raw material“. It is the major source of problem-solving and creativity and enables people to meet the challenges of the 21st century (Klopsch & Sliwka, 2022).

These challenges are often described by the acronym VUCA (Mack & Khare, 2016) which depicts the new reality as volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. In this world, reliable

predictions cannot be made that influence making concrete plans for our future (Weinreich, 2016).

The same applies to schools. It is difficult to estimate the later life and working world of students. Preparing learners to lead successful lives is a more complex and difficult task than it has ever been. A one-size-fits-all model for all schools cannot be successful. Schools have to take their environments, their staff, and their students into account to deal effectively and be student-oriented.

Engaging with school environments and actively influencing their impact on schools is an important and recent task in Germany. Since the mid-1980s, the German school system has gone through three phases of modernization - focusing on increased autonomy, output control, and individual control mechanisms (Klopsch, 2016, p.67) - which paved the way from an „administrative school” (Vogel, 1977, p.18) to a „designing school” (Berkemeyer, Feldhoff & Brüsemeister, 2008, p.161). This change enabled schools to intervene independently in their specific challenges.

The autonomy that schools have been granted since the beginning of modernization serves as an „option space for a wide variety of design options, measures, and instruments” (Rürup, 2007, p.119). The entire school community is now responsible for discovering possibilities of change, whereby the school leaders play a decisive role in initiating and establishing the changing processes (Fullan, 1991, p.152) to develop schools.

This text investigates what school development means for principals and how they perceive it. To understand their attitudes and ways of working, we are focusing on the general demands on principals in Germany first.

DEMANDS ON SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

Changing working conditions and demands in the 21st century lead to changing principals' tasks. On the one hand, they have to deal with the requirements of everyday school life on an organizational and administrative level. On the other hand, they need to actively lead their school to succeed in the new normal of the digitalized world – not only on a technical level but also in teaching and learning.

Both perspectives, the variety of administrative tasks as well as those concerning school development are to be explained briefly in the following paragraphs.

Principals' tasks in German schools

Due to the changing demands on schools, which lead to increased possibilities for action, the tasks of principals have changed significantly in the last two decades (Meyer, A., Richer, D., Marx, A. & Hartung-Beck, V., 2019, p. 23). Until the early 2000s principals mainly had administrative tasks. Since then a growing range of tasks concerning planning and implementation of school development can be recorded (Schratz, et al., 2016, p.222). The tasks at the administrative level are attributed to school management (Dubs, 1992, p.31). They mainly involve an „effective and smooth process“ (Meyer et al., 2019, p. 24) of the staff's work. School development refers here to the „goal-related strengthening of a school's performance potential” (ibid.) which can be described as school leadership.

With increasing demands for school development in the 21st century, there is not only a wider range of tasks but also a different quality of processing (Schleicher, 2009, p. 312).

All tasks strongly related to leadership require competencies that were previously not required at all or only to a very limited extent.

In an international comparison, the discussion „about the competencies of principals [in Germany is still] rather at the beginning“ (Scherer, Posner & Prinz, 2009, p.344) and is not answered uniformly across the individual federal states. This can be seen in the task descriptions within the school laws. All tasks are assigned to the classic areas of school development – organizational development, staff development, and curriculum development (Rolff, 2010, p.29), to the administration, staff management, and cooperation with the community (Meyer et al., 2019, p.29). Although the range of tasks is similar in all states, the specific topics encompass different intensities (ibid., p.26). For example, in Baden-Wuerttemberg, only 24% of the tasks concern school development in the sense of leadership while in Bremen school development, and consequently school leadership, covers 51% of all tasks (ibid., p.33).

Management, as a way of more or less creatively solving problems, and leadership, as discovering new ways of dealing with challenges (Schley & Schratz, 2021, p.19) are like two sides of the same coin. Ideally, they are in balance, and – as leadership models show – they are not only the business of one school principal but many people involved (Leithwood, 2001; Toprak 2021). Leadership approaches, however, are not automatically embedded in a community. Rather, they range from leadership in the sense of a one-man band to behavior within a jazz combo in which areas of responsibility are delegated, to an orchestral leader who relies on collaboration and assigns special importance to individuals (Portin, 2003, p.26).

From a systemic point of view, all tasks in school management and school leadership are firstly assigned to the principal. He or she is in charge of school quality (Bonsen 2010; Reichwein, 2007). The principal has to link single aspects of everyday school life and unite them into a large whole. Considering the premise that school development is crucial for school quality and that administrative management tasks often predominate; the overarching question arises about what school development means for leading a school.

Ways of School Development

Research findings reveal different ways of school development which can be located in a broad continuum (Klopsch, 2016). One pole is located in the tradition of systemic approaches. It is assumed that any kind of development is a means of administrative action. The other pole describes school development with a strong emphasis on the individual school as an institution and its respective members.

Institutional school development is seen as a process that contributes in a spiral way to schools developing as learning organizations (Dalin, Rolff & Buchen, 1996, p.37). These „learning schools“ (Büeler & Buholzer, 2005, p.64) build on the individual skills and strengths of the people involved. The main characteristics are the development of human resources, clear communication about mental models, i.e. the awareness of deeply rooted assumptions and routines, and the development of a common vision which promotes participation and commitment and considers team learning to be the basis. In this perspective, systemic thinking arises. It can be described as thinking in contexts, analyzing and developing internal and contextual characteristics (Senge, 1990, p.15ff). Principals in learning schools act as an interface of action patterns of all staff and students. They act as a catalyst and – in the sense of a „change agent“ (Fullan, 1993) – they can steer the change in a common direction.

Systemic school development focuses on processes at school from a different perspective. Individual schools are initially not perceived as learning organizations in this sense since they are not able to translate a „multitude of learning processes into decisions“ (Saldern, 2010, p. 173). Systemic school developers assume that schools „can only move in one pathway“ (ibid.). The initiation of learning processes needs collaboration of different levels. The meso level of the school system, i.e. the individual schools, has to be changed in combination with the macro level of the system, i.e. the superordinate school administration level. This puts the focus on the bureaucratic part of the school organization. It is particularly emphasized in dealing with goals, through the need for unambiguous targets (Klopsch, 2016, p. 109f.). Central objectives are communicated to all schools where they are flexibly adapted to the individual school situation (Saldern, 2010, p.174).

The need for schools to control themselves is based on school management. Systemic school management gets dynamics and uses them and the diversity of the people involved to balance the uncertainty of effect and to initiate further development based on constant self-reflection (Arnoldt, 2011, p.11). The goal perspective of systemic leadership in this context - as in institutional school development - is not to achieve short-term goals, but to „develop [the] organization into a self-directing organization“ (Doppler, 2009, p. 5), i.e., to ensure the long-term effectiveness of intended changes.

METHOD

To explore the individual meaning of school development and the associated experiences of school leaders, it seems purposeful to survey schools that are actively engaged in school development. To explore personal attitudes, attributions, and modes of action, qualitative social research lends itself here.

Therefore, six principals and their deputies of Kulturschulen 2020 BW were chosen as the research sample. Kulturschulen 2020 BW is a network of ten schools in the German state of Baden-Wuerttemberg that got funded to actively work on their specific development. It aims to develop a cultural-aesthetic profile that reaches all students, supports them in their personal development, and allows them to learn with a high degree of self-efficacy and motivation (Klopsch, 2020, p.142). At the time of the survey, all schools had been actively working on their individual school development for five years within the program. One of the criteria for admission to the program was the cultural-aesthetic orientation of the school. Schools were very likely to have been actively engaged in school development work for more than five years. This is of crucial interest in the assessment of perceived roles, experienced gains, and challenges, since sustainable innovation processes, depending on the size of the school, take between three and ten years to show changes externally and internally (Fullan, 1993).

All schools could be classified into three different levels of cultural-aesthetic education. There were

- (a) culturally interested schools which added different clubs and culturally-aesthetic learning experiences at organizational levels.
- (b) Culture applying schools that worked on an organizational level but also supported their staff development.
- (c) Culture integrating schools which worked on an organizational level, staff level and additionally chanced everyday classroom practice (Klopsch, 2020, p.151).

Out of this perspective, it also seemed interesting whether or not school leaders perceived their work differently in culturally interested schools, culture applying, or culture integrating ones.

Research questions were:

- What does school development mean to school leaders?
- Do they perceive school development differently when being on another level of cultural-aesthetic education?

The research question was approached in the qualitative research tradition. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with principals and their deputies as experts. The expert interview is particularly suitable for taking organizational knowledge into account in addition to individual attributions since the experts have „responsible independence for providing possible solutions to problems“ (Pfadenhauer, 2009, p. 102), which is based on „knowledge of the organizational structures, distributions of competencies [and] decision-making paths of the [...] field of action“ (Meuser & Nagel, 1997, p. 486).

The evaluation of the qualitatively collected data is based on Mayring's content analysis (Mayring, 2010). Deductive categories were formed according to the interview guideline. Due to the openness of the qualitative research tradition, an additional inductive procedure was connected which extended the categorical system with additional subcategories (Bortz & Döring, 2006, p. 330).

The intercoder reliability of the developed categories is $K=0.958$ and can thus be estimated as „almost perfect“ (Landis & Koch, 1977, p. 265).

After defining the categories, school types were developed. These show indications of changes in school management work and are discussed in the results section.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

School management and its connection to school development can be linked to the following four main categories: (a) importance of school development, (b) challenges of school development, (c) the profit of school development, and (d) the school leaders' role within school development. All main categories were differentiated by further subcategories. These are presented in the following. When analyzing the different main categories, the school's developmental levels (culturally interested schools – culture applying schools – culture integrating schools) are considered as well.

Importance of School Development

School leaders stress the importance of school development in four dimensions. First, they describe a general goal orientation that has to be developed and maintained:

„We first have to determine the current state and then formulate goals as to where we want to go or whether we want to change anything at all. That is also part of development, to say: „Nah, that's good, we'll keep that“ (I3A/Z8-11).

When it comes to students, school leaders show a more precise idea of school development. On the one hand, they emphasize how important it is to do justice to all students (I3A/Z17-18).

On the other hand, they highlight the need for holistic development by supporting different competencies (Z11A/Z6-7).

The third perspective describes the continuity of constantly developing schools and teaching (I3A/Z45). The fourth perspective is connectable here but takes into consideration the call for further development by the school system. It is a reaction to external requirements:

„School must evolve. There are societal changes to which the school must respond. We have to go along with them, and we have to do some things we don't want to do, but then that's education policy.“ (I3A/Z6-9).

Concerning the different levels of culturally-aesthetic education at school, it can be stated that all schools name goal orientation. The schools that include cultural-aesthetic learning rather additively in their school program are the only schools that design school development as a reaction to external requirements. Schools that integrate cultural-aesthetic learning additively on the school level, but also integratively in the classrooms, have mainly student orientation as a reference point.

Challenges of school development

The challenges of school development are presented by the interviewees from five different perspectives. First, they address the scope of existing resources. Problems are in the amount of available working time (I3A/Z29) which is described as insufficient, as well as in the staff number which seems to be very small (I3A/Z28). In addition, „difficult framework conditions“ (I1A/Z68) are mentioned which can be attributed to the heterogeneous student body or the large class sizes (I1A/Z70).

Another challenge is seen in formulating a goal for school development and working on its implementation:

„You can't work in the blue.“ (I3A/Z24),

„The ideas are there, now it just has to go to the implementations.“ (I3A/Z40).

Another challenge is the unpredictability of the tasks that are connected with school development which cannot be precisely controlled.

„Of course, there are always such problems that are not expected. School just has to function somehow, if something comes up, a lot of things threaten to fail.“ (I3A/Z173-175).

In addition, schools feel challenged because school development leads to changes that, on the one hand, take a long time to be seen and felt in the school community (I1A/Z47). On the other hand, these changes are not linear with one single outcome. Schools are challenged to get different development strands together to form a large whole (I1A/Z36-38).

As the last dimension in the field of challenges, the interviewees describe school development as an additional task (I3A/88) that must be managed „on top of everyday business“ (I3A/Z83).

Getting back to the different levels of cultural-aesthetic education, it is noticeable that schools that use mainly additive learning opportunities (level 1) face challenges from many different perspectives. For example, they mention the imponderability of the task, the additional work they will have to do as a result of the school development, and the resources they will need, and they describe the achievement of goals as problematic.

Schools that are applying cultural-aesthetic learning (level 2) within the traditional school day describe two things as particularly challenging: the time required for change and lacking resources. Schools that are designing a holistic way of cultural-aesthetic learning (level 3) only

stress the length of time it takes to develop things as a challenging feature of school development.

Profit from school development

This category embraces all positive perceptions experienced through school development. Schools see four different ways of profit. First, they emphasized that school staff can be involved in a targeted manner. Whenever development processes are spread over the shoulders of several people, they can be implemented more effectively than if they are the sole responsibility of the school management.

„Of course, the idea is that through the participation of many, the result is a more sustainable, more broadly anchored one“ (I1A/Z116-118).

From another perspective, it is presented that innovations can be brought into the school through school development (I2A/Z192), which change the traditional everyday school life:

„The royal road must be to combine traditional forms with innovation“ (I2A/Z291).

Moreover, developing a school can support the extended educational mission (I1A/Z150) and thereby take on the character of a democratic role model (I1A/115).

A last profitable aspect is, that schools receive a „right to exist“ (I1A/Z124) through their school development, because their profile gets visible to the outside world (I1A/Z122) and other people realize what this particular school is all about.

Concerning the individual levels of cultural-aesthetic learning, we can see that culturally interested schools (level 1), as well as those who are applying cultural aspects (level 2) in their learning, emphasize that innovations are made possible by the additional expertise of educational partners. Schools that integrate cultural-aesthetic learning holistically (level 3) say that the benefits of school development are in involving and reaching all those involved in school life, working on a broader educational mission, and securing the school's existence.

Role of principals in school development

School leaders' self-perception of their roles in school development can be divided into four different categories. First, they consider themselves responsible for communicating within the school and with the school's community (I1A/Z183; I1F/Z118).

In the second category, principals and deputies step back into a more passive role in favor of their staff. They motivate and support teachers and other professional staff, and give them space and time to develop together:

„Today I see it more like curling and I am the one who polishes the lane so the rock can take the right direction. The person pushing the curling rock is the school community, so to speak. [...] [I] am closer to the target than the person pushing the rock. I'm closer to the target circle, I observe the situation and through communication, I can make the rock go in the right direction, but I don't push it“ (I1A/Z173-177).

A third category emphasizes the management role of the school principal (I1F/Z113), which can be seen in the following quote:

„It's more like surfing or sailing, where you try to get ready with as good equipment as possible, to catch the as good wind as possible to pick up speed and make good progress as a ship [...]. It is good [then] [...] to have a paradise in mind and to sail around the world in search of it.“ (I2A/Z140-146).

Furthermore, the role of an executive body of the country is named: „We are obliged to loyalty“ (I3A/286).

Concerning different levels of cultural-aesthetic learning, principals and their deputies show that whenever being at a school that is providing additive learning opportunities (level 1), they perceive themselves as executors of the defaults of the country. They consider mainly themselves as those who are guiding the process. Principals and deputies of schools that are increasingly working to be not only additive but also integrative (level 2) stress their role primarily as motivating and supporting the staff. Those schools that favor holistic school development (level 3) see the gain in motivating and supporting colleagues and communicating within the school and within the community.

Discussion

All interviewees stress clear differences in their perception of school development as well as commonalities. For example, it seems obvious that school development needs a clear objective to which all the work at school is aligned.

A closer look at the individual principals and deputies shows that there seem to be two different types of school leaders. Following the self-description of two school leaders who can be attributed to these different types, they were named 'captain' and 'skip'. The term 'skip' was chosen in reference to the player in the curling team who supports the others in the game and advises on the best way. According to the leadership approaches, named above, it is like the orchestral leader. However, he or she wants to step back on one line with a team.

The 'captain' considers himself or herself to be the person who is responsible for school management. He or she has „paradise“ (I2A/Z145) in mind and works out the necessary steps to get there. The way paradise looks is set by educational policy. Schools act loyally by implementing it specifically. The captain could thus be attached to the systemic school development model described above which embeds tasks in „a fixed framework [...] in which [schools] must act“ (Saalfrank, 2016, p.17). In connection with the leadership approaches, the characteristic here lies with the one-man band.

The captain experiences tasks of school development as tasks that are „on top of everyday business“ (I3A/Z83). This indicates that he or she attributes himself or herself more strongly to school management than to school development in the sense of leadership.

This assumption can be stressed by the importance of school development for the captain: it is perceived mainly as a reaction to external requirements. Although the captain is aware of the fact that goal orientation is one of the initial conditions of school development, he or she nevertheless considers it to be one of the greatest challenges, along with the availability of resources.

The 'skip', on the other hand, perceives himself or herself as someone who supports and motivates his or her colleagues to participate in the school development process. The skip thinks that he or she is much of a communicator - internally and externally (e.g. I1F/118). For a skip, the biggest challenge in school development processes is, that it takes a long time for changes to be implemented in everyday school life. He or she perceives profits of school development on different levels. First of all, this includes reaching out to and involving everyone involved in school life. The skip realizes an expanded educational mandate through school development. He or she favors joint work on a common focus, which gives his or her actions a democratic role

model. Additionally, the school's existence is secured by a certain profile with which it distinguishes itself from others.

Consequently, the skip could be a representative of institutional school development that leads the school to be a learning organization (Dalin, Rolff & Buchen, 1996). His or her focus includes clear communication, participation, individual engagement, and team learning. In doing so, the learning organization includes internal and contextual characteristics and develops them in a targeted manner (Senge, 1990). This could also be supported by the perspective of legitimizing existence that has been pointed out.

The skip's goal is a deepened student orientation. This indicates that he or she is not only interested in the additive change of school life but seeks to change the core elements of the school, which includes teaching. In the overall picture, the skip seems to perceive school development as an equal part of work alongside school management. He or she lives a modern way of school leadership (Toprak 2021).

Concerning the levels of cultural-aesthetic education, it is noticeable that "captain principals" mainly integrate additive learning opportunities into their daily routines to establish a new school focus. "Skip principals" develop schools that deal with the new focus on several levels – from an organizational level and staff training up to changing traditional teaching.

In summary, it can be assumed that school leaders who tend to spread school development over everyone's shoulders and see themselves as a node in a network of stakeholders realize more benefits of school development and achieve more instructional development than the others.

Principals and deputies who describe themselves as primarily responsible for change perceive a significant additional workload and see more of a challenge than a gain. The complexity experienced as a result of the new focus does not seem to be distributed among several people, but rather expands the range of tasks for school leaders.

In the schools of the sample, the school is mainly expanded by increasing learning opportunities on the organizational level; a change in teaching does not take place.

Limitations and future directions

This study was funded by Karl-Schlecht-Foundation and the Ministry of Education, Baden-Wuerttemberg, Germany. Its scope is limited because of the small sample of schools. The results of the study cannot be generalized to all culturally-aesthetic schools in Germany. Future studies are needed to understand more about how these schools can move step by step to integrate different stakeholders in school development. It might be possible, that schools on level 2, have school leaders who lead like a jazz band (Portin 2003). We can assume that there is a floating change from a one-man band to an orchestral leader alongside the levels of school development but further studies are needed to confirm this.

CONCLUSIONS

The interviews show that even if the objective is the same for all schools (creating a cultural-aesthetic profile to support the student's identity development and learning), strongly differing approaches to school development can arise.

While some principals describe themselves as responsible for a process that must be carried out in addition to the day-to-day management of the school, others succeed in involving staff, students and parents and developing an offer that encompasses several levels.

Fundamental to the action of school leaders seem their „professional [pedagogical] attitude, [which as] a highly individualized [...] pattern of attitudes, values, beliefs“ (Kuhl, Schwer & Solzbacher, 2014:107) leads to striving for different modes of school development and thus the penetration of everyday life by the goal of development.

The assumption that „school development belongs to the inner DNA of a school [...]“ (Beutel, 2019, p.10) seems to be the prerequisite for holistic school development which changes several levels and thus also the teaching. Reality at schools, even in those schools whose leaders describe themselves as active school developers, has not yet arrived at a DNA understanding. Consequently, transforming schools must not be stimulated exclusively by the system through an expanded range of tasks for principals. It requires a joint discussion of all those involved in school life not only to prevent principals from being burdened with additional tasks and, but also to develop a vision that reaches the entire school and inspires staff, students and parents to work together.

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