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The Current Shortage of School Leaders as a Present Educational Challenge: Access to the Profession and Support Structures

ABSTRACT

The key roles that school leaders possess make it important to research their professional development, especially against the background of the current shortage of school staff in Germany and many other Western countries. Considering this, the following research question emerges: How do teachers gain access to the position of school leader? To answer this question, narrative-based interviews were conducted with school leaders in Germany and examined using content analysis. The analysis of the interviews shows that opportunities and coincidences seem to have led teachers to their current leadership positions. The path to such positions had not been planned in the long term. Support structures also seem important. Often, future school leaders are already (informally) involved in school development processes as teachers. The fear of someone else taking over and not being able to realise one's own ideas seems to be a further motivation to become a school leader in some cases.

KEYWORDS: School leaders, Professional biographies, Career path, Narrative-based interviews, Qualitative research

ABSTRACT

Il ruolo chiave dei dirigenti scolastici rende importante la ricerca sul loro sviluppo professionale, soprattutto alla luce dell'attuale carenza di personale scolastico in Germania e in molti altri Paesi occidentali. Alla luce di ciò, emerge la seguente domanda di ricerca: come fanno gli insegnanti ad accedere alla posizione di dirigente scolastico? Per rispondere a questa domanda, sono state condotte interviste narrative con dirigenti scolastici in Germania, esaminate con un'analisi del contenuto. L'analisi delle interviste mostra che le opportunità e le coincidenze sembrano aver condotto gli insegnanti alle loro attuali posizioni dirigenziali. Il percorso verso tali posizioni non era stato pianificato a lungo termine. Anche le strutture di supporto sembrano importanti. Spesso i

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futuri dirigenti scolastici sono già coinvolti (in modo informale) nei processi di sviluppo della scuola come insegnanti. La paura che qualcun altro prenda il sopravvento e non sia in grado di realizzare le loro idee sembra essere, in alcuni casi, un'ulteriore motivazione per diventare dirigente scolastico.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Dirigenti scolastici, Biografie professionali, Percorso di carriera, Interviste narrative, Ricerca qualitativa

1. *Project Context and Background*

The research presented below is embedded in the joint project *Schule macht stark*, which translates as *School Makes You Strong (SchuMaS)*, an interdisciplinary research network consisting of 13 institutions from across Germany. The expertise of the participating researchers lies primarily in the fields of school improvement and instructional research. The overall aim of the project is to develop effective, research-based, and practice-proven approaches for schools serving socially disadvantaged communities to ensure equal opportunities for all pupils. The project follows a research-practice-partnership approach. It is designed to be co-constructive and collaborative. Researchers and practitioners meet on equal footing and learn from each other. *SchuMaS* will accompany and support 200 schools in socially disadvantaged areas in Germany over a period of 5 years (2021-2025)². The project has four main areas of focus: instructional development (German language and mathematics), professionalisation, out-of-school learning and social space orientation, and school development and leadership. The school development and leadership cluster aims to support schools in reaching their potential for organisational learning, including the creation of a resource-oriented school culture and the development of school leadership skills. The cluster includes a component of research focusing on school leaders³. This research project is part of the school development and leadership content cluster. The research on school leaders is crucial, as they are particularly important for school development processes due to their significant influence both on the school as an organisation and on its members⁴. In addition, they decide whether innovations find their way into

² BMBF (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung) & KMK (Kultusminister*innenkonferenz), *Schule macht stark. Gemeinsame Initiative von Bund und Ländern zur Unterstützung von Schulen in sozial schwierigen Lagen*, 2019, < <https://www.kmk.org/aktuelles/artikelansicht/schule-macht-stark-gemeinsame-initiative-von-bund-und-laendern-zurunterstuetzung-von-schulen-in-s.html> > (11.10.2023); for more information on SchuMaS please see < www.schumas-forschung.de > (12.10.2023). The initiative is jointly funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) and the 16 federal states.

³ S.J. CZAJA et al., *Schulentwicklung und Führung an sozialräumlich benachteiligten Standorten stärken. Beratungsansätze im Forschungsverbund. Schule macht stark - SchuMaS*, «Die Deutsche Schule», 114(4), 2022, p. 397-403.

⁴ U. LICHTINGER et al., *Grundkurs Schulmanagement XXX. Schule wird gelingen mit Flourishing SE*,

individual schools. The school leaders' key role makes it important to research their professional development, especially against the background of the current shortage of school staff in Germany and many other Western countries. The existing shortage of teachers in Germany is being compounded by a shortage of school leaders, a position that appears to be unattractive to many teachers⁵. Few teachers in Germany currently consider school leadership as a career goal. Schools in socially disadvantaged areas in Germany (such as the Ruhr area) are particularly affected by staff shortages. This makes it all the more interesting to more closely examine at the professional biographies of school leaders: How do they enter the profession? What does the typical career path of a school leader look like? Is it more like a straight multi-lane motorway or a leisurely country road full of bends? Does it rise and fall, or is it flat? Can one see the horizon? What challenges have school leaders faced along the way, and what do they think could be done to tackle the shortage of school leaders (and teachers) in the future? The purpose of this article is to provide initial answers to these questions by focusing on the transition from teacher to school leader. First, I present the background of the school leadership profession in Germany (Section 2). I then present the research design (Section 3). Finally, the findings are presented and discussed. The article concludes with open questions and an outlook for further research (Section 4).

2. Theoretical Framework and Research Status

2.1. Qualifications and Career Path to School Leadership in Germany

«There is no good school without a good school leader»⁶.

In Germany, entry into the leadership profession occurs almost exclusively via the path of traditional teacher training. School leaders must complete both a traditional teacher training course as well as special training for school leaders. Because new school leaders are recruited from the teaching profession, they are thus comprehensively qualified in pedagogy⁷. There is no single qualification for school leadership; «[i]nstead, the qualification is regulated differently depending on the federal state; in some cases, it includes extensive mandatory measures, in others no qualification is required»⁸. For example, in the federal

Carl Link, Kronach and Cologne, 2022, p. 152.

⁵ C. CRAMER et. al., *Schulleitung in Deutschland. Repräsentative Befunde zur Attraktivität, zu Karrieremotiven und zu Arbeitsplatzwechselabsichten*, «DDS – Die Deutsche Schule», (2), 2021.

⁶ H.-G. ROLFF, *Schulentwicklung kompakt. Modelle, Instrumente, Perspektiven*, Beltz Verlag, Weinheim, 2022, p. 213.

⁷ P. TULOWITZKI et al., *Die Qualifizierung von Schulleiter*innen in Deutschland – ein bundesweiter Überblick*, «DDS – Die Deutsche Schule», (2), 2019, p. 150.

⁸ *Ibidem*, translation by F. Proskawetz.

state of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), where this research project is based (University of Duisburg-Essen), the mandatory school leadership training lasts 13 days (for comparison, Schleswig-Holstein and Thuringia require 5 and 37 days, respectively). The qualifications cover similar content in all states⁹. The content of in-service training includes leadership training, human resources, communication, organisation and collaboration, quality and school development, and law. The state of NRW, for example, covers all areas except leadership training¹⁰. A special feature in NRW is also an aptitude assessment procedure, the passing of which is a prerequisite for applying for a school leadership position.¹¹ Tulowitzki et al. highlight the large number of optional in-service training opportunities for school leaders that all federal states offer and suggest the formulation of standards for in-service training at the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs level¹².

The range of responsibilities of school leaders in Germany is wide, including in the areas of management, leadership, administration, and staff development, among others. Similarly, teaching is (still) part of the responsibilities of school leaders¹³. They consequently act as teachers, managers, coordinators, and a number of other roles.

In their study *Leadership in German Schools (LineS2020)*, Cramer et al. report that the position of school leadership in Germany is primarily held by experienced teachers. They had previously worked as teachers for an average of 15 years¹⁴. The authors also note that for just under half of the school leaders interviewed in the *LineS2020* study, the path to becoming a school leader was «associated with encouragement and support from (informal) mentors, who gave school leaders tasks during their careers to prepare them for higher positions, provided them with expert advice and/or supported them in stressful times»¹⁵.

2.2. Situation of Current Shortages and Experience of Stress

Germany, like other Western European countries and the US, is facing a shortage of applications for the position of school leader¹⁶ (as of December 2019: more than 1,000 unfilled positions¹⁷). Due to this shortage of teachers in Germany, the chances of becoming a school leader are typically quite good.

⁹ Ivi, p. 158.

¹⁰ Ivi, p. 159.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² Ivi, p. 155.

¹³ Ivi, p. 149.

¹⁴ C. CRAMER et. al., *Schulleitungen in Deutschland – Kurzbericht zur Studie*, 2020, <<https://osf.io/zm4q3>> (12.10.2023).

¹⁵ Ivi, p. 2, translation by F. Proskawetz.

¹⁶ C. CRAMER et. al., *Schulleitung in Deutschland. Repräsentative Befunde*, quoted, p. 131.

¹⁷ See also U. MÜLLER et al., “How about being a school principal?” – “I’d rather not, thank you!”. *International comparative studies on the motivation for taking over and remaining in school leadership positions*. Pädagogische Hochschule, Ludwigsburg, 2022.

This shortage is caused by myriad reasons and results from the typical career path of school leaders in Germany, who originally intend to only become teachers. The position appears to be unattractive for many teachers. Cramer et al., who conducted a survey of teachers, give various reasons for this. For example, « [j]ust under a third of teachers have already considered a school leadership position, but have not pursued this path, mainly due to satisfaction with their current pedagogical work and fear of the demands»¹⁸. According to the authors, it is above all the expected strain and low incentives that argue against becoming a school leader. The associated lack of preparation for the tasks of school leadership could also be a reason for not being (further) interested in the position¹⁹. Müller et al., who interviewed teachers in Germany and the US who were generally open to the position of school leader, cite several reasons as barriers to applying: excessive administrative tasks and obligations in many areas; fear of conflict, for example with parents, which can lead to time-consuming legal proceedings; the lack of independence from external structures; and the expected reduced contact with the students' living environment²⁰. In the *LineS2020* study, Cramer et al. state that «the management of day-to-day concerns [determines] the task profile of school leaders far more than school development and innovation»²¹. Due to the shortage of teachers in Germany, even fewer teachers choose this career path. In addition, the heavy workload of school leaders and their salaries may be another reason: in Germany, they receive only a small percentage more than the average teacher. Although Cramer et al.'s (2020) figures confirm that school leaders are satisfied with their professional careers, which they enjoy and experience as predominantly inspiring (i.e., predominantly intrinsically motivated²²), the figures also point to 'chronic job-related stress due to work overload or even excessive demands'. Surveys of principals in Germany and the US found that principals in both countries were dissatisfied with their salaries, workload, and lack of work-life balance²³.

3. *Research Implementation*

3.1. *Research Questions and Objectives*

Against this background, the following questions arise:

- how do teachers gain access to the position of school leader?

¹⁸ C. CRAMER et. al., *Schulleitung in Deutschland – Kurzbericht*, quoted, p. 132.

¹⁹ C. CRAMER et. al., *Schulleitung in Deutschland. Repräsentative Befunde*, p. 138, translation by F. Proskawetz.

²⁰ U. MÜLLER et al., “*How about being a school principal?*”, quoted, pp. 8-9.

²¹ C. CRAMER et. al., *Schulleitungen in Deutschland – Kurzbericht*, quoted, p. 3, translation by F. Proskawetz.

²² C. CRAMER et. al., *Schulleitung in Deutschland. Repräsentative Befunde*, quoted, p. 139.

²³ U. MÜLLER et al., “*How about being a school principal?*”, quoted, pp. 10-11.

- How can access to the profession be facilitated?
- What types of support do teachers need to access the profession?

The research examines both who becomes a school leader and how they enter the profession. Understanding the career paths of school leaders could attract more teachers to become school leaders, ease the entry phase, and help to support and reduce the burden on future school leaders.

3.2. *Research Design*

Due to the heavy workload of school leaders in Germany, it is generally difficult to recruit them for interviews. The *Convenience Sampling Technique* was used to select the sample²⁴. In total, more than 20 interviews with German school leaders and members of the school management board were conducted, of which four have been selected for the paper to illustrate school leaders' professional paths²⁵. The average length of the interviews was one hour. When selecting the interviewees, great care was taken to ensure a high degree of contrast. Thus, women and men of different ages, work experience, years as leaders and different types of schools (primary, secondary) were included. The research project is situated in the paradigm of qualitative research. To answer the research questions and thus strengthen the attractiveness of the profession, narrative-based interviews were conducted with school leaders in Germany. During the interviews, the school leaders were asked the following:

- how they made the decision to become a school leader and how they obtained their job; and
- how important support structures (explicit and implicit) are in their professional development.

The four interviews were analysed by means of qualitative content analysis, according to Mayring²⁶. The next section summarises the main findings.

4. *Findings*

4.1. *Interviews*

Melanie

«And then I decided to apply» (Melanie).

²⁴ J. GOLZAR et al., *Convenience Sampling*, «International Journal of Education and Language Studies», 1(2), 2022.

²⁵ It is a mixed sample consisting primarily of 'external' schools, while including some project schools. The interviews were conducted in German and subsequently translated into English.

²⁶ E.g. P. MAYRING, *Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse – Grundlagen und Techniken*, Beltz, Weinheim, 2010.

The interview occurred in December 2022 and lasted about an hour. Melanie, a woman in her fifties, leads a comprehensive school in a socially disadvantaged area in the German Ruhr area, a former mining region. Melanie came into the position through the strong support she received from her school leader, who pushed her to become her successor. During her time as a teacher, she had felt encouraged and supported by the leader of her school. She narrates, »In 2003, a new school leader came here. He had me on his radar quite quickly, and it was always clear to him that he had to push me: «I can use you in the school leadership team». When the leader at Melanie's school left and the position became vacant, Melanie considered applying but was initially unsure. When she learnt that applications for the post had been received, she decided to apply because she feared that a new school leader would not lead and shape the school in the way she wanted. She says, «If someone comes here and says that "what they've done here is all well and good, but we're going to do it in a completely different way, we're not going to do it that way", which I wouldn't mind, but if it no longer reflects the heart of the school [...]. And then I had another night to sleep and to think about it, and then I decided to apply. In fact, there was a fellow candidate». Today, as school leader, she is supported by a strong leadership team that she relies upon: «I couldn't do it all without a team».

Thomas

«And then I set off» (Thomas).

The interview occurred in May 2023 and lasted about an hour. Thomas, a man in his fifties, is the leader of a high school in a socially advantaged area in a small city in NRW. Thomas came to his current position through the flat organisational structure of his school, which enabled him to become involved in school management board work at an early stage of his career: «At 34, I was the second youngest teacher here and was allowed to participate in school development. [...] I was able to participate relatively quickly in school management work thanks to the flat hierarchy that we have». The support he received from school staff helped him become a school leader after the previous school leader was promoted and left his post: »And when my principal, our principal, was recalled to the district government, he was unexpectedly promoted. Many fingers from the staff pointed at me and said, «Thomas. Don't you want to do that now and get promoted?».

Chris

«I am a quarrelsome person. I am not looking for trouble, but I won't be pushed away» (Chris).

The interview occurred in July 2023 and lasted about an hour. Chris, a man in his late fifties, is the leader of a primary school in a socially advantaged

area in a small city in Bavaria. Chris says that even as a young teacher, he was unhappy with his school leader and had several conflicts with his colleagues. Chris describes himself as a 'contentious person'; as a young teacher, he believed that he could do better than his former school leader: «I have always been annoyed in my younger years about school leaders who gave me work to do, who were clueless, and I swore to myself that one day, when I am old – and I am quite old now in my own eyes – I do not want a young school leader who tells me what to do and has no idea». Chris consequently decided to apply for the position himself: «I applied for the school leadership position. That means that you usually have two or three applications that come to nothing. I think that was in the second or third year, I was 38 or whatever – or 39. In the first year I was lucky or unlucky that the school leader was in his position for only one more year. So I have done everything. I learnt everything from the bottom up and realised that if you have a lot of time, and I have invested a lot of time in this, you actually have to find ways to make things happen within the narrow confines of the civil service».

Danielle

«I don't like people telling me what to do» (Danielle).

The interview occurred in August 2023 and lasted about two hours. Danielle, a former member of the school management board, is in her late forties and left her position to work temporarily in the field of educational sciences. Although Danielle did not plan to become a member of the school management board («it just happened»), she says that she «likes to make things happen» and «have influence and control over the things that she does». Even in her first years as a learner, Danielle found that she «[couldn't] subordinate herself well to people for whom she has no respect». She describes herself as 'not obedient', critical, and questioning of the authority of her superiors; her dissatisfaction with her superiors led her to seek the position of a member of the school management board: «I don't like being told what to do. That's a bit weird. I also like to be told what to do by people. People who know something about their job. But I don't like people telling me what to do. They think they know, but they don't». Because of her enjoyment of developing concepts and her high level of design competence, the school district director recommended considering the position of a school leader: «He said that I would be ideal for the position of a school leader».

4.2. Preliminary Conclusions and Research Outlook

In all four cases, opportunities and coincidences seem to have led to the interviewee accepting their current position. None of them shared that the

path to the leading position had been planned in the long term when they entered the teaching profession; rather, this career path resulted from opportunities that arose in the course of their work as teachers – mostly random opportunities that were then actively seized, which the interviewees then made the most of. This suggests that the typical path to school management in Germany resembles not a motorway but rather a road with many detours, bends, and hindrances.

Support structures, including help from former school leaders and school staff, seem crucial. Often, a future school leader is already (informally) involved in school development processes as a teacher and is asked to accept the position of a school leader after the former school leader has (temporarily) left the position.

Added to this is the desire to shape the school, implement one's own ideas, and be able to control them. The fear of someone else taking over and not being able to realise one's own ideas seems to be an additional motivating factor to become a school leader in some cases.

The conclusions have raised a number of questions. Because the career paths of school leaders are not planned in the long term, structured support measures seem crucial for teachers interested in school leadership. Which specific support structures do teachers need to make the transition into school leadership? Could structured mentoring or trainee programmes be useful in schools? Does it make sense that the path to school leadership actually leads through the teaching profession? What do school leaders believe? Furthermore, the motivations for becoming a school leader could be explored in more detail. What are the motives behind the desire to become a school leader, and what are the personality types of head teachers? For example, are there gender- or generation-specific differences? To answer these questions, further interviews will be conducted.

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