Leadership for Learning in Germany and the US: Commonalities and Differences

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1. Leadership for learning as an integrated model: An introduction

Over the last two decades, *leadership for learning* (LFL) has emerged as a concept that integrates various educational leadership theories and concepts into a more comprehensive theoretical model, i.e. instructional leadership, transformational leadership and shared leadership (Daniëls/Hondeghem/Dochy 2019; Hallinger 2011; Townsend/MacBeath 2011). Although the model encompasses a variety of assumptions and practices, at its core it can be viewed as a set of principles woven around the notion that every member of a school's staff should have a stake in creating optimal conditions for learning, and that the role of a formal educational leader in this context is to provide school-wide, learning-focused leadership (MacBeath/Dempster 2009). An underlying understanding is that principals become effective (mostly) indirectly and that leadership behavior as well as its connections to learning and its antecedents are shaped by a school's context and culture (Goldring/Porter/Murphy/Elliott/Cravens 2009; Hallinger 2011; Murphy/Neumerski/Goldring/Grissom/Porter 2016).

Thus, LFL is understood as a process where whole school communities actively engage in purposeful and effective interactions that nurture relationships focused on improving (interconnected) learning on all levels of a school (Day 2011): the organizational learning, the professional learning of employees and the individual learning of students.

There is a large overlap between instructional leadership and leadership for learning, as both concepts emphasize the relevance of leading and supervising the instructional and curricular program of a school, defining a school's mission and promoting a positive school learning climate (Boyce/Bowers 2018a). But while the ultimate goal within both leadership concepts is to improve student learning, instructional leadership mainly tries to reach this goal by optimizing the instructional program, whereas leadership for learning "aims at building the academic capacity of schools as means of improving student outcomes" (Hallinger/Heck 2010: 654). The concept of leadership for learning goes beyond the idea of instructional leadership by incorporating a broader range of leadership activities to support learning and learning outcomes (Bush/Glover 2014: 556). One main characteristic of LFL is that learning-oriented principals focus on "school-wide alignment of all aspects of a school with instructional-centered leadership at its core" (Boyce/Bowers 2016: 2).

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Seen from this angle, the improvement of student learning is mainly reached through interactive organizational resources that support school-wide reform work and teacher change (Cosner 2009) and through capacity building (Daniëls et al. 2019). On this account, leadership within the LFL framework is conceptualized as a dynamic process of (micro) interactions within an organizational entity by incorporating aspects of laterality (Harris 2008; Harris/Leithwood/Day/Sammons/Hopkins 2007). Laterality refers to an understanding that leadership can be shared, and thus not only happens along a vertical (usually top-down), but also a lateral path (for example, teacher to teacher). Consequently, the concept of leadership for learning is also closely related to pluralistic leadership models like shared, distributed and collaborative leadership (Denis/Langley/Sergi 2012). In contrast to the concept of instructional leadership, where leadership is usually understood to be exerted by holders of a formal position, leaders within the leadership for learning framework are understood as emergent leaders, irrespective of whether they have been appointed to an official position or not. This – at its core – can be seen as a distributed perspective.

This chapter starts by offering some conceptual notions about leadership for learning, especially regarding the contextual factors that (might) shape it. It then provides a brief overview of factors that shape leadership for learning in Germany and the US. This overview is structured along the lines of input, process and output factors.

2. Assessing leadership commonalities under a common framework

Leadership is a cultural phenomenon linked to the values and customs of a group of people (Gerstner/Day 1994). Thus, a sound framework for the assessment of leadership commonalities and differences among and between cultures must take into account specific aspects of the underlying cultural systems. For our analysis – to describe differences and similarities between Germany and the US – we refer to the well-established frameworks of educational effectiveness research, namely the Context - Input - Process - Output model (CIPO model, Scheerens/Bosker 1997). The model groups together factors and its (simple) heuristic makes it possible to describe relationships between Inputs, Processes and Outputs in educational settings within certain contexts. It should be noted that the model is not a logic model (Astbury/Leeuw 2010) in the pure sense, as it lacks dynamic as well as reciprocal aspects, and thus does not allow to prompt unambiguous research hypotheses about mechanisms and influencing paths among the incorporated factors or categories (Kuger/Klieme/Jude/Kaplan 2016). Drawing on the four dimensions of the model, we will focus on the following aspects of LFL:

C Contextual Conditions for Leadership for Learning (e.g. educational policy, support system)
I Input of and for Leadership for Learning (e.g., training and recruitment of principals)
P Process of Leadership for Learning (e.g., procedures of leading and learning)
O Output(s) of Leadership for Learning (e.g., anticipated and realized outcomes of school leadership)

In conceptualizing leadership for learning, one critical challenge involves conceptualizing and understanding relationships between school leadership and teaching and learning. Teaching is not a simple reflex of learning; teaching and learning are distinct practices, and we need to understand how both practices not only connect with one another, but also with leadership practice. Recent work argues for attention to conceptualize leadership, teaching and learning in terms of the relationships among these practices (Spillane 2015). Scholars of human practice, working in several disciplinary traditions, argue for attention to activity systems that take into account how persons interact with one another using aspects of their environment (Engeström 2001; Engstrom 2001; Cook/Brown 1999). Teaching or leading, for example, is often conceptualized as what the teacher or leader does, roughly equivalent to a teacher's or leader's behavior. In contrast, scholars of human activity argue that practice is not about the actions of individuals but about interactions – it is about what people do together using key aspects of their situation rather than what they do on their own (Spillane 2006). Hence, the challenge to understanding relationships among leadership and learning fundamentally concerns understanding relationships among leading practice, teaching practice, and learning practice (Spillane 2015).

3. Contextual Conditions for Leadership for Learning

3.1 Germany

With regard to the relationship between leadership and context, there's hardly any German research that makes use of quantitative designs. However, the existing findings support the nowadays common wisdom that context matters. For example, Schwarz & Brauckmann (2015) drew upon survey data to show that the area close to schools (ACTS) influences among other things school principals' perceptions of student-related challenges at school, workload and what is done during the work time.

Furthermore, Pietsch and Leist (2018) demonstrated that competition between schools (to attract students) has a major impact on the LFL behavior of principals in German secondary schools: the stronger the competition between schools, the more pronounced the leadership activities of principals. The nature of school leadership varies directly with the level of competition, even when controlled for other potential contextual confounding variables such as the socioeconomic status of students' families and school organization factors. What was striking was that all facets of LFL, i.e. instructional, transformational and shared leadership, were positively associated with competition. Thus, the LFL climate of a school as indicated by a principal's leadership behavior directly reflects a school's competitive context, in that principals seem to react to the (perceived) competitive pressure by adapting their leadership style accordingly. In contrast to American findings, the social context of schools does not seem to have an impact on the leadership behavior of principals in Germany.

3.2 USA

Advocates of the Leadership for Learning model argue "that leadership is enacted within an organizational and environmental context" (Hallinger 2011: 127), with context referring to features of the broader organizational and environmental setting within which the school and the principal are located (Hallinger 2016). From a distributed perspective context is understood not as something external to leadership and as something that influences it from the outside, but rather as something that is constitutive of leadership practice, influencing it from the inside out. Put metaphorically, context is not a stage on which individuals practice and that influences what individuals do; it defines the practice as it is the medium for practice and for interactions.

Fittingly, existing research indicates that school contextual and compositional factors may have effects on all three leadership styles incorporated into the LFL model (Hallinger/Murphy 1986; Liu/Bellibas/Printy 2016; Smith/Bell 2011). It underscores that a school's context can influence the way the school is led and/or its priorities. In other words, the national, regional and local as well as the social and organizational context of a school can be considered to be inextricably linked to school leadership and its consequences.

4. Input of and for Leadership for Learning

4.1 Germany

Principals of public schools in Germany are usually recruited exclusively among the teaching staff. Teachers go through a master-degree level higher education qualification that ends in a state-recognized "Master of Education" (for more details, see Tulowitzki/Krüger/Roller 2018). They then have to undergo a mandatory period as teachers in training for 1-2 years in school before becoming "full" teachers. Teachers interested in becoming a principal apply for vacant positions that are in many circumstances publicly listed. The vetting process usually involves a check of an applicant's career achievements and teaching abilities. While having a teacher-type master's degree is a hard requirement, additional qualifications are often also desired; for example, experience as vice principal or having had special responsibilities in schools, or having completed a voluntary further qualification in educational management. However, the teaching competencies and teaching evaluations are often given the most weight when assessing an application. Candidates applying for a position as principal will usually have to undergo a series of interviews; the ministry of education and cultural affairs, and usually also the school where the candidate applies, get to weigh in on whether or not the position should be awarded to the candidate. In many but not all states, they are required to undergo a short course in the form of preparatory or in-service training. The training usually covers aspects of management, judicial aspects as well as aspects of quality management. Once appointed, principals are usually civil servants or on indefinite contracts, meaning they are appointed for life.

The position of the German school principal has received more attention over the last decades because as schools have gained more autonomy, the responsibilities of school-based leaders expanded accordingly (Tulowitzki 2015). Among other things, this has led to an increased need for professionalization and support.

4.2 USA

Writing about school leadership in the US is difficult because there is not one US school system. Rather, in the US there are multiple school systems – some public, some private, and some hybrid – from local school districts to charter school networks to religious based school systems. Even public school systems vary radically, depending on whether they serve urban, suburban, or rural communities. Moreover, these school systems operate in rather different government/policy environments, depending on the state (Manna 2015). The policy and government environments in which schools operate – for instance, in New York and New Mexico – are not the same. For example, some states approve curricular materials for core school subjects for use in schools, whereas other states leave such matters to local school systems. Overall, state governments have a variety of avenues through which they can leverage influence on school principals, including establishing leadership standards, influencing leadership preparation programs, principal licensure and principal evaluation. However, there remains considerable variability among states in how they deploy these policy levers in practice. And within states, there can be considerable variability on everything from principal recruitment to formal preparation and professional development.

Nevertheless, there appear to be some broad patterns about school leadership that mostly hold across state policy environments and many school systems. Principals are hired by local school system leaders (e.g., the local school district), though there are exceptions to this pattern; for example, in Chicago, where the majority of school principals are hired by the Local School Council (LSC), which is elected by members of the community served by the school. Typically, the school principal hires teachers, often with input from school staff, depending on the school system. In some school systems, system leaders can also play a role in teacher recruitment (for example in some of the Charter School Networks).

5. Process of Leadership for Learning

5.1 Germany

While the German education system has many unique features compared to other European countries (for a detailed presentation, see Döbert 2015), there are strong indications that educational leadership practices share common characteristics across the globe (see for example Leithwood/Harris/Hopkins 2008, 2019; OECD 2014). One particularity, however, is that in Germany, principals only have little authority over teacher recruitment and appointment as well as over teacher salaries and teacher promotion. Consequently, principals hold less than 20 percent of the responsibility for resources (the OECD average is 38 percent, OECD 2016).

The formally assigned authority of principals over staff varies from federal state to state (*Land*), in many cases the teachers are free to teach as they deem appropriate (as they have what is called “freedom of teaching” and “pedagogical freedom”, see Wermke 2011: 681f). That means that principals in Germany typically are limited in terms of influence on teaching practices and pedagogical approaches used in schools. As principals in Germany work in a low-accountability context and – like teachers – are civil servants in many states, their position is rather secure (Huber/Gördel/Kilic/Tulowitzki 2016). In many schools, the principal and deputy principal additionally work with several teachers on matters of leadership and management such as organizing processes of quality management, initiating and implementing school improvement projects, forming an extended leadership team (in German *Steuergruppe*, which translates to “steering group”). Through their work on selected management or leadership issues as well as on various projects and initiatives, they have a significant influence on matters of school improvement as well as on practices of teaching staff (Feldhoff 2010; Feldhoff/Rolff 2008).

5.2 USA

Traditionally, with respect to teaching and learning the two images of the school principal in the literature were the principal as buffering teachers from external interference especially with respect to their classroom practice, causing a perpetual tension between principal’s desire to focus her/his time on improving instruction and what Larry Cuban refers to as the “managerial imperative” of the job (Cuban 1988). While managing the tension between the managerial and the instructional continues to be an issue for principals, increasingly they cannot afford to buffer teachers from external environmental pressures to improve teaching and learning (Spillane/Lowenhaupt 2019). This added pressure can cause teachers to focus their efforts on (relatively) easy-to-teach students, thus putting students who traditionally have been disenfranchised by the school system at risk.

Since the 1980s there have been dramatic shifts in the policy environment in which US schools and school systems operate, regardless of state with local, state, and federal policy makers in the USA directing their attention and policy initiatives on classroom teaching and student learning, specifying what teachers should teach, in some cases how they should teach, and acceptable levels of student achievement. Mobilizing policy instruments – in particular rewards and sanctions – for compliance with externally imposed performance standards are sought by federal and state policy makers. As a result of the dramatic change in the institutional environment of US schools over the last 25 years, curriculum standards and test-based accountability have become staples. Moreover, requirements to report student achievement data by different subpopulations of students (e.g., race, class) has foreground tremendous inequities in students' opportunities to learn. As the pressure on school leaders and teachers to improve the quality of teaching and learning from beyond the schoolhouse has increased, principals can no longer buffer teachers from external initiatives intended to draw attention to teaching and learning.

Policy makers are not the only ones pressing for school leaders to pay attention to teaching and learning. Extra-system agents and agencies such as philanthropic institutions, university preparation programs and national associations have also played a prominent role, often with government support and incentives, in transforming the American education sector. One such effort is the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards, recently revised and renamed as the Practice Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL), that lay out expectations for school and district leaders regarding practice (Young/Crow/Murphy/Ogawa 2009; Young/Mawhinney/Reed 2016). Designed primarily as a foundation for thinking about leadership practice, the PSEL standards have also been influential in leadership development work. Based on a review of the empirical literature and the educational landscape together with input from researchers and practitioners, the standards are intended to guide the practice of educational leaders by identifying the nature of the work and defining what counts as quality work. Teaching and learning and its improvement figures prominently in these standards for leadership practice. Furthermore, recent work reports that all 50 states in the United States have either adopted or adapted the ISLLC standards (Anderson/Reynolds 2015).

These shifts in the institutional environment of America's schools represent a considerable departure from business as usual for teaching and learning in schools, and for leadership in particular. For example, supporting instruction, leading instructional improvement and monitoring the quality of instruction are increasingly central to the work of school leadership. While the tension between the managerial and the instructional persists, improving teaching and learning are integral to the work of the school principal and educational leadership more broadly.

6. Output(s) of Leadership for Learning

6.1 Germany

German research explicitly based on LFL is virtually non-existent. To the best of our knowledge, only a handful of studies exist (Ammann 2018; Pietsch/Leist 2018; Pietsch/Tulowitzki/Koch 2018). Studies considering effectiveness criteria, that is student learning and achievement gains of students, as outcomes measures are – with only one exception (Pietsch/Lücken/ Thonke/Klitsche/Musekam 2016) – not available. Regarding the scarce empirical knowledge base from Germany, Pietsch, Tulowitzki and Koch (2018) explored multilevel associations of LFL, teachers' job satisfaction and organizational commitment, drawing on survey data from the school inspection of the German federal state of Hamburg. Their findings indicated that shared leadership is a strong predictor of individual and shared job satisfaction as well as organizational commitment of teachers' job satisfaction and organizational commitment, and that LFL is contextually bound. The social background of a school's student population had a statistically significant impact on teachers' organizational commitment and job satisfaction at the school level. Teachers who worked in schools with a higher amount of socially privileged students were more strongly committed to their schools and more satisfied with their jobs than their colleagues who work at schools in challenging social circumstances. Additionally, results indicated that the association of an instructional leadership culture and the shared organizational commitment and shared job satisfaction of teachers varied with the social and structural context of a school in its entirety. Thus, with regard to the structural and social contexts of a school, the study also showed that instructional management and its relation to the shared job satisfaction and shared organizational commitment of teachers seem to be contextually contingent.

Using teacher survey data from the federal state of Hamburg, Pietsch et al. (2016; 2017) also investigated the direct and indirect ties between various leadership styles, namely, instructional, transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership, and the instructional practices of teachers by applying a structural equation model. Results revealed that mediating variables – e.g. organizational commitment, and motivation of teachers, capacity (beliefs) of teachers and working conditions of teachers – are influenced by a leadership core as well as by all leadership facets, and that the leadership behavior varied systematically with a schools' achievement context.

In addition to these studies, which explicitly focus on LFL in its totality, there exists research from Germany into educational leadership that covers individual facets of LFL, though again the evidence base is sparse. There is very little research looking into instructional leadership in Germany (Brauckmann/Geissler/Feldhoff/Pashiardis 2016; Klein 2016). Similarly, only a small number of studies dealing with practices akin to shared leadership and transformational leadership have been produced. For example, Schaarschmidt and colleagues found that a participatory and supportive leadership style led to more intact interpersonal relationships among staff, and acted as a buffer for stressors of the day-to-day work (Schaarschmidt/Kieschke 2013: 93). Similarly, a study conducted in North-Rhine Westphalia, one of the most populated federal states in Germany, found evidence that transformational leadership, participation (in other words, sharing of tasks and responsibilities) as well as the work climate in schools correlate highly with the affective commitment of teachers (Harazd/Gieske/Gerick 2012). Findings from a mixed-methods study (Gieske 2013), also conducted in North-Rhine Westphalia, echo this: Data indicated that teaching staff had a stronger organizational commitment in schools that were led by what Gieske dubbed "rational school principals". These were principals who tried to lead by presenting issues in a transparent manner, winning staff over through arguments and tried to involve staff in the decision-making process (Gieske 2013: 131ff). None of those studies focused on linking leadership to student achievement.

6.2 USA

In the US, there is a relatively long history of efforts to document relations between aspects of what we refer to as leadership for learning and school outcomes, dating back to at least the beginning of school effectiveness research. Research on school effectiveness, starting with work by Lezotte and Brookover in the 1970s, documented how schools can organize to create conditions necessary to improve teaching and student learning. Among other things, scholars working in this tradition (see Purkey/Smith 1983; Lezotte 2001; Brookover/Lezotte 1977) have identified conditions that characterize effective schools as measured in terms of student outcomes including:

- Strong school leadership focused on quality instruction
- High expectations for students
- Planned curriculum coordination and organization
- Linking professional development to the expressed needs of the staff
- Clear and focused mission
- An orderly and safe school environment
- Frequent monitoring of student progress as basis for improvement
- Positive home-school relations.

Though work in this tradition has been critiqued methodologically, it had a strong influence on the field and subsequent scholarship.

In the 1980s, research in the ‘instructional leadership’ tradition identified both the roles and functions of instructional leaders, including defining and communicating a clear mission for instruction, managing a program for instruction by coordinating curriculum and supervising teaching and students’ progress, recognizing achievement, and nurturing a positive learning climate for both children and adults in schools (Hallinger/Murphy 1985; Hallinger 2009; Heck et al. 1990, 1991; Marks/Printy 2003). A major meta-analysis of research on school leadership involving 27 research studies (two thirds of which were conducted in the US) focused on relationships between school leadership and student outcomes. The meta-analysis shows that the closer school leaders’ work is to teaching and learning, the more likely they are to have a positive influence on student outcomes (Robinson/Lloyd/Rowe 2008).

Over the past quarter century a large number of studies dealing with facets of leadership for learning have been undertaken (Boyce/Bowers 2018b; Daniëls et al. 2019; Hallinger 2011). Successful principals in this context are seen as value-driven, cooperation-oriented, aiming at building the school's capacity for improvement, sharing and empowering leadership where appropriate, and then developing suitable strategies only after having understood the context (Hallinger 2011: 137-138). Particularly, a large body of quantitative empirical LFL research is based upon data from the School And Staffing Survey (SASS, Boyce/Bowers 2018b), which (together with its successor the National Teacher and Principal Survey) is the largest, most comprehensive survey of schools and school staff, which provides descriptive data on the context of elementary and secondary education on a wide range of topics. Within the SASS LFL is conceptualized assuming that

> teacher autonomy and influence and principal leadership serve as the foundation of instructional leadership with a reciprocal relationship between them, adult development is affected by teacher autonomy and influence, and all of these three factors contribute to school climate, which in turn acts as a significant bridge between instructional leadership and the three emergent factors. […] teacher satisfaction, teacher commitment, and teacher retention. (Boyce/Bowers 2018b: 171)

Taking advantage of longitudinal administrative data, several recent studies show reasonably large ‘principal effects’ on student outcomes, typically test scores (Branch/Hanushek/Rivkin 2012; Grissom/Kalogrides/Lobe 2015). Furthermore, several recent studies show a relationship between school leadership and both teacher retention and teacher satisfaction (Boyd et al. 2011; Grissom 2011; Ladd 2011; Sebastian/Allensworth 2012). Empirical findings indicate that effective American schools have principals who focus on curricula and instruction by shaping a schools’ climate and culture, defining and communicating missions and visions, recognizing and awarding success and accomplishments, maintaining good internal and external relations, and investing in the schools’ personnel (Daniëls et al. 2019).

Table 1. Summary based on table on relationships between instructional leadership themes and human resource factors (i.e. teacher satisfaction, commitment, retention), expanded to account for studies from Germany

Country	**Number of studies**	**Level of evidence**	**Rationale**
USA	42	Limited to moderate	Sufficient number of primary studies, but lack of multilevel modeling
Germany	3	Limited	Lack of primary studies

Source: Boyce/Bowers 2018b (USA); own research (Germany)

7. Discussion and Conclusion

Based on our overview, we come to the conclusion that school leadership per se and LFL in particular are far less discussed as well as empirically investigated in Germany than in the US. Furthermore, we observe that the scholarly discussion on school leadership in Germany – unlike in the US – does not seem to focus much on effectiveness, i.e. student learning and achievement gains of students. There are preliminary indications pointing to the social context of a school not being as relevant for shaping principal leadership in Germany compared to the US.

Furthermore, the dearth on studies on educational leadership, and by extension on leadership for learning in Germany, may be indicative of a key difference between the US and Germany when it comes to the professional culture in schools: Teachers in Germany are far more autonomous than their US colleagues. Possibly due to their more independent status and their extensive preparatory training, they are relatively resistant to influences of school principals on the classroom level. By that logic, principals in Germany serve more as a buffer for teachers against disruptions, and as mediators and administrative managers. American principals, by contrast, seem to have a more pronounced role in terms of influencing instructional practices, human resource management and leadership in general. It seems plausible that American principals can’t afford to buffer their teachers from external environmental pressures anymore due to the high-stakes accountability context they are operating in. While standards-based accountability plays a major role in the US but not in Germany, this can be seen as another explanation for differences in terms of educational leadership: the German low-stakes accountability system offers German teachers and principals more room to maneuver in terms of leadership and teaching practices than their American counterparts.

Nevertheless, the empirical results suggest that LFL in both contexts share more communalities than differences. Thus, on the one hand principals on both sides of the Atlantic seem to have a strong influence on the working conditions of teachers, their professional capacities, personnel development and mediated by that on teaching practices. On the other hand, this is reached by the same means: instructional, transformational and distributed/shared leadership practices. Furthermore, there is evidence that the local context of a school shapes the behavior of principals in Germany as well as in the US – independently from the national context in which principals and schools are situated. However, while the social context plays a major role in the US regarding how and how successfully principals lead, the social context in Germany appears to have less of an influence on leadership practices and their success. Other context factors, especially those of the administrative kind, have a more pronounced influence.

Ultimately, this comparative contribution shows that international comparative research allows us to reflect on particular national situations and provide an opportunity for understanding implicit and culturally specific theories, assumptions and empirical findings concerning how school principals influence the teaching and learning within schools as well as relevant determinants, interactions and results. Furthermore, the contribution points to the fact that LFL is an under-researched topic on both sides of the Atlantic, being nearly non-existent in Germany. Nonetheless, it underscores the relevance of LFL and its viability, irrespective of any national context. It furthermore paints a picture of emergent research to be conducted in order to better understand links between practices of principals and teachers on the one hand, and students and learning on the other.

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