Leadership for Primary Schools:
An Examination of Innovation within an Austrian Educational Context

Petra Heißenberger

University College of Teacher Education in Lower Austria

Abstract

This study examined relationships between the work of innovative school principals and innovative primary schools determined by defining eight areas of school leadership: Instructional Development, Classroom Management, School Organization, Social Interaction, Personnel Development, Cooperation, Infrastructure and School Marketing. A questionnaire was sent out to 658 primary school principals in Lower Austria. Data were analyzed using Lime Survey, SPSS© (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), and PASW© (Predictive Analysis Soft Ware). To determine to what extent the self-assessment of principals supported the existence of respective areas of innovation, their self-assessment (independent variable) was correlated with the outcomes from the item grouping (i.e., innovation themes). In addition, a correlation calculation with correlation parameters by Pearson and Spearman was executed. In summary, it must be pointed out that between the self-assessments of the principals and the subsequent self-assessment of school innovation themes no statistically significant correlations were verifiable. This study supports the need for further education and training that can support principals in their role as designers of their schools.

Key Words

innovation, principals, primary school, school leadership

Statement of the Problem

In the Austrian system of education, compulsory schooling starts at the age of six and lasts for nine years. Following primary school, students can choose from among two different types of secondary schools – new middle school and grammar school - each varying in academic emphases and admissions requirements. Upon successful completion of secondary school, students may continue their education by selecting a school that focuses on either general or vocational education. At the age of fourteen they can either stay at grammar school or leave for another year at a polytechnic school followed by a three-or-four-year apprenticeship.

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Corresponding Author:

Petra Heißenberger, University College of Teacher Education Lower Austria

2500 Baden, Mühlgasse 67, Austria

Email: petra.heissenberger@ph-noe.ac.at

School quality is undoubtedly an important issue both nationally and internationally, and the development of a high-performing and innovative school is linked to the leadership skills and qualities of the school leader. In several countries around the world, the school leader's role entails a heavy focus on instructional leadership, or leadership for learning (Stewart, 2013). In Ontario, for example, university preparation for school leaders is centered on skill building to support academic instruction. Singapore's approach to school leadership includes recruiting top teachers and placing them into middle-management positions, possibly leading to further full-time training aimed at maximizing organizational performance, designing schools, and implementing innovations within a school (Stewart, 2013). In Austria, the selection of a school leader is a multi-step process that involves the candidate's attendance at a hearing designed to carefully assess professional qualifications and experience. If successful, the candidate is appointed by the Board of Education of Lower Austria. Principals may first work in their new position without any advanced training, but are required to take part in an in-service course on school management within their first four years on the job.

Internationally, the focus on instructional leadership represents a shift in emphasis for school principals whose roles were previously defined primarily through administrative tasks. I am responsible for the further training and education, the school management courses and the school management masters program for teachers and principals in Lower Austria – that´s why I focus on leadership in my research. I´ve taught in primary schools years before, so I decided to focus on primary schools too. Principals always have to implement innovations in schools – that´s why I focus on innovations. Research can be very helpful to develop courses and trainings for principals. In Austria there will be a constitutional amendment starting in 2019: Principals will have to complete a school management course before applying for the job of a principal.

The new role of the principal takes on added significance as schools are increasingly faced with the task of preparing students with the requisite knowledge and skills to meet the changing needs of technology-based economies. Principals must establish learning environments that foster "more innovative thinking skills, cultural awareness, higher-order cognitive skills, and sophisticated communication, and collaborative skills (Suarez-Orozco & Sattin, 2007).

Such educational innovations directly respond to the need for flexibility in public education as schools implement a variety of instructional and administrative changes that address the ongoing needs associated with globalization (Ellison, 2009). At the core of innovative processes are practices of experimentation and transformation in both instructional and administrative realms (Ellison, 2009).

The capability as well as the willingness to participate in innovations and to integrate them into the educational system have become modern imperatives. The promise connected with innovations is to change a state of affairs that is regarded in need of improvement. More often than not innovations are put into practice only locally, they have undesired and at times unexpected side-effects and remain on the level of being short episodes. The perception of this problem corresponds with an increasing public, political and scientific interest in innovation and its transfer. The educational sciences also have taken on this complex of topics in its research (Bormann, 2011).

Transfer research examines the way in which innovations spread in the educational

system and on which conditions such a process depends. So research is carried out to which extent the intensity of cooperation between persons of a social system, the innovation climate and the support of the acting people contribute to their permanent establishment (Fussangel & Gräsel, 2006). Existing analyses of reported transfer successes revealed that in this field above all content-related, personnel and educational predictors should receive attention (Nickolaus & Gräsel, 2006). In addition, the qualitative integration of an innovative idea in terms of value changes, assumption of responsibility and permanence of the reform idea must not be ignored (Gräsel, Bormann, Schütte, Trempler, Fischbach & Asseburg, 2012). This study deals with the personnel predictors with regard to principals in primary schools: Is there a connection between the work of innovative school principals and that of innovative primary schools in Lower Austria? What are the most important skills of/for innovative school principals?

Research Questions

Given the ever-changing needs of schools within a global context, how exactly do principals envision and articulate their roles and responsibilities in innovation processes? What styles of leadership support this process? The current research focused on innovation in Austrian primary schools, with the intention of strengthening awareness of leadership practices that may facilitate innovation within these contexts. As such, the specific research questions were as follows:

1. How many primary schools in Lower Austria could be identified as innovative?
2. How do primary school principals in Lower Austria assess themselves as innovative?

3. Is there a connection between the work of innovative school principals and that of innovative primary schools in Lower Austria?

The goals of this research were to (a) examine principals' influence on the development and implementation of innovative practices in primary schools, and (b) provide an opportunity for principals to reflect on their practice. The study further examined the distinguishing factors in school management that help to determine the differences between schools that are innovative, and those that are more pedestrian in practice. Finally, the study sought to determine whether there is a transparent connection between innovative management and innovative schools.

Methodology
Research Sample
The sample for this research consisted of 658 primary school principals in Lower Austria. In order to locate the contact information for primary school principals, I contacted the Board of Education of Lower Austria and searched school homepages using the Google search engine. Using these methods, I was able to obtain the email addresses for all primary school principals within this geographic region.

The Questionnaire
The questionnaire that served as the basis of this research includes eight areas of school leadership as articulated in the *Innovation Check for Schools (ICS)*, a guide developed by members of the University College of Lower Austria and the University of Economics in Vienna in 2009.[1] The themes of the ICS include (1) Instructional Development, (2) Classroom Management, (3) School Organization, (4) Social Interaction, (5) Personnel Development, (6) Cooperation, (7) Infrastructure, and (8) School Marketing. Each theme of the ICS is defined by

a question, followed by several statements that respondents are asked to evaluate in terms of the extent to which they agree. For example, the guiding question under the theme of *Instructional Development* is "How innovative is teaching at your school?" Examples of the Likert statements that follow include "We have a variety of teaching methods," and "We have individual tasks for each student." The actual questionnaire disseminated to primary school principals is a modified version of the *Innovation Check for Schools* described above (see Appendix A). Specifically, additional questions were added in order to (a) collect demographic information on the principals included in the research sample, (b) assess the type and extent of support that principals require, and (c) provide additional space for principals to comment on their work. The questionnaire with nine areas of school leadership was emailed to all research participants.

Of the 658 questionnaires distributed, 78% were answered and returned. Slightly less than half (n = 309) of the principals indicated that they are responsible for only one school site. Of this group, 35% worked as a principal anywhere between one and five years; 31%, between six and ten years; and 32% held more than ten years of experience in the field. Approximately 40% of those responsible for one school site also reported that they were free from teaching obligations. Over 80% of the surveyed principals are female (see table 1).

Demographic Data

Characteristic	Value
Participants (*n*)	516
Gender [%]	
women	81
men	8
no answer	11
Number of Years Working as a Principal	
1-5 years	33
6-10 years	27
more than 10 years	29
no answer	12
Number of School Sites	
one school	60
two schools	23
three schools	6
no answer	12
Teaching Obligations	
not required to teach	45
required to teach	44
no answer	11

Table 1. Demographic data of research participants.

Statistical Procedures and Analyses

Data were analyzed using Lime Survey, SPSS© (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), and PASW© (Predictive Analysis Soft Ware). Innovation data were retrieved in the same order in which they were presented on the questionnaire (See Appendix A).

The first research question (How many primary schools in Lower Austria could be identified as innovative?) was important to assess the effects of the initiation and acceleration of innovation processes on principals, teachers, and on the school as a system. The second research question (How do primary school principals in Lower Austria assess themselves as innovative?) helped to identify a broad spectrum of characteristics of innovation in connection to the work of principals. The third and final research question (Is there a connection between the work of innovative school principals and that of innovative primary schools in Lower Austria?) reflected the central theme of this research, as it described the actual project goal: the designation of school innovation areas that are affected by the factor school management.

To achieve these ends, I surveyed primary school principals to determine possible innovation potentials in the management of Lower Austrian primary schools. To assess the degree of innovation for each topic of concern in the questionnaire, a sub-population of schools was formed to test individual topics within the identified spheres of essential innovation themes. The subgroups were counted to determine how innovative schools are in the defined areas (e.g., teaching development, personal development, etc.).

Certain innovation themes were determined to be essential based on two features: The question quality (unambiguousness) could be classified as very

high and the variability (factual existence at the school) could be easily and quickly established. This methodology obviated the respondent's tendency to mark item groups or individual items too optimistically, as factual evidence of an item's existence in the school could be easily and objectively verified. In this way, innovation themes were defined as fulfilled if all items of the questionnaire were assessed positively. An auxiliary variable and sub-totalities were formed to determine how many schools were innovative in each area of innovation.

Additionally, in schools where an area of innovation was processed apparently well, the self-assessments of principals were correlated with the sub-totalities. The sub-totality of the innovation area "development of teaching" i.e. consists of three items that were determined to be very meaningful. This step helped to clarify the extent to which the top-down process of steering school innovation was verifiable. Although a bottom-up process has not been proven, the additional step of correlating the self-assessments of principals with sub-totalities helped to prove the force of innovation in top-down-processes. This does not mean that a bottom-up process can be indirectly assumed to have been proven. However, it does specify the areas in which bottom-up processes can be assumed.

Findings

To determine to what extent the self-assessment of principals supported the existence of respective areas of innovation, their self-assessment (independent variable) was correlated with the outcomes from the item grouping (i.e., innovation themes). In order to increase the reliability of the achieved result, two more observations were taken into account. In addition, a correlation calculation with correlation parameters by Pearson and

Spearman was executed, which is cited in relevant literature as a frequent alternative to Kendall´s Tau. The intent was to determine the significance of the random sample between sub-totalities 1-6 and the correlated item. As a result of this verification check, it became apparent that there was no relevant relation in case of a further variation of the correlation measurement.

In summary, it must be pointed out that between the self-assessments of the principals and the subsequent self-assessment of school innovation themes, no statistically significant correlations were verifiable.

Research Question 1: How many schools could be identified as innovative?

Principals assessed their schools as very innovative in the area of *Teaching Development*. For example, 72% of the surveyed principals were counted as belonging to the group of those schools that fulfill the criteria completely. Most principals (65%) viewed themselves positively in the area of *Personnel Development* and recognized that the selection and development of personnel are very important determinants for the successful development of each school. Approximately forty percent (41%) of the principals identified weaknesses in their leadership in the area of *Organization of Teaching*, 47% realized that there were deficits in the area of *Cooperation*, and 48% were convinced that there were deficits in the area of *School Leadership*.

It is striking that needs were identified in exactly those areas of innovation where school as an institution is dependent on its local sphere. In primary schools, the organization of teaching

always requires flexibility on the part of the parents (e.g., the regulation of lesson times). Moreover, cooperation must be gained from those partners, with whom - in the school's view - it is desirable. The transfer of functions to delegate tasks to the staff not only means that these are accepted by them, but also that the changed role of school management needs to be adopted from the outside (i.e., parents, local policy) - a circumstance that may explain why the values in the innovation area of *School Organization* were so low (54%). With regard to this research question, the following interim result can be formulated: Although primary school principals realized that the field of teaching development is the predestined field of innovation, they also expressed the belief that school management alone was not in a position to develop innovations beyond socio-political controlling mechanisms (i.e., supervisory authorities).

Research Question 2: How do Primary School Principals Assess Themselves as Innovative?

The self-assessment data (see table 2) show that principals were very honest in judging their own capabilities and qualities, but they did not always trust their skills as school leaders. When it comes to empathy (*I view myself as extraordinarily empathetic*) and motivation (*I can motivate other people quite well*), a rather small percentage of principals (38%) rated these statements as "Totally True". An even smaller percentage rated themselves as conflict competent (22%) (*I am quite able to deal with conflicts*) and self-confident (21%) (I have great self-confidence).

Statements on Self-Assessment

	Totally True	Rather True	Less True	Not True	No Answer
I view myself as especially communicative.	51	34	3	0	12
I view myself as very committed.	67	21	0	0	12
I view myself as extraordinarily empathetic.	38	41	3	0	18
I view myself as pedagogically competent.	57	30	0	0	13
I view myself as very able to deal with conflicts.	22	49	16	0	13
I like taking initiative.	48	36	3	0	13
I like challenges.	42	37	9	0	12
I like working in a team.	65	22	1	0	12
I have great self-confidence.	21	58	8	0	12
My organisation competence is outstanding.	42	41	4	0	13
I can motivate other people quite well.	38	46	3	0	13
I like working as a lone fighter.	3	9	43	30	15

Table 2. Rounded percentages of participants' responses (self-assessment).

In conjunction with the values established in their self-assessment of pedagogical competences, we can derive from the first indication (i.e, "I view myself as very able to deal with conflicts") that principals do in fact possess these essential traits, but they view these as qualities within themselves that are not yet fully developed. If principals are to develop and facilitate innovations within their schools, they must be able to address their colleagues' concerns with empathy. Additionally, they must demonstrate self- confidence and the ability to convey their own ideas with full commitment.

The results of the self-assessment also raise considerations for future education, training, and recruitment of principals. Specifically, they will have to produce evidence of essential leadership qualities such as motivational readiness, ability to deal with conflicts, empathy, and confidence in their own potential.

Research Question 3: Is There a Connection between the Work of Innovative School Principals and that of Innovative Primary Schools in Lower Austria?

Based on the results of this research, it is reasonable to conclude that there is no relation between the work of an innovative principal and the existence of an innovative principal. Principals do not promote innovations as their top priority, nor are they averse to them. Instead, it seems that the source of school innovation is likely to be found in the staff itself, or is brought in as an impulse from outside the school. In sum, the study does not support the belief that top-down processes are important for the successful development of schools.

Discussion

Initiative, independence, competence, self-confidence, and personal responsibility are

necessary dispositions for school principals because schools also take on current social challenges for which personal commitment is necessary. When the school leader assumes responsibility for the design of the institutional culture, innovations become a natural, everyday occurrence at school (cf. Altrichter & Schratz, 1992).

This study supports the need for further education and training that can support principals in their role as designers of their schools. This support, amongst other things, should work to strengthen the consciousness and competence of principals as leaders who influence innovation processes in their schools. The design and planning of support include consideration of the following questions:

- What kind of school management behavior promotes the innovation of teaching?
- What kind of school management behavior promotes innovation of schools in general?
- Do teaching innovations come into existence independent of the attitude or performance of the principal?
- Does the school develop independent of the behavior of the principal?
- Are there factors in the principal's conduct that inhibit teaching innovations?

Future Research

As indicated above, a central issue in this research is the need for further education and training of principals that strengthens their motivational and organizational skills, thus supporting the development and implementation of educational innovations. Within the framework of this study, it cannot be clearly demonstrated that principals who assess themselves as innovative have exercised primary influence on innovations. What constitutes an innovative leader? Can leadership be trained or taught? The role of bottom-up-processes remain questionable. Moreover, innovation processes depend on extra-curricular partners. Policies that encourage bottom-up leadership might be as effective as top-down leadership. Follow-up projects will examine these questions in greater detail.

Notes

1. For more information, go to http://www.ph-noe.ac.at/forschung/projekte/innovationscheck-schule.html

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About the Author

Petra Heißenberger, Phd, is Deputy Head of the
Department of Educational Management and Leadership at
the University College of Teacher Education in Lower
Austria. She has taught in primary school, and currently
works with principals and teaches course in school
management. Her interests include special needs education
and therapeutic pedagogy, communication and leadership,
human resource management, reflections on one's own role,
and active participation in learning communities.

Appendix A

Research Study Questionnaire: Leadership for Primary Schools: An Examination of Innovation within an Austrian Educational Context

  I.   School Site and Principal

Note: Your executive status "appointed" or "entrusted" is regarded as equal in this research study. In case you run several school sites fill in the questionnaire of just one school site.

  1.   In which educational region is your school located?
       a.   Educational region 1
       b.   Educational region 2
       c.   Educational region 3
       d.   Educational region 4
       e.   Educational region 5

  2.   How long have you been managing this school as principal? (If you have previous experience as a
       principal, include that in your years of experience below).
       a.   1-5 years
       b.   6-10 years
       c.   11-15 years
       d.   longer than 15 years

How many schools do you manage?
       a.   1 school
       b.   2 schools
       c.   3 schools

  3.   As a school principal I am
       a.   released from teaching obligations
       b.   not released from teaching obligations

4. Gender:
   a. female
   b. male

5. How much time do you spend on administrative activities at your school and how much on pedagogical activities?
   Note: The sum of these activities should equal 100%.
   a. administrative activities: _____ %
   b. pedagogical activities: _____ %

6. How do you view your leadership style?
   a. mainly staff-oriented
   b. mainly subject (factually)-oriented
   c. balance between staff-orientation and subject-orientation (factual orientation)

7. How many pupils currently attend your school at the moment?
   a. less than 50 pupils
   b. 51 -100 pupils
   c. 101 – 150 pupils
   d. more than 150 pupils

8. How many classes (forms) are there at your school at the moment?
   a. 1-3 classes
   b. 4-7 classes
   c. 8-12 classes
   d. more than 12 classes

9. How many permanent teachers do you have on staff?
Note: In case you have a teaching obligation because you are not released from teaching, please include yourself in that number. Here, it is about the number of persons, irrespective of how many lessons they teach.
   a. 1-5 persons
   b. 6-10 persons
   c. 11-15 persons
   d. 16-20 persons
   e. 21-25 persons
   f. more than 25 persons

10. How many teachers with less than 10 years of service do you have at your school?
   a. 1-5 persons
   b. 6-10 persons
   c. more than 10 persons

11. How many teachers with 11-20 years of service do you have at your school?
     a. 1-5 persons
     b. 6-10 persons
     c. more than 10 persons

12. How many teachers with 21-30 years of service do you have at your school?
     a. 1-5 persons
     b. 6-10 persons
     c. more than 10 persons

13. How many teachers with 31-40 years of service do you have at your school?
     a. 1-5 persons
     b. 6-10 persons
     c. more than 10 persons

14. How many teachers with more than 40 years of service do you have at your school?
     a. 1-5 persons
     b. 6-10 persons
     c. more than 10 persons

II.   Statements on the Subject

Directions: Please select the choice that best represents you.

Self-Assessment

	Totally true (3)	Rather true (2)	Less true (1)	Not true (0)
I view myself as especially communicative.				
I view myself as very committed.				
I view myself as extraordinarily empathetic.				
I view myself as pedagogically competent.				
I am quite able to deal with conflicts.				
I like taking initiative.				
I like challenges.				
I like working in a team.				
I have great self-confidence.				
My organisational competence is outstanding.				
I can motivate other people quite well.				
I like working as a lone fighter.				

Development of Teaching: How innovative is the teaching in your school?

	Totally true (3)	Rather true (2)	Less true (1)	Not true (0)
I am acknowledged as an expert for quality control in teaching.				
I advise my teachers on matters related to teaching.				
I guide discussions about current pedagogical theories and practical models and suggest ways for faculty to integrate them into their teaching.				
Traditional grading (marking) is supplemented through additional methods of performance assessment.				
As school principal I see to it that new learning material (files, books etc.) are used in my school.				
As school principal I make sure that new learning and teaching methods are applied in my school.				
In our school, every single pupil is supported by through Individual assignments and special tuition (e.g. supporting students by doing their homework).				

Organisation of Teaching: How is teaching and leisure time organized?

	Totally true (3)	Rather true (2)	Less true (1)	Not true (0)
In my school there are blocked lessons (hours).				
I support the implementation of projects in my school.				
Teaching units and breaks are flexibly organized.				
In our school there is a wide range of recreational offerings during breaks (play and action activities in the garden).				

School Organisation: How is your school organised?

	Totally true (3)	Rather true (2)	Less true (1)	Not true (0)
I am working on the development and implementation of common, binding procedures and routines in my school (rules).				
The cooperation with my district inspector goes really well and he/she is very supportive.				
I experience rigid structures (e.g. staff decisions, budget allotment) as "applying breaks" in the school system.				
In our school, responsibilities are unambiguously assigned and made visible (e.g. in a responsibility matrix, a notice ...)				

Social Interaction: Is social interaction important in your school?

	Totally true (3)	Rather true (2)	Less true (1)	Not true (0)
I promote a common set of values and norms in my school.				
I promote cooperation among my teachers within my school.				
I cultivate a policy of intensive and good communication with the pupils of my school.				
I maintain intensive and good communication with the parents of the pupils in my school.				

Personnel Development: How do your teachers continue their education e. g. in courses/trainings...?"

	Totally true (3)	Rather true (2)	Less true (1)	Not true (0)
I give my teachers regular feedback about their lessons to				

point out areas of improvement and I support them in their activities.				
I observe the lessons of my teachers on an hourly basis.				
I observe the lessons of my teachers according to the method "Classroom Walkthrough."				
I have staff talks with my teachers.				
I suggest targeted further training for my teachers and thus promote their professionalism.				
Teachers who have participated in such further training courses share these information in the faculty.				
I recognise individual strenghts of my teachers and praise them.				
I recognise weaknesses and encourage my teachers to work on them.				
My teachers exchange knowledge and share experience on a regular basis.				

Cooperation: How does your school organise cooperation with external partners?

	Totally true (3)	Rather true (2)	Less true (1)	Not true (0)
I enjoy excellent relations with the local community/school provider. (The school provider in most cases is the community or municipality and has to pay for the school building, the heating, furniture, working materials,…).				
I hold a political office in the local community of my school.				

I hold a political office in another community.				
My school cooperates with the local kindergarten (nursery school).				
Our school cooperates with external partners (e.g., projects, subject-related lectures etc.) to offer our students insights into areas that lie outside the daily school routine.				

Infrastructure: In what areas of infrastructure does your school excel?

	Totally true (3)	Rather true (2)	Less true (1)	Not true (0)
In my school there is innovative, technical equipment (e.g., data projector, smart boards etc.).				
The organisation of rooms is innovative (e.g., lighting, oxygen, ergonomic workplaces, various desk arrangements etc.).				
My school regularly offers a healthy snack to pupils.				
In my school, a warm lunch is served.				

School Marketing: In what ways do you market your school?

	Totally true (3)	Rather true (2)	Less true (1)	Not true (0)
There exists a written mission statement of my school.				
The homepage of my school is kept up-to-date.				
We actively showcase our school actively through targeted activities in public (e.g. public relations, homepage, folders, exhibitions, events etc.)				

School Leadership: How do you run and organize your school?

	Totally true (3)	Rather true (2)	Less true (1)	Not true (0)
I delegate assignments and tasks to my teachers, providing them with the needs and competences necessary for the execution of their work.				
I finish all jobs and tasks myself because my teachers have already reached the limit of their stress resistance.				
In principle, I avoid conflicts.				
We work on clear aims for our common work.				
I promote innovations in my school.				
I regularly attend training courses designed school executives.				
I am well anchored in a network (school management group, regular meetings in the district, other activities...).				
I also profit from this network.				
I practise a reflexive leadership style, asking for active feedback from my teachers time and again.				

As a school principal which kind of support do you need?

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Additional comments:

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