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Distributed Leadership, Teacher Autonomy, and Power Relations Between Headteachers and Teachers Under Low-Stakes Accountability Conditions: An Ethnographic Account from Switzerland

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Abstract

Distributed leadership is propagated internationally as an effective means to improve teaching and learning in schools. Increasingly it is acknowledged that practices of distributed leadership depend on their context and governing conditions. Based on ethnographic research, this article discusses how distributed leadership is put into practice within a "loose" governing regime with low-stakes accountability. The example is taken from Switzerland, where the strengthening of leadership is one of the core instruments of New Public Management (NPM) reforms, while high-stakes accountability instruments have not been implemented. The analysis discusses tensions that distributed leadership generates between headteachers and teachers in a primary school. It argues that a "loose" accountability regime produces an opaque field of power relations, in which the self-governing imperative of distributive leadership meshes with claims of traditional teacher autonomy.

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Introduction

After New Public Management (NPM) reforms modelled schools as self-governing organisations, leadership grew into one of the central policies to improve the quality of schools (Anderson & López, 2017; Gunter, Grimaldi, Hall, & Serpieri, 2016). Leadership emerged as a powerful discourse (Gillies, 2013) proclaiming to lead teachers and schools to organisational and pedagogical development, to improve students' learning as well as to increase equity, social justice and inclusion in education (Ärlestig, Day, & Johansson, 2016; Waite & Bogotch, 2017). The earlier emphasis on the personality of individual leaders has given way to the idea of shared responsibility. Therewith, overlapping concepts such as "shared" or "distributed" leadership have gained prominence (Bolden, 2011). By involving teachers in leadership, the concept of distributed leadership promises to move away from hierarchical control and to distribute power and responsibility among the teaching staff (Gronn, 2002). Distributed leadership is related to an understanding of the school as a professional learning organisation, engaging teachers to develop their teaching and student learning in their school (Spillane, 2015).

Critical scholars argue that leadership approaches mainly rely on prescriptive and normative models instead of researching the messy practices and complex social relations in schools (Niesche,

2017). Lumby (2013) points out that the literature on distributed leadership largely neglects questions of power and how practices of distributed leadership shape power relations in schools. Furthermore, a critical perspective uncovers prescriptive leadership models as ahistorical, apolitical and functionalist, ignoring that leadership is an NPM strategy of governing at a distance (Wilkins & Gobby, 2021). Thus, from a critical sociologically informed perspective, the question arises of how the imperative of distributed leadership structures power relations in schools. Furthermore, understanding distributed leadership as a governing strategy asks for situating distributed leadership practices concerning its larger context. Increasingly, it is recognised that leadership practices are shaped by the institutional, socio-economic and political context (Ärlestig et al., 2016; Hallinger, 2018; Brauckmann, Pashiardis, & Ärlestig, 2020; Klein & Bronnert-Härle, 2020). This suggests that leadership policies and practices are shaped by their specific governing conditions, such as the degree of school autonomy or accountability mechanisms (Easley & Tulowitzki, 2016; Pashiardis & Brauckmann, 2018). Comparing leadership practices in eight countries, Moos, Krejsler, and Kofod (2008) suggested that leadership practices depend on the conditions of accountability: While "tight" accountability and performativity countries (such as the USA, UK, Canada, China, Australia) put pressure on headteachers to operate top-down, a "loose" governing regime (such as in the Scandinavian or German-speaking countries) leaves more room for manoeuvre to schools and thus for negotiations within school teams.

Critical leadership studies analyse leadership as politically constituted social practices shaped by power relations (Gobby, 2016). Headteachers are the concern of governmental activity because they

are approached as mediators and translators of government policies (ibid.). Distributed leadership emerges as a governing imperative that guides headteachers and teachers to act upon each other, aiming to change their practices in the school and the classroom (Gillies, 2013; Niesche, 2014). From this perspective, distributed leadership is, like other leadership models, related to the rationalities of NPM and is an instrument in supporting reform implementation (Fitzgerald & Gunter, 2008). It addresses teachers as autonomous, self-determined individuals to assume a moral agency and to engage in governing processes (Keddie, Gobby, & Wilkins, 2018). However, it puts headteachers and teachers "in an almost impossible position, caught between a leadership inspired imaginary of agential change and the need to implement reforms that have been centrally determined" (Hall, 2013, p. 270). It appeals to ideas of teachers' autonomous engagement, without taking into account the contradictions between the agency provided by distributed leadership in a managerial context and the high degree of autonomy that teachers enjoyed in pre-NPM conditions (Hall, Gunter, & Bragg, 2013, p. 471). In this perspective, distributive leadership is identified as a "pseudo-democratic" practice that seduces teachers with the idea of professional autonomy and less directive development, while in fact it secures their commitment to managerial agendas (Gunter, 2012; Hall, 2013; Niesche & Thomson, 2017). Distributed leadership is identified as a vital policy of the accountability era "as a means for absorbing the added pressure of accountability" (Holloway, 2021, p. 142).

These critical findings derive from Anglophone countries with high-stakes accountability, in which also teacher performance is regularly evaluated and assessed based on student test scores (ibid.) This raises the question of how distributed leadership is practised

under "loose" conditions of low-stakes accountability. How is distributed leadership practised if schools – and thus teachers – are not subjected to test-based accountability and frequent evaluation but are governed by bureaucratic procedures and professional guidance? Only a few studies have explored the effects of distributed leadership under loose governing conditions, such as in the German-speaking countries (Klein et al., 2019). This article contributes to the empirical analysis of leadership practices in the context of "loose" governing conditions with low-stakes accountability. The case under examination is located in a canton of Switzerland, where NPM reforms remoulded the bureaucratic-professional governance – however, without embarking into a managerial system like the one dominating the Anglophone school system (Wilkins, Jordi, Gobby, & Hangartner, 2019). How does the dispositive of distributed leadership unfold within the Swiss "loose" accountability governance?

Accountability conditions in Switzerland after NPM reforms of education

Today, Switzerland belongs, together with its neighbours, to those European countries with poorly instrumented, low-stakes accountability (Brauckmann, Thiel, Kuper, & Tarkian, 2015; Voisin & Maroy, 2018). This is somewhat surprising, as NPM was a dominant reform discourse in Swiss politics from the 1990s onward and education was one of the preeminent fields of discussion (Buschor, 1997). NPM initiatives propagated school autonomy by a shift from "input" to "output" control (ibid.). Nevertheless, NPM governing reforms (not only) in public education have remained fragmentary (Hangartner & Svaton, 2013). The regulation and governance of schools in Switzerland lie in the responsibility of the cantonal authorities. Consequently, the governing regimes differ between the

cantons and similar NPM reform discourses were followed by distinct policies. Reforms initiated school evaluations and inspection by specialised agencies and furthermore large-scale student testing and performance monitoring in some cantons (Quesel, Husfeldt, Landwehr, & Steiner, 2011). However, educational authorities largely restrained from sanctioning unsatisfying results by high-stakes accountability (Mahler & Quesel, 2015; SKBF, 2018). It is, for example, the exception rather than the rule that the cantonal and municipal authorities publish the results of external school evaluations (Landwehr, 2009). In the absence of a high-stakes accountability system with threatening sanctions, schools are governed by objectives for self-development, "best practice" peer learning, persuasion and advice (Hangartner & Svaton, 2015). Even though the governance system has been modernised, it still mainly corresponds to the bureaucratic-professional model with low-stakes accountability (Brauckmann et al., 2015; Voisin & Maroy, 2018).

Despite the dominance of the reform discourse on school autonomy, schools in a majority of cantons did not receive a substantial increase in autonomy. This means that they cannot decide independently on questions of financial resources or the distribution of subject lessons (Hangartner & Svaton, 2016). Instead, municipalities and schools receive room for manoeuvre to adapt given reforms to local conditions (Hangartner & Heinzer, 2016; Hangartner & Svaton, 2020). Nevertheless, headteachers today are a central concern of school governance: far beyond the responsibility for school organisation and management, headteachers are expected to drive school development by implementing reforms, improving teaching-learning conditions and transforming schools into learning organisations. In retrospect, of all the NPM reforms, the implementation of headteachers in schools

and the successive increase of their responsibilities have probably the most lasting effect. The growing importance of school leadership is reflected in a growing research field in Switzerland and the neighbouring German-speaking countries (Huber, 2016; Schwanenberg, Brauckmann, & Klein, 2020). Empirical surveys analyse the leadership attitudes of headteachers, their tasks or working hours (Gather Thurler, Kolly Ottiger, Losego, & Maulini, 2016; Windlinger, Warwas, & Hostettler, 2020). However, there is a lack of sociological studies that analyse how leadership shapes the social relations within school teams.

Methods

The insights of our contribution are based on two distinct ethnographic research projects that envisaged the social relations between headteachers and teachers in overall nine schools of the primary and lower secondary levels. While the first project focused on governing relations within and beyond schools, the second project is primarily concerned with the guidance of self-directed learning and asks about its analytical relationship to the (self-) governing of teachers. The first project studied how school autonomy policy is translated into governing practices in the canton of Bern. The project was scheduled in the context of a governance reform that provided municipalities more freedom concerning school organisation and leadership, accompanied by a new control process conducted by the cantonal school inspectors. Thus, the reform promised extended local autonomy paired with increased accountability. Four case studies were chosen, contrasting a reformed governance model that strengthens professional leadership by the position of municipal superintendent with traditional governance with lay school boards supervising the headteachers individually.

Our ethnographic research strategy followed the vertical case study (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2014) by traversing the hierarchical governing relations between schools, municipalities and cantonal inspectors vertically. In each case study, we focused on one school and explored the governing relations within the school and between the school and municipal and cantonal supervision bodies for two years. The headteachers were the central actors in the field, as they connected the school with both the municipal and the cantonal authorities.

The authors conducted the ethnographic research and focused on participant observation in meetings held in the municipal administrations, offices of school administrators, the teachers' room, or classrooms converted into meeting rooms. Most field visits tracked meetings of one or two hours; occasionally, we followed full-day or multi-day training sessions. In schools, we followed the interactions between teachers and headteachers in teacher assemblies, steering groups, working groups and school development events. We followed the headteachers in the headteachers' assemblies, the school board meetings, and their interactions with the cantonal inspectors. The documents involved in the meetings and the relevant governing regulations were collected and analysed.

Furthermore, formal interviews with key actors and informal ethnographic conversations were conducted. We focused on interactions related to questions of school development, school evaluation, the organisation and governance of schools. As far as possible, we followed the themes through their journey through the different institutions, e.g., from the headteacher conference to the municipal school board and back to the school, aiming to follow the discussions on the same issues in the different bodies. The research

opportunities and issues were shaped by the size, organisational form and specific themes in the four case studies.

Table 1.
Overview of fieldwork in the selected case study and the sum of visits in the four case studies conducted between 2011 to 2013*

	Discussed case study	Total of the four case-studies
Teachers/headteachers in the school	22	87
Headteachers' conference	10	46
Municipal governing bodies	25	65
Interactions with cantonal school inspector	8	24
Formal interviews	5	23

* Additional 35 field visits in two case studies focused on the interactions between the teachers engaged with special needs and inclusive education, which contributed to a dissertation focusing on the governance of inclusive schooling (Svaton 2017).

The handwritten field notes of the meetings were, with the partial consultation of the audio records, elaborated into detailed protocols. We analysed the observed practices, processes and relations within the multi-level governance system by systematically analysing distinctions and similarities between the case studies. Furthermore, we analysed the rationalities of the regulatory framework and traced the divergences between regulations and observed practices. We coded field protocols, transcribed interviews and documents, and recorded the sequential analysis of essential parts of the protocols in detailed analytical protocols. Central codes and related incidents were summarised in a comparative overview.

The second, ongoing, project studies autonomy-oriented classroom settings in four schools in the German-speaking part of Switzerland and in one school in the French-speaking part. This project researches the governmentality of self-directed learning by studying the articulation of technologies of guidance and self-governing practices. It focuses on the works of teachers, in the classroom and at school level and asks how the autonomy-oriented classroom settings and the (self-)guidance of teachers are interrelated. Thus, this recent project connects a new focus on students' self-direction with the former interest in school governing relations. Fieldwork in the four schools in the German-speaking part of Switzerland includes 350 hours of participant observation in classrooms, 75 hours of coaching interactions between teachers and students (half of them including the parents), 131 hours of teacher meetings and 50 hours of interviews. These schools enacted themselves as reform-oriented, innovative schools with individualised, autonomy-oriented classroom organisation. Nevertheless, we observed ambiguous relations between headteachers and teachers; in particular, in the public schools, we observed also acts of resistance of teachers and open conflicts between teachers and headteachers.

Theoretical perspective

Our research is informed by a practice theoretical approach (Reckwitz, 2002) and analyses governing interactions as social practices (Wilkinson & Kemmis, 2015; Hangartner, 2019b). Moreover, we analyse practices of distributed leadership from a governmentality perspective. With this notion, Foucault problematised the relations between domination and self-guidance as "conduct of conduct" (or *"conduire les conduits"* in the French original), and thereby, he played on the ambiguous meanings of the term conduct in French: the notion

refers to the guidance of others as well as to let oneself be conducted, to how one is conducted and to the way one behaves (Foucault, 2009, p. 193). By this, governmentality is a relational perspective on the techniques by which humans "'lead' others (…) and a way of behaving within a more or less open field of possibilities" (Foucault, 1982, pp. 789-790). From a governmentality perspective, distributed leadership is approached as governing practices, related to questions of power and subjectivation (Gillies, 2013; Wilkins & Gobby, 2021).

Results

The introduction of headteachers as school leaders initiated a sustainable change in the power relations in schools all over Switzerland. Before the NPM reforms, teachers with administrative duties held a senior position as *primus inter pares* in the team, but necessary decisions were taken at the weekly teachers' assembly. Teachers in pre-NPM times enjoyed a high degree of autonomy in their daily work, despite their double subordination under the authority of cantonal inspectors and local school boards' control (Rothen, 2015). The introduction of headteachers transferred teachers' supervision into the school's internal relations. Therewith, it transformed the former egalitarian-democratic culture in teacher teams into a hierarchal organisation. The school heads subsequently received increasing competencies by taking over responsibilities both from local school boards and cantonal inspectorates (Hangartner & Svaton, 2014). Headteachers are now responsible for pedagogical leadership and operational management. They are superior to teachers, and they are responsible for pushing teachers to adapt their teaching to reform demands. The hierarchy installed in schools, however, has remained flat; there is usually no intermediate level of hierarchy between the

headteacher and the teaching staff.[1] Rather than delegating formal authority to superior teachers, distributed leadership requires teachers to engage in school development.

In a "loose" low-stakes framework, the accountability relation between headteachers and teachers within schools is also weak. Headteachers today frequently visit teachers' classrooms once a year or less and give feedback on their teaching practice. However, no high-stakes accountability instruments are used to govern teachers, such as frequent standards-based evaluation of teachers, the measurement of teacher performance related to students' test results or merit pay (Holloway, 2021). Headteachers in practice have only a few sanction options at hand if teachers do not meet up-to-date pedagogical standards or neglect duties outside the classroom. Furthermore, most headteachers are only part-time engaged in this function and are also busy teaching in the usually small or mid-sized schools they direct (Windlinger & Hostettler, 2014). Within limited time resources available, heads are mainly preoccupied with administrative duties, leaving the guidance of teachers as an additional burden (Brauckmann & Schwarz, 2015; Windlinger & Hostettler, 2014). Thus, despite the formal hierarchisation of school teams, the headteachers' position remains precarious; their formal position of authority is undermined by a lack of resources, sanction instruments and an ambiguous status both as superior and as a colleague. These diffuse power relations are accentuated by the increasing teacher shortage of the last decade, which puts experienced teachers in a powerful position. The preeminent field of headteachers' influence consists of their lead in

[1] Big schools, which for example include several buildings, may be organized in teams, which have a team leader. These leaders may have additional responsibilities; however, they are not superiors to their colleagues.

hiring new teachers and administrative and organisational practices, by which they guide teachers. Similar to neighbouring Germany, there is a contradiction between the narratives of school improvement initiated by leadership and headteachers' limited resources and decision power (Klein & Bronnert-Härle, 2020).

Between their formal position as school leaders, their restricted resources and the tradition of personal autonomy for teachers, headteachers rely on their pervasive power and often use "soft leadership", avoiding open conflict and aiming at consensus and harmony within the teaching team (Perrenoud & Tulowitzki, 2021; Hangartner 2019a). Accordingly, leadership is participative and involves teachers (ibid.). In our two research projects, we observed distributed leadership in different forms: In the bigger schools (such as the school discussed later) a so-called "steering committee", consisting of approximately five to seven teachers, supports and advises the headteacher on questions of school development, yet without having formal decision power. It is common for school leaders to involve the whole team in school development strategies. Important pedagogical and organisational questions are discussed with the entire team and possibly also decided together. Beyond, teachers are demanded to cooperate in class- and subject-related groups or in the whole school team to reflect on and improve their pedagogical practices. Furthermore, a few teachers hold the responsibility for specific subjects, such as ICT, and are involved in making school strategies.

The headteachers in our case studies strived to develop their schools together with the teaching staff. With one exception, the headteachers in our case study schools identified with the direction of reforms given by the cantonal ministry and beyond strived to be ahead of pedagogic trends such as inclusive education or individualised

teaching and self-directed classroom settings. However, the headteachers' intentions to transform the school were slowed down by a few experienced teachers. These teachers positioned themselves critically against (distributed) leadership in their schools. A qualitative study in the French-speaking part of Switzerland reports ambivalent stances of both headteachers and teachers on distributed leadership; the actors experience it as an "uncertain transaction", leaving both teachers and headteachers with limited influence (Progin & Olivier, 2018). In the following, we discuss such an uncertain transaction between headteachers and teachers from our ethnographic fieldwork.

An ethnographic account of distributed leadership at a school development workshop

We analyse the tensions that the dispositive of distributive leadership generates between the headteachers and the teaching staff at the example of a school development workshop in a primary school. We selected this school to zoom into the micropolitics of power because the two headteachers showed a dedicated commitment to teacher autonomy and democratic decision-making at their school. Furthermore, we selected this example because questions of power and autonomy were publicly addressed by the school team. Although the example is already some years old, it has lost none of its actuality: While school governance was restructured in the run-up of our study, it has remained unchanged since then.[2] The later study accordingly confirms the ambiguous power relations between teachers and headteachers. While at first sight, the disputes look like being determined by personal characters involved, the repetition of similar

[2] see Volksschulgesetz Kanton Bern, Art. 36, 43, 44; https://www.belex.sites.be.ch/frontend/versions/1165 (29.04.2022)

conflict lines, however, points to subjacent structural dimensions. In contrast to other case studies, the discussed example does not involve personal criticism against the persons of the headteachers. The absence of personal conflicts makes the example well suited to analyse the structural ambiguities between distributed leadership and teacher autonomy.

The primary school lies in a middle-class, quiet neighbourhood and consists of twelve classes and thirty, primarily female, teachers. Lisa and Patricia are both in their forties and share the 60%-job of the headteacher.[3] They both have been working at the school as committed teachers for a long time. Lisa is an engaged unionist and politically engaged for teacher autonomy and democratic governance of schools. From this perspective, she strongly disapproves the increasing hierarchisation of school relations that she has witnessed during her professional career. Unlike Lisa's joy at fervent arguing, Patricia remains calm and restrained even in heated discussions and often takes a mediating and caring position. In line with their democratic understanding of headship, the two women organised a two-day workshop with the whole team to determine the goals of the new school programme. It was the second programme that this school created, and like the first one, it was compiled in a participatory manner. A legacy of the first programme was the initiation of a group called "steering committee", by which a small group of teachers supported the headteachers and participated in their decisions.

The school programme is a self-governing instrument that shall initiate and support school development (Heinrich & Kussau, 2016);

[3] Swiss educational scholars analyse the sharing of headteachers' tasks among two or three persons as «shared leadership» (Fuchs & Wyss, 2016; Kohlstock & Buschor, 2018).

the tool was introduced in many Swiss cantons during NPM reforms (Kohlstock, 2013). In the canton of Bern, where the school is located, both the programme's goals and implementation are annually controlled by the cantonal school inspectors; in addition, the self-governing instrument has to be authorised by the local school board (Hangartner & Svaton, 2015). However, it lies in the responsibility of the headteachers, how they involve teachers in creating the programme.

The workshop marked the beginning of our fieldwork, as we met with the whole team for the first time. Both of us participated in the workshop, took fieldnotes and audio-recorded some of the discussions partly. The following examination of the workshop first addresses the positioning of the headteachers within the team, then analyses how questions of leadership, power and autonomy were debated and finally comments on the workshop's results. Based on these discussions, we conclude how governing and self-governing practices are articulated at this school and what these reflect on the dispositive of distributive leadership.

Ambiguous positioning as headteachers and team members

The organisation of the workshop gives a first impression of how the headteachers understand and shape the governing relations within the school: Lisa and Patricia involved the whole teaching staff in the workshop to set the development objectives for the next four years jointly. They delegated the moderation of the workshop to a consultant from the University of Teacher Education, while they themselves participated as team members in the workshop. The moderator opened the workshop with a presentation about the school programme as an instrument of both school development and accountability. Then, teachers were asked to assess the impact of the

last school programme and the steering committee's work. After a short and positive evaluation, the two days were used for collecting ideas and for detailing the objectives and content of the new school programme. In between, teachers were invited to express their priorities and by doing so to decide on the objectives that are included in the school programme.

During the two days, the headteachers stood out with their engagements in plenum discussions. They usually took over the moderation when participating in a working group and ensured that the discussion produced concrete results. During the breaks and at the end of the first day, they decided together with the consultant on how to proceed the workshop. During discussions, the two women participated with their opinions as teachers but sometimes positioned themselves as headteachers, providing background information that their colleagues did not have. Thus, the workshop was organised in a participatory manner by involving all teachers in the discussions and the decisions about the programme's content. However, precisely because the headteachers did not lead the workshop but participated as team members, they exercised a decisive influence: By their engagement in discussions, their superior knowledge and their taking over of responsibility, the two headteachers took a unique role, which reflects on their ambiguous standing as being both a headteacher and a teacher at the school.

Controversial discussions about leadership and teacher autonomy

On the first day, a new teacher in the team addressed questions of leadership, autonomy and power twice in public. The first incidence happened during the review of the first school programme and the steering committee's work. The steering group was positively assessed: the involved teachers characterised the work as exciting, and

both the headteachers and the team appreciated the group's work as helpful. Only Rose, who had only recently joined the team after having worked at a school abroad, threw a critical statement in the round: by engaging a steering committee, the headteachers led the team in a direction that was already pre-defined; this would be no longer a grassroots democracy. This short critical voice remained unanswered; shortly afterwards, however, Rose initiated a controversial discussion on leadership by addressing questions of power and autonomy. Asked to reflect on shared values at the school, Rose warned her colleagues about the developments she experienced at the school abroad:

> *"That school was organised hierarchically with department leaders and headteachers. At the beginning, I was shocked to realise that the headteacher defined the pedagogical standards and that I had to execute it. I had to adapt, and I was restricted in my individuality. Do we really want to go in this direction?" The moderator seems to be somewhat irritated about the unexpected intervention; she comments that the statement discloses fears and then remarks, that schools which can position themselves with an unmistakable profile would have a comparative advantage in their marketing. Christine, a teacher engaged in the steering committee, now firmly reacts to Rose's statement: "We, teachers, decide, not the headteachers". The moderator again makes a corrective comment, saying that a successful organisation is confronted by the question of how much individual freedom it allows teachers. Then, headteacher Lisa interferes and supports Rose's criticism with the argument that "the ministry indeed fosters the hierarchisation of schools, for example by introducing superintendents directing the headteachers. But we vehemently oppose this development". Finally, Patricia closes the controversy by saying in her usual soft voice "in our school, we go another way" – leaving unsaid what she means by it.*
>
> *(Shortened and revised extracts of field notes, 15.10.2011)*

The outsiders' perspective on distributed leadership, power and autonomy provokes vehement rejection and brings controversial understandings of autonomy to the fore. Rose and the moderator, even though from opposing standpoints, address the "autonomous school" as a hierarchical organisation: Rose, based on her experiences within a managerial context, is criticising distributed leadership for curtailing teacher autonomy and for securing teacher commitment to reforms that have been externally determined (Hall, 2013). In contrast, the consultant reproduces the NPM discourse on school autonomy with schools marketing customers in quasi-markets; although public schools in Switzerland did not receive the amount of autonomy she invokes, but rather, pupils are still distributed to nearby schools by local school boards.

The managerial framework suggested both by Rose, and the consultant is rejected by those team members in leading positions: Christine's insistence that teachers decide in the school appeals to the autonomy teachers enjoyed in the past, when hierarchies in school teams were absent and decisions were taken at the teacher assembly. Headteacher Lisa positions herself as part of the team and criticises the ministry for hierarchising governing relations on the municipal level. Patricia exempts the school from the predicted negative development; with the "we" she invokes the collective identity of the staff members that together choose another route. To our surprise, the striking distinction between the managerial orientation of the moderator and the identification of the headteachers with the former egalitarian school organisation did not grow into an open discussion during the workshop.

Decision-making and results

The teachers' discussions and working in small groups on the content of the new school programme resulted in the following priority list of objectives:

1. School internal communication
2. Concept "continuing education"
3. Project week (a week with a special programme for the whole school)
4. Concept "integration" [4]
5. Implementation of the new curriculum (*Lehrplan 21*)[5]
6. Concept "vulnerability"

At first sight, this participative process which involved democratic decision-taking seems to reflect the priorities of the teaching staff. However, our analysis identified only Nr 1 and Nr. 3 as genuine concerns of the teacher team, which was already apparent during the workshop's engaged discussion. As our fieldwork continued, we learnt that the other four priorities were, in fact, policies put on the agenda by the authorities: by the ministry (Nr. 2, Nr. 5), by the municipality according to the general guidelines of the ministry (Nr. 4) and by the municipal headteachers' conference (Nr. 6). Thus, although the objectives were defined during a participative process, the school programme includes only two subjects which were chosen by the teachers themselves, while the majority of goals were defined by the authorities. These subjects were partly put on the list by the

[4] «Integration» is the dominant term concerning inclusion policy used in Switzerland (Svaton, 2017).

[5] This is the first intercantonal curricula of the German-speaking cantons, which is part of a broader project to harmonise public schooling (https://www.lehrplan21.ch/; access: 11.04.2022).

headteachers as leftovers from the last school programme or were brought in, again by the headteachers, during the discussion.

Even though these external goals were not openly assigned as obligatory, they survived the joint discussions and evaluations, by which the priority list underwent several transformations. As the workshop constituted the beginning of our fieldwork and our attention was focused on getting to know the teachers, the atmosphere at the school and the character of the relations, it might well be that we did overlook strategies that kept the mandatory policies on the list. Interestingly, however, possible manipulations to transform external demands into the school's priorities were so subtle and smooth that they escaped the attention of us observers and did not provoke open resistance by team members.

Discussion

The participative workshop to outline a school programme emerges as an outstanding occasion where self-governing practices are intertwined with governing technologies (Heinrich & Kussau, 2016). The imperative to develop a school programme makes teams responsible for changing their practices. Thereby, with its participatory elaboration, the school programme enacts the objectives and development plans as objectives of the school team. As the development direction is primarily pre-defined by mandatory policies, recommendations or general trends, the school programme is centrally an instrument to transform top-down steering into self-guidance of the school (Hangartner & Svaton, 2020).

However, the transformation of governing policies into self-direction did not work out straightforwardly. Some teachers at the school responded to the governmentality of the school programme with counter-conduct against the demanded ways of how they should

govern themselves and their pupils (Demetriou, 2016). During the workshop, we observed how some teachers disregarded the recommendation of the external moderator on how to design projects, but they continued to plan teaching projects as they were used to doing it. While teachers did not openly oppose the objectives of the school programme during the workshop, we could observe during the following fieldwork how teachers reacted with diverse strategies of resistance against the mandatory reform objectives. Patricia informed the teachers during a conference that the headteachers would start to control the fulfilment of the requirements of the continuing education concept, she received heated reactions. Teachers bemoaned their heavy workload and asked the headteachers to relieve teachers from this obligation. On this occasion, Patricia and Lisa came under pressure and had to defend their intention to control whether teachers met the ministerial requirements and no longer wanted to accept that teachers disregarded the orders. A second example: At another teacher conference, the headteachers reprimanded the disregard of the vulnerability concept and admonished teachers to discuss the pupils, who might be exposed to harm, as demanded. Alternatively, to mention a third example: the municipal integration concept, which had already been postponed from the former school programme, was again not tackled during the fieldwork period. In conversations, teachers questioned the reform, arguing that although they supported the aims of inclusive education, they could not implement the expected changes due to the lack of resources. Terhart (2013) identifies this argument as the main reason why (German) teachers tend to resist reforms that demand to change their teaching practices.

In an interview at the end of our fieldwork, Lisa reflected on why the pedagogical development of the school team was not advancing in the way that she intended:

> *At the moment, our team seems to be sluggish, maybe tired. If somebody is needed to take the initiative and do some extra work, you have to wait endlessly, and nobody is willing to engage for it. (…) We are better at team development than in pedagogical development. I hope the development of teaching will be the priority of the next school programme. That would be related to inclusive education questions, individualised learning and learning landscapes, and diversity and heterogeneity. These trends are a huge challenge for most of our teachers. I think these are the core issues. I wish that we would dig deeper into these pedagogical issues. (Interview Lisa, 22.04.2013)*

In this interview, Lisa seems to be somewhat disillusioned and disappointed about the reluctance of her team to engage in projects which extend the daily work in the classroom. By identifying with teachers' perspectives, she addresses the engagement to develop school practices as "extra work" and not as an ordinary part of today's teachers' duties (as the ministry does). In line with it, she does not classify the perceived reluctance as resistance but interprets it as tiredness. By turning her interpretation reflexively, it could be approached as her disillusion and tiredness about the need to motivate and push her teachers, by which she seems to run into the void. Her stance on teacher autonomy is related to her commitment to engaging for social justice and an inclusive school (Woods & Roberts, 2016). As a headteacher, however, she has to mediate between governing policies, the self-governing school and teachers' needs. Thereby, she is put in a position where she is torn between governing policies, her personal pedagogical visions, teacher resistance and her support of teacher autonomy.

Conclusion

Whose autonomy and whose power are brought to the fore by the dispositive of distributed leadership introduced in a "loose" governing context? Under low-stakes accountability conditions, distributed leadership emerges as an important "soft" governing instrument to activate teachers' engagement for the development of their schools and the improvement of their teaching practices (Perrenoud & Tulowitzki, 2021). In contrast to the widespread depiction as a democratisation of leadership, the imperative of distributed leadership in Switzerland mirrors the hierarchisation of power relations among teachers in public schools. Paradoxically, distributed leadership emphasises the agential power of teachers that has only been challenged by NPM reforms. Before, teachers had a great deal of autonomy in practice and took main decisions at the teacher assembly. Distributed leadership is now reformulating teacher agency within hierarchical power relations. Similarly, to a managerial context, distributed leadership emerges as a self-governing instrument to implement reforms that are largely defined by educational policies (Hall, 2013). Correspondingly, teacher autonomy in the sense of the freedom of individual teachers in what they do in "their" classroom is weakened even under "loose" governing conditions: teachers today are demanded to open their classroom doors and to cooperatively develop their practices.

However, the low-stakes accountability conditions produce an opaque field in which power relations in schools are enacted. The superficial proximity of the agency addressed by distributed leadership to traditional teacher autonomy constitutes a contested terrain: Teachers may experience their engagement in processes of distributed leadership as autonomy. Other teachers may perceive the

requested self-transformation as an expression of mistrust. Even in the absence of high-stakes ac-countability, teachers may perceive distributed leadership as a means to harness their willingness to adopt reforms and an increasing workload (Lumby, 2013). In response, teachers may react with resistance against the demand for self-governed transformation. The weak accountability conditions that dispense with regular evaluations and measures of teaching success leave opportunities for passive and active resistance and to maintain traditional routines.

Headteachers are positioned amidst contradictious expectations: they are demanded to activate their teachers to engage in reforms and their self-transformation, while they should care for their teachers and protect them from work intensification. If headteachers aim at initiating changes at their schools, they are dependent on the support and loyalty of teachers. In times of widespread teacher shortage (such as currently in Switzerland), the position of teachers in this bargaining relationship is strengthened. Teachers may use the blurred space between distributed leadership and traditional teacher autonomy – to turn it in their favour. Teachers who do not comply with reforms are (still) able to adopt the demands without initiating significant changes in their teaching (Terhart, 2013). However, it is questionable whether the power to immunise against reforms still deserves to be named teacher autonomy. Teachers' silent resistance against the superfluous evocation of teacher leadership raises the question of how a counter-conduct of teachers, as a critical "art of not to be governed like that and at that cost" (Foucault, 2007, p. 45), could look like. Turning the perspective, it asks how a democratically inspired approach to distributed leadership and school autonomy

could be formed in that it takes the agency and autonomy of teachers seriously.

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