

Chapter 12

The Network of Erfurt Schools (NES): Professionalization of School Actors and School Development Through School, School Supervisory Authority, and University Cooperation in Germany



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Introduction

This chapter evaluates the effectiveness of a school network program in Erfurt, Thuringia, Germany, called the Network of Erfurt Schools (NES), which was developed in 2006 to promote cooperation between the Erfurt School Supervisory Authority, schools, and universities (Huber & Schneider, 2009, 2013). For the latter, Professor Stephan Huber's research group at the University of Erfurt was involved. NES was originally launched as a qualification and support offer for educational leaders in self-responsible schools, in which 14 schools in the city and region of Erfurt were involved.

School supervisory authority participation: The idea and initiative for the partnership triad came from the local School Supervisory Authority. One of their tasks was to support school leadership and schools effectively. There were two streams of development. The first was in the field of staff and leadership development, e.g., identifying individuals with leadership potential at an early stage and supporting them. The second was in the field of supporting school and quality development, e.g., organizing and supporting regional school development networks and coordinating local education management initiatives, etc.

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University participation: At the time, Huber's research group was involved in research and knowledge transfer in the areas of leadership/management, quality management, human resource management, and in particular human resource development. The beneficiary target groups were individual actors and institutions in the field of education, especially executives, in the entire German-speaking, European and non-European area. In addition to its research and development mandate, Huber's research group sees itself as a service facility for teachers, school management, school administrators, cantons, ministries, and institutions that deal with the quality and development of educational facilities. In the sense of "Responsible Science" (in work in practice, with practice and for practice), the team works on thematically broad projects that are highly relevant to science, educational practice, and educational policy.

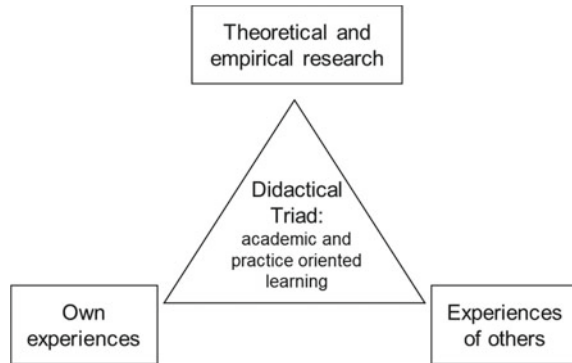
School participation: Schools had to apply to participate in the network. NES's aim was to contribute to the professionalization of school actors, particularly educational leaders, and to the development of school organizations regarding school development through cooperation at the local level. The school leaders and the members of their teams are the target group of the qualification offer. In this way, the course takes account of the principle of cooperative leadership and guarantees the transfer of what has been learned into practice.

Overall, NES conducts professional development and offers exchange opportunities. In this network, the following forms of cooperation were promoted: cooperation within the school, cooperative school management, cooperation between schools, and cooperation with other institutions within and outside the school system. The initial focus was on the professional development opportunities organized as part of the joint project. However, during the project, the focus increasingly shifted to cooperation between schools in various areas to develop the quality of professional work in schools. After five years, NES officially concluded in 2010. Although the formal framework ceased to exist, various cooperative relationships between the schools involved remain, and the school-university partnership has a long-term benefit, as a follow-up survey shows. Hence, it may be fairly stated that the network still exists as a self-managed cooperation project. In the following section, the conceptual features of the qualification and support offer are presented, and the course of the project is described.

Objectives

NES aimed to support both school management and teachers in tackling the new tasks and challenges that arise regarding school self-responsibility. The focus was on aspects of school governance and on improving the quality of work in schools, especially teaching and learning. Thus, the network was initially consistently designed

Fig. 12.1 Didactical triad of the Network of Erfurt Schools (NES)



to support school leaders and teachers interested in school quality and school development in building and expanding their competencies in systematic school development. This aim was to enable the participants to lead development processes in their schools in a more targeted, systematic, and effective way and to design these processes more consciously for personal responsibility, based on the knowledge from theoretical and empirical research, the comparison with their own experiences, and in exchange with the experiences of others (see Fig. 12.1).

Hence, fundamental prerequisites for adult learning could be considered. Teacher and school leaders, as adult learners in general, bring their personal and professional experiences, their knowledge, and their way of seeing themselves to bear in the learning process to a high degree. In contrast to children, for whom learning something new takes precedence, adults base their learning needs on developing what they already know (see Knowles, 1980; Siebert, 1996). Adult learners select what they learn, they filter information, consciously or subconsciously. Thereby, they proceed in a way that is much more problem-oriented than theme-centered, and the effects of learning are more sustainable when there is the possibility to apply in practice what they have learned.

According to Gruber (2000), gaining experience in professional competencies means learning in complex application-relevant and practice-relevant situations (see also Joyce & Showers, 1980; Kolb, 1984). New competencies are mostly gained through practice followed by feedback and reflection. However, sufficient theoretical foundations should be imparted as well so that a reflection of practice beyond the well-worn subjective everyday life theories can take place (see Fig. 12.2; Huber, 2011, 2013a, b). Adults expect that the knowledge and understanding gained are tools that can be applied in specific and extremely complex work situations, with as little loss due to the transfer as possible.

The reality and the experiences of the participants, their needs, and problems, should be the starting point and the point of reference for the selection of content and methods applied. The knowledge that cannot be made use of is called “inert knowledge” (Renkl, 1996; Whitehead, 1929).

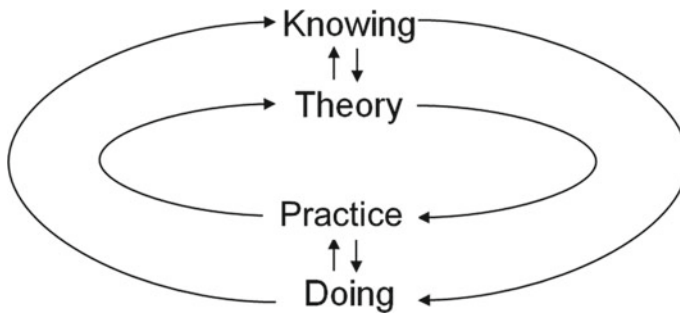


Fig. 12.2 From theory to practice, from knowing to doing (Huber, 2011, 2013a, b)

For the 14 participating schools in and around the city of Erfurt, qualification events took place in the network, which were oriented toward the central topics of school quality, school development, and school management concerning educational policy and school-related issues. To facilitate the knowledge transfer acquired in the qualification, and to ensure the sustainability of using the extended competencies in the school practice, collegial networking was stimulated and made possible by the network. The university and School Supervisory Authority partners offered further training events and saw themselves playing the role of cooperation mediators, cooperation promoters, and cooperation supporters.

One advantage of cooperation between schools is that solutions to similar challenges can be developed jointly within the framework of the extended form of self-responsibility (Huber, 2014, 2015a, 2018, 2020a; Huber & Koszuta, 2021; Huber et al., 2012, 2017, 2019, 2020a, b; Huber & Wolfram, 2014). This can lead to a reduction in the workload for schools. As various experiences and perspectives contribute to the dialogue, resources for options of action strategies emerge, which can be used in the work processes of the individual schools. The solutions developed cooperatively are potentially of a different quality compared to the sum of individual performances. By working in groups, feedback possibilities were offered to the participants.

Systematic cooperation also stimulates new knowledge development, which is subsequently shared and incorporated into the practice of the profession. Adding to individual learning, cooperation also promotes organizational learning. Ultimately, cooperation should positively affect the social climate in the participating schools. By creating a positive attitude toward cooperation at the individual level, a “culture” can also grow at the school community level in which cooperation is both a goal and a method. Furthermore, cooperation between schools can promote a culture of cooperation within a school (i.e., among school management, teachers, and pupils). Obstacles to cooperation in the individual school, which may arise due to differences in the organizational structures or cultures of the individual schools, can be overcome more easily through cooperation among schools.

Notably, the individual events in NES considered the following three principles (Huber, 2010, 2011):

- Demand orientation: The topics that are the focus of the events are worked on in close collaboration for a prolonged time. These topics are determined by schools and are flexible in advance. Under this thematic umbrella, the individual school formulates its focus that it would like to work on.
- Application orientation: In all events, the experiences of the participants and their schools are consistently considered and used. The participants are given time for individual exchange within the school team and exchange with teams from other schools or school types. This deliberately creates opportunities for improved transfer to the schools.
- Effectiveness and sustainability: To increase effectiveness and achieve sustainability, practical support and assistance are offered to the schools. Various support services are explicitly recommended to the school teams of the individual schools; for example, those of the Thuringian Ministry of Education and Cultural Affairs, the Erfurt School Supervisory Authority, the Thuringian Institute for Teacher Training, Curriculum Development and Media (Thillm), and external support services. Thus, the network concept is also consistently pursued in this area.

Target Group

Since a single person cannot initiate the steering processes at a school, the project involved senior and middle school leaders across each setting. The 14 schools involved in the project were two primary schools, five comprehensive secondary schools, and seven vocational schools. Furthermore, the individual schools each participated with a school team comprising two to three people, including the principal, their deputy, and other members of the principal's office. Alternatively, representatives of the existing coordination committees or steering groups for school development at the schools were involved. However, the size and composition of the school team opened the possibility of jointly finding solutions for the school and planning their implementation during the events. This promoted both transfer and sustainability.

The school participating in NES, with self-responsibility, decided the concrete composition of the school teams. The team composition during the project could only be changed in justified individual cases. At the request of some schools, other teaching staff members at the school were also included if their functions or experiences for the respective thematic event were assessed as meaningful and useful. For example, a colleague who controlled public relations at the school also participated in an event on public relations. Here, a place of learning was created for potential future managers, where they could gain insight into the work and area of responsibility of the school management.

Right from the start, there was a focus on participant orientation. As experts in their educational practice, teaching staff contributed their wealth of knowledge and skills and networked with the other participants. These included national and international lecturers from educational practice, educational policy and administration, educational research, and support systems. Staff members:

- get to know the international and national social (mega) trends and development tendencies in the field of education
- get to know current developments in management, leadership, and governance
- get to know scientific (theoretical and empirical) models of educational quality and educational innovation and know about their successful and practical implementation in everyday working life
- expand and deepen competencies (knowledge, skills, and abilities) in concrete fields of action of management and leadership as needed by personal further training planning
- systematically analyze their own professional practice and the overall strategy for the management and development of their educational organization to work out concrete development steps that can be implemented in practice as needed
- manage individual work needs (analysis and strategy work on their own organization and leadership role) as well as case work in a scientific project and use this “action research” as a specialization for their own professionalization and further development of their organization
- deal with new or already experienced professional requirements for managers in a self-assessment; the Competency Profile School Management (CPSM)
- learn different procedures for institution-related analysis, e.g., B. school barometer plus and strategic planning, e.g., B. ISO strategy—school development in the balance of Innovate, Sustain, Optimize (Huber, 2021)
- network with representatives from other educational organizations and areas, acquiring in-depth knowledge and skills for the systematic dialogue with other participants, lecturers, and speakers, in job shadowing, coaching, and mentoring talks.

Although participating in each of NES’s meetings was voluntary, the schools participated in all events to appropriately exchange the knowledge acquired in their own schools and to present the results of their work both internally and externally.

Implementation of Multiple Learning Approaches in NES

The different typical learning occasions of effective further education and training (Huber, 2011, 2013a, b; Huber & Schneider, 2022), such as courses, self-study, feedback, collegial exchange, concrete experiences, reflection, and planning, were the conceptual cornerstones in NES (see Fig. 4; Huber, 2011, 2013a, b) and are captured in Fig. 12.3.

The following list describes the details of the elements in Fig. 12.3:

- Courses (external/in-house). Course formats are part of the basic methods of professional development. Used innovatively, they consider that “learning” to be modifying one’s patterns of behavior and thinking is to be comprehended as inspiration and information, reflection and exchange, experiment and realization.
- Self-study (textbooks/software). In self-study methods, the respective topics of the courses are prepared and explored. The study material should be up to date, mirror

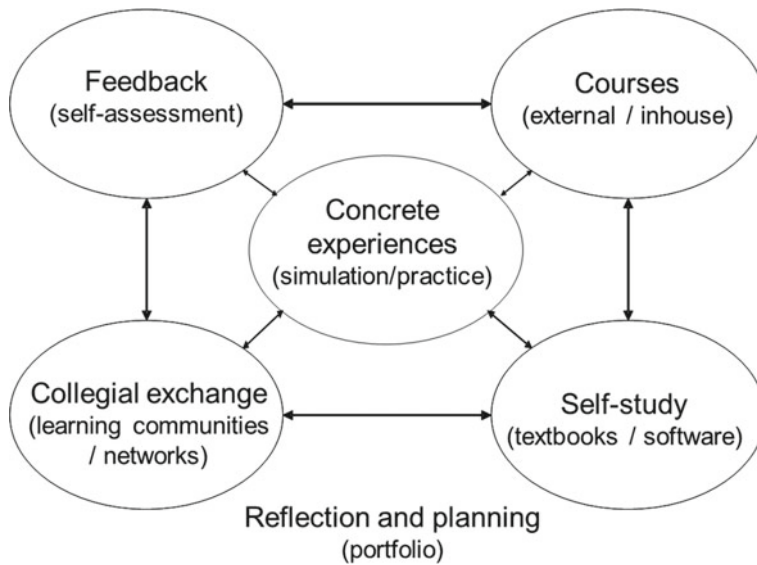


Fig. 12.3 Multiple learning approaches (Huber, 2011, 2013a, b)

the state of the art of academic discourse and comprise authentic documents taken from practice, and provide the participants with basic and background knowledge, with practical transfer support.

- Concrete experiences (simulation/practice). Of course, practice is always the starting point and goal of professional development programs, particularly when they are needs-oriented and practice-oriented, but it is also a very interesting learning place. The idea is that the real working context as clinical faculty alone comprises the appropriate complexity and authenticity necessary to lead to adequate learning processes. Working on individual projects, classroom observations, and shadowing and mentoring provide the opportunity to work on complex problems taken from practice.
- Collegial exchange (learning communities/networks). Professional learning communities and networks are central components in situated learning opportunities and provide chances for an intensive reflection on one's actions and behavior patterns. By that, learners are likely to start from their cognition and beliefs, which control their behavior patterns, and from their subjective theories, then modify their ways of acting accordingly. If professionals are integrated in learning communities and networks outside their own schools, there is a higher possibility to widen their view and, thus, change processes are supported (see Little, 2002; Erickson et al., 2005, both cited in Gräsel et al., 2006).
- Reflection and planning (portfolio). To use all learning opportunities, reflecting upon them seems to be crucial. Such reflection can take place before participation in professional development (to choose the right opportunities or to sharpen the individual needs) as well as after it (to modify one's conceptualizations). At the beginning of a program, the participants often start a portfolio. The portfolio is

suitable to combine teaching and learning with self-evaluation. This documents the development process and supports the individual's professional development planning.

- Feedback (self-assessment). Most professional development programs—particularly if they are linked—emphasize transfer, reflection, and the exchange of what has been learnt with one's colleagues. Application orientation and action orientation are central to achieving the sustainability desired or required. One aspect, however, is missing, which is the part of assessment-based feedback. This must not be underestimated as an important learning approach. It is highly recommended that participants go through self-assessment for an individual potential analysis to receive feedback on relevant requirement areas and dimensions. Formatively used, this provides a needs assessment as a good start for planning professional development. If done in the right way, it can have a very strong impact on the motivation for learning, too, not only on the content.

From these multiple learning approaches, various qualification formats for the school–university partnership were derived. These are as follows:

- Training events or thematic plenary events (as half-day or full-day events)
- Working groups
- Participation in international education conferences
- Literature and working materials for self-study
- Learning location practice/school (in the school team)
- Collegial consultations, coaching, and moderation
- Discussion rounds with different personalities (fireside evenings)
- Job shadowing
- Knowledge management (instead of a portfolio): a virtual learning environment as a support
- Self-assessment and feedback through evaluation.

Through the different formats, the acquired knowledge can be systematically used for one's own professionalization alongside quality assurance and development in one's own school. These are briefly described below.

Training Events or Thematic Plenary Events

Within the framework of a kick-off event for the needs analysis, the participants were allowed to communicate their current qualification needs. In the kick-off event, the content of the further full- or half-day events and the further qualification formats were discussed. On various topics (e.g., teaching development, self-evaluation, team development, etc.), the schools set their individual focus on which area they worked on for the duration of the school year.

Further training events were spread over at least four days throughout the year and were structured as follows:

- Reflection on the work phases in the school (experiences from the trial phase, dealing with possible solutions, support offers and their use, and open or newly arising questions)
- Collection of questions from the schools
- Treatment of topics in a differentiated form (e.g., theoretical input, group work, collegial exchange, and exercises)
- Development of solution approaches by the school teams (measures for the trial phase in the school).

The topics of the training events can be divided according to their relation to different areas in schools and the school system:

- School Systems Development:
 - Thuringian development project “Self-responsible school”
- School Management and Leadership:
 - School quality–School development–School management
 - Spreading of leadership responsibility, cooperative leadership, and steering group work
 - Dealing with difficult situations in personnel management: dilemmas, areas of tension, frustration, and motivation in the teaching staff
 - Evaluation: the practice of stocktaking and self-evaluation
 - Public relations
- Human Resources:
 - Project management
 - Human resource development and the effectiveness of training
 - Team development
 - Time management and work organization
 - In-service training for teachers in schools (training concepts, conditions for success, sustainability, and teacher motivation)
 - Cooperation
 - Collegial advice
- Learning and Teaching Environment:
 - Methods studio: learning, teaching, and moderation methods
 - Integration of pupils with learning disabilities/community teaching
 - Student motivation: how to motivate students
 - Pupil assessment systems, learning objective monitoring, and competence assessment (concept of competence)
 - Catalog of norms and values/behavior in a good school/code of conduct
 - Violence/sanctions/denial of school/rules

- Professionalization: Feedback
 - Online-based self-assessment and feedback through competence profile school management (CPSM).

Working Groups

The participants were encouraged to get together in working groups and to work on individual topics in greater depth according to their interests and/or current needs. The composition of the working groups was decided on a self-responsible basis across schools and school types, and their organization was autonomous. How many working groups and for how long a participant worked was decided by the participants in consultation with their school team. The members of a school team could also divide themselves among the working groups or work together in one group. The working groups worked both in time slots provided for this purpose during the training events and between training events on self-organized dates. The working groups, if they wished, could receive support from NES's initiators and organizers in the form of materials, moderation, etc. The working groups existed until they decided to dissolve because they had achieved their goals and continued existence was no longer necessary.

The feedback on the working groups' work to the entire plenum took place regularly via short reports on the respective work status and a detailed presentation of the work results.

In NES, there were working groups on the following topics:

- School profile, mission statement, and school program
- Team development and independent teacher teams
- School sponsoring, public relations, and cooperation
- Staff management: appraisal interviews
- School-specific curricula and methods curricula.

In the beginning, the working groups' meetings took place within the framework of the all-day training events (to which all schools or school teams were invited). After an introductory phase, they were increasingly organized on their own responsibility, independently of the training events. At the request of the participants, however, these meetings were integrated into the training events again after some time because they experienced an institutionally-secured framework, which is binding for all, as more reliable and appreciated.

Participation in International Education Conferences

A special offer for the network members was and still is participation in the World Education Leadership Symposium (WELS.EduLead.net). The participating network members can learn about international concepts and models of education leadership and engage in a diverse exchange of ideas and experiences with colleagues.

Literature and Working Materials for Self-study

The participants received literature lists on relevant topics and, in some cases, specifically compiled literature or specially prepared study letters.

Learning Location Practice/school (in the School Team)

Approaches to solutions found in the training events were to be implemented or tested by the participants in their own schools. Hence, the school teams could leverage various support services:

- NES team (collegial advice, moderation, and coaching)
- The support system of the State Education Authority (advisors of different professions)
- Consultant at the Teacher Training Institute
- External advisors.

Cooperation and Collaboration

The primary aim of the school–university partnership was for the participants to learn from each other. In their dialogue, “knowledge” emerges that could not be given anywhere else in this context-rich form. In this way, the self-learning potential of the participants unfolds. The school-specific development projects were supported by the offer of collegial consultations, coaching, and moderation. Between the training events, collegial consultation meetings were initiated, which ideally should continue beyond the intended qualification program in a cost-neutral manner. Hence, small groups were formed whose members—initially with external support in the sense of coaching—worked on concrete problems and school-specific issues and exchanged, supporting each other.

Discussion Rounds (Fireside Evenings)

Once a year, a round of talks with personalities from politics, business, science, and the school system was organized for the participants. The aim was to talk to each other in a relaxed atmosphere, to develop an understanding of each other, and to establish contacts. Topics were “Current Challenges in Thuringian Teacher Education,” “Self-Responsible Schools in Thuringia,” and “Current Central Educational Policy Developments in Thuringia.”

Job Shadowing and Internships

Theoretical knowledge and skills are important, but illustrative practical examples, exemplary models, and independent active participation are essential. Such examples and models are provided by collegial job shadowing. They occurred within NES’s framework during the school holidays. The internships could be conducted at one of the following institutions:

- In another school within or outside Thuringia (in another federal state or neighboring country)
- In another educational institution
- In a business concern.

The aim was to gain experience, know other practices and other cultures, observe and reflect on others, and generate ideas for one’s actions. The exchange gained was extremely important for the participants’ self-reflection. Support was offered in the arrangement of shadowing opportunities.

It has become a tradition in NES to host different network members and their schools at each plenary event. The hosts offered not only a spatial overview, usually in the form of a school tour, but also insights into the content of their school concepts and current school challenges. For example, the network visited the Lobdeburg School in the city of Jena and became familiar with its school concept. In addition, the network members visited other educational institutions, for example, the “Experimentarium of the Imaginata” in Jena, where they talked to scientists about the learning theory of “comprehension-intensive learning.”

Knowledge Management Versus Portfolio: A Virtual Learning Environment as a Support

In NES, knowledge management procedures took the place of the portfolio. Knowledge management in the network was supported by the Thuringian school portal and a dedicated virtual learning environment, in which materials from the events were

archived electronically and made accessible to all participants. A knowledge management file was also stored there in which all participating schools, adding to their contact data and demographic information (e.g., number of students and teachers, pedagogical focus, and project participation), documented current or planned school development measures. In the sections “We are looking for” and “We offer” were listed as support needs and concurrently offered support for other schools in the network. Furthermore, the virtual learning environment offered the possibility of communication by allowing users to exchange information on self-selected topics.

Self-assessment and Feedback Through Evaluation and CPSM

One form of feedback was the development of a distinct feedback culture (e.g., evaluations). Another form was individual feedback through the Competence Profile of School Management (CPSM; Huber & Hiltmann, 2011; Huber 2013c; see also www.Bildungsmanagement.net/CPSM) and the offer to use the results as a basis for discussion (e.g., for extended school management).

Project History

Based on the evaluation results¹ on the plenary events, particularly on the further training events and the collegial consultations, and based on our observations, the following central experiences can be reported:

- NES was never rigid in its conception. Individual qualifications and support formats were emphasized more strongly in different temporal phases according to need.
- In the first phase, the focus was on professional development events in the classical sense. First, an overview of the different elements of school quality management was given, and central topics were addressed in an introductory way, partly by external speakers.

In the initial phase, some participants seemed to expect to receive information from external speakers in a strongly lecture-oriented manner. This phase was characterized by lectures as a form of one-way communication, the desire for as much accompanying written material as possible, and almost exclusively technical questions about theoretical models and concepts. The transfer and implementation of these theoretical models and concepts were the focus of group work. Initially, school teams were always designated for group work so that people from the same school

¹ Various forms of evaluation were used, such as event evaluations and annual interim evaluations based on short questionnaires with open and closed questions, individual and group interviews, and plenary discussions.

could work on questions of transfer and implementation at their school. However, there was rather little feedback on this implementation in practice, although attempts were made to take it up in plenary sessions.

In the second phase, three years after NES's inception, individual topics were extensively handled. This took place in very different formats. On the one hand, expert speakers conducted the theoretical treatment. Then, after the participants had explicitly formulated their needs, they were invited and prepared topics within the plenary event. The participants asked concrete questions and discussed theoretical models and concepts, depending on the context. The participants themselves conducted the theoretical treatment in the working groups. These were organized relatively autonomously and worked on by their own responsibility. The results of these working groups were presented and discussed in plenary sessions.

Eventually, and especially at the end of the official term, the participants increasingly demanded formats that emphasized learning from and with colleagues. Central to all formats was the wealth of experience of the schools participating in the network. The reason for the lively and profitable exchange of experiences was a certain heterogeneity of the group of participants. For example, the concepts, processes, and projects of the schools were regularly discussed in plenary sessions. The focus was on questions regarding implementation in school practice, feasibility, and consequences. The school teams worked out specific solutions for their school within the network, tested the developed measures in their school, and reflected on this work phase with colleagues from other schools so they could be developed further.

Over time, cooperation between individuals and schools was no longer merely encouraged but was increasingly pursued and even demanded by the participants. In this way, the participants' competencies could be better used and bundled, and the collegial exchange of experiences intensified so that the participants profited from each other beyond the pure qualification offers. At the end of the term, an intensive working atmosphere was perceived. The participants formulated their needs, registered them, and demanded solutions. The program of a plenary event was very dense; a qualification (half) day was very intensive. The reason for this was the noticeable increase in participant activity since the initial phase. The participants no longer perceived themselves as mere recipients but as actual experts for school quality who significantly (co-)determined NES's success.

Feedback on the Aimed Principles

The evaluation findings indicate that the aimed principles in NES—context, need, and transfer orientation—have been upheld.

- *Needs orientation:* The topics to be worked on were defined and determined by the participants themselves. This was considered extremely positive despite the strong reluctance of some participants in the initial phase, which was also noticeable until the end.

- *Application orientation/transfer and practice orientation:* The participants had many opportunities to reflect on their special skills and interests in the plenary sessions. Recognition and awareness of known measures and basic theoretical knowledge took place. The participants also rated positively that NES's offers were practice-oriented—they were geared to the reality in schools, and various suggestions were given for the transfer into school practice. The event-related evaluations were very good for the practical orientation—for example, almost 80% agreed with the statement “The contents were taught in a practice-oriented manner.” More than 90% assumed that the knowledge and skills would be put into practice.

Nevertheless, there was a wish for an even better dovetailing of theory and practice and an even stronger reference to practice. Concrete examples and concepts for implementation in school practice could and should have been given greater focus. For example, visits to other schools, which are regarded as examples of successful theory-practice transfer, and more school-related work.

- *Effectiveness and sustainability:* The participants saw NES as effective support and accompaniment for their school practice. Offers from other support systems were also increasingly demanded and taken up.

Other aspects that were experienced as helpful can be derived from the evaluation results.

These are explained below.

- *Science and theory orientation:* The technical and theoretical preparation of the topics alongside the information transfer were evaluated. The topics were based on current national and international scientific findings.
- *Instructor orientation:* With more than 80% agreeing, the lecturers were assessed as well-prepared, professionally competent, and participant-oriented (allowing questions and answering them satisfactorily, helping participant motivation, and inclusion of all participants). This ensures that the instructors, as those responsible for the teaching–learning arrangement, did justice to their central importance for the quality of the continuing education and training measure. Concurrently, some participants wished that instructors would repeat less and give clearer work assignments.
- *Participant orientation:* The participants' skills and aspects of individual motivation were considered. Most participants could acquire new relevant knowledge and skills for school practice. Thus, selecting the course content corresponded to the participants' expectations in most cases.
- *Activity orientation:* The cooperation of all participants was high. The participants' activities were characterized by lively questions, lively technical discussions (both in the plenary and in group work), and a high level of participation in group activities. Nevertheless, the participants wished for more balanced participation of individual group members.
- *(Didactic) quality orientation:* The didactic and methodical implementation of the formats was assessed as meaningful. The organization was assessed as very

successful. The change of methods between plenary sessions, group work (school-specific and school-independent), collegial consultations, and the various possibilities for exchange and cooperation (e.g., group activities, time for professional and personal discussions alongside the distribution of helpful material) were positively assessed. When asked about suggestions for improvement, some participants argued for a smaller size of the participant groups. In addition, the participants wished for more (self-)discipline of all colleagues and thus more regular participation from the schools and their representatives, better time management, and stronger result organization.

Follow-Up

The participants' reflections on NES during its official existence resulted in a consistently positive picture, whereby an open and pleasant atmosphere alongside the intensive exchange of experiences across the school types was primarily emphasized. The term "network" was, after five years of cooperation, no longer just a title since mutual support and help took place and still takes place even after the official end of NES. This positive development was also perceived by those responsible for the organization.

However, we also must summarize that NES is no longer a cooperation project in the narrower sense, after the loss of common goals and a formal framework, i.e., the coordination and organization of learning events and the close scientific support and moderation by Stephan Huber. There still are isolated relationships at the individual or organizational level, but the network no longer cooperates in the way it used to.

Today, more than 10 years after the official end of the project, the participants who remain in school service still draw a very positive balance. A short survey concluded that, even in the informal way in which NES is practiced today (without state incentives), the various cooperative relationships that have emerged since 2006 offer lasting benefits.

Based on the network goals, the following sections can be summed up as the long-term benefits:

Cooperative Leadership and Cooperation in the School Are Essential

The schools involved each took part as a school team, mostly school leaders and deputies or a person from the extended school leadership team or the steering group. Today, many of these participants from the expanded team are school leaders themselves. For their own professionalization and the development of the competencies for educational leadership, networking is ascribed a great benefit up to this day.

Above all, it was helpful to make contacts, even as a junior manager, and to recognize opportunities to help shape the school at an early stage. School management is a collaborative task that must be carried out by far more than one person. However, overall, the interaction between the various leaders is decisive for ensuring and developing the quality of schools. The competencies for this must and may be continuously developed over time through qualification, reflection, exchange, and the like but, above all, actively taking on leadership tasks. Adding to being able and willing, it also needs to be legitimized (see Huber et al., 2015).

Cooperation Between Schools Enables New Perspectives

The cooperation among the Erfurt schools and the resulting diversity of perspectives—within and across schools—is, according to the former participants, certainly the greatest benefit that remains visible today. It is reported, for example, that the exchange in the network made it possible, for the first time, to gain insights into the organization and educational work of other types of schools in the local area. There were individual cooperation projects in which, for example, consideration was given to providing greater support for the transitions between different types of schools for pupils, thus making them smoother.

The trustful relationships in the network have also been shaping communication up to today. The predominantly short communication paths paid off, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. A principal in the survey also reported that all Erfurt school leaders of the vocational schools organized regular (informal) online meetings during the pandemic. Hochschild (2020) in an essay discussing operational school oversight states that “In this way, the school is changing, also externally, from a ‘closed shop’, which has to deal with problems alone, to a part of the community or the school environment” (p. 82).

Cooperation with Other Institutions Inside and Outside the School System

Cooperation among the former partner schools, the school supervisory authority, and the university in the local joint project no longer exists in that form. The network initiation in 2006 was primarily due to individuals who initiated and organized the network and who had the vision to recognize the benefits of such a school–university partnership. After these individuals left their school, or Erfurt, the incentives for this project could not be continued. Former participants would like further formal support as a school supervisory subsidy, including funding, to organize further training or observations. This path would offer the opportunity to strengthen school supervision in the modern role of “school supervisory authority” (Huber et al., 2020a, b; Huber,

2020a) that remains rarely practiced. In this role, offers are made to schools, different perspectives can be experienced in networks, and a trusting, collegial exchange on equal terms is made possible.

Conclusion

This evaluation of NES demonstrates two important considerations for educators' professional development training (Huber & Schneider, 2022), relating to demand, practice, and sustainability.

First, professional development must integrate diagnostic tools as a starting point for training and development programs to identify differentiated needs from which professional development goals and objectives are developed. To offer subject-specific programs tailored to the needs of individuals, groups or specific schools, the prior knowledge, subjective theories, attitudes, expectations, goals, and motivations of potential participants must first be identified. These form the starting point for planning professional development and the corresponding learning approaches.

Second, professional development must focus on practices to move from knowledge to action (see Huber, 2013c, 2020b; Huber & Hader-Popp, 2008, 2013; Wahl, 2001). This is necessary to get from theory to practice and to transfer what has been learned to everyday teaching.

Additionally, the NES evaluation offers valuable hints for the design of school–university partnerships in this or a similar form. An alternation between needs-oriented training in the plenary and other forms that promote cooperation appears to be central. The participants also benefited from sufficient opportunities to exchange experiences and to “think outside the box.” Closely connected to this is the impact of a multiplier effect, in that positive cooperation experiences acquired outside of one's own school also positively affect cooperation in the schools, increase dialogue and exchange within the teaching staff, and thus contribute to the organizational development of the individual school.

In NES, it was possible to initiate and promote cooperative relationships consistent at various levels, especially cooperation between the management level/school leadership and cooperation between schools in the local environment. The important function of a “promoter,” ideally the school supervisory authority who provides the organizational and financial framework and support, is—especially at the beginning and over a certain time—an important condition for success.

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