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Reading Markus Amman's¹ Anecdote

The Anecdote

Mr. Miller experiences the pace of reform in the school system and its acceleration as too fast. Being a headmaster of a new middle school in Austria, he illustrates his concerns with the following example: "In April, these innovations on the KEL-conversations were decided in parliament. In September the laws arrived in the schools as well as the legal documents, but not the guidelines for the implementation. The guidelines arrived in February," Mr. Miller argues quietly, each word choosing carefully. "And now we should implement them quickly?," he rhetorically asks. In September his school opted to wait for the guidelines to arrive in order not to go wrong. However, Mr. Miller does not mind innovation: "There are a lot of good ideas and, and, there are really innovative new things.," he adds, followed by a long pause for reflection. "Yet, if one innovation chases the other, you automatically lag behind," Mr. Müller sighs, smiling uneasily. "A little slower would be great," he exhaustedly concludes, breathing deeply in and out.

The Reading

Upon reading the anecdote Markus Amman wrote, I pose the question: What can it tell us about my area of research, „Leadership for Learning?“ Or, in other words, as a researcher and teacher of pedagogical school leadership, what can I derive from this story that affects me and gives me pause to think?

"A little slower would be great," says Mr. Miller at the end of the anecdote "exhaustedly." During the anecdote he speaks of the "pace of Reform," of "acceleration as too fast" and that "one innovation chases the other." When I read

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this anecdote, two images come to mind that are often used in principal education: a high-speed motorboat and a freighter. As metaphors, these images suggest when a school develops like a racing boat, the start is tremendous, and things move great distances quickly. But, when the gasoline is gone, it drifts aimlessly on the water. The freighter, in contrast, starts maneuvering very carefully, cautiously leaving the harbor to pursue a clear goal slowly but continually. From Lakoff and Johnson (2003) we know how metaphors structure our thinking and that the image of a freighter illustrates a particular understanding of school development. Have you ever spent two weeks on a freighter? I imagine it to be quite boring. From research and experience we know that the development process includes various phases in which activities fluctuate in their intensity, and that reaching goals is a much more complex process than navigating a ship. Metaphors carry a normative concept, which is useful to understand those who use the metaphors, but less useful, however, to understand the process of school development.

I see a second theme in the anecdote. Interestingly Mr. Miller speaks correctly in the anecdote not of development, but rather of implementation: “we should implement them.” According to the anecdote, the Austrian parliament decreed that in the New Middle-schools Child-Parent-Teacher-Talks are obligatory. The schools’ administration have the mandate to implement the talks in their schools. But, what does “implementation” mean for school leadership? Does it mean to implement such talks in accordance with the government by asking “what do we need to do so that the talks take place and comply to the government decree?” Or, does it mean to implement such talks in a manner that they make sense from a pedagogical perspective? In other words, does it mean to position and design the talks so that their implementation aligns in the same developmental direction with the basic goals of the school, its mission and significance? From the Leadership for Learning-perspective the introduction of Child-Parent-Teacher-Talks, or other elements of a pedagogical action, is not a goal in itself; the introduction alone is absolutely no guarantee of a pedagogical value-added in the students’ learning or education. It might be possible to achieve such a pedagogical goal if, for example, the creation of greater transparency and with it better cooperation between the parties involved in education. A school leadership’s choice to implement the talks either in isolation or in accordance with the school’s pedagogical goals is crucial to the quality of the school.

With the first option, implementing such talks in isolation creates a requirement to be fulfilled; the second option creates the possibility to shape and develop one's own school.

Certainly one could argue that a pedagogical orientation also requires such talks be implemented. In just this situation, a principal scorned the timing understandably, complained about the impossible manner of introduction from the Ministry, and requested more time for implementation. Let us examine the timing aspect: an isolated implementation of such talks is a relatively linear process the introduction of which can more or less follow a stable time plan. If a principal chooses to introduce the Child-Parent-Teacher-Talks in isolation, (s)he is well-advised to create a time-plan with a logical flow and follow it. One such principal understandably grew frustrated at the Ministry whose timing made a reasonable time-plan on the part of principal impossible. The two time-plans were incompatible and inevitably gave rise to conflicts and ultimately, given the principal's subordinate position relative to the Ministry, to frustration. If, however, a principal aligns the introduction of the Child-Parent-Teacher-Talks with the pedagogical goal of mutual cooperation, the ability to make a time-plan is much more tenuous. It is impossible (or shall I say I have never experienced such a situation?) to establish a good, cooperative relationship between students, parents and teachers according to a set action-plan. When cooperation serves the pursuit of qualitative goals, a principal cannot, by definition, set its introduction to fit a fixed, linear schedule. This is true, by the way, for (almost) all goals that a principal pursues using Leadership for Learning. The frustration regarding the Ministry's procedure is a question of focus. As a principal, on what do I focus my attention? On the timely introduction, or on the qualitative change process? Shifting the focus of attention does not prevent the frustration completely, but it puts it in perspective, especially since the quality of a school does not depend on if it implements the requirements of the Ministry on time, or if the school succeeds in the creation of a high-level of cooperation between the parties involved at school. This showed impressively in our research on the school leadership of the winning schools of the German Schoolprize. They too occasionally voiced their frustration over the state regulations and actions. However, in the next breath they spoke of how they reformulate and adjust them to fit into their school program, often grinning as they talked.

I began this talk with a metaphor and dare end it with one. Perhaps the development of a school can be compared to a sailboat. With a sailboat, one sets course for a goal and must adjust the course continually allowing for the changing winds and gusts, according to the waves, the weather and more. Sailing is a continual process, a search of how to deal best with the conditions to reach the goal. Sometimes one is more or less successful; sometimes there is frustration, sometimes joy. It is less about right or wrong, rather about the search for the next solution in a higher degree of complexity. And, on a sailboat, it is never boring.

Thank you.

References

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