

Practice Transfer of Qualitative Research Results –
Reflections Based on a Grounded Theory Study

Bastian Hodapp

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aus:

Praxistransfer in der tertiären Bildungsforschung

Modelle, Gelingensbedingungen und
Nachhaltigkeit

Herausgegeben von
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Practice Transfer of Qualitative Research Results

Reflections Based on a *Grounded Theory* Study

Bastian Hodapp

The Study

Theoretical Background

Leadership is relationship building. Relationships are regulated through and by emotions (Heisig, 2008). If leadership is to be understood as relationship and communication work, one can easily infer that the handling of emotions has a crucial effect on leadership processes. However, the amount of research on the connections between emotions and leadership remains scarce to this day (Pundt, 2015; Urban, 2008). At the same time, a number of authors assume that emotions play an integral part with regard to leadership (Arnold, 2003; 2011; Goleman, Boyatzis & McKee, 2003; Pundt, 2015; Urban, 2008) and that emotional competencies are essential to the actions of leaders (Dust, 2012; Müller-Commichau, 2005; Urban, 2008). One reason for the growing relevance of social-emotional competencies in the work context (Hauer, 2003; Schlegel, 2003) is that leaders are increasingly confronted with the need to provide solutions to complex social problems (Urban, 2008). Especially in reference to the education system and the pedagogically organized system of life-long learning (Nittel, Schütz & Tippelt, 2014), there are hardly any empirically captured insights on the relevance of emotions in the everyday professional life of educational leaders.

Approach, Methodology, and Methods

This study follows the approach of comparative pedagogical occupational group research (Nittel et al., 2014) and *Grounded Theory* methodology (Strauss, 1991; Strauss & Corbin, 1996). Leaders from three different segments of the educational system were compared in order to conduct this study. The data was gathered in (N=15) expert interviews (Meuser & Nagel, 2013), and it was analyzed with the coding procedures of *Grounded Theory*.

Leading Questions

The study analyzes the relevance of emotions in the work environments of educational leaders. To investigate this, I asked the following questions:

1. Which emotionally charged situations do educational leaders face?
2. Which qualities of emotional competence should leaders possess?
3. How do leaders in elementary, secondary, and adult education handle emotionally challenging and straining situations?
4. What are the similarities and differences among the emotional competencies of the different educational occupation groups?

Results

I was able to reconstruct 47 descriptions of situations based on my data. The category *phenomena of threat, harm, and loss* was central to 39 emotionally negative case vignettes, while *phenomena of personal and social (re)integration and generativity* was the central category for eight positive cases. Leaders of daycare centers and high schools report many more emotional situations compared to adult education leaders. Positive emotions are especially found in reference to clients, while negative emotions are usually found in reference to coworkers, (financial) supporters, and parents. The analysis of the collected data shows that the work of educational leaders is marked by contradictions and unsolvable conflicts, especially in emotionally charged situations.

One crucial aspect of the emotional competence of educational leaders is the way they handle emotionally challenging or straining situations. Four categories have proved to be central: time reference, space reference, social reference, and personal reference. All strategies used by leaders can be placed within the dimensions of those four references.

Case Vignette Example

“There is nothing more practical than a good theory!” (Lewin, 1951, p.169) This statement by socio-psychologist Kurt Lewin is especially true for theories that were developed following the principles of *Grounded Theory*. These theories particularly stand out because they have a potentially high practical relevance due to their consistent retrospective dependence on empirical data. In my data analysis, I was able to reconstruct 47 case examples of situational descriptions (i.e. case vignettes). One of these examples is elaborated in the following passage.

Case Example: Behavior of a Parents’ Council Member who is Perceived as Confrontational

Ms. Eichin¹ claims that she occasionally encounters situations in which parents’ behavior causes “massive turmoil” (37:40). The vice president of the school recalls the case of a mother who worked toward being elected as a member of the parents’ council right at the beginning, when her child entered fifth grade. This mother supposedly “bashed” (37:56) teachers online and organized certain measures that were not discussed with the school’s leadership and that were difficult to reverse afterwards. According to Ms. Eichin, they repeatedly reached out to the woman in question; however, conversations were unsuccessful and usually ended in outbursts of rage or “denigrating speeches” (38:13) by the mother. At the same time, there was a case of mobbing in one class. That same mother artificially exaggerated this event, even after leaders had already resolved the issue with students, and this behavior of the mother additionally harmed teachers, says Eichin. This conflict also cost a lot of time. Eventually, the family in question moved, and Ms. Eichin felt that it was “good riddance” (38:35). Ms. Eichin concludes that she experienced the actions of this woman as “completely obtrusive” and “always demanding” (38:40). As a leader, states Eichin, she was forced to deal with this mother and was “helplessly at her mercy” (37:43). If she had done nothing, she would have possibly had to face even worse consequences. Eveline Eichin says she perceived the situation as “ineffective” (38:54) and noticed that school leadership was able to do only very little when parents behave inappropriately or confrontationally.

Each case example was analyzed with open and axial coding. The results of the analysis were visualized with the help of a chart, and the result of the previously described case example is shown in Figure 1.

¹ The names of the interviewees were anonymized using fictitious names for each participant. The interviews were conducted in German and the interview excerpts used in this article were translated by the author.

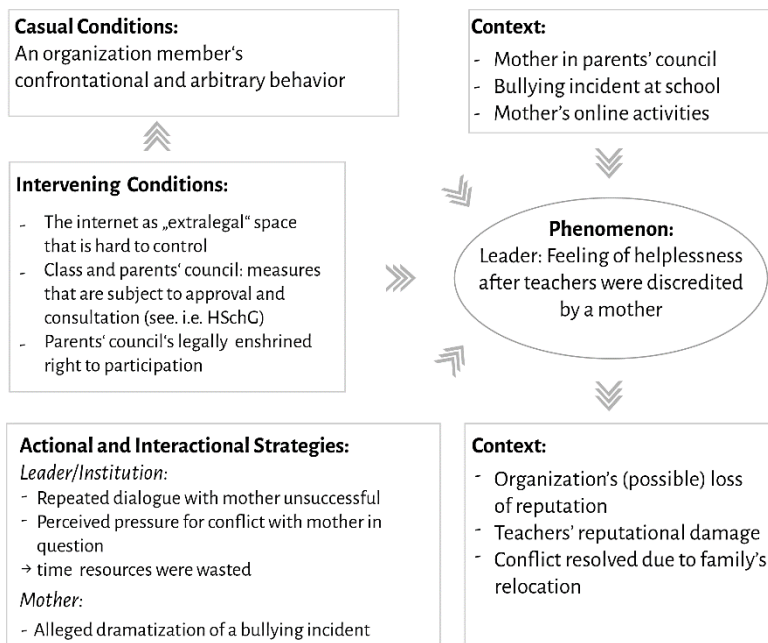


Figure 1: Result of Analysis (open and axial coding) of the Case Example "Behavior of a Parents' Council Member who is Perceived as Confrontational"

Outline of a Possible Transfer Scenario

This study surveyed educational leaders from different areas of the educational system – more specifically, the pedagogically organized system of life-long learning – and analyzes the resulting data in search of similarities and differences. Within the framework of the illustrated advanced training offers, leaders from different segments could be merged in order to learn from other examples in terms of *best practice*.

Next to the application of case vignettes in advanced training for (future) educational leaders, the results of this qualitative study could also be relevant for people who are involved in the qualification process or supervision of educational leaders. This could include professors of respective fields of study or those working at the ministry of education and cultural affairs who are responsible for the qualification of school administrators but also professional staff working in the fields of supervision,

counseling, and coaching. The study has shown that responsible (financial) supporters, too, make up an important group since their actions have a considerable influence on leaders' work.

The question of how research results can be transferred into practice leads to more questions: What is research? What is practice? Which elements (results, insights) can be carried into practice through research? Who should be involved in practice transfer? How should practice transfer be designed? How can practice transfer be influenced positively or negatively? How can long-term and sustainable transfer processes (in reference to attitudes and schemes) be accompanied? How much anecdotal or biographical credibility does practice transfer need? Are sufficient resources available to accompany practice transfer? What switching points or transfer points between research and practice, like, for example, counseling and advanced training, aid a successful practice transfer?²

How can the kind of data outlined in the case example and the analysis results generated within the framework of the qualitative *Grounded Theory* study be transferred into pedagogical practice? A possible scenario would be the use of such case vignettes for further and advanced training for (future) leaders in educational organizations. The data analysis shows that emotional dilemmas, paradoxes, and antinomies were especially important tests of educational leaders' professional decision-making and their acting as a leader. A situationally fleeting character (Wrogemann, 2012, transl. BH) marks the latter:

Referring to the mastering of different performance tests, educational leaders constantly find themselves in situations in which differences between their acting competence and the situational structure of expectations demand improvisational reactions. (p. 91)

A professional handling of such situations and challenges cannot be standardized (Kraimer, 2014, transl. BH):

In the logic of case reconstruction, requirements can be created to document the arbitrariness of a specific case and to transfer it to a substitutionary crisis management that cannot be achieved technologically or in a standardized way but only professionally. (p. 104)

Within the framework of qualification offers for educational leaders, we are confronted with the question of how those antinomies, paradoxes, and dilemmas can be discussed and worked on in a sustainable, learning-conducive way. While novices

² These questions were developed during the post-doc symposium in Hamburg (23./24. November 2017) with the topic "How can practice transfer in tertiary education research be successful?"

follow mainly context-free, rule-based knowledge, experts require situational, intuitive knowledge (Dreyfus, 2004). Case studies in particular seem to evoke personal changes so that beginners can develop into experts (Flyvbjerg, 2006):

The case study produces the type of context-dependent knowledge that research on learning shows to be necessary to allow people to develop from rule-based beginners to virtuoso experts. (p. 221)³

Participants in professional training could first gain an impression of each situation by reading the case examples. Another possibility that has already been tested with this data is to visualize case studies as a role-play with different roles and respective instructions. The challenges of dealing with emotional dilemmas, paradoxes, and antinomies became especially visible during such an experiment with students of a master's program in educational science. Following such a role-play, participants could discuss the experiences that they had and connect them to experiences in their own everyday professional life. Based on the charts (see, for an example, Figure 1), causal and intervening conditions that contributed to the development of each situation can be analyzed. These analyses allow a tracing of the causal and intervening conditions in critical and confrontational situations – those that leaders usually encounter – from a practical perspective.

Moreover, functional and less functional acting and coping strategies and their contextual embeddedness can be identified. Especially for future educational leaders and those who have only recently started their positions, such results can help anticipate areas of conflict and develop and reflect possible action strategies. Case examples allow for a response to central questions within the framework of advanced training, particularly in reference to the antinomical tensions of each professional field of action (Helsper, 2016): What are basic, structuring tensions of professional actions, and what are avoidable tensions that are constituted by framework conditions? Are there overarching tensions and antinomies in different professional fields of action, or are there distinct differences among individual fields of action? What conditions and correlations drive professional actions to paradoxical and communicative entanglements that undermine the relationship between professionals and clients?

The application of such case vignettes would also be interesting in the context of an intervention study for the development of emotional competencies. Appropriately documented interventional studies on educational leaders that consider case studies and role-plays are scarcely available (Berkovich & Eyal, 2015).

³ Flyvbjerg (2006) points out, however, that he does not want to discredit rule-based knowledge, which is of central importance in all fields, especially for novices. He states that it can become problematic, though, when this rule-based knowledge is seen as the highest learning objective.

Conclusion

The implementation of reconstructive case vignettes, like the illustrated advanced training offers for educational leaders, can support practitioners to reflect on their own action practice and exchange views on the research results at hand. The resulting suggestions could serve as reflection guides for the professional decision-making of educational leaders. The application of reconstructed case studies to emotional situations in educational leaders' everyday professional lives could additionally aid in their sensitization for handling challenging situations competently and in expanding their professional communication and decision-making strategies. Specifically, the context-specific knowledge generated by qualitative methods can support a respective professionalization.

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