

Supervision and coaching in schools in South Tyrol

A contribution to educational development



The fact that supervision can become established in schools rather than in other institutions stands to reason.

It is possible that this is a trend, which can be seen in many European countries. Social changes are being felt directly there and represent a challenge.

A comparison of various implementation models would by all means be interesting. The following article provides information about the reality within the South Tyrolean school system and is intended to be a contribution to the discussion. Feedback to: gasserhell@hotmail.com or ullimazza@hotmail.com would be much appreciated and perhaps even published in future editions of the journal.

■ **Christine Gasser**

Background and development of counselling activities

The school system in South Tyrol, which consists of separate establishments for the German, Italian and Ladin language groups, underwent radical structural and educational changes in both 2000 and 2010. A higher retirement age as well as the change in family structures and the resulting demands placed on teaching staff, together presented new challenges for schools and kindergartens. It was necessary to adapt the system to correspond to the newly evolved situation. The need for support was evident. Supervision and coaching was recognised by the school administration as a means of providing quality assurance going forward.

In the year 2000, a qualified teaching professional was made available to take on this counselling role. This resource was, however, not enough to meet all the registered needs. For this reason, additional counsellors with the corresponding qualification in supervision and coaching joined the contingent in 2005. They were part of the support system available to schools set up in 5 regional educational counselling centres and were also responsible for other advisory tasks such as organisational and tutorial development, school and integration counselling services and health promotion.

The options and the range of services were thereby expanded but still failed to satisfy all requests. As a result, a coach and supervisor pool was set up at the central educational authority. This also consists of external counsellors, who can be called upon should the internal support system be operating to capacity.

To be part of the pool, the following criteria must be met: -

Completed supervision and coaching training, expertise in the field, willingness to work according to the general conditions within the educational authority, willingness

to allow the evaluation of implemented supervision processes and to participate in an annual exchange of experiences.

The aim of the project

- During a time of structural revolutions, teaching and managerial staff are to receive support through supervision and coaching in order to be able to view the changes and demands in their field of work from multiple perspectives and to be able to interpret their tasks and roles more clearly and to carry them out more efficiently than was previously possible.
- Supervision helps to improve communication, cooperation and the ability to deal with conflict between all members of the school community, so that work with pupils can be carried out more effectively and on a more goal-oriented basis.
- By adhering to individual, interactional and systemic



perspectives, supervision contributes to the quality assurance of tuition, to the professionalism of teaching staff, to an increased sense of collaboration at school and in turn to school development.

- Supervision as a measure for health promotion prevents the risk of burn-out and encourages teaching staff to use their time and energy resources efficiently.

Individual coaching is available for school heads as well as tandem coaching together with their deputies. The topic „Between management and teaching staff“ is aimed specifically at principals and vice-principals. Teaching staff can take advantage of team and group supervision at their own schools or at regional events open to staff from all levels of education. The supervision options for teaching staff are organised under the following subject areas:

„Assert yourself, set yourself apart, increase satisfaction“ and „Dealing with difficult situations“ as well as „Reflecting on the school day“.

The path to supervision

Those interested should register on an individual basis for a course offered within the framework of training courses organised by the educational authority. If a school has more than 6 members of staff who are interested in team or group supervision, then this can be organised at their own school and run by a supervisor from the coaching pool. During the initial discussion either face-to-face or by telephone, the basic course conditions will be clarified. These include the topics to be covered, mutual expectations, ways of working and organisational matters. If schools elect to use staff from the coaching pool, the central educational authority covers the costs of the fees. The participants do not incur any costs. As a rule, a supervision cycle incorporates

several meetings throughout the school year each of which lasts two to three hours. The project „Supervision at German-speaking schools in South Tyrol“ was authorised for the first time by the education authority for the academic year 2000/2001 and subsequently extended in the years that followed.

A specific requirement

Over the years it emerged there was a specific coaching requirement for principals. On one hand, this type of support is becoming more and more well-known through literature and the consultancy market for senior managers, but on the other hand a series of new appointments has seen a stream of younger managers coming on board. They welcome and also recognise the importance of allowing themselves to be accompanied during the early years in their new role mainly due to the often difficult staff situation. At the same time, it is mainly about redefining their role, handling a wider circle of staff, sensitive staff situations and general leadership questions. Whether it's coaching or supervision: „The concept of „multiple perspectives“ means the simultaneous „taking into account“ of different levels and the willingness to reflect on an event from different points of view.“ (Petzold, 1998)

As far as supervision in schools is concerned, it relates to:-

- on an individual level, the character of the supervisee, his or her professional role and competencies e.g. as a teacher
- on an interactional level, the dynamics and the teacher's interpersonal communication with colleagues, principal, parents and pupils
- On a systemic level, the organisation itself

The multiple perspective model zooms in on the perspective of the present, past, future, an individual, a team, context, the conscious, the unconscious and the preconscious.

Participants

Teaching staff with over 20 years service have the highest representation among participants. Possible reasons for this include the fact that job security allows for increased self-reflection, interest in colleague exchange is growing, professional training courses are less interesting and consequently the desire for a different type of personal development is increasing and the strengthening of one's own mental hygiene is becoming more and more important.

The proportion of women compared to that of their male counterparts is higher. Both senior and middle management are well-represented.

Questions asked by „Editor“ Ulrike Zipperle Mazza to Christine Gasser

1. On the part of the teaching staff, does the range of counselling services meet your expectations?

Answer: Actually no! When you consider the fact that teaching staff are exposed to increasingly high demands and complain about being overworked, you would expect them to jump at the chance to participate free of charge in reflective practice offered as part of team or group supervision. On the other hand, we know that people who are or feel under pressure, do not have the energy to invest in their own mental hygiene and further education. "Supervision" is unfortunately often associated with terms such as „problem“ or „deficit“. Looking after yourself in order to be able to achieve a balance is still a vision

of the future and not a professional matter of course. On the other hand, more and more senior managers are referring to this type of support and participants report back positively on how beneficial it is to have case conferences under the guidance of external people.

2. Supervision and coaching has been under evaluation for 15 years. What are the core messages coming out of this and do they correspond to your presuppositions?

Answer: The core messages are that collaboration with colleagues substantially improves through mutual supervision because topics and conflicts can be clearly discussed and solutions worked out. Teaching staff feel like a weight has been lifted and they can approach the school day with renewed strength following exchanges with colleagues. Exchange and dealing with issues under the guidance of a supervisor is perceived as very useful by participants, since

the way in which issues are tackled with the use of probing questions helps to move away from complaints and take the necessary action.

3. In the case of there being no financial limits, which area and which group of people would you like to see being offered more support and in what form?

Answer: If financial and staff resources were increased, we could also meet the demand for individual supervision of teaching staff. For many, this would be more easily accessible than taking part in group supervision. ■

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