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educational monitoring at the local level in tension between science and politics

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Dealing with the tensions between scientific claims and those of political-administrative actors marks a central task of municipal educational monitoring. However, empirical research has not systematically examined the relationship between these significant references. Our contribution focuses on how the tensions are addressed and balanced in practice. The results reveal different relations between the two perspectives, producing various practical forms of local educational monitoring. In this way, establishing data infrastructures in municipalities becomes visible as a complex and situational process. The results reflect educational monitoring's theoretical and practical development needs and implications for education research.

Keywords: educational monitoring, municipal politics, qualitative social research, science and practice

Educational Monitoring at the Local Level in Germany

Over the last decades, the federal and state governments have addressed municipalities in Germany as important governance actors in the educational sector. The promise of this regionalisation policy in education is a better and more efficient regulation of educational problems, such as reducing the inequality of opportunities (Brüggemann et al., 2023). In Germany, education policy and administration at all levels of the education system have become more data-based.

Such processes of so-called data- or evidence-based educational governance have emerged with the increasing datafication and digitalisation of education (Hartong, 2020, p. 64). In response to the expanding datafication and the creation of new data infrastructures, a branch of research known as critical data studies has developed at the international level (Dalton et al., 2016; Hartong & Nikolai, 2021; Hepp et al., 2022; Iliadis & Russo, 2016; Jarke & Breiter, 2019). In Germany, the number of studies critically analysing the socio-political implications and challenges of datafication in education has increased in recent years, particularly regarding datafication in school contexts (Breiter & Bock, 2023; Hartong & Förschler, 2019).

Datafication policies emerged in Germany more tentatively than in other countries such as Australia, the United States or the United Kingdom, which already have extensive education data infrastructures (Dabisch et al., 2021; Hartong, 2018). One reason for this late coming is the German federal constitution, where the federal states are responsible for education governance. Additionally, the German federal constitution distinguishes between inner and outer school responsibilities. The states are responsible for all matters relating to the content of school education, such as curriculum development and teachers. The responsibilities of the local communities include administrative staff, school buildings and technical infrastructure (Hartong et al., 2021, p. 139). Municipalities also

provide a wide range of local offerings outside the school sector in various educational contexts and systems, for example, early childhood education and adult education.

At the municipal level, the expansion of data infrastructures in the education sector is being driven forward by extensive project funding from the federal and state governments. Funding schemes such as “Lernen vor Ort” (Learning Locally), “Bildung integriert” (Education Integrated) and “Bildungskommunen” (Education Municipalities) from the Federal Ministry of Education and Research support the establishment of municipal education management and educational monitoring through financial support for hiring dedicated staff.

Local educational monitoring as a continuous data-based process of observing and analysing the education system aims to advise local authorities on strategic decision-making and educational policymaking. Municipal educational monitoring is thus part of the system of “data-driven reforms” described by Bellmann (2015, p. 46), in which the distinction between science and politics becomes increasingly difficult and in whose practice scientific and political interests merge (Forster, 2015, p. 68).

Although dealing with scientific and political interests is a central monitoring task at the municipal level, the relationship between these spheres remains underdetermined in theoretical discussions and empirical research. We address this gap by first reconstructing the relationship of the two spheres in the programmatic conception of municipal educational monitoring. With contextural analysis (Jansen et al., 2015), we present a meta-theoretical framework to empirically analyse the tensions between the two perspectives and their treatment in establishing municipal data infrastructures. Finally, we discuss the implications of the observed practical entanglement of scientific and political-administrative perspectives for the theoretical and practical development of educational monitoring and education research.

Educational Monitoring at the Local Level Between Science and Politics

Suppose the mediation between a scientific perspective and those of the stakeholders from the political-administrative system is a central challenge for educational monitoring. In that case, the question arises of how the relationship between the two spheres is designed in the programmatic discourse on municipal educational monitoring.

So far, according to the diagnosis, decisions and actions have only been based on experience and assumptions (Andrzejewska et al., 2011, p. 8). The programmatic promise is that action and decision-making could be improved by recourse to monitoring knowledge. Thereby, the knowledge gained from educational monitoring comes with a claim to interpretative authority regarding the quality of the municipal education system (see also Maritzen & Tränkmann, 2015, p. 242). As Döbert & Weishaupt (2015, p. 14) claim, it enhances educational policy decisions because it provides policymakers and administrators “a deeper understanding of the education system and opens up a wider range of decision-making options”. It is, they argue, the knowledge that is needed to develop policies. Municipal education monitoring thus becomes an “indispensable basis for […] successful education governance in a municipality” (Döbert & Weishaupt, 2015, p. 20).

In order to realise its potential for governance, the monitoring knowledge, equipped with a higher degree of rationality, should be transferred as seamlessly as possible into the political-administrative field. This idea of linear transferability is seen by Brüsemeister (2020, pp. 34–35), as he describes

that monitoring is responsible for "translating scientific arguments into political decision-making processes" and "making clear to policymakers what scientific data mean politically".

Against this background of the primary orientation of the programmatic discourse towards the ideal of evidence-based and data-driven governance, the implementation of municipal educational monitoring is primarily framed as a scientific activity: "An education report is a scientifically based product and must therefore also meet scientific criteria" (Andrzejewska et al., 2011, p. 8). Almost inevitably, the academic discussion focuses on developing indicators and the characteristics of publications that are appropriate for the target audience. The primary target context of educational reporting, the political-administrative system, and the possibilities and processes of negotiation and interpretation between data-providing and data-receiving actors have remained significantly underexplored (Diedrich, 2021, p. 29).

In this context, there is a need for conceptual development as empirical findings on the reception and use of products of municipal education reporting show. Thus, the legitimacy of municipal educational monitoring or its products does not derive exclusively from its importance for political decision-making processes but from its symbolic function as a figurehead for modern and rational administrative action (Brüggemann, 2021, pp. 349–350). If monitoring knowledge is incorporated into educational policy decisions at the municipal level, other forms of knowledge, such as experience and practical knowledge, become relevant. The allocation of resources also depends on the actors' willingness to cooperate (Sendzik, 2023, pp. 317–318). Finally, yet importantly, the accompanying research on the "Lernen vor Ort" programme uncovers numerous conflicts of goals and interests in different arenas and fields of municipal education management. This also reveals the gap between scientific claims and those of actors from politics and administration (Opper, 2016, pp. 115–116) and the blurred boundary between scientific expertise and political decisions in the implementation of municipal monitoring (Niedlich & Brüsemeister, 2016, pp. 90–94).

These findings suggest that the relationship between science and the political-administrative field is more complex than the programmatic discourse on municipal educational monitoring implies. However, empirical research has not yet systematically explored the relationship between the two spheres. We, therefore, ask how people responsible for municipal educational monitoring practically establish a relationship between the two perspectives and deal with tensions and contradictions that emerge in the process. With contextural analysis (Jansen et al., 2015), we present a meta-theoretical framework that allows us to empirically analyse the tensions between the two perspectives and how they are dealt with in establishing municipal data infrastructures.

Contextural Analysis as a Methodological Framework

Contextural Analysis is a relatively new method of reconstructive social research, which was developed primarily in debate with the documentary method in organisational research (Jansen et al., 2015). Contrary to the assumption of the documentary method, after which social practice is primarily based on tacit knowledge, contextural analysis assumes that different forms of knowledge or reflection spaces intertwine in social practice. Therefore, the analysis of social practice must be about the reconstruction of the modus operandi that connects these different spaces. The aim of contextural analysis is

> to establish how different reflection spaces are brought into a stable alignment by such

> operations as they are carried out in the practices of organisations, how their boundaries are defined in the process, how problems and tensions develop and dissolve in such a practice and how the arrangements that emerge condition themselves. (Jansen et al., 2015, p. 30)

Our study focuses on the tensions arising from scientific and political aspects of educational monitoring. Concerning our data analysis, this focus raises two important research questions: How are scientific aspects communicatively invoked? How is this perspective related to the position of political-administrative actors?

Findings

Our analysis is based on interviews conducted in 2018 with people responsible for municipal educational monitoring from the projects funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research under the "Bildung integriert" program. The findings reveal the dynamics of municipal educational monitoring and how political-administrative and scientific perspectives interplay in practice, shaping this process.

One case stood out in particular because of the relationship between scientific aspirations and the political-administrative perspective established in a manner inconsistent with the programmatic ideal. The practice of educational monitoring primarily evolves from the position of political-administrative actors. A distinct scientific perspective on educational issues in the municipality cannot be established. Perspectives for action are limited and cannot be expanded because a small group of individuals carries out monitoring under the conditions of a steep administrative hierarchy. Suggestions and input from the monitoring are only viable if they align with the interests of the steering group members or the superior, as the following interview excerpt illustrates:

> That's always the case, in principle, it's also determined by the steering group. For example, right at the beginning, that was [year], we created a dossier on [topic]. And then, in [time], there was the steering group meeting. We asked them if that's what they wanted. And they said, 'No, we have different priorities' […] Yes. And, uh, that's why it's always topic-specific. A lot of it comes from our management. And we're quite close to them. (Interview 203)

In other interviews, we observe more developed forms of interweaving perspectives. In some cases, the structure-forming moments for monitoring, derived from the political-administrative system, are condensed in framing the mediation practice as a problem of reception. The interviewees thoroughly reflect upon the contexts of action and possibilities of the recipients from educational administration and politics. However, they are considered only in their publications, such as educational reports. The following quote may illustrate this:

> So basically, you always have to think about recommendations for action, and you have to imagine a text that way. So, in the end, you have to be confronted with the question, 'What should we do now?' 'What do we do with this information?' It's not my job as an educational monitorer to answer that, but that's how it's approached. (Interview 103)

However, the interests and needs of the political-administrative target group and opportunities for (joint) development of recommendations and political solutions are not further explored or pursued to expand the action potentials of monitoring. At this point, the perspectives run more alongside each other and are scarcely intertwined. Like the form of educational monitoring described above, this one is also influenced by the practical conditions in municipal administrations. For example, in one municipality, a working group comprising monitoring and administrative actors was set up, where a more extensive integration of both perspectives seemed possible. Despite these potentials, the coupling of the two perspectives was predominantly negotiated in the working group within the framework of a reception problem. The specific form of educational monitoring is thus conditioned and established by the working group.

In other cases, more extensive action potentials unfold because those responsible for educational monitoring can contribute more to educational policy planning and decision-making processes. Monitoring here assumes a mediating function. It creates opportunities to bring monitoring knowledge together with the perspectives of various actors from the political-administrative field and experts. The goal is to develop educational policy perspectives without being limited solely to the basis of monitoring knowledge. In one case, it is described as follows:

> So, the goal is definitely to create recommendations for action. But from the beginning, we resisted including it as part of the educational report or in the report because the report is a descriptive presentation […] and it's also purely a matter of expertise, so monitoring cannot develop recommendations for action for the vast area because there's simply a lack of expertise. But these workshops are supposed to identify needs and derive recommendations for action. (Interview 201)

Only through the gradual incorporation of the expertise and knowledge of other actors does identifying action needs, developing recommendations for action, and deriving goals become a legitimate process that cannot be achieved solely within an educational report. In the interviews, it is repeatedly suggested that these processes are fragile. Whether the intertwining of perspectives succeeds and whether it leads to the establishment of permanent formats in municipalities remains uncertain.

In our analysis, we were able to condense different forms of municipal monitoring into three types: educational monitoring with primary reference to the political-administrative system, educational monitoring as a functional coexistence of logics, and educational monitoring as their complex intertwining (Brock & Mahl, 2023). Behind these types are diverse forms of practice that emerge along the specific conditions and the interplay of perspectives at each municipality, forming (at least temporarily) stable forms of educational monitoring.

Conclusion

Our study shows how scientific claims become entangled with those of the political-administrative field in municipal educational monitoring as part of the system of data-driven reforms. The reference to scientific principles takes on various forms. In some instances, it is even almost completely hidden. As our results show, science is not the central reference of educational monitoring but one perspective among many. Therefore, municipal educational monitoring cannot locate its object exclusively in theoretical and methodological innovation of indicators. However, it

must reflect more firmly on the relationship between science and its primary application arena, the political-administrative field (see also Hermstein et al., 2018). This requires a shift in the programmatic discourse, which has so far been primarily oriented towards the production of scientific knowledge and its implementation in educational governance at the local level. Given our results, two implications of this guiding orientation seem particularly problematic.

Firstly, this is accompanied by an undifferentiated understanding of the practice of municipal educational monitoring, whose primary goal is seen in the implementation of scientific standards. This position corresponds more to an idealised self-description of scientific research. However, it does not reflect the practical conditions within municipal administration, where different logics refer to each other and where educational monitoring occurs as a practice that is not exclusively oriented towards scientific standards. People responsible for educational monitoring must, therefore, not only have scientific expertise but must also be able to recognise and reflect on their involvement in political relations and the resulting tensions and conflicts because a significant potential of educational monitoring lies in its function as a mediator between the different logics.

Secondly, from a democratic theory perspective, scientific monitoring knowledge cannot claim higher rationality for itself but stands on an equal footing with other forms of knowledge in the education policy process (Renn, 2017; Maritzen & Tränkmann, 2015, p. 242). Moreover, scientific knowledge cannot be assumed to be transferred seamlessly and predictably to determine educational policy decisions. What relevance scientific knowledge gains and how it potentially shapes policy planning and decision-making is only decided in the practical application of knowledge itself (Hagen-Demszky et al., 2009; Rasche & Behnam, 2009). Therefore, monitoring should not only aim to produce theoretically and methodologically robust knowledge but also develop concepts on how monitoring knowledge can be integrated into planning and decision-making processes as one of many equally valid perspectives (Renn, 2017).

To implement these demanding tasks, stable conditions are needed. However, municipal educational monitoring is a practice that is confronted with unclear role attributions, disruptive changes, and the associated restructuring of its possibilities for action (Brock & Mahl, 2023). In German municipalities, educational monitoring is still voluntary without a legal basis. As a result, there is a lack of resources for the permanent financing of staff positions and a lack of institutional expectation structures and defined contributions to the action of various actors. However, these (financial) resources and normative foundations are essential for the continuous development of municipal education systems (Hermstein & Berkemeyer, 2023, p. 64).

Moreover, our research connects with a growing number of critical data studies that focussed on processes of datafication and digitalisation across different educational and national contexts (Iliadis & Russo, 2016; Hartong & Förschler, 2019; Jarke & Breiter, 2019; Hepp et al., 2022). They illustrate how datafication leads to ambivalent consequences and "a complex entanglement of very different (technical and social) logics, practices and problems" (Hartong & Förschler, 2019, p. 2). Studies have identified a context dependency on data infrastructures and a significant influence of the local context on datafication (Dabisch et al., 2021, p. 378). Results have shown how datafication is creating new topologies of education policy (Gulson & Sellar, 2019).

In our study of educational monitoring at the local level, we also found different forms of educational governance practices and a complex entanglement between different logics depending on local conditions and contexts. Because municipal educational monitoring can become a powerful

governing tool, investigations should critically examine how relations of power in education are changing and new connections between data, educational research and policy emerge. Such research findings offer orientations for people entangled in educational monitoring on the local level and for educational researchers to reflect on their role in this complex system. Transformation processes in connection with the datafication of education require increasingly specific competencies from those involved, especially "micropolitical literacy" (Schmachtel, 2022) and "data infrastructure literacy" (Gray et al., 2018).

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