

Interview transcription 3.12.2019

(42:90 minutes)

A and C: Interviewers

B: Interviewed principal of an elementary school in a suburb of Solothurn

A: So, the first question we are interested in would be if you could tell us about yourself, why you decided to become a school principal?

B: Yes, that was never a decision I just made from one day to the next, but I had an interim solution, I worked as a deputy, also just as a level representative and took over the interim position with two colleagues and I liked this job and that's why I thought I would do the training. At that time, you could do the training without employment and I was then asked if I would like to take over a small rural school and there I first gained experience and when the schools there were merged, I decided to continue working as principal and got the job in X.

A: What surprised you the most when you were here as principal?

B: How differently the canton of Solothurn is organized in contrast to the canton of Berne, for instance, the school is organized completely differently, especially the special needs support, where German as a foreign language is really a part of it [in Solothurn]. There are many more lessons there than in the canton of Berne, and the fact that it is actually so institutionalized here at the school that at kindergarten, there are five lessons of German as a foreign language at kindergarten level, no matter how many children are really foreign-language speakers. Then it's actually at the elementary school level, there are four lessons, really per year for all classes, and in third grade, there are two more lessons for all classes. And so, we have the attitude that it is really important for us to learn good German from the first grade on, so that they are well prepared for their future academic career.

A: Did you choose this school explicitly or did it just happen?

B: No, it was very much by chance. That is, simply saw it in the newspaper, tested its market value. They wanted me at all costs.

A: Sometimes it's as easy as that. What is your professional background? Did you first do teacher training, for instance? Or do you from another field?

B: No, I went through the classical training. Five years of seminar back then, then I actually worked in the profession for ten or twelve years, all levels, 1st-6th grade at primary school, and then I started with interim school leadership with responsibility for certain grades and then school leadership.

A: You were just speaking about your training, a training that was still possible at that time, without already holding a school principal position, how were you prepared to become a school principal?

B: Yes, as I said, at this CAS [Certificate of Advanced Studies] "How to lead and manage a school," you have a little bit of budget, a little bit of law, staff management, meetings, staff interviews, yes, but there is a lot you can't work on and prepare, so a lot is ad hoc, where you have to make decisions and acquire knowledge.

A: So mainly it would be this training that prepared you for it?

B: Yes, exactly.

A: Are there any other offers you could have benefitted from of or is it really the only one that is recommended?

B: Yes, I personally learned some things, but that's actually what is offered.

A: Now concerning this school, as principal you probably know the school very well and know a lot about the students. Can you give us some demographic information, for instance, boys/girls, which languages, socio-economic background.

B: We once recorded languages. I think there were 54 different languages that we have here. We have a lot of small apartments from the past, factory apartments, because the X-Factory was there, which attracts customers who don't pay such expensive apartments. For this reason, the socio-economic background is quite deep and we have a lot of migrants, including refugees. It is close to the city, but not quite in the city. Girls, boys, for a while a lot of boys, now again about 50/50. We had a phase where we found that there were more boys than girls. So we started to think about why that was so.

C: The difference between immigrants and refugees.

A: How would you explain the difference between refugees and migrants? Or what does that mean for you?

B: The refugees are often dependent on social welfare and often live in refugee camps - we have a refugee camp here in X. They visit them beforehand and then they join them. With migrants, we often have family reunification, which means that the father already works there and then the family follows. These people are not on the run and actually have to leave the country for political reasons, but come to Switzerland for other reasons.

A: And they stay at school? Or do they move on again?

B: Sometimes they go back again. That depends very much on their attitude. Depending on the conviction with which the mother comes to Switzerland with the children, we have also seen already that they come here for the father's sake and then the mother didn't want to learn German and was totally unhappy. Then we said that if they are so unhappy and really don't want to learn German at all, that is a bad sign for the children. They do not want to settle here. Think about whether you really want to come here to Switzerland. This family then briefly went back to Italy. But families who really come here, who really learn the language, who are open to the culture, often stay.

A: And with refugees it is different? They don't stay that long?

B: No, often they come to our school and want to stay here. If they come to us without any German at all, they have the opportunity to go to this class for foreign language learners. There they can be integrated very well. There is also the integration officer, who actually looks after the refugees very well. As I said, the social service also has its mission there. I think refugees are well taken care of.

C: What does it mean to you, integration? How do you know when you see it?

B: An exciting question. [---] Yes, in part, they are interested in the culture here, they integrate themselves, in part they really do that, certainly also in German, they adopt the local language.

A: To what extent did the education we just spoke about prepare you to run a school that is also so different socio-culturally?

B: Little, very little. We had a module on different cultures in the Master program in Education Management. I can't remember the name exactly, but it was about integration, migration, things like that. But you would find that.

A: So this is one module out of how many approximately?

B: Yes, it is not even a whole module. It is only a part of a module. There were five modules in total. It was a small piece of the mosaic, really minimal.

C: Is it enough? Would you have liked it to be a bigger part?

B: For me as the principal of the school concerned, it would certainly be exciting to learn more. It would also be exciting to learn how the different cultures have an attitude towards education, but also women as principals, but also boys at school, girls at school. What does that mean? It would be very exciting to know more. And what makes us bother is that we don't get to the people. How can we reach the children in the first four or five years of life? The first four or five years are really decisive and formative for the development of the child and if there is too little knowledge about education there, that we actually have a lot of trouble in kindergarten and then problems arise. For this

reason, we would like to advise and motivate mothers and fathers, such as the playgroup. So, there are offers, but they are simply not used enough.

A: But it is nice that these offers exist. That is also not self-evident.

B: Sure, that is very important for us. As I said, we already have this German course at school here and you can also take the children with you. That is very valuable. We don't only have German there now. We don't just do grammar there, but also everything to do with teeth, so how important is brushing your teeth. How important are school medical checks or another topic we will also cover is media consumption. These are now topics that we want to bring into this German course and we hope that these parents will be trained as mediators, who will pass this on to other parents.

A: Thank you.

B: Multipliers. Now I remember the word again.

A: I was thinking of the snowball system.

B: Yes, really as multipliers to pass on the knowledge.

A: That's great. You have already given many examples. Especially with migrant families: Is there anything that prepares you personally to deal with them? For example, language courses or do you only speak German with them?

B: Exactly, that is my attitude. We have already talked about it, but then we would have to learn so many languages that we say, no, we are in Switzerland, the language is German, which you learn or speak here. What we do for sure is to organize a lot of interpreters. In the first two or three years it is very important for us that the parents understand what we want to say to them. After three years, they have to slowly speak German themselves. We are now also considering that after three or four years, if they have a B or C permit, they will have to pay for interpreters if they do not speak enough German. We have also organized an information evening for parents on the topic of media. We have offered to have different interpreters present each evening. The parents

could tick the box, they want an Albanian translator, I need an English translator, an Italian translator. We organized these interpreters and the people just did not show up unannounced. These are the problems we have. You tick off and say I'm coming, but the commitment is still too small.

A: So you have already talked about the social service and about the offers you make. Is there something like a diversity office in your school or canton that you can rely on? Some kind of organization or institution that you would say takes care of diversity.

B: Yes, we have the Office for Social Affairs (OSA) in the canton of Solothurn and they always hold an information evening for these parents, migrant parents. They present various offers there. They take care of that a little bit. And here in the community it is the integration officer. She receives these people, she accompanies them, she supports them, she asks them, she says how important it is to come to the parents' evening at school, to be there.

A: Do you receive information there? Is there any information material from OSA?

B: Yes, there is already. I don't get it sent to the school. If I do, the school secretary receives it. But what we do have is a guide to how the school is organized. We have that in different languages. We get it from the canton.

A: Great. Would you happen to have one of these?

B: Yes, I'm sure I can get one from the school secretariat. And you can find it on the net. I have to take a quick look. I can give it to you. We work with it. We sometimes give it to the parents as well, it's this app, which is available in many languages. It's often about education.

A: What is it like with the students here, those who are not from a migrant background? Is there an awareness of the privileges with those who already speak German, who come from here, who have a different status?

B: I think there is. They feel that again and again. But not the same for everyone. Depending on their educational background, they feel it more or less.

A: How would you see yourself in this field of migration and diversity? You as a principal with a lot of responsibility? You have to integrate both. How would you position yourself?

B: We keep saying that it's an opportunity, this difference, this diversity that we have at the school. Our teachers must see it as an opportunity, because it is another difficulty that actually comes with the school context. When you come to this school, you have to like to come into contact with foreign-language parents, with migrant parents. It should not bother you if someone comes with a headscarf. That is really everyday life here. The children really see that too. The diversity. We don't look at a child with dark skin in a funny way, on the contrary, there are many others. I am one of them. So, this multi-culture is very strong here. It is lived strongly, lived completely. We have absolutely no bullying stories from such groups, no violence things for this reason, so that's absolutely no issue.

A: It is not like that everywhere.

B: No, really. So sometimes a little in the school yard, that they simply use it and make a stupid comment, but never that more profound problems for this reason. Pure, pure Swiss children, maybe 10 percent, not more. They are often still in contact with a second foreign language, or the mother is foreign or the father is from another country.

C: Do you hear about problems like this in other schools or with, for other school principals? Is this a topic of conversation? Is this an issue that you discuss?

B: Yes, so we have a school here in the X, which is very rural. They have a Syrian refugee family and they looked at it differently. Well, it is also a different size of school, we are 450 children, there are 100 children. There, the family was observed and looked at more than in our school when a refugee family comes. It is also quite common that children come and go here. There surely less. With fewer children, fewer dynamics happen. But I would not say that there are big problems.

A: You have already given us that. Are these also the educational policy guidelines that you have? Does that come from the canton? Is that how you deal with it at school?

B: Yes, exactly. And the integration officer certainly knows a lot more.

A: When you hire a new teacher, do you pay special attention to cultural skills or because you just said that you have to come with that attitude?

B: Let's say for sure that you have to cope with these differences and that you really have a lot of foreign language speakers and the German language is very difficult to implement. That is already a certain willingness, a consciousness, which one must actually point out to the people.

A: Did you carry out evaluations with the teachers or is there another way you can have, for example, self-evaluations from the teachers, how they see the school climate in itself?

B: Yes, we always have an external school evaluation every six years. This is carried out by the canton, and the school climate and the teaching topic are always an issue, so there is absolutely no conspicuousness in terms of foreign language skills.

A: Would you say that because of this diversity, the students have different ideas about teaching because of different cultures, etc. What is it like at school? Is it possible to question the teaching, the status quo, so to speak? Or would you rather say, this is our school, we are in Switzerland, this is how we teach?

B: Yes, I think I would, I wouldn't know that they have the opportunity to question that. Maybe if they had that as a current topic. Well, I know that in the Advent season, the third grade looks at Christmas in different places and in this context it could also be that you look at schools in different places. Thematically there is the possibility.

A: If you hire teachers, you lead them as principal. You are responsible for the teachers to support and guide them in their existence, in their teaching. How do you do this specifically with teachers and children inside and outside the school? Do you have

specific techniques or tasks that you see? How do you guide or support the teachers in dealing with children with a migrant background inside and outside of school?

B: As I said, we offer that they can call in interpreters and if it really comes to difficult conversations, that it then makes sense that the school principal comes in and we have also already felt that a female person is not really beneficial. The main school principal has to present himself as a man because then it works. We have also organized further training. This is now the Skala project by Markus Neuenschwander. He had actually, how to deal with children, educational chances in heterogeneous school classes and how to influence the children's attitude with the teachers' attitude and in an extreme way also foreign language speakers. For example, if you say to a child that you did a great job, you get a 5 [grade system from 6 (best) to 1 (worst)], to a German-speaking child, what, you only get a 5? Very generally, of course, but this is a training on how my statements as a teacher affect the children's behavior. He has done a study on that, that is exciting.

A: And other trainings, for example anti-racism trainings? Is there something like that?

B: I think before I became principal here, there were the heritage language courses, we also have them and there they partly talked about the other cultures, so that the teachers are a bit more sensitive.

A: How would you describe it, to what extent do you incorporate the strengths of the students to guarantee a culturally sensitive and inclusive education?

B: Well, I think that because the children themselves are in this foreign language status, they are a little bit sensitized to it and they behave openly accordingly. They are open to it.

A: So they are culturally sensitive because you include interpreters and there is an integration officer here? Inclusion, how do you practice it?

B: Everything is integrated. What we haven't talked about yet is this foreign language class, F-class, that is, children who really come without any knowledge of German. It is a regionally organized foreign language class. There they learn German intensively in the

morning and in the afternoon, they are here in the school and then actually participate more or less.

A: Are there any other clubs? Ethnic associations, associations in the community that deal with this topic? Or are you more alone as a school that welcomes the children? Do you then bring the students there or are there other contact persons who then come to the school to support you?

B: You were also speaking about associations. There are all our village associations. They are sensitized and actually take in foreign-language or refugee children.

A: Do you have an example of a refugee child who has been accepted in an association here?

B: Yes, Jugi is certainly an issue. Yes, youth squad, it is actually a gymnastics club.

A: But not specifically? These are normal clubs that exist in a village. They do not publicly promote migration? Open for diversity?

B: Exactly. Other than that, I don't know any. There is a commission for society, and it has taken up the cause a bit, as a legislative goal. Little has been implemented yet.

C: Where do the foreigners come from? Which countries?

B: I'm bringing out the class lists. Portugal, Belgium, Italy, Germany, Eritrea, Syria, Macedonia, Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Zimbabwe, Russia, Serbia, Poland, Spain, Greece, Turkey, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Sri Lanka, Austria, Romania, Iraq, Denmark, Vietnam, they are perhaps naturalized, Morocco, Hungary, Afghanistan, Philippines. That's it.

C: That's many. How many? 28. One from each one or several?

B: Sometimes only one sometimes we have a lot. From Turkey we have many, many, Morocco two or three families, Bosnia, Kosovo, Italy, we have a lot, sometimes there are many groups. There is one family and sometimes many more come. And there are also

years when we have many Turks. Sri Lanka, we do not have so many anymore. It was a time when we had many more Tamils. And then there are those who are naturalized and you can't tell by looking at them, they speak Chinese at home. Or a daughter, the man went to the Dominican Republic and met a woman there and now the child came after. Then they got married and she is Swiss.

C: Can they come at any time of the year or must they start in September?

B: No, it's always possible.

C: And do you have responses from the Swiss families that are here? Are they having any reaction to diversity in the school?

B: It's normal here. It is always interesting. You are also very well received, help is offered. The children are invited, the refugees are invited. They are given toys or crayons. In our school it is also the case that when refugees come to us they get a so-called refugee box. We have provided a box for kindergarten children so that they can play games, a coloring pad, coloring pencils, paper, so that they have something to do. There are also refugee boxes for older children with scissors, glue, utensils, so that they can get to work and find meaningful activities.

C: Who does this?

B: The school.

C: Do the parents ever meet?

B: We have an offer. That means family integration meetings. We used to do this for the Eastern Bloc countries so that we could show them there how important school is, how important the tasks are for them as parents, but today it is open to all families. But there are sometimes groups where people meet and say, come to me and get to know each other. I also told the integration officers that we would like to have an integration café where parents could get to know each other.

