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# School development consulting in networks—current research perspectives from Austria

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While school development has for a long time focused on individual schools, current attention is internationally shifting toward forms of cooperation between schools and with various external partners in networks. School Development Consulting (SDC) is considered an important factor that is expected to make a significant contribution to the success of emerging school networks. This article focuses on school networks and their significance for school development, with additional support provided by SDC. The basis of the study is a content analysis of the perception of SDC within the school network “Shaping Society by Fostering Democracy in Schools” (SSDS) at the University of Education Upper Austria (Austria). This network serves as an example for school development within the framework of networks with additional support from SDC. The article aims to answer the questions of which supportive or hindering conditions can be identified in school development processes within school networks and which specific contribution does SDC make within these processes. For the analysis, 14 key actors involved in the school development and consulting process of the above-mentioned network were interviewed. The analysis reveals that SDC strengthens development processes within school networks by providing support, creating structures, mediating between the individual school level and the network level, and promoting transfer. At the same time, success factors such as practical relevance and educational expertise as characteristics of the consultants, as well as process design and sense-making as key activities, became evident. The findings highlight the importance of a stable and supportive school leader in school development processes. Finally, four professional functions of school development consultants within a school network were identified: *Continuity Function*, *Transfer Function*, *Coordination Function*, as well as *Expertise* and *Legitimacy Function*. As a result of the analysis, a recommendation is made for the further professionalization of SDC within school networks toward a collaborative, co-constructive SDC that initiates organizational transformation processes at the individual school level as well as the network level.

### KEYWORDS

guided expert interviews, networks, new governance, organizational education, school development consulting, school development

## 1 Introduction

Schools, as the central educational organizations in society, exist against the backdrop of current cultural and social changes. They must respond to new challenges and find a new educational mission in our changing world. From this, the necessity for “school development” arises. Cultural and social changes, new administrative regulations and curricular reforms have had a significant impact on school development policies in many European countries during the last years. This constellation gives rise to new challenges for established routines, practices and identities in schools and surrounding organizations in the local communities (Müller and Fahrenwald, 2023). Several studies have already identified a complex set of diverse conditions for success for school development reform projects. However, these studies consistently emphasize the relevance of the socio-spatial context as a condition for success (Rolff, 2016). Regional cooperation within broader educational landscapes thus becomes a central perspective for future-oriented school development, both in theoretical and practical educational considerations (Berkemeyer and Järvinen, 2011; Brühlmann and Rolff, 2015). In the context of new governance in the Austrian school system, which aims, among other things, to promote greater equity in educational opportunities, concepts such as decentralized governance and the regionalization of educational processes are gaining increasing importance. In this context, networking is attributed significant potential, as it is often more effective in addressing challenges than traditional state governance structures (Emmerich and Maag Merki, 2009). In particular, the ability to directly exchange knowledge, thereby creating and utilizing synergies, professionalizing teachers, fostering cooperation among various stakeholders, and enabling learning based on mutual trust, are highlighted as key advantages (Jungermann et al., 2018). In a multi-level system, school networks are considered as an intermediary governance tool for school development (Rauch and Korenjak, 2019). They provide a structure in which information can be exchanged and knowledge can be generated, thereby creating a foundation for the joint development of innovative concepts in teaching and school development (Dederig, 2007). Networks are thus moving to the center of school development theory and educational practice as a central perspective of sustainable school development (Berkemeyer and Järvinen, 2011; Brühlmann and Rolff, 2015).

When engaging in school development, it is beneficial to involve external support to gain additional resources. This is where school development consulting (SDC) comes into play—a common form of support in many school systems aimed at fostering the autonomous quality development of individual schools (Altrichter et al., 2021; Dederig, 2014). SDC is widely expected to contribute substantially to the success of school development processes, and its relevance is increasing in response to rising demand. This growing importance contrasts with a clear research deficit, particularly in Austria, where empirical work on SDC remains limited (Altrichter et al., 2021). In the context of school networks, SDC is considered to have supportive potential, as it is regarded as an important support measure for the successful development of school (Fahrenwald and Müller, 2022) particularly in the transfer (“recontextualization,” Fend, 2008) from the network level to the individual school level.

Given the to-date incomplete and limited literature on the linkage between school networks and SDC, this study addresses the central research gap by empirically examining the specific contribution of SDC for school development within networks.

To systematically close this gap, we build on Paseka (2023) model of school development based on Giddens’s structuration theory and extend it to the context of school networks. We situate the theoretical model within the context of school networks and position SDC as an intermediary actor at both the network level and the individual school level. The theoretical framework explains how network content is applied within schools (transfer) and how capacities skills are strengthened. To systematically analyze and discuss the specific contribution of SDC within a concrete network, we also identify conditions for successful school development both in general and in networks. In doing so, the approach directly contributes to the scholarly examination of SDC’s concrete influence on school development in networks.

Based on the current theoretical and empirical state of research, a more detailed analysis of school development consulting as a central support measure in networks appears to be of scientific relevance. Ultimately, this leads to the following research question, which is discussed in this article: Which conditions do the actors involved in a school network perceive as supportive or hindering when it comes to fostering school development processes and which specific contribution does SDC make within these processes?

## 2 Theoretical framework of school development through networking and SDC

The basis of the theoretical framework is the interplay between the agency of the actors, with their individual knowledge, skills, and attitudes [“structuring activities” or “structuring attempts” according to Altrichter and Langer (2008), or “agency” according to Paseka (2023)], and the structures underlying their actions. Structures become visible in rules and resources (Giddens, 1997). *Interpretative-semantic rules* give meaning to actions and arise from shared patterns of interpretation (e.g., informal rules, unwritten laws, behavioral norms within a school). *Normative-evaluative rules* define what is considered right or wrong. These are formalized (e.g., service regulations, school laws) and lead to consequences if they are not followed. *Resources* are means through which actors can act. These include *material resources* (e.g., financial allocations for schools) and *authoritative resources* (e.g., meaning, appreciation). These structures or organizational prerequisites are in tension with profession-specific structures that arise from the demands of professional action. The resulting contradictions must be situationally balanced by teachers in their daily work to remain capable of action (Paseka, 2023).

### 2.1 Schools within school networks

By embedding the school as an organization within the context of school networks, existing structures are disrupted (“structural liquefaction,” Altrichter and Langer, 2008) and expanded through new rules and resources. Expanded in the sense that there is (limited) change, stabilization, and/or replacement of structures, leading to a facilitation of work and a successful development process. In other words, all involved actors manage, through mutual coordination, to reflexively get a handle on their structures and reshape them in such a way that they achieve the desired effect (Altrichter and Langer,

2008). A school network, i.e., a network between schools and potentially other actors relevant to the educational task, can be understood as a specific form of social network. Like other social networks, it is based on the relationships of the involved individuals and aims to regulate coordination needs and optimize coordination processes to better deliver certain pedagogical and organizational services (e.g., the external representation of an individual school) (Wald and Jansen, 2007; Sydow, 2010). Complex tasks (e.g., initiated by education policy) can be solved more effectively and economically in this way. The special quality of task processing within the network is assumed to be achieved through trust, sustainable social relationships, coordinated behavioral expectations (rules), better quality and access to resources, the interaction of different competencies as well as the provision of alternative courses of action.

To be capable of action, actors possess knowledge: both discursively accessible, explicit knowledge and practical knowledge, which is not directly accessible through language but is instead embedded in the routines and self-evident practices of everyday life. This knowledge is the result of familial and professional socialization processes (within teacher education but also through the school as a workplace) (Paseka, 2023).

## 2.2 School development consulting

An additional actor in the field of agency, from whom a significant contribution to the success of school development processes is expected, is School Development Consulting (SDC). The task of school development consultants is to support individual schools in their organizational, professional, and instructional development in such a way that not only is school quality (in the sense of the quality framework for schools) improved, but also the school's capacity for self-regulation is strengthened (Altrichter et al., 2021; BMBWF, 2024). In Upper Austria, SDC is institutionally anchored within the University of Education Upper Austria (BMBWF, 2024). This institutional positioning creates additionally an interface between practice and research and, thereby, opens a perspective for developing SDC within networks in the sense of Research-Practice Partnerships (RPPs), understood as long-term collaborations which work toward educational improvement and sustainable transformation (Farrell et al., 2021). According to Adenstedt (2016), SDC refers to forms of work and collaboration between individual schools and external educators who are not part of the school's teaching staff. These external

educators use targeted, professional approaches to provide school-specific solutions to problems or to enhance the problem-solving skills of the teaching staff. The approaches vary in terms of content-related aspects (goals, topics) and organizational aspects (duration, content sequencing, target group, etc.) To achieve this, they offer specific services such as alternative courses of action, tailored solutions, broadening the school's perspective by providing an external viewpoint, breaking routines, process facilitation, creating or increasing acceptance, and imparting new knowledge (Dedering, 2024). SDC can be positioned on a continuum between the two poles of expert/specialist consulting and process consulting, or conceptually distinguished between instruction-centered SDC and organization-centered SDC (Figure 1) (Dedering et al., 2022; Goecke, 2018). A clear separation between the two types presented is not always possible.

To clarify the significance of the concept of consulting, it is important to reflect on the different implications and effects of terms that often appear together, such as “consulting” and “guidance,” from a language-analytical perspective (Krainz, 2025). This analysis makes it possible to more clearly differentiate the objectives and effects of consulting and guidance and to integrate them more consciously into the context of school development. While consulting, through its intervention-oriented nature, carries the potential for change—encouraging the questioning of existing structures and the exploration of new possibilities—guidance is more adaptation-oriented and aims at stabilization and support within existing frameworks (Krainz, 2025).

Goecke (2018) classifies SDC as a “professional form of consulting” that should be regarded as “organizational consulting.” His theoretical approach to SDC is based on organizational consulting as a social system (Dedering et al., 2013; Goecke, 2018), which focuses on three different system levels: the client system, the consultant system, and the consulting system (Goecke, 2018).

From the perspective of the *client system*, the following three elements are particularly relevant: (1) the organizational and structural prerequisites (e.g., type of school, size, stage of development, or prerequisites in the form of motivational attitudes toward counseling), (2) the expectations of the consulting (either clearly formulated and described or very vague), and (3) the perception of the consulting (intentions, goals, and strategies of the consulting that are received and influence one's own actions, which in turn lead to interactions with the consultant's actions) (Goecke, 2018).

From the perspective of the *consultant system*, the following three elements, which determine the actions of the consultants, are

<i>Expert/Specialist Consulting</i>	<i>Process Consulting</i>
The consultant supports the school with a specific problem by contributing their expertise and collaboratively developing a <b>dialogical</b> solution with the school actors.	A framework is created in which the school actors are empowered to solve their problems <b>independently</b> .
<i>Instruction-Centered SDC</i>	<i>Organization-Centered SDC</i>
The focus is on the topic of <b>instructional development</b> . School development consultants possess a high level of subject-specific expertise.	The focus is on the <b>organizational structures of the school</b> . School development consultants possess cross-disciplinary and communicative competencies.

FIGURE 1  
Types of consulting (Dedering et al., 2022; Goecke, 2018).

particularly relevant: (1) knowledge and competencies (scientific knowledge of the counselors, knowledge based on their profession and experience in previous consulting processes; personal, communicative, content-related, and methodological competencies), (2) strategies and concepts (the counselors' concept for their own professional actions), and (3) second-order observations (observing changes that occur in connection with the consulting) (Goecke, 2018).

The *consulting system* encompasses all interventions and interactions between the client and consultant systems within the framework of the consulting process, from the initial contact and the creation of a consulting contract to consulting interventions and final reports (Goecke, 2018).

In the joint actions of the actors, structures can be changed, reshaped, or reimagined and implemented. What is crucial is the ability of the participants to reflexively intervene in the flow of actions, question routines, and act differently than expected (Altrichter and Langer, 2008; Paseka, 2023). Networking plays a central role in this process: it creates space for exchange, joint reflection, trust, sustainable social relationships, coordinated behavioral expectations, better quality and access to information, the interaction of different competencies, and the generation of knowledge. Adapting the content learned in the school network to the context of the individual school ("recontextualization," Fend, 2008) is the responsibility of the respective school itself. This adaptation from the network level to the level of the individual school is a critical point that must be considered in school development work (Holtappels, 2019). This is where SDC comes into play, effectively supporting this process with the help of specific strategies by creating a framework in which actors can make their goals and actions visible, drive a collective learning process, and thereby achieve quality improvement. School development consultants support this process with their subject-matter and process knowledge, creating a certain distance from the school.

## 2.3 Conditions for successful school development in general and in networks

To systematically analyze and discuss the specific contribution of SDC within a concrete network, it is necessary to identify which aspects promote or hinder school development in general and within networks.

Gräsel (2010) distinguishes four dimensions of characteristics that either promote or hinder school development: first, the innovation itself; second, the teachers; third, the individual school; and fourth, the environment and its support for the transfer. If innovation is perceived as a benefit or a facilitation of work, it is more likely to be adopted. If teachers feel competent with the innovation and are able to individually modify it, the likelihood of adoption increases (Gräsel, 2010). Within the individual school, the support of the school leadership (Gräsel et al., 2006) and collaboration among the teaching staff are two key factors for successful school development (Gräsel, 2010). If the environment is relatively stable and there are not too many other innovations, this can facilitate the implementation of the innovation (Gräsel, 2010). The school leadership plays a central role in shaping the school development process: it initiates and supports processes but can also hinder them (Rolff, 2018b). If processes are enforced against the will of the teaching staff by leveraging hierarchy, resistance may arise (Terhart, 2016). Additional hindering factors for school development include a lack of scientific authorities for practice, a shortage of change agents, and the absence of economic incentives for change, as the school system is not subject to economic competition (Gräsel, 2010). Traditional values and attitudes also influence the adoption of

innovations (Gräsel, 2010). Of particular interest for the present discussion context is the fact that school development is particularly successful when schools collaborate with other schools (Rolff, 2018a). In the context of school networks, numerous forms of cooperation occur, which also include potential external partners such as NGOs, cultural institutions, environmental protection associations, sports clubs etc. If universities are also part of a school network, their expertise in scientific research and findings can be utilized within Research Practice Partnerships (RPPs) (Penuel et al., 2021). For school network work to be perceived as successful by participants, mutual trust and supportive school leadership that fosters acceptance of the network within the teaching staff are particularly relevant (Fussnagel and Gräsel, 2012). It is the responsibility of the school leadership to ensure that their school is actively engaged in the school network (Brown, 2019). The importance of regular school network meetings has been empirically substantiated (Gurvich, 2019). The experiences of other schools facing similar challenges can be particularly relevant for school practice and thus beneficial for a school network (Buhren and Rolff, 2012). School networks can be considered as instruments of school development when they not only initiate individual learning processes for the participating actors but also transfer the learning process from the network level to the level of the individual school. A transfer strategy can facilitate this (Manitius and Berkemeyer, 2015), for example, through SDC. The advantages include, among other things, providing the individual school with more resources (Buhren and Rolff, 2012). Additionally, support through expert consulting can provide input, mediate impartially, incorporate the latest research findings, and offer a new perspective by reevaluating work and achievements (Buhren and Rolff, 2012). Findings on the connection between school networks and the role of SDC by Kamarianakis and Webs (2019) indicate that school development consultants contribute in three central ways: First, they facilitate the transfer between individual schools and networks by collaboratively developing and demonstrating practical ways to use network content to support and implement the development goals of individual schools. Second, they encourage the establishment and expansion of sustainable structures within schools to support the transfer and implementation of network content (e.g., through collaborative work on embedding concepts in the school program or institutionalizing teams). Third, they assist schools in selecting topics for (internal) teacher training, considering the schools' development goals.

## 3 Case study

### 3.1 SDC in the school network "Shaping Society by Fostering Democracy in Schools" in Upper Austria

The subject of the following presented study is the school network "Shaping Society by Fostering Democracy in Schools" (SSDS) in Upper Austria. The network aims to promote democratic quality development in individual schools and serves as a support system for participating schools by providing additional resources, particularly additional support through SDC.

The school network was established in 2020 and aims to "contribute to the development of a democratic school culture and the establishment of sustainable regional educational partnerships [...]" (Fahrenwald,

2024). The development of this network is overseen by the University of Education Upper Austria and funded by the foundation “Bildung Tomorrow<sup>1</sup>” in Vienna. The core idea is to connect schools that are committed to democratic school development and to facilitate continuous and professional exchange among them. The schools participating in the network integrate the “Service-Learning” approach into their teaching and collaborate with either external or internal partners as part of project work. The goal is to enable students to experience democratic participation and societal engagement while also opening schools to the broader community. Currently, 10 schools are part of the network: two primary schools, four middle schools, three general secondary schools, and one vocational secondary school. Admission to the network primarily occurs through self-identification and application by the school or through targeted invitations from the network. Many of the schools already have years of experience with (socially engaged) project work and are now systematically aligning their project work with democratic education principles through Service-Learning.

From the outset, participating schools receive guidance and support in their school development processes related to the implementation of Service-Learning from a team of school development consultants from the University of Education Upper Austria, consisting of a tandem of two consultants per school. Additionally, the schools benefit from continuous scientific monitoring and research, relevant professional development opportunities, the training of multipliers, and annual networking meetings. Support is also provided by the NGO “füruns. Zentrum für Zivilgesellschaft,”<sup>2</sup> which facilitates connections between schools and external partners from civil society. Furthermore, the Austrian network’s international exchange with the Service-Learning network in Berlin<sup>3</sup> and the Erasmus+ project “Service-Learning for Democracy in Europe<sup>4</sup>” (SLEAD) (Fahrenwald, 2024) provides additional inspiration.

The SSDS school network functions as a support system for school quality development on two levels: At the individual school level, on-site support is provided by school development consultants as part of SDC. At the network level, schools collaborate to advance shared school development processes, with a focus on trust-based cooperation, mutual exchange, and the joint use of resources (Table 1).

### 3.2 Research design

The empirical study was preceded by a literature review on school development through networking and SDC (Froschauer, 2025). It shows that a network-based organization of school development, supported by SDC, could promote the realization of research-established conditions for successful school development in three dimensions: A professionally organized school network with clear objectives and coordinated process design supports school improvement when consulting is closely aligned and, where necessary, assumes network management to prevent interference and leverage synergies. Networks create exchange, trust, and synergies for innovation; school development consultants ensure transfer between the individual school and the network, foster sustainable

TABLE 1 Levels of support within the SSDS school network (Froschauer, 2025).

Individual school level	Network level
On-site support for individual schools by school development consultants (SDC)	Collaboration with other schools to advance joint school development processes (collaboration, trust, exchange)

structures, and align professional development with development goals, thereby generating continuity, professionalization, and additional support. Networks offer training and best-practice exchange, while consulting identifies suitable examples, provides support to the needs of the individual school and ensures that school and network processes do not hinder one another but instead interconnect and reinforce each other.

To empirically differentiate the dimensions identified in the review, and given the exploratory nature of the study, a qualitative research design was chosen. This approach aims to gather detailed information about the school development process of individual schools within the network and the support elements perceived during this process, acknowledging the limited research to date on SDC within the context of school networks.

This study presented here follows a qualitative descriptive-exploratory approach, based on guided expert interviews (Helfferrich, 2019). The interview guide was based on challenges and success factors for school development in general, as well as for school development within networks, as described in the literature to allow participants to report as freely as possible in order to obtain experience-near descriptions of concrete events and actions in the school development process, in line with the research question. It served as a thematic frame with a focus on situational episodes rather than mere attitudes. Opinions and memories were elicited in line with the topic by first using open entry questions from the guide and subsequently applying systematic deepening and clarification techniques. Specifically, for example, following the open question about the perception of the SSDS school network, episode questions were used by asking about concrete events, impulses, processes, and conditions regarding the school development process. Paraphrasing, interim summaries, and follow-up questions were used to refine meanings. Contrast questions were used to make situations and conditions visible (e.g., “Were there perhaps critical points and/or stressful situations within the consulting process?”). Through this way of conducting the interviews—from the general to the specific—not only perceptions were gathered, but also living experiences and causal relationships could be reconstructed.

### 3.3 Composition of the sample

As part of the study, actors/stakeholders most involved in the school development and consulting processes at the individual schools and in the establishment of the school network were interviewed ( $N = 14$ ). The sample included six schools (two elementary schools, two lower track schools, and two higher track schools), three teams of two school development consultants each, and the project coordinator of the school network. At each school, either the principal or the project-leading teacher participated; in one case, both actors participated together (Table 2).

The relationships established between the interviewer and the interviewees during school network meetings fostered a trusting conversational atmosphere and enabled open and nuanced insights.

1 Bildung Tomorrow. (n.d.). Bildung Tomorrow. <https://bildung-tomorrow.at/> (Accessed December 1, 2025).

2 Für Uns. (n.d.). Für Uns. <https://www.fuer-uns.at/> (Accessed December 1, 2025).

3 Service-Learning in Deutschland. (n.d.). Service-Learning in Deutschland. <https://www.servicelearning.de/> (Accessed December 1, 2025).

4 SLEAD Europe. (n.d.). SLEAD Europe. <https://slead-europe.eu/> [Accessed December 1, 2025].

TABLE 2 Composition of the sample.

Type of school	Location	Participating role	Gender	Date	Codification
Elementary school 1	City	Principal	$m = 1$	03/02/2025	I6_03.02._SL
Elementary school 2	State	Project-leading teacher	$f = 1$	04/12/2024	I3_04.12._PL
Lower track 1	Country	Principal	$m = 1$	02/09/2024	I2_02.09._SL
Lower track 2	Country	Project-leading teacher	$f = 1$	20/08/2024	I1_20.08._PL
Higher track 1	City	Principal + project-leading teacher	$m = 2$	28/01/2025	I5_28.01._SL + PL
Higher track 2	State	Project-leading teacher	$f = 1$	28/01/2025	I4_28.01._PL
SDC		Participating role	Gender	Date	
Team elementary school		School development consultants	$f = 2$	02/12/2024	I2_02.12._SEB
Team lower track		School development consultants	$f = 2$	13/11/2024	I1_13.11._SEB
Team higher track		School development consultants	$m = 1, w = 1$	03/12/2024	I3_03.12._SEB
		Participating role	Gender	Date	
		Project coordinator	$f = 1$	27/02/2025	CF_27.02._1

### 3.4 Data analyses

For the analysis, the structured qualitative content analysis according to Kuckartz and Rädiker (2022) was chosen, as it allows for a systematic yet flexible analysis of extensive interview data. The category system was developed based on supportive and hindering conditions for facilitating school development processes within a school network. To ensure intersubjective traceability, Table 3 provides a list of the category system, including coding rules and exemplary anchor examples. The three main categories “School-Internal Factors,” “School-External Factors,” and “Network-Related Factors” were developed based on existing research on success factors for school development processes and school networks. In the first coding round, they were established as deductive main categories with corresponding subcategories in MaxQDA. Within the subcategory “School Development Consulting,” relevant text passages were inductively divided into subcategories. For the main category “Network-Related Factors,” the subcategory “Opening of School Development Consulting” was added inductively. This allowed the analysis to be both theory- and data-driven. During the course of the analysis, iterative adjustments to the categories were made (Kuckartz and Rädiker, 2024).

## 4 Content analysis of the significance of SDC for school development processes in school networks

Based on the research question “Which conditions do the actors involved in a school network perceive as supportive or hindering when it comes to fostering school development processes and which specific contribution does SDC make within these processes?,” supportive and hindering conditions were identified. The corresponding categories and subcategories are documented in the coding manual (Table 3). Since SDC operates at both the individual school level and network level, the codes were assigned to both levels. The following analysis examines the contribution of SDC for school development processes within a school network in greater depth: first, stakeholders’

perceptions are analyzed, subsequently, SDC’s role within the SSDS school network is specified.

### 4.1 Perception of SDC in the SSDS school network by stakeholders

Based on the accounts of the respondents, it can be noted that SDC within the SSDS school network is perceived as a mediating, trust-building, professionally supportive, transfer-promoting, structuring, and network-stabilizing entity. It connects the level of individual schools with the network level as well as the involved actors, thereby creating the foundation for school development processes. A particularly significant contribution of SDC in the context of the SSDS school network seems to lie in ensuring that the ideas developed within the network do not remain abstract but become effective within the specific contexts of individual schools.

To achieve this, SDC provides resources: on the one hand, school development consultants create a trusting framework that enables school actors to structurally implement the Service-Learning approach. In this context, the practical relevance and the well-founded expertise of the school development consultants prove to be particularly important. In the present study, the consultants are exclusively school-affiliated, with some additionally working as teachers, which further deepens their expertise and understanding of school processes.

A central aspect that stands out in the work of SDC within the SSDS school network is the emphasis on expert/specialist consulting as opposed to general process consulting. The consultants see their strength primarily in providing content-related and practically oriented support for teaching development. This is also highlighted by the statements of one school development consultant:

“I would also say that supporting the Service-Learning schools has been an area where we already work. It fits very well with our own focus because we ourselves have been working in this way in our teaching practice from very early on, so it suited us well. It’s different, for example, from when a school wants to introduce a new branch and needs a process for that. But when it comes to teaching, this has been an area that personally aligned very well with us.” (I3\_03.12.\_SEB, Pos. 110)

TABLE 3 Coding manual.

	Category	Definition/Coding rule	Exemplary anchor example
Individual school level	<b>Internal school factors</b>		
	1. School management	<i>The category of school management</i> includes content explicitly related to school management as an initiating and supporting factor in school development processes (e.g., school management supports the project) or, conversely, a lack of support.	Stable and supportive school management plays an important role in a school development process.
	2. Project management	<i>Project management</i> includes content related to the commitment (e.g., reliability, competence) and standing of this actor within the teaching staff.	This depends on whether the project manager understands this very well, is convinced of it, and is passionate about it, or whether a certain, well, consistent attitude toward the project tradition prevails.
	3. Acceptance and participation of as many actors as possible involved in the entire school partnership	The category of <i>acceptance and participation of as many actors as possible involved in the entire school partnership</i> includes content relating to the attitude and identification of these actors with school development (e.g., existing interest, previous experience, and seriousness of the topic).	It is important that the whole team, not just one person, says we are doing this now because we want to look good and perhaps because of our school development plan, but because it is a matter close to our hearts and because the whole team is behind it and involved.
	4. Predefined structures and resources	The area of <i>predefined structures and resources</i> includes content related to the workload perceived by the individual school as a result of participating in the project.	There is a lot of other work to be done, and learning through engagement also requires organizational effort. If you do not always feel like you have to do this and that. It is often seen as extra work by many people. I believe that more schools would do something like this if they had more time for it, if other things did not take over so much.
	5. Changing actors	<i>Changing actors</i> are defined as content related to personnel changes at the school (e.g., stable school management, stable teaching staff) that are brought into connection with the school development process.	The change of principal contrasts the “old days” with the “new days,” and the importance of the topic is lost.
	<b>External factors</b>		
	6. Scientific approach	The category of <i>scientific approach</i> includes content that has an influence on the school development process due to the project’s connection to the PH.	With this learning through engagement background, or rather with this scientific aspect that is now coming into play, the whole thing has taken on additional importance. In other words, it is taken more seriously, it is perceived differently, now at school and also by us teachers, and it is easier to convey to parents.
	7. School development consulting		
	a. Practical relevance and pedagogical knowledge	The area of <i>practical relevance and pedagogical knowledge</i> covers content relating to the characteristics of school development consultants (e.g., independent teaching experience, extensive background knowledge on the subject, understanding of schools through their own experience as teachers, perception of the internal perspective of schools, empathy).	The schools valued the school development consultants’ experience as teachers and their authentic credibility.
	b. Stability, flexibility, and meaning	The category of <i>stability, flexibility, and meaning</i> refers to the attitude of the school development consultants during the consulting process (e.g., no pressure, not pushy, offering alternative options) as well as to the way the people involved in the consulting process interact with each other (e.g., appreciation, motivation, personal contact, benevolent attitude, scientific approach, trust, empathy).	Flexibility and empathy toward the everyday school life of a teacher or headteacher; a support process that took the pace of the individual school very much into account. The school development consultants always gave me the feeling that what happens at your school is something very special.
c. Process design	<i>Process design</i> includes content related to the design of the consulting process (e.g., clarification of tasks, definition of goals and process steps, clarity of roles).	Schools appreciate clear, step-by-step work as well as regularity and commitment in the support provided.	
d. Situation at the individual school	The category “ <i>situation at the individual school</i> ” includes content relating to the school’s response to SEB (e.g., lack of response from schools, school management as decision-makers and responsible parties at the school location during the counseling period).	Finding a balance between schools “needing us” and “we should keep an eye on them” and “we are annoying them.” School management that does not approve SEB proposals.	

(Continued)

TABLE 3 (Continued)

	Category	Definition/Coding rule	Exemplary anchor example
Network level	<b>Network-related factors</b>		
	8. Connection to research	The area of <i>connection to research</i> covers content that addresses the role of the partnership between research and schools (e.g., a sense of security through established topics, impetus for innovation, SEB, motivation and a spirit of optimism, access to scientific findings).	First of all, we were already a little curious about new things at the time, because the old management did not really like that. And then the opportunity arose, so to speak. Then there was also the guidance and support from the teacher training college. And I think those were really the key factors for the success at the time or for this spirit of optimism.
	9. Networking meetings and exchange	<i>Networking meetings and exchanges</i> include content that addresses cooperation and exchange with other schools (e.g., exchange on similar problems or successes) as a prerequisite for school development and motivation to continue.	Meetings where people got together, talked to each other, found out what was happening in other schools, and the other schools also presented themselves. So that was very valuable and provided input for further actions.
	10. Predefined structures at individual schools and school management	<i>The predefined structures at individual schools and school management</i> include content related to the individual school (e.g., attitudes and resources) and the central role of school management in networking (e.g., commitment).	And it [the SDC] would take some of the burden off my shoulders, because at the moment I feel like everything depends on me. But really everything depends on me. The hardest part of the whole thing is motivating my colleagues and convincing the critical voices. What I heard most often was, "Now my lessons are being canceled again, and I need those lessons for schoolwork and the matriculation exam." And I hope that my principal will come to the networking meeting this time. Then we'll see if the spark catches, so to speak. Hopefully, I'll also manage to get some colleagues to come with me again. If you go alone, I think the last time I was there, I was alone. That is a bit of a problem, because if I'm the only multiplier, then it becomes a bit difficult.
	11. Opening up school development consulting	The opening of <i>school development consulting</i> includes content related to activities that school development consultants have taken on beyond the individual school.	But fundamentally, that is the difference, in my opinion, because we consultants always exchange ideas with each other, keep each other up to date, and also get ideas from one another. But when you are consulting with an individual school, those are individual processes somehow, sometimes completely different from working in a network, I would say. That is probably the difference. The exchange and the fact that you are engaging with the schools at the network meetings exchanging ideas with the schools and with colleagues.

This statement highlights that SDC within the school network is particularly effective in providing expert/specialist consulting and practical support to teachers. In contrast to process consulting, which focuses on the problem-solving competence of the client system, the emphasis here is on the further development of teaching concepts and the promotion of innovative pedagogical approaches. The consultants contribute not only theoretical knowledge but also their own practical experiences, which increases the acceptance and effectiveness of their guidance among school actors.

The significance of expert/specialist consulting in the context of the SSDS school network stands in tension with existing scientific findings that primarily describe SDC as long-term process support in the field of organizational development. Studies such as those by [Dedering et al. \(2013\)](#), [Adenstedt \(2016\)](#), and [Hofbauer and Bernhard \(2023\)](#) emphasize that school development consultants often act as process experts who assist schools with comprehensive and complex tasks related to school development. In particular, the study by [Hofbauer and Bernhard \(2023\)](#) shows that the vast majority of surveyed school development consultants perceive themselves as process experts.

A key difference that must be considered in the present study is the specific context of a school network. The findings of this study suggest that within the SSDS school network, expert/specialist consulting focused on the implementation of the Service-Learning approach is perceived by both the consultants and school actors as particularly effective and appropriate. This may be partly because schools involved in a school network often already have some prior experience with school development and innovations, and the implementation of the Service-Learning approach is guided by quality criteria that provide structure. In this case, the consultants can specifically address the unique needs of the actors and provide practical and scientifically grounded support:

“The big advantage we have at our school, and this might sound a bit odd, but it really is the case, is that because I have already done a lot in this area and have repeatedly worked on it, I am very well-informed. So, in principle, we only discussed the framework conditions. Everything else, I then passed on or managed within the school. As a result, the need for support was not as great as it might be in some other schools.” (I6\_03.02.\_SL, Pos. 16)

The studies by [Dedering et al. \(2013\)](#) and [Adenstedt \(2016\)](#) refer to SDC in a broader context, which often involves fundamental and structural changes within individual schools. In such contexts, which are frequently characterized by profound organizational transformations, process consulting appears to play a central role in enabling long-term and sustainable changes. However, the results of the present study indicate that within a school network, where exchange and collaboration between schools on a specific topic (*Service-Learning*) are the primary focus, expert/specialist consulting can gain greater importance.

The results of the present study indicate that in a school network based on trust, stable relationships, collaboration, as well as exchange and networking between schools, professional consultation as a form of guidance on equal footing can gain relevance. The respondents emphasized that SDC specifically supports the translation of the network's abstract ideas into concrete measures tailored to the context of individual schools. In this process, no pressure was exerted by SDC. Instead, the SSDS school network and SDC were perceived as a

source of guidance and as an opportunity to make the work of individual schools visible, recognized, and appreciated.

A school principal described the role of the SDC in the following words:

“[...] like buoys in the school routine, which one could use for orientation, where specific things were agreed upon, and where it was then checked whether we had achieved them or not.” (I2\_02.09.\_SL, Pos. 33)

This statement illustrates that SDC, for him, represents a supportive and pleasant process, comparable to a visit to the hairdresser or a relaxed coffee break, where one can sit back and receive positive impulses. In this context, the consulting is perceived as a pleasant asset made accessible through membership in the network. It provides scientifically grounded insights and structured professional advice in manageable portions, which is appreciated by the participants.

At the same time, a tension becomes apparent between the trusting collaboration in the spirit of the network idea and the objectives of SDC, which aim to improve school quality and break established routines. It is interesting that even the school development consultants themselves expressed critical views about the consulting process within the Service-Learning school network:

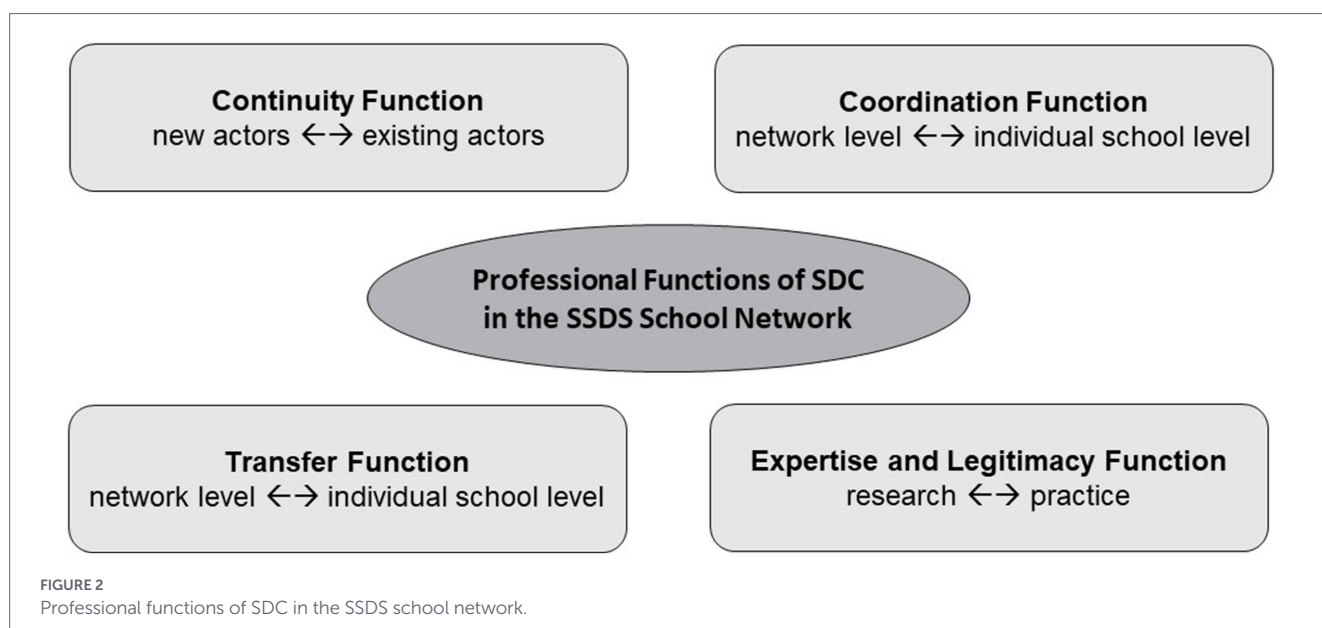
“I mean, fundamentally, they [the individual school] experienced school development consulting positively in this context because it was a form of support. But to what extent, well... for me, there are still some parameters where I would say there is room for improvement.” (I1\_13.11.\_SEB, Pos. 39)

“Yes, I sometimes almost had the feeling, we didn't contact them [the individual school] often anyway, but that sometimes it didn't come across the way we had actually intended.” (I1\_13.11.\_SEB, Pos. 43)

It seems that the consulting did not always achieve the necessary depth to initiate the desired change processes, while simultaneously attempting to foster collaboration in the spirit of the network. This issue becomes particularly evident in the statement of a consultant who, after the microphone was turned off, even described the consulting as “pseudo-consulting.” Overall, it becomes clear that SDC within the SSDS school network faces the contradiction of, on the one hand, initiating whole-school change processes, and on the other hand, creating offerings that are “easy to digest” in the spirit of the network idea (cooperation, trust, exchange) to promote acceptance and prevent schools from leaving the network. The critical feedback from the consultants should therefore be taken as an opportunity to consciously reflect on the specific characteristics of consulting within networks and to further develop the consulting approach in such a way that the interaction of both support systems (SDC and school networks) can be better aligned.

## 4.2 Role understanding of SDC in the SSDS school network

To better understand the contributions of SDC within the SSDS school network, its role was analyzed and divided into four professional functions (see [Figure 2](#)) that SDC fulfills in this context. These functions highlight the significant importance of SDC for school development, both at the individual school level and the network level,



particularly regarding sustainability. The following sections provide a detailed explanation of these functions and examine their relevance to the interaction between the two support systems in the context of school development.

The evaluation shows that staff turnover, particularly in key positions such as school leadership or project management, represents one of the greatest challenges for the continuity of school development processes:

“[...] this teacher, who was so highly committed, has since retired, and the project immediately came to a halt. In general, one must say that school development processes are the first to stagnate when crises arise or when there are personnel changes. [...] The project progresses as well as it can when the people behind it are fully committed, but as soon as someone is transferred, retires, or there is a change in leadership, it very quickly and often comes to a standstill.” (I1\_13.11.\_SEB, Pos. 18)

The *Continuity Function* of SDC therefore plays a crucial role in ensuring the long-term effectiveness and sustainability of school development processes in the context of a school network. Its aim is to secure the stability and sustainability of these processes, particularly during times of staff turnover. By preserving and transferring knowledge and experience, it ensures that development processes are not disrupted by personnel changes. The results of the study suggest that school development consultants should develop targeted measures to promote continuity within school networks. This includes strategies for the handover and transfer of goals and knowledge during staff changes, to facilitate the integration of new actors and ensure the school’s continued participation in the network.

The *Transfer Function* of SDC involves the dissemination of knowledge, experience and best practices between the network level and the individual school level, as well as within the school itself. A key aspect of this function is recontextualization (Fend, 2008): content and approaches are adapted to the specific contexts of individual schools and sustainably implemented. This ensures that the ideas

developed within the network do not remain abstract but become effective in practice. In this context, a school principal describes:

“The exchange was important. That was the most important thing. Simply the informal exchange about what is possible, what we are doing. And possibly also whether they have any ideas, suggestions for improvement, or additions, extensions. That was simply the most important thing. This exchange and perhaps also the recognition that we are on the right track. So that we are not heading in the wrong direction, but that our story is on the right path. That was what mattered.” (I6\_03.02.\_SL, Pos. 25)

The *Coordination Function* is a specific task of SDC within networks. It involves the organizational design and structuring of network activities, for example, through the planning and implementation of network meetings in collaboration with the network coordination team. SDC ensures that activities within the network are carried out in a structured manner and that processes are aligned. This function is essential for promoting collaboration among the various actors in the network and creating clear guidance. The coordination function requires school development consultants to go beyond traditional consulting roles and take on new tasks specifically tailored to working within school networks. This includes not only the organizational planning of network meetings but also active participation in team meetings with other school development consultants within the network:

“But fundamentally, that’s the difference, in my opinion, because we consultants always exchange ideas with each other, keep each other up to date, and also get ideas from one another. But when you’re consulting with an individual school, those are individual processes somehow, sometimes completely different from working in a network, I would say. That’s probably the difference. The exchange and the fact that you’re engaging with the schools at the network meetings exchanging ideas with the schools and with colleagues.” (I2\_02.12.\_SEB, Pos. 80)

In the SSDS school network, school development consultants become central actors who coordinate and promote collaboration between schools and potentially other stakeholders relevant to the educational mission. This requires regular exchange and alignment among the school development consultants. The coordination function thus necessitates an evolution of the SDC role, focusing more on collaborative and organizational work within school networks. Network meetings and team sessions provide an important platform to fulfill this function and to ensure the sustainability of network activities. The willingness of SDC to embrace these new tasks is crucial for securing the long-term effectiveness and efficiency of school networks.

The *Expertise and Legitimacy Function* of SDC positions them at the intersection of practice and research. SDC acts as a mediator and actively shapes the collaboration between these two areas. They promote the participation of schools and support the joint development of practice-relevant solutions based on scientific findings. The expertise and legitimacy function of SDC involves not only the transfer of knowledge but also the creation of trust, acceptance, and legitimacy for change processes.

“Then, from my boss who otherwise wasn’t really known for initiating innovative processes this information suddenly came, and I think it was very important for her that it came from the University of Education Upper Austria. Yes, that it was something solid and credible. That it was a university professor who had made contact. That gave her the impression that this was something significant. If it had come from me or from my colleagues, then it wouldn’t have been seen as much. In that sense, in our situation at the time, it was immensely important that, first, the contact came from the PH [University of Education Upper Austria], and second, that there was actual support from these school development consultants. As I said, for our school at that time, it was very, very beneficial. It probably got the whole process started in the first place.” (I4\_28.01.\_PL, Pos. 12)

This statement of a project-leading teacher makes clear that the school leadership, which was previously not known for initiating innovative processes, was motivated by the connection to research to actively support the development process.

## 5 Discussion

The presented empirical study provides initial insights for developing a better understanding of the specific contribution of SDC within school networks, using the example of the school network “Shaping Society by Fostering Democracy in Schools” in Upper Austria. Returning to the starting point—that school development can be understood as individual, organizational and inter-organizational learning enacted through networking and SDC—the findings confirm that SDC indeed fosters this learning, contributing positively to school development through networking. SDC can potentially be perceived as an entity for the sustainable preservation and transfer of knowledge, goals, and experiences during personnel changes, as a (professional) supporter of schools in development processes, as a coordinator of network activities, and as a mediator between practice and academia. In particular, SDC can contribute through these roles to ensuring the continuity and retention of schools within the network.

The four professional functions of school development consultants in the SSDS school network identified in the interview study—*Continuity Function*, *Transfer Function*, *Coordination Function*, and *Expertise and Legitimacy Function*—align with the three dimensions outlined in the literature review (author, in press) for the targeted support of school development through networking and SDC. In the Continuity Function, SDC ensures goal clarity and continuity, so that knowledge and experiences are preserved and carried forward over the long term (even in the face of personnel changes). The study confirms the transfer-promoting function of SDC in networks: SDC supports the transfer of knowledge, experiences, and best practices between the network level and the individual school level, as well as within schools. It ensures that content is adapted to the specific contexts of individual schools. In the Coordination Function, as well as in the Expertise and Legitimacy Function, the potential for quality development and assurance becomes evident, along with support for sustainability through the exchange of best-practice examples at regular network meetings and through building bridges between science and practice.

Problematic for the supportive role of SDC in school development through networking become tensions that arise from the discrepancy between the principles of networks based on equality, collaborative partnership, and trust—and the traditional notion of SDC, which often implies authority differences between participants. Particularly critical is the perception that, in some cases, no clear consulting position can be found (“pseudo-consulting”). This self-description points to the mentioned role ambiguity. There is a risk that school development consulting within school networks may disappoint expectations and leave potential untapped.

It thus becomes clear that the identified roles can only be performed effectively if SDC is actively integrated into individual school development processes and its expertise is taken seriously.

Due to the institutional anchoring of SDC at the University of Education Upper Austria, SDC operates at the interface between research and practice. In the SSDS school network, this partnership creates supportive conditions for school development at the individual school level in terms of a sense of security through an established theme, impulses for innovation, motivation, and access to scientific evidence. SDC is a key factor in bridging practice and research. The professional functions of SDC in the SSDS school network show that they are highly compatible with the international *Research-Practice Partnership* discourse (Coburn and Penuel, 2016; Fishman et al., 2013) for theory-practice interrelationship in school development processes. Viewed in this way, the SSDS school network is an approach in which the partnership between research and practice in the context of school networks is strongly supported by school development consultants (who are not active researchers):

- building trust-based cooperative relationships among the actors involved,
- enabling individual schools to make sense of their knowledge and, on that basis, expand their options for action,
- providing actors with orientation through a shared understanding of goals, processes, and ways of working, thereby contributing to the structuring of school development processes.

There is room to strengthen the explicit interrelationship of research and development. At the network level, SDC serves as a point of connection by inviting scientific experts to network meetings based on the needs of individual schools. This is where

exchange occurs, and new insights are fostered through co-constructive linkage and the integration of diverse expertise. At the individual school level, SDC adapts these inputs in a context-sensitive manner.

## 6 Conclusion

The analysis reveals that the specific contribution that SDC does make within fostering school development processes in networks lies in strengthening these processes by providing support, creating structures, mediating between the individual school level and the network level, and promoting transfer. At the same time, success factors such as practical relevance and educational expertise as characteristics of the consultants, as well as process design and sense-making as key activities, became evident. The findings identify four professional functions of school development consultants within school networks: *Continuity Function*, *Transfer Function*, *Coordination Function*, as well as *Expertise and Legitimacy Function*. The functions described are highly compatible with the international *Research-Practice Partnership* discourse (Coburn and Penuel, 2016; Fishman et al., 2013) for theory-practice interrelationship in school development processes and can be clearly situated within it: SDC operates at the interface between research and practice. At the network level, it deliberately picks up impulses during network meetings (e.g., by inviting experts) and, at the individual school level, adapts these inputs in a context-sensitive manner for the specific school. The potential of the interaction between SDC and school network is realized particularly when SDC has a clearly defined role and is aware of its dual role at both the network level and individual school level. SDC fosters thus organizational learning enacted through networking, contributing positively to school development. SDC can potentially be perceived as an entity for the sustainable preservation and transfer of knowledge, goals, and experiences during personnel changes, as a (professional) supporter of schools in development processes, as a coordinator of network activities, and as a mediator between practice and research. In particular, SDC can contribute through these roles to ensuring the continuity and retention of schools within the network.

The specific contribution that SDC does make within fostering school development processes in networks is realized particularly when school development consultants have a clearly defined role and are aware of their dual role at both the network level and the individual school level. A possible solution is to re-define SDC within school networks: A current network theory perspective should align the consulting role more closely with principles of guidance and support on eye level, thereby harmonizing it with the network concept. This orientation requires a new and expanded professional identity for school development consultants beyond the individual school level. The overall tendency should be toward collaborative, co-constructive consulting that initiates transformation processes at the individual school and at the network level. Given that school development in networks is to be understood as a process of inter-organizational learning in,

of, and between organizations (Göhlich et al., 2018), SDC initiates inter-organizational cooperation with experts from research and practice: At the network level, it deliberately picks up impulses during network meetings (e.g., by inviting experts from research) and, at the single school level, adapts these inputs in a context-sensitive manner for the specific school.

Due to its exploratory nature, this study has several limitations that must be considered when presenting the results and interpreting the data. The selection of schools and interview partners was based on the criteria of the strongest possible involvement in the consulting and school development process at the individual school level. At the individual school level, only the perspective of the school leader and/or the project-leading teacher was obtained. While this promises an overview perspective, it is nonetheless a specific one. The viewpoints of other stakeholders were not considered. Furthermore, the perception of SDC within the SSDS school network was examined retrospectively, i.e., looking back at the process, which may have necessitated accepting potential memory gaps among the respondents. It should also be noted that the reconstruction of supportive and hindering conditions for school development through networking and SDC refers to the consulting process of individual schools during the pilot phase (2020–2022) under challenging conditions (COVID-19 pandemic) within the framework of the two-year research and development project, as well as the ongoing support of the school network by school development consultants to this day. Our findings are based exclusively on participants perceived assessments; complementary data and systematic observations were not available. Less-involved voices are underrepresented, and triangulation was not possible, leaving potential discrepancies between perception and practice untested. Accordingly, the findings should be interpreted with caution. Future directions could overcome these limitations by systematically selecting schools and interview partners based on additional criteria and adopting a process-accompanying perspective by observing a current consulting process of a new participating school within the school network.

As the research results have pointed out, the school network “Shaping Society by Fostering Democracy in Schools” at the University of Education Upper Austria is one example for school development within the framework of networks with additional support and guidance from SDC. To support the further development of SDC in networks and ensure its long-term quality, additional empirical studies are needed to identify which specific activities school development consultants undertake, particularly at the network level and how SDC is situated within networks as opposed to SDC exclusively at the single school level. In particular regarding the measures employed by SDC to promote the convergence of research and practice as the findings show, a school network with additional support and guidance from SDC is a potential approach in which the partnership between research and practice, in the context of school networks, is significantly supported by school development consultants. The overall tendency should consequently be toward collaborative, co-constructive school development consulting that initiates organizational transformation processes at the individual school level as well as at the network level.

## Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

## Author contributions

JF: Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Investigation, Conceptualization, Formal analysis. CF: Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing, Project administration, Supervision.

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