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### **Navigating turbulence: a qualitative phenomenological study exploring successful educational leadership in Central and Eastern Europe's private and independent schools**

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# Navigating Turbulence: a Qualitative Phenomenological Study Exploring Successful Educational Leadership in Central and Eastern Europe's Private and Independent Schools



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## Abstract:

In an increasingly volatile world, it is paramount to successfully navigate turbulence. The COVID-19 pandemic (March 2020) emphasized the need to enhance educators' responsiveness. Exploring and understanding the experiences of the school leaders who established new schools, in Central and Eastern European countries, after the Fall of the Berlin Wall (November 1989), and continued leading them to this day, will increase knowledge about effective responses to turbulence. The purpose of this study will be to investigate the lived experiences of the visionary school leaders who created new private and independent schools in the post-Soviet period, and to reveal common threads. Through the investigation of school leaders' experiences a more cohesive understanding of educational leadership will emerge.

## Problem:

Exploring and understanding the leadership experiences of the school leaders who established new schools after the Fall of the Berlin Wall, and continued leading them to this day, will increase knowledge of effective responses to turbulence. Education systems are impacted by crises of wide-ranging causes and the resulting turbulence. For this study, the construct of turbulence is understood as "potentially disruptive forces in an organization's environment or operating conditions" (Beabout, 2012, p.17). School leaders, when faced with turbulence, must manage contradictory forces, or risk causing harm to the organizations they lead by compromising the school's primary mission of supporting student learning and development. The abrupt geopolitical shifts associated with the Fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, in 1989, are a prominent example of extreme turbulence. These events punctuated the beginning of a period of transformations in Europe, reconfiguring the socio-political environment and profoundly impacting education systems (Anchan et al., 2003; Chankseliani & Silova, 2018; Phillips & Kaser, 1992). New private and independent schools emerged during this time of extreme turbulence and persisted through Covid-19 to this day. The exploration of these school leaders' lived experience opens new perspectives to the understanding of navigating and responding to extreme turbulence (Beauchamp et al., 2021; Hall & Rowland, 2016; Hargreaves & Harris, 2015; Hargreaves, 2021; Harris, 2020; Harris & Jones, 2020a; Mutch, 2014; Mutch, 2015; Smith & Riley, 2012; Striipe & Cunningham, 2022).

## Research Question and Relevant Literature:

The central question guiding the design of this study is: What is the lived experience of successful educational leaders as they navigate extreme turbulence? To establish the foundation for this phenomenological qualitative study of educational leadership an understanding of two converging bodies of scholarly literature is required. First, is the review of the literature that establishes the context and situates the initial experiences of those leaders: the revolutionary post-Soviet period in Central and Eastern Europe. Second, is the exploration of the more frequently utilized theories and models in educational leadership research. This investigation into the theories/models and practices will substantiate new perspectives on educational leadership in turbulent environments.

## Conceptual framework:

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to describe the essence of leadership under turbulence, by examining the lived experience of school leaders who created new schools, in Central and Eastern European countries, after the Fall of the Berlin Wall and continued to lead their schools. Through the description of their leadership experiences while enduring turbulence, the study seeks to examine how they reformulated the delivery of education (Zhao, 2020), use of resources (Harris & Jones, 2020b) and capability (Striipe & Cunningham, 2022) to support school effectiveness. According to Klenke et al. (2016) the multidisciplinary and context-dependent nature of leadership makes it an ideal topic for qualitative research, and a phenomenological design enables the description of the shared meaning several different individuals attribute to their lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A phenomenology provides rich and descriptive data of school leaders' practices of guiding their schools, their communities, and their students to continuously learn in contexts of extreme volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA). Consequently, a more cohesive understanding of educational leadership in turbulence will emerge.

## Methods:

This study will be delimited to school leaders that established their schools in the 1990s and continued to lead their schools through the Covid-19 pandemic to the present. The study design will use Giorgi's (2009) descriptive phenomenological strategy of inquiry, which structures and defines seven different phases of data collection and data analysis.

The participants will be individuals who have, by virtue of their experience, the potential and ability to inform their understanding of school leadership in turbulence (Creswell, 2009). Participants will be purposefully selected, in a number that falls within the recommended range (5 to 25) for a phenomenological study (Polkinghorne, 1989), and if needed with snowball method, to reach data saturation (Saunders et al., 2018). Multiple forms of verification will be included to assure accurate and consistent data collection (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For accuracy all interviews will be recorded using two different systems. The files will be backed up in two different locations. The interviews will be transcribed using a transcription service, and the researcher will check the accuracy of the transcription. The verification steps, which provide credibility to qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018) will include: (a) clarification of the researcher bias; (b) rich, thick descriptions, (c) external audits and debriefing, and (d) member checks.

Data will be collected using individual semi-structured and open-ended interviews with participants, lasting approximately one hour. The interview protocol aims to capture the meaning individual participants ascribe to leadership in turbulence.

- Leadership and turbulence
- Educational leadership
- Change
- Resilience
- Adaptability



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