

# Co-constructive socio-spatial school development – towards sustainable school-university partnerships in contexts of educational inequality

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This article examines how socio-spatial perspectives can inform school development in contexts marked by educational inequality and how collaboration between educational research and school practice can be organised as sustainable school-university partnerships.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The article combines a conceptual discussion of research–practice collaboration with empirical insights from a modular workshop process implemented within the German research and development programme *Schule macht stark*. The workshop format integrates socio-spatial analysis based on small-scale contextual data with participatory explorations of local environments conducted by students. Methodologically, the collaborative process follows the logic of design-based research and draws on conceptual perspectives from research–practice partnerships and boundary work.

**Findings** – Initial findings indicate that school actors often interpret their socio-spatial contexts primarily through deficit-oriented perspectives. The joint interpretation of contextual data and students' experiences within the workshop setting contributes to more differentiated understandings of local environments and stimulates reflexive professional learning processes among educators. At the same time, the results suggest that structured collaboration between researchers and practitioners can support the development of context-sensitive strategies of school development in socio-spatially disadvantaged environments.

**Originality/value** – The article contributes to current debates on research–practice collaboration by linking socio-spatial perspectives on educational inequality with a conceptualisation of co-construction as a guiding principle for school-university partnerships. Based on the empirical and conceptual analysis, five principles for organising sustainable co-constructive collaboration between research and school practice are proposed.

**Keywords** Research–practice collaboration, Design-based research, Research–practice partnerships, boundary work, Participatory inquiry, Professional learning, Habitus sensitivity, Context-sensitive improvement, Boundary-spanning practices

**Paper type** Research article

## 1. Introduction: why socio-spatial school development requires co-constructive research

In recent years, school systems across many countries have been confronted with increasingly complex and persistent challenges. Among these, educational inequality remains one of the most pressing issues. A large body of research shows that students' educational trajectories are closely linked to their social background and to the structural conditions of the school contexts in which they learn (e.g. Baumert *et al.*, 2006; OECD, 2010; Forell *et al.*, 2024). Particularly in socially disadvantaged areas, schools often operate under conditions characterised by cumulative challenges such as unfavourable student compositions, limited resources and complex socio-demographic environments (van Ackeren *et al.*, 2021). Educational inequality must therefore be understood not only as an individual phenomenon but also as a socio-spatial one, shaped by the local contexts in which schools are embedded (Forell, 2026).



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At the same time, expectations towards schools have expanded considerably. Schools are increasingly expected to respond to societal pluralisation, growing heterogeneity among students, digital transformation and rising demands for evidence-informed improvement (Holtappels, 2019; Rolff, 2019). In response, educational policy and research have emphasised closer collaboration between educational research and school practice. Partnerships between schools and universities are therefore increasingly regarded as important arrangements for linking scientific knowledge production with the development of educational practice (Coburn *et al.*, 2013; Penuel *et al.*, 2015). School-university partnerships, however, encompass a broad range of collaborative arrangements that differ in their purposes, structures and expected outcomes. They may focus on outreach activities for children and young people, professional learning opportunities for educators, teacher education, community engagement or the joint development of educational innovations. The present article focuses on research–practice partnerships (RPPs) as one specific form of school-university partnership.

Despite this growing emphasis on collaboration, however, the sustainability of such partnerships remains uncertain. Many school-university collaborations are project-based and limited in duration, and they are often shaped by tensions between the different institutional logics of research and practice (Kerres *et al.*, 2022; Gonser & Zimmer, 2023). While practitioners typically focus on context-bound problem solving, researchers may pursue different forms of knowledge generation depending on their epistemological and methodological orientations, ranging from locally situated understandings to theoretically informed insights with relevance beyond individual cases. This raises the question of how sustainable forms of collaboration between schools and universities can be conceptualised and organised.

This article addresses this question by conceptualising co-constructive socio-spatial school development as a framework for sustainable school-university partnerships. The argument combines a socio-spatial perspective on educational inequality with a conceptualisation of co-construction as a reflexive mode of relating research and practice (Rothland, 2019). Drawing on insights from socio-spatial school development processes developed within the German research initiative *Schule macht stark*, the article illustrates how such collaborative arrangements can operate in practice. In doing so, it contributes to current debates on sustainable school-university partnerships by linking a conceptual framework of co-construction with empirical insights from socio-spatial school development in contexts marked by educational inequality.

## 2. Educational inequality and socio-spatial school contexts

Educational inequality has long been recognised as a central issue in educational research. Numerous studies have demonstrated that educational participation and achievement are closely linked to students' social background and to the resources available in their family environments (e.g. Baumert *et al.*, 2006; OECD, 2010; Forell *et al.*, 2024). At the same time, research has increasingly emphasised that educational inequality cannot be explained solely by individual characteristics. Educational processes take place within institutional and contextual environments that shape both learning opportunities and the organisational conditions under which schools operate.

In this regard, schools are embedded in socio-spatial environments characterised by specific social structures, demographic developments and institutional constellations. Differences in educational outcomes therefore emerge not only from individual mechanisms of social reproduction but also from the interaction between schools and the local contexts in which they are situated. Understanding educational inequality thus requires a perspective that takes into account the socio-spatial conditions under which schooling takes place. Against this background, the following section introduces a socio-spatial perspective on educational inequality. It first discusses how educational inequalities become spatially structured and how this process can be conceptualised analytically. Building on this

## 2.1 Spatialisation of educational inequality

Against the background of persistent educational inequalities, the question becomes increasingly relevant how schools as institutional actors are embedded in specific socio-spatial constellations and how this embeddedness shapes processes of school development. The relevance of such a socio-spatial perspective is not only visible in empirical school development processes but has also increasingly been elaborated in recent school pedagogical research from both theoretical and practice-oriented perspectives. For example, the volume edited by [Schuppener et al. \(2023\)](#) brings together a number of recent contributions that emphasise the importance of socio-spatial contexts for inclusive school development.

Drawing on the school culture approach introduced above, in- and out-of-school practices can be understood as continuously (re-)producing symbolic orders shaped by historically inscribed artefacts and practices that are socially and institutionally framed while simultaneously being produced and enacted through organisational and individual action ([Kessl & Reutlinger, 2022](#), pp. 19, 29; [Hummrich, 2018](#), p. 252). Such relational conceptions of space emphasise the processual nature of space and understand it not as independent from social phenomena but as emerging from the interaction between structural conditions and actors' practices ([Fritzsche et al., 2010](#), p. 13; [Kessl & Reutlinger, 2010](#), p. 249; [Löw, 2001](#), p. 224). From this perspective, the school's socio-spatial environment becomes not only an analytical category but also the outcome of dynamic processes of negotiation that are increasingly taken into account in school pedagogical research.

In order to capture the socio-spatial constitution of school development conditions more systematically, educational inequality needs to be understood as a spatialised – and simultaneously spatialising – category that goes beyond simplified attributions of individual performance. Educational inequalities do not merely manifest themselves in particular places; rather, they are actively (re-)produced through the interaction of infrastructural, socio-demographic and action-related factors ([Forell, 2023](#), pp. 16ff.). Against the background of socially conditioned educational inequality, this three-dimensional understanding of the school's socio-spatial environment can be related to [Stojanov's \(2011\)](#) concept of educational justice, which identifies distributive, participatory and recognition justice as central reference points.

Within this framework, the socio-spatial environment of schools can be conceptualised along three interrelated dimensions [1]:

- (1) *Physical-material dimension*: From the architectural conditions of school buildings and school grounds to the surrounding infrastructure and the broader municipal school landscape, structural factors influence teaching and learning processes as well as the distribution of educational opportunities.
- (2) *Socio-demographic dimension*: The social and milieu-specific composition of the student body has a decisive influence on the learning climate and on the societal participation opportunities of children and adolescents.
- (3) *Action-related dimension*: In addition to interactions and communication within and beyond the school, institutional regulations shape school culture. In this context, particular patterns of appropriation, representation and interpretation among educational actors become visible, raising questions of recognition justice.

At the same time, such a multidimensional understanding of socio-spatial school contexts allows processes of the spatialisation of educational inequality to be described analytically in a more differentiated way. It also makes it possible to examine how these processes affect schools' development capacities and thus provides a theoretical foundation

## 2.2 Schools in challenging contexts as focal points of socio-spatial inequality

The close relationship between social background and educational success has been widely documented and can be consistently observed across international large-scale assessments over the past 25 years (for an overview, see [Forell et al., 2024](#)). Students from more privileged families tend to achieve higher levels of academic performance and attain higher educational qualifications at key transition points and endpoints of their educational trajectories than students from less privileged backgrounds. In addition to individual and structural primary, secondary and tertiary effects of social origin ([Forell & Bellenberg, 2025](#), pp. 344ff.), collective contextual factors at the level of the classroom, the individual school and the surrounding school environment also play an important role in the emergence and accumulation of educational inequality. These composition and institutional effects are described as quaternary effects of social origin, leading to distinct learning and development milieus across schools located in more or less advantaged contexts.

*2.2.1 Quaternary effects of social origin as composition and institutional effects at the level of the individual school.* In addition to social differences between children and adolescents from different socio-economic backgrounds, clear and stable differences in competence levels can also be observed between students attending academic-track schools and those attending non-academic school tracks. These differences are largely attributable to the students' initial learning conditions when entering the respective school type. For example, even after three years in lower secondary education (up to grade 7), students in non-academic school tracks do not reach the average reading competence level observed among fifth-grade students in academic-track schools ([Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung, 2020](#), p. 140). When translating differences in competence scores between school types into learning years, the findings from NEPS data confirm this pattern: the difference of 105 points reported in PISA 2015 corresponds to a gap of more than four years of learning between academic and non-academic school tracks ([Avvisati & Givord, 2021](#), p. 20).

Two central explanatory factors can be identified for these school-type-specific differences. Importantly, these factors point beyond individual characteristics of students and highlight the role of structural and institutional conditions in shaping educational opportunities. On the one hand, so-called composition effects refer to the social and cognitive composition of the student body within different school types. On the other hand, institutional effects also shape differences in students' competence development across school types. These effects relate to systematically differing instructional cultures ([Wacker & Scharenberg, 2023](#)) as well as unequal structural conditions between school types, such as differences in available human resources or material equipment ([van Ackeren et al., 2021](#), pp. 28–29).

Accordingly, the observed social disparities do not arise solely from the concentration of students with similar individual learning prerequisites but also from institutionalised school and classroom conditions. These include unequal distributions of educational resources, differentiated opportunity structures, and forms of socio-spatial segregation that shape students' educational experiences long before individual schools begin to respond to them. Particularly in stratified school systems characterised by early tracking, these conditions produce differentiated learning and development environments ([Baumert et al., 2006](#)). Students from less privileged backgrounds are therefore disproportionately likely to attend schools with a comparatively high share of students from socially disadvantaged milieus ([OECD, 2010](#), p. 157). In their study on educational inequality, [Solga and Dombrowski \(2009\)](#) therefore concluded: "It is not the background of a lower-track student per se that produces competence differences, but rather the unequal learning opportunities associated with the social segregation of school types" (p. 22).

### 2.3 School development capacity as a way of addressing spatialised educational inequality

Socio-spatially disadvantaged contexts confront schools with specific challenges that cannot be reduced to the characteristics of their student populations or the family conditions in which students grow up. Rather, these contexts also affect the organisational capacity and governance options of individual schools. School development in such environments therefore becomes a double-bound task: schools must respond to external contextual demands while simultaneously expanding their internal capacities in order to address educational inequality effectively.

Schools in challenging contexts that succeed in achieving unexpectedly strong student outcomes are often able to compensate for unfavourable learning conditions in material, social and emotional terms while simultaneously creating learning opportunities that are well adapted to students' needs. In this regard, establishing a cultural fit between the different habitus of the actors involved within the institutionally organised school plays an important role, as does the creation of an organisational fit "between situational factors on the one hand and the structures and actions of the actors as well as the characteristics and abilities of the student body on the other" (van Ackeren *et al.*, 2021, p. 23). The extent to which schools succeed in achieving this depends largely on the level of their school development capacity.

School development capacity refers to the collective abilities and resources of a school to develop strategically and to act as a learning organisation. It includes the capacity to design organisational structures and processes in ways that create both supportive learning environments and a collaborative school culture (Klein, 2022, pp. 76–77). Such an approach requires a strength- and potential-oriented perspective on students, in which they are not primarily addressed as performers of isolated cognitive achievements and where responsibility for educational failure is not individualised (te Poel, 2018, pp. 342–343).

This perspective is grounded in a broader understanding of educational justice that goes beyond the performance-based and often deficit-oriented concept of distributive justice. Instead, it also incorporates perspectives of participatory justice, as reflected in the capability approach (Nussbaum, 2006), and recognition justice (Stojanov, 2011). According to this perspective, justice is not primarily achieved through the equal distribution of social goods or the provision of capabilities for participation, but through a particular quality of social relations "in which actors mutually respect each other as persons of equal moral worth" (Stojanov, 2011, p. 40).

School development capacity thus represents not only an organisational response to context-specific challenges but also a way of actively addressing spatialised educational inequality. It shapes the ways in which schools use their organisational agency within structurally unequal conditions and creates the foundations for adaptive and justice-oriented processes of school development. However, the development capacities of individual schools do not emerge in isolation. Particularly in socio-spatially disadvantaged contexts, schools often rely on external support structures and collaborative arrangements that extend beyond the boundaries of the individual institution. In this regard, cooperation between schools and external partners – including universities, research institutions and local actors within the socio-spatial environment – becomes an important resource for strengthening school development capacity.

### 3. Research–practice collaboration in socio-spatial school development

Addressing spatialised educational inequality requires not only organisational capacities within individual schools but also forms of collaboration that extend beyond the boundaries of single institutions. Particularly in socio-spatially disadvantaged contexts, schools often rely on external expertise, research-based knowledge and collaborative networks in order to develop and sustain effective strategies of school improvement. Against this background, cooperation between educational research and school practice has gained increasing importance in recent years, both in educational policy and in school improvement research. Such cooperation is

frequently framed in terms of collaborative knowledge production or co-construction. However, in order to understand how such collaborations can contribute to addressing complex socio-spatial challenges, it is first necessary to clarify the relationship between educational research and school practice as distinct yet interrelated domains. The following sections therefore conceptualise co-construction as a specific mode of collaboration at the interface of educational research and school practice [2]. Building on a discussion of the structural differentiation between both domains, the section then introduces design- and development-oriented research as well as design-based research, RPPs and boundary work as key conceptual reference points for analysing and structuring such collaborative arrangements.

### *3.1 System differentiation between educational research and school practice*

If school development capacity is to be strengthened through collaborative arrangements between schools and external partners, the relationship between educational research and school practice must first be conceptually clarified. In the field of school pedagogy, this relationship has long been characterised by debates about the disciplinary self-understanding of the field and its relation to professional practice. Scholars repeatedly point to an uncertain boundary between academic discipline and professional field (Rothland, 2019, pp. 89–90) as well as to tensions between empirically oriented analytical approaches and normative expectations of educational development (Reh & Drope, 2012, p. 154).

In this context, school pedagogy operates within a dual expectation horizon that simultaneously links the production of scientific knowledge with the improvement of educational practice (Meseth, 2016, p. 474; Buchborn *et al.*, 2025, p. 9). Accordingly, the discipline cannot be adequately described either as a purely descriptive science or as a direct guide for professional action. Rather, it can be understood as a reflexive practice science that analyses and interprets school practice through theoretical and empirical perspectives while simultaneously addressing questions of educational development. From this perspective, the relationship between educational research and school practice cannot be reduced to simple models of knowledge transfer. Instead, both domains constitute distinct reference systems that follow different logics, produce different forms of knowledge and pursue different goals (Kerres *et al.*, 2022, p. 3; Buchborn *et al.*, 2025, p. 11). Educational practitioners typically focus on the situated handling of context-specific problems, whereas academic research often seek to generate knowledge that is theoretically grounded, generalisable beyond individual cases and communicable within scientific discourse. Depending on epistemological and methodological orientations, such knowledge may aim at theoretical generalisation, contextual understanding, design principles, or other forms of transferable insight (Gonser & Zimmer, 2023, pp. 16–18). As Rothland (2019) notes, scientific inquiry tends to increase complexity through analytical differentiation, whereas professional practice must often reduce complexity in order to enable concrete action (pp. 89–90).

Recognising this system differentiation neither implies a hierarchical devaluation of school practice nor reduces practitioners to mere objects of research. Instead, it highlights that collaborative arrangements must acknowledge the distinct logics and expectations of both domains. Rather than assuming a linear transfer of knowledge from research to practice, cooperation must therefore be conceptualised as a process in which different forms of knowledge are related to one another while their differences remain visible. This perspective is particularly relevant for socio-spatially disadvantaged contexts, where complex educational inequalities require forms of collaboration that connect school development processes with research-based knowledge and local socio-spatial resources.

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### 3.2 Design- and development-oriented educational research

Within educational research, several approaches have emerged that explicitly aim to connect scientific knowledge production with the development of educational practice. These approaches are often described as design- or development-oriented educational research (Dilger & Euler, 2017; Rau *et al.*, 2022; Tulodziecki *et al.*, 2014). Despite differences in terminology, these approaches share a common research logic: the systematic integration of processes of educational development into the research process itself. Design- and development-oriented educational research can therefore be understood as a specific mode of collaboration between research and practice in which different forms of knowledge are related to one another while maintaining their respective epistemic and institutional logics (Asbrand, 2025, p. 18).

Research projects in this tradition typically start from concrete problems emerging from educational practice. On this basis, theoretically informed design solutions are developed, implemented and empirically examined in iterative cycles that include phases of problem analysis, design, implementation, evaluation and theoretical reflection (Tulodziecki *et al.*, 2014, pp. 8–9, 15–16). A central characteristic of this research logic is its dual orientation towards both scientific knowledge production and the improvement of educational practice. Research is expected not only to contribute to theoretical understanding but also to support the development of educational practice in specific institutional contexts. Methodologically, such projects therefore often rely on mixed-method approaches that combine qualitative and quantitative data in order to capture the complexity of educational development processes while maintaining scientific quality standards (Breitschwerdt & Egetenmeyer, 2022, p. 7; Tulodziecki *et al.*, 2018, p. 440).

From the perspective developed in this article, this research logic is particularly relevant for socio-spatially disadvantaged contexts. Schools in such environments often face complex constellations of social inequality that cannot be addressed through standardised reform models alone. Instead, they require context-sensitive forms of knowledge production that combine empirical analysis, organisational learning and collaborative development processes. Design- and development-oriented research therefore provides an important conceptual foundation for co-constructive socio-spatial school development, as it enables researchers and practitioners to jointly address context-specific challenges while simultaneously generating transferable knowledge about school improvement processes.

### 3.3 Conceptual perspectives on co-construction: DBR, RPPs and boundary work

The preceding discussion has shown that design- and development-oriented educational research relies on structured collaboration between research and practice under conditions of persistent difference. Particularly in socio-spatially disadvantaged contexts, where schools are confronted with complex and interrelated forms of educational inequality, such collaboration becomes a key resource for developing context-sensitive strategies of school improvement.

In current school development research, this general understanding has been specified through several conceptual perspectives that each emphasise different aspects of the relationship between research and practice. In the following, three such perspectives are introduced – design-based research (DBR), RPPs and Boundary Work – and discussed with regard to the concept of co-construction as a reflexive mode of organising collaboration between educational research and school practice.

*3.3.1 Design-based research as a methodological articulation of design- and development-oriented educational research.* Against the background of the understanding of design- and development-oriented educational research outlined above, Design-Based Research can be interpreted as a specific methodological manifestation of this research mode at the interface of

research and practice, in which the development and testing of interventions themselves become the central medium of knowledge production (Reinmann, 2020, p. 14). Programmatically, this approach is often characterised through a double distinction: on the one hand, from a subject-object logic of empirical research in which school practice primarily appears as an object of investigation, and on the other hand from action-oriented research approaches in which the competence and responsibility domains of research and practice tend to merge (Dilger & Euler, 2017, p. 2). In contrast, DBR aims to address the divergent knowledge forms of both systems in a structured form of collaboration (Malmberg, 2020, p. 80).

A widely cited procedural specification of this approach can be found in the generic model developed by McKenney and Reeves (2012), which conceptualises DBR as an iterative process of design and research. Within this model, analysis, design, development and evaluation are not conceived as a linear sequence but as recursively related phases. The clarification of practice problems, the development and testing of design solutions and the theoretical analysis of the research object are mutually intertwined. The aim is the simultaneous development of a locally viable intervention and the advancement of theoretically grounded knowledge that can extend beyond the individual case (McKenney & Reeves, 2012, pp. 76–80). In this way, the dual focus on practical improvement and theoretical knowledge development – central to DBR – is made explicit in process-logical terms.

While this model provides an instructive description of the internal logic of design-based research and development processes, the specific relationship between research and practice remains largely implicit. A theoretical clarification of this relationship is proposed by Euler (2024), who conceptualises DBR as a process of coordinating different epistemic, temporal and institutional logics. From this perspective, goals are not assumed to be shared a priori but must instead be negotiated throughout the collaborative process. DBR can therefore be understood as a structured way of working with difference (Euler, 2024, pp. 5–6).

*3.3.2 Research–practice partnerships as an institutionalised form of collaboration between research and practice.* While DBR conceptualises these negotiation processes primarily at the level of concrete research and development projects, RPPs aim at the formalised and long-term institutionalisation of such collaborative relationships. They are typically understood as long-term, mutually beneficial partnerships between research and practice that are designed to address pressing problems of practice while simultaneously generating knowledge that is both relevant for practice and theoretically meaningful for research (Coburn *et al.*, 2013, pp. 2–3).

In contrast to project-based collaborations, the central focus of RPPs lies less on the development of individual products and more on the establishment of stable working relationships and formalised cooperation structures. RPPs therefore rely on intentionally designed strategies of collaboration in which rules, roles, routines and protocols are deliberately organised so that cooperation does not depend solely on personal engagement or informal coordination. A defining characteristic is the principle of shared authority, in which research questions, designs and interpretations are treated as joint responsibilities of research and practice (Coburn & Penuel, 2016, p. 49), ensuring “that all partners have a say in the joint work” (Penuel *et al.*, 2021, p. 49).

In this sense, Farrell *et al.* (2019) demonstrate that the negotiation of responsibilities and roles within RPPs cannot be taken for granted but must be repeatedly established and stabilised over the course of collaboration. Against the backdrop of the widely discussed research–practice gap (Farley-Ripple *et al.*, 2018), RPPs therefore aim less at a linear transfer of knowledge than at the establishment of working relationships that systematically enable trust-building and the coupling of different knowledge logics. At the same time, research is conducted that can inform both local practice and broader educational contexts and contribute to strengthening organisational capacities for school development (Henrick *et al.*, 2017, pp. 5–7). Even within such long-term partnerships, however, the structural



difference between research and practice remains and must be continuously negotiated within the collaborative process.

**3.3.3 Boundary work as an analytical perspective on co-construction at system boundaries.** The preceding considerations on DBR and RPPs illustrate that co-construction cannot be realised automatically through the adoption of a particular research approach or the establishment of specific collaboration formats. Instead, it emerges at the boundaries between the respective systems of research and practice. In order to conceptualise these boundaries not only normatively but also analytically, the concept of boundary work provides a useful perspective.

In its classical formulation, [Gieryn \(1983\)](#) described boundary work as the social, situational and interest-driven practices through which the boundaries of science in relation to non-science are constructed, stabilised and strategically shifted (pp. 781–782). Transferred to the relationship between educational research and school practice, this perspective allows the differences between these domains to be understood not as fixed properties but as distinctions that are produced in research processes, institutionally stabilised and practically enacted. Boundary work thus refers to the negotiation processes that permeate the forms of co-constructive collaboration described above and through which the relationship between research and practice is continuously shaped in specific situations. At the same time, Gieryn's approach is primarily descriptive and analytical and does not provide a theory of how such differences might be bridged [\[3\]](#).

A decisive process-oriented development of the boundary-work concept is offered by [Penuel et al. \(2015\)](#), who shift the focus from symbolic demarcation to joint work at boundaries. In this perspective, boundary work no longer primarily refers to demarcation practices but to the mutual engagement with differences in collaborative work processes. Such work takes place both in situational boundary crossings and in the development of stabilised forms of collaboration, often described as boundary practices. Examples include joint problem definition, codesign processes or iterative negotiations of goals and roles within collaborative projects ([Penuel et al., 2015](#), pp. 188–190). From this perspective, both DBR and RPPs can be interpreted as institutionalised formats of reflexive boundary work that make the epistemic and organisational differences between research and practice systematically workable. Co-construction thus appears as a structured and tension-filled practice at stable yet negotiable system boundaries.

#### **4. Co-constructive socio-spatial school development in practice**

The conceptual considerations developed in the previous sections suggest that addressing spatialised educational inequality requires forms of school development that are sensitive to socio-spatial contexts and organised through sustained collaboration between educational research and school practice. To illustrate how such co-constructive approaches can be translated into concrete school development processes, this section presents an example from the German research and development programme *Schule macht stark!* (SchuMaS). The following sections first introduce the socio-spatial workshop approach developed within the programme and its underlying rationale. Subsequently, methodological aspects and data sources are outlined before presenting first empirical insights into how the workshop process contributed to participants' understandings of socio-spatial contexts and informed school development processes.

##### **4.1 The socio-spatial workshop approach**

The socio-spatial workshop approach presented in this article was developed within the German research and development programme *Schule macht stark!* (SchuMaS), a large-scale initiative designed to support schools in challenging socio-spatial contexts through collaboration between educational research, school practice and educational administration

(Maaz & Marx, 2024). Within the interdisciplinary research unit *Außerunterrichtliches Lernen und Sozialraumorientierung* (ALSO), the workshop approach was designed to strengthen schools' capacities to analyse and utilise their socio-spatial environments as resources for school development. The approach was implemented in 13 participating schools and forms an example of how co-constructive socio-spatial school development can be organised in practice.

The workshop format combines analytical and development-oriented elements and follows the design-based research logic outlined in [Section 3](#). Rather than separating knowledge generation from practical development, the workshops create iterative spaces in which researchers and school practitioners jointly analyse socio-spatial conditions, reflect upon their implications and develop context-sensitive strategies for school improvement. In this sense, the workshops are not conceived as a linear transfer of research knowledge into practice but as a co-constructive process in which empirical evidence and professional experience are continuously related to one another. The workshop approach consists of two complementary modules. The first module focuses on socio-spatial analysis and aims to develop a differentiated understanding of the socio-spatial contexts in which schools operate. Drawing on the multidimensional understanding of school social spaces introduced in [Section 2](#), participants jointly interpret socio-structural data, local contextual information and school-based perspectives in order to identify both challenges and resources within the school environment. The second module complements this analytical perspective through socio-spatial exploration. Here, students are involved in exploring and documenting places that are relevant to their everyday lives, thereby contributing experiential knowledge about their local environments that may remain invisible within purely data-based analyses.

Together, both modules seek to establish a shared understanding of the relationship between schools and their socio-spatial environments. By combining structural analyses with students' lived experiences, the workshop approach creates a common basis for reflection and provides starting points for the development of context-sensitive strategies that address educational inequality within specific local contexts.

#### 4.2 Methodological note and data sources

The empirical insights presented in the following section are based on data collected during the implementation of the socio-spatial workshop approach within the SchuMaS programme between 2023 and 2025. The workshop process was carried out in 13 schools located in socio-spatially disadvantaged contexts across several German federal states. Participants included school leaders, teachers and other educational professionals who were directly involved in the socio-spatial workshop activities.

The findings draw on two complementary sources of data. First, questionnaire data were collected before and after participation in the socio-spatial analysis module. Prior to the workshops, participants were asked in an open-ended format what they associated with their school's social environment. The resulting statements were analysed through qualitative content-related coding and subsequently aggregated into broader thematic categories. The frequencies reported in [Table 1](#) are based on 514 coded statements provided by 243 respondents. Examples of frequently occurring responses included references to poverty, unemployment, limited extracurricular opportunities, cultural diversity, and parents' educational backgrounds. Second, data were collected from  $N = 187$  participants after completion of the socio-spatial analysis module in order to explore whether and how participants' perceptions of their school's socio-spatial environment had changed through engagement with socio-spatial data and the collective reflection processes within the workshops. Responses were analysed descriptively and grouped according to dominant patterns of perceived confirmation, differentiation, expansion or intensification of participants' perspectives.

**Table 1.** Categorised frequencies of responses to the open question “What do you associate with your school’s social environment?”

| Category                              | Percentage |
|---------------------------------------|------------|
| Socio-economic aspects                | 31.5 %     |
| Diversity-related aspects             | 21.2 %     |
| Limited (extra-)school infrastructure | 12.3 %     |
| Low educational background of parents | 11.9 %     |
| Lack of parental engagement           | 6.0 %      |
| High population density               | 5.6 %      |
| Unspecific stress factors             | 5.6 %      |
| Unspecific positive aspects           | 5.3 %      |

**Note(s):** *N* = 514 mentions/243 respondents from 13 schools in challenging contexts

In addition, the findings concerning socio-spatial exploration draw on materials generated by students during the exploration activities as well as on documented reflections and feedback from participating school actors. These materials provide insights into how students perceive their local environments and how these perspectives were incorporated into subsequent reflection and development processes within the workshops. The empirical insights reported below are exploratory in nature. Rather than providing evidence of causal effects, they serve to illustrate how co-constructive socio-spatial school development can contribute to processes of reflection, perspective transformation and collaborative sense-making among school actors in contexts of educational inequality.

#### 4.3 First insights from the modular workshop process

The implementation of the socio-spatial workshop approach has generated first insights into how co-constructive forms of collaboration between educational research and school practice can contribute to school development in contexts of educational inequality. Across the participating schools, the workshops created opportunities to combine empirical data, professional experience and students’ perspectives in ways that supported reflection on socio-spatial conditions of schooling. The following findings illustrate how the two workshop modules contributed to processes of perspective transformation and collaborative sense-making among participating school actors.

**4.3.1 Socio-spatial analysis: data-informed reflection on school contexts.** The socio-spatial analysis module aimed to support school actors in developing a more differentiated understanding of the socio-spatial contexts in which their schools operate. A first indication of the relevance of this objective emerges from the pre-workshop survey. When asked what they associated with their school’s social environment, participants most frequently referred to socio-economic challenges, diversity-related aspects and limited (extra-)school infrastructures (Table 1).

In their initial assessments, participants predominantly referred to:

- (1) socio-economic aspects such as poverty or unemployment (31.5%);
- (2) diversity-related aspects, including cultural differences or limited German language proficiency (21.2%);
- (3) limited extracurricular opportunities and local infrastructures (12.3%);
- (4) parents’ educational backgrounds (11.9%).

In contrast, positive or resource-oriented aspects of the local environment were mentioned comparatively rarely (5.3%), suggesting that local potentials and resources initially played only a marginal role in participants’ perceptions of their school environments.

These findings illustrate that socio-spatial contexts are frequently perceived primarily through the lens of challenges and deficits. From the perspective of socio-spatial school development, however, such perceptions represent only one side of the socio-spatial reality of schools. The socio-spatial analysis module therefore serves not only to identify structural challenges but also to broaden participants' perspective on local resources, actors and developmental opportunities within the school environment.

The post-workshop survey ( $N = 187$ ) indicates that engagement with socio-spatial data and collective reflection processes contributed to changes in how participants perceived their school environments. While 40.6% reported that the data largely confirmed their previous perceptions – often describing this confirmation as professionally relieving and helpful for understanding students' learning conditions – almost 60% reported some form of differentiation or expansion of their perspectives:

- (1) 28.9% described a more informed or conscious perception, indicating that the module stimulated reflection on previously implicit assumptions about the socio-spatial context of their school.
- (2) 19.8% reported that their perspectives had become more differentiated or broader, suggesting that they became aware of aspects of the socio-spatial environment that had previously remained outside their field of attention.
- (3) 10.7% referred to a strengthened perception, meaning that certain characteristics or problem constellations became more salient through engagement with the socio-spatial data.

These findings suggest that the combination of objective socio-spatial information and practitioners' everyday experiences can contribute to processes of perspective transformation. Importantly, the workshops did not simply replace existing interpretations with data-based explanations. Rather, they created opportunities for participants to reflect on previously implicit assumptions and to situate their everyday experiences within broader socio-spatial contexts. In this sense, the workshops functioned as co-constructive spaces in which empirical evidence and professional knowledge were jointly interpreted and related to one another. Participants' reflections further indicate that tensions between institutional expectations of schooling and the habitus of students frequently emerged as a central theme during these discussions. The workshops therefore did not merely increase knowledge about local conditions but also encouraged reflection on questions of fit and misfit between schools and the socio-spatial realities of students' lives. From this perspective, socio-spatial analysis can contribute to strengthening habitus sensitivity and to developing a more context-sensitive understanding of educational inequality.

Taken together, the findings indicate that socio-spatial analysis may provide an important analytical foundation for subsequent school development processes. By establishing a shared understanding of local conditions and by opening spaces for collective reflection, the module created starting points for the development of context-sensitive strategies aimed at addressing educational inequality within specific socio-spatial contexts.

*4.3.2 Socio-spatial exploration: incorporating students' perspectives.* While the socio-spatial analysis module primarily focused on the interpretation of structural and contextual conditions, the socio-spatial exploration module introduced students' perspectives as an additional source of knowledge within the workshop process. The findings suggest that students possess highly differentiated understandings of their local environments and are able to identify resources, challenges and opportunities that frequently remain invisible within purely data-based analyses. Feedback from participating schools indicates that students demonstrated increased motivation and engagement when they were explicitly addressed as

experts of their own everyday environments. Through the exploration activities, students documented places, relationships and experiences that they considered relevant to their lives and subsequently shared these perspectives within the workshop process. The low-threshold design of the exploration tools enabled participation across different age groups and among students with diverse learning prerequisites, thereby creating opportunities for broad involvement in the exploration of socio-spatial contexts.

The findings further suggest that the exploration module generated effects beyond the individual level. Participating schools reported that students increasingly perceived the school as a place that they could actively shape and influence. Teachers also noted that existing participation structures, such as class councils and student representative bodies, benefited from the process, as students articulated more concrete ideas, requests and proposals for change. In this sense, the exploration activities did not merely provide additional information about students' local environments but also created opportunities for participation and collective reflection within the school community.

From a socio-spatial perspective, these findings highlight the importance of complementing structural analyses with students' lived experiences. While school actors often focused on challenges and constraints within local contexts, students' explorations frequently revealed social networks, informal learning opportunities and locally embedded resources that had previously received little attention. The exploration module thus contributed to a shift from a predominantly deficit-oriented perspective towards a more balanced understanding of socio-spatial conditions that also recognises local potentials and resources. At the same time, the findings illustrate a central characteristic of co-constructive socio-spatial school development. Rather than treating students as objects of educational interventions, the workshop process positioned them as active contributors to the production of knowledge about the school and its environment. The resulting dialogue between students, school practitioners and researchers created a shared basis for reflection that extended beyond the interpretation of socio-structural data alone.

Taken together, the findings from both modules can be interpreted against the multidimensional understanding of schools as socio-spatial institutions developed in [Section 2](#). While the socio-spatial analysis module primarily addressed the socio-demographic dimension of school contexts by drawing attention to structural conditions and opportunity structures, the socio-spatial exploration module foregrounded students' lived experiences of local environments and the physically material dimensions of socio-spatial contexts. At the same time, the participatory processes embedded in the workshops reflect the action-oriented dimension of socio-spatial contexts by creating opportunities for collective reflection and negotiation among students, practitioners and researchers.

Bringing these perspectives together illustrates that socio-spatial school development requires more than the analysis of contextual conditions alone. Rather, it depends on linking structural data, everyday experiences and participatory processes in ways that support a more comprehensive understanding of educational inequality and provide a foundation for context-sensitive school development.

## 5. Discussion: Co-constructive socio-spatial school development

The empirical insights presented in this article illustrate how socio-spatial perspectives and co-constructive forms of collaboration between educational research and school practice can contribute to addressing educational inequality in socially disadvantaged contexts. While the findings remain exploratory and are embedded within a specific research and development programme, they nevertheless highlight several mechanisms through which socio-spatial school development processes may support the development of school capacities and the emergence of sustainable school-university partnerships.

### *5.1 Reframing socio-spatial contexts in school development*

A first insight concerns the role of socio-spatial perspectives in shaping how schools interpret their local environments. The findings presented in [Section 4.1](#) indicate that school actors initially tend to interpret their socio-spatial context predominantly through a problem-oriented lens. Socio-economic hardship, diversity-related challenges and limited infrastructures are frequently emphasised, while local resources and potentials are mentioned comparatively rarely. Such perceptions are understandable given the everyday pressures under which schools in socially disadvantaged contexts operate. At the same time, they illustrate how socio-spatial realities may become reduced to deficit-oriented narratives that focus primarily on constraints rather than on possibilities for action.

The socio-spatial analysis module addressed this pattern by introducing empirical data as an additional source of knowledge within collective reflection processes. As the findings from the workshop process suggest, the confrontation of practitioners' everyday experiences with systematically prepared socio-spatial data often led to a differentiation or expansion of existing perceptions. Rather than simply confirming or rejecting practitioners' prior interpretations, the joint interpretation of socio-spatial information created a space in which implicit assumptions could be reflected upon and contextualised more systematically. From the perspective of socio-spatial school development, this shift in perception is particularly relevant. A multidimensional understanding of socio-spatial contexts – encompassing physical-material, socio-demographic and action-related dimensions – makes it possible to move beyond simplified interpretations of educational inequality. Instead of attributing educational challenges primarily to individual students or their families, socio-spatial perspectives draw attention to the interaction between structural conditions, institutional arrangements and everyday practices. In this sense, socio-spatial analysis contributes not only to describing contextual constraints but also to identifying potential resources and actors within the local environment that may support school development processes.

Beyond changes in perception, the findings suggest that socio-spatial analysis may also contribute to the development of context-sensitive school development strategies. By establishing a shared understanding of local conditions among researchers and practitioners, the workshops created a common point of reference for subsequent discussions about priorities, resources and possible courses of action. Although the present data do not allow conclusions about longer-term organisational change, they indicate that socio-spatial analysis can provide an important foundation for translating reflection into context-sensitive school development activities.

### *5.2 Co-construction as boundary work in socio-spatial school development*

A second insight concerns the role of co-constructive collaboration between educational research and school practice in socio-spatial school development processes. As discussed in [Section 3](#), collaboration between these domains is characterised by structural differences in knowledge production, institutional logics and temporal orientations. Educational practitioners typically focus on the situated handling of context-specific challenges, whereas academic research aims to produce theoretically grounded knowledge that can be communicated within scientific discourse.

The workshop-based development process described in this article can be interpreted as a practical illustration of how such differences may be productively addressed. In methodological terms, the process follows the logic of design-based research, in which analytical and developmental activities are closely intertwined. At the same time, the longer-term cooperation between researchers and participating schools reflects key characteristics of RPPs, particularly the intention to establish sustained working relationships rather than short-term project-based collaborations.

From the perspective of boundary work, such arrangements can be understood as institutionalised spaces in which different forms of knowledge and different institutional



logics encounter one another. Rather than attempting to eliminate these differences, co-constructive collaboration makes them visible and subject to negotiation within joint working processes. In the workshop context, this becomes visible in the collective interpretation of socio-spatial data, the integration of students' perspectives and the iterative development of context-sensitive strategies for school development.

Seen in this way, co-construction does not describe a harmonious merging of research and practice but a structured process of relating different forms of knowledge while maintaining their respective epistemic and institutional foundations. Particularly in socio-spatially disadvantaged contexts – where schools face complex constellations of social inequality – such collaborative arrangements can provide important opportunities for connecting empirical analysis, professional experience and local knowledge.

### *5.3 Implications for sustainable school-university partnerships*

Taken together, the findings also provide insights into how school-university partnerships may be organised in ways that support sustainable school development in challenging contexts. Three implications emerge from the analysis.

- (1) First, the findings underline the importance of context-sensitive knowledge production

Schools operating in socio-spatially disadvantaged environments face complex and locally specific constellations of challenges that cannot be adequately addressed through standardised reform approaches alone. Collaborative arrangements between schools and universities can therefore play an important role in generating locally relevant knowledge that combines empirical analysis with practitioners' experiential knowledge and the perspectives of students.

- (2) Second, the findings highlight the relevance of institutionalised forms of collaboration

Co-constructive arrangements cannot be realised solely through short-term projects or informal exchanges. Instead, they require structured formats of cooperation in which roles, responsibilities and communication channels are clearly defined and sustained over longer periods of time. Such institutionalisation is particularly important for building trust and for enabling the continuous negotiation of goals and expectations between research and practice.

- (3) Third, the results point to the significance of reflexive professional learning processes within schools

The workshop-based analysis and exploration of socio-spatial contexts not only generated new knowledge about local environments but also contributed to shifts in how school actors interpreted the relationship between schools and their socio-spatial surroundings. In particular, the confrontation of everyday perceptions with empirical data and with students' perspectives encouraged more differentiated interpretations of socio-spatial conditions and highlighted the importance of habitus-sensitive approaches to school development.

Taken together, these implications suggest that co-constructive socio-spatial school development can serve as a promising framework for linking educational research and school practice in contexts marked by educational inequality. By connecting socio-spatial analysis, participatory exploration and collaborative reflection, such approaches create opportunities for developing context-sensitive strategies of school development while simultaneously contributing to the production of scientifically relevant knowledge.

## **6. Co-construction as a guiding principle for school-university partnerships**

The findings presented in this article suggest that socio-spatial school development depends not only on the availability of contextual information but also on forms of collaboration that enable different perspectives and forms of knowledge to be brought into productive dialogue.

The workshop process illustrated how researchers, practitioners and students jointly contributed to the development of a more differentiated understanding of socio-spatial conditions and their implications for school development. At the same time, the findings highlighted that such collaboration is characterised by different expectations, knowledge forms and institutional logics that cannot simply be merged or dissolved. From this perspective, co-construction can be understood as a guiding principle for organising sustainable school-university partnerships. Rather than describing a harmonious fusion of research and practice, co-construction refers to the structured collaboration between different actors who contribute complementary forms of knowledge while maintaining their respective roles and rationalities. The workshop experiences reported in this article therefore point towards several principles that appear particularly relevant for organising co-constructive collaboration in school development contexts.

What consequences follow from such an understanding for the design of concrete collaborative research contexts? On this basis, five structuring principles for co-constructive school development research can be formulated. These principles should not be understood as prescriptive guidelines but rather as reflexive points of orientation for organising collaboration between educational research and school practice.

#### (1) Recognition of persistent difference

Co-constructive arrangements are not aimed at eliminating or harmonising the differences between research and practice. On the contrary, they presuppose the recognition of different goals, expectations, knowledge orders and institutional logics. Co-construction therefore seeks to work productively with these differences and to use the tensions arising from them as a resource for processes of knowledge generation and school development.

#### (2) Dual orientation towards knowledge and development

Co-constructive school development research is structurally oriented towards two different but equally important goals: the generation of scientific knowledge on the one hand and the support of school development processes on the other. This dual orientation cannot be reduced to a sequential relationship or a hierarchy between research and development. Co-constructive arrangements are therefore neither purely implementation projects nor purely research projects.

#### (3) Institutionalised collaboration structures

Co-construction cannot be realised as a by-product of loosely organised project collaboration. It requires institutionalised and durable working arrangements. Such arrangements depend on reliable structures, clearly defined roles, transparent responsibilities and continuous formats of exchange that create spaces for mediation and include intermediary actors where appropriate. Only through such structural anchoring can co-construction become a sustainable format that extends beyond occasional cooperation.

#### (4) Protection and transparency of different institutional logics

Co-constructive collaboration requires that both scientific and practical logics remain visible and are protected from mutual appropriation. Scientific research depends on publishability, methodological transparency and theoretical relevance, while school practice is oriented towards situational appropriateness, feasibility and organisational embedding. Co-construction can only function sustainably if these different requirements are not implicitly levelled but recognised and addressed in their respective validity claims.

#### (5) Negotiation and reflexivity as structural principles

Finally, co-construction requires institutionalised formats of negotiation and reflection. Such formats create opportunities to address tensions, irritations and boundary questions explicitly

## 7. Conclusion: limitations and perspectives for co-constructive socio-spatial school development

This article has examined how socio-spatial perspectives can inform school development processes in contexts of educational inequality and how such processes may be organised as co-constructive collaborations between schools and universities. By combining socio-spatial analysis, participatory exploration and collaborative reflection within a modular workshop format, the study illustrates how empirical data, practitioners' experiential knowledge and students' perspectives can be brought into dialogue in order to support context-sensitive school development. At the same time, the findings underline that such collaborations require institutionalised structures of cooperation in which different knowledge logics can be productively related to one another.

Several limitations of the study should be acknowledged. First, the empirical insights presented here are based on early findings from the workshop process and therefore provide only an initial perspective on the potential of co-constructive socio-spatial school development. Second, the results are derived from a specific programme context involving schools in socially disadvantaged environments, which limits the generalisability of the findings. Third, the analyses focus primarily on processes of professional reflection among school actors and do not yet allow conclusions about longer-term organisational change or student outcomes.

These limitations point to several directions for future research. Longitudinal studies are needed to examine how socio-spatial perspectives influence school development processes over time and whether they contribute to sustainable changes in school practices and organisational cultures. Further research could also investigate how co-constructive formats such as workshop-based collaborations can be embedded more firmly within institutional partnerships between schools and universities. Finally, greater attention should be given to the role of intermediary actors and boundary-spanning practices that mediate between educational research, school practice and educational governance structures.

Taken together, the study suggests that socio-spatially informed and co-constructively organised forms of collaboration hold considerable potential for linking educational research and school development in contexts marked by educational inequality. By creating spaces in which different perspectives on schooling and local environments can be systematically related to one another, such approaches contribute not only to more context-sensitive school development but also to a deeper understanding of how research–practice collaboration can be organised as a sustainable partnership.

### Notes

1. For a more detailed description of the three conceptual dimensions, see [Forell and Bellenberg \(2025, pp. 349–350\)](#).
2. The article initially uses the term *co-construction* in a heuristic sense to refer to forms of jointly addressing school development issues by educational research and school practice. A more differentiated theoretical conceptualisation is developed in the subsequent sections of the article.
3. In more recent work on school-university cooperation, possibilities of mediation have been emphasised more strongly. [Becks et al. \(2026\)](#) conceptualise such constellations as dialogical processes of mediation between different orientations and logics of action and illustrate how such a space of mediation can be organised. In the international literature, this is often discussed in terms of *boundary spanning*: activities in which actors mediate across institutional boundaries. In such contexts, hybrid spaces – so-called *third spaces* – emerge in which different forms of knowledge are brought together and processes of joint knowledge production become possible. The term *boundary spanner* is used inconsistently in this context: sometimes referring to a specific mediating role of

individual actors, and sometimes to a function that can be taken on by different participants (Rudder *et al.*, 2025). In the federal-state initiatives mentioned above, intermediary actors such as foundations, state institutes or school development support organisations are increasingly involved, operating as independent actors within the triadic cooperation constellations described above.

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