An Act of Interpretation?

A case study exploring the role of school principals in implementing educational reforms in Swedish upper secondary schools

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the role of two Swedish upper secondary school principals in the process of interpreting and implementing the Education Act.

Previous research around the role of school principals in Sweden has shown that the decentralization reforms of the 1990’s has resulted in much broader frameworks within which to interpret central steering documents. In this situation contextual factors are important for determining how principals relate to central steering documents. Concepts such as governing tools, leadership style and personal norms are mentioned in relation to this process.

Based on the empirical material gathered in the case study it is suggested that the profile and internal organization of the two schools in question play an important role in determining which parts of the Act the respective principals choose to focus on, as well as the nominal role and responsibilities of the principals in the school. These factors thus help shape how the principal sees his/her role in the implementation of the Act.

The results of the case study are discussed in the light of such previous research, as well as a wider political debate around the recent educational reforms. On the basis of the empirical material it is proposed that although the Education Act increases the judicial powers of school principals, principals still retain some independence vis-à-vis the state with regard to the implementation of certain specific measures contained within the Act. Nevertheless, principals express the view that the clarity of the Act on many points has ensured that the degree of free interpretive space experienced by principals with regard to the Act has been relatively small.

Keywords: school principals, Education Act, Swedish educational reforms, interpretation, implementation.
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1 Background

During the spring of 2010 the Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket) began informing schools about intended changes to be brought about by a series of new national educational reforms. These included a new Education Act, new curriculums for the pre-school and comprehensive school systems, wholesale reforms to the upper secondary school system and the introduction of a new grading system. Complementing these educational reforms were changes to the system of education and training of teacher graduates as well as the introduction of a teacher’s registration.¹

The 2010 Education Act replaces the previous Education Act which had been amended sixteen times since its introduction in 1985. The new Act confirms many of the changes that have taken place since then, such as decentralization of school governance, participation of independent schools and the integration of pre-schools into the national school system. Unlike the previous document however, the new Act establishes a common regulatory framework for both municipal and independent schools.²

The document itself is 137 pages long and consists of 29 separate chapters dealing with, amongst other things, divisions of responsibility within the school system and school unit, rights and entitlements of school students, quality control, student/guardian participation, measures for ensuring a safe environment and combating unacceptable behaviour. The document also contains specific regulations concerning different school forms as well as guidelines outlining regulatory control the right to appeal school decisions.³ The terms of the Act have been binding on all Swedish schools since 1st July 2011.

The new Act is particularly significant from the perspective of school principals. In contrast to the previous Act, where the role and responsibilities of the school principal are described in brief terms as those of “being familiar with the daily activity of the school,”⁴ the new Act establishes a clear leadership function for the school principal, consisting of leading and coordinating the school’s pedagogic activity, working for the school’s educational development and making decisions about the internal organisation of the school.⁵ This leadership function is particularly discernible around the questions of special measures for students who fail to

¹ Skolverket, 2010, Utmaningar för skolan: Den nya skollagen och de nya reformerna, p.3.
³ SFS 2010:800, Skollag.
⁴ Utbildningsdepartementet 1985, Skollagen, 2 chapter, 2§.
⁵ SFS 2010:800, 1 chapter, 9&10§.
reach educational targets, grading in special circumstances and guaranteeing a calm and safe environment. In all of these questions the new Act gives the school principal ultimate decision making responsibility, for example in the activation of special measures for individual students,\(^6\) in the setting of grades in cases where two teachers cannot agree,\(^7\) and in the determining of rules to do with order and discipline in the school.\(^8\)

Education minister Jan Björklund motivated the new Act on the basis of the need to improve educational performance given the negative trend of educational results in Swedish schools.\(^9\)

According to a study of educational performance in literacy, mathematics and science conducted by the Organisation for of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the educational results of Swedish students declined significantly during the period between 2000 and 2009. The gap between the highest and lowest performers also increased significantly in this period. These downward patterns of educational performance were not replicated in most other countries included in the study. Structural changes in the Swedish school system and changes in ways of working in Swedish schools have been suggested as possible causes of such downward educational patterns.\(^10\)

According to Lilja,\(^11\) however, the educational reforms can be seen as ideological in nature when viewed from a globalization perspective. Rather than merely being a legislative response to negative educational performance, the reforms are seen as an expression of the national government’s desire to increase state influence in the sphere of education. The author claims that goals of the reforms are to promote “the knowledge economy” in order to increase national competitiveness in global markets.\(^12\) Educational targets which focus on improving student results in core areas that are beneficial for economic competitiveness have, according to Lilja, taken priority over educational goals related to socialization and cultural reproduction.\(^13\)

\(^{6}\) Ibid, 3 chapter, 9§.
\(^{7}\) Ibid, 3 chapter, 16§.
\(^{8}\) Ibid, 5 chapter 5§.
\(^{10}\) Skolverket, 2010, pp.128-142.
\(^{12}\) Ibid, p.208.
\(^{13}\) Ibid, p.207.
The increasing centrality of the role of school principals in achieving educational goals can be observed in a report issued by the agency for school inspections (Skolinspektionen) which is based on a study of thirty Swedish comprehensive schools. The report identifies several shortcomings in respect of the role of school principals as pedagogic and professional leaders with responsibility for ensuring the attainment of educational targets. It also mentions the importance of the new Education Act for achieving improvements in these leadership qualities.\textsuperscript{14}

Given this desire on the part of the national state to achieve change and promote goals in Swedish schools and the focus on the role of school principals in achieving these changes, the question of how school principals themselves relate to this process is of particular interest. Decentralization of the Swedish school system means that the state has responsibility for the formulation of national educational goals regarding the content and the wider frames of organization. However, it is at a local level that these goals must be implemented.

The overall aim of this dissertation is to explore what happens when school principals implement national educational reforms, the aim of which is to change the role of the principal within the school. In the following section I will present previous research in the field of the Education Act and the role of school principals in implementing educational reforms. With this previous research as my starting point I will also develop analytical instruments which can be used as models for understanding how school principals relate to national steering documents.

\section*{2 Literature Review}

\subsection*{2.1 Previous research}

In respect of the academic literature that is relevant for this dissertation, searches have been restricted to previous research which relates to one or both of the following areas: 1) the implementation of national educational reforms in Sweden; 2) The role of school principals in Swedish schools. The material generated by these searches includes university course literature, academic articles, reports and dissertations.

At the time that the writing of this dissertation commenced many Swedish schools were still in the process of introducing the changes required by the 2010 Education Act. It is therefore hardly surprising that previous research on this specific subject is scarce. One of the few available studies is the master thesis in the field of esthetical philosophy written by Elsie Johansson in May 2011. This work examines Swedish school principals’ experiences of the new educational reforms and is one of the few academic studies that have been carried out that present a school principal perspective on the new reforms. Johansson’s focus is that of school principals’ experiences in dealing with the new demands put on them, as well as their experiences of meaning and context in the work with the reforms. A phenomenological and hermeneutical approach is applied when analysing qualitative interviews with five comprehensive school principals. Johansson’s summary conclusion is of how school principal’s experiences can be divided into four main themes, namely contact with information material, organizational structures and processes, leadership duties and specific contexts.

Of less immediate topicality but perhaps greater theoretical relevance for my chosen field of study is Stefan Rapp’s doctoral thesis Rektor – garant för elevernas rättssäkerhet. Rapp’s study, which was published in 2001, looks at the role of Swedish school principals as guarantors of the legal security of their students. The Education Act is central to this study as the principle legal document dealing with students’ legal rights. Rapp discusses the role of the school principal from different theoretical perspectives and interviews representatives from different national educational agencies. On the basis of his findings, Rapp shows that students have a great number of legal rights but that school principals’ knowledge of these rights is not always satisfactory and the legal security of students is generally weak. The decentralization of the Swedish school system is seen as a significant factor in the weakening of students’ legal security. This is due to the fact that the regulatory system for centralized state schools was much stronger than that in the current decentralized system. Decentralization has meant that principals are presented with broad frameworks rather than detailed instructions as to how the school should be run. This, in turn, provides principals with a great deal of interpretive work to do when implementing central steering documents.

15 Johansson, E, Rektor och grundskolereformer: rektorers erfarenheter av reformarbete, Karlstads University, 2011.
18 Rapp,2011, p.21
A central thematic concept in Rapp’s thesis is that of describing what principals actually do when carrying out decisions that are grounded in the framework of central steering documents. The first stage of this process is described as that of interpreting the steering document. In some cases the principal’s interpretation of the steering document leads subsequently to actions that are described as “the stating of goals”\(^{19}\) (målhävdande) whilst in other cases this leads to the taking of “formal decisions”.\(^{20}\) This distinction between what principals ought to do in certain situations according to relevant steering documents and what principals actually do is the central theme of Ulf Leo’s doctoral thesis *Rektorer bör och rektorer gör.\(^{21}\)* The focus of Leo’s study is, however, somewhat different to Rapp’s. Leo is primarily interested in principals’ professional norms around “the democratic mission”\(^{22}\) (*demokratiuppdraget*), i.e. work related to the teaching and practice of values to do with democracy, as regulated by Swedish central steering documents.

Lindensjö and Lundgren’s book *Utbildningsreformer och politisk styrning* gives a historical overview of how the kind of societal ideals that Leo is interested in have functioned as goals and principles for Swedish educational reforms.\(^{23}\) A model developed by Urban Dahllöf\(^{24}\) is applied in which given frameworks, such as those provided by central steering documents and also additional factors\(^{25}\), lead to processes within the school system which in turn produce observable results at school level.

Building on this basic model, Lindensjö and Lundgren also identify three governing tools that can be used to achieve desired results, namely judicial regulation, economic governance and ideological governance.\(^{26}\) These concepts are applied and developed further by Nihlfors\(^{27}\) in her study of the role of municipal school governors. In addition to the three types of governance mentioned by Lindensjö and Lundgren, Nihlfors identifies an extra component of governance, namely that of following-up and evaluation. Unlike the judicial, ideological and

\(^{19}\) Author’s translation.


\(^{21}\) Leo, U, Rektorer bör och rektorer gör, 2010, Lund: Lund University.

\(^{22}\) Author’s translation.


\(^{26}\) Lindensjö and Lundgren, 2000, p.25.

economic components, this governing component is used exclusively at local level and is therefore primarily a focus for the municipality or the school unit.28

Having established that frameworks lead to processes which lead to results at school level and, furthermore, that different types of governance can be used to achieve different results, Lindensjö and Lundgren describe the different stages in the implementation of educational reforms. The implementation process is seen as consisting of two arenas, those of policy formulation and policy realization. Both of these arenas contain a political and an administrative stratum which are themselves responsive to general and specific social contexts.29 Building on these concepts, Skott shows that these policy arenas are, in fact, interrelated given that goals are continually reformulated at national level after first being tested at local level.30 This interactive process is called the curriculum cycle.

As mentioned previously, Rapp and Leo are both interested in what school principals actually do when carrying out decisions that are grounded in central steering documents. Lindensjö and Lundgren use the term guideline writing31 to describe the process of political decisions made within the formulation arena being transformed into binding rules in the realization arena. It is through this process that the abstract principles of central steering documents are transformed into practical tasks within the school unit. Leo applies a norm perspective when looking at the question of how principals interpret the “democratic mission” as it is laid out in steering documents and how this interpretation is then translated into concrete actions.32 Another doctoral thesis which analyzes the role of the Swedish school principal from a norm perspective is Helena Hallerström’s Rektors normer i ledarskapet för skolutveckling.33 On the basis of qualitative interviews with school principals Hallerström describes the central norms or ideals of these informants when working with school development at school level. One of norms concerns the principal’s way of relating to goals contained in steering documents when meeting with staff. It is found that principals tend to prefer basing the work of achieving change on the establishment of consensus amongst employees. Staff level initiatives are seen as preferable to top-down decision making. Principals are thus careful not to appear to use

28 Ibid.
29 Lindensjö & Lundgren, 2000, p.159-178
31 Lindensjö and Lundgren, 2000, p.177.
32 Leo, 2010.
steering documents in a way that stifles democratic discussion amongst teachers in the school.  

The question of the personal norms and leadership style of school principals is also discussed by Kåräng.  

He uses the terms administrative leadership and pedagogic leadership. Where the term “administrative leadership” is used in the narrower, literal sense, it describes the system of official frames and rules that surround the activity of the principal. The term can however also be used to describe a restrictive and inflexible style of leadership where the school principal interprets frameworks and rules in a very narrow way, thus failing to take advantage of potential flexibility that may exist for developing new solutions to problems.

“Pedagogic leadership” on the other hand can be understood to mean that the work of the principal directly affects the content and method used in classroom situations. Although this style of leadership may be welcomed by some, it is often viewed negatively by teachers who wish to protect their professional independence. Where this occurs it may be seen as beneficial for both parties for principals to restrict themselves to administrative duties.

This theme of the role of the principal in the professional realm of the school is also dealt with by Johanson and Kallos. Here, the potential conflict between the principal’s work in carrying out decisions taken at a political level and the work of providing leadership within the school where the decisions are carried out is discussed. It is held that principals aim to create legitimacy for political goals through interpretative strategies where concretized goals are directly related to the pedagogic activity of the school. This must however be balanced against other framework factors, such as economic and political considerations and ensuring a positive image for the school. Johanson and Kallos call this process of adapting political goals so that they fit into specific realms the process of reduction.  

The question of winning the support of teachers in order for policy realization to occur is mentioned briefly by Lindensjö and Lundgren: “In order for a reform to be implemented it must be perceived by teachers as important, it must carry some advantage for them”.

34 Hallerström, 2006, p.140-141.
Related to the above concepts of “realms” or “frameworks” where principals must first seek legitimacy before achieving change, Svedberg\textsuperscript{40} identifies four \textit{domains} in which schools operate. The first is described as the political domain and includes the taking and influencing of political decisions. The second is the administrative domain and involves the transformation of political decisions into plans, guidelines and resources. The professional domain consists of pedagogues who carry out political ambitions in practical school situations. The last of these domains is that of the clients, who are defined as the school students and their guardians. This is the group who are shaped by the decisions and practices within the school and who carry expectations about what schools should deliver. It is found that school principals commute between these different domains depending upon the task or issue in question. The degree to which a school principal occupies one or more of these domains can also depend on the personality or values of the principal in question.\textsuperscript{41}

\subsection*{2.2 Thematic concepts}

This focus of this dissertation is the role of the school principal in receiving, understanding and then acting upon national steering documents that aim to achieve particular goals. In the literature reviewed above, a number of key concepts can be identified which are useful tools for analysing this phenomenon.

\subsection*{2.2.1 Interpretive process}

Although the term “interpretive process” is not actually used by Rapp, I have used the term as a convenient label for Rapp’s description of what happens when the goals of central steering documents are transformed into actions. According to Rapp, two different outcomes can be identified when principals interpret central goals, namely “the stating of goals” and “formal decisions”. This process of determining relevant actions on the basis of interpreting the content of steering documents can also be linked to that which is described by Lindensjö and Lundgren as \textit{guideline writing}, i.e. the transformation of political decisions into administrative

\textsuperscript{40} Svedberg, L., \textit{Rektorsrollen. Om skoledarskapets gestaltning}, 2000, Gothenburg: HLS förlag.

\textsuperscript{41} Svedberg, 2000, p.83-102.
rules that are to be followed by staff and students in a local school context. On the basis of Rapp’s model\(^\text{42}\), the interpretive process can be summarized thus:

![Diagram of the interpretive process]

Fig 1: The interpretive process

### 2.2.2 The interpretive framework of the school principal

Dahllöf’s frame factor theory, which has subsequently been developed into a school curriculum theory by Lundgren\(^\text{43}\), holds that different contextual factors affect the development of processes by which given central frameworks are transformed into concrete local outcomes.

With this as a starting point, the observation of Johansson and Kallos that principals seek to legitimize central political goals by relating them to the school’s pedagogic activity\(^\text{44}\) can be viewed in a frame factor perspective. Other factors can be seen of central importance for school principals’ contextual frameworks vis-à-vis implementation of the educational reforms in Swedish schools. These include the nature of the relationship between the school principal and state/municipal authorities, the “domain”\(^\text{45}\) a particular issue belongs to and which “governance tools”\(^\text{46}\) are available to the state, municipality or principal when dealing with the issue at hand. These different contextual factors can thus be said to provide the principal with an interpretive framework which affects cognitive understanding of what the steering document means and how the goals of the steering document can or should be practically transformed into concrete actions. The interpretive process can thus be said to be “filtered” by different contextual frameworks as demonstrated below:

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\(^{42}\) Rapp, 2001, p.24  
\(^{44}\) Johansson and Kallos, 1994, p.115.  
\(^{45}\) Svedberg, 2001.  
2.2.3 The curriculum cycle

Here, Skott’s description of the interrelation between state and local level in the process of implementing national education policy is simplified. The cycle’s starting point is that of the division of the process of implementing educational policy into two arenas, namely those of national policy formulation and local policy realization. Skott shows that these policy arenas are, in fact, inter-related through the process of reformulating goals at national level, a process which occurs over time. This interactive process is referred to as the curriculum cycle and is illustrated below:

![Curriculum Cycle Diagram](image)

2.2.4 Aspects of principal’s school leadership role

The role of the principal in a school can be determined by contextual factors but can also be determined by the principal’s own preferred method of operating. Kåräng’s dichotomy of “administrative leadership” or “pedagogic leadership” takes account both the official role of principal in terms of what his/her main responsibilities are in the school unit, but also how the

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47 Lindensjö and Lundgren, 2005, pp.159-178.
48 Skott, 1999, p.396.
principal chooses to define his/her own role.\textsuperscript{49} Given that one of the goals of the Education Act is for school principals to take a more active role in the pedagogic activity of the school by taking on extra decision making responsibilities within the professional domain of the school, it is possible that a shift is already occurring both in what the principal does and how the principal defines his/her own role. This also links in with Hallerström’s observation that school principals generally prefer a consensus seeking leadership style which aims at staff consensus, as opposed to a more top-down leadership style where steering documents are used as a means of avoiding discussion at school level.\textsuperscript{50} The different aspects of the principal’s leadership role can thus be divided into task related roles which are to do with school domains and governing tools and personal norms which include interpretive norms and professional norms.

![Fig 4: Aspects of principal’s school leadership role](image)

3 Aim and research question

The aim of this dissertation is to understand how educational reforms are received and subsequently implemented by school principals in Swedish schools. The specific focus is that of the processes involved in interpreting and acting upon the different measures contained in the new Education Act.

\textsuperscript{49} Kåräng, 1997, p.263-265.
\textsuperscript{50} Hallerström, 2006, p.140-141.
The new Education Act emphasizes the role of school principals. An understanding of how school principals interpret the Education Act and also how they view their own role in the practical implementation of the Act therefore has great general relevance. The question of how school principals in general relate to the Education Act is however somewhat outside the scope of this dissertation. Instead, I wish to explore the specific challenges of two principals in two very different schools in the same municipality. Through qualitative interviews with the principals, my aim is to gain insight into the process of interpreting national legislation and implementing it on a local level.

Given the stated aim and the limitations imposed by the thematic concepts discussed previously, the specific questions to be researched in this dissertation are as follows:

How do principals in two different schools experience the process of interpreting the new Education Act in the light of different contextual factors?

How do principals in two different schools view their own role in the implementation of the Act at school level?

4 Method

4.1 Choice of method

In order to answer the research questions, I conducted qualitative informant interviews with two school principals. This provided me with deeper insights into the thoughts and experiences of school principals with regard to their interpretation of the Education Act and how they view their own role in the implementation of the Act.

Trost\textsuperscript{51} defines the aim of qualitative interviews as being to attain understanding about how the interviewee thinks or feels, and what they have experienced as well as the nature of the interviewee’s conception of his or her reality.\textsuperscript{52} The decision to interview school principals was thus made with the expectation that this group are familiar with the Education Act as a document and have been heavily involved in the work of implementing the requirements of the document in their respective schools.

\textsuperscript{52}Trost, 2005, p.23.
Both of the interviews lasted between 20 – 30 minutes and took place in the principal’s office during school time. The interviews were semi-structured in nature. The same interview guide containing 22 questions was used for both interviews.\textsuperscript{53} The questions were deliberately designed to capture each of the informants’ personal reflections, thus making me aware of potentially important divergences in experience. The questions contained in the interview guide were supplemented in some cases by follow-up questions during the interview where it was deemed necessary or relevant to attain further information or where the understanding of a question appeared to differ between the interviewee and interviewer. From the perspective of symbolic-interaction as outlined by Trost\textsuperscript{54} my role as interviewer was that of establishing communicative interaction with the interviewee on the basis of seeking an answer to a specific question. It was thus my responsibility to ensure that the communicative interaction engaged in during the interview was reasonable and necessary in the pursuit of this goal.

4.2 Selection of informants

The informants are school principals for two upper secondary schools in the same Swedish municipality. They were selected on the basis that they represent schools of different sizes with very different profiles and significant differences in respect of the programmes and courses offered within the schools. This selection choice relates both to the significance of differing contextual factors for the principal’s interpretive framework and the fact that the qualitative approach I have taken will benefit from general diversity in empirical material.

My own relationship with the informants is of both practical and methodological relevance for the informant sample chosen. I worked as a substitute teacher at both of the schools during the process of arranging and conducting the interviews. A professional working relationship had thus been established between me and both informants. The circumstances in which the interviews were conducted therefore entailed significant risks in respect of the reliability of my empirical material which I will later discuss. However, there are also practical and methodological advantages to this situation, not least the fact that this established professional relationship appeared to be a significant factor in the successful arrangement and carrying out of the interviews.

\textsuperscript{53} See appendix

\textsuperscript{54} Trost, 2005, p.23.
My initial preference had been for a wider range of informants. In addition to my two informants I had attempted, without success, to arrange interviews with three other principals at different upper secondary schools in the municipality. The actual study that I have carried out has the character of a case study, although my initial aim was for a broader empirical base. As Kvale points out, random selection can actually be a threat to validity of knowledge in a qualitative study. A selection principle based on carefully considered criterion (sometimes referred to as an illustrative case study) will have limited general applicability but may contain important illustrations about the nature of diversity within the chosen subject area. I will be careful not to make general claims on the basis of my results, but it is possible that, as Kvale puts it, the result will provide knowledge with relevance beyond the isolated case.

It may well be of some relevance that I did not have an established professional relationship with any of the other three principals that I had contacted. My informants showed little reluctance or hesitation in participating in the interviews, neither did they object to or avoid answering any of the questions that were put to them during the interviews. My regular presence at the school and accessibility to the informants entailed certain practical advantages. This was apparent when the initial times that the interviews had been arranged for needed to be changed due to illness and other engagements. In both cases alternative interview times were arranged that were convenient for both parties.

As previously mentioned, the two schools are under the jurisdiction of the same municipal authority but differ in many other important respects. I will henceforth refer to them as School A and School B. Furthermore, the principals of each school will be referred to respectively as Informant A and Informant B.

School A is among the highest performing upper secondary schools in the municipality measured by average final grades and a high degree of competition exists amongst applicants for placement on the school’s natural science and social science programmes. School B, on the other hand, offers programmes exclusively aimed at students lacking the necessary qualifications to gain entry to the range of academic and vocational programmes that are offered at upper secondary school level. Significant differences also exist with regard to the size and organisation and of the schools. In 2010 School A had around 700 students.

57 Kvale, 1997.
participating in five different programmes and all pedagogic activity in the school took place at just one site. The school employed 43 full time qualified teachers in 2010. In comparison School B had just over 200 students participating on a programme that was previously referred to as Individual Choice (Individuella Val)\(^{58}\) and employs 21 full time teachers at three different school sites in the municipality.\(^{59}\) Classroom groups in school A consist of around 40 students, whilst at school B classroom groups can be as small as 10 students. Despite these differences, the age group of the students at each school is 15-18 years old.

In respect of the informants, there are notable differences in the previous experience of each of the principals. Informant A has been a school principal since 2004 and has been the principal of School A since 2005. Informant B on the other hand has been as principal for School B since 2007, has been a principal for twenty years. Previous to this current job Informant B worked as a school principal in a different municipality.

### 4.3 Ethical considerations

Before the interviews, I considered possible ethical issues that might arise. Two particular aspects made my interviews reasonably uncomplicated from an ethical point of view. Firstly, that I was talking to my informants in their professional role, and did not consider myself to be putting the informants in any form of risk (including the possibility of them saying something that might be damaging for their own reputation). The risk that I might do my informants any physical, psychological, social, economic or legal harm was therefore minimal.\(^{60}\) Secondly, neither informant could be considered in any way vulnerable in the way that, for example, minors, victims, prisoners, etc. may be considered vulnerable.\(^{61}\) My biggest concern prior to the interviews was that I would be made privy to sensitive information regarding particular students. The interview guide was constructed with this concern in mind, and I had decided before the interviews how I would deal with such a situation should it arise.

\(^{58}\) As a result of the recent educational reforms this programme has recently been reformed into five new programmes with specified goals. These programmes are: Preparatory education (Preperandubildning), Programme oriented individual choice (Programinriktat individuellt val), Individual alternative (Individuellt alternativ), Vocational introduction (Yrkesintroduktion), and Language introduction (Språkintroduktion) (author’s translations).


\(^{60}\) Creswell, J.W, 2009, Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches, p.89.

\(^{61}\) Ibid.
In accordance with the ethical principles published by the Swedish Research Council, in I informed my informants of the purpose of the interview, that I would record the interview, and what I would do with the information after the interview. They both consented to this. Though there was a prior connection between my informants and myself, this connection was of a purely professional nature and therefore unproblematic in respect of the integrity of my informants.

4.4 Processing the material

The interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed in extenso by me alone. Once I had transcribed the interviews, I used the computer programme Open Code to analyze the material. Though Open Code was originally developed for Grounded Theory, its uses are much wider and it was a useful tool in the sorting of my empirical material. The Open Code programme allows the user to sort material into codes and categories, and it is this categorization of my material that forms the analysis section of this dissertation.

It should be noted that both interviews were conducted in Swedish, and that I have not translated the interviews in full. This means that the analytical work with the interviews was undertaken in Swedish. However, any quotations from the interviews in this dissertation have been translated into English by me. One might argue that any translation requires a level of interpretation, and as such, something is lost along the way. However, by doing my analytical work on the original text rather than a translated text, I feel that I have minimized the risk of any vital information being lost this way. This has been a crucial part of my ambition to, as stated by Kvale, capture the intended meaning of the original statement as faithfully as possible. The translated quotations in this dissertation have been made with this ambition in mind.

4.5 Reliability and validity

63 Trost, 2005, s. 127.
65 Kvale, 1997.
The reliability of a qualitative interview can be said to depend on three factors: concord, precision and objectivity. Though originally mostly a concern for quantitative research, these factors also work as a useful starting point when considering the scientific merit of a qualitative study.

Concord concerns the similarity between questions intended to measure the same thing. In my interviews, I have tried to achieve this by using the same interview guide in both interviews. Arguably, one of the benefits of a semi-structured interview is that it allows a measure of flexibility on the part of the interviewer, a possibility to follow up on relevant strands of thought. However, an interview guide also allows the interviewer to keep within a framework, where the following up of answers or thoughts serve primarily to add depth to the subject at hand.

Precision is a matter of the interviewer's registration of answers. As Trost puts it: “One shouldn't assume understanding of something until one is sure that one understands it and has checked accordingly.” In a qualitative interview, this might mean asking "control questions," and making sure that you understand what the informant is trying to say. In my interviews, I have tried to construct questions that are as unambiguous as possible, and when I have been unsure of the meaning of a particular statement, I have asked the informant to clarify.

The last factor is objectivity. Objectivity in a qualitative interview implies that the interviewer is not treated like a blank slate that registers answers with computer-like precision. Rather, it is a matter of making sure that the reader does not understand an informant's answer in a considerably different way than the researcher did. The fact that I knew both of the informants, and that I had worked at the school meant that there was a risk that certain terms or expressions might be used between us that are not familiar to the outsider. I was aware of these risks before the interview and was careful to ensure that our interaction was as objective as possible, without creating unnecessary distance. All quotes used in the analysis are my own translations of the original Swedish transcriptions. The work of translating these quotes took place some weeks after the initial interviews took place. This clearly entails risks for the objectivity of the study given that my subjective interpretation of the interviewee’s comments may be reflected in how the final quotes are formulated. I have attempted to minimize this

66 Trost, 2005, p. 111. Trost actually mentions four factors, the forth being consistency, but points out that this last factor is hardly relevant for a qualitative interview.
67 Trost, 2005, p. 112.
risk by including certain specialist terms in Swedish where these terms may not be generally recognized in English.

In short, though these factors are more easily applied to quantitative research, they appear useful as a starting point when thinking about the reliability and validity of the interviews that form the empirical basis for this dissertation. Factors that may have considerable effect on a qualitative interview, such as any previous connection between informant and researcher, cancel each other out in this case. The informants’ relationships to me are similar enough that I feel that there is a good level of comparability between the two interviews.

The issue of validity is an issue of whether or not a question measures what it is intended to measure.\textsuperscript{68} In this dissertation, the questions asked are informed by my research questions and thematic concepts based on previous research. Though, as mentioned above, I have used the same – hence to a degree standardized – questions in both interviews,\textsuperscript{69} the interviews have been semi-structured and I have allowed for a level of straying from the interview guide. Nevertheless, the interviews have been quite firmly framed by my research questions and the thematic concepts. Thus, although the interviews were not heavily standardized there was a degree of structure to them.

\section*{5 Analysis}

The analytical categories used in this section are based on the content of the empirical material rather than the theoretical concepts that were used when constructing the interview guides. Nevertheless the categories are relevant for the theoretical and analytical starting points outlined in section 2 and should allow for an organization of the empirical material in a way that allows me to answer my initial research questions as well as developing a discussion around any interesting and relevant themes that are touched on in the empirical material. As previously mentioned in the method section, all quotations contained in this section are the author’s translations of original Swedish interview transcriptions.

\subsection*{5.1 Principal’s role and responsibilities}

\textsuperscript{68} Trost, 2005, p. 113.
\textsuperscript{69} See appendix.
This category relates to how the informants viewed their roles as principal on a general level and is intended to give a description of the kind of work the principals engage in independently of the implementation of the Education Act. The empirical information here will be analysed in the light of contextual frameworks that can affect the interpretation framework of the principal.\(^{70}\) I will also focus on the concepts of “school domains”\(^{71}\) and “governance tools”\(^{72}\), as well as the terms “administrative and pedagogic leadership”.\(^{73}\)

Informant A spoke of the fact that many of the tasks that might be described as belonging to the professional and client domain in School A are delegated to so-called program principals (programrektorer) who are responsible for tasks relating to students’ legal rights in School A. Informant A described his role in the following terms:

   My most important task … is to have overriding responsibility for the school and the development of the school … to make sure the organization is working with the right things … that we make the right priorities and we channel our energy in the right direction.

It is not entirely clear from this description whether the principal’s tasks in School A can be described as primarily pedagogic or administrative in character. Certainly very little of what are mentioned as the central responsibilities of the informant relates directly to the pedagogic work of the school. If one uses the wider definition of administrative leadership applied by Kåräng, i.e. that of someone who defines his/her tasks primarily within the boundaries of existing rules and regulations\(^{74}\) then Informant A’s use of the term “development” would appear to indicate an interpretive approach that has less in common with what Rapp refers to as “concrete decisions” than “the setting of goals”.\(^{75}\) This more dynamic, less rigid attitude towards the leadership role can also be observed when Informant A mentions the importance of the “marketing” and “positioning” of the school in relation to the outside world:

   It’s also about positioning the school in the municipality in relation to the superstructure and also in relation to the outside world and to our partners such as the university, businesses and so on.
   Increasingly it’s about marketing and positioning the school in that way.

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\(^{70}\) See 2.2.2
\(^{71}\) Sveberg, 2000.
\(^{73}\) Kåräng, 1997.
\(^{74}\) Kåräng, 1997, p.263.
\(^{75}\) Rapp, 2001, p.24.
Marketing and positioning are terms that can be associated with a business-client relationship which implies that, despite the delegation of many tasks which relate to the school’s clients, Informant A still viewed his role as very much belonging to the client domain. An economic component can thus be detected in Informant A’s responsibilities in that making the school attractive for potential students is seen as an important task. In contrast, Informant B is more explicitly focused on pedagogic questions when describing his role:

T: In your role as school principal which tasks do you perceive as being the most important?

IB: Well, it’s to lead … leadership … to be leader for all of the work in the school … the pedagogic work in the school … I see the task of the leader all the time as being to pursue the work of developing the school.

Informant B describes his work as that of pedagogic leadership, a term which Kåräng uses to mean a leadership role where the decisions made by the principal have an effect on what occurs in classroom situations.\(^\text{76}\) Despite initially defining the role of principal as that of providing pedagogic leadership, Informant B went on to mention administrative tasks such as recruitment of staff and responsibility for the school budget when discussing the main responsibilities of the principal at School B. Significantly, Informant B also mentioned rules which regulate the tasks of the principal. Informant B thus experienced providing administrative leadership in both the narrow and wider senses of the term\(^\text{77}\) as an important aspect of the principal’s job description at School B.

It is worth noting the focus of Informant B on the internal activity of the school. This is a marked difference from the outward-looking approach of the principal in School A where most internal administrative and pedagogic tasks are delegated to other members of staff. The internal activity of the school would thus appear to be a more significant contextual factor for Informant B than Informant A. This is particularly noticeable when comparing the way each of the informants relate to economic governance of their respective schools. The economic component of the principal’s governance in school A is described in terms of marketing and positioning the school in relation to the outside world, terms that reflect an active approach to economic questions. This can be contrasted with Informant B, whose economic tools are first and foremost that of responsibility for the school budget. The use of the term “budget”

\(^{76}\) Kåräng, 1997, p.264
\(^{77}\) Ibid.
assumes a more passive way of relating to economic questions and one where the economic framework of the school is given.

When discussing the question of how the school deals with issues around order and discipline within the school, Informant B makes references to the legal and judicial components of his leadership role. He is, however, careful to distance himself from what he refers to as “political” questions:

I have reported to the police what should be reported … where crimes are committed … we know that if a student is a threat for another student we can suspend that student … after that it is a political question … [another] department … deals with these kind of questions.

Informant B is keen to point out that “political questions” are not part of his mandate and that his authority in questions of order and discipline within the school do not extend beyond the realm of the principal’s legal duties. The political domain is thus expressly excluded when Informant B discusses his roles and responsibilities. This can be contrasted with the more participative way of relating to the political domain of Informant A, for example when discussing decisions made at municipal level.78

5.2 Contextual factors

This section deals with specific contextual factors that are of relevance for how the principal interprets and subsequently implements the Education Act. When forming the interview guide, three contextual factors were identified as being highly relevant for the principal’s interpretive framework based on the theoretical literature, those of the principal’s relationship with state organizations, the principal’s relationship with municipal organizations and the profile of the school. The interview guide was designed with these factors in mind. Based on content generated by the informants in the empirical material, a further contextual factor has been included in the analysis, namely that of the school’s internal organization.

Relevant theoretical concepts here are that of the curriculum cycle79 and the interpretive framework of the principal.80 Of further interest is the question of how the principal relates to

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78 See 5.2.2.
79 See 2.2.3.
80 See 2.2.2.
issues within the political and professional domains in the process of interpreting and implementing the Education Act.

5.2.1 Principal’s relationship to state organizations

Both principals mentioned that they were aware of the government’s proposals with regard to a new Education Act before the Act was enshrined in law. Some signs of active involvement in the process of formulating the new law were evident in the reflections of Informant B:

I remember that I looked at the preposition that the new government put forward for a new Education Act … we actually had the possibility of influencing [the final outcome] as there was a round of seeking comments (remisrunda) \(^{81}\) to do with the proposition … so I have made a few remarks here and there.

Both informants mentioned contact made with the National Agency for Education in the process of interpreting and implementing the Act. The contact with this agency appears to have consisted for the most part in the principals seeking information or guidance from the agency. Informant B mentioned further instances of direct contact between himself and state organizations in the Act’s realization stage:

Myself and some others here [at the school] have travelled away to conferences and listened … and had contact with the Department of Education and such like in order to make myself acquainted with the Act.

Informant A expressed the view that the process of interpreting and implementing the Education Act had been less problematic than that of the work of interpreting other documents that form part of the new educational reforms. The legal nature of the document is identified as significant in this regard:

I think we’ve had more time on the Education Act than we’ve had on [issues concerning] grading … Education Acts can’t be changed so quickly … the legal process has its own schedule which means that … it takes time to make changes to a new Education Act.

\(^{81}\) The process of seeking advice and comments from relevant agencies in the process of formulating laws.
Further to this, it was made clear by both informants that there has been a wide availability of prescriptive texts ⁸² (förordningstexter) produced by state organizations regarding the Education Act. Informant A expressed the view that the Education Act is a more cohesive text than other steering documents and named reforms of the grading system as an example of a more problematic text to interpret. The process of interpreting and implementing the Education Act at school level is thus described by Informant A as a less complicated task than is the case for other central steering documents.

These observations can be analyzed in the light of the “curriculum cycle” concept.⁸³ According to this, the formulation and realization of central steering documents is an inter-relational process where problems encountered at the realization stage lead to the eventual re-formulation of the steering document. Based on the empirical material provided above, it would appear that the government and state agencies consulted widely during the formulation stage of the Education Act. Clear guidelines were then provided to schools at the realization stage. Inter-relational activity between state organizations and school principals was therefore much more pronounced during policy formulation than during policy realization. Informant A contrasted this with other educational reforms, where the informant experienced that less time was available for realizing steering document goals than was the case for the Education Act.

Of further significance is Informant A’s description of the Education Act as a more cohesive document than the other educational reforms:

One hasn’t had as much time to spend on [prescriptive texts] and such like around [the steering documents relating to grading] but with the Education Act I don’t think it feels like a piece-meal document. One understands it in its entirety.

Informant A identifies the legal character of the Education Act as significant. Whereas much of the content of the Education Act includes measures which are legally binding on principals, reforms around grading require a much greater degree of interpretation on the part of professionals at the realization stage. This judicial component may explain why the Act was experienced as more cohesive than other documents and why state organizations were able to provide clearer interpretive guidance for principals at the realization stage. Despite this, some frustration is evident in the comments of Informant B regarding the lack of clear interpretive guidelines over specific issues:

⁸² Author’s translation.
⁸³ See 2.2.3
T: How have you experienced the contact that you have had [with state organizations]?

IB: Well, there is goodwill from both parties ... but when I come with my awkward questions [that one can’t] really know from reading the Act ... as recently as yesterday I got an answer where I can’t really work out if they have answered my question.

T: Was this a question of interpretation?

IB: Yes, it would have to be but as it’s not always possible to work out [the meaning of] the Act as it leaves things open for interpretation and there is no way of checking if one has interpreted correctly. Then it’s a matter of [testing interpretation through] the school inspection.

Here, the role of school inspections in testing certain aspects of the law is mentioned by Informant B. Similarly Informant A refers to the possible necessity of judicial precedent in determining how particular aspects of the Act should be interpreted. The curriculum cycle is therefore still relevant even when applied to the Education Act, except that it would be wrong to use the term “re-formulation” to describe what happens directly after problems occur at the realization stage. The role of the School Inspection is to interpret rather than re-formulate legislation. Where aspects of the Act are not clear on certain points, principals have certain, albeit temporary and limited, freedom to make decisions based on their interpretation of the Act. This freedom is temporary to the extent that inaccurate interpretations can subsequently be reversed by the Agency for School Inspections or through the official appeals procedure and limited to the extent that school principals are likely to want to avoid the bad publicity that would result in failing to abide by the law as laid down in the Education Act.

5.2.2 Principal’s relationship to municipal organizations

The role of the municipality is mentioned by informants solely in relation to the realization arena of the curriculum cycle. Whether or not the municipality played any role in the formulation of the Education Act is outside the remit of this dissertation.

The aim of the interview questions concerning the informant’s interaction with municipal authorities was to determine the role of the municipality in providing contextual frameworks

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84 Although reformulation of Education Acts does occur in cases where existing wording is incompatible with other laws.
85 See 2.2.3
for the principal’s interpretation and implementation of the Act at school level. Of further relevance is the thematic concept of the interpretive process in which guideline writing is a key stage in the transformation of goals contained in central steering documents into concrete tasks within a school.

From the informant responses it is possible to identify examples of issues relating to the interpretation and implementation of the Education Act being discussed at municipal level before any decision was made at school level. One such issue that was particularly relevant for the principal of School A was the continued existence and/or role of programme principals within the school. As previously mentioned, many of the responsibilities within the professional and client domain of School A are delegated to these programme principals. Given the requirement in the Education Act that one principal should have overriding responsibility for the pedagogic work of the school and that the person responsible should hold the title of principal, it was a matter of some concern for Informant A that principals would no longer be permitted to delegate certain areas of work to other members of staff.

Informant A mentioned that responsibility for discussing and making decisions on this question was given to a working group of municipal school principals on which the informant actively participated.

Another example of an act of interpretation being made at municipal level was that of practical implementation of individual action plans (åtgärdsprogram). According to the terms of the Education Act individual action plans are required in cases where students are identified as requiring extra support. The principal is responsible for measures to do with the activation and implementation of individual action plans. The role of the municipality in framing the implementation of this work is described by Principal A:

At municipal level we’ve decided upon a template … a structure for how the individual action plan will be written. There is going to be a digital system [so that different members of staff at different schools have access to the action plans] … which means that we need to have the same type of forms and templates in order to ensure equal treatment in all schools.

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86 See 2.2.2
87 See 2.2.1
88 Lindensjö & Lundgren (2000) p.177
89 SFS 2010:800, 2 chapter, 9§.
90 Author’s translation. The terms arbetsgrupp and beredsgrupp are used alternatively by respondent.
91 Author’s translation.
92 SFS 2010:800, 3 chapter, 9§. The definition of a student in need of extra support can be found at 3 chapter, 6&7§
93 SFS 2010:800 3 chapter, 9§ states: “the individual action plan shall be decided by the principal”. (Åtgärdsprogrammet ska beslutas av rektorn).
The principle of equal treatment for all students in all of the schools that the municipality has responsibility for is thus a central framing aspect in the implementation of that part of the Education Act which deals with individual action plans. Based on the information from Informant A, decisions are taken at municipal level regarding the exact formulation of guidelines to do with individual action plans.

It should be noted however that, on the basis of the response of Informant A, these decisions appear to have been taken with the full collective involvement of school principals in the municipality. In fact, the role of the political leadership within the municipality is not touched upon at all by Informant A and a collective “we” is used whenever referring to municipal level decision making. A slightly more detached way of relating to the municipality can be detected in certain statements made by Informant B. Here, the organization of the municipality is discussed, in particular the role of the uppdragssidan\(^94\) in the decision making process:

> Well, I think there have been a number of meetings in the spring that have made things clearer and taken decisions … the [uppdragssidan] dealt with this sometime around a year ago … and it has influenced and helped things … they have asked me questions as well … I’ve been asked a number of questions by the [uppdragssidan] regarding the Introduction program.

The uppdragssidan is described in terms of being a body that is separate from that of the informant and the school and which has its own tasks and responsibilities. The principal’s role vis-à-vis this body appears to be that of providing consultation rather than determining policy. Informant B also mentioned the existence of an upper-secondary school staff group and a principal’s group at municipal level. These groups were however described as consultative bodies for the principal himself when dealing with elements of the Education Act that require interpretation:

> I engage in discussions with … the upper-secondary school group\(^95\) … there are people there who I have bounced different ideas off … and the principal’s group … when we have meetings I bandy around those thoughts I have where things aren’t particularly clear.

\(^94\) This is a Swedish term used by the informant to describe that part of the municipal authority that administers tasks to different organizations. Given that I could not find an adequate English alternative that would be adequately descriptive for the reader, I have chosen to use the Swedish term in the text.

\(^95\) Swe: gymnasiestaben
Based on the responses from both informants it would appear that the exact role of the municipality in providing an interpretive framework for principals in the work of implementing the Education Act varies between different schools and can depend on the issue in question. On some specific issues, where several schools identify a common problem, the municipality functions as an arena of collective decision making for the parties concerned. On other questions, where certain issues of fundamental principle have been identified, the municipality provide specific guidelines that limit the interpretive freedom of the principal. In addition to this, the municipality also provides a support network where principals can seek advice or support on issues of concern, as well as principals themselves being a source of information and professional expertise for other municipal organizations.

5.2.3 School organization

As observed by Johansson and Kallos amongst others, the carrying out of decisions taken at a political level and the work of providing leadership within the school unit can be an area of potential conflict for a school principal. In this context, a “process of reduction” may occur, where principals interpret goals or develop strategies that create legitimacy for the goals at school level.96 One of the ways that legitimacy can be created is by utilizing the established organizational processes of the school or by establishing new organizational processes. This may involve delegating decision making or allowing other members of staff to influence decision making.

As previously discussed, one of the major areas of discussion within the municipality concerned the role of program principals. Given the requirement of the Education Act that the school principal be responsible for all aspects of the school’s pedagogic activity, it is interesting to note that the principal shared responsibility for much of the work around interpretation and implementation of the Education Act at School A:

T: When you first started the work (of interpreting and implementing the Act) in the school, what was it that actually happened on a purely practical level?

IA: On a purely practical level we developed routines around how we would work with the individual action plan and certification notification (beskedsanvisningar) and then firstly we did some work in

97 Author’s translation
the leadership group, the school leadership that we then did some further work on with a team leader during a concentration day when we went away and just worked with that in order to establish what works in reality.

Based on the above it can be deduced that the initial work around interpreting and implementing those parts of the Act that were prioritized was the collective responsibility of the leadership group at School A. Of particular interest is the role of team leaders in legitimizing the work done at leadership level amongst teachers at School A, a point that is subsequently expressly made by the informant:

If you think about the process around what the routines should look like … the team leaders were active in this and by being active in the process they can also legitimize and promote [the work] in their teams.

The work of developing “routines” at leadership level is something that team leaders are actively involved in. These routines are subsequently communicated to other members of staff by the team leaders. This can be viewed in the light of “the process of reduction”. The aims of the Act are thus legitimized at staff level through the participation of the team leaders in the decision making process.

This collective leadership approach at School A stands in contrast to the approach employed at School B where the principal takes on much greater responsibility for the process of informing staff about relevant aspects of the Act:

With regard to implementing (the Act) … last year I did a series of lectures and workplace meetings … I picked out parts of the Act where there were clear changes and presented them to the staff … they’ve had a lot of documentation that I have produced myself as there was a lot in the Act that was new … so I’ve worked with different groups and I’ve worked with all of the staff in the school and tried to explain things.

Staff involvement in the process of interpreting and implementing the Act in School B is described variously as that of continual feedback and evaluation amongst the whole staff and the delegating of particular work to staff with particular responsibilities. Compare the two quotes below from Informant B:

There has been constant communication here in the school … everyone who works at the school, the ones who are going to realize all of that which is new … and that has affected me too … things flow backwards and forwards and we test different ways and everything isn’t going to be exactly as it was when we started off as we have to evaluate and revise things in order to move forward.
I have appointed [members of staff] called quality leaders that have responsibility [for the development of the school’s work] in each of the staff teams … this has been a way of working with the implementation of … all of the new school reforms.

From the first quote it appears that there is a high level of general staff involvement in implementing the Act and that the work of implementation is to some extent a matter of trial and error. In the second quote, the organizational structure of the school is emphasized and specific members of staff are named as having particular responsibility in the implementation process.

5.2.4 School profile

In this section, the role of the school’s pedagogic activity in providing a contextual framework for principal’s interpretation of the Education Act will be discussed.

Informant B is clear on the point that the main focal point for his work was that of the specific educational profile of School B:

T: Was there anything particularly noteworthy in the new Education Act that you felt could be of interest or relevant for [you]?

IB: The [main area of concern] for this school is that the Individual programme was taken out and replaced by five [new] introduction programmes ... so I focused very much on ... what these new programmes would look like.

The centrality of this particular reform for the pedagogic activity in School B means that the work of implementing the Act involved wholesale changes that affected key professional and pedagogic aspects of the work of all of the staff in the school. The work around implementing the reforms contained in the Individual programme at School B appears to have taken precedence over most other questions surrounding the Education Act and this particular issue dominated when Informant B discussed the Act. It is also significant that much of the work of implementing the part of the Education Act that relates to the Individual programme had been started quite early:
I read [the Act] a lot in the beginning, before the Act had come into force, so we began applying the part of the new Act dealing with rules around qualifications [for entry into upper secondary school programmes] a year before it even came into force.

The direct relevance of many parts of the Act to the core pedagogic activities of the school meant therefore that the work of implementing the Act was so extensive that it required the implementation process to begin before the Act had actually come into force.

In contrast, Informant A when reflecting on the relevance of the Act for School A tends not to focus on particular parts of the Act but rather on the overriding ideas and principles of the Act:

[The Act] is very much about equality and possibly most importantly equality between municipal and private actors. That feels quite relevant as it affects us when there isn’t competition on equal terms. So it is something that we welcome, that the conditions of competition are regulated and that is what the Act is very much about ... the right to a school library and so on.

This focus on competition is also mentioned by Informant B in relation to the school’s specific profile:

The Act opens things up ... there will be many others who can organise the Introduction programme ... independent schools can do it ... all municipal schools with vocational programmes ... and this means that [the school] has got competition in a different way.

Informant B went on to mention that this increased competition had lead to the school marketing itself in a way that had not been done previously. This focus on competition implies that the Act has led to an increased awareness of economic aspects of school governance and the need for schools to relate to their clients in a different way than previously. This is confirmed by the fact that Informant B also chose to discuss different marketing strategies that the school has developed since the reforms were introduced.

In summary, in the case of School B the profile of the school determined which areas of the Act the principal chose to focus on although it did not determine how these areas should be dealt with. In fact, the opposite was the case. The extent of the reforms meant that the pedagogic activity of the school has been renewed and re-evaluated in order to conform to the requirements of the Act. Rather than framing the way that the principal interprets the Act, the Act has framed the way that the informant relates to the pedagogic activity at School B.
work of the principal in interpreting and implementing the Act has thus been focused on pedagogical issues that directly relate to the professional and client domains of the school. In contrast, Informant A relates to the Act in a more overriding way, and discusses the Act in the light of political issues, such as equality between schools. These are also issues that relate to the school’s client domain.

5.4 The role of the school principal in the implementation of the Act

In this section, the empirical material will be analyzed with reference to the thematic concepts concerning aspects of the principal’s school leadership role. The role of the principal in the implementation of the Education Act at school level will thus be viewed from the perspective of “governing tools”, “school domains”, “professional norms” and “interpretive norms”.

Of particular interest and significance for the role of the school principal in relation to Act implementation is the informant’s responses to those parts of the Act that deal with order and discipline in schools. Neither of the informants viewed these parts of the Act as binding, and both were critical of the ideology underpinning this part of the Act. Informant A had particular strong views with regard to the issue of school detentions:

T: Is there anything in the (Education Act) that you don’t regard as relevant for your work in the school?

IA: No, not that I can think of ... there are a few things that I don’t believe in such as detentions.

T: How are you working with detentions? Have you discussed it?

IA: No ... we view education as a gift. It’s not a punishment to educate oneself. If we were to punish someone it would be by saying that they weren’t allowed to attend lessons, not that they should go to more lessons.

T: Have there been any discussions about this?

IA: No because we have chosen a completely different way of working than rules to do with order, bans and so on. We like to talk about how we want things to be in school and how we relate to each other ...

98 See 2.2.4.
100 Sveberg, 2000.
101 See 2.2.4.
maybe in other schools it doesn’t work with the ways of working that we have ... maybe detention and punishment is needed there but for us it would be very counter-productive.

The above can be viewed in the light of the interpretive and professional norms of the principal. Given that these aspects of the Act exist that do not formally bind the school in a legal sense\(^{102}\) the informant interprets this part of the Act as giving the informant the freedom to choose whether or not to implement the measures mentioned. Punishments such as detention are thus viewed by the informant as something which the Act allows principals to introduce, if so desired. This interpretation of the Act suggests that Informant A does not display an administrative leadership style in the wider sense, given that the application of measures to do with detention are explicitly ruled out. A more rigid, rule centred leadership style would not explicitly rule out the possibility of applying any measures that are potentially available. In addition to this, the apparent unwillingness of the informant to discuss the issue of detention with other staff members suggests that the informant’s personal norms (or contextual factors concerning the image or profile of the school) override any professional norms the informant may have in regard of seeking consensus when making decisions.

Those parts of the Act that establish the right of schools to impose punishments provide schools and in particular school principals with increased legal/judicial powers. Nevertheless, the questions they raise are treated as belonging primarily to the professional domain, although for Informant B the question even appears to be a matter for the political domain:

> I have written some things in the newspaper over the last year because I mean everything isn’t as I would like it to be ... for example I think that there has been too little focus on the work of preventing [such things as] victimization and bullying, poor behaviour, criminality and so on. [We should be] working more pre-emptively with the Education Act ... it focuses on punishment of different types, which I think is a shame.

Here, Informant B is not confined to the role of passive acceptance in respect of government legislation. The act of challenging political decisions in a public domain suggests that the informant views the role of principal as carrying authority in the field of school related questions. A critical tone can also be detected when Informant A reflects upon the general aims of the Education Act:

\(^{102}\) The aspects of the Act relating to order and discipline allow principals to choose which methods are most appropriate (see 5 chapter, 5§ Skollagen 2010).
One reflection that I had was that there was a shift in leadership possibly from pedagogic leadership to more legal/judicial leadership and that principals are used more and more as guarantors for judicial governance ... I think also that this is very much about the wishes of the state to steer schools better because decentralization has meant things have been stretched out more and more. So the Education Act and school principals are being used as the extended arm of the state.

The references to “guarantors for judicial governance” and “being used as the extended arm of the state” suggest that Informant A on a personal level views the Act as an attempt by the state to create extra judicial powers for itself, which principals are then given the responsibility for overseeing. Nevertheless, on a professional level the informant appears clear about the responsibilities the Act entails. This is apparent when discussing the role of the staff in implementing and/or conforming to the requirements of the Act:

T: What is your role in encouraging responsibility amongst the teachers? How do you encourage participation amongst the teachers? Did you have any discussions or did you need to force some teachers to participate?

IA: One thinks about the processes we had around what the routines would look like ... but otherwise in this case the written law is so clear on many points that it is in reality correct to say “this is what is required, we must get this done”

Informant A refers to the routines that were in place which involved team leaders but then adds that the teachers in the school have a non-negotiable legal responsibility to implement the Act. In this way, despite personal reservations around the goals of the Act, Informant A appears to understand and conform to the legal obligations that the Act places on him. From the point of view of professional and interpretive norms, it would appear that Informant A has a less pedagogic/democratic and more administrative style of leadership than Informant B who mentioned a high level of staff involvement in the implementation process. This consensus seeking leadership style is also reflected in the following response of Informant B:

T: With regard to your contact with the staff in the school, how do you experience that they have reacted? What is their attitude to the Act?

IB: Their attitude to the Act?

T: Yes ... have you experienced any unwillingness?

IB: No, I don’t think so.
T: No

IB: However there are things [to do with the Act] that we question together.

The informant then went on to mention the measures to do with discipline and punishment as issues that the staff have questioned. Thus, for Informant B, reservations about the Act are grounded in those reservations made at staff level, whereas for Informant A little in the way of discussion around the issue appears to have taken place at school level.

Of further interest and possible significance is the observation of Informant B that the Act has given him greater freedom to delegate tasks:

I have delegated what one can now delegate … I delegate leadership tasks to staff at the school. That wasn’t possible before but I’m doing it now … I delegate tasks that the new Education Act allows but which it didn’t before, so it’s clear that my role has involved much more formal delegating.

This interpretation of the Act goes against the general consensus that the Act aimed at increasing the responsibilities of the school principal. This interpretation also contradicts that of Informant A, who focused on the increased responsibilities of the principal that the Act entails:

What I have focused most on are those parts [of the Act] where schools can be held responsible, or where principals can be held responsible in a clearer way … [I] tried to understand the significance of greater legal security for students and the right of parents to appeal and so on in order to establish routines that we could then launch quickly in the school.

Here, it is important to make a distinction between the role of the principal in the implementation of the Act and the role of the principal as a result of the Act and it is possible that Informant B’s comments regarding the freedom to delegate tasks refers to the former, whilst Informant A refers to the latter. Certainly, there is little to be found in the contents of the Education Act itself which would allow for an interpretation in line with that given by Informant B that the Act allows principals to delegate leadership tasks.

It should be noted that Informant A mentioned that responsibility was shared with the programme principals around the organization of the individual action programme at School A. This is interesting given the fact that the Act requires that the principal take sole responsibility in this area. The suggestion that the interpretation and implementation of the
Act was a collective leadership responsibility at School A is strengthened further by the description of how work around the Act was carried out in practical terms at the school, which is described in section 5.2.3.

The principal at School A shows understanding towards the professional concerns of staff at the school regarding a particular aspect of the Act, but at the same time emphasizes the state’s judicial power as an important governing tool:

T: How did the teachers in the school react to the Education Act on the whole? What was your understanding of their attitude?

IA: There was a fear that increased documentation leads to [spending] more time on that and less time on classroom situations. This is a theme for everything that [I hear] from teachers because they have the view that they already have enough to do, and then new demands [are put on them] ...

T: Is this just in respect of the individual action programme?

IA: It’s in respect of everything of an administrative character that’s coming in. At the same time there’s a will to do the right thing and follow the law. One doesn’t want to be the one who is reported to the National Schools Agency.

The concerns of the teachers are understood and taken seriously by Informant A which suggests a consensus seeking and professionally oriented approach to leadership. At the same time, elements of an administrative leadership approach (in the wider sense of the term) can be detected in the informant’s mentioning of the risk of being reported to school authorities. In contrast, Informant B makes few references to judicial governing tools when describing the work of implementing the Act at school level. Instead, his role is described in terms of responsibility for follow up and evaluation, which suggests an interpretive approach where “statements of goals” rather than “formal decisions” are the interpretive norm, as well a less administrative, more pedagogic concept of the leadership role of the principal.

6 Discussion

6.1 Relevance of empirical results to wider discussions around educational reforms

103 See 5.2.3
Two competing interpretations are presented in the background section of this dissertation regarding the underlying motive behind the recent Swedish educational reforms. Representatives of the government maintain that the reforms were a responsive measure aimed at halting the negative pattern of educational results amongst Swedish students. The results of international studies are pointed to as evidence of this decline. Critics of this official position claim that the reforms are politically motivated and betray a desire of the government to increase state jurisdiction within the educational arena.

This critical stance is echoed in some of the responses gathered from informants, and a suspicion is evident as to the underlying motives of the Education Act. It should be noted however that the focus of the interviews was on the Education Act, which is only one part of the educational reform package that was launched in 2010. The Education Act as a document tends to focus on questions within the client domain and its main jurisdiction is that of judicial governance. In contrast, the other parts of the reform package, such as the new school curriculums, subject grading criteria and the reform of upper-secondary schools focus more on issues within the professional domain and therefore it is more likely that these documents will be read by teachers. These documents are also more likely to directly concern the issues of educational performance that are mentioned by the government when motivating the reforms.

One issue which both informants mentioned and where the general motives of the Act were criticized was that of measures to do with discipline and punishment in schools. Arguably this is an issue of an ideological as well as judicial nature and it is interesting that both informants express their concerns about this aspect of the Act on the basis of professional pedagogic principles rather than on questions of an administrative nature. It should be noted however that those criticisms of the Education Act that are based on the conviction that the Act aims to increase the jurisdiction of the state in school affairs are not valid in this case. On the contrary, it can be noted that both informants have made a conscious choice not to utilize the disciplinary measures available to them as a result of the Act. In this sense, the Act can be said to increase the judicial tools available to the principal alone, given that the question of whether or not a detention can be issued in a school is a matter that the principal has the sole legal right to determine. The state’s role here is of providing legal guarantees for the principal in those cases where detentions are issued.
Another question that has been raised in the wider context of educational reforms and that can be discussed in the light of the informants responses is that of the role of the school principal as pedagogic leader within the school. This issue was raised by the Agency for School Inspections, who claim that school principals are failing in their task of providing pedagogic leadership within the school unit. Based on the responses of the informants it would appear that tasks relating to direct pedagogical questions are an important part of the general responsibilities of principals in upper secondary schools. However, the importance of these tasks is balanced against other tasks that are of importance for the school. Amongst these are questions related to the marketing of the school and competing with other schools for students. The issue of competition is mentioned by both informants and its significance appears to have increased as a result of the Education Act which, according to both informants, has created a more level playing field with regard to competition between private and municipal actors. The marketing of the school is in itself not something that is directly related to the school’s pedagogic activity although it is to be assumed that there is an indirect relationship between the competitive success of a school and the school’s pedagogic activity.

6.2 Relevance of empirical results to previous research

The role of the principal as legal guarantor is a key starting point for Rapp\textsuperscript{104} who claims that principals lack knowledge in respect of their legal duties within the school arena. Of significance in this regard is the observation made by both informants that they received a great deal of guidance from state level organizations in the process of interpreting and implementing the Act. Rapp highlights the problems associated with decentralization, namely the greater level of interpretive freedom that principals experience when dealing with legal documents. That the state now provides principals with clear prescriptive guidelines as to how the Act should be interpreted and implemented suggests that the problems identified by Rapp have been recognized and rectified at state level, although one of the informants appeared not to welcome the idea that principals were reduced to “extended arms of the state” as a result of the Act. This situation seemed nevertheless to carry some advantages for the principal in that the informant claimed that the Education Act felt like a more cohesive document than other steering documents. A conclusion that can be drawn from this observation is that principals

\textsuperscript{104} Rapp, 2001
actions when interpreting the Education Act can be expected to consist to a relatively high degree of “formal decisions” rather than “statement’s of goals”, to use Rapp’s terminology.105

The distinction between what principals are supposed to do, according to steering documents, and what principals actually do in practice is of key importance for Leo.106 Here the significance of professional norms is examined as an explanatory factor for principal’s actions in the school arena. The empirical material provides few concrete examples of discrepancies between the wording of the Education Act and the concrete actions of principals in the school. What is, however, apparent is that principals are not “neutral” in the way they relate to steering documents. Rather, their interpretations and actions are guided by a range of factors, one of which is personal or professional norms and beliefs. Despite this, it can be noted that many of the personal reservations that the informants had about aspects of the Act did not affect their commitment to fulfilling its requirements and that the clarity of the text and level of state guidance was of significance in reducing the significance of the informant’s professional and personal interpretive framework on their final actions.

6.3 Other issues of relevance generated by empirical results

6.3.1 Differences between schools

Based on the informant’s responses, the work of realizing the Education Act appeared to be of a fundamentally different character in the two schools. Certainly there appears to be a tangible difference in the way that each of the informants related to the Act as a document. One of the questions that is asked of both informants is whether they view the document as an entity or as the sum of many parts. Whilst Informant B indicates that he preferred the former approach, Informant A indicated that the latter approach was adopted.

Given the scale of the changes that the Act entailed for School B in comparison with School A, it may well be the case that the implementation of the Act has entailed a series of organizational changes at School B. This may explain the remarks of Informant B that the implementation of the Act has resulted in greater powers of delegation. Whereas School B previously offered the choice of only one programme prior to the implementation of the

106 Leo, 2010.
reforms, the school now offers a wider range of different programmes that contain a greater range of school subjects which may have entailed a significant expansion in the activities of the school and thus an increase in the workload of the principal. In contrast, Informant A already enjoyed significant powers of delegation, powers that appeared to be threatened by the requirements of the Act. The size and profile of the respective schools are therefore clearly of relevance for explaining the apparent contradiction between the experiences of the principals with regard to issue focus and division of responsibility.

6.3.2 The role of the municipality in decision making

That education should be of equal value in all schools is one of the key principles enshrined in the Education Act. This principle is upheld by municipal authorities when framing the work of the principal around the Education Act. This can be observed in Informant A’s description of the work undertaken by the municipality in respect of the individual action programme. The municipality is thus an important contextual factor in the principal’s interpretive framework when dealing with the Education Act.

However, the extent to which the municipality frames the work of the principals appears to vary and is dependent on both the nature of question itself and on the principal’s relationship to the municipal authority. Where questions of a collective, political nature arise, such as the right of students to equal treatment, the municipal authority makes decisions about how the Act should be interpreted and establishes these decisions through the production of written documents that are communicated directly to municipal school employees. On such occasions, school principals have the opportunity to affect the decision making process but once the decision is made at municipal level their degree of interpretive free space with regard to this question is reduced.

Where questions of an administrative nature arise that are pertinent to some but not all of the school units within the municipality, such as the question of the role of programme principals, interpretive decision making is delegated to smaller working groups on which relevant members participate. Here, it can be assumed that the ability of the individual school principal to affect the final decision is great, but again the principal is bound to follow the decision

107 I chapter 1, 9§, Skollagen, 2010.
made by the municipal working group. Besides these elements of interpretive decision making, municipalities also function as arenas for professional consultation.

It can therefore be said that the extent to which the school principal is guided by collective municipal level decision making and the extent to which the school principal influences collective decision making in the municipality varies from case to case. On the basis of the examples mentioned by informants, the degree of municipal decision making and element of influence on the school principal would appear to depend on which domain the issue belongs to.

![Fig 5: Domains of municipal authority in relation to school principals.](image)

### 7 Conclusion

The aim of this dissertation was to understand how educational reforms are received and subsequently implemented by school principals in two different Swedish schools with a specific focus on the processes involved in interpreting and acting upon the different measures contained in the new Education Act. The questions I aimed to answer related to the experiences of the principals in these schools in interpreting the Education Act in the light of different contextual factors and how the principals saw their own role in the implementation of the Act.

These questions are interesting and relevant when seen against the background of the recent reforms to the Swedish educational system. The reforms affect everyone who has any kind of contact with the Swedish school system. They affect the rights of students within the schools, as well as their guardians. They affect the working conditions and practices of teachers within
the schools. They even affect newly graduating teaching students, for whom the attainment of a teaching license is now a pre-requisite for securing permanent employment.

However, it is upon the shoulders of the school principal that arguably the biggest burden of responsibility has fallen. In the process of writing this dissertation and conducting interviews with principals, I have been struck by the complexity and variety of tasks that the school principal is responsible for. These tasks include operating within political arenas of state and municipal level decision making, as well as providing leadership within the professional arena of pedagogy. Expertise in the field of marketing strategies and financial accounting is also useful for a school principal.

Furthermore, principals must also be able to successfully interpret formal legal documents. On the basis of my results it appears clear the present Education Act can be understood as a judicial tool of governance which increases the role of the state in school activities to a much greater degree than was previously the case. Despite some of the reservations held by the informants, it seems clear that the Act provides principals with a much clearer framework for understanding their legal responsibilities to students. From the point of view of school students, the Act can therefore be seen as strengthening of the right to both an education of equal value and a school experience of equal value, regardless of which school one attends.

The work of state organizations in providing prescriptive texts for school principals means that the “free space” of the principal when interpreting the Education Act is severely restricted. Again, this ought to reduce differences between schools and ensure that all students are treated equally. In those cases where interpretive “free space” is available for the principal, it appears that municipalities are influential in ensuring that schools adhere to the guiding principle of equal treatment that is enshrined in the Education Act.

Differences between schools nevertheless remain, and the two schools that have been the objects of my study are classic examples of two very different schools, with very different organizational forms and operational norms. These differences provide important contextual factors for explaining why interpretation of steering documents may vary from school to school and lead to an inbuilt inequality in the school system. The question of whether these differences are positive and necessary and whether the right of students to a choice of different school is more important than the right of students to a school of equal value is a normative question that I have not attempted to answer in this dissertation. The discussion is
nevertheless an important and fascinating one, and one that ought to be addressed more in the political debate around education policy.

Despite the fact that the Education Act is viewed as a heavily prescriptive document that restricts the principal’s interpretive free space, it is nevertheless apparent that the professional and personal norms of the school principal can still determine what action is taken in respect of specific measure contained within the Act. An example of this is the informants’ interpretations of the measures in the Act that relate to order and discipline. There would appear to be ample room for further research around the question of what decisions have been made in schools regarding order and discipline since the Education Act came into effect. An example of such a research question is that of how school principals interpret the new order and discipline measures contained in the Act and what kind of contextual factors affect school principals’ interpretations and actions in respect of these measures.

In my empirical material it can be seen that school principals’ views of their role in the implementation of the Education Act are strongly influenced by the judicial tools that are available to clients via state regulatory organizations. Examples of such judicial tools are the school inspection and the school appeals procedure. Such judicial tools can be seen as important legal guarantees for students in cases where principals or teachers fail to meet the legal requirements contained in the Act. The problem identified by Rapp of principals having inadequate knowledge of legal documents\textsuperscript{108} can therefore said to be resolved by a strengthening the judicial tools available to students and parents. The question is however, whether this is an adequate substitute for principals having a proper understanding of their legal responsibilities. There exists a danger that the school might be transformed into an arena of lawsuits and litigation unless school principals demonstrate common sense in respect of the law. Both of the principals I interviewed displayed a strong familiarity with and knowledge of their responsibilities vis-à-vis the Education Act. However, given the principal’s vast spectrum of responsibilities, many principals may be tempted to take the view that matters of legal responsibility will take care of themselves. One possible way of ensuring that student’s rights are adequately safeguarded is the establishment of permanent student representatives on the boards of schools. Such a system, if applied properly, would ensure that school principals were constantly put under pressure to fulfil their legal responsibilities. It would also ensure that students were fully informed of their rights, thus also contributing to the development of student’s education in the field of democratic citizenship.

\textsuperscript{108} Rapp, 2001.
One of the disadvantages of the Education Act from a teacher perspective is that where measures contained within the Act are strongly binding on the school, principals tend to employ a more top-down leadership style where staff involvement in, and influence over the implementation process is limited. However, where measures contained within the Act involve the implementation of far reaching changes to the pedagogic activity of the school, such as was the case with the reforms to the Individual programme, school principals tend to employ a more consensus seeking style, using follow-up and evaluation as a primary governance tool. In this dissertation I have made reference to the themes touched upon by Hallerström and Leo in respect of the professional norms of school principals. Following on from the themes that I have touched upon in this dissertation, another relevant area of further research is potentially the impact of the new educational reforms on principal’s democratic and professional norms. A relevant issue for research could thus be that of how the size and profile of a school affects the professional norms of the principal in the school.

8 Bibliography


9 Appendix

Intervjuguide

1. Hur länge har skolan funnits?
2. Hur länge har du varit i din närvarande tjänst?
3. Vilken / vilka uppgifter uppfattar du som viktigast i din roll som skolans rektor?
4. Minns du i vilket sammanhang du först fick kännedom om den nya skollagen?
5. Fanns det någon eller några delar av skollagen som du spontant upplevde som särskilt märkvärdiga då du fick kännedom om dem? (Varför?)
6. Finns det en eller flera bestämmelser i skollagen som du upplevde som särskild relevant för ditt uppdrag? (Varför?)
7. Då det gäller arbetet att förverkliga skollagen på skolan på vilket sätt förhöll du dig dokumentet? (Alltså som helhet eller som summan av dessa olika delar?)
8. Du nämnde X som särskilt märkvärdig / relevant. Minns du någon diskussion eller annan form av överläggning gällande hur man ska förhålla sig till X på skolnivå? (t ex på nationell, kommunal eller skolnivå?).
9. Bidrog du till någon av dessa diskussioner? (på vilket sätt?)
10. Hur gick det till med arbetet att förverkliga X på skolenivå? (t ex hade kommunen, lärarna, andra anställde, eleverna, vårdnadshavare osv någon inflytande?)
11. Togs några formella/informella beslut om hur X skulle förverkligas/genomföras?
13. Ungefär hur mycket av detta arbete (att ta beslut, formulera riktlinjer osv) deltog du i helt ensam? Hur mycket i samband med andra? Delegerades någon del av arbetet åt andra?

14. Hur reagerade lärarna på skollagen överlag?

15. Fanns det några delar som vissa/någon lärare reagerade mot?

16. Hur uppmuntrade du delaktighet och ansvarstagande bland lärare?

17. Har du haft någon kontakt med statliga organ under genomförande processen (från och med att skollagen antogs)?

18. Hur har du upplevt din kontakt med statliga organ i samband med skollagen?

19. Har du haft kontakt med kommunala aktörer/andra skolrektorer under genomförande processen?

20. Finns det någon/några faktorer som har med skolans särskild profil/egenskaper att göra som har gjort att arbetet kring skollagen har känts särskilt relevant?

21. Några aspekter som inte har upplevets som särskilt relevant med tanke på skolans profil/egenskaper?

22. Finns det något annat som det känns angelägen att nämna?

Tack för medverkan!