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In the eye of the storm? Mapping out a story of principals’ decision-making in an era of decentralisation and re-centralisation

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ABSTRACT
The aim of this article is to explore how Swedish principals experienced the decentralisation and re-centralisation reforms and how they affected principals’ autonomy and decision-making capacity. Data were obtained from three surveys of Swedish principals, carried out in 2005, 2012 and 2019. The results show that principals experienced a high degree of autonomy in their decision-making in 2005 and 2012 and also a balanced control from state and municipalities. At the time of the third study in 2019, principals continue to express a rather high degree of autonomy, but this autonomy is now combined with an increased degree of control. However, given the high degree of autonomy, in combination with low degree of conflicts between different stakeholders, the article concludes that the expression ‘in the eye of the storm there is calm’ appears to suit Swedish principals’ decision-making, at least, in the development of decentralisation and re-centralisation.

Introduction
In the past decades, much attention has been given to issues around educational governance and school reform, including paths of success. Scholars have also discussed the reasons behind the absence of clear results of school improvement research in relation to the proliferation and scale of reforms (e.g. Cuban 1990, 2013). The work of Fullan (2000), which departs from the North American setting, reveals that large-scale improvement reforms were first attempted in the 1960s, but that these had a modest impact, mainly because advocates of reform ignored issues of implementation and failed to account for local institutions and cultures. Still, the recent work of Harris et al. (2013) and Fullan (2018) shows that the quality of policy implementation, rather than policy selection, is key to fostering and sustaining educational improvement. Harris and Jones (2017, 195) also pointed out that ‘policy-makers around the world remain...
preoccupied with identifying the ‘right’ policies to achieve change and improvement, rather than considering the conditions and contextual factors that are most likely to make any chosen policy effective in practice.’

Earlier works also showed that national, regional and local contexts are essential for understanding educational reforming and school system improvement (Hargreaves and Shirley 2009). The work of Seashore Louis et al. (2008) focuses on the effect of policy culture on states’ policy-making mechanisms. By studying educational leadership and policy-making mechanisms in three US states, Seashore Louis et al. (2008) showed that each state had very different means by which they pursued educational policies, concluding that political culture is a mediating factor for states’ responses to increasing demands for leadership and accountability initiatives, and that it is therefore necessary to account for the impact of each state’s unique political culture when planning for these initiatives and explaining their results. This statement is the starting point of this article, focusing on principals in large-scale reforms over time.

In Sweden, there is a rather long tradition of large-scale national education reforms (Wermke and Salokangas 2021). During the 1990s, the municipalities were granted increased responsibility as Local Education Authorities (LEAs), becoming more directly responsible and accountable for their schools. Thus, LEAs and principals took on responsibility for issues related to school leadership and school improvement, in contrast to the earlier system in which they received detailed instructions from the government and its school agencies. In combination, and in line with international movements, Sweden has also been influenced by neo-liberal policies and market reforms (Lundahl 2002a, 2002b, 2007). As Whitty (2010) points out, neo-liberal policies have been in place for more than three decades and these developments should be considered part of a broader trend across continents as national differences erode. Accordingly, such trends, for instance as seen in the UK (e.g. Ball 2009; Wilkinson 2016) and in Australia (e.g. Fitzgerald et al. 2017; Hogan and Thompson 2019) are also evident in the Swedish school landscape (see also Salokangas & Ainskow 2018). However, it has been argued that Sweden and previously Chile stand out as internationally noteworthy examples quite unlike other countries, for instance when it comes to opportunities for school companies to make profit on education funded by public grants (Blossing, Imsen, and Moos 2014; Carrasco and Gunter 2019).

Looking further into the current body of research, there are additional details to observe regarding the autonomy of schools and principals. The work of Keddie (2015), emerging from the British context, revealed similar policy movements in Sweden and the UK regarding reforms aimed at increasing school autonomy but at the same time also accountability and state control. As noted by Keddie, these shifts resulted in a more dynamic and diverse school system characterised by flexibility and by recentralised governance. Moreover, the work of Han (2018) indicated that, in recent decades, school autonomy has regularly been promoted as a way of making schools more productive. However, research has also cast doubt upon whether greater autonomy for schools, principals and teachers is always preferable. For instance, even at schools with large amounts of autonomy, teachers claimed that school leaders were more concerned with administrative and/or financial assignments (Skerritt 2019). Previous research has also highlighted the risk that students from poorer backgrounds might be even further disadvantaged if schools were to become more autonomous and thus bear more responsibility for their own improvement (Armstrong and Ainscow
Sweden has received recommendations from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to reform its current school system to increase equality between schools and between students (see Cerna et al. 2019). However, without overlooking the results revealed in both international and Swedish research, there still appears to be a need to expand understanding of how professionals experience large-scale reform over time and how it impinges on their decision-making, especially when it comes to principals. Against this backdrop, the work of Lundahl (2002b) concludes by posing the question: Sweden – decentralisation, deregulation, quasi-markets, and then what? Our article aims to address this question, charting a path by exploring how Swedish principals experienced the decentralisation and re-centralisation reforms between 2005-2019, how these reforms affected their relationship with various stakeholders, and how they affected principals’ autonomy and decision-making capacity. To this end, we draw on empirical data obtained from three large-scale surveys on principals’ work in Sweden. The analysis builds on the work of Ingersoll (2003) and Ingersoll and Collins (2017), which provides a theoretical lens for understanding the decisions principals make during these large-scale reforms, how they describe their relations to state and municipality government, and how they are controlled in their daily work, and by whom. This work by Ingersoll and by Ingersoll and Collins highlights the multidimensionality of public education organisation by focusing on the level at which decisions are made. In doing so, interesting arguments on the dynamics of decentralisation and centralisation can be made. These dynamics are at the core of the presented reforms in the context of Sweden.

The article is structured as follows: First, the Swedish school system is introduced. Then, the material and methods are presented. Thereafter, the results are presented, structured in terms of the three time periods in focus: 2005, 2012 and 2019. The article ends with a discussion in which the results attained are linked to previous research highlighting general and specific features of the Swedish case.

Sweden – between recentralisation and decentralisation

In the post-war period, Sweden was characterised, due to its social democratic heritage, as one of the most centralised school systems in the western world (Jarl, Kjellgren, and Quennerstedt 2018). In this system, the state provided detailed directives to the local political level, i.e. to the municipalities, for example, regarding employment of principals and teachers, salary standards, distribution of financial resources, the content of the curricula, and so forth. More simply, in this system, a professional principal was a skilled administrator who was well familiar with current regulations and directives.

Over time, however, reform ideas were developed concerning how to involve LEAs, principals and teachers in local school improvement, in order to develop professional expertise related to specific conditions in the local context. A watershed in this development was the investigation on School’s Inner Work (SIA) (Swedish Government Official Reports, SGOR 1974, 53), in which several recommendations were offered regarding school principals’ work on school management and organisation. The SIA investigation advocated, for example, that principals develop the school’s organisation and quality work to promote good educational results and job satisfaction. These ideas, at least hypothetically, paved the way for a professional leadership more rooted in the local context.
Nevertheless, it was not until the 1990s that decentralisation reforms were truly implemented in Sweden (Lundahl 2002b). Management by objectives and results replaced detailed state regulation and the responsibility for organising public education, and for allocating resources to schools, was transferred from the state level to the 290 municipalities. In addition, the responsibility for hiring and paying teachers was devolved to the municipalities, and the school system was also opened up for ‘independent’ school organisers. The National Board of Education was replaced by a new government agency, the Swedish National Agency for Education, which adopted a principle of ‘stopping at the municipal border,’ to uphold local freedom (Jacobsson and Sahlin-Andersson 1995). In retrospect, municipalities, principals, and teachers found it difficult to understand and act in the transformed educational landscape (Swedish National Audit Office 2011). It has also been stressed that the reforms were carried out at a time when neither municipalities, principals, nor teachers had the preparedness, resources, and/or capacity to handle the new responsibilities and assignments. In addition, it has been argued that the Swedish Government and government agencies did not provide sufficient support to local education authorities (LEAs), principals, and teachers as implementers of the reforms (SGOR 2014, 5).

However, over the past 10 years, there has been a change of course in Swedish school governance in terms of a re-centralisation movement, where the state is considerably more present at the municipal level compared to the 1990s and early 2000s. The establishment of a new agency in 2008, the Swedish Schools Inspectorate, marked an important step in this development (Rönnberg 2012). A primary task of the Schools Inspectorate has been (and still is) to inspect principals’ work in relation to national regulations, for example, regarding the schools’ systematic quality work, equality, grading and assessment. In addition to external inspections and an increased number of state directives, a number of large-scale school improvement initiatives were launched by the National Agency for Education in later years.

Against this backdrop, it becomes evident that educational governance in Sweden is characterised by frequent reforms, and a system where the responsibility for education is divided between three political levels and several actors: the parliament, the government and the government agencies at the national level, local educational authorities and independent school providers at the municipal level, and schools, principals and teachers at the local school level (Wermke and Salokangas 2021). To specify, laws and regulations, such as the Education Act and the national curriculum, are defined by the national level where, in addition, government agencies are responsible for evaluation of school activities, and for providing support to LEAs or their independent counterparts and principals in all school forms. As noted above, there are public (i.e. municipality) and independent school providers in Sweden, both, in turn, responsible for providing high-quality education. In the municipalities, education is directed by a school board and a superintendent. Rather characteristic of Sweden, the school boards consist of appointed politicians representing the political parties of the municipal council. In addition, it is worth emphasising that there are 290 municipalities in Sweden and therefore that there is also considerable diversity in local school governance. There is also diversity in how education is organised and operationalised at the school level, since school principals are responsible for the organisation of schools’ inner work (Jarl, Kjellgren, and Quennerstedt 2018). In the Swedish context, the terms LEA and municipal government are used synonymously. We will continue this practice in our article.
Materials and methods

This article aims to contribute to an understanding of the governance of school systems as they oscillate between rationales of centralisation and decentralisation. In line with the governance perspective, we examine the relations between different stakeholders at various levels (Wermke and Salokangas 2021). These relations are determined by various policies and their enactment. The idea of enacted policies can be seen as a significant feature in the shift from ‘government’ (the practice of politics, policy and administration under the auspices of the state) to ‘governance’ (involving co-production by many agents and agencies) (Novak 2018, 13).

Drawing on the above-mentioned paradigm, the article employs the work of Ingersoll (2003) and Ingersoll and Collins (2017) on decision-making, power relations, and conflict in schools and school systems. In particular, Ingersoll’s (2003) seminal work on power and control in American schools offers a holistic perspective, which covers important aspects of autonomy among educational professionals. He is interested in power distribution and conflict within the school organisation. Ingersoll (2003) considers that power within an organisation belongs to those who control the most important decisions that are to be made. In order to analyse power relations in schools and school systems, one must therefore define which are the most important decisions that affect principals’ work, but also determine which criteria should be used for evaluation and how one should examine who controls these decisions.

According to Ingersoll (2003), the problem of finding the proper degree of control and consent is a cornerstone in organisation theory, and essential for avoiding demotivation, disorder and low performance. He claims that the effects of distribution of power and control vary, depending on which activities and issues are being controlled. This is why it is especially important to separate important and unimportant decisions in order to gain an appropriate understanding of power distribution. Less important decisions might be delegated, leading employees to believe they have real power, while key decisions continue to be firmly controlled at a higher level within the organisation.

Moreover, Ingersoll (2003) and Ingersoll and Collins (2017) view decision-making in schools as related to the degree of conflict between various stakeholders. Consequently, decision-making abilities at particular levels can be seen in relation to the degree of conflict in the school organisation and autonomy is understood as the possession of a high degree of power over issues concerning daily activities. This line of thought relates various levels in the public education organisation to each other, by asking where in the organisation the most important decisions are made. With this, grades of centralisation/decentralisation can be shown. ‘School centralisation or decentralisation refer to the relative levels of power and influence’ (Ingersoll and Collins 2017, 80). The dynamics of centralisation versus decentralisation are at the very core of the Swedish reforms presented in this article.

In relation to the presented research on school leadership, we argue that centralisation/decentralisation dynamics are generic to the organisation of public education internationally, nationally and locally. Therefore, we switch from the focus of Ingersoll and Collins on the relation between teachers and administrators to the relation between principals and administrators at different levels of the school system. In addition, although Ingersoll’s (2003) theorisation is based on empirical work carried out in the US and
focuses primarily on teachers’ work, his theoretical work has been further adapted in recent years to fit analyses of principal autonomy (see e.g. Wermke and Salokangas 2021). This approach is beneficial for cross-cultural and longitudinal studies, due to the facility of connecting his theoretical considerations to a very straightforward and context-independent operationalisation. Even Ingersoll and Collins (2017) have shown, by employing international OECD data on levels of decision making in various countries, the value of understanding school organisation in various national contexts.

**Data analysis**

The analytical work of the article draws attention to previous work on the potential of re-analysing quantitative data. By building on other scholars in education research (Gorard 2001), good arguments emerge for deliberate secondary analyses of empirical material which has been collected for similar purposes. The analytical approach of this study is a secondary analysis of large-scale survey data. Like many other scholars in education research (e.g. Gorard 2001; Hammersley 2010), we argue in favour of deliberate secondary analyses of empirical material collected for similar purposes, but for other studies (see also Dale, Wathan, and Higgins 2008). There are various terminologies for this approach, including labels such as re-use or re-work, related to the different purposes of re-analyses which have been suggested (Heaton 2008). However, there is an agreement that the terms secondary and re-analysis can be used interchangeably (Hammersley 2010). We will do so in this article.

However, most re-analyses of empirical survey data are made by drawing on large-scale studies from the OECD (Dale, Wathan, and Higgins 2008). These studies are designed in such a way that re-analyses of PISA or TALIS studies are explicitly welcome. All data is neatly organised and available for open access via the organisation websites. Moreover, extensive technical documentation aims to increase the validity of each secondary analysis planned with the data. However, large-scale studies of international organisations are also limited in their empirical value. Firstly, such studies are designed for international comparisons of many cases. That is why the items used are formulated in a more general way, leaving much space for ambivalent answers, preventing in-depth understanding of professional practice in varying contexts (Wermke and Salokangas 2021). Secondly, the studies of international organisations often exhibit a political dimension, which means that the studies in question aim to construct what a ‘good’ teacher, ‘good’ principal or ‘good’ school actually should look like (ibid; Robertson and Sorensen 2018). Thus, in this paper we argue for the use of studies conducted by colleagues with similar research interests.

Our research design takes into account the recommendation of Johnston (2017), who presents a procedure for secondary analyses of other researchers’ empirical material: The first step is indeed the development of the research question. More specifically, only precisely formulated research purposes and questions make it reasonable to use data from other studies. This leads to the second step in the design work, namely the identification of the dataset(s). By following these remarks, our design of the empirical work for this paper is straightforward. Guided by our interest in reconstructing principals’ perspectives over time from a rather broad-scale perspective, we identified larger research
studies in the Swedish context. In the next step, we contacted our colleagues and asked for the raw data, documentation on research design and sampling. Two studies have been conducted by Statistics Sweden, and these followed rigid standards of sampling and procedure. One of the authors of this article was a member of the research team that conducted the first study. In the case of the most recent study, the first author of this article was the main responsible researcher. For this reason, we were able to secure high quality data. Even so, due to temporal differences between the studies, different sampling strategies, and varying item formulations, we have decided to only use the available data in a descriptive way. Consequently, we will not make any inferential arguments, by investigating the significance of differences over time, and we will reconstruct our longitudinal path in a chronological way, presenting first the voices of Swedish principals in 2005, then 2012, finally 2019. The three studies were undertaken at relevant and interesting junctures of Swedish school history. Each study is also contextualised in the results presentation.

The analysis identified identical or comparable questions among the three studies which address the focus of this article, i.e. to explore how Swedish principals experienced the decentralisation and re-centralisation reforms, how the reforms affected their relationship with various stakeholders, and how the reforms affected their autonomy and decision-making capacity. The work of Ingersoll (2003) and Ingersoll and Collins (2017) is used to frame the longitudinal journey by centring autonomy on principals’ decision-making capacity, the ways in which their decision-making is controlled, and their relation to other potential stakeholders in the school organisation and school system. In addition, potential conflict areas are described.

In relation to the descriptive approach of our analyses, we will only report the mean of the items in question and the number of valid answers. Due to the different sample procedures, we will not report standard deviations. Their depiction of potential differences in heterogeneity or homogeneity of answers over time might be misleading. In order to enable comparisons over time, we standardised the scales of all three studies. The 2012 and 2019 studies employ a 6 point Likert scale, the 2005 study employs a 4 point scale. We have adjusted to the lowest scale (4 point), where 1 indicates no agreement, 2 minor agreement (combining points 2 and 3 of the 6 point scale), 3 major agreement (combining 4 and 5 of the 6 point scale), and 4 complete agreement (the equivalent of 6 on the 6 point scale).

From the 2019 study, free text of survey will also be included into our descriptive data. Here, the most frequent words have been counted in the answers on the question ‘What are the most important tasks for you as a school leader? Please give three examples?’

The three studies

This article builds on selective results of three large-scale survey studies focusing on the work and attitudes of Swedish principals at three different points in time, covering a time range from 2005 until 2019. These studies, together, provide a rather unique image of principals’ work in Sweden. We present the technical nature of the three samples included below. Since only two of three samples are randomised, and we also had to adjust the scales of the three studies, we will not present any inferential statistical statements, i.e. we will not reason about the significance of any eventual differences.
The first study was conducted in 2005 as part of a research project which studied the consequences of the extensive decentralisation and marketisation reforms of the 1990s for local educational governance (Jarl and Pierre eds 2018). Data collection included surveys of school administrators, principals and teachers. A questionnaire was sent to a sample of 1605 principals in primary, secondary and upper-secondary school in the spring of 2005. The sample was drawn from a total population of 5,164 principals. The survey was administered by Statistics Sweden. To guarantee that the study included principals working in primary, secondary and upper-secondary schools in different types of municipalities, an independent, stratified and randomised sample was used. Four different types (quotas) of municipalities were identified based on official statistics provided by the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions. Due to randomisation, all principals in each quota had the same probability of being included. The sample included 1,605 principals from the four quotas, with a higher share of primary and secondary school principals than principals from upper-secondary schools, in each quota. 64 percent (n = 1031) responded to the survey. Respondents were distributed as follows: primary and secondary school 66.3%, and upper-secondary school 33.7%. Also, responses represented both public and independent schools: public schools 89%, and independent schools 11%.

The second study was one of seven questionnaires focused on various levels of the ‘governance chain’ in the Swedish school system (see also Nihlfors and Johansson 2016). The survey comprised principals in preschools and compulsory schools in both public and independent (pre)schools in 2012. A total of 8,063 principals received the questionnaire. Around half of the principals (52.5%) responded to the questionnaire (n = 4,232). The sample represented the entire education sector. By comparing the acquired data with official statistics, Nihlfors and Johansson (2016) concluded that the sample was representative for different group of principals in Sweden at that time. With regard to the internal non-response to individual issues, this will be addressed when it exceeds 5%. A large part of the survey consisted of multiple-choice questions on which the principals were asked to estimate how much or little they agreed with the statements made.

In the third study, email addresses to head principals were obtained from the Swedish National Agency for Education (see also Nordholm, Arnqvist, and Nihlfors 2021). In the study, temporarily appointed or contracted principals were excluded. Deputy principals were also excluded. Principals with responsibility for both preschools and schools were included as a group. Taking these factors into consideration, the survey was distributed to approximately 3,000 principals. The final sample of principals (n = 1,286) comprises 249 out of 290 local municipalities. This resulted in a response rate of 42.6% The sample comprised principals working in public and independent schools. In this sample, the percentage of principals working in public and independent schools was 83.3 per cent and 17.7 per cent, respectively. According to official statistics from the Swedish National Agency for Education (2019), the figures for all comprehensive schools in Sweden were 81 per cent principals in public school and 19 per cent principals in independent schools. Compared to the statistics from the National Agency for Education, the sample also represents a variation in age, size of school and number of years in professions, which is in line with the population of principals in comprehensive schools.
Results

2005: Swedish principals at the twilight of decentralisation

At the time of the first survey, over ten years had passed since the decentralisation and marketisation reforms of the early 1990s. At this point, the state specified goals and objectives in the national curriculum. Since 1991, municipalities have had overall responsibility for distributing state funding and evaluating and following up on the local schools’ activities. It is important to note, however, that different stakeholders (e.g. Swedish National Agency for Education 2000) have started to identify the potential downsides of the decentralised governance model even if concrete actions are yet to be taken. Instead, a strong faith is still placed on local professionals and their capacity to develop professional knowledge based on the local context, even if they might need support to do so. Therefore, a new agency, the National Agency for School improvement, was established in 2003 with the overall assignment of supporting local school improvements in pre-schools, schools and adult education.

Table 1 provides details on how principals perceive the directives and expectations expressed in governing documents and local policies. To begin with, we notice that the local school’s plan affects and influences principals to a high degree. This is also a reasonable contextual interpretation since the trend towards decentralisation had been established at this time in addition to the fact that the state still safeguarded local discretion. The municipality’s school plan is perceived to affect decision-making to a limited degree. The removal of the municipal school plan obligation in 2010 is, thus, in accordance with our findings. Simply stated, the LEA, i.e. the municipality administration, affects and controls the principals’ room for manoeuvre to a lesser extent than policy documents at school and at state level. Furthermore, it is important to note that the national curriculum and the Education Act still clearly affect the principals’ room for manoeuvre, which in turn could be linked to the earlier tradition of a strong state governance.

Another area of the survey concerns how principals are affected by communication with various stakeholders on issues concerning the management of their school. Based on how the questions are formulated and their character, they can be interpreted as a channel for obtaining information and as a strategy for impacting principals’ autonomy and decision-making.

Table 2 confirms the results revealed in Table 1. The LEA affects and controls the autonomy of principals to a lesser extent. The superintendent’s power is somewhat more prominent, but linked to the above results and how the local school curriculum, plan, and the Education Act is rated by the principals, one might argue that the municipal level impacted and controlled principals’ work to a lesser extent. It is also important to emphasise that at this time there was no direct communication between principals and

Table 1. Documents affecting principals’ work.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To what extent does the school’s local workplan affect your way of running the school?</td>
<td>1017</td>
<td>3.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To what extent does the municipality’s school plan affect your way of running the school?</td>
<td>1011</td>
<td>2.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To what extent does the (nationwide) curriculum affect your way of leading the school?</td>
<td>1019</td>
<td>3.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To what extent does the Education act affect your way of leading the school?</td>
<td>1023</td>
<td>3.41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1= not at all, 4= completely.
government agencies. Arguably, this lack of direct dialogue is an important result in itself.

Another way of expanding our understanding of how Swedish principals experienced the decentralisation and re-centralisation reforms, as well as how these reforms affected their work is to study their decision-making capacity and how principals valued different aspects of their job.

The first statement on Table 3 asks whether the main role as principal is to ensure that the school does not exceed the budget. The principals rated this statement relatively low. Moreover, in terms of how much time is spent on administrative tasks, the principals’ estimates on this statement are relatively low, from a historical perspective (compare with later international data from OECD 2016), to which we shall also return. With regard to the statement of whether state responsibility for the school would give the principals more room for manoeuvre, it is noteworthy that the estimates are neither high nor low and that the principals thus seem relatively satisfied with their municipal supervision.

In terms of the last statement, in which the principals estimated how much of their work time they devote to pedagogical leadership, the mean is relatively high, and accordingly, we note that the principals claimed that they were able to perform their role as pedagogical leaders to an arguably high extent.

A final area of the survey, which provides valuable data given the aim of the article, concerns various value conflicts and how they are perceived by principals. Perceived autonomy and decision-making are viewed in relation to other actors and conflicts with them.

Table 4 shows that, in general, there seems to be a consensus between the various stakeholders at the municipal level. The level of conflict is somewhat higher between school administration and political representatives, which can be reasonably linked to principals integrating more with the former stakeholders and therefore that slightly more conflicts arise (see the particularities of Swedish LEA below). Another conclusion indicates that the various stakeholders knows where they stand with respect to one another which, arguably, also affected principals’ opportunities to make decisions.

Summing up this first section of the analysis, it has been revealed that, from the principals’ perspectives, the local school level influences and controls principals’ decision-making to a greater degree than the municipal level does. Furthermore, it can be declared that the state level, mainly through the national curriculum and the education act, is still very present. Furthermore, it could also be argued that the degree of control exerted by different stakeholders is fairly low within essential areas, provided there seems to be room for principals to work with issues that also concern pedagogical leadership, since administrative tasks do not occupy all the principals’ time.

**Table 2.** How are you affected by conversations involving the following actors in matters concerning the management of the school?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To what extent is your way of leading the school affected by conversations with the municipal school administration?</td>
<td>967</td>
<td>2.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To what extent is your way of leading the school affected by conversations with the superintendent?</td>
<td>958</td>
<td>2.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To what extent is your way of leading the school affected by conversations with the local school politicians in the municipal board of education?</td>
<td>886</td>
<td>2.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1= not at all, 4= entirely.
As noted above, several major reforms had been implemented at the time of the second survey. The clearest example of an incipient re-centralisation is perhaps the establishment of the Swedish Schools Inspectorate in 2008. Another example that illustrates these re-shaped relationships between the government, LEAs and local schools and the new ‘political winds’ is the shutdown of the short-lived National Agency for School Improvement, which only operated between 2003 and 2008 (SGOR 2007, 101). In 2011, as also mentioned, the requirement for a municipal school plan was removed, but at the same time the revised Education Act (2010, 800) stipulated that LEAs, and principals, were (and still are) obligated to systematically plan for, follow up and develop the quality of education at the local municipal level. This work concerns to what degree the objectives of the Education Act and other state directives has been achieved. Roughly speaking, one could argue that the reforms, at least in theory, entailed that the principals became more independent from the municipal level, but at the same time, the directives and control from the state level increased.

Worth observing initially, in analysing comparable questions of this study and the study completed in 2005, it becomes evident that few changes has occurred regarding principals’ experienced autonomy and decision-making capacity. In examining the survey questions of this second study, there were several questions here as well detailing how Swedish principals experienced the decentralisation and re-centralisation reforms. It is also worth noting that several questions are similar with the survey of 2005. By following the work of Ingersoll (2003) it becomes relevant to examine how principals experience their degree of autonomy and decision-making capacity in this stage and if the re-centralisations reforms impinge on their daily work.

In Table 5, the mean values are rather moderate, with some reservations around autonomy in financial decisions. These results represent the overall image that principals, in spite of the re-centralisation reforms, experience a high degree of autonomy within several key areas of their leadership, both from municipal and state-level stakeholders. It is noteworthy, for example, that principals experience a high degree of decision-making capacity concerning the pedagogical work/direction of the school, in addition to how to carry out their work. These results indicate that the formation of the Swedish Schools Inspectorate,
which had been operating for four years at the time of the study, had a somewhat limited impact on principals’ work at that point. Moreover, the sharpened formulations found in the Education Act of 2011 also appear to have had a limited impact to date.

Another type of question that provides details on principals’ decision-making capacity and autonomy concerns different forms of control that principals experience, shown in Table 6.

One overall finding concerning experienced demands voiced at municipal and state levels is how similarly principals rate municipal and state demands to be, with one exception, keeping the budget of the school, which makes some sense. In some cases, there is a slight tendency for state requirements to be rated more highly, which might indicate a shift in power between state and municipal level. However, in terms of decentralisation and re-centralisation, there still appears to be a fairly good ‘balance’ of control from different levels of the school system which frame principals’ work. Moreover, the table also reveals that the degree of control is rated as fairly moderate, given that all means are under 3.00. Accordingly, one reasonable conclusion might be to consider that principals experienced their autonomy and decision-making capacity in essential dimensions of their work to be high.

Another type of question that could expand our understanding of how Swedish principals experienced the decentralisation and re-centralisation reforms concerns how the reforms affected their relationship with various stakeholders, and how the reforms affected their autonomy and decision-making capacity, in terms of value conflicts. This was also a focus of the 2005 study. Arguably, value conflicts indicate whether principals consider their personal values to be challenged or questioned by different stakeholders and/or whether their personal values do not correspond with formal directives stipulated on state and local municipal levels.

By studying Table 7, we can initially observe that the mean values are, once again, rather low. One overall result is thus that Swedish principals, at the time of the study, experienced a rather low degree of conflicts in their daily work, which arguably also affected their autonomy and decision-making (cf. Ingersoll 2003; Ingersoll and Collins 2017). Accordingly, they did not need to stretch the rules or procedures. However, principals experienced a higher degree of conflicts in the assignments from the superintendent compared to those passed down from the state level. Principals consider also that the superintendent should act more rapidly and more extensively if colleagues underperform, i.e. increase control and reduce their autonomy. Another key finding, in line with Table 7, is that principals experienced a rather low degree of conflicts between local and national goals which, once again, indicates some form of balance between decentralisation and re-centralisation.

Summing up this second section of the analysis, we can conclude that the effects of the re-centralisation reforms have so far been rather modest because, for instance, principals

### Table 5. How do you experience the degree of independence in your work?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy regarding decisions on the school’s internal organisation</td>
<td>3931</td>
<td>2.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy regarding decisions on financial decisions.</td>
<td>3925</td>
<td>2.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy regarding decisions on the pedagogical work/direction of the school.</td>
<td>3926</td>
<td>2.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy regarding decisions on how to carry out my work.</td>
<td>3921</td>
<td>2.90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1= do not agree at all, 4= agree completely.
express a balance between state and municipal directives. Thus, there are also no clear changes regarding principals’ decision-making capacity compared with the 2005 study, although there are some tendencies towards increased state control. Another important finding is that principals experience a low degree of conflicts and that they do not see any major problems in dealing with ‘double management’ from local authority and state level. These conclusions will be important to carry with us as we now take a closer look at the third and final survey study.

2019: principals established in the ‘new’ system

To contextualise and describe the Swedish school landscape at the time of the third study in 2019: The Swedish Schools Inspectorate has become a key player in the Swedish school system, regularly inspecting public and independent school providers (Novak 2018). It is also essential to highlight the large-scale school improvement programme ‘Collaboration for the best school possible’. The programme started in 2015 and stands out as a rather unique example of large-scale school improvement from both a national and international perspective. Simply stated, LEAs and single schools that receive substantial critique by the Schools Inspectorate, are offered the chance to collaborate with National Agency for Education and selected universities. At the beginning of 2020, a large number of local authorities and/or individual schools were involved in activities linked to the programme. Regarding numbers, the programme involves principals and

Table 6. Different demands on me (as a principal).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Municipal board requirements</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To keep the unit’s budget</td>
<td>3728</td>
<td>2.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To lead the pedagogical work.</td>
<td>3641</td>
<td>2.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That the children’s knowledge development should reach the highest possible goals</td>
<td>3307</td>
<td>2.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That the educators’ work rests on a scientific basis</td>
<td>3534</td>
<td>2.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To lead the development of the school’s inner work</td>
<td>3605</td>
<td>2.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To implement the Educational Act</td>
<td>3509</td>
<td>2.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To implement the nation-wide curriculum</td>
<td>3492</td>
<td>2.82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State requirements:</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To keep the unit’s budget</td>
<td>3082</td>
<td>1.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To lead the pedagogical work.</td>
<td>3607</td>
<td>2.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That the children’s knowledge development should reach the highest possible goals</td>
<td>3456</td>
<td>2.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That the educators’ work rests on a scientific basis</td>
<td>3598</td>
<td>2.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To lead the development of the school’s inner work</td>
<td>3567</td>
<td>2.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To implement the Educational Act</td>
<td>3537</td>
<td>2.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To implement the nation-wide curriculum</td>
<td>3533</td>
<td>2.96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1= non at all, 4= completely.

Table 7. Value conflicts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I often experience a conflict between my own values and the assignments I receive from the state.</td>
<td>3666</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I often experience a conflict between my own values and the assignments I receive from the superintendent.</td>
<td>3678</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I often feel that my values about the goals of the education differ from the values of my educators.</td>
<td>3675</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My work as a school leader is often hampered by conflicts between local and national goals.</td>
<td>3620</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I believe that the superintendent should take action against schools that have underperformed for a long time more rapidly than currently occurs.</td>
<td>3037</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am prepared to stretch rules or procedures if necessary to perform a task in line with my own values.</td>
<td>3495</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1= do not agree at all, 4= agree completely.
employees at approximately 250 schools, 50 process leaders at the National Agency for Education and 130 educators from Swedish universities. The financial resources are close to SEK 100 million (around 10 million US dollars) annually (Swedish National Agency for Education 2019).

In addition to this specific improvement programme, there is a considerable amount of state funding that LEAs can apply for. In the year 2021, the total amount was SEK 6.3 billion (around 63 million US dollars) (Swedish National Agency for Education 2021). These figures illustrate how state funding becomes a steering strategy for governing local municipal actors and principals, both regarding content of improvement, but also administratively. A third example of a more present state concerns the large number of ‘General advice’ (allmänna råd) formulated by The National Agency for Education to support local professionals at different levels.

Regarding the questionnaire from 2019, several of the questions were identical to those of 2012. However, compared to the study of 2012, additional questions targeted state presence at the local municipal level, and thus the survey items, can also be expected to become historical documents. Analogous to the first studies, questions were asked about principals’ experienced autonomy and their decision-making capacity in relation to both municipal and state stakeholders.

In Table 8, it emerges that autonomy is experienced to be high, alongside allocation of available financial resources. In fact, the rating is much higher than it was in 2012. Arguably, even if noteworthy changes have occurred in national and municipal policies, principals perceived autonomy and decision-making capacity seems to remain at a high level and has increased, at least in the areas that the three surveys probe.

In relation to the first two studies, this survey also entailed questions on value conflicts. Table 9 offers details on this area.

It becomes evident that few differences emerged compared to the two earlier studies. In fact, the mean values are almost identical to the study of 2012. This result remains true for the statement concerning whether principals are prepared to stretch the rules if necessary to perform in line with their personal values. These results, individually and in combination, offer us important insights, since they constitute an important framework for principals’ decision-making and thus their daily work in the shadow of large-scale reforms. One further observation suggests that the re-centralisation reforms do not seem to have increased the degree of conflicts between principals and different stakeholders.

As in the first two surveys, questions were posed about the extent to which certain factors impact principals in their daily work. The survey questions also offer important insights into how principals experience control and by whom they perceive themselves to

**Table 8.** How do you experience your degree of autonomy in the following situations?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Decisions about the focus of the pedagogical work at my unit.</td>
<td>1269</td>
<td>3.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decisions about my own work as a principal.</td>
<td>1271</td>
<td>3.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decisions about the school / preschool’s internal organisation.</td>
<td>1268</td>
<td>3.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decisions about school improvement work.</td>
<td>1268</td>
<td>3.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decisions about the allocation of available financial resources.</td>
<td>1263</td>
<td>2.80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1= none, 4= completely.
be controlled. Here, there are notable variations over time. Table 10 shows the results of these statements.

By observing the mean values in Table 10, it becomes clear that something has happened in this area since the two earlier studies. Specifically, compared with the survey of 2012 and the statements addressing education and the nation-wide curriculum, the above results indicate that principals, generally, feel an increased state presence and that the government agencies have a significant impact on their work. Compared to the two earlier surveys, there is also a higher impact from financial support (e.g. collaboration to make the best school possible and state funding) and the National Agency’s for Education’s ‘General advice’. Accordingly, in spite of the fact that principals experienced a rather high degree of autonomy in their decision-making, this freedom is now combined with a higher degree of control. In relation to the work of Ingersoll (2003), but also Author, this emerges as a significant finding: Autonomy and control are not contradictory – rather they co-exist regardless of level. This also raises important issues regarding the balance of control from the state and municipal levels. In other words, these results indicate that a shift in power between LEAs and a national authority level has indeed occurred at the time of the study.

Given that autonomy and control are complementary, we shall finally return to the issue of finance and administration. In this most recent survey, there were several items with free text questions. For example, principals answered the question: ‘What are the most important tasks for you as a school leader? Please give three examples!’ ($n=1255$). By studying these answers, it becomes clear that keeping the school’s budget, administration/quality work and student health care questions are recurring issues. An analysis of the most frequent words in the free text answers, for example, revealed that over 400 respondents considered keeping the schools’ budget/financial tasks as a primary issue. Here, again, something has happened compared to the two earlier surveys. A kind of ‘battle’ between state and municipal governance can be detected, meaning more specifically that the municipal school administration, using various strategies, still controls principals’ room for manoeuvre by reducing their decision-making capacity, here exemplified by a principal:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 9. Value conflicts.</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I often experience a conflict between my own values and the assignments I receive from the state.</td>
<td>1267</td>
<td>2.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I often experience a conflict between my own values and the assignments I receive from my superintendent.</td>
<td>1264</td>
<td>2.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I often experience a conflict between my own values and the assignments I receive from my superintendent.</td>
<td>1249</td>
<td>1.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am prepared to stretch rules or procedures if necessary to perform a task in line with my values.</td>
<td>1219</td>
<td>2.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1= do not agree at all, 4= agree completely.

15

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 10. To what extent do the following aspects affect you in your work as a school?</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Steering documents and policy texts</td>
<td>1272</td>
<td>3.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The National Agency for Education (e.g. financial support and the ‘Common advices’).</td>
<td>1269</td>
<td>3.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Swedish Schools Inspectorate (e.g. regular inspection, reports and publications).</td>
<td>1264</td>
<td>3.19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
School leaders have far too many assignments. The state assignments for a principal are sometimes overshadowed by (municipal) assignments, personnel administration, rehab, work environment, responsibility for buildings, responsibility for hygiene routines, and so on. The principal assignments must be strengthened and more ‘municipal managerial assignments’ should be handled by others (in the municipal administration).

Summing up this third and final section, it has been revealed that the re-centralisation reforms have had limited impact on principals’ experienced autonomy. However, over time, it is the degree of control that has expanded, both from state and municipal levels.

**Discussion and conclusion**

The results of this article are relevant in relation to previous research, both nationally and internationally. To start with, the findings reveal similarities between Sweden and other countries in terms of decentralisation, marketisation and increased school autonomy (cf. Eyles, Machin, and McNally 2017). The findings also correspond to the work of Keddie (2015) indicating that increased autonomy for school principals is, over time, combined with increased accountability, which was evident at the time of the third study. Another important finding corresponding to the work of Skerritt (2019) is whether increased autonomy necessarily fosters school principals’ skills as educational leaders, for instance working with instructional leadership. The results of the current article, along with the work of Skerritt (2019), instead indicate that the autonomy of principals, whether deliberately or not, is restricted by administrative and financial tasks.

The results are also worthy of reflection linked to the work of Wilkinson (2016), Whitty (2010) and Salokangas and Ainscow (2018) which shows how neo-liberal policies and decentralisation reforms are to be considered a broad trend across countries and continents, redrawing the landscape for educational professionals. Given that ideas of NPM proliferate at various levels of school systems worldwide, this also affects the (perceived) autonomy of principals and how they negotiate and make sense of the autonomy that exists (cf. Nordholm, Arnqvist, and Nihlfors 2021). Put frankly, within the restraints of the given autonomy, one might argue that principals prioritise administrative and financial tasks, because this is consistent both with prevailing expectations and values but also with their own personal understandings. Given that Sweden is one of the countries that has gone the furthest in terms of marketisation and decentralisation, the results obtained are perhaps not surprising.

These results are also relevant in the light of former work addressing the notion of ‘responsibilisation’. As noted in the work of Keddie, Gobby, and Wilkins (2018), principals today are, to a greater extent, responsible for tasks that formerly was a state responsibility. In such a system, not only principals but also teachers are regularly surveilled and evaluated. In this regard, Skerritt (2020) identifies three overlapping types of surveillance constraining the autonomy of schools termed ‘vertical surveillance’, ‘horizontal surveillance’, and ‘intrapersonal surveillance’. However, despite these influential trends of neo-liberalism, marketisation, competition and an entrepreneurial school leadership, the work conducted by Gobby, Keddie, and Blackmore (2018) showed that principals, within their autonomy, still can navigate and create space for other positions and values in their leadership. How this ‘room for manoeuvre’ is understood and enacted in the Swedish context is still rather unexplored and therefore a potential focus for future studies.
Linked to the work of Seashore Louis et al. (2008) and Harris and Jones (2017), it also becomes important to reflect upon contextual factors specific for the Swedish case. To start with, even if the period of focus is characterised by several and substantial reforms, the practice of principals was still characterised more by continuity than by change. This study has shown that principals rate their autonomy and decision-making capacity at the same level during the investigated period. Furthermore, the degree of conflict between principals and various stakeholders was also perceived to be rather low throughout the period, which also indicates that principals’ work continues somewhat calmly and quietly over the 19 years in focus. As noted, in 2019 we detected shifts in the data, but there remain clear parallels with the influential work of Cuban (1990; 2013) and Fullan (2000) regarding educational reform and perspectives over time. These results are also relevant to compare with the work of Harris et al. (2013) and Fullan (2018) which stress that it is the quality of policy implementation, rather than policy selection and number, that is the key to fostering and sustaining educational improvement. As described above (see SGOR 2014, 5), questions have also been raised whether municipalities, principals, and teachers had the preparedness, resources, and/or capacity to handle the new responsibilities and assignments and whether sufficient support was offered from state level to LEAs, principals, and teachers as implementers of the reforms.

Another finding specific for the Swedish case is the combination of a long (and strong) tradition of central state governance up to the 1990s and from that point on far-reaching decentralisation and marketisation reforms (cf. Lundahl 2007). Put another way, what can we learn from a case in which these two contradictory logics are combined? The results of the article suggest that large-scale reforms of this type take on rather complex expressions, at least when it comes to principals’ work and educational leadership. In previous research on educational reforms in Rönnberg (2012), for instance, used the term ‘the return of the state’, linked to the founding of the Swedish Schools Inspectorate in 2008. However, based on the results of the current article, one might argue that the state’s presence and its control were at a similar level, despite the intense reforms, at least when it comes to principals’ work. Put another way, the state never left, in spite of decentralisation reforms and the entrance of market logics, at least not as an institutionalised reference for understanding educational governance and the relationship between the school, municipal and state level. Thus, and as above showed, the results of the article indicate that the market logic has and continues to impinge upon principals’ work and their experienced autonomy. In that sense, the article shows that there might be a need to further problematise the often-applied dichotomy of centralisation and decentralisation and instead explore and make use of more finely-graded frameworks of hybridised governance (cf. Wermke and Salokangas 2021).

Finally, to conclude this article by returning to the question posed in the work by Lundahl (2002b) in the introduction: Sweden – decentralisation, deregulation, quasi-markets, and then what? This article has strived to map out the following chapters of the story, concluding that, at least when it comes to principals and their daily work, elements of state and municipal governance coexist over the following time period, framing principals’ autonomy and decision-making capacity. That finding, in combination with the low degree of conflicts between different stakeholders, brings us to the ultimate conclusion that the expression ‘in the eye of the storm there is calm’ appears to suit Swedish principals, at least, in the development of decentralisation and re-
centralisation. This is indeed a relevant finding, both from a national and an international perspective.

**Note**

1. Using weights, \( n \) equals 5,117 individuals. Using weights, the distribution of answers were; primary and secondary school 79.8%, upper-secondary school 20.2%; public schools 90%, independent schools 10%.

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