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State, municipality and local community. Exploring principal's autonomy and control in the rural north of Scandinavia

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on Nordic school leaders and how rural principals experience autonomy and control in current governance regimes using a sample of principals in the very north of Norway and Sweden as a case. An analysis instrument constituting four different schooling domains (educational; social; developmental; administrative) and the ways in which autonomy and control are perceived within each domain structured the analytical work. The analysis showed that both Norwegian and Swedish principals experience a high degree of autonomy within the four domains. Regarding control, principals of the two countries intimated that control is generally more evident within the educational and administrative domains and less evident within the developmental and particularly within the social domain. Regarding differences between the two countries, Norwegian principals experienced more control from regional and local municipal level compared to their Swedish colleagues. The findings add important pieces to the current body of research on rural principals and school system governance.

KEYWORDS

Autonomy; control; rural principals; school leadership

Introduction

Research on educational governance has shown the complex relations which influence the making and implementing of school reform. Principals, teachers, students, their parents negotiate the direction of development of how and where schools are steered (Altrichter & Maag Merki, 2016; Wermke & Salokangas, 2021). The emergence of varying versions of governance lays the groundwork for a recognition of the formation of a conglomeration of influences rather than a singular, state-based form of governance. In many countries, such education governance and educational reform has led to the placement of increasing conflicting expectations on principals. Principals must relate to and support their teachers, leading to the suggestion among researchers of a distinction between principals as either head teachers or administrative managers

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(Wermke & Höstfält, 2014). Other scholars have put forward the relation of principals to society and community, or in other words, to civil society (Lortie, 2009; Wahlstrom, Seashore Louise, Leithwood, & Anderson, 2015). To complicate matters, it has also been argued that principals must often deal with a governance system which is a hybrid of a hierarchical political model, with top-down decision-making from the state, and a bureaucratic model related to municipal administration (Moos, Nihlfors, et al., 2016a).

Questions of this nature also actualise the relationship between autonomy and control, two concepts central to this article. In this regard, the influential work of Cribb and Gewirtz (2007) unpacks the two concepts and the relationship between them (see also Bergh, 2015). For example, Cribb and Gewirtz emphasise the importance of not seeing the concepts as opposites of each other, but that they can rather covariate. They also stressed the need of moving beyond the normative assumption that autonomy should always be understood as something positive and control as negative, and instead explore the complexity that surrounds these concepts. Thus, they also stressed that concepts “are constantly being made and remade, and negotiated and renegotiated in all of our daily interactions” (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2007, p. 205). In recent work, Nordholm, Nihlfors, and Arnqvist (2021a) also showed that autonomy could constitute an important prerequisite for school leadership, but making sense of the relationship between autonomy and control might be even more important for successful school improvement. For example, principals experience a significant degree of autonomy in their work, especially from the central municipal level. However, a lack of dialogue and feedback, but also control from the same level can hinder leadership. These former findings are also essential for how the two concepts are understood and conceptualised in the current article.

That declared, this article focuses on principals’ perceptions on autonomy and control in and of their leadership practices. We will focus on principals in two neighbouring countries, Sweden and Norway, in rural areas far away from any central state authority. Arguably, educational research on rural areas has received modest attention in general, particularly with respect to school leadership (see e.g. Nordholm, Nihlfors, & Arnqvist, 2021b; Preston, Jakubiec, & Kooymans, 2013). As in countries like Australia, Canada and the US, Norway and Sweden have many sparsely populated areas and thus provide an important case. With its geographical focus, the article is also intended to illuminate the influence of the civil society on the work of principals, since research has shown that in rural municipalities, the relations between school leaders and the local community is often very close (Harmon & Schafft, 2009).

Regarding school governance, influential research conducted in the Nordic countries (e.g. Moos et al., 2016) highlight important similarities and differences between the two countries. In terms of the relationships along the local “governing chain”¹ between political representatives, superintendents and local school principals there is a variety of both tight and loose couplings. In local decision-making processes, superintendents generally prepare and submit proposals for decisions at the local board which are often approved (Moos et al., 2016; Moos & Kowalski, 2006; Paulsen, Johansson, Moos, & Nihlfors et al., 2014). However, previous research shows that there is at times mistrust between the politically appointed school boards and the professionals within municipalities, specifically in the Swedish and Norwegian contexts (Nihlfors & Johansson,

2013). Another key finding holds that Nordic superintendents and the central municipal level are not infrequently “bypassed”, turning them into “agents in a broken chain”, since principals and teachers answer directly to the governmental level (Moos et al., 2016). In support of these movements, the work of Nordholm et al. (2021a) also indicates that Swedish principals, generally, support re-centralisation reforms in Sweden granting more direct state governance and support to the local school level. With relevance for Norway, other tensions are worthy of reflection. For instance, even municipal self-government formally is stated in The Local Government Act (2018), the pursuit of transparency and the avoidance of blame still is a commonly observed problem in public management (cf. Hood, 2007).

We approach our task through investigating perceptions of Norwegian and Swedish rural principals, in a qualitative and explorative interview study, in terms of their experienced autonomy and how they experience control in their leadership practices. For this we use an analytical framework, building on the work of Ingersoll (2003), Ingersoll and Collins (2017), and Wermke and Salokangas (2021). The scholars conceptualise autonomy as relating to the most important decisions to be made within a school organisation and the control of these decisions. Both decision-making and control evolve in various dimensions of their work.

The article is structured as follows. Firstly, we present a research review on the governance of principals across Norway and Sweden, with a particular focus on their autonomy and principals in rural areas. The following section details the case under investigation and the empirical material, as well as the theoretical framework and the data analysis. Thereafter, the results are presented. The article ends with a discussion including conclusions and some directions for further research.

Principals and school governance in a Nordic context

Historically, the Nordic welfare state was built after the Second World War. One foundation stone, both in Norway and Sweden, was the combination of “a strong state” together with local municipal decision-making. There was also a strong belief in a comprehensive school for all children. Schools would educate future generations based on a progressive pedagogy for democratic citizens (Moos et al., 2016). Educational decisions were also decentralised down to the central municipal level, to principals, and to teachers in order to underpin democratic teaching. Thus, teaching was often based on trust in the professional expertise at the local municipal level (Uljens, Møller, Årlestig, & Frederiksen, 2013).

However, even if both countries have put a lot of trust in local professionals, there are also parallel movements to consider. More precisely, the decentralisation reforms of the two countries, which expanded from the 1990s onwards, have also been combined with state regulation, a standardised quality system, accountability and external inspection (see e.g. Holmgren, Johansson, & Nihlfors, 2013; Møller & Skedsmo, 2013). In Norway, a quality assurance system was introduced in 2005, indicating a shift in the Norwegian education policy from an “input” regulatory framework, where laws, organisation and financing are included, to an “output” oriented policy that focuses on performance (Helgøy & Homme, 2007; Mausethagen & Mølsted, 2015). Nevertheless, Norwegian municipalities and counties have a certain autonomy regarding what is to be

reported, according to local requirements and needs (Johansson, Holmgren, Nihlfors, & Moos, 2013).

In addition, and despite new policy winds and strategies in understanding school and leadership quality, the work of Møller et al. (2005) showed that successful school leaders, defined as “good practice” by the Ministry of Education and research was, for example, characterised by deep collaboration and team-learning, learning communities, learning centred approaches, and democratic principles and values. Moreover, former research indicates that the local municipalities still become important when it comes to school governance, which means that education, in many respects, is “a municipal affair”. In support for this conclusion, the work of Prøitz, Mausethagen, and Skedsmo (2019) revealed significant differences regarding views of learning outcomes in local policy documents and strategies by comparing different local school authorities and administrators.

Regarding Sweden, variously portrayed as a unique example of decentralisation and marketisation (Allen, 2010; Lundahl, 2002), the school system was opened up to “independent” school organisers in the 1990s, which henceforth formed a school market together with public school organisers. Another watershed moment in Sweden, indicating a “return of the state” (see Rönnerberg, 2011, 2012), was the founding of the Swedish Schools Inspectorate in 2008, whose main assignment was to regularly inspect all public and independent schools. A foundational concept of the Swedish school system also holds that each school and municipality is obliged to report statistics annually to the National Agency for Education, including the results of national tests, so that these are made available for public review (Holmgren et al., 2013; Johansson et al., 2013).

Another area of high relevance linked to the focus of the current article concerns national school inspection, which has been brought to the fore in both Norway and Sweden during the last decade. Here, as well, similarities and differences between the two countries are relevant to highlight. The work of Hall and Sivesind (2015) focusing on the years between 2002–2012, for instance, revealed that even if the cases of public administration of the two countries appear homogenous from the outside, there are important differences in the inspection policies between Norway and Sweden. For example, they showed that Norway policies, at least previously, were more characterised by legal and pragmatic approaches to inspection comparable to Sweden in which the emphasis in the same period was placed on professional and expert-defined modes in addition to regulation. In latter work, focusing on how state inspection is played out in practice in Norway, Hall (2017) also identified a shift away from the use of governing tools as mere legal compliance towards an increased use of SSE reports as the means of obtaining the information used in the evaluation of the inspected schools.

Regarding principals’ autonomy, there is, analogously to research on teacher autonomy (e.g. Wermke & Forsberg, 2017; Wermke & Salokangas, 2021), an increased interest in this research area in recent decades. For example, the work of Fuchs and Wössman (2004) indicated a positive correlation between leadership autonomy, strategic decision-making and student performance. The work of Cladwell and Spinks (2013) revealed a positive correlation between autonomy and curricular revisions that improve students’ results. Regarding Sweden, a nation-wide study (Nordholm et al., 2021a) showed that principals, both in public and independent schools, experience a rather

high degree of autonomy in their work. Free text answers, however, provided important nuances. For instance, principals in both public and independent schools in the municipality categories “large city” and “city”, intimated that they are controlled by their local education authorities, for example in school improvement issues. In reviewing the current body of research, Cheng, Ko, and Tai Hoi Lee (2016) emphasised, however, that the current body of research on school principals’ autonomy is still rather fragmented and lacking. They argued, for instance, that too little attention had been paid to cultural autonomy and internal structural autonomy at individual and group levels, as well as to conceptual links between school autonomy and learning outcomes. Thus, based on their review, they emphasised the need for further studies in various contexts.

Linked to the focus of this article, influential research has shown that context is essential for understanding the nature of principals’ work and for successful school leadership (e.g. Hallinger, 2011; Moos, Johansson, & Day, 2011). Taking this into consideration, the article draws attention to a specific and (so far) rather unexplored context (see, e.g. Preston et al., 2013; Starr & White, 2008). In one example, in which rural school principals’ perceptions of the local schools and further education in Sweden was examined, Nordholm et al. (2021b) showed that the local school and further education are, according to Swedish principals, generally valued highest in the large cities and lowest in sparsely populated rural municipalities. In addition, they also revealed certain details of principals’ work in sparsely populated rural areas, for instance, that while the local school is important in these communities it is not, however, viewed as a foundation for children and youths’ future academic studies. Still, there is a need for qualitative case studies to attain a deeper understanding of the conditions and context of rural school principals, e.g. on how they navigate these complex governance configurations and on their perceptions on autonomy and control in and of their leadership practice. The next section details the case under investigation, the empirical material, the theoretical framework, and the empirical analysis.

Methodological framework

Theoretical starting points

The starting point for our conceptualisation on principal autonomy is Richard Ingersoll’s work (Ingersoll, 1996, 2003; Ingersoll & Collins, 2017) concerning power distribution and control in schools, which has helped us conceptualise autonomy around principals’ decision-making capacity and the ways in which their decision-making is controlled. Although his theorisation is based on empirical work carried out in the US, due to its focus organisational, rather than nation-specific contexts, the central idea provides applicable conceptual tools to different national contexts and comparative studies.

Therefore, in order to capture the nature of autonomy in schools and school system, it is important to investigate how autonomy is controlled and by whom, as well as how school professional are trusted considering what and by whom (Bergh, 2015; Cribb & Gewirtz, 2007; Wermke & Prøitz, 2019). Principals may, for example, operate under a very prescriptive budget policy which sets strict boundaries concerning educational or

special educational decisions, whereas school-level policy and national legislation may give them considerable scope concerning, for example, the social side of their work in form of extracurricular activities. Control may be imposed upon principals by different actors. For example, some areas of their work may be inspected regularly by municipality administration, or perhaps by an external inspector sent by state agencies. In some instances, inspections may be less influential over principals' decision-making; however, in other instances external inspections may have considerable effects on them. In order to capture such nuances in research, it is important to acknowledge different dimensions of principals' work.

Method and sample

Stake (2005) coined the term “instrumental” case study, in which a particular case study is used to provide insight into a specific issue and to suggest possible generalisations. Accordingly, the function of the current case study was to offer empirical data that could demonstrate certain features of Norwegian and Swedish rural principals; their autonomy and how they are controlled in their leadership practices. The empirical material of this paper was collected in the autumn of 2017, in a research project on autonomy in education (Wermke & Salokangas, 2021) which formed the foundation for two Master theses. The two Master theses constituted two studies on Principal autonomy in the very North of Europe. The authors of the respective studies are included as co-authors to this article. The number of inhabitants in the local municipalities varied from just over 2,000 inhabitants to just under 23,000 inhabitants. All Swedish principals worked in the in the very northern part of the country. The Norwegian principals, located in the same region, worked in neighbouring municipalities on the opposite side of the border. The sample consisted of six ($n = 6$) Norwegian principals and eleven ($n = 11$) Swedish principals. All respondents worked in public schools and almost everyone had completed principal education or corresponding education in school management. The number of students in the schools where the principals worked varied between 25 and 400 students. In terms of time in the profession, there was a variation of between 1.5 to 25 years.

Data analysis

Ingersoll's approach is beneficial for cross-cultural studies, due to the facility of connecting his theoretical considerations to a very straight-forward and context independent operationalisation. Ingersoll formulates four empirical questions that guided our study design: (1) What are the most important decisions to be made in relation to principals' work? (2) Who is allowed to make such decisions? (3) On which foundations are these decisions made? (4) Who ensures that the decisions made are appropriate? Questions 1 and 2 relate to the autonomy of principals concerning the most important decisions and whether the principals are allowed to take these decisions. Questions 3 and 4 relate to the control dimension, which for us means detailing how the most important decisions are built and evaluated.

The analytical work is structured by an analytical device for the empirical investigation of autonomy in education from a comparative perspective (see also Wermke

& Salokangas, 2021). This device builds on the idea of autonomy in education as a multidimensional phenomenon. This means that actors in school systems can obtain and/or lack different forms of autonomy in different dimensions of their profession. The device, which originally was designed for analysing teachers' autonomy, has been further developed in latter worked and adapted to also fit analyses of principals' autonomy. Building on the device, we will investigate principal autonomy in terms of the different domains in which decisions can and must be formed. In relation to the work of Wilches (2007), of Ingersoll (2003), Lortie (2009), but also the classic study of Rosenholtz (1989), concerning the workplaces of principals, we propose four different domains which are essential to principals' work. Our definition of the domains presented below may be open to discussion, but above all our grid attempts to capture the multidimensionality of autonomy in public education. (a) Firstly, by *educational domain* we refer to matters related to activities and responsibilities connected to teaching and learning. (b) Education and schools more specifically play a crucial role in the socialisation of students. We call this the *social domain*. In the case of principals, this work is often undertaken on an organisational level in which principals work together with teachers and school staff. Another example of socialisation would be building relationships with parents and also with other stakeholder in the local community. (c) *Developmental domain* refers to decisions that relate to identifying and steering the school towards a "vision" or a plan of action. This domain refers to what principals' plan and do in order to develop the school, and in steering the direction of the school in matters such as *professional development* of staff decisions. (d) Finally, by *administrative domain*, we refer to the administrative work of schools that facilitates learning and other possible activities in schools, distinguishing educational and administrative duties of teachers, including decision-making concerning for example *timetabling*, use of *resources* etc.

Following this device, we will categorise 1) what principals see as their autonomy in the most important decisions in their daily work and 2) to whom they feel accountable in their work regarding the most important decisions to be made. The interview transcripts were analysed following a deductive qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2007). A group of codes were firstly related to expressions of decision-making capacity and practices in the educational, social, developmental and administrative domains of principals' work. These codes represented autonomy. Secondly, another group of codes were related to expressions of control of principals' work in the given domains. In addition, we coded these two groups in terms of their experienced intensity. For increasing the reliability of our results, at least two members of our study group performed the coding work in varying combinations.

Results

The results presentation is structured as follows: Focusing on the overall aim of the article, i.e. to investigate the perception of Norwegian and Swedish rural principals on their experienced autonomy and how they are controlled in their leadership practices, the first section provides some overall findings detailing the context of rural principals in Norway and Sweden, both from a historical and contemporary perspective. The different stakeholders in the two school systems, and the potential tensions between

them, are a central focus in this initial section, alongside similarities and differences between the countries. The following sections present principals' perceptions of autonomy and control, structured by the four dimensions under four sub-headings.

The landscape of rural principals

As signposted, there are historical explanations which provide important details on the similarities and differences in terms of perceived autonomy between Norwegian and Swedish principals. One explanation that principals highlighted in the interviews concerns the local municipalities' particular form and shape. With some fascination, Swedish principals described the depopulation that took place in these areas from the 1970s onwards, and how previous municipalities were merged into larger ones. A Swedish principal explained that "Town A was its own municipality before, so here alone there were once 17 schools". Similarly, another Swedish principal depicted:

the merging of local municipalities stated at the beginning of 70, 71. So, B was its own municipality and C was its own municipality, D was its own municipality and E was its own municipality ... and they were not small (municipalities), they were relatively (big ones). And buses came from all the other villages (Swedish principal, SP).

In contrast, Norwegian principals described their municipalities against a different historical backdrop and explained how small rural communities, to a greater extent, have been preserved without mergers of the type that have taken place in Sweden. Put another way, even if small municipalities have been merged into larger ones in Norway as well, the Norwegian side is still characterised more by small municipalities, often with one or more very small schools, as exemplified here by a Norwegian principal:

One third of the inhabitants live in "the village", 800 inhabitants. The municipality has just over 2000 inhabitants. The school district in the countryside goes to this school downtown. Everyone can go to (that) school. There is one more school in the municipality (Norwegian principal, NP).

Another notable difference between the two countries, partly linked to historical developments, concerns governance and the links between different levels of the school system. More specifically, the link between different levels in the "governing chain" is described as more robust by Norwegian principals compared with their Swedish colleagues. Swedish principals often described the local governance and the connection between the central municipal level and the state level as more loose or diffuse:

The school, local administration, municipal administration must belong to the same, be included in the learning ... there must be a clear chain in the school as an organisation. It is an obstacle. Thinking about our own meetings, we decide and agree, and it then becomes an obstacle if you do not implement a decision that has been made. You lose confidence in the governance chain, it is an obstacle, a weak chain of command and control (SP).

Norwegian principals, by contrast, described their framework for local decision-making and the link between central municipal and state level in somewhat different terms. That is, principals, to a greater extent, expressed that they are part of a rather strong

governing chain and that they there are different actors on different levels that impact their space for action as principals:

I carry out my job on my own, mainly. But I get assignments from my boss, who is the superintendent, who answers to the council, and from parents and colleagues. Even though I manage my own job, the assignments come again and again from above. The assignments always come from the outside. There is not enough time. Tasks added all the time. Nothing is removed. (I have) no direct contact with politicians in the first line, but receive questions via the superintendent (NP).

The above quotes illustrate an important difference, namely that Norwegian principals, in general, have had the state as more present governing actors over the years, while in Sweden there is a more fragmented picture that emerges from the 1990s onwards. In addition, Norwegian principals stated that they cannot sidestep the central municipal level in the same way as their Swedish colleagues. These results can possibly be traced to the fact that the municipal administrations in Norway have not changed as much as in Sweden, with mergers and so forth, but instead the local municipalities and their administrations have looked largely the same over time. This has also led to the development of strong and lasting ties between the different levels. Swedish principals also expressed that they, to a greater extent, turn directly to the state level, previously referred to as “bypassing” municipality governing actors. This does not occur among the rural principals in Norway, despite the fact that they also work far away from the capital’s central administration. These contextual factors provide an important background which allows us to take a closer look at principals’ perceived autonomy in the two countries within the four different domains.

The educational domain

Starting with principals’ perceptions of autonomy in the educational domain, Norwegian respondents claimed that they generally have a high degree of autonomy in their work. They emphasised, however, that the autonomy they have is built on trust and mutual understanding, in and between different levels of the school system:

There must be trust in the system, [it] must be in place. My boss needs to be able to trust me and trust that I do my job. I have to do my job 100 percent correctly, within certain rules (NP).

With regard to the concept of control, Norwegian principals also experience, as with high autonomy, a high degree of control from stakeholders at different levels. With regard to state control, principals declared that the state clearly controls and influences within the pedagogical domain, but also that this development has increased in recent years:

The state is becoming more and more prominent in the governance of the principal’s role, through laws. On the educational side, it is direct control from the state (NP).

With regard to control at the regional and municipal levels, the principals expressed that here also there are clear control mechanisms, in and between different levels of the school system, directing them as educational leaders. A key occupation in this regard is the Fylkesman (called “statsförvaltaren” since 2020, roughly translated to

“administrator of the state”) representing the state at the local municipal and regional levels:

It is the Fylkesman who supervises us. Right now, we have an inspection that the school

owner has ordered, it focuses on special education and the adoption of it. Fylkesmannen supervises the school and I think there is quite a lot of supervision, there is always supervision. Last winter we were inspected and now again, we spend a lot of time documenting, answering. It takes time (NP).

In Sweden, principals also claimed that they have a lot of autonomy in their pedagogical leadership. However, and in contrast to the Norwegian colleagues, they said less about mutual trust and a deepened dialogue with the municipal administration and local politicians. Instead, they stressed the importance of state-level governance and external inspection setting the direction of their work:

Then, of course, the state governs me through the Education Act. It (the state) is the one who controls the most ... I can say that being 200 km away from the superintendent means that I have great (autonomy), also from the nearest colleague, 100 km away. There are not many who have insight into what I do (SP).

Analogously, with regard to principals' perceptions of control there are also here some differences or nuances between Norwegian and Swedish respondents. Regarding similarities, Swedish principals, also, expressed that the government clearly controls them in their work in their role as educational leaders:

The strongest control is actually the state, which controls the most, laws and steering documents. They control me the most (SP).

In terms of control at the regional and local municipal levels, the analysis revealed differences between principals in the two countries. In more detail, the analysis showed that Swedish principals did not experience the same detailed control from local politicians, and from the superintendent and the central municipal level. Instead, the analysis found examples of different types of dialogues compared to Norway; not as detailed, but still rather unique for rural areas. A Swedish principal who previously worked in a capital city municipality stated:

Yes, but I can imagine that ... as far as I know, my former municipality did not have such a thing, that politicians met the principals. It was the head of administration, who in turn met the principals once a week, who met the politicians (SP).

Summing up this first domain, there are similarities and differences between Swedish and Norwegian principals. That is, they both feel a rather high degree of autonomy in their work. In addition, they also experienced a fairly high degree of control, however, from different levels. In this regard, Norwegian principals experience more control both from regional and local municipal stakeholders.

The social domain

Taking a closer look at the second domain, the analysis revealed obvious similarities between Norwegian and Swedish principals regarding their perceptions of autonomy.

More precisely, principals from both countries argued that they have a great deal of autonomy in their work and also that there are characteristics that can be specific to rural areas. For instance, principals of the two countries described that they have a personal connection to the school and the local community, which also affects their leadership. A Norwegian principal told us:

I was born and raised here, I think it matters, I care for this place. Being a principal in your home locale is perhaps the easiest in a way, I do not experience it as difficult, but when I go shopping I am the principal, especially in a small place (NP).

The analysis also disclosed that principals, within the social domain, dare to take their own decisions and explore a path on their own, even if it sometimes means that they have to change their strategy or choose another direction, as described here by a Swedish principal:

Well, because I kind of reason that it's sometimes better to apologise than to ask for permission, because I still have to think sometimes about why I'm here. It's for the sake of the children ... So, as long as there is trust from the employer, I will do this and take decisions (SP).

With regard to perceptions of control, the analysis found no clear differences between Norwegian and Swedish principals. More specifically, very little was said about control from municipal decision-makers or the state level, but rather it was personal dilemmas, together with a specific role in the local community, that affected the principals' autonomy within this domain, as described here by a Swedish principal:

A challenge to live in the same village and work as a principal frames your freedom ... You have to distance yourself privately. Sometimes (you put on) the "mother cap", many different caps ... The advantage is that we know each other, we know where we have each other. The advantage can be that I am also in this soup together with the teachers (SP).

Summing up this second domain, the analysis showed that both Norwegian and Swedish principals experienced a great deal of autonomy in their work regarding controls from municipality and state administration. What rather limits their autonomy and frames decision-making is personal considerations and expectations in the surrounding civil society in the local community.

The developmental domain

With regard to principals' perceptions of autonomy in the developmental domain, the analytical work revealed that both Swedish and Norwegian respondents, generally, experience a high degree of autonomy in school development issues. Principals on both sides of the border stated that school development issues were important and that they have the opportunity to influence the content of the work that is to take place. A Norwegian principal explained:

(In our municipality there are) only two levels, there is coherent communication, the best. If you want to get development, it does not help to have a manager who says what I should do, development must come from here my employees, through employee talks and development talks, therefore I thrive in our municipality, a flat organisation (NP).

Swedish principals also expressed that they experience a high degree of autonomy within this domain, but they also stressed the importance of common visions and goals for the local preschools and schools between local politicians, the superintendent and principals. According to principals, such dialogues are a significant support. This is described by a Swedish principal:

The politicians here are very interested in and want to hear from us and want to see what happens to the decisions they have made. Last Wednesday, we had a meeting of the committee and the politicians then got to take part in each principal and preschool principals' presentation of the current situation. I reflected upon the fact that there were a lot of committed people (SP).

The analysis also found details on how the control of the content of development work is characterised by less state and municipal control compared with other domains. A Norwegian principal said:

First and foremost, it is state control, the state is becoming more and more clear on the principal's role in the school ... On the pedagogical side, it is direct control from the state. On the financial and administrative side, there is control from the municipality. We have no management function at the municipal level regarding development work, where we control ourselves (NP).

To sum up, in this third domain, a similar picture emerged in both countries, showing that principals experience a high degree of autonomy and, at the same time, a lower degree of control. The analysis also found examples among Swedish principals stressing the importance of mutual engagement and collaboration between principals, the superintendent and the local political level.

The administrative domain

Again, in this fourth and final domain of the perceptions of autonomy, principals express that they have a rather high degree of autonomy in their leadership, even if they state that autonomy comes with the burden of considerable frameworks and control mechanisms. Furthermore, both Norwegian and Swedish principals reflected on the interaction that exists between autonomy and control by different stakeholders and how it frames principals' work, as exemplified here by a Norwegian principal:

We can do as we want, in a way, we principals. As long as we follow the state control that is regulated by law and stay within the financial (municipal) directives and if we do that, then we have great freedom to manage our own budget (NP).

Equally, Swedish principals described how the municipal budget has an important control function that both enables and limits principals' autonomy, for example when it comes to development work:

I can say, being XX kilometres away from the boss means that I have great freedom. Not many people have insight into what I do. So, it's a freedom. But what governs my work? It is of course the steering documents, it is the state of course, but also the municipal decisions. It is the framework, governing documents and municipal decisions that affect the school ... The budget is a framework (SP).

However, in some examples, Swedish principals claimed that they also challenge the current structure to increase their autonomy. More specifically, they expressed a possibility to challenge the current model:

Because I wonder what can happen to them (principals)? In the capital, where it's also hard (money-wise), if you do not stick to the budget, you will be replaced. But with us, it is difficult to get hold of principals, so it does not matter if you run over budget, we will not be fired for it (SP).

Summing up this fourth and final domain, the analysis revealed a combination of a high degree of autonomy and control. The municipal budget is the most evident control factor highlighted by both Norwegian and Swedish principals. There are also some examples of Swedish principals trying to challenge current structures in order to obtain a higher degree of autonomy in their leadership.

Discussion and conclusions

This article took its point of departure from previous research on school governance and educational leadership with a focus in the north Scandinavian context and how rural principals experience autonomy and control in current governance regimes. In particular, the aim of this article was to analyse the perception of Norwegian and Swedish rural principals on their autonomy and how they are controlled in their leadership practices. A theoretical point for departure was taken in the work of Ingersoll (2003) and Wermke and Salokangas (2021), conceptualising autonomy as the most important decisions to be made within a school organisation, together with the control of those decisions. Both decision-making and control evolve in different domains and at different levels. Based on this assumption, an analysis instrument constituting four different domains (educational; social; developmental; administrative) and the ways in which autonomy and control are perceived within each domain structured the analytical work. Table 1 summarises the most important findings.

Regarding the overall results, the analysis shows that both Norwegian and Swedish rural principals experience a high degree of autonomy within the four domains of schooling. Regarding control, principals intimated that control is generally more evident within the educational and administrative domains and less evident within the developmental and particularly within the social domain. Control within the educational domain is, according to the principals, mostly conducted by state level actors.

Table 1. Rural Norwegian (NP) and Swedish principals' (SP) perception of autonomy.

	Educational domain	Social domain	Developmental domain	Administrative domain
Autonomy	NP and SP: High degree of autonomy.	NP and SP: High degree of autonomy	NP and SP: High degree of autonomy	NP and SP: High degree of autonomy
Control	NP: High degree of control both from municipal and state level SP: High degree of control from state level	NP & SP: Low degree of control. Control through personal attitudes and expectations in the local community	NP & SP: Low degree of control.	NP & SP: High degree of control. The municipal budget is the most evident control factor.

The administrative domain, on the other hand, is to a greater extent controlled by the central municipal administration.

Some Norwegian principals emphasised the amount of control and directives both from national and local municipal level. Swedish principals, in turn, often respond directly to state level, bypassing the superintendent and the political board, which might indicate that they do not trust or have doubts regarding the capacity at the central municipal level (cf. Nordholm & Andersson, 2019). Top-down bypassing of municipalities by state administration, as stated by Nihlfors and Johansson (2013), is consequently a process that also has a bottom up dimension. Our rural Swedish principals bypass the municipal administration on their own. In other words, Swedish principals navigate a path through their double governance configuration to increase their autonomy and prevent excessive control. Norwegian principals, in general, experience more control from the regional and central municipal administration compared to Swedish principals. Considering the work of Hall and Sivesind (2015), these differences might be linked to the different traditions and structures of state school inspection. More specific, given that school inspection in Norway has focused more on legal and pragmatic approaches to inspection, in and between different levels, the possibilities (and perhaps also eagerness) to by-pass the central municipal level has been lower compared to Sweden.

Furthermore, the lower degree of control within the developmental domain is relevant to highlight in relation to the work of Nordholm et al. (2021b), i.e. because principals in these rural areas appear less controlled by their local school administration compared to colleagues in larger cities. These results are analogous to the work of Prøitz et al. (2019), in which significant differences between different local school authorities and administrators were revealed. In addition, and as showed in the work of Hopkins, Stringfield, Harris, Stoll, and Mackay (2014), successful school improvement and educational reforming takes account to all school levels (i.e. national, state, district, municipality), i.e. it is through the interplay between these levels that generate conditions for sustainable and long-term educational change. In that sense, we return to the initial discussion on autonomy and control and the work of Cribb and Gewirtz (2007) and others. Once again, we emphasise the importance of not categorically understanding autonomy and control as positive or negative. Instead, it becomes important to seriously reflect upon the relationship between the two concepts. For instance, when it comes to discussions on (increased) autonomy and trust to local professionals, the analytical perspective applied in this article offers a valuable lens for such analysis and discussions.

Finally, in the social domain, a noteworthy combination of high autonomy and a low degree of formal control was revealed, and here, instead, it is the local community and principals' personal considerations that affect their room for manoeuvre. This relates to the statement by Wermke and Prøitz (2019) that a professions' primary reference frame might be provided by the civil society, which shapes professional work by the placement of expectations on the professional. In other words, the communities' children must be treated well, and parents and others will find out about and sanction deviating behaviour. In rural communities this is even more the case because the expectations on the local school are still high, even if they are of a somewhat different nature compared to the (large) cities (see Nordholm et al., 2021a).

Concerning governance, it is worth noting the historical differences revealed initially of the analysis detailing how many sparsely populated municipalities were merged into larger municipalities in Sweden, which has not happened to the same extent in Norway. This resulted in new municipal school organisations in Sweden, which arguably presented a challenge, not only for rural municipalities. Moreover, Norway has neither reformed the school system in the same way as Sweden concerning decentralisation and market adoption. Such factors have together formed today's Norwegian school system in which the links in the governing chain between the different levels of the system are much tighter compared to Sweden.

These results also provide important details on why superintendents and the municipal administration are sidestepped or bypassed (cf. Moos et al., 2016), i.e. that principals and teachers turn directly to the state level and its authorities. Given the results of this article, bypass strategies are perhaps even more expected in rural municipalities because these municipalities have had difficulty in building an organisation with the capacity to run and support local school development. And therefore, despite decentralisation and market adaptation reforms, Swedish principals and teachers continue to turn directly to the state level and its authorities. Considering previous research, and Rönnerberg's (2012) formulation of "the return of the state", one might argue that, in many rural municipalities, the state never left, at least not as main reference for principals' decision-making. In addition, in these municipalities, very few independent school organisers have established schools, meaning that the schools that have existed for a long time are the schools that also exist today. Consequently, the local rural communities' school system has not changed, at least from the perspectives of parents and professionals in schools.

To conclude; by studying the "last outpost" of the two countries, the Norwegian school system stands out as more centralised than the Swedish system, which stands out as more fragmented. In addition, the more perceptible impact on rural schools' work can be related to other changes than related to decentralisation and marketisation reforms. That is, rural municipality mergers in the 1970s in Sweden might have had more impact on rural governance configurations. In Norway, we cannot see a similar phenomenon. There, unlike in Sweden, local community and municipality administration are more integrated than in the Swedish mergers. These and the other findings add important pieces to the current body of research on principals' autonomy, but also on school leadership in rural principals and school system governance.

Note

1. The term "governing chain" is often used to illustrate how educational governance is exercised and linked between different levels in the school system.

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