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Inside de- and re-centralisation: the formation of governance in Swedish local education authorities during education reform

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ABSTRACT

This article concerns the professional work of Swedish heads of local educational authority [LEA] school administrations) with a particular focus on their relationships with local politicians since the 1990s. In recent decades, Sweden has undergone foundational educational reforms, radically de-centralising - and then re-centralising - the school system. Thus, Sweden represents an interesting case for understanding both de-centralisation and re-centralisation processes. We cover seven empirical studies of superintendents to understand how municipal governance and the role of superintendents have changed over time in response to these large-scale reforms. We show that the de-centralisation reforms of the 1990s destabilised municipal administrative structures and superintendents' roles and duties with regard to politicians. However, during the 2000s, the municipal administrative structures and the role and duties of superintendents stabilised significantly. In the mid-2010s, reforms institutionalised superintendents' roles and bound them more closely to the state administration.

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Local education authorities; superintendents; education reform; Sweden; decentralisation

Introduction

In their article 'In the Eye of the Storm' in this journal, Nordholm, Wermke, and Jarl (2023) describe 30 years of Swedish school reform as apparently having had little impact on school principals' experienced capacity for decision-making. As their title aptly illustrates, despite the hectic de-centralisation and re-centralisation reforms, their position has remained highly stable. Thus, from a historical perspective, education reforms at scale are (in part) much ado about nothing. These findings confirm several education policy scholars' reasoning on policymaking, from the development of reforms to their implementation at multiple levels of the complex system of public education. It is almost common sense that such a 'way down' is non-linear (Lundgren and

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Lindensjö 2000; Schulte 2018), characterised by local policy enactment (Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012; Braun et al. 2011) and highly affected by contextual factors (Schulte and Wermke 2019). Nonetheless, there is a need to understand the trajectories from policy to practice. Fortunately, the literature reports several approaches to explaining issues related to complexity and non-linearity (or non-causality).

Classic works on the recurrence of educational reforms and their shortcomings in evolving classroom practices have depicted educational reforms as stories of success and failure (Cuban 1990, 2013; Muncey and McQuillan 1996; Tyack and Cuban 1995). Reforms, as expressions of education policy, indeed constitute an endless process of trial and error, leading to changes (or a lack of change) via ‘tinkering towards utopia’ (Tyack and Cuban 1995). More pessimistically, some have argued that such reform stories are most important for policymakers and ‘politicking’. Reforms are artefacts of the political system, but they are only loosely coupled to schools and classrooms at a pragmatic level (Weick 1976). The most fertile feature of a political system lies in the fact that it can forget what it has previously done (Luhmann 2002). As a result of this feature, reform processes have historically tended to oscillate between alternatives, such as form versus content or de-centralisation versus centralisation (Broadfoot 1996; Tyack and Cuban 1995). To achieve a deep understanding of why reforms keep being undone in this manner, Cuban (1990, 12) asserts that future research should ‘do better by gathering data on particular reforms and tracing their life history in particular classrooms, schools, districts and regions’.

This article considers whether certain reforms indeed impact educational practices at multiple levels. As shown by Nordholm, Wermke, and Jarl (2023), the Swedish reforms did not significantly impact how principals perceive their professional decision-making capacity or their relations with other stakeholders. However, we argue that the Swedish reforms did significantly impact municipal school administrations and those working within them. In other words, while principals of individual schools did not experience changes in their decision-making capacity, overarching collectives of several schools within local education authorities (LEAs) (i.e. municipalities) absorbed many of the reforms’ direct consequences. From a historical perspective, this study examines the work and autonomy of superintendents as heads of local school administrations as well as their relations with local politicians in the complex system of local school administration.¹

Former research offers important insights into LEAs’ importance in school governance and educational reforms. Regardless of whether it is geographically or politically defined, the LEA functions internationally as an ‘intermediate organizational unit’ between schools and central government policies and authorities (Anderson 2013), comprising both a school board and a central administration office led by the superintendent (Rorrer, Skrla, and Scheurich 2008). Given recent decades’ de-centralisation efforts and new educational governance frameworks around the world (Honig and Rainey 2012), earlier research reveals how successful LEAs translate national policy, contribute to the development and implementation of national and local policy, and support school principals (Anderson 2013; Leithwood, Sun, and McCullough 2019; Nordholm 2016; Rorrer, Skrla, and Scheurich 2008). However, little is still known about the long-term development and dynamics of school administrations and administrative leadership. Thus, this remains a high-stakes issue to explore.

Although two decades have passed since Björk and Lindle (2001) concluded that ‘political action focused on superintendents as a nexus of political interaction’ was underreported, there is still a clear need for further research on superintendents’ responses to national demands across varying local contexts (Hardy and Salo 2022). While Ribbins, in 2008, highlighted the necessity of historical perspectives on leadership, administration, management and policy studies (LAMPS), empirical works on both structures and agencies in education administrations over longer periods of time remain rare.

We employ a similar methodological approach as ‘In the Eye of the Storm’ to re-analyse empirical studies on Swedish LEA heads dating back to 1990. Sweden is a fruitful example, as it has experienced both de-centralisation and re-centralisation reforms within a short period of time. Moreover, these processes have been accompanied by empirical research on multiple aspects of superintendents’ work and autonomy, offering an opportunity to trace reform work with time-related data in chronological order.

This article is structured as follows. First, we present a theoretical framework for the peculiar relationship between politics and public administration. Second, we detail the study’s methodological design and provide a brief overview of the reform history in Swedish education since 1990 to contextualise our findings. Third, we delineate the last three periods of Swedish municipal governance. Finally, we make theoretical claims regarding the nature of de-centralisation and re-centralisation in education.

A theoretical framework on the politics and administration relationship

This article draws on sociological theory to explain the complex relations among political and administrative actors in democratic societies. More specifically, it builds on the early work of German sociologist Niklas Luhmann concerning administrative law—how political decision-making is operationalised at scale in public administration across various societal areas (e.g. education, health, law). That framework constitutes the foundation for later work on functional system theory (Luhmann 2002; Luhmann and Schorr 1999) and decision-making processes (Luhmann 2011). Luhmann (1983) presents a universal theoretical framework for the nature of political planning and public administration,² although his elaboration of public administration as the operationalisation of political decision-making is not unique. In northern Europe, this assertion has a strong tradition stemming from seminal work on complex public administration decision-making as a governing practice by Lundquist (1972), Rothstein (2021) and Peters and Pierre (2012; 2018). This tradition can also be traced back to the significant role of bureaucratic authorities in Scandinavia (Etzemüller 2010). However, theoretical elaborations on public education administration are rare. As Luhmann (1983) presents a comprehensive and highly universal model – alongside the typical Luhmannian level of abstraction – his approach is a particularly fertile one. Since this past work only exists in German, this article makes a significant contribution to international research on public education administration.

Luhmann’s theoretical framework for political planning

The premise of Luhmann’s theoretical perspective is that politics and public administration have a complementary relationship. By ‘administration’, Luhmann means a

system of action specialised in making binding decisions in line with established plans and programmes. Such administrations' decisions are binding if they are generally accepted as such within the social environment of the administrative system. A willingness to accept administrative decisions can be rooted in various reasons. Luhmann defines politics as the complex configuration of social processes that serve to guarantee willingness and ensure the widespread acceptance of decisions. Consequently, we must distinguish between two related but separate spheres: politics and (public) administration. In older advanced civilisations (e.g. Rome, Athens), politicised bureaucracies typically separated politics and administration hierarchically according to rank. In other words, higher-ranked politicians dealt with both politics and its operationalisation. As society developed to be more complex, a separation between politics and administration became a necessity, as increasingly complex services could be organised within an ever-widening range of relevant possibilities. This separation may be understood as an internal differentiation of the political system. It causes an increase in the complexity and, in turn, the performance of the political system by enabling it to cope with increasingly difficult problems.

In Luhmann's words, such an increase in performance can lead to a reduction in the complexity of society by collectively separating binding decisions from specific individuals having a certain power. The more sharply the process of reducing complexity is separated into politics and administration and placed under different selection criteria, the more important processes of translation from one sphere to another become. This process takes place through the political planning and programming of the administration by political actors. Plans and programmes are the 'output' of political processes and the 'input' of the administrative system.

According to Luhmann, planning entails the delineation of decision-making premises for future decisions. In other words, planning means deciding on decisions. Planning entails defining a decision problem and determining the conditions for its solution. Political planning premises are based on two relationships: (1) the hierarchical relationship (line-of-authority relationship), and (2) the decision's relationship with a certain purpose. Politics lies atop the hierarchy because it determines the purpose and means. Decisions regarding the purpose of something must be made at the top of the hierarchy – in the political centre. This relationship stems simply from the fact that politicians are elected by the people, meaning that they bear legitimate power.

To fulfil the specific functions of political processes, it is important to establish sufficient role separations and communication routines between the administration and the public. While politicians must be closer to people to get (re-)elected, administration officials must make decisions impersonally, objectively and in line with established criteria (i.e. decision-making programmes). The tension between the need for change and the need for stability must be resolved in the relationship between politicians and their administration. Political administration must be open to ambivalence with regard to values while still being intent on protecting existing structures (Luhmann 1983).

Administrative decision-making exists in the form of specific means of problem-solving: juridical and economic. Juridical means, Luhmann argues, are based on certain conditions and causes (i.e. reasons for action). They specify actions that should or can be taken in each instance in which decisions are made. Juridical thinking –

focused on causes and conditions – is also used in the programming of automatic data-processing systems. Economic means pertain to the effects of a decision. They are related to the logic of efficiency, which underlies economic decision-making processes. The sphere of politics, however, has other means of communication. *Political decision-making* is based on mutual assistance and related demands (i.e. in coalition work or majority findings). Party politicians have neither the specialist knowledge nor the implementation experience and often lack the precise knowledge of the milieu that is necessary in planning processes. Moreover, the constellation of references amid which politicians must work includes positions, relationships, political careers, chances of consensus, power distribution and reputations. Consequently, politics is inherently too dynamic to facilitate consistent long-term planning.

This is the main crux of our argument: *politics and public administration must negotiate decision-making programmes regarding legitimacy, legality and efficiency.* According to Luhmann, some opportunism is required on both sides, and there must be a focus on mutual bargaining. In other words, politicians must cooperate with the administration to operationalise their work, understanding that the administration must also cooperate with them in order to legitimise its decisions as well as its very existence to the public. Mutual negotiation between politics and administration prevents the emergence of pure technocracies on the one hand and non-sustainable party politics on the other. In this way, the administration protects politics, and politics protects the administration.

As condensed in **Figure 1**, the political sphere and the public administration sphere have a complementary relationship. The people elect politicians who, in turn, negotiate societal rules (e.g. in parliaments). Generally, political communication rules do not address issues pertaining to individual people. Within the political sphere, decision-making premises are established and then passed onto the administration sphere. In the latter, decision-making programmes are built in line with the principles of efficiency and legality. In other words, the political sphere provides the legitimacy for a decision, while the administration sphere provides a stable and transparent

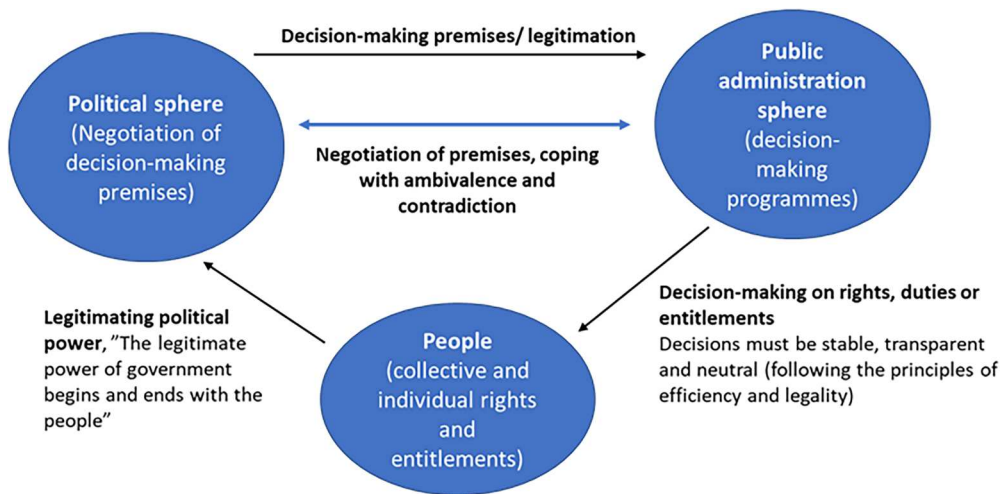


Figure 1. A theoretical framework of political planning (our model).

operationalisation of that decision. Notably, however, the relationship between these spheres is subject to negotiation. Particular means of making, communicating and executing decisions must be established and often continually re-established. Political configurations may evolve over time, prompting a need for innovation.

This article argues that such negotiation processes can be historically investigated by mapping how relations between politics and (public) administration evolve, stabilise and change. This is linked to the idea of a sequential order of political structures embedded in spatial dimensions. In other words, what we empirically observe in both entities and relationships is always the present situated historically (Archer 1988). This leads us to the study's methodological design, which is presented in the next section.

Methodological design: depicting change in context

This section accomplishes three things. First, it introduces the empirical case – Sweden – contextualises our application of Luhmann's theory to political planning and illustrates the significance of Sweden's reform history when it comes to the theorisation of education administration. Second, following the example of Nordholm, Wermke, and Jarl (2023), it presents this article's methodological approach, which is a re-analysis of empirical studies on Swedish superintendents dating back to the 1990s. Third, it presents the considered material.

The case employed: Sweden since the 1990s

In the post-war period through the late 1980s, Swedish educational governance was generally characterised as highly centralised and regulated (Lundahl 2005). Under this system, education policy pursued social equity in education and in society at large (Rothstein 1996). This pursuit entailed the implementation of a uniform school system in which all students were 'to be provided with a common frame of reference' (Englund and Quennerstedt 2008). Teachers and principals were employed by the state, and their wages and working conditions were centrally regulated. Central institutions allocated resources through direct state subsidies to municipalities and schools and specified core educational content and modes of teaching in national curricula.

In the early 1990s, de-centralisation reforms based on notions of local autonomy, professional autonomy and efficiency were implemented (Jarl, Fredriksson, and Persson 2012). These reforms transformed the educational system from one of the most centralised in the Western world to one of the most de-centralised (Lundahl 2005; OECD 2015). Hence, they transferred responsibility for education from the central government to municipal governments. Responsibility for teachers' and principals' employment, salaries and working conditions was transferred from the state to the local level (i.e. to LEAs). LEAs were also authorised to organise education and allocate resources to schools; management via objectives and results was introduced as the guiding principle for educational governance. Under this system, the role of the central government was limited to the specification of objectives, standards and means of evaluation. Teachers were entrusted to make decisions on teaching methods, while principals were strengthened through their authority to decide on the internal organisation of their schools (Jarl, Andersson, and Blossing 2021). A new government agency, the Swedish National Agency

for Education, oversaw the implementation of the de-centralisation reforms. In 1992, marketisation reforms followed, introducing a voucher system and making it easier for independent schools to receive public funding (Björklund et al. 2006).

Since the early 2000s, numerous political initiatives have aimed to bolster the role of central institutions to address weaknesses in governance (OECD 2015), deteriorating student achievement levels, and increasing inequality (Hansen and Gustafsson 2019). Direct state subsidies to schools and LEAs were re-introduced in the early 2000s and steadily increased from that point forward (Statskontoret 2019). The central government increasingly came to measure student performances against national standards (Sundberg and Wahlström 2012). At the same time, it significantly increased its use of performance-measurement tools in an attempt to regain some control that was lost during de-centralisation (Wermke and Forsberg 2017).

According to current national regulations, LEAs (municipal and independent school providers) are responsible for student performance, school improvement and resource allocation (Liljenberg, Ärlestig, and Nordholm 2023). Since 2018, all LEAs have been required to have a superintendent who ensures compliance with the Education Act (SFS 2010, 800). However, there are no national directives on necessary superintendent competencies. In municipalities, education is governed by a school board comprising elected politicians representing the political parties present in the municipal council (Nordholm, Wermke, and Jarl 2023). The school administration office and the officials working within are responsible for preparing proposals for decision-making on the school board and for implementing the board's decisions in schools. The superintendent serves as the head official of each LEA's school administration office.

Method

This study focuses on superintendents and their relations with local politicians in the complex system of local school administration. More specifically, it illustrates the negotiations between school boards and school administration offices, demonstrating how various stakeholders in public education structure their relations and enable education on a large scale.

This article's methodological design draws attention to previous work, highlighting the potential for the re-analysis of empirical materials collected with a similar purpose but for different studies (see, e.g. Gorard 2001; Hammersley 2010). Gorard (2001, 73) differentiates between secondary analysis involving the reanalysis of prior empirical studies, traditional research reviews summarising research findings in a field and meta-analyses that combine the previous two types 'by conducting a summary re-analysis' of earlier research findings.

Re-analysis can be utilised by re-using quantitative (Gorard 2001) and qualitative (Hammersley 2010) data from earlier projects conducted by other researchers. As argued by Johnston (2014, 625), 'the overall good of this method is the same as that of others, to contribute to scientific knowledge through offering an alternate perspective; it only differs in its reliance on existing data'. Through the processes of cross-pollination, paradoxically, 'using 'old' data can lead to more original research than getting new data' (Gorard 2001, 47). The primary problems with secondary analysis – that the data does not fit the research question and a lack of context-specific knowledge – are also apparent

when conducting primary analysis (Hammersley 2010). Consequently, the analytical process ‘has steps to be followed just as any research method’ (Johnston 2014), as we demonstrate in the section below.

Materials

We re-analyse empirical data from seven studies on the work and identity of superintendents (i.e. heads of local school administrations) dating back to the 1990s. The studies were identified via a systematic literature search of Swedish databases using various terms – including superintendent, work, position, local school administration, and LEAs – in different combinations. Additionally, we used a snowball method and identified publications’ reference lists. All of the studies include findings from surveys and/or interviews with Swedish superintendents; publications on local school administration that did not include superintendents’ own voices were excluded. Table 1 summarises the considered studies as well as each’s purpose, methods, empirical data and publication year.

The re-analyses followed a three-step process. First, we wrote descriptive summaries of the seven studies’ results, including key citations. In the summaries, we incorporated all material (result descriptions, descriptive statistics and citations) displaying manifestations of political-administrative communications and negotiations. Second, we conducted a deductive content analysis in the tradition of Mayring (2007), beginning with our theoretical assumption of a complementary and dynamic relationship between politics and public administration. Third, the material was arranged in chronological order and linked to significant political dynamics and policy events (e.g. reforms) in Sweden during the period of investigation. We identified three distinct time periods (with regard to our theoretical premises) over the course of the development of political administration in local educational contexts.

To further illustrate the motivations behind our methodological choices, we want to clarify the distinction between the re-analyses conducted in this study and what would have been done in a systematic research synthesis. Although we build on a systematic review of research on Swedish LEA heads, an exclusive focus on these heads would be of limited interest to an international audience. Moreover, we do not report on the studies’ summarised results when it comes to their analyses and theoretical implications. Instead, we focus on their descriptive material in chronological order, re-analysing it to understand de-centralisation and re-centralisation reforms through the application of a theory on political-administrative communication. This is our article’s major theoretical contribution to the international research community.

Findings

This section revises the findings of the seven empirical studies on Swedish superintendents across three periods: *the 1990s*, *the 2000s to early 2010s* and *the late 2010s to the present*. For each period, we detail – from the perspective of superintendents – how de-centralisation and re-centralisation have been operationalised and have shaped the relationship between politicians and school administration officials.

Table 1. Studies and publications on Swedish LEA heads since 1990.

Empirical Study	Overall Study Purpose	Materials, Methods	Main Publication(s) (Year)
1990s			
STUDY 1 1995	To examine superintendents' descriptions of their own administrative work, especially in the areas of instructional leadership and curriculum.	Questionnaire among 280 superintendents, response rate 74.2% ($n = 207$)	Bredeson and Johansson (1997)
STUDY 2 Part 1. 1995 Part 2. 1996–1997	To achieve a deeper understanding of superintendents' work, especially when it comes to their role as leaders of both the local school administration and autonomous professionals (i.e. school principals).	Diary notes, interviews Selection of 13 superintendents Observations, interviews Selection of 3 superintendents	Cregård (1996) Cregård (2000)
2000s			
STUDY 3 2002	To achieve a deeper understanding of educational governance by examining the manifestation of central and local government relations in the superintendent position.	Questionnaire among 65 superintendents, response rate 87% ($n = 57$)	Nihlfors (2003)
STUDY 4 2009	To report descriptive findings from a national superintendent survey on the work, position and autonomy of superintendents.	Questionnaire among superintendents across 290 municipalities, response rate unknown ($n = 240$)	Johansson and Nihlfors (2014) Moos, Nihlfors, and Paulsen (2016)
2010s			
STUDY 5 2012	To achieve a deeper understanding of how superintendents navigate the context of evolving relations between state and municipal educational governance.	Questionnaire among approximately 600 superintendents and school administration officials, response rate 52.7% ($n =$ unknown) Interviews Selection of 8 superintendents across 4 municipalities	Svedberg (2014) Nestor and Svedberg (2014)
2020s			
STUDY 6 Part 1. 2019 Part 2. 2020	To examine superintendents' work with a focus on areas of conflict due to their intermediate position between central and local governments and between political and professional steering.	Interviews Selection of 28 superintendents across 28 municipalities Questionnaire among 186 superintendents at independent schools, response rate 25% ($n = 46$) 372 superintendents across municipalities, response rate 37% ($n = 136$)	Foss and Krantz (2022) Krantz (2022)
STUDY 7 2019–2020	To examine superintendents' experiences with new central government regulations pertaining to their role and their consequences for their work.	Questionnaire among 304 superintendents, response rate 63% ($n = 193$)	Roos, Johansson and Svedberg (2022)

The 1990s: the establishment of LEAs as we know them today

The first scholarly works on Swedish superintendents in our considered period were published in the mid-1990s (e.g. Bredeson and Johansson 1997; Cregård 1996, 2000). By this time, Sweden had already experienced radical de-centralisation reforms, meaning that local school boards across the country's 290 municipalities had been granted far greater decision-making power to organise and plan education within their municipality. Having been formerly only responsible for managing school buildings, school food and transport, they were now tasked with managing many other tasks, including employer responsibilities for teachers and making local professional development plans for

educational staff. Additionally, the new 1994 curricula granted enhanced professional autonomy.

The superintendents had already indicated that they wished to focus more on educational leadership and school improvement if they had time to do so (Bredeson and Johansson 1997). When surveyed in 1995 about how much time they spend on various tasks, they ordered them as follows: (1) budget and finance, (2) school board training (i.e. the education of municipal politicians), (3) planning and setting goals, and (4) school improvement. School improvement being ranked fourth speaks volumes (Bredeson and Johansson 1997, 10). Moreover, superintendents reported that they experienced role conflicts and work overload and wished to hire various kinds of assistants, such as in the areas of curriculum and instruction, business management and personnel administration (*ibid.*, p. 11). Evidently, the Swedish superintendents needed more supportive structures and more qualified staff. They needed professional support from their administration to meet the challenges arising from de-centralisation reforms. Additionally, superintendents of this era seemed to exhibit very little involvement in the work of principals and generally remained invisible to teachers (*ibid.*, p. 21). Consequently, life in Swedish schools went on as usual.

Bredeson and Johansson (1997) described the unstable and often conflicting expectations placed on superintendents. The authors argued that it is unrealistic to think of superintendents as ‘teachers of teachers’ or as ‘the local expert’ on education (19), as ‘newly hired superintendents are employed to be good instructional leaders, but their boards are most interested in cutting budgets and personnel’ (20). The idea of autonomous school principals, inherent in the former centralised Swedish school system, is still valid and explains why superintendents maintain a ‘greater distance from educators’ (21). The authors concluded with a not-so-optimistic picture: ‘With the decentralization of authority to municipalities, superintendents have become much more vulnerable, and accordingly more attuned to local political pressure’ (24).

Between 1995 and 1997, Cregård investigated the work of LEA heads based on in-depth interviews, diary notes and observations of superintendents’ work (Cregård 1996, 2000). Her studies offer interesting insights into the roles of Swedish LEA heads during this period. Superintendents at the time expressed that ‘new rules, including, for example, school sector governance, have created uncertainty about authority and responsibility, such as which rules to follow in different circumstances’ (Cregård 1996, 64). They viewed themselves as ‘service organs’ (66) rather than people aspiring to teach their subordinates how to do their work. In fact, they emphasised that ‘the principals and teachers have more knowledge of the activity and are thus best able to determine how it should be carried out’ (66). Consequently, superintendents exerted a gentler form of control over their subordinates ‘by determining their actions’ despite allowing them to be autonomous (Cregård 2000, 147). The observation-driven results of this study revealed that meetings were used to govern principals and other school professionals in the municipalities. In regular meetings, superintendents determined not only what was to be discussed and dealt with but also how those discussions should be had (e.g. working in groups, seating arrangements during meetings), where they should be had (e.g. where to meet, whom to turn to) and when they should be had (e.g. time, length). However, at this time, the LEA heads believed that they must stay within the administrative domain (i.e. finance, administration and management) (147).

In 2003, Nihlfors published the results of her study on Swedish superintendents who had worked in their positions during the whole 1990s. By this time, over ten years had passed since the de-centralisation reforms, and several re-centralisation endeavours had already been pursued by the Swedish central government, which sought to establish stricter result controls. Nihlfors (2003, 177–178) asked her respondents to describe changes in their professional focus by ranking issues that dominated during the 1990s in relation to their (a) own work situation, (b) contact with all principals in the municipality and (c) contact with individual principals. These issues were divided into three periods: (1) early 1990s, (2) mid-1990s and (3) late 1990s. The results indicate that organisational issues were the most prominent across all three areas during the early 1990s but that there was a shift, as financial issues were ranked as the most prominent across all three areas in both the mid-1990s and the late 1990s. Curriculum issues were among the top three issues across all three areas during period 1 and period 2 but not during period 3, when performance monitoring took its place in the top three.

Moreover, Swedish superintendents had begun to feel less insecure, having developed a heightened sense of autonomy and power. A great majority of LEA heads had never or seldom experienced board politicians not following their recommendations and wishes in their decision-making (Nihlfors 2003, 181). This autonomy appears to have stemmed from active dialogue with politicians and other LEA officials. The superintendents speak with principals, officials and politicians several times a week (188). This high frequency can be illustrated by the finding that the heads only speak with trade union representatives, their own networks and teachers once a week and with the National Agency for Education and the Ministry of Education once a month (188).

Late 2000s to the early 2010s: the stabilisation of LEAs and the return of the state

During the 2000s, several implications of the radical de-centralisation reforms within Swedish education governance had become visible. For example, average student performances, according to international large-scale studies, had significantly decreased, and a school system once famous for its equal opportunities for all had experienced severe trends toward segregation (Hansen and Gustafsson 2019). This kicked off what scholars later labelled the ‘return of the state’ (Rönnerberg 2012) driven by the implementation of more frequent and stricter national curriculum testing, more detailed governance guidelines via a new school law and new curricula. Additionally, a school inspectorate was founded. The data in our studies mirrors these changes. As this section shows, superintendents experienced both an increased focus on student results and more continuity and stability in their work and their relations with politicians.

In a study from 2009, Johansson and Nihlfors (2014) further illuminated the municipal arena of public education. These years were apparently characterised by the stabilisation of structures and relations at the local LEA level between school administrations and school boards. Most heads reported having high or very high levels of autonomy. Shifts in levels of experienced autonomy were noted when school board compositions changed due to an election and when superintendents were new in their positions (ibid). However, the resultant changes were not particularly radical. The LEA heads determined that their discretion in managing their school districts would be quite

stable so long as they remained on good terms with the politicians. Moreover, 'more than 77% of heads in the study viewed themselves as being members of the municipality's administrative leadership team, which may also correspond to superintendents aligning with shifts towards a more centralist orientation in some municipality's political and administrative levels of government' (375). Politicians and administrative heads have consolidated with each other. Only 10 per cent of the participating superintendents 'indicated that they had more loyalty to (principals) than to the highest political and administrative leadership in the municipality' (375).

During this period, it appears as though the political sphere held no awkward expectations towards its superintendents. In one study, superintendents ranked the ten most important expectations for their job performance from the perspective of the school board as follows; in doing so, they presented a highly realistic superintendent job description: '(1) understanding pedagogical leadership, (2) leading principals [...] in their pedagogical leadership, (3) cooperating with the board and the society, (4) creating changes in the school organisation that lead to better economic outcomes, (5) creating conditions that enhance student performance on national tests, (6) developing and implementing national reforms, (7) developing and implementing local initiatives and reforms, (8) evaluating the results of national decisions on the local level, (9) evaluating the results of local initiatives and reforms, and (10) creating prerequisites for cooperation with other municipal actors' (Johansson and Nihlfors 2014, 376). This study also highlighted the overall alignment between school board expectations and superintendents' perceptions of their own most critical tasks. Superintendents' most important task, as determined by their own rankings, was 'creating conditions that enhance student performance on national tests the highest', followed by 'developing and implementing national reforms', 'developing and implementing local initiatives and reforms', and 'evaluating the results of national decisions on the local level' (376).

In 2012, a research team led by Svedberg (2014) conducted a series of empirical studies on Swedish superintendents. The results revealed that LEA heads perceived themselves to be working in a politically controlled organisation. Interviews indicated that a common perception was that political governance is weak and unclear regarding goals and expectations and that the heads must 'formulate goals and their own assignment' (Nestor and Svedberg 2014, 55). This lack of clarity, the authors argued, may be attributable to 'changes of majority, high turnover of politicians, new politicians, ignorance or lack of time, training and commitment', implying that the superintendents are 'taking over the political leadership – a form of civil service governance that can be based on reciprocity or take place unilaterally on the superintendent's terms' (55). Moreover, the authors highlighted the problem inherent in drawing the line between superintendents and politicians from various perspectives. The heads gave examples of how it can be difficult to strike the balance 'between, on the one hand, the politicians' relationship with their voters and daring to make decisions and, on the other hand, the administration's view of how financial resources should be allocated' (58).

During this period, national ranking lists were highly important, governing 'what are considered valid results because they are requested by the education board members' (Nestor and Svedberg 2014, 68). Similar processes were being generated at the LEA level, with municipalities often wanting to measure similar aspects themselves, leading to a culture in which 'the superintendent uses similar objectives and key figures when

leading his/her principals and schools' (68). As a result, superintendents experienced that 'the ambitions to monitor student performance can be a matter of equity and fairness between schools, but it can also lead to conflicts' (68). The authors concluded with an assertion regarding the stakes involved: 'disobedience can lead to dismissal or termination for the principal' (69) – but also for the superintendent. Thus, even the LEA heads were monitored.

Since the late 2010s: state institutionalisation of LEAs and superintendents as heads of administration and schools

In 2019 and 2020, a research team led by Foss and Krantz (2022) conducted a series of studies on superintendents' work. Their results showed that the roles and tasks of stable and institutionalised LEA heads as well as their communications with the political sphere have been institutionalised. Since 2019, the Swedish Education Act has expected each of the 290 municipalities – even the smallest among them – to have an official LEA head who is accountable for the municipality abiding by national laws and regulations. Although this formal position had already existed in most municipalities at the time, the new regulation institutionalised the role of LEA heads as well as the direct line of authority from state to local administration, bypassing municipal political decision-makers. Moreover, in 2022, the Swedish National Agency of Education began opening regional offices across the country, bringing itself institutionally closer to the LEAs.

The LEA heads expressed that 'their responsibility and function have not changed after the 2019 regulation' because ensuring operational alignment with existing laws and guidelines had already been an important part of their work prior to the new regulation (Krantz 2022, 50). However, at the same time, some expressed that their 'role vis-à-vis the municipal political level has been strengthened'. Furthermore, 'the heads who most explicitly experience that his or her scope of action is restricted by the municipal political level, believe that the superintendents' responsibility should be clarified as 'being the extended arm of the state' even more. The superintendents expressed how they work to build alliances with the chair of their politically elected school board. However, there are also examples of LEA heads maintaining a kind of steering position where they "channel politicians' interests' and ability to take responsibility' (62). There are also examples of superintendents who mobilise other forces (e.g. parents) to acquire support on issues where they feel that politicians do not understand or must take responsibility. For such negotiation work, they asserted that state governance maintaining a results-oriented focus is highly important.

According to Roos, Johansson and Svedberg (2022) – the last study in this review of studies on Swedish superintendents dating back to the 1990s – LEA heads have become deeply embedded in overall municipality administrations and have established extensive communication with school boards. With such a stable administrative role, it seems that LEA heads' education leadership responsibilities can now grow. Today, principals appear to be more tightly coupled with their superintendents. Relatedly, an interesting term has arisen to describe the two-folded role of Swedish superintendents: 'Head of administration as well as head of school' (*förvaltningschef tillika skolchef*) (692). Of course, this role has also resulted in new tensions. Heads of education administrations/heads of schools must now strike a balance between national and municipal missions. Thus,

they are faced with ‘having to choose between which interests should be prioritized’ (692). Some reported that this dynamic has resulted in closer relationships with schools but more distant relationships with municipal administrations. Superintendents described how the ‘head of administration assignment’ has been toned down in favour of the ‘head of school assignment’ (693). This, according to the authors, has affected superintendents’ priorities and strengthened education in relation to other municipal sectors. Here, the empirical studies stop, some tensions have been solved and new concerns have emerged. History continues.

Discussion

This article detailed the establishment, stabilisation and institutionalisation of Swedish school administrations and superintendentships following the radical de-centralisation reforms and the subsequent wave of re-centralisation (Nordholm, Wermke, and Jarl 2023). It drew on a theory of political planning that emphasises the complementary roles of the political and administrative spheres, suggesting that both spheres have developed communication rules to facilitate co-existence throughout their shared history (Luhmann 1983). Empirical studies on LEA heads at various points since 1990 illustrate this bargaining process.

The results show that the initiative for negotiation lies with the administration. Following de-centralisation in the 1990s, superintendents were faced with a wave of oncoming responsibilities and, in turn, both role conflicts and an increased workload. They were responsible for training their new superiors – politicians on school boards – on what they can expect from superintendents as well as what superintendents expect from them. This relationship-building process persisted throughout the 1990s and the early 2000s. Even today, superintendents assert that an important dimension of their work is bargaining with and ‘training’ the political sphere. Notably, this pattern aligns with our theoretical claims. Superintendents need political backup and, in exchange, provide the political sphere with subject knowledge, legal frameworks and efficiency standards. However, the work required for this endeavour restricts their ability to be educational leaders. Principals can operate with a high degree of autonomy so long as they abide by legal frameworks and meet educational standards. Superintendents only intervene in schools in particularly problematic cases. Hopmann and Künzli (1995) would call this the ‘negative coordination’ principle.

Of course, this configuration changed over time. In the late 2000s, the ‘return of the state’ (Rönneberg 2012) strengthened superintendents relative to municipal school boards, coupling them more tightly with state authorities. At present, 30 years on from de-centralisation, superintendents have come to constitute a role that combines administrative tasks (heads of administration) with educational leadership (heads of schools). Evidently, becoming genuine educational leaders has apparently required a working administration and a stable role for superintendents. We argue that the initial re-centralisation reforms made this shift possible by conditioning the relationship between the local political and administrative spheres. They made it so the state determines decision-making premises for both the political and administrative spheres by emphasising what is important (Rönneberg 2012). First, there is the school’s budget. Then, results become the most important means of communication. Later, the state

even provides templates for school-development and school-inspection processes (Novak 2018).

Our analysis also revealed that re-centralisation is correlated with strengthening the position of LEA heads relative to the political sphere of municipalities via the state increasingly integrating LEA heads into its administration. Through regional National Authority of Education offices, the state has also moved closer to the municipal sphere. The arguments presented by local administrations towards politicians have become stronger, but – as demonstrated by the last period of our investigation – this strengthening has come at a cost for superintendents. They may have experienced a loss of autonomy due to increased state monitoring through frequent national curriculum testing, detailed inspections and municipality rankings. A strong focus on desired and undesired results gives the political sphere justification for hiring and firing decisions. Consequently, Swedish superintendents today may find themselves forced to meet with politicians several times a week to explain why their schools are not performing as desired.

In conclusion, our historical journey has shown that the storm for superintendents in Sweden caused by large-scale reforms was not at all calm. In contrast to Swedish principals (Nordholm, Wermke, and Jarl 2023), superintendents were tremendously affected by the waves of de-centralisation and re-centralisation. Moreover, it has showcased the temporal dimension of such large-scale reforms (Archer 1988). It took time for newly established structures to operationalise de-centralised decision-making, and this process still entailed significant professional and, eventually, individual challenges. Much insecurity must be faced by politicians and public administrations in municipalities. Thus, we argue, it is not particularly surprising that the Swedish system ended up in both a result crisis and a legitimacy crisis following its extensive de-centralisation reforms. Both politicians and administrators needed to start from scratch (Stenlås 2011), meaning that many failures were likely unavoidable. The fact that the system did not collapse even further can likely be attributed to the autonomy of school principals, who acted within the eye of the reform storm to maintain the system's functionality. However, the system regained stability through re-centralisation reforms (Wermke and Forsberg 2017), which bound superintendents to the state and created distance between them and municipal politicians. Re-centralisation in this configuration actually means establishing new decision-making premises that condition local institutions in a particular manner. The political sphere within municipalities has been weakened, whereas the administration sphere has been strengthened through the integration of LEAs into the state's line of authority and the re-introduction of legal and efficiency rationales. In conclusion, the Swedish educational landscape has come full circle.

Furthermore, this study constitutes a valuable contribution to international research on LEAs through its depiction of how the dynamics of school administration and administrative leadership have developed and evolved within the Swedish educational landscape. Based on what we know about how successful LEAs translate, contribute to the development and implementation of national and local policy, and support school principals (Anderson 2013; Leithwood, Sun, and McCullough 2019; Rorrer, Skrla, and Scheurich 2008), it is clearly important to consider whether Swedish LEA heads have been given the autonomy requested from the state and the local political basis from which to lead and operate as successful school administrators. One limitation of this

study is that it does not use the original datasets from previous studies. At the same time, our choice to analyse reported results may be viewed as a benefit, as previous studies' knowledge of superintendents' era-specific contexts and conditions may have bolstered our understanding of critical topics in the study of Swedish superintendentship over time.

Notes

1. In this article, we use superintendent and head of school administration or, solely, head as synonyms.
2. The work mainly presented and paraphrased here is a collection of his early work with the title: "Politische Planung. Aufsätze zur Soziologie von Politik und Verwaltung." [Political Planning. Essays on the Sociology of politics and administration], collecting 11 essays of Luhmann, from between 1964–1970. We work with the 4th edition of the collection from 1983. The character of this book, being a collected works volume, results in redundant arguments in the texts. That is why, we will in our description of the theory, not refer to page numbers. In this section, we focus first of all on the chapter 5, "Politische Planung" [Political Planning], and chapter 9, "Opportunismus und Programmatik in der öffentlichen Verwaltung" [Opportunism and programmatic in public administration].

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