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The superintendent as a pedagogical leader - boundary spanning facilitating instructional leadership

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The local school authority has a fundamental role in students’ learning outcomes. According to the Swedish Education Act, the superintendent shall assist the local school board in this responsibility. However, the perspective of the superintendent as a pedagogical professional leader is often overlooked in the public debate. In policy discussion regarding the improvement of students’ learning outcomes, teachers and principals are instead in focus. Thus, it seems that in the Swedish educational context there are no explicit political expectations on superintendents as pedagogical leaders. Nor is there extensive research on the relationship between the local political school board’s expectations and the superintendent as a pedagogical leader.

Based on a critically interpretive approach within curriculum theory, this study focuses its research interest on the superintendent as a pedagogical leader (Uljens & Ylimäki, 2015). Crucial to the educational work and good governance of schools (Hardy and Salo, 2018), the superintendent’s position can be contextualised as a mediator between the local school board and the principals. The superintendent is placed in the borderland between political and professional demands. As a mediator, a main function for the superintendent is both filtering and buffering (Paulsen, 2014; Paulsen et al., 2014). In a loosely coupled system (Weick, 1976), the superintendent is expected to mediate expectations from different parts of the steering chain (Paulsen et al., 2014). As a driver of change, the superintendent interprets and transforms diverse and ever-changing policy contexts, in varying local environments and across multiple professional fields (Hardy & Salo, 2018). Different organisational structures provide the school system with a framework. Within these, certain educational activities are possible, while others are not. The steering of the school system can be illustrated as a steering chain, with different levels and arenas (Johansson, Nihlfors & Jervik Steen, 2014; Lindensjö & Lundgren, 2000). In this system, the position of the superintendent can be regarded as an important link in an extensive network of different specialised stakeholders (Nihlfors & Johansson, 2013).
superintendent is in the front line of the political system and their working conditions can thus be looked upon as politically created (Lundgren, 1986; Moos & Paulsen, 2014).

Instructional leadership plays a key role in school improvement, since it is directed by leadership to the improvement of teaching and learning (Coldren & Spillane, 2007; Hallinger, 2005; Seashore Louis & Robinson, 2012). With tight coupling and boundary spanning practices, instructional leadership can create a learning environment required for the kind of organisational changes that raise student achievement (Millward & Timperley, 2010). Superintendents can be perceived as having autonomy and discretion to realise the local schools’ interests and needs. As a pedagogical leader, the superintendent is exercising an indirect instructional leadership. By making people and organisations work together to manage and tackle common issues, the superintendent is undertaking boundary-spanning activities and can work effectively in raising students learning outcomes (Coldren & Spillane, 2007; Williams, 2011).

The superintendent and the local school board must collaborate to improve schools and student academic performance (Fusarelli, 2006). The aim of this study is therefore to study Swedish local school boards’ expectations on their superintendents as pedagogical leaders, and to understand and explain the consequences of these expectations. The research questions are as follows:

- What expectations do the chairmen of the local school boards have on their superintendents?

- What will be the consequences of these expectations for the superintendent as pedagogical leader?

Data has been collected through a digital survey, where chairmen of local school boards in all 290 Swedish municipalities were asked about their expectations on the superintendent. The response rate was 61 percent. The survey was divided into four parts with a total of 76 questions and the data was analysed in SPSS. In an open question, the chairmen were requested to enter the superintendent’s most important tasks. The answers were categorised and analysed.

The chairmen have great confidence in their superintendents and the superintendents have great opportunities to influence the political decisions. More than 98 percent of the chairmen stated that they got their primary information about the school activities from the superintendent.
According to the chairmen, the principals have the greatest responsibility for the students’ learning outcomes. The second greatest responsibility have the teachers, and then the board and the superintendent. The legal educational leadership assignment, for example leading the administration and leading the principals, was the superintendent’s most expected priority. The second was keeping budget and financial issues and the third was to prioritise the students’ learning outcomes. The study also showed that poor student results were ranked by the chairmen as least risky for the superintendent to get criticism for. Meanwhile, there is a higher risk to be criticised for unclear leadership, exceeding allocated budget or disloyalty.

The result indicates that the superintendent has a boundary spanning role, as a reticulist, entrepreneur, interpreter/communicator and organiser (Williams, 2011). As reticulist, the superintendent has considerable power through information advantage and opportunities to influence the political agenda. Almost all chairmen stated that they got their main information from the superintendent, which is supported by Johansson and Nilfors (2014). The results indicate further both agency and discretion, which leads to entrepreneurial opportunities. The great trust and high expectations on the superintendent, at the hub, emphasise the role as interpreter and communicator, as well as organiser.

As boundary spanners, with their access to and control over the distribution of information, the superintendents occupy a unique position in their organisations (Bradshaw, 1999). They can choose among activities and their formal position and status, enables them to control the allocation of resources and policy decision-making within their own organisations (Williams, 2013). For superintendents to become more involved as pedagogical leaders, they first and foremost need to see themselves as professional instructional leaders in addition to their usual managerial responsibilities (Huber, 2011). They need to make use of their boundary spanning role, aiming at improving students learning outcomes. But the possibilities of boundary spanning actions are not immediately obvious and the superintendents must initiate and develop them further.

References


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