



# Identity Construction Among School Superintendents in Sweden: A Study of Educational Leadership<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

*The study explores how Swedish school superintendents form their professional identities while navigating the dual demands of managerial and educational leadership. In a context of weak role formalization, identity formation emerges as central to understanding tensions between professional identity and role performance. Drawing on theories of identity and professions, the study uses thematic analysis of 28 in-depth interviews. The findings reveal tensions between external categorization and internal experience, shaped by policy pressures and resulting in resistance, adaptation, and hybridity. The analysis identifies divergent identity trajectories: some superintendents prioritize managerial efficiency, while others emphasize professional legitimacy. The study highlights the interplay between governance, professional discourse, and individual agency in identity construction.*

## KEYWORDS

*governance / identity construction / leadership / professionalism / superintendents*

## Managing and leading in a field of tension

In Sweden, superintendents' work is characterized by their leadership and management in a field of tension, since they are subject to political, professional, state, and municipal demands (Svedberg 2014). The inherent complexity of their position is evident in that the responsibilities incumbent upon superintendents are influenced by evolving national policy (Jarl et al. 2024) and the fact that the economic imperatives and strategic aims of school proprietors vary significantly (Skolverket 2018). The superintendent's role in Sweden is also weakly formalized at the national level (SFS 2010: 800), leaving role expectations vague and non-standardized. In this context, identity formation—understood as the interpretation and potential renegotiation of loosely defined expectations—is key to understanding tensions between professional identity and role performance. Research (Nihlfors 2003; Nihlfors et al. 2016) shows that national policy offers limited guidance, creating a gap between what superintendents aspire to do and what they are required to prioritize. Municipalities often expect them to oversee and develop the local school system, advise local policymakers, interpret national policy for educational actors, and ensure legal compliance (Krantz 2022; Krantz & Foss 2022). In case of serious deficiencies, they may act as whistle-blowers. These diverse tasks reflect a complex of the role, balancing administrative control, developmental support—further shaped by how local governance influences superintendents' identity and practice (Foss et al. 2022).

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This study examines how superintendents, in executing their duties, must negotiate a position that maintains an equilibrium between interests. I examine how this intricate balance engenders distinct opportunities and challenges across the governance, leadership, and organizational domains in educational institutions. The aim is to examine how superintendents navigate the multifaceted demands arising from the inherent tensions between dual-level political governance, encompassing both state and municipal levels, and the concurrent influence of professional governance. Additionally, I elucidate how the identification of outcomes is linked to the superintendent's professional identity.

To this aim, I pose the following research questions:

- (i) What external influences and contextual factors contribute to forming and evolving a superintendent's professional identity?
- (ii) How do these factors impact a superintendent's approach to managing demands and tensions between state, municipal, and professional governance?

The study begins by exploring the superintendent's intermediary role, followed by a discussion of how identity formation takes shape through a dynamic interplay between self-identification and external categorization. The methodology and thematic analysis of superintendent narratives are then outlined. Identity construction is explored within both political and professional governance contexts, leading to a discussion of the research questions and key findings.

## The intermediary position for superintendents

A common assumption is that politicians define the goals of education, while educational professionals determine the processes to achieve them. In practice, however, this division is often blurred. Politicians and officials may influence both the *What?* and *How?* of education, depending on how they choose to engage (Skott 2014). The 'rules of the game', between professional and political governance, are shaped by perceptions of how measurable the goals are, and how much knowledge exists about the processes required to achieve them (Ouchi 1979).

In response to declining academic performance and persistent inequities, Sweden has seen a series of political initiatives aimed at reversing these trends. In 2019, the legal requirement was re-instated for school superintendents to assist school organizers in ensuring compliance with national laws at the local level (SFS 2010: 800). The re-regulation was driven by longstanding concerns over unclear responsibilities between state and local authorities and weak adherence of school organizers to national educational goals (OECD 2015; SOU 2017: 35; prop. 2017/18: 182). The recent reform has facilitated the standardization of terminology in the titlature of municipal school directors (superintendents) throughout Sweden. However, the superintendent does not represent a new hierarchical level, as the school provider remains ultimately responsible for education. Although positioned above principals, the superintendent's role is vaguely defined in regulations and varies across municipalities – sometimes involving reporting to or acting as a chief administrative officer, with or without an intermediate level between superintendent and principal (e.g., Nihlfors et al. 2013).

Alongside re-centralization, politicians and professionals increasingly advocate for governance based on trust in professional expertise (Bringselius 2018; Rothstein 2018). Evidence also suggests a growing meritocratic orientation among officials (Johansson et al. 2018), and critiques of New Public Management (NPM) emphasize the importance of trust in leadership (Øllgaard Bentzen et al. 2023). In the Nordic contexts, research has shown how superintendents are influenced by NPM, ‘soft’ governance, social technologies, and discourses favoring immediate success over gradual change (Holmgren et al. 2013; Moos et al. 2016; Paulsen et al. 2014).

The relationship between the state and municipalities involves both legal and contextual dimensions (Skott 2014; Svedberg 2014). Legally, superintendents are responsible for assisting the school organizer in monitoring and ensuring compliance with national laws and guidelines. Contextually, variations among Sweden’s 290 municipalities—political, economic, demographic, and organizational—affect their autonomy and capacity to lead educational development (Skolverket 2018; SOU 2020: 8). Balancing municipal budgets with the Education Act’s mandate for equitable education present a complex challenge shaped by numerous contextual factors (Paulsen et al. 2014).

While some studies (Johansson et al. 2016) show that superintendents hold considerable autonomy and responsibility in implementation, they receive limited guidance in defining their role at the intersection of state and municipal governance, or in balancing political and professional duties (Nihlfors 2003).

## Framing a professional identity

This study draws on theories of identity formation (Jenkins 2014) and the professional domain (Evetts et al. 2006; Freidson 2001; Noordegraaf 2015). Jenkins (2014) argues that a social identity involves a dialectic interplay between nominal and virtual identities. A *nominal identity* refers to how individuals are categorized by others based on external factors, while a *virtual identity* refers to the internal, subjective experience of being a member of the externally categorized group. Jenkins (2014, p. 111) notes that ‘[t]he nominal is how the group or category is defined in discourse, the virtual how its members behave or are treated’. Jenkins further argues that nominal identity and virtual identity are chronically implicated in each other, although there is no necessary agreement between them. In the present study, the nominal dimension invokes how superintendents adapt or resist the interpretations and definitions of their role as outlined in policy and discourse, while the virtual dimension addresses how superintendents experience their professional ‘membership’, that is, how they are treated within their professional practice and their service in the capacity of a superintendent.

The study focuses on identification in practice, conceptualized as the embodiment of professional identity (Gherardi 2006, 2015), and draws on Evetts et al. (2006) to highlight how organizational demands interact with individual opportunities for identity formation. The premise is that, although superintendents may conform to external expectations, they are also capable of resisting categorizations through dis-identification and other resistant practices (Tomas 2009). Superintendents are, in a sense, situated within a dynamic tension delineated by professional and managerial discourses or, as Evetts et al. (2006) describe it, between occupational professionalism and organizational professionalism. As Noordegraaf (2015) argues, managing this tension may become a

routine or ‘natural’ aspect of professional work (Noordegraaf 2015). Their identity can therefore be considered as ‘hybrid’, as organizing professionalism implies a partial dissolution of the dichotomy between managerialism and professionalism, albeit without resolving the tension.

### Superintendent identification

The discrepancy between what superintendents want to do and what they are forced to spend most of their time on reveals identity and role conflicts (Nihlfors et al. 2013). Due to conflicting and difficult-to-reconcile expectations (Bredeson & Johansson 1997), the role has been described as ‘hybrid’ (Kowalski & Björk 2005). Superintendents may see themselves as guardians, assistants to political committees, or connectors between stakeholders (Roos et al. 2022). They vary in their commitment to pedagogical responsibilities versus managerial skills, with their agency also grounded in ethical considerations (Hardy & Salo 2022; Johansson & Nihlfors 2014). The breadth of experience and professional perspectives among superintendents informs their understanding of and reactions to policy reforms (Hardy & Salo 2017). Jarl et al. (2024) argue that over the past decade, the superintendent’s role has become institutionalized and increasingly connected to the state administration due to re-centralization. In much of the research (Bredson et al. 2009, 2011; Johansson et al. 2016; Hardy & Salo 2022; Moos et al. 2016) on how superintendents express their professional identity and define their roles, two ideal types of identities emerge: superintendents may perceive themselves as administrators overseeing the educational system (as managers of the education system), or they view themselves as *primus inter pares* among other educational leaders.

When taking on a managerial role, the superintendents gain higher status but become more distanced from the everyday professional practice of teaching (Kowalski & Björk 2005). They are responsible for maintaining system functionality—including financial, personnel, and psychological support—thus contributing to organizational stability and efficiency (Johansson & Nihlfors 2014). This aligns their identity with organizational professionalism, emphasizing effective management and a discourse of control (Evetts et al. 2006). They also respond to external expectations, positioning themselves as drivers of top-down professionalization (Hardy & Salo 2017). In the other ideal type, superintendents see themselves as one of several educational leaders, aspiring to be more directly involved in schools’ daily operations alongside principals and teachers (Kowalski & Björk 2005). Murphy and Hallinger (1986) attribute this to a personal interest in teaching and learning. Studies in the Swedish context show that superintendents imagine their role as facilitators of professional learning among principals (Nihlfors et al. 2013), engaging in quality discussions and adopting boundary-spanning roles (Håkansson & Adolfsson 2022; Roos et al. 2022; Ståhlkrantz & Rapp 2020). These roles relate to Evetts’ et al. (2006) concept of occupational professionalism, which emphasizes practitioners’ autonomy, discretionary judgment, and active engagement in operationalizing controls. From a Scandinavian perspective on educational leadership, democratic leadership is emphasized (Haake et al., 2023). In this context, superintendents advocate for a professional rationale in which meaningful management and quality precede bureaucratic and market-oriented approaches (e.g., Freidson 2001). Studies show how their work is influenced by communicative processes involving other superintendents,

principals, teachers, and other school stakeholders (Bredeson et al. 2009, 2011; Geiger 2009; Kowalski 2005). This interaction fosters, according to Hall et al. (2023), the development of effective solutions for complex problems.

## Methodological issues

### Implications of the sample

The study includes 28 superintendents who participated in individual semi-structured interviews, all recorded and transcribed verbatim. The sample was designed for broad variation within the study's defined scope, considering gender balance, municipal employment, and responsibility for compulsory education. Participants represented municipalities of varying sizes and types—metropolitan, urban, and rural—across southern, central, and northern Sweden. The municipalities also showed differing academic performance trends, including improving, stable, and declining results. Participants' experience varied, with a median tenure of five years. Since no national data exist on superintendent tenure, representativeness in terms of professional background cannot be determined. Superintendents from independent school providers and those without responsibility for compulsory education were excluded, limiting generalizability.

Managers tend to be drawn from the same professional group they were previously part of (Freidson 1994). All respondents had held various positions in education—such as teacher, principal, or middle manager—before becoming superintendents. These career paths can shape their professional identity and loyalty. Although there are no formal education requirements for superintendents in Sweden, the National Agency for Education and other stakeholders offer training programs, which only a few respondents had attended. Middle managers positioned between superintendents and principals were present in 17 of the 28 municipalities, particularly in larger ones. However, the data show no clear pattern indicating that superintendents in larger municipalities prioritize managerial tasks more than those in smaller municipalities, or vice versa.

### Thematic analysis

This study uses thematic analysis to explore how superintendents shape their professional identities and manage related demands and tensions. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis, the study tries to balance attention to each participant's unique experience with identifying shared themes across all 28 superintendents. To enhance transparency, each block quotation is followed by a number identifying the specific participant.

The study began by asking superintendents to reflect on their professional lives, a common approach in professional practice research (Gherardi 2006, 2015) often called 'Professional Work Life Narratives'. This narrative, drawn from interviews, focuses on what is meaningful in each individual's 'story'. As Gherardi (2006) notes, narratives create a dialogue about practice that shapes professional identity. Identity formation is tied to both actions and inactions within these practices. Thus, a superintendent's



identity is shaped through interaction (or lack thereof) with the practices defining their role, including relationships with politicians, principals, middle managers, and other stakeholders.

To showcase how the themes in the construction of superintendent identities emerge, I focus on the interplay of regulations, governance, and professional experience. The analysis begins with their role in interpreting national laws and navigating between political leadership and civil service. This involves managing relationships with politicians, middle managers, and principals. Through this lens, I see how superintendents construct their identities as both enforcers of legal frameworks and intermediaries between political forces and school operations. The analysis highlights how leadership experience, more than formal education, shapes legitimacy and identity. Superintendents' identities are shaped—above all—by their ability to mediate, communicate, and adapt to local contexts, in the interplay between *knowledge*, *experience*, and *legitimacy*. Superintendents see themselves as active contributors to organizational development and change processes. Two aspects emerge from the narratives: *being an overseer* and *being a developer*. These aspects embody the balancing act between managing existing systems and pushing for strategic change.

As the analysis progresses, it reveals that superintendents' identity formation is closely tied to experiences of *professional security and insecurity*. Security is associated with well-defined structures, trusted relationships, and clear role definitions, while insecurity arises from political instability, shifting responsibilities, and fear of overstepping boundaries. Further analysis shows that superintendents continually negotiate their professional identities amid uncertainty—whether navigating national standards, political shifts, or external criticism. They must continuously adapt their roles, balancing formal and informal responsibilities with flexibility and critical awareness. Their professional identity is fluid—shaped by competing demands, shifting between being an overseer and being a developer, and influenced by both their own and others' notions of professional autonomy.

Presented below are examples of how the statements of the various superintendents were initially analyzed, focusing on the significance attributed to their personal experiences and knowledge, as well as themes of security, uncertainty, and the management of challenges.

The final set of key themes that emerge in the construction of superintendent identities—within the tension between national, municipal, and professional demands—reflect both a nominal and a virtual identity. One theme shows how, in response to national education policy, a dissociative positioning arises. Here, *the superintendent is cast as a critic and antagonist to state-driven reform agendas*. This positioning emerges from the perceived gap between national policy objectives and the lived experiences of local school governance. In superintendents' relation to the professional domain, key themes such as *being a gatekeeper* and *exercising communicative and relational leadership* or *functional and systems-oriented leadership* come to the forefront. These themes reveal how the superintendent's role is defined not only by administrative responsibilities but also by their ability to communicate, lead, and manage across different spheres of influence within the education system. When focusing on legal compliance, a theme emerges in which the superintendent tends to strongly align with the role of ensuring adherence to national legislation, seeing themselves as guarantors of legal integrity rather than advocates for municipal

**Table 1** Analyzing superintendents' narratives

Professional knowledge	Professional security	Professional insecurity	Manage challenges
I must stay current with education law. Understanding of how economics, governance, and power work (20)	I'm good at drawing the line between 'what' questions and 'how' questions. I make it clear by stating, 'This is not your area,' to the politicians (26)	It's hard to know whether we are truly ensuring compliance with the Education Act in a context driven by efficiency measures (27)	I'm one of the critics of state governance, but I try to help create a calm work environment for teachers (2)
I must understand politics and the roles of public servants (12)	I have a good relationship with the politicians, which creates a sense of security for both me and the politicians (9)	Before each election, I become uncertain because you never know what kind of politics will emerge (7)	Swedish education policy, for the most part, has not aligned with my core ideals of a school focused on true <i>bildung</i> and personal growth (21)
I need practical experience in leadership related to the school context to be credible (3)	I have the trust of the politicians, as well as the trust of principals, and teachers, as things stand now (28)	We are relying on targeted government grants to fund the economy, which is a major source of uncertainty (13)	I think all measurement, in general, is problematic because of how it affects our view of knowledge (10)
My philosophy is to lead through conversation (4)	For me, it is crucial to work collaboratively with principals. I believe that together, we are stronger than when working alone (5)	I don't want the politicians to accuse me of technocratic control if I assert myself (19)	The concept of trust-based governance does not resonate well here politically (25)
We have a new board chair, so I need to support and train her (1)	For me, it is incredibly important to have an organization that provides support (15)	I sense a degree of uncertainty in my relationship with the middle managers. I cannot bypass them to go directly to the principals (27)	It can be challenging to stay focused on essential priorities—resisting shifts driven by national initiatives (16)
I must listen to employees on the ground, understand their work (6)	We actually have a national regulatory framework to follow, and I see it as a reassurance that we have these laws and regulations (6)	We have an organization where it's unclear who is responsible for what and who does what (11)	It's easy to become disconnected from what's happening in the school system. Staying up to date is truly a challenge (11)
I need to understand the operations, as this plays a crucial role in relation to politics—being the expert (18)	I have a strong understanding of the operations on the ground (12)	I would like to see the state ensure that superintendents are given a clear mandate and legal authority (25)	I have a bit of a need for control, so my challenge will be to step back (17)
I have to be willing to take risks, stay calm under pressure, and at the same time, remain humble (8)	I emphasize the importance of establishing clear structures, systems, and methodological approaches, alongside ensuring predictability (23)	When the Schools Inspectorate floods us with criticism it creates uncertainty, we start putting up facades and backdrops (21)	Getting everyone, especially the principals, to feel involved and become advocates for 'This is important' is a major challenge (9)
I must have the courage to challenge and ask tough questions (24)			





political agendas. This creates a nuanced identity, where *the superintendent identifies more as a representative of the state than as a municipal civil servant*. A sub-theme that emerges from this dynamic is the distinction between *operating within a municipality led primarily by political versus administrative governance*. This distinction shapes how superintendents perceive their authority and responsibilities, influencing their professional identity and the extent to which they experience professional agency.

**Table 2** Identified key themes

Key themes	Function	Representative subthemes
Critic of national policy	Values-based opposition	Criticism of governance, measurement, and policy misalignment
State official identity	Regulatory compliance & legitimacy	Trust in laws, audits, need for state mandates (local political vs. administrative governance)
Municipal governance role	Responsive to local politics & administration	Political uncertainty, unclear mandates
Gatekeeper & enabler	Filters political pressure, protects professionalism	Trust from principals, clear boundaries
Communicative & relational	Leads though dialogue, builds trust	Conversation, listening, support
Functional/system-oriented	Ensures clarity, control, and order	Structures, expertise, need for control

When the superintendents describe their practices, strategies, roles, and the evolution of their work, it becomes clear that the identity construction also occurs through processes of dis-identification—that is, when they actively distance themselves from or reject certain aspects of political governance (Tomas 2009). The underlying mechanisms of such dis-identification are conceptualized as emerging from the interplay between nominal and virtual identities (Jenkins 2014).

To summarize: the key themes in the identity construction of superintendents, situated in the tension between national and municipal demands, include (i) the superintendent as a critic and antagonist of national educational policy; (ii) the superintendent (more) as a state official (than as a municipal civil servant); and (iii) the superintendent operating in a municipality who is primarily subject to political *or* administrative governance. The main themes in the identity construction of superintendents, situated in relation to the professional level, are: (iv) superintendents who assume a gatekeeper and enabler role; (v) superintendents who adopt a communicative and relational approach; and (vi) superintendents who take a functional and system-oriented perspective in their governance and leadership. The following analysis examines how these key themes are constituted, with attention to both variations and similarity.



## **The superintendents' identity constructions in the duality of political governance and professional governance**

### **The superintendent as a critic of national policy and state governance**

The superintendent's role as a critic and antagonist of national education policy is articulated in the framework of professional discourse where they identify with the rationale inherent to being one among several educational leaders. Their critique is directed toward how the consequences of the national education policy have resulted in superintendents, principals, and teachers contending with increased organizational bureaucratization and a pronounced emphasis on control. The superintendents articulated the challenges in aligning themselves with the role of controllers guided by NPM logic.

I can't believe we've worked with New Public Management this long, it leads to control. "How do you know? Why? What are you going to do about it?" It becomes how we must work [against the principals]. (16)

A governance structure that promotes control, evaluation, documentation, and quantifiable performance is scrutinized not solely for its portrayal of the superintendent as a figure of control but also for its failure to yield any discernible positive impact on knowledge advancement in the Swedish educational framework, notwithstanding its political aspirations. Some of the superintendents argue that the national education policy has incorrectly influenced the perception of knowledge. Increased emphasis on an outcome-based curriculum has, in turn, contributed to an outcome-based management system which has restricted and narrowed the way knowledge and educational goals are viewed. This critique also encompasses, for some superintendents, an 'empathetic' view of students and acknowledgment of their adverse experiences.

The New Public Management idea of being able to systematize soft values is an extreme threat. For me, there are clear correlations between this idea and stress and mental illness among students who are constantly being tested, measured, and evaluated. It is genuinely uncomfortable. (25)

When the majority of superintendents, in various ways, criticize the constant testing and measuring in schools, they question how a specific power and control practice negatively affects them, too. In this scenario, superintendents might understandably experience discomfort when they exert control and managerial authority over principals and teachers. National policy is also criticized for being counterproductive and contextually unaware of the resource challenges that superintendents, schools, and professionals face in creating favorable conditions for learning and knowledge development.

We have too much focus on the easily measurable aspects such as grades and merit points. We need to keep track of them, but we also need to put them in perspective and contextualize them. We also need to look at what creates the conditions for students to succeed in achieving knowledge. (11)



Superintendents seek to integrate conditions, processes, and outcomes into a coherent narrative that reflects and explains the outcomes of activities. By highlighting the insufficient resources policymakers provide to schools, the superintendent is not held accountable when educational outcomes decline. This is a perspective particularly emphasized by those who also describe the financial situation as strained.

One superintendent's reference to 'constantly new reforms and goal formulations for the school' is interpreted as a manifestation of 'political opportunism' intended to expose symbolic actions by the state.

The politicians have an overconfidence in the goals they set, and there are often too many goals. In the case of schools, the goals do not really matter that much, and it's a bit terrible to have to say it, but now I'm saying it to you here. The goals don't matter that much. (15)

This reaction reveals disobedience toward the multitude of goals that the state sets for the school system. Criticism of the national education policy includes opposition to state governance, which is characterized as 'experimental and meddlesome'. According to many of the superintendents, this approach hinders long-term planning, prioritizations based on local needs and conditions, and the adoption of a holistic perspective.

That local school authorities and the superintendent are subject to constraints imposed by what one respondent describes as 'the state's hidden normative governance' has a performative impact on how educational activities are designed and executed. From this perspective, state governance is based on a lack of trust in the municipality's capacity to govern and lead educational activities.

Now, we have over 70 targeted state funding programs in the Swedish education sector, which means that the trust in the school authorities' ability and conditions to prioritize based on state goal-setting is undermined. (13)

While political pressures demand that state funds be allocated for specific purposes, some superintendents staunchly oppose such demands, since they are opposed to merely 'following the money'. The state's approach to economic governance of targeted interventions is perceived as lacking precision, often engendering short-termism, ambiguity, and bureaucratic complexities. It is contended that: 'Local municipalities are best positioned to discern their unique needs and priorities, thus necessitating a substantial degree of autonomy in the allocation and utilization of funds'. Criticism of intense state control, inspection, and accountability protocols includes the (prevalent) notion that these actions engender 'learned helplessness'. This is evidenced, according to some of the superintendents, by an increase in passive and reactive behavioral patterns among superintendents, principals, and teachers.

I have heard many superintendents say, "It's really great when the Swedish School Inspectorate visits because then I get help seeing how things are here." And I think to myself, "Yes, but it's *your* responsibility." It is a completely skewed way of thinking. (20)

An adverse consequence of state regulatory oversight and inspection work is the inclination among superintendents and other educational professionals to abstain from

initiating significant changes that might disturb the status quo. This response embodies the cautionary principle of ‘not rocking the boat’ (for now) and depicts how superintendents feel compelled to react to external demands and expectations. Criticism is also directed toward the idea that the role of the superintendent, as outlined in policy, is excessively narrow and constrictive.

There’s nothing in the role of the school superintendent [in the Education Act] that allows me to emphasize development issues. The role is more controlling, or it is as if we should at least do things right. (2)

The above describes superintendents as rule-driven controllers who ensure that others ‘do things in the right way’. This characterization is challenged because the superintendent desires to be involved in professional assessment and function as a key actor responsible for the development of the school and for determining ‘the right thing to do’.

### **Navigating between state governance and local politics**

The characterization of the superintendent (more) as a state official (than as a municipal civil servant) is closely tied to their commitment to the principles of state governance in contrast to (and as a critique of) decisions made by municipal politicians. Regarding their responsibility to ensure compliance with regulatory frameworks, several superintendents describe themselves as ‘the state’s extended arm in the municipality’. The effectiveness of the superintendents’ role concerning the municipal political sphere requires a more comprehensive and clearly defined mandate from the state. The superintendents’ identification with the national regulatory framework gives them a sense of security, which, in turn, reinforces their justification for their functions.

When the state governs, the education board cannot simply remove or prioritize tasks that we are required to do. [...] Local politicians are not experts; they are amateur politicians. (12)

In the context of municipal governance, the superintendents in this study embrace a meritocratic worldview, and guide and lead based on scientific principles, personal expertise, and legal mandates. In their role as gatekeepers, their task is not to resist state-driven governance to protect professional autonomy; rather, it is to serve as vigilant sentinels, ensuring that state policies are effectively implemented. According to most of the superintendents, local politics is often characterized by ignorance, financial constraints, and/or a tendency toward micromanagement. Consequently, superintendents must possess a distinct set of skills to:

Resist when local politicians introduce initiatives that do not align with curricula, guidelines, and regulations. As a superintendent, I must be able to oppose such attempts. It is the superintendent’s responsibility to inform the school board of any deficiencies that may arise from the political sphere. (7)



The challenge of dealing with municipal politicians is described by one superintendent as ‘one of the major challenges that superintendents face’. Local political ignorance combined with a desire to micromanage creates unpredictability and instability. Emphasis on ‘focusing on the mission’ aims to establish efficient procedures and clear operational processes in administration and educational organization.

Superintendents envision themselves as guarantors for the implementation of state policy and the improvement of quantifiable knowledge outcomes. Within this identification, some superintendents engage in a discourse where their focus is directed toward merit values, ranking lists (highlighting the relative educational achievements across different municipalities), and the weight given to (open) comparisons. For these superintendents, NPM technologies such as these are not a critical issue; instead, it is something they must accept and adapt to.

### Navigating political and administrative forces on local governance

Regarding the superintendent operating in a municipality who is primarily subject to political or administrative governance, a common perception is that superintendents are responsible for maintaining a delicate balance to avoid overt conflicts between democratic and meritocratic ideologies, requiring them to possess a keen sense of intuition in their role. The superintendent’s position is closely tied to the dynamic between the local political culture and the extent to which they perceive themselves as having autonomy and agency.

Two subthemes emerge in this dynamic: whether the municipality is primarily guided by politicians or civil servants and whether the prevailing attitude toward school issues is characterized by conflict or consensus. A culture of political consensus enhances the agency of superintendents by blurring the lines between the political domain (*what* things are done) and the professional domain (*how* things are done). In a municipality primarily led by civil servants who engage in a depoliticized local culture, superintendents and professionals enjoy greater authority and exert more influence and power over policy through their expertise. In this civil servant-led approach, several superintendents express the need to actively educate politicians to improve their understanding of school system governance. These superintendents identify with the role of an educator, as one superintendent states:

The Education Act now explicitly states that it is my responsibility to effectively educate politicians, ensuring they have the optimal conditions to make informed decisions regarding educational matters. (22)

In contrast, a conflict-driven or overly politicized culture tends to exert more detailed control and unpredictability, leading to a sense of paralysis and a desire to avoid responsibility. In municipalities characterized by a strong political orientation, the level of political engagement and the degree of micromanagement in educational affairs are reported to be notably high. If a superintendent is excessively constrained by political pressures, they can ‘adapt, protest, or resign’, as one of them expresses it. Ultimately, superintendents are subordinate to politics and derive their legitimacy from it. If a superintendent feels ‘vulnerable and targeted’ and has become ‘politically untenable’, the expectation

is that they will be removed from their position. One superintendent describes this scenario as follows:

I don't move at the same pace as our current municipal chief. He has a different perspective on leadership, with a more centralist approach. So, I must negotiate with myself: Am I willing to adapt, or do I believe so strongly in certain issues that I decide "No, it's better if I quit" [...] When things don't work out between the superintendent and the politicians, the relationship falls apart, and the superintendent must leave. That's just how it is in our profession. I also think that when the economy isn't managed well in Sweden's schools, superintendents get fired because someone needs to be blamed. (16)

From this perspective, the superintendent is revealed to be subservient to local political power and is identified as a scapegoat. According to the superintendent, this scenario arises from a misplaced emphasis on personal accountability by political authorities, which creates a psychological sense of insecurity. Additionally, some superintendents assert that government oversight, including their own role, is a fair game for scrutiny at the municipal political level.

I have been appointed by the board according to the legislation, but there is no respect for the superintendent's role; it is treated as a term of abuse. The prevailing perception here is that it is not the state's role to interfere in how we run schools. According to the local political administration, schools are a municipal matter! (25)

The deficit of trust between superintendents and the local political board has bolstered the former's allegiance to state control and their desire for a more robust state-imposed framework to support their managerial functions. Concerns about the influence of elected officials at the local level and the principle of 'municipal self-governance' are thus associated with perceived shortcomings in the municipality's adherence to the state's statutes and regulations. To address the issue of excessive political influence on local governance, the state needs to enhance its bureaucratic role through increased oversight and control, thereby fostering greater predictability, objectivity, and impartiality in implementing laws and regulations. In this context, some superintendents tend to form alliances with their professional peers, thereby assuming the role of a 'co-educational leader'.

### **Gatekeeper and enabler: bridging political and professional spheres**

The superintendent who assumes a gatekeeping and enabler role must acknowledge that the powers and responsibilities of principals and teachers are extensively regulated by school laws and curricula. Therefore, municipal politicians and superintendents are limited in their governance and leadership. When a superintendent advocates for the needs of the school, their arguments are linked to the regulations and descriptions that define the discretion of principals and teachers. The superintendents thus assume a gatekeeping role, determining what can move from the political level to the professional level. One superintendent states that:



Principals are autonomous in their operations. The Education Act governs their activities. Sometimes, we must explain this to the politicians, clarifying what the Education Act entails. We strive to be clear about the Education Act because few of our politicians have a background in education. (27)

From this perspective, superintendents advocate for increased allocation of resources to schools, principals, and students. Their aim is to ensure compliance with legislative mandates and regulatory provisions while also supporting the professional autonomy of principals and teachers. With the backing of fellow principals and teachers, these superintendents emerge as passionate advocates who strive to secure the necessary financial resources that enable schools to meet their statutory obligations. One of the superintendents argues that ‘The most important thing for me is to support the principals in their interactions with politics and finances’.

In the role of gatekeeper and enabler, superintendents try to ensure that professional values are not compromised. However, the superintendent does not always succeed in this role. There are several instances where superintendents report that they have had to adapt and become participants in implementing local decisions at the professional level that contradicted their values. One superintendent provides the following example:

We’re currently sitting and working on drug tests at school [...] The politicians want drug tests in schools, even in primary schools, which goes completely against my fundamental ideals. (21)

Other instances where superintendents perceive a failure in their gatekeeping role involve politicians micromanaging how principals and teachers should perform their systematic quality assurance processes.

Some superintendents may proactively involve principals in meetings with policy-makers. Additionally, fostering closer connections between the professional and political spheres is a strategic approach for these superintendents that instils confidence and trust in politicians regarding the superintendent’s effective oversight of different organizational levels and their respective activities. These superintendents consider themselves key actors in connecting different levels of the governance chain.

## **A communicative and relational leadership approach**

Superintendents who adopt a communicative and relational approach proceed cautiously and avoid actions that might ‘sidestep principals’. This indicates sensitivity and, to some extent, uncertainty about contributing to boundary and role violations that could undermine the responsibilities and authorities of principals and teachers. Simultaneously, superintendents rely on a presence within educational settings to gain a profound understanding of the conditions and prerequisites for the development of principals and teachers. Working as a superintendent ‘from within’, emphasizing ‘alignment’ and ‘involvement’, and being ‘attentive’ is regarded by these superintendents as the optimal approach to responsible leadership and effecting change.

I need to gain more substance and first-hand experience to effectively lead this change process. I need to understand what is happening and unfolding to get to the core of the issues and comprehend the challenges this particular school faces. [...] It doesn't matter what we do at the top; nothing will change unless principals and teachers are involved. (3)

As suggested in the quotation, this superintendent relies less on bureaucratic control and more on democratic and collaborative approaches. Some superintendents view leadership as a shared responsibility and see their role as closely connected to the management of curriculum and instructional matters. They are keen not to lose touch with and control over what is described as 'ground-level operations'. For these superintendents, it is crucial to trust and support those responsible for addressing problems, often the principals themselves. One superintendent argues:

I want to build trust in my leadership because that's when I feel things are also moving forward in the organization. And now that we're starting to build trust in the group, we can share and discuss our challenges. (7)

Establishing relationships and contexts where superintendents, principals, and teachers can deepen their understanding and knowledge is emphasized from the perspective that changes occur gradually and that approaches to change must be long-term. Working as a superintendent to improve the organizational culture is prioritized over the belief that changes in organizational structure alone can solve the problems and challenges that exist at the professional level.

To exercise effective and legitimate governance and leadership, these superintendents express that they must identify problems and opportunities, challenge others, and allow themselves to be challenged. This is described as a 'complex, event-driven, and partly emotion-driven' task. The superintendent must dare to relinquish some control. This also entails a communicative leadership approach characterized by what one of the respondents expresses as 'leading through conversations, asking questions, and not settling for generic responses indicating that everything is working well'. However, there is a degree of uncertainty about whether such governance is perceived as mistrust or trust by principals and teachers. Control can easily be interpreted as mistrust, while freedom might be perceived as trust. From the superintendent's perspective, control can also mean taking responsibility and not 'letting down employees by leaving them to fend for themselves'. Nevertheless, problems can also arise in close relationships if the superintendent is identified as 'a sounding board' or seeks to 'be popular in employee surveys', as one of them puts it.

## **A functional and system-oriented perspective to leadership and governance**

Superintendents who adopt a functional and system-oriented perspective recognize and emphasize several key factors essential for school improvement and for the professional nature of their practice to be properly recognized. One such factor is the establishment and maintenance of evidence-informed dialogues among professionals. This practice





requires superintendents set clear expectations for professionals to actively and systematically generate and apply relevant evidence to advance their professional practice. In the superintendents' narratives, they emphasize the necessity for professionals to engage in systematic quality work if they are to have a meaningful impact on their students' academic achievements and educational equity. For these superintendents, quality improvement work at the professional level also serves as a means of exercising control via access to the school's quality data. These data can be used to critique schools, principals, and teachers and to determine the allocation of necessary resources.

These superintendents emphasize their responsibility to intervene if they see a principal lacks competence or whose work is inconsistent with established standards. For instance, superintendents limit the number of goals set at the professional level and review various monitoring and quality systems to establish (clearer) routines and work processes. One superintendent recounts: 'I stated that each school, each principal, may have a maximum of three goals'. Superintendents also describe situations where they proactively initiate various interventions, including competency development programs or in extreme cases, termination of the principal's appointment.

By emphasizing the importance of structural organization and systematic methodologies, these superintendents encourage a functional and system-oriented governance and management framework to emerge within a clearly hierarchical structure focused primarily on achieving control and operational efficiency. This perspective fosters a heightened sense of accountability, where educational institutions are held to a high standard of responsiveness and answerability to the superintendent. The scope of the superintendents' 'mandate' is meticulously defined and regulated by a distinct 'delegation hierarchy'. As superintendents exercise their authority in the context of 'organizing to lead', there is a pronounced emphasis on enhancing 'organizational structures', as articulated by one superintendent:

I insist on the establishment of clear structures, systems, and methodical approaches, along with the assurance of predictability. I also expect these elements to permeate every facet of [school] operations throughout the entirety of the municipality. (23)

To foster profound transformative change, one superintendent advocates for a shift toward an organizational framework characterized by 'reduced dependence on individuals and a heightened alignment with functional imperatives'. Within such a framework, governance and management procedures are defined by their steadfast adherence to predefined strategies, protocols, and annual cycles that systematically outline the roles and duties of individuals across the organizational hierarchy. A significant portion of the superintendent's efforts is focused on orchestrating strategic planning, with the overarching goal of enhancing interconnectedness and cohesion among the various components of the organizational structure. These superintendents find it crucial that the effectiveness of the interventions being implemented is rapidly assessed.

Some superintendents explain how they receive more immediate feedback on ongoing activities in the operational domain through their middle managers, a level of oversight they argue would be difficult to achieve in a 'flat organizational structure'. As a result, they also describe a sense of detachment from day-to-day school operations. From an alternative perspective, superintendents express concern about the potential for goal displacement in a rigorously implemented functional and system-oriented

governance and leadership model. When decision-making is primarily driven by routines, criteria, and performance metrics, it becomes essential (as claimed by one superintendent) to ‘carefully consider the appropriate quality metrics, as high-quality data collection can be misleading when the operational reality is suboptimal’. Some superintendents may also experience a form of disengagement from the educational content of the school system when their focus is primarily directed toward structural and organizational aspects.

## Addressing the research questions

The findings suggest that superintendents occupy a dual and often conflicting role, positioned between national education policies and local municipal structures – a dynamic that shapes their professional identity as both regulatory agents and pedagogical leaders. A second finding is that superintendents perceived autonomy is influenced by political and legal contexts, including local political culture, national governance structures, and statutory frameworks such as the Education Act. These factors define their role and determine whether they see themselves as defenders of professional values or implementers of external mandates. A third finding is that superintendents professional identity is shaped by a critical stance toward dominant education policy trends—such as NPM and outcome-oriented reforms—distancing them from managerial logics and aligning them with educational and professional ethics. Regarding the study’s second research question, the key findings highlight three main leadership strategies employed to manage governance tensions. First, they engage in gatekeeping to protect professional autonomy, adopt relational leadership to foster trust and collaboration, and use system-oriented approaches to establish structure and operational efficiency. Second, conflicting expectations from state and municipal authorities create role ambiguity and erode trust, undermining the superintendent’s authority and complicating their governance role. Finally, the study shows that many superintendents advocate for stronger state oversight in response to local political instability, believing that clearer state guidance would reinforce their legitimacy and provide a more stable foundation for managing governance responsibilities across education administration levels.

## Discussion

As demonstrated in Nordic studies, superintendents are significantly influenced by national education policy (Moos et al. 2016; Nihlfors et al. 2013; Paulsen et al. 2014). This study highlights how outcome-based management shapes an identity prioritizing bureaucratic enforcement over educational leadership while also revealing resistance and ‘dis-identification’ with such policies (Tomas 2009). The role conflict between bureaucratic and educational responsibilities arises from pressure to act as controllers within NPM, conflicting with their self-view as educational leaders (Jenkins 2014). Unlike more policy-oriented studies (cf. Jarl et al. 2024; Johansson & Nihlfors 2014), this study emphasizes how embodied professional identity is challenged. The study shows—what is considered as state distrust in the municipalities, leading them to view their role as constrained and disconnected from local needs. They resist state control, critiquing it as



short-sighted, bureaucratic, and misaligned with school realities—form a ‘dis-identification’ rarely addressed in earlier research.

Local autonomy, intended to let municipalities allocate resources based on needs, is undermined by state funding and inspections, fostering identities marked by dependency and passivity. Superintendents argue that prioritizing control over leadership stifles educational progress. This convergence of resistant and subordinate identities reflects strategies responding to the perceived de-professionalization of their role (Freidson 2001), or a shift towards organizational professionalism (Evetts 2006). Their antagonism constructs an identity positioning them as educational experts and advocates for professionals and school interests. (e.g., Murphy & Hallinger 1986; Nihlfors et al. 2013). Their resistance to these policies also serves as a broader critique of the impact such governance approaches have on the effectiveness and autonomy of educational leadership at the municipal level. This resistance relates to their virtual identity, encompassing agency, autonomy, and the ability to handle complex professional challenges. Many superintendents’ professional background in the education sector may influence their loyalty and defense of their autonomy and that of other professionals (Freidson 1994), though some have adapted to state accountability demands.

Their identity is also shaped by viewing themselves as state representatives within municipalities (e.g., Johansson et al. 2018). State regulatory frameworks provide security and authority. Tension between state and municipal governance, local politics, and politicians’ limited knowledge of educational issues contributes to the self-view as ‘the state’s extended arm in the municipality’. As gatekeepers, they defend educational integrity against local political interference. Their meritocratic identity emphasizes adherence to scientific principles, expertise, and legal standards, sometimes causing tension with local politicians. To address these tensions, they advocate for a clearly defined and comprehensive state mandate that reinforces their authority and shields against political pressures. The contradiction in their dual identity—as critic of national policy and state official—creates complex identity hybridity rarely explored in Sweden (e.g., Kowalski & Björk 2005). Central tensions lie between advocating local autonomy and complying with state mandates, an area warranting further research amid ongoing recentralization (Jarl et al. 2014). This necessitates a careful balance between adhering to professional norms and navigating political demands, a balance described in this study as a tension between meritocratic identity and political governance, which is also shown to contribute to the construction of a hybrid identity (Noordegraf 2015).

Superintendents’ professional identity also reflects local political governance and administrative authority, shaped by political culture and power balances between politicians and civil servants. Strong superintendent authority correlates with depoliticized consensus, while politicized conflict weakens it. Although generalization is limited by sample size, this raises questions how local political culture influences superintendents’ professional identity. The study points to an underexplored area in research, namely how superintendent’s identity is contingent upon external political dynamics and internal administrative contexts, thus reflecting a complex interplay of personal agency and situational influences (Gherardi 2006). Previous research (Johansson & Nihlfors 2014) suggests that superintendents tend to show greater loyalty to municipal leadership than to principals. However, this study indicates that such patterns are context-dependent and not universally applicable.

The regulatory framework—particularly laws defining the roles of principals and teachers—shapes superintendent's professional identity by limiting their decision-making autonomy. This study highlights the underexplored role of superintendent-principal-teacher relations in this process. The analysis reveals how superintendents, in relation to other professionals, adopt roles or approaches which can be understood as manifesting two ideal-typical identities and a hybridity between them. From this perspective, communicative and relational approaches focus on building trust, collaboration, and responsiveness to the needs of educators, emphasizing flexibility and engagement with educational content, understood as an expression of occupational professionalism (Evetts 2006). In contrast, the functional and system-oriented approach prioritizes control, efficiency, and adherence to structured processes, often at the expense of flexibility and close engagement with educational realities. The differences between these two perspectives highlight central aspects of identity construction and possible contradictions since one approach is more human-centered and adaptive, while the other is more system-centered and rigid, with implications for how superintendents, based on their embodied professional identity (Gherardi 2006), manage governance tensions and their relationships with principals and teachers. The hybridity reflects how superintendents relate to discourses that, on the one hand, emphasize trust in the professionals as a governance principle and, on the other hand, highlight the need for more control and clearer political governance.

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