

# School Inspections and Principals' Leadership: A Swedish Case Study

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This article is about how criticism from the Swedish Schools Inspectorate affects principals' leadership. The result builds on experiences from an on-going case study that started in the beginning of 2011 and that will be finished in 2015. We present two examples where the local school management and principals try to improve the activities on the basis of the Schools Inspectorate's report. The first example consists of a so called research circle where we as researchers together with a principal and a group of teachers try to develop instruments to meet criticism of shortcomings in an unsafe school environment and poor study environment. The second example describes how the municipality initiated a development project (PRIO) where schools chart their own needs of development and how they are supposed to take action in order to respond to criticism from the Schools Inspectorate.

*Keywords:* leadership in education, Schools Inspectorate, principals' leadership

## Introduction

By all accounts, national education systems are becoming increasingly similar. This is often referred to as the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) (see, for example, Sahlberg 2011). It is reasonable to assume that a driving factor behind this is the results from international tests like TIMSS, PIRLS and PISA. The results of these tests also reinforce the image of the central role that education is supposed to play in the prosperity and future development of a country, and perhaps also in the national self-image. Ball (2003; 2004; 2006; 2008) has described how this has come to dominate educational discourse, both globally and nationally. It is becoming likely that as a result, governments would like to tighten their control over their respective national education system. A means of dealing with this is to establish a Schools Inspectorate, which presumably would affect the local school management and the measurements taken by principals to address detected defi-

ciencies. When the outcome of an inspection is made public, it is also expected to result in indirect effects because of the pressure that the surroundings put on the principals to take action (de Wolf and Janssens 2007). Case, Case and Catling (2000) describe this as a way to show educational accountability for the potential scrutiny of a wider audience. Publishing the results also gives the impression that national politicians have control over schools and that can legitimize inspections.

Lindgren et al. (2012) argue that inspections force individual schools to take responsibility for their own successes and failures. Ehren and Visscher (2006) claim that the effects of school inspections present a mixed picture and generally bring little improvement in the quality of teaching and learning (see, for example, Earley 1998; Gray and Wilcox 1995; Kogan and Maden 1999). However, events and processes that continuously take place in organizations are complex and uncoordinated, and managers are not always able to oversee and control these processes (Bolman and Deal 2005). As early as the mid-1900s, Simon (1945) told us that our knowledge of and ability to predict human behaviour is limited and that individuals do not always act in a rational and predictable way (see also Bolman and Deal 2005). Ehren and Visscher (2006, with reference to Wilcox and Gray 1996) maintain that principals rarely convert recommendations from inspections into broader visions or strategies. Instead, they use the results for their own purposes. It is, accordingly, difficult to know what effects school inspections have because, among other things, they can be difficult to ascertain or they occur long after a measure has been implemented, so-called dynamic complexity (see, for example, Senge 1990). However, it is nonetheless likely that inspections affect the actions principals take. It seems possible to detect that school inspections do have some short-term effects. Immediately after an inspection, school managers assign principals the task of drawing up action plans, which are subsequently reported to the Schools Inspectorate (see, for example, Lundgren and von Schantz Lundgren 2011; Lundgren, von Schantz Lundgren and Nyttell, 2012). However, we know little about how these plans are implemented. There is a lack of knowledge as to what long-term effects the proposed measures give rise to. Furthermore, it is unknown just how long principals believe they have to take action as a response to the findings by the Schools Inspectorate.

The purpose of this article is to describe and discuss how the local school management and principals within a municipality

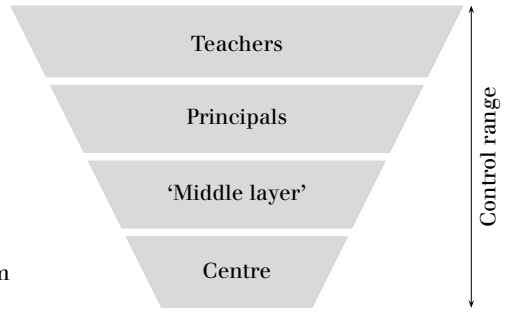


FIGURE 1  
System Improvement Requires  
Integration and Coordination  
across Every Level (adapted from  
McKinsey&Company 2010, 92)

have dealt with the deficiencies that were revealed when their schools were visited by the Schools Inspectorate.

### Inspection of Schools Puts the Principal in Focus

Organizational models, management and controls used in the private sector are now being used in the public sector. This movement is known as New Public Management (NPM). A prominent characteristic of NPM is that superordinate levels are thought to be able to influence the actions of subordinates through sanctions and rewards (Christensen et al. 2005).

Two reports by McKinsey (McKinsey&Company 2007; 2010) describe the structure of national education systems that have been successful for many years as well as the way they are managed and checked. One of these reports (McKinsey&Company 2010) presents a model on how to understand the way successful education systems work. The model (see figure 1) describes how an educational system consists of four levels: centre, 'middle layer,' principals and teachers.

The state (centre) has the overall task, based on the ideal image of the school as it is described in official policy documents, to check the way in which schools function. In education systems where there is a national Schools Inspectorate, the inspectorate has the responsibility for the control of school activities. Bolman and Deal (2005, citing Mintzberg 1979) distinguishes between control of performance and control of activity plans. The Swedish Schools Inspectorate focuses on four areas: 1) efficiency and results, 2) educational leadership and school improvement, 3) the school environment, and 4) pupil rights (SOU 2007). The Schools Inspectorate only reports deviations from the ideal image, whereas what is perceived to work is not of interest.

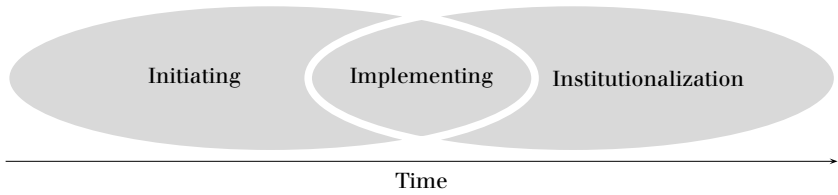


FIGURE 2 Processes of Change in Organizations  
(adapted from Ekholm 1990)

When there is a national middle level,<sup>1</sup> the duty of this level is to act as a link between the state and the local level. At the local level, the responsibility is put on the local school management and the principals. Within the school, it is the principals who are responsible for addressing the shortcomings. However, it is well-known as a result of implementation research (see, for example, Ekholm 1990) that processes of change take time and undergo several phases, which more or less overlap (see figure 2).

When a process of change is initiated, established patterns of behaviour already exist that are institutionalized, or ‘anchored’ by the operators concerned. The time to initiate and implement organizational change depends, among other things, on how extensive and profound the changes referred to are and to what extent the current changes lie with the times, for example, in line with current educational policy discourse. Processes of change can last for a number of years before the planned changes have been institutionalized (Ekholm 1990). In reality, planned changes happen rarely in the way that the initiators intend as organizations are complex. There may also be actors who oppose the planned changes. Institutionalized behavioural patterns are accordingly resistant to change and thus create stability.

### Collection of Data

This article is based on a case study which is a part of the research project ‘What makes a difference, 2.0?’ in a Swedish municipality. The research project started in January 2011 when the Schools Inspectorate reported the results from a 2010 inspection. The project intends to study how schools successfully deal with the deficiencies as noted by the Schools Inspectorate and will continue until the end of 2015. The results build further on what we pre-

<sup>1</sup> In Sweden, there is no ‘middle layer’ connected to a regional level.

viously reported in two papers (Lundgren and von Schantz Lundgren 2011; Lundgren, von Schantz Lundgren. and Nytell 2012). Since the case study was initiated, data have been continuously collected using several different methods, so-called triangulation (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2007). We have carried out observations in a series of meetings during the almost three years that have passed since the Schools Inspectorate visited the studied municipality. We have conducted school visits and studied both the Schools Inspectorate's reports, as well as the municipality's response to these. The first response from the municipality was delivered in April 2011 and then a second response came after the Schools Inspectorate had carried out a further visit in March 2012. Data have also been collected through three surveys conducted during this time period, as well as through interviews and informal conversations with principals, teachers, and the school management in the municipality.

## Results

The results are presented in relation to two of the three phases, initiation and implementation, as described in the implementation model (see figure 2). Firstly, we briefly discuss what happened when the Schools Inspectorate presented its feedback; after this we give two examples of measures that have begun to be initiated and implemented.

### *The Results from the Inspection Are Reported*

A fundamental criticism from the Swedish Schools Inspectorate (Skolinspektionen 2010, 5) was that 'all pupils are not given the opportunity to achieve their educational goals' and they urged the municipality to take action. One reason for the critique was that only 70 percent of the pupils in primary schools achieved the learning goals in all subjects in year 9 in 2010 compared with a national average of 77 percent. Another reason was that the rating average merit score for the schools was in this case lower than the national average. The results had also deteriorated over the previous five years. The Schools Inspectorate made the following remarks, among others, about actions that the local school management had to take (Lundgren and von Schantz Lundgren 2011).

The municipality must take measures to ensure that the principals are taking even more responsibility for carrying out its

mission. The municipality needs to improve monitoring and evaluation at a municipal level. [Skolinspektionen 2010]

The municipality responded that its intention was to carry out a review of the organization and also to introduce a quality management system that was supposed to create better opportunities for the principals. In turn, the principals responded that they already more or less knew what they would be criticized for. However, a majority of the principals said that the report would be of great value for the development of their schools. They also saw this as a good opportunity to be able to correct the detected deficiencies (Lundgren and von Schantz Lundgren, 2011). Three years after the inspection was carried out, the majority of principals stated that new inspections in the future would affect their everyday actions.

### *Two Examples of Development Activities*

The following section presents two examples of initiated development projects, which are stated to be a result of the Schools Inspectorate report. The first example consists of a research circle, where we, together with two principals and a group of teachers, try to develop measures in order to study and to counter criticism of shortcomings such as an unsafe school environment and the absence of a quiet study environment. The second example is a project, which was initiated by the local school management as part of a national project (PRIO)<sup>2</sup> in which the studied municipality is one of the participants.

### *The Research Circle*

A research circle consists of a group that collaborates with researchers in order to process a problem that the participants collectively have decided on (see, for example, Lundgren 2000; Lundgren et al. 2013). A research circle may initiate processes of change in the everyday work. The outcomes can be studied and corrected while these processes take place. The activities can also be seen as micro-research that is being conducted as a means of studying a phenomenon as a way to attain new knowledge and understanding.

<sup>2</sup> The PRIO model (Planning, Result, Initiative, and Organization) was initiated by the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR) and the City of Stockholm in cooperation with McKinsey&Company.

A research circle affords participants the opportunity to take part in 'educational dialogues,' where they can create a common frame of reference using and discussing literature. The free working form of the research circle allows the participants to choose problems and theoretical approaches as based on their everyday work (see, for example, Lundgren 2000). The school where the research circle is held has a principal, one of two, who has worked there for 14 years, which, according to our experiences, is quite unusual for a Swedish school. The school is situated in an area of low socioeconomic status, and more than half of the pupils in this school have a mother tongue other than Swedish. Many of these pupils are recent immigrants to Sweden. The school has some areas of specialization: sport, science and technology. The research circle started in autumn 2012 and will continue until spring 2014. Participation is voluntary and provides no special benefits in either assigned time or pay.

It was not that I was looking for anyone in particular, but it turned out that those who are often interested in other things also participate in this group. [Principal]<sup>5</sup>

The school principal describes those included in the circle as follows:

The research circle includes the principal, the assistant principal, five teachers and a local politician who has a connection to the school. [...] He is a retired teacher and runs a homework project at the school together with a Somali teacher. [Principal]

It is natural that the conditions that apply to participating in the research circle attract teachers who are interested in development. The group risks being seen as a threat by the other teachers, but perhaps some also see the importance of their colleagues being actively involved in the development of their school. The research circle meets on a regular basis every four to six weeks.

For these sessions, we write our reflections on the books used in the research circle. This is very interesting because you learn to understand how others think and how others express themselves. What we think we have in common, we

<sup>5</sup> Our translation of all quotes in interviews.

may not have in common, while the things we express in different ways may instead be understood during our discussions. [Principal]

The principal also describes how teachers in the research circle have started reading books again, which many teachers do not have time to do (Läraryörbundet 2013), but this also gives space to talk about their own activities in relation to the literature.

I see it as competence development for the teachers involved. [...] We jointly select the literature that we will use. It is a pretty democratic way to work. [Principal]

The principal believes that his participation in the research circle is necessary. As he puts it: 'I believe that as principal, I will better understand how teachers understand their mission.'

I have interviewed the participants. The first reflection I had was when one of the teachers said, 'I think the idea with the research circle is a good one, as everyone has to ask the question: Are we doing what we think we are doing?' It is not until one examines what one does that one can be sure that this is the case. [Principal]

The principal believes that another important function that the research circle fills is that it exposes problems in everyday life and thus creates space to reflect on and discuss possible measures to solve these problems.

We have chosen to study different things. We received, for example, remarks from the Schools Inspectorate stating that we lacked a quiet study environment for the pupils. [Principal]

The various problems that the participants in the research circle tackled may be seen as concrete examples of what the Schools Inspectorate describes as an unsafe school environment and a study environment lacking serenity, as perceived by the pupils. This resulted in a decision on the part of two teachers and the assistant principal to map areas outside the classroom, such as the hallways and public areas, and to consider, by extension, what could be done to improve safety for pupils. A retired teacher who works with homework help for pupils during their free time at school aimed to investigate the effect of the disruptive study environment, as perceived by pupils. A teacher aimed to study how



pupils understand the targets set for each lesson in the school, a routine that is part of a model that this school has used for a long time. The principal, along with a teacher, is interested in how pupils perceive their future prospects by examining how they talk about their prospective career choices and what they need to do to achieve these.

### ***The PRIO Model: An Attempt to Work on a Broad Front***

PRIO started in Sweden in early 2012 with two pilot schools and at the turn of 2012/2013 joined nine other Swedish municipalities. The municipality in this case study was one of those. The PRIO model is based on the results of studies of successful school systems made by McKinsey (McKinsey&Company 2007; 2010), as already mentioned, in some 20 countries around the world. One of the conclusions of the reports was that national school systems can be developed to work significantly better regardless of where they are at the moment. Another conclusion was that there must be balance between support and capacity-building measures and controls, as well as that the school itself must be responsible for its own development. The general goal of the PRIO model is to help raise the level of achievement results in Swedish schools through the initiation of processes and work methods that result in the school evolving into an organization of learning. This is supposed to be achieved by working to strengthen collegial collaboration and by school management directing resources to where they will do most good. The fact the municipality in this case has chosen the PRIO model can be seen as a broad attempt to face and deal with the shortcomings, often described in general terms and supported by legal text, that the Schools Inspectorate has highlighted. Examples of such shortcomings are as follows:

- All pupils are not given the opportunity to achieve their educational goals
- The municipality must ensure that all activities are goal-oriented to pre-empt and prevent unfair treatment

A 'project cycle,' according to the PRIO model, is implemented for 20 weeks, where the first five weeks are devoted to identifying and analyzing how the activities are conducted and communicated to the principal. The next five weeks are used to form working groups that develop a local working schedule. During the following 10 weeks, the teachers work, in collaboration with the

school principal, to implement the development plan the development plan that they have drawn up. The development work is generally focused on six areas of improvement:

1. Goals and priorities
2. Collaboration and team development
3. Competence development
4. Management
5. Organization and resources
6. Culture and attitudes

The development work is based on five basic principles:

- The individual school ‘owns’ the project together with the local project management
- The development processes should be based on facts
- The focus is on the organization and on developing processes that enable the creation of good teaching opportunities
- The teachers have the educational responsibility
- The work should be characterized by openness and transparency

The first school started its development work in the spring semester 2013 and in the autumn semester 2013 another school joined. The long-term goal is that all schools in the municipality will eventually use the PRIO model. The responsibility for the project lies with a steering group consisting of an education committee chairman and senior officials responsible for school issues in the municipality. To run the project, there are two project managers, both of whom have previously worked as principals in the municipality, which they see as valuable experience for the carrying out of this task. The two project managers say that they have the necessary conditions to carry out the project successfully (meeting was held on 2 May 2013). ‘It feels like this is a tool, an approach, a process that we have long sought’ (Project Manager A). One of the two project leaders feels that the mapping that has already been carried out in one of the schools managed to identify key problems, which will help to create real changes in activities.

This tool is developed for schools, as a foundation in development processes. [...] Now we are suddenly talking about tangible things. [Project Manager B]

The fundamental idea is that a principal knows only a few of the problems that exist in operations, problems which in turn can be part of a larger number of complex issues.

The feeling you have as a principal is that you may not have enough time to do this mapping, the analysis you would need to do on your own school. If they use this tool, it will create a systematic quality improvement process based on the situation and needs of each unit. We think this would be interesting. [Project Manager A]

By having staff identify and visualize specific problems, based on their own perspectives, it will also be possible to discuss how these problems can be resolved.

The individuals do the development work, without any rules from above, other than the legal requirements and the rules that the governing documents impose on us. [...] It sends signals, not only to the unit, but it gives signals and requirements at all levels, from top to bottom throughout the organization. [Project Manager B]

This way of working places the responsibility for the development work on the individual school and its staff. The role of the principal becomes that of an 'enabler' who creates opportunities and supports the development work.

## Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose of this article, which is based on an ongoing case study, has been to describe and discuss how local school management and principals are able to deal with the deficiencies that are revealed after their schools are visited by the Schools Inspectorate. The result is interpreted in relation to the fact that the Swedish government, in recent years, has undertaken a series of reforms in the school system based on NPM. In this case study, the focus is on the re-establishment of the Schools Inspectorate in 2008 (SOU 2007) and the possible effects of this for principals. The Schools Inspectorate is supposed to verify that schools are meeting formal requirements and that the pupils are performing in relation to the curriculum. Our interpretation also relates to McKinsey's two reports (McKinsey&Company 2007; 2010), which describe functioning school systems from around the world (see figure 1). The results of these reports have had a wide impact in Swedish schools.

The results show how the state (the centre), indirectly supported by the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR), tries to control and develop schools by NPM-inspired means, for example, by using objectives, results and inspections. This form of governance is based on, as McKinsey (McKinsey & Company 2007; 2010) has shown, the fact that the different parts of the school system have to support each other. From the way that the Swedish school system is governed conducted, it is obvious that the principals will be in focus, as they are the ones who under the Education Act are responsible for operations. Principals are, as a result of this, exposed to pressure from many different directions, such as the state (the centre) and school management ('the middle layer'). Inspections also affect the role of principals in relation to teachers, not least because a commonly recurring criticism from the Schools Inspectorate is that principals do not follow up pupils' performance and hence do not take necessary measures when the pupils' results are poor. How this affects the principals' relationship to teachers is unclear, but it could conceivably have a negative impact if the teachers feel that they are being more controlled rather than supported. Principals are also subjected to pressure from parents and the public. As there are only deviations that are reported, there is risk if a school appears to be functioning poorly, this may also affect the perception of parents and the public. This could have negative consequences for a single school as pupils in Sweden can choose freely between schools.

The requirement of principals to address the deficiencies found can thus be seen as far-reaching. In the first phase, after the inspection was made, the school management in the municipality asked principals to describe why there were deviations and also to create action plans in order to answer the Schools Inspectorate. In the next phase, when the action plans were completed, the principals were supposed to act in order to remedy the deficiencies. Two examples of actions were selected to illustrate this. In the first example, the research circle, the interest was directed towards specific problems in a school, pupil safety, and the atmosphere inside and outside the classroom. Some effects were immediately visible. The most obvious was that the research circle had created a place where principals, teachers and researchers could come together to define problems and study how the problems manifested themselves. It was then also possible to formulate a picture of the situation, communicate this to colleagues and also initiate concrete actions. It could be said that this school had started to create an internal development organization. According to

our experience, this is lacking in many schools, as focus is usually on dealing with the problems that crop up in everyday work. The second example describes a broader effort, undertaken on the initiative of school management, using the PRIO model. The idea is that all schools in the municipality will be covered at a later stage. However, there is for the moment only one school that has implemented a project cycle and one that has started. The presumption was that in this way, schools would be able to develop an ability to develop on their own.

A conclusion from this case study is that local school management and principals tried to develop tools that would engage the staff so that they could process the problems that the Schools Inspectorate had pointed out. However, it is reasonable to assume that schools will always face new problems, which need to be addressed, and that principals accordingly must focus on how their school is able to continuously improve. It is also known from previous research (see, for example, Ekholm 1990) that it may take several years from the time an action is initiated until it has been implemented for lasting effects to be detectable. The formal deficiencies, such as plans that do not meet the formal legal requirements, will, in most cases, be resolved as will the minor deficiencies. The fact that schools better comply with formal requirements for documentation purposes may be viewed as an improvement. However, how this correlates with a better education for pupils or improved results in tests like PISA, TIMSS or PIRLS remains an unanswered question. It is also an open question whether it is possible to solve, even in the long term, problems that are related to the fact that a school is a complex organization with a complex mission. As we see it, there is a risk that this will lead to increased emphasis from the centre on aspects that are possible to document, while elusive processes in the school are only described in general terms. Such a development would lead both to increased administrative control of principals as well as to principals themselves increasing their administrative control of teachers instead of focusing on their own pedagogical leadership. This raises a still unanswered question, that being, do inspections of schools contribute to development or do they maintain the current situation instead?

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