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The Swedish national principal training programme: a programme in constant change

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ABSTRACT
In the mid-1970s, a systematic national principal training programme was introduced in Sweden. The aim was to guarantee better-equipped principals in their mission to lead and develop schools in accordance with national steering documents. Since then, the programme has been subjected to changes, but its focus has remained the same. The three-year programme is currently directed at already-employed principals whose efforts are estimated to consume about 20% of their working time. Six universities provide the programme with content that corresponds to thirty higher-education credits. Consequently, the academy has to balance its fundamental role as a critical independent institution and its mission to provide an education that is crucial in the educational steering system. This article presents an historical overview of the programme’s development as well as the current programme’s design and challenges, and it discusses the expected future demands for change.

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Introduction
The Swedish school principal’s task is multifaceted, complex, and challenging. It takes place in a globalised society with external and internal demands for change and a variety of inconsistent competing values. Principals have to maintain school performance in highly competitive contexts, develop an evidence-based theory-based driven approach to school improvement, become more socially conscious, and tackling the underperformance of certain groups in education (Devine 2013).

The complexity for the Swedish principal consists of the many commissions that are incumbent on the position of principal as stated in the Swedish School Act, curricula, and other regulations. As an educational leader and head of a staff, a principal has overarching responsibility for activities that work towards the national educational academic and social goals, following up with and evaluating students’ results according to goals and standards, and overall student achievement. A principal is further responsible for involving the participation of students and parents in the work of a school and for a school environment that supports high-quality teaching, supervision, and support according to
students’ needs. It also concerns the responsibility for the creation of a collaborative and trusting learning culture between subjects and grades. Moreover, must the principal assure that staff members are aware of the international agreements Sweden has undertaken to consider in education (Skollagen 2010:800). This shortened overview of principals’ responsibilities illustrates the need for principals to have good knowledge of their responsibilities as well as an understanding of the skills and abilities to fulfil their assignment.

The article begins with a brief overview of the history of the profession of principal that Sweden has developed since the sixteenth century. Thereafter, follows a description of how the systematic training programme for principals has changed from its first programme in 1976. The article concludes with a presentation of the present day discussion concerning a further revision of the programme and what new knowledge is required for school leadership.

The emergence of the profession of principal

The Swedish word for the principal is rektor and originates from the Latin rector (the governor), which was the title for a leader of a Catholic cathedral school in the eleventh century. At that time, Sweden only had one principal, a number that increased to seven in the 1500s (Ullman 1997). How the principals’ task should be accomplished did not have any specific instructions besides an academic exam. In 1571, the first regulations for principals were written, which also stated that a principal should live a descent and sober life. According to Ullman (1997), instructions from the 1700s declared that a principal was expected to care of a school (i.e. watching over the teachers’ way of living and diligence, correcting their mistakes, and reporting to the bishop and the cathedral chapter if someone was unsuitable for teaching). Because a principal issued the students’ grades, he (the profession was considered suited for men only) was further expected to be very acquainted with their academic progress and conduct. By then about thirty principals operated in Sweden, a number that was constant for 200 years.

Eventually, grammar schools which focused on academic studies, with the assumption that many of their pupils would go on to higher education, emerged and led by principals with university degrees. In 1842, the compulsory public school was introduced but with no regulations for principals (Hartman 2018). For those schools, the Lutheran Church was the responsible authority with the vicar as the leader. Other significant leading professions in those schools were first or head teachers and school inspectors. However, teachers in public schools reacted against having principals who represented another social class. They questioned why leaders of public schools were appointed based on academic merits but with no knowledge of teaching in public schools or the needs of students and teachers (Ullman 1997).

Several school reforms in the mid-twentieth century changed the principals’ assignment and their academic education was no longer prioritised (Ullman 1997). Those with doctoral degrees no longer applied for the position of principal in grammar schools. Instead, schools attracted those with an interest in administrative tasks. The title rector that had been exclusive for a few within well-defined educational elite lost its obvious connection to higher education. Yet, it was still desirable that a principal should be the primus inter pares within the staff (i.e. the first among equals). From 1958, head teachers of the compulsory schools were also termed principals, which implied a dramatic increase in the number of principals in Sweden.
Up to the 1960s, quite a few preparatory courses were offered for preparing principals. Some courses, initiated by principals themselves with focus on pedagogy, administration, and regulations, were offered to a limited group. Additionally, the union’s summer courses also addressed school administration. However, a discussion concerning a more organised training commenced. The minister of education at the time advocated for a programme to enhance the principals’, understanding and knowledge of pedagogical and organisational leadership. The view on the profession as a solely administrative task began to change towards a mission that implied developing a school’s core processes of teaching and learning. Moreover, the formation of the School Leadership Union contributed to the consideration of principalship as a specific profession (Ekholm 2015).

**School leadership training: an education in constant change**

*Education for school leaders: the 1970s*

The discussions concerning the need for a training programme for principals resulted in a school commission in the early 1970s that mainly consisted of school principals. Its purpose was to investigate what a principal training programme could look like. The commission’s proposal and plan formed the basis for the legislation the Parliament passed in 1976 for a two-year systematic training programme, the Education for School Leaders. The then Swedish National Board of Education was responsible for its implementation in ten regions that covered Sweden. School inspectors, school psychologists, principals, and union representatives are examples of those who were educators in the programme (Ekholm 2015).

The programme was compulsory and directed at appointed principals. Local superintendents and local school politicians also participated. The programme’s objective was to prepare leadership that took responsibility for the development of schools in accordance with the national steering documents, curricula, and syllabi. It was supposed to enhance the principals’ understanding of national educational goals and work out a plan for their schools’ development based on a critical review of their schools’ daily work. It was emphasised that authentic problems should form the basis for learning (Ekholm 2015).

The length of the programme was two years. It consisted of twenty-five course days divided into three-to-four-day meetings and held at hotels in the region. Moreover, the principals were required to stay away from their schools for an additional four weeks. For two of the weeks, the principal was required to job shadow leaders in their daily work for companies in the region, typically local places such as a car factory or a shop (Myndigheten för skolutveckling 2007). During the other two weeks, they joined organised activities for young people within the municipality.

*The new education for school leaders: the 1980s*

The training for principals was evaluated after a decade of implementation. Based on evaluations, the participants’ individual leadership skills had been strengthened but the programme’s effect on school development could not be related to the programme. Parliament decided in 1986 to launch a four-part programme: the Program for Aspiring Principals, Introduction Program (for newly appointed principals), Principal Training
Program (for appointed principals), and continuous in-service trainings. It was especially important to attract women to principalship because the majority of principals were men. The traditional attitude that principal was a male profession had been hard to change and the uneven distribution with only 7% female principals had become a political problem (Brüde Sundin 2007). The municipalities were responsible for the preparation courses that introduced new leaders into their profession while the state took care of the programme for already appointed principals. In 1988, the new educational programme for principals was announced (Ekholm 2015; Johansson and Svedberg 2013).

The National Board of Education was still in charge of the new variant of the programme. It was now conducted in six regions that covered Sweden and extended to three years consisting of thirty course days with two-to-three-day seminars in hotels. It was led by the same staff with different experiences and knowledge of principalship. The two weeks of societal practical experience was no longer an issue. Instead, individual supervision was introduced.

The programme focused on three themes: society and its demand for schooling (e.g. national educational goals, democracy, and steering strategies); the local organisation perspective (e.g. how to practice democracy and to conduct school development); and the school from a teaching perspective (e.g. goal steering and pedagogical leadership). Further, the focus was on the close relationship between competence, knowledge development, experience, and practice (Ekholm 2015).

**The Principal Training Program: the 1990s**

During the 1980s, a discussion began among politicians and the National Board of Education concerning a radical reorganisation of the national educational administration. Prior to the beginning of the 1990s, Swedish schools were steered by the state using goals, regulations, and financial resources. Decentralisation of the education system, a transformation that was visible in parallel international educational development, changed this structure (Gewirtz, Ball, and Bowe 1995). The state retained its overall responsibility for national goals and guidelines expressed in the revised School Act, curricula, regulations, syllabi, and timetables, but the local authorities received the responsibility to decide how education should be organised and to the best way to allocate resources in order to reach educational goals (Myndigheten för skolutveckling 2007). The new reform also opened the way for an increase of independent schools, which are, as the public schools, financed by the municipalities (Larsson 2011; Jarl and Rönnberg 2015).

The reform also changed a principal’s role. It implied that principals’ opportunities to take more holistic responsibility for their schools’ achievements was enhanced. A principal was supposed to be acquainted with statutes and decrees, but also to become a pedagogical leader. The role was supposed to change from a leader in the school to a leader for the school (Forsstein Seiser 2017; Svedberg 2016). A principal should, therefore, challenge a centuries-old practice of teaching and at the same time force through heavy changes.

In 1991, the Swedish National Agency for Education (henceforth, the agency) was established and replaced the Swedish National Board of Education. This new authority received a directive by the government to suggest the placement of and responsibility for the Education for School Leaders and a new evaluation was conducted. The programme’s positive impact on the participants’ enhanced knowledge and understanding
of leadership tasks, and awareness of the need for development efforts remained. Yet, one still could not say that any substantial effects occurred in the participants’ schools due to the principals’ participation in the programme.

The agency purchased the education from six universities where the educators who had been involved in the education for school leaders continued their task but now under a new label: the Principal Training programme (Ekholm 2015). The agency decided to continue with the experienced-based education but now within a different organisation. There was no longer a collaboration with other stakeholders as in the former version of the programme. The two weeks of shadowing leaders in organisations out of the school were also removed. Moreover, it was no longer compulsory for principals to enter the programme. It was an offer from the state to the municipalities to let their principals participate.

The Principal Training Program was still thirty days distributed over two-to-three-day meetings in hotels over two-to-three years. However, four overarching themes were revised: (a) educational goals (e.g. national goals, a school’s role in society, and a school’s task to develop democratic social conditions); (b) steering (ideological, legal, and financial steering); (c) pedagogical development (strategies and methods for school development); and, (d) student achievement, reviews and evaluations.

Although education was pursued by the National Agency of Education within universities, there was neither an academic course plan nor higher education credits. Since the 1970s, the question concerning the programme’s connection to the universities had been discussed. Parallel to the Principal Training Program described above was a school leader college constituted at the end of the 1980s with traditional credits and a possibility of a licentiate degree. In addition, other master’s courses focusing on educational leadership were offered at several universities. However, the majority of principals still chose the programme arranged outside the academy (Ekholm 2015).


After four years of implementing the Education for Principals Program, it was time for an additional review of its form and content. The programme’s placement was discussed and a full inclusion to universities’ ordinary supply was advocated in relation to a reform of teacher education. However, the responsibility for the programme remained outside the universities because in 2003 the programme transferred to the then-established National Agency for School Improvement. Seven universities throughout Sweden along with the agency who took responsibility for the Stockholm region, hosted the programme that now was opened to appointed preschool managers and leaders in approved independent preschools and schools. Former principals and others with experiences and relevant knowledge of schools and leadership were employed at universities. The programme should still run for two-to-three years with thirty course days as previously. Its content should be based on participants’ sharing experiences. As a way to approach academic demands, one should also be able to validate the programme to higher education credits (Myndigheten för skolutveckling 2007).

Changes were also made, however, in the programme’s content. In parallel to the organisational changes in the late 1990s, evaluations had indicated that the decentralisation of school responsibility to the municipality level had resulted in a declined quality of
principals’ work. An expert group with the mission to discuss the principals’ roles as those who are responsible for schools’ pedagogical activities published its report in 2001. The report proclaimed that there are three significant qualities and attitudes should form the basis for school leadership: democratic leadership, learning leadership, and communicative leadership (Utbildningsdepartementet 2001).

Based on the findings from the report, several recommendations were made. First, the content should contribute to the principal’s understanding of their accountability for upholding equality, legal security, and quality within the decentralised school system. Secondly, the programme ought to supply the participants with personal courage and engagement in order to stimulate and motivate school staffs to reach the curricular goals and all students’ academic achievement. Third, capabilities such as follow-up and evaluate their activity, analyse teaching and outcomes, handle their schools as learning organisations, and understand their roles as managers and leaders were important goals to fulfil. Fourth, the participants should also develop an ability to engage in deliberative dialogues with staff and students and emphasise that expectations of learning are not only an issue for students; it also includes staff and leaders. Additionally, principals’ competences to, through dialogue, lead and enhance their activities’ results were emphasised. As it was in former programmes, it was up to each programme provider to interpret and realise the educational goals through lectures, literature, and practical assignments (Ekholm 2015; Utbildningsdepartementet 2001).

The national school leadership training programme: the latest edition

It did not take long until the Education for Principals was subjected to another change because of criticism that the programme had effects on a personal level but school practice remained the same. Amongst several studies and evaluations, Daun (2004) reported that the training had improved the leaders’ communication and evaluation skills. Aurell et al. (2005) found that the leaders’ problem-solving skills, creative thinking, and emotional engagements were influenced by the programme. However, the Agency for School Improvement described a lack of legal aspects of management and school leadership as well as how a school’s achievement in relation to the national educational goals was reviewed and formed the basis for school improvement (Myndigheten för skolutveckling 2007). The later evaluation also problematised the variety between course providers’ interpretations of the programme’s purpose, form, and content.

Because the programme was voluntary, only about 50% of the then principals attended the programme, and its capacity for responding to the need for educated principals was too low. If, and how, the education for aspiring principals and the introductory programmes were offered varied between municipalities. Moreover, the programme’s tradition of being based on collegial discussions between school leaders might have preserved norms and traditions (Myndigheten för skolutveckling 2007). In 2006, the National Agency for School Improvement suggested that the training programme should be redesigned and sketched a suggestion for an improved programme. A reduction of the universities’ role was suggested, which evoked strong reactions from the academy. The new government that was installed after the 2006 election did not pay much attention to the recommendations but set up an internal investigation at the Department of
Education. The investigation resulted in the closure of the National Agency of School Improvement and the National Agency of Education took back the responsibility to distribute the programme to higher education institutions (Ekholm 2015).

In 2008, the new National School Leadership Training Program was established and made mandatory for principals in compulsory and upper secondary schools and voluntary for preschool principals whose efforts are estimated to consume about 20% of their working time. Parliament established a decree for the programme with the objectives that the participants would receive qualifications for taking the responsibility for children’s and students’ equal, judicial, and secure education; create prerequisites for goal achievement at individual and school levels; and take responsibility for the development of the schools as a whole.

The programme still runs over three years with the same arrangement it previously had, but today it covers three courses per year consisting of ten higher education credits each. The courses cover certain themes. ‘Legislation on schools and the role of exercising the functions of an authority’ is where the prerequisites prescribed in laws and regulations are considered. ‘Management by goals and objectives’ focuses on school quality assurance work, and ‘school leadership’ has the standpoint of the leader’s national commission and steering principles for promoting enhanced school achievement. These themes have been specified in 36 intermediate goals of knowledge, understanding, skills, and abilities to achieve. Supervision is also included within the programme (Skolverket 2015).

The agency remains responsible for goals and guidelines as well as admission and distribution of resources to the universities. Since 2008, the agency purchased the new programme twice from interested higher education institutions, yet with a new procedure. All interested parties have had to apply to implement the programme with specified criteria. All applications are reviewed by external assessment. Some institutions retained their commissions, but others failed and new actors entered the programme with contracts for six years. The previous demand for inclusion to the universities ordinary supply was not fulfilled, but today the programme consists of second-cycle courses and study programmes and corresponds to the first step towards a master degree in leadership. This has raised new demands for literature and examination, and the staffs’ qualifications have been adjusted to the demands from the Higher Education Ordinance. Compared with the former experience-based content became the teaching more scientifically grounded and the number of original international research in the programme’s work of reference increased. Educators in the programme have, in general, master’s or doctoral degrees in subjects appropriate for the programme’s content.

Conclusions

Education for Swedish principals has been negotiated and shaped via three dimensions: politics and profession, national goals and local prerequisites, and public and independent schooling. The school leadership profession has been transferred from government to governance; that is, more interactive processes have been introduced with a focus on a variety of measures of performances (Johansson and Svedberg 2013). Globalisation, immigration, neoliberal politics, and information and communication technology have had impacts on societal development and educational changes, and the education of principals is no exception.
Even though the National Principal Training Program is an established institution within the educational system, it is once again a subject for debate among politicians, scholars, and other stakeholders with interest in school principal issues. An inquiry from 2015 (SOU 2015:22) indicated that many of the problems principals experience result from insufficiencies in the school system’s chain of command, from the central level to the local level and from superintendents to principals and educators. An unclear dialogue between different administrative levels hampers common strategies on how to achieve national goals in individual schools. The inquiry further suggested a multiannual national action programme to strengthen schools’ chains of command in relation to national goals. First is a government recruitment-training programme for aspiring principals recommended as the first step towards the principalship. Secondly, they found a need for more focus on the national assignment and the local chain of command in the National Principal Training Program. Third, the inquiry recommended compulsory advanced education programme following the National Principal Training Program. Fourth, a training programme for principals above the principal in the chain of command such as superintendents is suggested, as well as training for teachers on the school management system within the teacher-training programme. In addition, some sort of training programme should affect elected representatives who have responsibilities for schools.

Also, the 2015 School Commission received the task of giving suggestions on ways to improve achieved learning outcomes and the quality of teaching as well as enhanced equivalent schooling. In 2017, the report came with suggestions for changes in the principal training programme (SOU 2017:35). The background to the commission’s task is, amongst other things, an insufficient amount of educated principals, a lack of prerequisites for professional development, and a lack of an equivalent education.

The commission suggests that a national function for teacher and principal education be established with representatives designated by the government, such as teachers, principals, representatives from local authorities and trade unions, and scholars. This function shall pursue development work concerning issues of competence for educators and school leaders based on science and proven experience. A principal training programme still exists but also includes further courses with different themes (e.g. pedagogical leadership and quality assurance, leadership and organisation development, or other relevant themes).

Parallel to the 2015 School Commission, another commission presented suggestions for change in 2018 (SOU 2018:17) and supported the suggestions mentioned above. Again, education for aspiring principals was suggested, this time as a national programme, and further that the programme should be included in the universities’ ordinary supply. The 2018 commission suggested a revision to the School Act with the purpose of giving teachers and principals the possibility to participate regularly in competence-developing courses.

To sum up, the education programme for principals has been under constant revision. Despite all changes mentioned above remains the objective of preparing principals that takes responsibility for school development in accordance with the national goals. Yet, societal changes such as the market-oriented educational context require principals who understand the formal and informal aspects of the educational system and their role within the same. The increased number of refugee students raises new demands on principals’ competences (Norberg 2017). Knowledge concerning the jurisdiction around pre-schools and schools and children’s and students’ rights are significant for an equal
education and for a school’s democratic mission (Johansson and Svedberg 2013). The challenge for the universities is their need to balance their fundamental missions as independent, critical institutions with the task of preparing professionals as civil servants in a politically steered educational system.

Note

1. The term *curriculum* signifies in the Swedish context the document that expresses goals and guidelines for public and independent preschools, preschool classes, compulsory and upper secondary schools, leisure time centers, and adult education.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

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