

International Perspectives on the Micropolitics of the Superintendency

Lars G. Björk

Tricia Browne-Ferrigno

University of Kentucky, Lexington / Kentucky, USA

Abstract

The rise of globalization compelled national governments to examine how they would adapt widespread social, economic, and political changes to advance their nation's future wellbeing. Most recognized the pivotal role of education in facilitating adaptation to changes unfolding in society and expressed concern about the quality of their education systems and student academic performance. During the last three decades, nations engaged in what is generally regarded as one of the most intense and protracted attempts at educational reform in recent history. National educational reform initiatives initiated in the Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden) and in the United States of America. In many instances, shifts in national education policy altered how school districts were organized, managed, and governed which in turn reconfigured superintendents' roles. An examination of findings from recent nationwide studies on superintendents suggests that decentralization and devolution of decision-making authority to municipal governments, local schools, and parents may have heightened the importance their micropolitical roles in the provision of education.

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Introduction

During the past several decades, the rise of global economic competition forced policymakers to link student academic performance to their nations' long-term economic survival. This heightened concern about the capacity of national education systems to ensure next generations of students are literate, numerate, and capable generated collaboratively developed innovative solutions to difficult problems (Björk & Browne-Ferrigno, 2012, 2014). The primary objective of most educational reform initiatives is to improve student learning and students' capacity to identify and solve problems. These reforms created a forum through which citizens, educators, and policymakers examined fundamental assumptions about the devolution of authority from central governments to local municipalities, education funding, definition of education providers, and expansion of teacher and parent involvement in school-based decision making. Recent nationwide studies conducted in the Nordic countries (i.e., Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden) suggest that national educational reform legislation has altered the way school districts are organized, funded, and governed. Findings from recent empirical, nationwide studies provide insight into the dynamic interplay between globalization and national education reform policies that both recentralized and decentralized many key dimensions of education authority and that likewise profoundly influenced the nature and direction of superintendents' work (Björk, Johansson, & Bredeson, 2014; Johansson & Nihlfors, 2014; Moos, 2014; Paulsen, 2014; Risku, Karnervio, & Björk, 2014). These nationwide reports and scholarly studies not only enhance our understanding of the devolution of governance and decision-making authority in the Nordic countries but also heighten our understanding of how superintendents' have increased their acuity for micropolitics.



Methods

Nationwide studies funded by the Finnish and Norwegian ministries of education and national research councils in Sweden and Denmark (2009-2011) provide an empirical foundation for a discussion about the how shifts in national education policies influenced changes in the nature and direction of superintendents work. Study findings suggest that the devolution of decision-making authority altered superintendents' roles, moving them away from management towards micropolitical dispositions. Taken together, these studies provide insight into one dimension of superintendents' role characterizations in an international setting.

Superintendent Roles

Most scholars concur that educational reform initiatives launched during the last three decades (1983-2016) in the Nordic countries and the United States of America (USA) have altered the nature and direction of superintendents' work (Björk et al., 2014). Five role characterizations used to describe the nature of superintendents in these international contexts were developed by scholars in the United States who grounded their work in historical and empirical evidence (Björk, Browne-Ferrigno, & Kowalski, 2014). Taken together, role characterizations provide a useful analytic framework for discussing the complexity of superintendents' work in other national contexts and understanding how their roles have changed and are changing in response to emerging national education policies. Although these roles may be intertwined and may increase or wane in importance as contexts change, none have become irrelevant.

The first four role conceptualizations that were identified by Callahan (1966) emerged during several eras including *teacher-scholar* (1850 to early 1900s), *organizational manager* (early 1900s to 1930), *democratic-political leader* (1930 to mid-1950s) and *applied social scientist* (mid-1950s to mid-1970s). The fifth role, *communicator* (mid-1970s to present), was incorporated into the literature during the first decade

of the 21st century by Kowalski (2001, 2003, 2005, 2006). These five role characterizations provide a template for understanding superintendents' work in the USA as well as a wide array of international educational reform contexts. Briefly discussing each of these roles may help readers understand the breadth and depth of superintendents' work as well as situate the discussion of the micropolitics of the superintendency

Superintendent as Teacher-Scholar

Historical evidence suggests that the superintendents' role as teacher-scholar emerged during the 1890s and was aligned closely with their being viewed as a master teacher (Callahan, 1962). Their responsibilities included training and monitoring classroom teachers, supervising curriculum development, supporting learning-teaching activities, and improving student academic outcomes (Cuban, 1976b; Kowalski & Björk, 2005). During the late 19th century, school districts expanded exponentially and superintendents' primary role as teacher-scholar was eclipsed by management responsibilities. In the decades following the 1983 release of the *Nation at Risk* report that launched national educational reform in the USA, expectations for superintendents were gradually altered to align with new education policy initiatives that underscored the importance of ensuring that all children learn at high levels. Although their management role remained a dominant characteristic, the superintendent's role as a teacher-scholar re-emerged but with an important shift in how they enacted this role.

During the most recent era of educational reform that unfolded within the USA between 1983 and 2016, superintendents' involvement in improving student academic performance was more indirect than direct. They enacted it by using management tools uniquely at their disposal to create a districtwide environment in which staffs could accomplish their work. Key areas included maintaining and monitoring a clear instructional and curricular focus, recruiting and selecting staffs, supervising and evaluating



principals, and strategically planning for instruction (Björk, 1993). Findings from two successive nationwide studies indicated shifts in expectations: Glass, Björk, and Brunner (2000) found that 40% of superintendents responding to their survey reported that their school boards expected them to serve as an educational leader. A decade later, Kowalski, McCord, Petersen, Young, and Ellerson (2011) reported that more than 60% of superintendents responding to a national survey indicated that their school boards expected them to serve as instructional leaders, which ranked third in importance among the five role characterizations.

Superintendent as Manager

As the size and complexity of public school districts expanded during the late 19th century, superintendents' primary role as teacher-scholar was eclipsed by expectations for them to serve as school-district managers (Cuban, 1976b) with the goal of making districts run more like efficient businesses (Kowalski, 1999). This role redefinition was supported by leading scholars in the field (e.g., Elmwood Cubberly, George Strayer, Franklin Bobbitt) who argued persuasively in favor of creating a corporate model in education in which school boards ceded executive control over business affairs to superintendents. They also acknowledged that their new management role would invariably increase superintendents' stature, influence, and power within local communities (Callahan, 1962). During the following decades, superintendents served as chief executive offices and handled budgets, operations, personnel, and facilities. Although the roles of teacher-scholar and manager seemed unrelated, educational reformers recognized that they were not mutually exclusive but complementary dimensions of their work (Kowalski, 1999; Browne-Ferrigno & Glass, 2005). In many instances, superintendents used their position as district manager to launch and sustain important reforms focused on improving learning and teaching. Rather than viewing their management responsibilities as constraining, they realized that their executive management role enabled them to collaborate with district school-board members in

making strategic decisions and persist over time in accomplishing common goals.

Superintendent as Applied Social Scientist

The notion of superintendents using research findings and district-level data in making important decisions about improving learning and teaching is not a new concept but rather a common-sense principle of good management (Kowalski et al., 2011). For example, Callahan (1966) discusses the importance of educators using social-science research findings to identify causes and corrective measures for poor academic performance among low income and minority students. Superintendents' disposition towards data-informed decision making recognizes the relationship between education and society and is central to understanding how changing demographics, poverty, racism, drugs, and violence may affect children's academic performance (Culbertson, 1981; Fusarelli & Fusarelli, 2005; Kochan, Jackson & Duke, 1999). The superintendents' role as social scientist was a central tenet of the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which was replaced in 2015 by the federal Every Student Succeeds Act. The new federal law focuses on equal opportunity for all students and assurance that all high school graduates are fully prepared to enter the workforce or postsecondary education. Evidenced-based practice has thus become a professional expectation for superintendents in the 20th century.

Superintendent as Communicator

Since the mid-1950s, the rise of information-based societies has heightened citizens' expectations for greater transparency in corporate and government affairs, public education, and student academic performance. This sea change—from the public viewing school districts as closed systems to viewing them as open systems—has influenced significantly the acceptability of impersonal communication as well as school and district staffs' forbearance with receiving directives down a chain of command (Achilles & Lintz, 1983; Luthans, 1981). Dispositions that accompanied the availability



of information fundamentally altered the way superintendents communicated externally with broad-based communities (Kowalski, 2001) and internally with educators and staff members. A case in point is the educational reform movement that began in the USA in the early 1980s.

The heightened intensity of public discourse surrounding educational reform had several important outcomes. First, it focused national attention on the need for accountability to ensure that schools improved student academic performance. Second, the national conversation became more inclusive, thus giving citizens and parents a greater voice that shifted discourse towards the notion that all children should learn at high levels. Third, relational models of effective leadership that emerged concurrently with the press for educational reform underscored the importance of replacing conventional top-down communication patterns that negatively impacted staffs (Guzley, 1992; Trombetta & Rogers, 1988) with two-way communication patterns that minimized perceptions of power differences with school- and district-level administrators and thus enabled greater levels of participation (Kowalski et al., 2011).

These shifts were gradual but irreversible. For example, two decades after the educational reform movement began with publication of *A Nation at Risk*, Glass and colleagues (2000) found that a majority of superintendents interacted with parents and citizens in setting district objectives and priorities, strategic planning, program and curriculum decisions, and fundraising. Communication patterns continued to shift. Later, Kowalski et al. (2011) reported that the single most important role superintendents played in their districts was that of serving as an effective communicator with broad-based constituency groups and internal staffs. The rise of an information-based society clearly expanded expectations for transparency and collaborative work environments essential to launching and sustaining educational reforms (Kowalski & Keedy, 2005).

Superintendent as Democratic-Political Leader

During the formative years (1860-1930) of the superintendent in the USA, the notion of political engagement was reserved for school-board members and representatives of local governments (Björk & Lindle, 2001; Kowalski, 1995). However, the social and political turbulence that accompanied the Great Depression of the 1930s thrust superintendents into the political milieu of their local communities and school districts. Melby (1955) asserted that a resurgence of parent activism to regain control of their schools and competition for increasingly scarce resources (e.g. gaining bond issue approval and increasing local school taxes) would irrevocably alter superintendents' views about their political role. Their perceptions proved useful during the ensuing decades when they were required to galvanize support of school-board members, citizens, parents, and employees to implement national- and district-level racial integration initiatives (Howlett, 1993).

During the early years of the education reform movement, superintendents' acuity for deftly handling special interest group influence on decision-making processes became a hallmark of highly effective superintendents (Björk & Lindle, 2001; Cuban, 1976a; Kowalski, 1995). Glass and colleagues (2000) found that 58% of surveyed superintendents acknowledged attempts by special interest groups to influence district-level decisions while 83% identified school-board relations (i.e., micropolitics) as a significant challenge for them. A decade later, superintendents ranked their role as democratic statesman and political leader as fourth among their several roles (Kowalski et al., 2011). In current circumstances, the issue is not whether superintendents enact a political role but how well they do it (Björk & Gurley, 2005; Kirst & Wirt, 2009).



Micropolitics

In general, the term *politics* refers to how the allocation of resources is accomplished within a nation, state, or organization, or simply who gets what, when, and how (Laswell, 1936/2011). Macropolitics and micropolitics provide a framework for understanding two separate yet related levels of political activity that encompasses both conflict and cooperative decision-making processes. On the one hand, macropolitics describes the influence by global, national, or state entities responsible for provision of public education by national and state governments that work with and through municipal, private sector entities, and school-districts (Blase, 1998; Blase & Björk, 2009; Cibulka, 2001; Willower, 1991). In general, the notion of *macropolitics* affirms the interdependence, enduring differences, and power relations that accompany formation of a broad sense of purpose for national education policy.

On the other hand, the notion of *micropolitics* is often regarded as the central mechanism through which major organizational outcomes related to school-district change and reform are produced. In other words, micropolitical processes are situated within an organization's political culture (Ball, 1987, 1994; Blase & Björk, 2009). Blase and Blase (2002) persuasively argue that

an organization's political processes, for example, a school's formal and informal (e.g., organizational stakeholders and their power sources, interests, ideologies, and interchanges) as well as its political culture (e.g., patterns of interests, ideologies, decision making, power distribution) dramatically influence most school outcomes, including teaching and learning. The degree to which political processes and political culture account for a given outcome (e.g., decision, policy, program, practice, events) varies, of course, from one school to another and, over time, within the same school. (p.10)

Boyd (1991) observed that those responsible for local policy implementation—typically district staff, principals, and teachers who Lipsky (2010) calls street-level bureaucrats—may reshape or even resist policy intentions promulgated by national and state governments, school boards, or municipal school governing boards. In this regard, the concept of micropolitics provides a useful way to

understand the differences between macropolitical intent and local implementation, which Mawhinney (1999) termed an “implementation dip” (p. 10). In many instances, externally imposed educational reforms are often accompanied by ambiguity, uncertainty, or resistance, which means that superintendents must possess the acuity to handle political dynamics within municipal governments, school boards, district offices, and parent organizations (Björk, 2000; Björk, Kowalski, & Young, 2005; Goldring & Greenfield, 2002).

During the past several decades, Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden have recognized the importance of education to their economic wellbeing. As a consequence, they engaged in intensive efforts to improve the quality of learning and teaching, implement accountability measures, and promote the devolution of governance and decision-making to a wide array of education providers. Scholars acknowledge that in large measure the success of policy implementation is highly dependent on the political acuity of superintendents in working with principals, classroom teachers, and parents. Examining findings from recent nationwide studies about education reform in these countries may contribute to a broader understanding the centrality of the micropolitical role of superintendents. The following sections provide brief overviews of policy issues and solutions advanced by these Nordic countries and implications for superintendents moving from conventional managerial roles in municipal governments to micropolitical-engagement roles with broad-based stakeholders.

Educational Reform in Sweden

The emergence of the superintendency in Sweden developed in response to multiple and diverse social, economic, and political forces organized under different entities and forms of control that included church, national and municipal levels. By the mid-1950s, a combination of political responsibility for education and strong central professional control had laid the foundation for the nation’s



education system. In many ways, the emergence of the superintendency in Sweden mirrored concerns for national economic and social wellbeing of its citizens and unfolded in three broad eras. The first, designated as the pre-superintendent era, reflects historical events leading up to passage of the Education Act of 1958. During the second or formative era (1958-1990), the superintendent position was introduced and regulated by the Education Act of 1958, which defined how the nation's educational system was organized, administered, and governed. During the third or decentralization era (1991-present), the national government and municipalities made decisions about organizing, governing, and administering schools that required superintendents not only to serve as municipal managers but also to possess political acuity essential for navigating ideological and partisan turmoil surrounding policy debates. They also had to work collaboratively with municipal administrators and school principals in implementing the nation's new educational system. The nature and direction of their work during this era was the focus of a recent nationwide study reported by (Johansson & Nihlfors, 2014).

During the late 1980s, perceptions among members of the major political parties in Sweden were in accord with the conviction that the state-centric system had failed its children and the nation's economy. There was a broad-based consensus that in order to advance the nation's future economic wellbeing, policymakers had to reform the then-existing centralized public education system. These education reform initiatives were launched during a time (1994-2006) when Sweden was experiencing an economic downturn; partisan politics was contentious with shifting control of Parliament between left- and right-wing political factions periodically offering different education policy options. These political power swings within Parliament also created considerable tension between national and local municipal governments that in turn triggered reactions by educators and local school boards responsible for implementing reforms.

Findings from the Swedish research project, *National Policy Meets Local Implementation Structures* (Johansson & Nihlfors, 2014), heighten understanding of policy shifts that unfolded over several recent years, particularly with regard to the changing nature of superintendents' roles in the post-1989 era. The research report shows that the Education Act of 2010 and the revised Education Act (SFS 2010:800) of 2011 shifted education authority from the national to the municipal level, increased principals' management responsibilities, and made teachers accountable for student academic performance. Further, the new legislation not only expanded parent participation on school boards but also empowered them to exercise their option to enroll their children in publically financed independent schools (Holmgren, Johansson, Nihlfors, & Skott, 2012; Johansson & Nihlfors, 2014).

Findings reported by Johansson and Nihlfors (2014) also describe the devolution of education authority and provide insight into Swedish superintendents' perspectives on parent involvement. Although municipal-level school board chairpersons and superintendents serve as public administrators and appropriately assume a neutral stance on governance matters, they view parents as a political interest group that influences the school board decision-making processes. Indeed, the level of parent activity within the education decision-making processes in Sweden is significantly related ($r = .397, p < .001$) and evidences how much influence is ascribed to parents by school-board chairpersons and superintendents. Although parents are viewed as an influential interest group, strict compliance with provisions of the Education Act may be circumvented by structural barriers like regular routines and limited distribution of information as well as by parent role ambiguity (Kristofferson, 2007, 2008). Taken together, these structural impediments enable those in power to keep it (Johansson & Nihlfors, 2014), thus adding fuel to the criticisms that the Education Act's intent to encourage greater parent representation is being circumvented.



Throughout this period, new education reform legislation required municipal superintendents and school administrators to interpret and implement initiatives that were often controversial if not indifferently received by local school staffs. Johansson and Nihlfors (2014) also report that superintendents rank ordered the most critical tasks are (1) creating conditions that enhance student performance on national tests et cetera, (2) developing and implementing local initiatives and reforms, and (3) developing and implementing national reforms all of which are directly related to implementing Sweden's Education Act SFS 2010:800. Another interesting finding from the recent study is a nearly equal balance among superintendents who viewed themselves as being embedded in the policymaking process (30%), those who saw themselves as both policymakers and administrators (30%), and those who viewed their role solely as administrators responsible for policy implementation. A majority of superintendents (88%) reported perceiving that they are a part of the policymaking processes, evidenced by their working closely with their school-board chair to explain learning programs and develop policymaking strategies. This suggests superintendents play a key role in mediating education policy at the municipal level of government. Taken together, these reforms transformed the traditional management-oriented role of superintendents into a new collaborative-leadership role requiring them to serve as members of municipal management teams, provide support for implementing educational reforms, working with new school-level governance structures, and mediating municipal education policy initiatives.

Because municipalities determine how education is administered and governed, the work of contemporary Swedish superintendents varies widely in accordance with local contexts, culture, and politics. In addition, a wide array of stakeholders and interest groups has heightened the intensity of the political environment. Findings from the 2009 nationwide study of Swedish superintendents (Johansson & Nihlfors, 2014) reveal a wide array of new roles enacted by superintendents—particularly one related to micropolitical

engagement. This is most evident in their role as mediators between (a) political and municipal administrative managers and (b) educational practitioners while engaged in school-district policymaking processes. In serving as mediators, gatekeepers, and policy implementers, Swedish superintendents work with and through others to accomplish national policy and municipal education services.

Educational Reform in Finland

Since the late 1960s, educational reform in Finland has been closely linked to global economic competition, political renewal, and social development (Sahlberg, 2010) focused on ensuring that its children are prepared to compete in a global economy. Their success in skillfully navigating these hazardous waters contributed to their formulating a set of national policies that redefined its education system that is widely regarded as one of the most effective in the world. Findings from a national study of the superintendency reported by Risku and colleagues (2014) suggest however that a recent economic downturn, demographic shifts, municipal mergers, and protracted ideological debates have influenced continuous improvement of Finnish schools. These events likewise contributed to transforming Finnish superintendents' role from that of a management-oriented, bureaucratic functionary to a member of an executive management team with political acuity to accomplish increasingly complex work.

Education in Finland is provided by municipalities that have constitutional autonomy with regard to how they structure, organize, govern, and lead school districts. Historical provisions for modern Finnish municipal administration can be traced back to two important Parliamentary Acts, one in 1865 and the other in 1872, that required municipalities to establish their own local governments, provide for the delivery of basic education, and establish municipal-level school boards (Kuikka, 1992; Pihlajanniemi, 2006; Salmela, 1949). Later, both the 1945 School Board Act and 1968 Basic Education



Act affirmed the requirement that municipalities convene school boards and create an office of the superintendent to manage schools and implement education changes. The 1968 Act affirmed that the national government set education policy and student-learning objectives and simultaneously decentralized the provision of education services to municipal governments. They were held accountable for implementing national education reforms through assigning strategic planning, administration, evaluation, and reporting requirements to municipal school boards to be centrally administered by superintendents and their qualified staffs (Aho, Pitkänen, & Sahlberg, 2006; Isosomppi, 1996; Risku, 2011; Sarjala, 1982, 2008; Varjo, 2007).

Since the late 1960s, Finland has struggled with unprecedented demographic, financial, and ideological debates that changed its national system of education and altered municipal responsibilities and the role of superintendents. For example, according to demographic data (Statistics Finland, 2013), Finland's population is aging at a more rapid rate than in any other country in the European Union (EU). Since the 1960s, the population has been migrating to towns, metropolitan areas, and urban centers (Aro, 2007; Ministry of Education, 2007; Peltonen, 2002; Statistics Finland, 2007). While rural communities experienced a steady decline in population, urban areas experienced rapid increases in birth rates, which lead to school closings in rural areas and school openings in urban areas (Statistics Finland, 2013). Consequently, policymakers faced a conundrum as to how to provide equitable social services and education throughout the nation.

In the early 1990s, one of the most severe economic recessions in recent history decreased the nation's gross domestic product by 12%, increased unemployment by 15%, and expanded the national debt by 700%. The recession fundamentally altered how the state financially supported its municipal-based education system (Aho et al., 2006; Peltonen, 2002). Before the recession the government's financial transfer system provided 70-80% of the actual operating costs of

municipal basic education. By 1993, Parliament had changed the funding formulae and reduced state subsidies for municipal education by almost 50% (Aho et al., 2006; Souri, 2009). The decline in financial support from the state called for greater efficiencies and became a primary driving force for the rise in municipal strategic planning and managerialism (Kanervio & Risku, 2009).

The confluence of demographic changes and declining national support for a wide array of public services contributed to citizens favorably viewing municipal mergers as a viable solution to the delivery of a wide array of social and educational services in the country. To place this phenomenon in historical perspective, in 1945 there were 558 municipalities in Finland but by 2013 there were only 320 (Local Finland, 2013). In their study of Finnish superintendents, Kanervio and Risku (2009) found that they considered demographic changes as one of the most significant factors influencing the nature and direction of their work. Because they have primary responsibility for leading and managing the provision of education in merged municipalities, the intensity and complexity of superintendents' work has increased.

These dramatic changes were accompanied by protracted ideological debates that in many respects changed Finnish society and influenced educational reforms. Three are particularly noteworthy: *neoliberalism*, *democratic individualism*, and *managerialism*. Neoliberalism is regarded as a political philosophy endorsed by those who support the shift towards economic liberalization including free trade, privatization, and deregulation that translates into an expansion of the role of the private sector in society. Neoliberal theory promotes a market economy under the guidance and rules of a strong state (Harvey, 2005). Neoliberal ideology basically advances the notion of students' right to select their school from among those available in the municipal system or in the private sector (Laitila, 1999). Democratic individualism argues against state centralization and for empowering municipalities and individuals to make decisions that directly affect their lives. Democratic individualism has



influenced changes in Finland since the 1970s (Ryynänen, 2004), particularly with regard to reconfiguring the relationship between national and municipal governments in which the latter are given greater responsibility for education (Niemelä, 2008) that enables them to reconfigure the role of superintendents in different school-district organizations (Ryynänen, 2004). Managerialism is grounded in an industrial-era ideal of achieving operational efficiencies (Enteman, 1993) through top-down decision making, strategic planning, data analysis, and rigid implementation frameworks.

Taken together, neoliberalism, democratic individualism, and managerialism grounded the Finnish parliamentary acts and provided a framework of strategies to approach greater municipal autonomy, reductions in state support, and discretion in how to use competition to allocate scarce resources among service sectors. Although efforts to advance the notion of decentralization in Finland were notable, the role of the central government in education remained an equally prominent feature of its political system. Municipalities were expected to implement legislatively mandated educational reforms and meet accountability standards (Aho et al., 2006; National Board of Education, 2013; Souri, 2009). In order to restructure municipal governments, implement mergers, institute national educational reforms, and meet education accountability standards, municipal councils and executive boards began to hire superintendents who were well educated and had teaching and administrative experience and whose thinking aligned with municipal strategies (Kanervio & Risku, 2009). Since the 1990s, demographic shifts, economic changes, and parliamentary education reform acts have altered the provision of education and the role of superintendents. Accomplishing work in this milieu requires superintendents to have greater managerial competency, strategic-thinking abilities, and acuity for micropolitics.

Education Reform in Norway

Findings from nationwide studies of the Norwegian education between 1990 and 2008 as well as more recent work by Paulsen (2012) provides insight into educational reform in Norway and the multifaceted role of school district superintendents. During the past several decades, Norwegian primary and lower secondary schools have been criticized for mediocre student academic performance in literacy, mathematics, and science as reported by the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD] in their Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) studies (Kjærnsli, Lie, Olsen, & Turmo, 2004; Välijärvi, 2006; Välijärvi, Linnakylä, Kupari, & Arffman, 2002). Policymakers enacted a wide range of educational reforms directed towards improving academic programs, implementing accountability measures, and expanding parent involvement to enhance student academic performance. These reforms generated a significant level of tension between national and local education agencies (Paulsen, 2012).

Norway has a three-level school governance system with each level having a legitimate power base and formal authorities (Møller, Prøitz, & Aasen, 2009). First, there are 428 municipalities between the state level and the school level that constitutes the operational education core (Johansson, Moos, Nihlfors, Paulsen, & Risku, 2011). Decision makers and leaders at each of the three levels exert some degree of influence on policy- and decision-making processes that impact how schools are managed and lead. These circumstances create a complex system that influences superintendent's work (Nihlfors, 2003; Nihlfors, Johansson, Moos, Paulsen, & Risku, 2013), which has become multifaceted. Essentially, Norwegian superintendents are characterized by Paulsen (2014) as being middle managers who accomplish work by spanning boundaries using diverse strategies including serving as mediators, gatekeepers, coordinators, advocates, and liaisons to accomplish their work. Taken together, these ways of doing work require different skill sets and the capacity to understand and apply the principles of micropolitics.



Thompson's (1967) definition of middle management makes a distinction between three levels of the organization including the technical (operational), managerial (administrative), and institutional (strategic). In this regard, middle managers "perform a coordinating role where they mediate, negotiate, and interpret connections between the organization's institutional (strategic) and technical (operational) level" (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1997, p. 466). As such, a manager's mediating role encompasses the exertion of influence downwards as well as upwards in the organization (March & Simon, 1958; Pappas, Flaherty, & Wooldridge, 2003). In addition, middle managers also operate at the external boundaries of the organizations by interacting with customers (Thompson, 1967), stakeholders (Mintzberg, 1993), and community citizens (Busher, 2006). Superintendents are characterized as being middle managers (Paulsen, 2014) who conduct their work by spanning internal as well as external organizational boundaries. As such, they play an important role in linking different internal functional units and aligning them with important external environments (Tushman & Katz, 1980). Effective utilization of boundary spanning opportunities by superintendents may contribute to the organization's learning capacity and enable them to exert greater influence in policy and decision-making processes (Paulsen, 2014).

Superintendents as middle managers play key roles as mediators working at the external boundaries of the organization to facilitate interaction between those on the inside and interest parties or stakeholders on the outside (Mintzberg, 1993). Their day-to-day practices help link the organization with the external environment through four distinct forms of mediation: gatekeeping, coordination, advocacy and liaison (Paulsen, 2008, 2014). The gatekeeper function suggests that superintendents perform as internal brokers who have position power to select and protect against other members of the same system (Tushman & Katz, 1980). As gatekeepers, they may select from the flow of external information what issues are most relevant and pressing that will be considered by the group (DiPaolo

& Tschannen-Moran, 2005). Second superintendents serve as municipal coordinators or change intermediaries (Paulsen, 2014) who help colleagues make sense out of complex situations in support of change initiatives (Balogun, 2003). In many instances, the term *sense giving* is used to heighten attention to superintendents role in facilitating learning and creating conditions for staffs to adopt new ideas or practices and to find alternative solutions (Balogun, 2003, p.70).

The third mediating function assumed by superintendents is advocacy (Gould & Fernandez, 1989) in which they represent one internal group while engaging with other groups within the organizational hierarchy. Paulsen's (2012, 2014) findings indicate that Norwegian superintendents provide key information in decision-making processes and agenda-setting functions of municipal school boards. Their specialized knowledge of specific domains within education serve as a primary source of influence, help mobilize resources, and is viewed by other politicians as having the strongest influence among members included in decision-making processes (Paulsen, 2012). A fourth mediating function of the superintendent is their serving as a liaison between groups in and across organizations or in professional networks. In this role superintendents may exert influence upwards and downwards in the hierarchy (Pappas et al., 2003). Conditional trust (Tushman & Scanlan, 1981) enables them to successfully mediate in conflicts and accomplish work.

Study findings reported by Paulsen (2014) underscore the importance of the local, municipal level of Norway's school governance system within the policy-implementation process. Findings also suggest a pattern of mediation by superintendents who serve in middle management positions in Norway's municipal school system. In other words, when national education policies reach municipalities, superintendents mediate or reinterpret them to fit local priorities. In essence, superintendents actively filter out, buffer, and translate national policies in their daily interactions with school principals and others within the community. In retrospect,



understanding the role of superintendents as middle managers—particularly how they exert social and political influence upwards as well as downwards in an organization or professional network—suggests the importance of superintendents’ having micropolitical perspectives in describing how they accomplish work. Moreover, the role content, leadership functions, and influence patterns of superintendents as middle managers in large complex organizations provides insight into how micropolitics may be enacted in a Norwegian educational reform context.

Educational Reform in Denmark

Global competition and widespread collaboration among European countries stimulated an educational reform movement that profoundly affected education in all Nordic countries. The shift away from traditional democratic, public sector systems towards new, corporate-oriented and market-driven management models have fundamentally altered Denmark’s education system. National educational reform policies not only created schools as freestanding institutions that are managed directly by the Ministry of Education rather than municipalities but also created local parent-dominated school boards that expanded their involvement and voice. These changes replaced a traditional, professional model of educational administration with state-centric, bureaucratic management that relies on social technologies such as strategic planning, quality standards, student academic testing and reporting, and school comparisons (Moos, 2014).

Over the past four decades, Denmark moved away from social-welfare state policies towards those that promised long-term economic survival. Moos (2014) notes that transnational agencies (e.g., EU, General Agreement on Tariff and Trade, International Monetary Fund, OECD, World Trade Organization, World Bank) acted as key driving forces in Europe’s response to globalization through adoption of neoliberal economic perspectives (i.e., deregulation, privatization, outsourcing). Many of the central tenets

of neoliberalism were embedded in Denmark's education acts. The Consolidation Act on Folkeskolen (1993) affirmed that the purpose of schooling in Denmark is to prepare students to be productive individuals and continue the nation's democratic form of government. However, a dramatic shift in Denmark's core values is evidenced in the 2006 Act on the Folkeskolen (Consolidation Act No. 170) that describes the purpose of schooling as developing a competent workforce (Bovbjerg, 2009; Moos, 2014). Concurrent with adoption of these neoliberal economic perspectives was putting into practice a New Public Management (NPM) model (Hood, 1991) for organizing and administering public education that was unambiguously tied to private sector notions of competition, consumer choice, and managerial efficiency. The most conspicuous examples include the adoption of school choice in daycare and Folkeskole attendance, upper secondary schools, and autonomous schools across Denmark. Policy re-centralization was accompanied through promulgation of uniform rules, regulations, and policies and a top-down accountability system aligned with national goals.

Although Denmark recentralized its policymaking processes, it decentralized many aspects of its decision-making processes giving municipalities and schools greater control over many aspects of the education delivery system. For example, principals and teachers were given more control over curriculum, accountability, budgets, and staffing as well as day-to-day administration. In addition, the Ministry of Education gave municipalities a greater role in implementing the required quality assurance system that is a central feature of its NPM model. In effect, municipalities are expected to manage schools using national goals and objectives and assessment frameworks developed by Parliament and government ministries. For example, the 2006 Amendment Act on the Folkeskole (Consolidation Act No. 170), also known as the "aim" clause, instituted a system of education that expanded choice, parent voice, and a battery of accountability tools (i.e., social technologies). However, municipalities were allowed a measure of discretion in



determining how their schools were organized, administered, and governed and given freedom to make decisions about budgets, facilities, and personnel.

In Denmark, municipal school superintendents are viewed as being key players in implementing the new national quality assurance system. However, numerous changes in public sector governance implemented in Denmark over the past two decades make it difficult to provide a coherent description of their positions, roles, and responsibilities. In the decades before Denmark's educational reform movement, superintendents were situated in a direct line of governance authority that flowed from the transnational level agencies (EU) to the national level (Parliament) to the government administrative level (Ministry of Education) to the municipal levels and then to the institutional (school) level. The first municipal level includes the municipal council (political committee) and municipal administration, whereas the second municipal level includes a school committee and the superintendent of schools. The last level is the school, which has a school board with a parent majority and a professional staff (e.g., principals, teachers, educational specialists). The superintendent, who is situated in the middle of the education chain of command, is accountable to municipal authorities and is expected to comply with national rules, regulations, and policies concurrently with administering the local district school.

Recent educational reforms in Denmark provide a measure of insight into the impact of the global economy and its transition towards a new competitive, market-oriented state. Scholars also note that neoliberal policy changes altered the nation's education system by creating a homogenized public-sector system that uses private-sector strategies. The state is using contracts to accomplish national standards and accountability; although critics argue that this may be viewed as an effort to re-centralize government, others note that it also supports decentralization. Unquestionably, these new policy initiatives have altered traditional education structures, changed the

nature of public education discourses, and re-defined the relationships between state, local authorities, and schools. As local schools have been restructured, new forms of administration have emerged that in turn are redefining relations between politicians and school professionals. The most evident shift at the municipal level is the changing roles of superintendents and principals—from serving as educators to working as corporate contract managers. Implementation of this new model of education has created political tensions between policymakers and school professionals, heightened ambiguity, and generated the need for greater political acuity at all levels of the new education system to accomplish routine work.

Discussion

During the past 30 years, the rise of the global economy stimulated a wide array of social, economic, and political changes within the Nordic countries. Heightened concern about the quality of schools launched what is arguably one of the most intense and protracted attempts at educational reform because the education reforms challenged fundamental assumptions about how schools are organized, governed, and lead. Findings from nationwide studies on the superintendency in Sweden, Finland, Norway, and Denmark provide important insights into changes in political ideology, devolution of responsibility for education, and transformation of the nature of superintendents' leadership. An important theme that emerged from these nationwide studies is the centrality of superintendent leadership to the success of implementing national educational reforms and how extensively the position itself is changing. Complex policy environments that characterize educational reform in the Nordic countries are redefining how and where superintendents complete their work. It is evident that as Nordic countries devolved responsibility for school district operations to municipalities and held them accountable for school improvement, the role of superintendents shifted away from serving



as managers to becoming team members who help colleagues interpret and implement complex national policies. They not only mediated the effects of policy changes within the districts and schools but also by necessity became more politically astute as they worked with and through others to accomplish national goals. Björk and Blase (2009) persuasively argue that micropolitics is a critical dimension of superintendent leadership and that it serves as a central mechanism through which education policies are implemented at the local level. They observe that a school district's political culture (i.e., patterns of interest, ideology, decision making, and power distribution) and stakeholders (i.e., their ideologies, interests, power sources, and networks) exert a powerful influence on how education reforms are implemented. Although political cultures and processes vary across the Nordic countries as well as districts and municipalities within them, most superintendents have acuity for politics, understand ideological differences, and are aware of interest groups activities that accompanied these policy changes. These circumstances increased the scope, intensity, and complexity of their work. For example, Norwegian superintendents acted as mediators to alleviate resistance to change. Their counterparts in Sweden and Finland became part of municipal management teams, and new funding patterns forced them to compete for scarce resources with other social service providers—thus heightening their recognition of the need to work with political interest groups. Finally, Danish superintendents were compelled to handle widespread disaffection of their staffs with national ideological, market-oriented education policies. Although many superintendents in the Nordic countries tend to be cautious about disclosing their political dispositions, most concur that they do not have a choice as to whether they are engaged in politics but only how they will participate.

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About the authors:

Lars G. Björk is a professor in the Department of Educational Leadership Studies at the University of Kentucky and a 2009 Fulbright Scholar in Finland. In 2011, the Ministry of Education (Peoples Republic of China) appointed him as an adjunct professor in the National Training Center for Secondary School Principals (Shanghai). Email: lars.bjork@uky.edu

Tricia Browne-Ferrigno is a professor in the Department of Educational Leadership Studies at the University of Kentucky. Her long-term research agenda has focused on leadership preparation, development, and mentoring. Her other research interests include educational reform and school improvement, the superintendency, teacher leadership, and innovations in doctoral education. Email: tricia.ferrigno@uky.edu