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## Educational Leadership at Municipality Level: Defined Roles and Responsibilities in Legislation

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore the roles and responsibilities that national education legislation in Iceland imposes on municipalities in terms of leadership. A qualitative content analysis was applied to explore the relevant national legislation—that is, education acts, regulations, and curriculum guides—and identify themes by looking for specific words that are characteristic in leadership practices. The findings reveal that policy ends concerning educational leadership of municipalities are somewhat tacit in current national legislation. Yet, the roles and responsibilities that the state delegates to municipalities comprise leadership functions that are distributed in nature and, to a large extent, harmonize with *desired* leadership practices as emphasized in the literature. Legislation emphasizes comprehensive education, but also includes signs of technocratic homogenization. In the discussion of our findings, we argue that the educational system is quite dependent on the political emphasis at each given time, making it difficult for both municipalities and the state to facilitate a cohesive leadership emphasis. We suggest that closer attention to the local level, and a recognition of it as an important unit and agency for educational development, is of significant importance. These observations will be followed by a further investigation into the actual practice of leadership at the local level.

**Keywords:** municipalities leadership role; educational leadership; educational governance; national legislation; policy in education

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## Introduction

This article deals with *leadership and organization for education*, one of the primary themes of this special issue; more precisely, we explore the policy emphasis put forth in national documents in Iceland regarding the role of the municipalities in leading the compulsory schools. In Iceland, as in the other Nordic countries, the governance of compulsory schools has been transferred from state to municipal control (Compulsory School Act No. 66/1995; Moos, Hansen, Björk & Johansson, 2013). This transference calls for increased coherence in policy and actions between the state, local authorities, and the schools themselves (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). As Moos, Paulsen, Johansson and Risku (2016) state, national governance can be seen as “an interdependent mix of the municipalities, the schools and the state system” (p. 293).

There is a growing consensus in the literature that to build a successful educational system, educational leadership needs to be established at all levels, that is, from the transnational level to the national, local, and individual school levels (Louis, Leithwood, Whalstrom & Anderson, 2010; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Moos, Nihlfors & Paulsen, 2016). Evidence indicates that leadership at the municipality level can affect student learning in both negative and positive ways (Louis et al., 2010). As might be expected, action taken at the state level has been found to influence both the focus of leadership and the ways educational leadership is provided at the municipal level (Louis et al., 2010; Moos, Nihlfors, et al., 2016).

Governments use educational legislation to provide frameworks for guidance in the educational work performed at the lower levels. In most contexts, this legislation takes the form of educational acts that are followed by regulations and national curriculum guides. Apart from those formally codified ways, states also use informal means of steering educational settings (Moos, 2009). The Nordic countries are known for their comprehensive education policy frameworks where the emphasis is on educating as a process and a means to develop the whole person to function in democratic and social settings (Moos, 2013a). This framework has increasingly been influenced by the transnational emphases of New Public Management and neo-liberalism. It has resulted in technocratic homogenization where setting standards and measuring outcomes on a “global set of criteria” is stressed (Moos, 2017, p. 163). This has been followed by a change in emphasis in steering education at the national level which appears to be changing what leadership focuses on at the municipal level in the Nordic countries (Nihlfors Johansson, Moos, Paulsen & Risku, 2013).

This study deals with the compulsory school level. The purpose is to explore educational governance in Iceland by identifying the roles and responsibilities that national legislation imposes on municipalities in terms of educational leadership. The research question is:

- What educational roles and responsibilities does Icelandic national legislation emphasize concerning the educational leadership of municipalities?

In order to answer this question, relevant laws and regulations are analysed. The findings are examined with regard to significant educational leadership practices as well as policy and recent political development concerning educational governance in Iceland.

### **Levels and sources of educational leadership**

Leadership in the educational sphere is believed to have the potential to work both as an impetus for releasing capacities that exist in the organisation (Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2008) as well as a link for joining the different factors that influence student learning (Louis et al., 2010). Thus, leadership can boost capacities within the schools and provide a channel for different factors to reach the students. A key factor in this synergistic success is to enable the contribution of each of the different groups belonging to the school community, namely, states, districts, principals and other school leaders, teachers, students, and parents (Louis et al., 2010).

As Moos, Paulsen, et al. (2016) explain, the municipalities, the schools, and the state system are linked in educational governance and together they shape the national educational governance institution. However, they work relatively independently from each other. Leithwood, Louis, Anderson and Wahlstrom (2004) and Louis et al. (2010) provide insight into how different sources of ideas concerning leadership and other practices at the state and district levels influence conditions at the school level. Their theory presumes that differences in student learning are a function of the capacities, motivations, and commitments of school personnel; the features of the school and district settings in which they work; and the external environment, such as nationwide state policies.

Governments are believed to use oblique forms of power in multilevel settings to lead education. These oblique forms of exercising power and leadership have been described as hard and soft forms of governance (Moos, 2009). Hard governance relates to passing laws and regulations that impose certain actions upon the lower levels. These are considered to be of fundamental importance for building a unified structure for educational systems at the national and local levels. Soft governance relates to non-binding rules and indirectly influencing people's thinking and their understanding of themselves and the world through, for example, discourse, procedures, and guidelines (Moos, Johansson, Paulsen, Strand & Risku, 2016). Since the goal of soft governance is to indirectly influence people's core values and beliefs it is considered a powerful way of leading. It is increasingly used like other governance structures that are influenced by New Public Management ideas (Moos, 2009).

Neo-liberalism and New Public Management have gained global dominance in shaping education systems in the last several decades. They emphasize outcomes and standards and an education largely based on competition, comparison, and accountability. Regarding leadership, it means putting an emphasis on managerial procedures and hierarchical structures that support those features. As its ideology is built on the idea that the lower levels cannot be trusted properly to fulfil their duties without close control, one of the consequences is a breaching of trust between different actors at the school level, as

well as between the state-, local-, and school levels (Gunter, Grimaldi, Hall & Serpieri, 2016).

The origins for New Public Management and neo-liberalism are often seen as being the complete opposite of the Nordic education model. The Nordic education model originates from the Nordic welfare state model (Moos, 2013b) and the belief that the best way to educate children is by looking at the purpose of education from a comprehensive point of view, often called *Bildung* (Moos, 2013a). *Bildung* refers to character building with an emphasis on developing the person as a whole in, and for, democratic and social settings (Moos, 2013a). The Nordic welfare state model, together with comprehensive schooling, is believed to be fundamental to the way we approach school leadership and practice in the Nordic countries at the present time. Despite this general prominence, education in the Nordic countries has to a large extent been influenced by New Public Management and neo-liberalism (Moos, 2013b), resulting in increased emphasis on technocratic homogenization. That means that more emphasis is put into national and international outcome and performance standards, opening the educational system to competition and comparison, and increasing accountability demands (Moos, 2013b; 2017).

Furthermore, New Public Management and neo-liberalism have emphasized steering with soft governance on behalf of the states to shape the educational systems (Moos, Johansson, et al., 2016). The embodiment has, amongst other things, been to increasingly bypass the municipality level altogether while encouraging states to negotiate with schools directly without municipality involvement (Moos, Paulsen, et al., 2016). At the same time, it also seems that these philosophies are causing changes at the municipality level that influence the role and leadership of main agents, such as superintendents (Moos, Johansson, et al., 2016).

### **Educational leadership at the municipality level**

Louis et al. (2010) found that students performed better in schools where district leaders and principals work towards distributed and shared leadership. These findings are consistent with studies that indicate that shared leadership, that includes rather than excludes different actors, works better in educational settings than leadership originating from hierarchical leadership ideas (Leithwood et al., 2004; 2008). Louis et al. (2010) also revealed that the influence of district leaders was more indirect than direct. The conditions they provided contributed to principals and teachers feeling supported in their work, especially in aspects that research has linked with school effectiveness. A key component in this positive milieu is the establishment of trust amongst all parties.

Louis et al. (2010) matched the leadership practices of district leaders to a model consisting of four main leadership functions that have been identified as contributing to successful leadership in most contexts. These are: setting directions, developing people, refining and aligning the organization, and improving teaching and learning programs. They found that as district authorities matched these categories more closely, principals

reported greater feelings of self-efficacy, teachers improved through greater distributed leadership and enhanced professional development, and student performance at the school level improved. Since leadership that pivots around improving teaching and learning has been demonstrated to result in better student learning than other kinds of leadership (Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe, 2008), that category can be considered to be of utmost importance.

### **The Icelandic context**

There are two main levels of educational governance in Iceland: the state and local authorities (municipalities). The structure of Icelandic compulsory schools is determined in legislation set by the state in parliament (Compulsory School Act No. 91/2008), and a state policy is established in a national curriculum (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014a). Within this framework, the municipal authorities run their respective schools and are required to set their own educational policies based on this overall framework. The 72 municipalities in Iceland differ in size and population, ranging from over a hundred thousand inhabitants in the capital city to less than fifty in some sparsely populated areas. Accordingly, the context in which the municipalities operate differs considerably, dependent on population density, distances between residences, educational background, economic situation, and so on.

Iceland, like the other Nordic countries, has emphasised comprehensive education (Moos et al., 2013). However, during the last two decades, policy imperatives based on neo-liberalism and school-based management, mostly emphasized by right-wing governments, have dominated Icelandic politics (Sigurðardóttir, Guðjónsdóttir & Karlsdóttir, 2014). One step in this direction occurred in 1996 when the governance of compulsory education was transferred from the state to municipal control (Compulsory School Act No. 66/1995). This course of decentralization and empowerment on behalf of municipalities and schools has strengthened ever since (Hansen, 2013). However, this movement met with a setback during and after the economic crisis in 2008, followed by four years under a left-wing government; people started to question different fundamental values that underpinned education and decision making at the political level (Sigurðardóttir et al., 2014). This can be seen in the current national curriculum guides published in 2011, as they stipulate to a large extent the idea of *Bildung* with the main purpose of supporting children to become thriving citizens in a democratic and fast-changing world.

In 2013, a right-wing government took over and the Minister of Education, Science and Culture published a white paper on issues of concern for the first time in Icelandic educational history. It was the minister's answer to diminishing results in international surveys like PISA and pivots around education reform. In the paper, the minister proclaims increased leadership and steering on behalf of the ministry with regard to school reforms, especially in literacy education, with an emphasis on standardized tests, and transnational and public comparison between schools and municipalities. The paper stresses the importance of "strong leadership" on behalf of the ministry, with the ministry

as a strong leader of leaders as a means to fulfil its goals in education reform and ultimately be successful (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014b, p. 26). Its publication was followed by a national literacy covenant that is managed and organized by the newly established Directorate of Education. Then, at the end of the year 2017, a coalition government consisting of both left and right parties took over, making the future policy emphasis uncertain.

Little evidence exists for how the municipalities in Iceland have conducted their leadership roles and achieved their responsibilities following the changes of 1996. Even less is known about how the framework provided by the state guides and supports the municipalities in their roles. This paper is our first step to probe deeper into this interaction.

## Method

The purpose of this study is to explore educational governance in Iceland by identifying the roles and responsibilities that national legislation imposes on municipalities in terms of educational leadership. Official documents are analysed in accordance with Berg and Lune's (2012) stage model of qualitative content analysis. Regulations referred to in the Compulsory School Act (No. 91/2008) were read through. Relevant documents are listed in Table 1 in English (translation from Icelandic), in alphabetic order.

*Table 1: An overview of main legislative documents under study*

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Compulsory School Act No. 91/2008

Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Compulsory Schools:  
With Subject Areas (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture,  
2014a, originally published 2011)

Local Government Act No. 138/2011

Regulation on Compulsory School Pupils with Special Needs No.  
585/2010

Regulation on Evaluation and Inspection in Compulsory Schools and  
Municipal Councils Duty to Inform on School Work No. 658/2009

Regulation on Responsibilities and Obligations of the School Commu-  
nity in Elementary Schools No. 1040/2011

Regulation on School Housing and Playgrounds No. 657/2009

Regulation on Specialist Services of Municipalities for Preschools and  
Compulsory Schools and Pupils' Welfare Council in Compulsory  
Schools No. 584/2010

Rules on School Transport in Compulsory Schools No. 656/2009

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These documents were analysed both to search for specific words, such as *leader* and *leadership*, as well as for themes that emerged from the documents (Berg & Lune, 2012) and were relevant to the research question.

During the sorting process (Berg & Lune, 2012) ten themes emerged that were then reorganized and developed into six categories—to provide comprehensive and inclusive education for all; provide housing, facilities and structure; evaluate the schoolwork and make it public; develop educational policy and follow up on it; support professional and school development that improves teaching and learning; and, provide support to students with regard to learning and general well-being. In the following section, the findings are presented in a descriptive way.

## Findings

Municipalities, managed by municipal councils (Local Government Act No. 138/2011), must elect a school board that supervises and guides the schools on their behalf. Principals must see to the establishment of parents' associations and students' associations and of a school council that serves as a consulting forum between the principal and the school community on the school's affairs (Compulsory School Act No. 91/2008). Compulsory schooling is from the age of 6 to 16 for a minimum of 180 school days a year over a nine-month period. Education shall be free of cost for children and their families and operated by the municipalities.

The leadership role of the municipalities is never addressed directly in the legislation. Instead, it is addressed in words and phrases like these: *are responsible for*, *have the responsibility for*, *must establish*, *must operate*, *have the obligation to*, *must have*, *are to*, *shall*, and *should*. The municipalities' leadership role is therefore somewhat concealed behind the description of roles and responsibilities.

Leadership of school principals is the only leadership put in words in legislation, even though it is only mentioned once:

Every compulsory school shall be led by a [principal] who provides a direction of the school, provides professional leadership, and assumes responsibility for the school's work vis-à-vis the Municipal Council. (Compulsory School Act No. 91/2008, Article 7)

Municipalities are professionally and financially responsible for providing appropriate housing and educational equipment that supports the education and well-being of the students. They have the responsibility to provide infrastructures that facilitate this (especially school service), develop an educational policy that they and the school community endeavour to accomplish, and evaluate the outcomes of their schools. They are also responsible “for all cooperation” between compulsory schools and external parties, such as schools at other levels (Compulsory School Act No. 91/2008, Article 5). This has to be done within the parameters of an educational policy that endorses comprehensive and

inclusive education (Compulsory School Act No. 91/2008; Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014a). These roles and responsibilities are consistent throughout the legislation and will be explored in more detail in the following sections.

### **Provide comprehensive and inclusive education for all**

The educational policy endorses an inclusive and “comprehensive view of education” (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014a, p. 9) for all students (Compulsory School Act no 91/2008). The comprehensive educational policy pivots around six fundamental pillars: literacy, sustainability, health and welfare, democracy and human rights, equality, and creativity. Through this approach, education that develops “systematically the knowledge, skills and attitudes that strengthen the individuals’ future ability to be critical, active and competent participants in a society based on equality and democracy” (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014a, p. 5) is to be applied.

Policy demands that this type of education should be provided to all students and “their needs for education met in a regular, inclusive compulsory school, regardless of their physical or mental abilities” (Compulsory School Act No. 91/2008, Article 17). This includes students for whom Icelandic is not their mother tongue, students with health problems, emotional or social difficulties, and so forth. It can, therefore, be argued that the municipalities’ most fundamental educational leadership role is to make it possible for all children to study in their local comprehensive and inclusive school.

### **Providing housing, facilities and structure**

The playgrounds and the construction and maintenance of school buildings and facilities within the buildings are the responsibility of the municipal council (Compulsory School Act No. 91/2008). These facilities “must conform to the objective of ensuring the safety and well-being of pupils and staff”, including “suitable furnishings, acoustics, lighting and ventilation” (Article 20). The municipalities must also ensure that each school has access to a school library and provides school meals, school transport, social activities, afterschool centres and school health services. Further requirements are set down in the Rules on School Transport (No. 656/2009) and the Regulation on School Housing and Playground of Compulsory Schools (No. 657/2009) in consultation with the Association of the Local Authorities.

It can be argued that this responsibility of the municipalities is more pertinent to the managerial role of the municipalities than with leadership. Yet the laws and regulations (Compulsory School Act No. 91/2008; Regulation No. 1040/2011) require that the municipal council consults with the school board, the school council, the principal and the wider school community on the construction and maintenance of the schools and the playgrounds, which requires leadership actions on their behalf. This main task also requires an insight into the actual needs of students and school staff when it comes to resources for the schools.



### **Evaluate the schoolwork and make the result public**

External evaluation is stipulated as one of the main tasks of the ministry regarding compulsory schools, while this duty is partly delegated to municipality councils (Compulsory School Act No. 91/2008) and their school boards (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014a; Regulation No. 658/2009). It is the school boards' responsibility to conduct external evaluations of schools and report to the ministry, along with information on their operation, implementation of their school policies, and planned improvement. School boards must also make sure that their own external evaluations and the schools' internal evaluations are systematic and followed up on so they may lead to improvements. They are also responsible for making all evaluations public and assessable. This task is one of the clearest statements that appear in the documents and refer to the municipalities leadership role—or the possibility of providing leadership regarding various elements of schooling.

### **Develop educational policy and follow up on it**

Each municipality is expected to establish an educational policy, make it public to the local inhabitants and provide information to the ministry about the implementation process and plans for improvement (Compulsory School Act No. 91/2008). This educational policy should be acceptable to themselves and the school community; correspond to national laws and regulations; be adapted to the local context; capture the special characteristics that each municipality wants to highlight; be developed with the cooperation of all parties involved; and give space to each school to elaborate professional decisions, such as regarding each school's own policies and the school curriculum guide (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014a). The responsibility of developing an educational policy might be considered a domain that provides a pathway for the municipalities to exercise leadership, although it is not explicitly stated that way in the laws.

### **Support professional and school development that improves teaching and learning**

The municipalities are given responsibility for “the development of individual schools” (Compulsory School Act No. 91/2008, Article 5), while the ministry is to “support development work” (Article 4) in the schools. In the national curriculum, the responsibilities of municipalities' in this context are more blurred. Instead, the collective responsibility of the different parties involved—state, municipalities, school services, principals and teachers—is advocated as a key factor in developing both the school and staff. The principal is also accountable for the creation of a plan for lifelong learning in each school (Compulsory School Act No. 91/2008).

The professional development of principals and teachers is seen as a core element for implementing new pedagogical and educational ideas and maintaining organized, structured and steady school development functions (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014a). The staff should “have the possibility to participate in lifelong learning on a

regular basis in order to enhance their professional competence” (Compulsory School Act, Article 12) and take study leave paid by a fund financed by the municipalities. Life-long learning and professional development are therefore presented as the right and duty of teachers and principals and as a fundamental activity for professionalism and for school development (Compulsory School Act No. 91/2008; Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014a).

The most obvious pathway for the municipalities to provide professional development for staff as well as to support school development is by means of school services (Regulation No. 584/2010). Municipalities are to

ensure the availability of school services in compulsory schools, decide on their organisation, and seek to ensure that they can be provided within the schools themselves. School services comprise on one hand support for pupils and their families, and on the other, support for the work carried out in compulsory schools and for their staff. (Compulsory School Act No. 91/2008, Article 40)

The aim of school services is “furthering compulsory schools as professional institutions which can solve most problems that occur in school activities and to give school personnel appropriate guidance and assistance in their work” (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014a, p. 44). Support provided by school services for school staff is, for instance, counselling on teaching and caretaking of pupils with and without special needs, on schoolwork, innovation and improvement work and the work environment. The municipalities have freedom as to how they organize school services. They can run school services on their own as an independent unit, operate it together with other municipalities, or make service agreements with other municipalities, institutions or entities. The principal is responsible for taking the initiative to request the specialist assistance needed at any time (Regulation No. 584/2010).

Although it seems clear that the municipalities bear the responsibility of school development and professional development, the legislation had to be carefully searched by the researchers to map how it presents the municipalities’ leadership responsibility. The language used in the legislation, especially the National Curriculum, is vague concerning the exact role of the municipalities, using more common language on cooperation and joint responsibility.

### **Provide support to students with regard to learning and general well-being**

The importance of ensuring the well-being of students and ensuring that the work within the schools provides all students with the possibility to improve their educational performance is stressed in all the main policy documents. The municipalities are mandated to put infrastructures in place that support the schools to fulfil this task (Compulsory School Act; Regulation No. 585/2010; No. 584/2010). This infrastructure, as with professional development and school improvement, is mainly presented in the form of school services which should monitor and provide appropriate resources; provide appropriate evaluation tools; and diagnose students’ physical, psychological or social needs that affect their

learning progress and give counselling to staff on how to deal with those needs in the learning environment (Regulation No. 584/2010).

To guarantee the well-being of the students, municipalities are obliged to ensure that collaboration is in place between different parties concerning students with special needs or long-term illnesses. Such ancillary resources include school services, social services, child protection authorities and healthcare services. For this purpose, the municipalities are also responsible for “promoting good contacts between preschools, compulsory schools and upper secondary schools in the interest of continuity of schooling” (Compulsory School Act No. 91/2008, Article 40).

## Discussion and conclusion

In this section, educational governance in Iceland is explored by discussing the roles and responsibilities identified in legislation concerning compulsory schooling and municipal educational leadership. First, this is done in relation to significant practices for municipal educational leadership. Then it is done in relation to policy and recent political development concerning educational governance in Iceland.

### Municipal educational leadership in legislation and significant practices

The word *leadership* itself is hardly used in the Icelandic legislation we examined, and never in relation to the role of municipalities. Leadership in the legislation is therefore tacit and embedded in terms like *are responsible for*, *must establish*, *are to*, *shall* ..., and so on. This tacit stipulation of leadership highlights the value of this study. The main pieces of legislation under study were passed in 2008 and 2011 and are, thus, almost ten years old. This time-lapse might partially explain the absence of more explicit expressions of leadership in the legislation, but the importance of educational leadership at the state and local levels has gained increased attention in the last decade (Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Leithwood et al., 2008; Louis et al., 2010; Moos, Nihlfors, et al., 2016). These findings, therefore, make way for improving the current legislation with more leadership-oriented clarity in mind.

Despite this lack of clarity, the analysis of the legislation reveals that the leadership of the municipalities in Iceland is expected to be inclusive and shared (Leithwood et al., 2004; Louis et al., 2010) and should foster group goals, teamwork, and cooperation in its widest sense, including teachers, parents, and the wider community. Thus, it is to have the characteristics of distributed leadership and the potential to channel the synergic success that supports capacity building and student learning as put forward by Louis et al. (2010). The six categories that merged in this investigation correspond in many ways to leadership practices found to promote professional development within schools and boost student learning—that is, setting directions, developing people, refining and aligning the organization, and improving teaching and learning programs (Leithwood et al., 2008; Louis et al., 2010).

However, the relative vagueness of definitions and explanations of responsibilities between state and municipalities concerning teaching and learning programs and professional development of teachers and principals is a matter of concern. This allows space for the municipalities (and other parties) to transfer the responsibility onto another party, such as principals or teachers, or claim that this need has been fulfilled even though this is not the case. This might lead the municipalities, the individual teacher, or principals—or even the state—to become dysfunctional that would diminish the capacity development of the people involved (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). This conclusion echoes the findings of a recent report on the implementation of inclusive education in Iceland (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2017). It found the demarcation of responsibility between the local and national levels to be blurry regarding the implementation of tasks, and as a result, reforms see less educational progress. The state legislation could, therefore, be clearer on these issues.

The core element emphasized in the legislation is the idea of comprehensive and inclusive education, where the development of the student as a whole in democratic settings is the centre. In the light of the findings, we argue that municipalities are expected to provide leadership in ways believed to support comprehensive education and *Bildung* and that this leadership has in many ways the characteristics of its core elements. Those are, for instance, the emphasis on learning as a common process in democratic settings and for the benefit of not only the individual student and teacher but also for the common good (Leithwood et al., 2004; Louis et al., 2010; Moos, 2013a; 2013b).

Louis et al. (2010) suggest that leadership at the district level is most successful when it supports the principal and teachers in their work. It seems that Icelandic legislation promotes such an approach to municipal leadership as it aims at building an infrastructure that supports the principal and the teachers in their work within individual schools. Of concern in this context is that not all municipalities will be able to fulfil their legal roles and provide the desired leadership due to a lack of financial resources, professional experts, and so on. This is particularly relevant in sparsely populated areas. Sigþórsson (2013) supports this concern in his study on specialist services in preschool and compulsory schools in Iceland. This also seems to be the case in other Nordic countries (Moos, Johansson, et al., 2016). Accordingly, it seems reasonable to conclude that the capacity level of municipalities to provide leadership and support varies greatly. This especially accounts for professional development and improvement of teaching and learning—fields that are considered to be of fundamental value and importance for student education (Louis et al., 2010; Robinson et al., 2008).

In future research, it would be valuable to look into how municipalities (and the state) understand and execute their educational leadership roles, whether their understanding and execution is in line with the leadership functions the state emphasizes in legislation, and how it depends on the cultural, economic, and political context at different times.

### **Policy and recent political development concerning educational governance**

At the same time as legislation has shown an increased emphasis on *Bildung*, indicators of New Public Management and transnational influences are apparent, such as in the focus on decentralisation and external evaluations. It can be claimed that this double focus on municipal control alongside a focus on *Bildung* has been maintained in legislation without much other interference from the state. In that way, the state has placed greater emphasis on what Moos (2009) refers to as hard governance rather than soft. Yet, the ministry's increased emphasis on action following international surveys like PISA seems to be shifting the focus more towards soft governance. An example of this is a former minister's white paper (Minister of Education, Science, and Culture, 2014b) and the establishment of a national literacy program. What is happening in Iceland might, therefore, be similar what has happened in most of the other Nordic countries with regard to New Public Management (see Moos, 2013b). There the states have increasingly used soft governance to influence education (Moos, 2009).

Some of the actions, such as placing the operation of the national literacy covenant centrally at the Directorate of Education instead of giving this responsibility to the municipalities, might also signal the state's attempt to bypass the municipalities, a move that is more likely to weaken municipalities' educational capacity instead of strengthening it (Moos, Paulsen, et al., 2016). If and how this shift could be changing the leadership landscape at the municipality level, as it has done in some of the other Nordic countries (Nihlfors et al., 2013), is still to be investigated.

The clear emphasis on leadership and actions from the ministry presented in the white paper, compared to the non-mention of municipal leadership in legislation, adds to the uncertainty as to where educational leadership roles of the municipalities lie in comparison to that of the ministry. It also contradicts the otherwise robust emphasis on decentralisation and empowerment of the local level in legislation. This contradiction in policy could work against coherence between the state and municipal level. Such a situation is likely to diminish schools' capacity to handle reforms and threatens the educational possibilities of children (Fullan and Quinn, 2016; Louis et al., 2010).

The white paper is a policy paper of a minister that has now left the field and is therefore not in action as such. Yet, it still has much influence and will have for an unknown time, for example, due to actions that followed and are still at full speed, such as the implementation of the national literacy covenant and the establishment of the Directorate of Education. Moreover, the obvious emphasis in the white paper on technocratic homogenization (see Moos, 2017), such as comparison, competition, and transnational and standardised tests, speeds up the pathway towards New Public Management and neo-liberalism which slowed down following the economic crisis in 2008 (Sigurðardóttir et al., 2014). Thus, though the Icelandic school system has in many ways managed to articulate the ideology of *Bildung* in its legislation, it is influenced by technocratic homogenisation (in and out of legislation) to a degree that might prove to be a threat to current

and future students. This is something that has to be carefully considered in future legislation and policy and would need to be investigated further.

This research project draws into light that despite a certain stability in legislation, educational policy at the state level is vulnerable and very dependent on the political emphases at different times at the national and transnational level and even on individual ministers. This makes it more difficult, both for the municipalities and the state, to provide steady educational leadership. We suggest that the educational system would benefit from these findings by paying closer attention to the local level as an important entity for educational development. We propose that more attention should be given to coherence with regard to policy, leadership, and actions between the state-, municipal-, and school levels as well as within each level, in an attempt to improve educational leadership and student education.

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