

# Towards New Forms of Educational Leadership? – The Implementation of First-Teachers in Swedish Schools

## Introduction

Global processes are reshaping the educational systems of the Western world. The demand for higher standards, benchmarkings and ranking lists bear witness of increasing competition where education becomes like a product on a market (Resnik 2008). New public management models are implemented to govern schools and control teacher quality. In a Scandinavian perspective this has put pressure on school leaders and created a dilemma to balance the demands from a market-oriented discourse while maintaining a democratic educational culture (Moos & Møller 2003). Together with this comes the notion of accountability and that teachers are to be held responsible for low standards among pupils (Ingersoll 2011). The relationship between teacher quality and pupils' results and achievements is a common argument in international reports like *How the Best-Performing School Systems Come Out on Top* from McKinsey & Company (Barber & Mourshed 2007) and *Creating Sustainable Teacher Career Pathways* (Natale et al. 2013).

Today expert organisations exert a growing influence and play an important part in legitimating transnational curriculum governance and policy-making aimed at raising standards and increasing school achievements through measurement and external accountability (Nordin & Sundberg 2014 in press). Problem descriptions as well as suggested solutions on the global arena are prescribed for the national stage and for policy-making and implementation by actors in the local setting. Transnational trends of standard-based measurement, accountability and teacher professionalism for increased quality thus influence national educational policy and trickle down to district and school levels. In this case Sweden is no exception. A recent example that will be at the center of

attention in this paper is an extent reform on career services for teachers that I henceforth will refer to as "the first-teacher reform"<sup>1</sup>.

The first-teacher reform is unprecedented in the history of educational politics in Sweden and was part of a larger "package" of restructuring the national curricula and school system. It was launched by the government with the explicit aim to provide new career services for teachers – "first-teacher" and "lecturer" – and was put in effect in July 2013. In order to be appointed first-teacher a teacher certificate (and degree) and a minimum of four years of documented excellence in teaching is required. For a lecturer a PhD or Licentiate degree is necessary (Skolverket 2013). The government also chose to upgrade and radically expand it in a second step. A long-term goal is to raise the status of the teaching profession and attract more top-performing students to become teachers. The reform allows accountable authorities to create and shape the content of the services and to appoint teachers. The services are financed through government grants which mean a quite substantial salary raise for those who are appointed first-teachers. There are few restrictions and the descriptions of what first-teachers are supposed to do and this opens up for interpretation. As a consequence, there is a great variety between how the municipalities have chosen to implement the reform and to define the role of the first-teachers (Skolverket 2013).

What makes this reform so interesting is that it has introduced and formalised a new category of teachers involved with educational leadership and school improvement without any thorough consideration or analysis of implications for the leadership practice, development processes and the organisation and management of schools. Another aspect is that the municipalities have been given relatively free hands to design the roles of the first-teachers. In this paper I will present some tentative results from my ongoing research-project about the implementation of the first-teacher reform in a local context. My focus in this actual text is the relationships between actors on the different levels involved and in particular issues concerning leadership and school development. An overarching question is what happens to existing organisational structures and relations within and between different levels and sub-systems when new kinds of actors

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<sup>1</sup> The reform itself is named "career services for teachers" but the popular term used by politicians and in the media is the first-teacher reform. This is probably due to the fact that the vast majority of teachers are appointed first-teachers and that government funding mostly is directed towards first-teacher positions.

are introduced? By analysing policy documents and qualitative data from interviews and questionnaires from local authority administrators, principals and first-teachers I seek to answer two main questions:

- How do first-teachers describe and understand their role in the organisation?
- In what ways does the introduction of first-teachers effect the educational leadership of the principals?

Since the first-teacher reform is very recent – and in fact still in the process of being rolled out – my work here is largely exploratory, suggestive and will consist of preliminary findings. In order to analyse the research questions above I will use a theoretical and conceptual framework that provides a perspective on 1) the interdependencies between and within different levels and sub-systems in an organisation and 2) how formal leaders look at their role as leaders, their understanding of leadership practice and in what ways the leadership of others can be supported and encouraged.

## **Curriculum Reform and "Nested School Systems"<sup>2</sup>**

Before I move on to present the specific perspective on the school system for this study I want to make two points. The first point is that a curriculum is more than a collection of documents that are used to manage a country's school system. The curriculum embodies expectations, values, notions and views on the role of school in society expressed by the state authority (Wahlström 2009). A crucial aspect is therefore to frame the first-teacher reform within a larger context. In this respect the so-called frame-factor theory provides a perspective on how ideas and values on an overarching level – the society or ideological level – influence and shape the curriculum level and in the end the school level with its classroom context and the teaching (Sundberg & Wahlström 2012).

My second point is that the first-teacher reform illustrates the somewhat paradoxical character of the Swedish school system. On the one hand the system is marked by

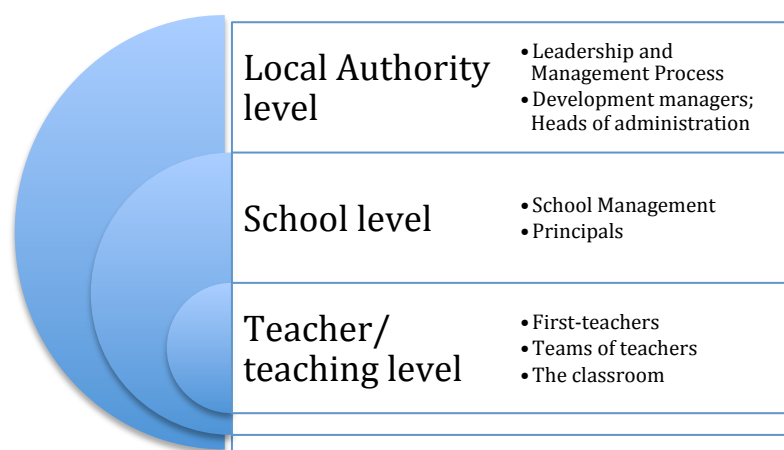
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<sup>2</sup> I owe thanks to my colleagues Jan Håkansson, Daniel Sundberg and Carl-Henrik Adolfsson whose ideas and works on the recontextualisation of curriculum reform, curriculum innovation in a local context and "nested school systems" have served as very important foundations for the theoretical aspects of this paper.

decentralisation – in fact Sweden during the 1990s swiftly changed from a centralised system to become one of the most decentralised within the OECD . On the other hand state control over the school did not diminish but metamorphosed. Instead of more direct and targeted reforms through legislation the governing strategies shifted character to more indirect control over the municipalities through audit and evaluation by state authorities. Researchers today speak of a process of "re-centralisation" (Englund 2012; Adolfsson 2013).

Over the last years the Swedish school system has experienced a series of extensive changes: new curricula, new school legislation, a new grading system and regulations for raising standards. Due to the high pace and frequency of state-initiated reforms over the last years, a lot of pressure has been put on local school authorities. Now, how can we study and understand a complex and multi-layered organisation as the school when it comes to the implementation of political reforms in a local curriculum context? In this study I will use a slightly altered and adapted form of Lauren Resnicks (2010) concept of "nested learning systems". The concept "nested school systems" will be used to describe the transfer and transition of the ideas and values embedded within the first-teacher reform through the organisation.

The perspective on the nested school systems is a three-level conceptual model describing the intermediating layers of the school organisation. Above all it complements the frame-factor theory because it draws attention to the intersection between the curriculum and the school levels. Furthermore it does not only provide an analytical tool for understanding a local implementation setting but also makes it possible to discuss the communication, interaction and content in reform processes vertically and horizontally in the different levels of the school organisation: local authority level, school level and teacher/teaching level. An important aspect is that the system consists of nested sub-systems, for instance teams of teachers, the classroom, the school management team, etc. The following model describes the general aspects of and the interdependencies in an opened nested school system (Resnick 2010):



Figur 1 The Nested School System – implementation arena for the first-teacher reform and sub-systems. Adaptation from Resnick (2010)

The sub-systems are shaped by specific conditions and constituted by their own internal logic. Even if they can be seen as separate entities there are interfaces between the systems where curriculum and reforms are transferred, translated and negotiated. Due to the various contexts, interests and relations within each sub-system, actors in these systems use different strategies and make meaning out of policy and reforms in their particular way. This is an essential aspect to keep in mind when it comes to exploring the arguments and views of district school administrators, principals and first-teachers, These are actors and stakeholders on different levels where the first-teachers actually constitute a totally new sub-system concerned with issues regarding educational leadership and school development. To conclude: The nested school systems allows us to highlight the interdependencies as well as the independence between actors and to grasp the particularities in processes of curriculum reform implementation in the local context.

A central and recurring concept in this text is leadership and I now move on to discuss the concept of "distributed leadership" which I will use as a lens for looking at and discussing the relationship between principals and first-teachers.

## Distributed leadership

A classical view on leadership is that it depends on certain characteristics, attributes and qualities within an individual. A leader might be someone with charismatic features or a resolute and vigorous person that generates respect. Against such notions of leadership

there are those who claim that leadership as practice cannot be seen solely as situated in and emanating from the leader as individual but rather as something relational (Pierce & Newstrom 2007) and where leadership is enacted by and stretched out over the people in an organisation (Spillane et al 2001; Leithwood et al 2007). These notions of leadership are prominent also in the Swedish research field where for instance Ann Ludvigsson (2009) puts forward the idea of "co-produced leadership" in her study on how principals and teachers understand each others thoughts and actions in every-day work. Other scholars like Helene Ärlestig (2008) and Monika Törnsén (2009) underline the importance of a leadership practice and structures that contributes to frequent communication between teachers and principals in matters concerning teaching and learning.

The shift of focus in leadership research is in many ways the result of asking the questions of "how?" and "why?" instead of "what?" regarding the practice of school leaders. In their work on leadership practice and its connection to the improvement of teaching and learning Spillane et al (2001; 2004) outlined and developed a distributed perspective on leadership practice from socio-cultural theory and concepts within activity theory and distributed cognition. According to Spillane et al "leadership practice is constituted in the interaction of leaders and their social and material situations" (2001, p. 27). Leadership is something that is co-performed. Such a holistic and systemic view on leadership practice has implications for the level of analysis; The school is the most suitable level for analysing leadership activity and not the individual level (Spillane et al 2001). This aligns with the ambition in this study to look at the relationship between the nested school sub-systems.

It is an undisputable fact that distributed leadership has been one of the most influential and contested concepts in research on educational leadership for more than over ten years (Harris 2012). The focus on the idea of shared or multiple leadership – that also has replaced more individual-centred conceptions of leadership – has resulted in a great number of studies. In brief, over the last years we have seen a booming trend of the usage of distributed leadership in research. One reason for this is that the concept has paved the way for new perspectives on leadership practice (Harris 2012; Harris 2013). At the same time there are critical voices. Some researchers question the empirical

evidence for distributed leadership (Harris 2012; see also Jones 2014) and the tendency to use it as a universal solution for managing and developing organisations. (Jones 2014). Besides these points, critics also argue that it is a "rhetorical" and politically correct concept which reflects the hegemony of accountability and a neo-liberal agenda on quality in global education policy. The reason for the boost of distributed leadership is that currently it is in sway among politicians, officials and school stakeholders and that "situated action" is a poor level for analysis (Corrigan 2013). To some point it is reasonable to agree that there exists a confusion and blurring about what distributed leadership actually means and how it can be defined in the vast literature on the subject with its examples from hundreds of schools, but on the other hand this makes it harder to reconcile with the opinion that there is a lack of empirical evidence.

One of the most important features within the framework of distributed leadership is that leadership practice involves multiple agents with both formal and informal roles and rests on the interaction of people in an organisation (Bennett et al 2003; Spillane et al 2004). An essential aspect is mutual trust and the following quote from Alma Harris (2013) captures both the salient features of the concept and the implications that a re-designing of an organisation according to the principles of distributed leadership may have on its various actors:

Distributed leadership implies a fundamental change in the way formal leaders understand their practice and the way they view their leadership role. Distributed leadership means actively brokering, facilitating and supporting the leadership of others. It does not mean, as some would suggest, that everyone leads or that everyone is a leader/.../Distributed leadership underlines that heads are only a part of leadership practice in any school as there are inevitably many other sources of influence and direction. (Harris 2013, p. 546-547)

Leadership practice is relational and there is an intrinsic logic and dynamic which is marked by negotiation and relies on different kinds of expertise. In particular the latter aspect of expertise is important because the first-teachers are teachers that have been formally appointed on the basis of documented excellence in teaching.

A general observation in research is that distribution of leadership functions and roles has a positive impact on organisational development and change (Harris 2012; Leithwood et al 2007; Leithwood et al 2009; Larsen & Rieckhoff 2014). In their comprehensive study on patterns of distributed leadership in a large urban school district in Canada Leithwood et al (2007) underlined – which is similar to Harris

conclusion in the quote above – the importance of facilitation and support from the formal school and district leaders. In particular the principals played a key role for the teaching staff through creating conditions and an allowing culture for developing their leadership capacity (compare Harris 2013). Leithwood et al come to the following conclusion:

Distributing leadership to others does not seem to result in less demand for leadership from those in formal leadership positions. However, it does produce greater demand: to coordinate who performs which leadership functions, to build leadership capacities in others, and to monitor the leadership work of those others, providing constructive feedback to them about their efforts. (Leithwood et al 2007, p. 63)

Leithwood's et al results on the role of and the implications for principals are important, especially from the point that first-teachers represent a new category of teachers which are (in general) assigned a leading role in improvement processes for schools and/or teaching. How do principals respectively first-teachers experience the conditions for this and how they are facilitated to lead? Another crucial and interesting result Leithwood et al present is that those among the teaching staff that were attributed legitimacy to lead and were recognised as leaders by their peers possessed characteristics and qualities that are typical for principals and formal administrative leaders (2007). This raises questions about how the views on the role and attributes of the first-teachers from the perspective of local authority representatives, principals and the first-teachers themselves.

## Methods and Material

As has been said previously the results presented in this study is a part of a larger ongoing research-project concerning the implementation of the first-teacher reform in a local context. Before I turn to the particular methodological aspects of the present study I will give a very brief presentation of this project. All in all, five municipalities take part in the project. They are between small to medium-sized in terms of the number of inhabitants:

<i>Municipality</i>	<i>Inhabitants</i>
A	26 500
B	30 000
C	40 000
D	65 000



E	86 000
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Each participant follow an individual time plan and structure in the project but the overall research design is that two major "blocks" of studies are carried out. The first block aims at mapping the implementation of the reform from the visions and strategies, recruitment, management, organisation and processes on the different levels in the school organisation. Furthermore the different expectations and conceptions of the introduction of first teachers on separate levels are investigated. The second block is concerned with results and implications for teaching and learning, that is concrete examples from the work of first-teachers. In this final part of the project, successful examples and factors for the improvement of teaching are used for working with school development.

The empirical material for the study conducted here comes from the first of the two blocks described above. It consists of three categories of material: documents produced by the local authority, interview transcripts and qualitative data from questionnaires. I mainly draw from the empirical data collected through the interviews and questionnaires with development managers, heads of administration, principals and first-teachers<sup>3</sup>. Considering the aim to study notions, views and beliefs among different actors in a leadership practice this study exclusively methods for qualitative inquiry and data are used, a very common approach in leadership studies (Bryman 2004).

Representatives from the local school authority and principals have answered questions about what their expectations on the first-teachers are concerning collegial work and improvement of teaching, what they think are the primary role for first-teachers, how they experience the relationship between the principal and the first-teacher and what challenges they see for the first-teacher and the organisation. In interviews with first-teachers similar questions have been asked and the focus has been on how first-teachers look at the conditions for their assignment, their role in the organisation, the main challenges they encounter, in what ways their position and work have an impact on their colleagues, the relationships to principals, colleagues and pupils. Besides using

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<sup>3</sup> The participating municipalities have chosen different forms of taking part in the research-project: a "lighter" version consisting of interviews with representatives from the local authority combined with questionnaires to principals and first-teachers or a series of in-depth interviews with all mentioned categories.

qualitative interviews and questionnaires I only to a minor extent have performed a document analysis of visionary and strategic documents, organisational charts and descriptions and assignment descriptions for the first-teachers. These documents give some clues about the impact on the relationship between first-teachers and principals and the image and notions of the organisation.

By using a combination of methods the aim is to collect a wide range of qualitative material and perform a systematic analysis of how different actors and stakeholders involved in issues concerning leadership and school development express their expectations on the first-teachers and how they perceive implications of the first-teachers as new actors within and between different sub-systems.

### **First-teachers about their role in the organisation**

When asked about the reasons for wanting to work as first-teachers the over-all answer is a deep interest in the improvement and development of teaching. There is a wide range of motifs within this argument: personal grounds for improving the own work, general arguments concerning subject-matter teaching, supervising a colleague or working with a team of teachers. In this respect many first-teachers express hope that their colleagues will see them as a "catalyst" for improvement processes that both teachers and pupils will benefit from. Some refer to the possibility to receive a mandate from the principal and legitimacy within the organisation to produce new ideas and lead projects. Few mention that the appointment is seen as a confirmation of being innovative and constructive teachers and a reward for previous development work.

One of the duties first-teachers see as central in their role is collegial learning, that is taking the lead in organising activities for professional development among their colleagues. It is obvious that the first-teachers consider themselves to be responsible for initiating and promoting a learning culture and support their colleagues. Examples of tasks are mentoring, leading discussions on recent research, peer assessment, advising and helping teachers with particularly difficult pupils and so on. One first-teacher argues that it all is about "to make colleagues change the way they think, in some cases how they teach but also to make them turn their questions inwards from time to time instead of always directing them outwards". A number of first-teachers claim that they finally

feel they are in a position that will allow them to make changes and to make a difference, especially within areas where principals or their teacher colleagues lack both time and resources.

Besides the strong emphasis on being a mentor and support for teams of teachers or single teachers the first-teachers express that they look at themselves as significant partners to the principals. Here they stress that school leaders must underline the importance that other teachers participate and that they sanction and legitimate the assignment of the first-teacher in front of the staff. In addition to this first-teachers call for a firm leadership with explicit and reasonable assignments. It is of the outmost importance that the school management are perfectly clear about what they expect from their first-teachers. Confusion and uncertainty about the purpose and nature of the assignment will create an extremely complicated situation at all levels in the school.

An interesting remark is that first-teachers to a great extent seem to have an unclear picture of their relationship with the principal regarding leadership and mandate. Most likely this is due to the fact that the reform is new, but on the other hand it is obvious that first-teachers have difficulties in finding their position and role within the organisational structure. This is how one first-teacher describes the feeling to be caught in between different notions between the local school authority and the principal:

It has been quite a lot of difficulties to stand between the expectations from the school and the expectations from the local school authority. The school management has considered it a way to reward skilled teachers to work with something they are good at while the local authority has totally different expectations where the focus more is to visualise the process, report, analyse and so on/.../Then you receive different signals from the local authority and school management about deadlines, what you ought to work with and who is responsible for what.

The example from the first-teacher above illustrates how first-teachers sometimes can feel like a "satellite", separated from but in orbit around the leading structures of the organisation. Another dimension which relates to this is the feeling of loneliness, or as one first-teacher puts it: "From time to time I feel like I am the only one to push things forward". To some extent disappointment is directed towards the principal and that the vague instructions regarding the assignment are accompanied with a tendency that principals tend to move over organisational issues to the first-teachers:

We haven't been given any conditions to perform our assignments in a good manner. No explicit time in our services, the services are occupied with other things when the

assignment is unclear. Principal is not distinct in communication with the other teachers what they can expect and which areas I am working with.

It is no overstatement that the need for legitimacy and a mandate from the school management is one of the main arguments concerning the conditions for the first-teachers assignments. However there is another aspect – which is possible to identify in the quote above – that is even more frequently mentioned: The importance of time for the assignment. There is great variation between the municipalities in this matter and this is probably one of the points where the high degree of freedom for the accountable authorities to design and shape the assignments becomes most apparent. In brief: some municipalities provide the first-teachers with a specific amount of time as part of the assignment while others don't. This leads to unequal conditions and for those without explicit time the assignment is an extra work-load.

In order to be able to perform their tasks and lead development work the first-teachers call for what can be described as "time and places for change". Besides the time problem there is a lack of natural forums and places to meet and engage in activities that would promote professional development, collegial learning and so on. Such meeting places seem hard to establish and as a first-teacher puts it: "It is a precondition to have a natural arena for encounters if you are supposed to promote development". In alignment with the tendency that questions regarding the school organisation is pushed over to first-teachers (above) meetings have increased, but these are not primarily meetings about school and teaching improvement. In many ways the first-teachers feel that they have to create meeting places and this may strain the relationships to the colleagues. The fact that time is short – or even non-existent – does not only apply to first-teachers. Several first-teachers therefore call for extra time for their colleagues.

First-teachers are a new formal category of teachers and there are different reactions among the teaching staff. Many of the first-teachers state that colleagues at their school or in their team mostly are positive and happy about their appointment. In short they are welcomed as first-teachers. But of course they also encounter different kinds of resistance and have to struggle for initiating and leading development processes:

It is a challenge to achieve improvement/change because it isn't obvious that colleagues agree on what is necessary to improve or might not even share the view that something has to be improved. It requires a lot of work to get everyone to embark the train and to move in the same direction.

Apart from troubles such as motivating and creating incentives for improvement work there are however also examples of envy and suspicion:

I had hoped to be able to work more positively with the other teachers but it hasn't worked out well. The role as first teacher is associated with a whole lot of jante<sup>4</sup> and envy from the other teachers which more or less makes cooperation with certain individuals impossible with a substantial influence on the group.

It might be considered a relatively gloomy picture of how the first-teachers understand their role and one may ask for how long they will endure. However it is important to stress that first-teachers describe themselves as highly motivated and that they really appreciate their assignments. Very often the first-teachers refer to the fact that the reform is new and that neither the organisation nor the principals and colleagues have had time to adjust. Initial difficulties were to be expected, but first-teachers also can express a solid belief in what the future might bring:

In five years or so I believe that first-teachers are an evident part of schools. I think and hope that they finally have brought research into schools in a way that doesn't come naturally today. We have already begun the journey but the more we become, the wider the impact we will have.

There are examples of first-teachers that have begun working with other first-teachers. Thus networks are created that stretch out over schools and it is an interesting development. Not all municipalities have these networks but regardless of this first-teachers point at the necessity to be able to work with a fellow or in a team of first-teachers.

## **Implications for the educational leadership of the principals**

The general views from heads of administration, development managers and principals are that the implementation of first-teachers 1) doesn't directly change the formal responsibility of the principal to act as educational leader, and 2) means great opportunities for principals and schools to improve teaching and to make a difference for both teachers and pupils. However there are also aspects and arguments in the interviews that to some extent point in other directions. It is possible to identify views that might indicate a changed role for principals and shifts within the leadership practice, especially in a long-term perspective.

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<sup>4</sup> "Jante" refers to the Danish-Norwegian author Aksel Sandemose's "The law of Jante" which in a Scandinavian context means that you should not think that you are something special. In an Anglo-Saxon context "Tall poppy syndrome" is an equivalent.

A major impression from listening to representatives from the local school authority and principals is that the first-teacher reform is welcomed as a way of working with internal changes and improvements. A head of administration argues that the local school authority "have provided the principals with a tool box for developing their schools. They now possess the tools in order to be educational leaders without having to do the craft themselves". Furthermore the first-teacher is regarded an expert that the principal can ask and instantly receive a correct answer. In some cases first-teachers are assigned more administrative tasks where an example is one principal who consider them "a great help in planning teaching groups".

A recurring point is that there are no direct consequences for the educational leadership of the principals in terms of handing over authority, rather they express the positive effects in terms of having received a support and someone to discuss different development projects with. Even if first-teachers are involved and may be responsible for defining areas of improvement it is always the principal who decides on and distributes the assignment. A number of principals admit that they probably could have been more explicit about the specific tasks for first-teachers and that they haven't participated actively in their work. The following quote from a principal illustrative some self-criticism and indicates that principals as educational leaders not always are as involved as one might expect:

Two of the first-teachers have been working together with a group of teachers that meets every week. Here we as principals haven't been directly involved. That may be a disadvantage. We ought to be more engaged in monitoring./.../ We should also evaluate the relationship between the local authority and the principals so assignments are distinct, so that the first-teachers don't experience a double rule. We as principals own the process but are supported from the local authority.

The majority of principals stress that they as educational leaders must encourage and equip the first-teachers with the proper means to carry out their work. One aspect is the matter of trust och confidence. The first teachers are said to hold a strong mandate from the school management and they must feel that the work for changes and improvements is something principals and first-teachers do together. Added to this is the significance of first-teachers working together and that principals must promote and help them to find time for cooperation.

While the principals authorise the work of first-teachers they can also identify weaknesses and potential risks like "shortcomings in leadership, to be able to mentor and have the courage to question habitual patterns". It is also obvious that there are examples of principals that look at the role of first-teachers to have a more administrative role and that the conditions for working with more content-specific issues are up to the first-teachers themselves:

How the first-teachers have been received is much depending on personality and the mandate among their colleagues. The expectations seem to differ, but one expectation is that they are supposed to create structure among such things that don't quite right function and then it concerns structural issues, like creating groups. Expectations on the development of teaching varies among the teachers.

Even if principals and representatives from the local school authority in general share the same positive image of the first-teacher reform there are examples of principals who are concerned. One dimension that is described is that some principals were critical towards the thought that everyone of the first-teachers were supposed to have assignments and be responsible for development projects. The idea that certain "experts" should take over was not appreciated.

Another example which reveals criticism and concern about the reform has to do with the consequences for principals as a professional group. An argument is that the first-teacher reform primarily attracts those among the teaching staff with leadership attributes. These teachers are highly motivated and engaged in school and teaching improvement. It is not only new, challenging assignments and development projects that attract but of course also the substantial raise of the salary. The latter aspect is regarded problematic because some first-teachers receive a higher pay than the principals. In this respect there is a great concern that the future recruitment base for school leaders and principals is drained and a higher degree of principals will quit their jobs.

As said previously, there is a strong conviction that principals maintain their position as educational leaders. Nonetheless it is possible to identify some differences between the municipalities in terms of school management. In some of the municipalities first-teachers are included in the school management team, while they in other cases are considered not to be in a position to take part in over-all plans and decisions. An example of the latter comes from a principal who expresses: "I am the one who has the

educational leadership. I really don't hope and believe that they [the first-teachers] should take over". In the first case principals are clear about that they are the educational leaders but they stress the importance of having the first-teacher close to the management structure and that "the principal don't have to work with every case".

Finally, there is an aspect that in some extent indicates that heads of administration, development managers and principals can see eventual changes in the educational leadership in the future. They believe it is too soon to be specific about this and draw any conclusions because the reform is so new. One development manager states that "shifts [in the leadership between principals and first-teachers] will probably first be able to see in a long-term perspective". A key factor is believed to be education for the first-teachers. They require time for deepening their competences in for instance mentoring their colleagues. Another crucial point raised is that the assignments of first-teachers must be remodelled and that they most likely might be differently shaped in a few years.

## **Final comments**

In this study I have presented some tentative and indeed preliminary results on the implementation of the first-teacher reform in a local context. My focus has been on the relationships between actors on different levels, mostly principals and first-teachers. It is evident that the actuality of the first-teacher reform makes it hard to draw any firm conclusions. In this closing part I will highlight and discuss some particular points.

First-teachers have difficulties in finding their position and role within the organisational structure. There are examples of them feeling pressured between the local authority and the principal. Out from the model of the nested school systems (figure 1), at which level of the organisation should we then place them? The most obvious choice is to put and describe them as a sub-system within the teacher/teaching level. After all they engage in mentoring and supporting their colleagues and operate within teams of teachers. But as we have seen first-teachers work closely to the principal – and in some cases close to the local authority – and schools even include the first-teachers in the school management. A trend that I only have mentioned briefly concerns the emergence of groups of first-teachers in the shape of networks. Especially



this is something that is worth looking further into as the municipalities more fully have implemented the reform. How might these influence the interfaces between the three different levels in the nested school system?

While my first point has to do with the first-teachers position in the nested school system, the second point concerns leadership practice. Principals don't experience any direct changes for them as educational leaders due to the implementation of first teachers. They don't directly see that they distribute leadership functions, instead the principals in many ways express a view where they can be regarded as "facilitators", creating conditions for the first-teachers to develop their leadership capacity (Harris 2013; Leithwood et al 2007). When first-teachers begin working in networks that stretch out over the own school they not only create arenas for exchanging ideas and professional support but something that promotes the forming of a common identity. Furthermore first-teachers will have a more detailed insight than principals in conditions at other schools. They can argue for changes and resources on a well-informed basis and challenge the authority of principals, not solely out of being experts in specific fields. From out of the perspective of the nested school system first-teachers as a sub-system forming in between – or if you wish parallel to – the levels of local authority and the school level might be influential. They may exert another kind of leadership practice within the collaborative dimension of the network.

All in all, first-teachers might gain a collaborative advantage for working with improvement processes and to exercise an educational leadership that cut across schools. It is too early to say anything precise about such a development but if we hypothetically suggest that it would become a salient feature of the municipal school organisation the question is if this paves the way for what can be called *a networked educational leadership*?

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