Chapter 6
Sweden: Centralisation and Decentralisation as Implementation Strategies

Mikael Holmgren, Olof Johansson, and Elisabet Nihlfors

6.1 Introduction

In the post-war period, the Swedish social democrats established what has later come to be referred to as the *Nordic model* of welfare provision. Where many other affluent democracies put their faith in the market or the family, Sweden was committed to an expansive state, comprehensive social citizenship and universal, egalitarian and impartial welfare institutions (Esping-Andersen 1990). Policy was to be formulated at the national level through negotiation between leading politicians and representatives of major organised interests, implemented by neutral, rule-following civil servants and carried out by local authorities and professionals in the municipalities. In education, the social democratic project was translated into a comprehensive school system for all children up to the age of 16, formally introduced in 1962 along with compulsory school attendance. Where the municipalities had previously had a great deal of leeway, they now had to observe detailed laws and regulations. With common standards and the state as a financial backer, education for everyone was to pave the way to a more equal society (Lindensjö and Lundgren 1986).

The national directives would prove more difficult to implement than initially anticipated. In response, the 1970s saw the beginning of a gradual unloading of decision-making authority from the national to the local level, leading to revised curricula in 1980 and a new education act in 1985. Securing equality in education remained a

M. Holmgren (✉)
Department of Political Science, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden
e-mail: mikael.holmgren@gu.se

O. Johansson
Centre for Principal Development, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden
e-mail: olof.johansson@pol.umu.se

E. Nihlfors
Department of Education, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden
e-mail: elisabet.nihlfors@pedag.umu.se

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primary objective and key justification for preserving central control over resource allocation, but emphasis had shifted from detailed regulations to frameworks and goals. Although many of the reforms that followed in the 1990s were modelled after the market and aimed at inviting private interests and competition, the social democrats typically offered little resistance (Englund 1996; Blomqvist and Rothstein 2000; Arnesen and Lundahl 2006; Pierre 2007; Jarl and Rönnberg 2010). The political discourse that emerged was a mixture of economic, democratic and pedagogical ideas, especially focused on the promotion of freedom of choice, increased citizen participation and further transfer of authority from the national to the local level. In Hirschman's (1970) classic terms, ambitious reformers were now intent to see the last remains of centralised planning replaced with a system where stakeholders had ample opportunities to both *exit* the system and to *voice* their concerns. To this end, there were three especially significant developments (Holmgren et al. 2012): the decision to allow parents and students to select a school of their own choice; the heavy promotion of independent schools, that is, schools free of local political control but financed through tax money; and the introduction of local school boards with parent participation in traditional public schools. All three regulations were mandated by the national parliament but, crucially, layered on top of a core structure of local government largely controlled by local branches of the established political parties.

The restructuring of education and several other core policy areas that occurred in Sweden throughout the 1980s and 1990s has led some observers to declare 'the fall of the strong state' (Lindvall and Rothstein 2006). However, the past decade of educational reforms has seen both social democratic and liberal-conservative government coalitions hard at work on bringing the state back in. Equality in education is once again invoked to justify national regulations and state interventions; new procedures for screening, contract design, reporting requirements and monitoring have been enacted; and inventive exercise of soft power is coupled with traditional strategies for command-and-control. Whereas the 1990s saw considerable efforts to promote marketisation and network governance, recent reforms have in large part been aimed at clarifying and strengthening hierarchical relations.

The chapter develops in four parts. First, we provide an overview of the formal governing structure at the local level, focusing on how authority previously held by the state has been delegated to the municipalities and independent schools. Second, we examine some of the steering mechanisms enacted at the national level to control the performance of local actors. Third, we consider the role of educational leadership in the current system. Fourth, and finally, we assess the implications of the reforms for the distribution of power between the state, the municipalities and the schools.

6.2 The Municipalities and Independent Schools

Swedish education currently consists of five parts: (1) preschool, (2) one-year preschool class, (3) nine years of compulsory and comprehensive school, (4) three years of upper secondary school and (5) adult education. In all five parts, the state

now governs partly through goals and partly through detailed regulations, but also by scrutinising both inputs and outputs. The municipalities and independent schools, meanwhile, are expected to follow regulations and fulfil the national goals but also to individually adapt to local conditions and provide schools with support for improved student performance. Curricula are developed at the national level, but decisions concerning areas such as administrative organisation, recruitment, resource allocation and school profiles are to a considerable extent left to the discretion of politicians and professionals at the local level, although with the important caveat that local objectives must not conflict with national objectives.

In practice, the Swedish state has of course always been dependent on decisions made at the local level to carry out and implement national policy (Lindensjö and Lundgren 2000), and historically, the expansive Nordic welfare states have also typically come equipped with quite expansive systems of local government (Sellers and Lidström 2007). But in contrast to the post-war period, the local level is now formally expected to not just implement policy but also to formulate policy. Several arenas and actors are involved in the process, the most central of which are the municipal boards with their appointed politicians; the independent schools and staff with their own boards and appointees; and the public schools and staff, who also have the opportunity of establishing their own school boards with local stakeholders. From a simplified macro-perspective, the state thus delegates decision-making authority through two subsystems: one where individual schools are accountable to a municipality, which in turn is accountable to the state, and another where individual schools are accountable to an independent school board, which in turn is accountable to the state.

6.2.1 The Municipalities

Swedish municipalities generally follow similar design principles as the parliamentary system found at the national level. As a consequence, they also enjoy quite high levels of discretion in comparison to many other countries (Lidström 2011). The governing of public schools begins with the citizens of a municipality electing a local assembly, *Kommunfullmäktige*, which controls the municipality budget, sets local tax levels and appoints the municipal executive committee, *Kommunstyrelsen*. The executive committee is typically assisted by a number of municipal boards, *Kommunnämnder*, that cover most of the day-to-day activities; although some municipalities have instead opted to have working groups that are under more direct control of the executive. Some board functions, including education, are mandatory, but it is also possible for the assembly to establish optional functions based on local needs. The municipal boards are responsible for ensuring that all national goals are met and that everything operates in accordance with the decisions of the local assembly. The boards are comprised of politicians appointed by the assembly, though they need not be elected, and thus generally reflect the relative strength of the local political parties.

All municipal boards are attached to an administrative unit and thereby serve as the primary local policy-making arena. In the case of school boards, the unit is typically termed the school office and led by one or more superintendents, although the same function can also be covered by a more general office. The superintendent has traditionally been a central function of the local administration, but following the reforms of the 1990s the role has become more diffuse in virtue of being deregulated (Johansson and Lundberg 2002; Nihlfors 2003). The school office serves as the link between the municipal board and local schools but also generally acts as a representative in relation to independent schools and other external actors. Professionals in the administration are responsible for directing board policies to school headmasters, who in turn are responsible for ensuring that the individual school performs in accordance with the expectations of the municipal boards.

The municipalities are responsible for financing individual schools, but the actual funds come from taxes levied at both the national and municipal level. The amount of redistributed funding a municipality receives from the state is dependent on factors, for example, how many pupils they currently service. Each municipality is expected to tailor their resource distribution according to school needs, but in practice it often occurs through a lump sum based on student enrolment, and school headmasters must then make a case for why their school may require additional funding. Having to support and advertise their schools in competition with both independent schools and other public schools is a new experience for school leaders. The state can also redistribute means by launching directed national programmes aimed at, for example, skill development, computers or integration initiatives. These means can be directed to all or select schools. In such cases the state can intervene more directly in loc.l school governance, which might not always be supported by the school districts.

6.2.2 The Independent Schools

In the early 1980s, there were only some 35 independent schools in the entire country, with even fewer receiving official financial support and following the same regulations as municipal schools. The early 1990s saw the situation change drastically. The social democratic government had already proposed an agenda for reform in the 1980s but was reluctant to make any sweeping changes; independent schools were to remain a complement to municipal schools, rather than become a full-fledged alternative. When the Social Democratic Party lost hold of the government cabinet in 1991, however, the liberal and conservative parties mounted a vigorous campaign for freedom of choice, insisting that parents ought to have the right to choose the school their children attended (Schüllerqvist 1996; Green-Pedersen 2002). Today, all independent schools receive financial support and follow the same national regulations as public schools, making them *independent* only in organisational structures and fiscal operations. They are otherwise similar to public schools in terms of state regulations, curricula and standards of school inspections (Lundqvist 2010).

Striking the right balance between funding for independent and public schools has been a matter of ongoing debate and reform, however, and it has recently been changed by more specific regulation regarding the basic amount for each child and added means for children in need of special support. Although there are national guidelines concerning how to calculate the sum, the actual decision is still made on the municipal level. As a consequence, there are differences both in the processes leading up to local decisions and in the funding levels between municipalities. Independent school owners are currently allowed to make profit, but potential reform has been debated for some time, the central issue being whether it is reasonable to allow private organisations to profit from tax money.

The municipal school boards must be allowed insight into operations that fall within their municipality, but they have no formal authority to close or otherwise sanction individual independent schools. All independent schools must nonetheless fall under the jurisdiction of a board with functions equivalent to the municipal boards: that is, a board responsible for ensuring that all national goals are met. However, due to the large variety of possible association forms, these can differ greatly in structure, some a local and consist of parents or school staff, while others are external to the school itself.

6.3 How the State Steers Education

Although many decisions that were previously handled at the national level are now made by the municipalities, independent schools and school leaders, this should not be misunderstood as implying that the state has necessarily given up control over the operation (Lundahl 2005; Hudson 2007; Segerholm 2009). Indeed, while the initial launch and development of the new governance system throughout the 1980s and 1990s were accompanied by a strong rhetoric emphasising decentralisation, the state still retains the right to define the standards against which the operation is to be held, to pass judgement on whether the standards have been met and to impose sanctions if the standards are deemed unfulfilled. During the post-war period, formal accountability was mainly considered a concern for the politicians at the national level. The parliament represented the very will of the people, and the governing political parties deserved to both claim credit for success but also – through general elections – to receive the blame for failures. As decision-making authority was unloaded to the local level, however, so too were demands for accountability (Bergman and Strøm 2011). The need to balance increased separation of powers in education with increased centralised quality control was raised by a government-commissioned taskforce as early as the 1970s (Orring et al. 1974), and this balancing act has been central to much of the subsequent public sector reform.

Today, the Swedish government primarily relies on two central agencies to steer education: the School Inspectorate and the National Agency for Education, both populated by professionals but with politically appointed directors. In broad terms, the School Inspectorate is mostly tasked with oversight responsibilities, whereas the

National Agency for Education is mostly tasked with development responsibilities. For example, while the School Inspectorate performs site visits to individual municipalities and schools to determine whether conduct and ambitions are in accordance with national standards, the National Agency for Education oversees the development of curricula, national tests, grading criteria, legal prescriptions, teacher and school leader education, while also coordinating various networks and arranging national conferences on current research, political developments and *best practices*. In practice, however, the division of labour between the two agencies is more complex. The National Agency for Education is also expected to evaluate the efficacy of its instruments and oversee the collection and analysis of national statistics. The School Inspectorate, meanwhile, has increasingly adopted the role of consultant, following criticisms from local politicians and educational practitioners that too much focus was placed on areas in need of improvement, while too little advice was offered on how to improve these areas.

There are now a variety of mechanisms through which the state learns about the characteristics and behaviour of the actors acting on its behalf, including procedures for screening, contract design, reporting requirements and oversight.

Screening: Teacher education has historically been viewed as an important means of securing the quality of education. The current system of university-level teacher education has its roots in the 1970s but has been subjected to numerous reforms with the aim of keeping the skills and values of the profession aligned with the more general restructuring of education (Jarl and Rönnberg 2010). School leadership training in Sweden started in the 1970s and was developed into a 3-year programme within the National Agency for Education. In 1993, the programme was transferred to eight universities, but the programme was not allowed to give academic credits. This right was given to six universities in 2009. Today, headmasters are required to enrol in the national head teacher training programme within 1 year of being appointed. The headmaster training programme is divided into three 10-credit courses, focusing on school law, quality work and leadership, respectively. In contrast, teacher education is the de facto standard but not legally mandatory for being hired as a teacher. However, the new education act has introduced a teaching certificate required for grading students, which demands that teachers spend at least 1 year in service under mentorship and receive a written recommendation from the responsible school headmaster before being eligible.

Contract Design: Employer responsibility represents one of the areas where the state has most clearly retreated, with municipalities and independent school owners now technically holding the right to hire and fire staff. During the post-war period, wage negotiation was a matter between teacher unions and representatives of the state. Despite union resistance, the total responsibility for teachers was transferred to the municipalities in 1991, which meant that the central negotiations were moved to the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions. Later, individual agreements between employer and employee were also introduced. However, while municipalities and independent school owners have the right to organise their own administration and establish voluntary functions, such as the superintendent, other functions, like the school headmaster, are mandatory and entail regulated responsibilities and

qualifications. In practice, part of the contract has thus already been formulated at the national level prior to any local negotiation.

Reporting Requirements: Sweden has a long tradition of self-evaluation in the public services. Initially, the accelerated decentralisation of education in the 1990s was coupled with demands for locally developed school plans and yearly quality reports, detailing how the plans had been enacted. However, the plans were unimplemented in many municipalities (Johansson and Lundberg 2002), and in contrast the new education act only demands that local quality assurance takes place and is documented; it does not specify how. Schools and municipalities are still legally obliged to provide information regarding results and finance when requested, however, and the National Agency for Education collects yearly statistics on a number of measures that are made available for public scrutiny. Additionally, schools must administer standardised national tests in English, mathematics, Swedish and Swedish as second language in school years 3, 5 and 9.

Monitoring: Through most of the twentieth century, state inspections were handled by a single central education agency, tasked with both oversight and development responsibilities. The past two decades have seen an increase in the frequency and authority of inspections, however, and whereas these were previously typically performed after complaints, inspections are now also performed for pre-emptive purposes. Current inspection duties are handled by a dedicated agency, the School Inspectorate, through scheduled site visits to all municipalities and schools every 3 years and with written reports, which are made available for public scrutiny (Rönnberg and Segerholm 2011). Additionally, Sweden makes frequent use of external third party evaluators, perhaps most notably through long-standing memberships in transnational collaborations such as PISA, PIRLS and TIMSS, but also by financing research centres, doctoral students and other academic projects. Since the 1990s, attempts have also been made at promoting more decentralised forms of oversight, that is, 'fire alarms' as opposed to 'police patrols' (see McCubbins and Schwartz 1984). The most politically prominent example is the establishment of local school boards populated by parents and other stakeholders, but the new education act also awards individual citizens expanded rights to appeal decisions made by local authorities to the School Inspectorate.

If deviance is either discovered or anticipated, the state has the legal right to veto certain courses of action, before they are pursued, to punish behaviour which it finds undesirable ex post as well as to de-authorise municipalities and independent school owners alike. For example, applications to establish independent schools are screened by the School Inspectorate and can be denied if deemed inadequate, but permission to operate may also be fully revoked once granted following unsatisfactory inspection results. In contrast, the state has lost many of its direct veto powers in relation to the municipalities and has instead mainly relied on agenda control and earmarked allocation of resources. Until recently, the state could only withhold resources that would otherwise have been delivered, but the new education act also awards the School Inspectorate the right to impose fines on both independent school owners and municipalities. Moreover, the state does hold the right to seize full control of individual public schools for up to 6 months since the early 2000s. It remains to

be seen whether the latter is a credible threat, however, because unlike the closing of independent schools it is a right that has yet to be exercised.

6.4 Cross-Pressures and Challenges for Educational Leadership

As a governance function, the Swedish school headmaster has arguably been strengthened in recent years. One example is the increased formalisation of school leader responsibilities in national legislation, where the school headmaster has gone from being addressed 20 times in the Education Act of 1985 to 114 times in the new Education Act of 2010. We can see that the political elites expect headmasters to drive national policy into improved teaching and learning. But importantly, as defined by law, the role of the school leader is not a passive one: school leaders are to interpret the law and make authoritative decisions based on regulations and good professional judgement. The state wants democratic leaders who can involve teachers, parents and children in running the school as a democratic organisation. In that sense the importance of the function has been elevated to a higher level than in the past. On the other hand, Swedish school leaders are also by design expected to respond to multiple interests that may not always be in agreement with one another. The tensions between globalisation, nationalisation and localisation position schools of today in increasingly challenging situations, where the principles and practices of education are constantly under scrutiny. With the decentralisation of financial management and greater focus on quality control, Swedish school leaders have come to face an increased emphasis on performance and accountability (Moos et al. 2011; Gu and Johansson 2012). In order to successfully navigate in their role, headmasters must understand and act on at least three different arenas: the political arena, the arena of discourses and the arena of the future.

It is widely held that the policy stream from the national political arena has intensified during the past decade. However, quantitatively speaking the pace at which new reforms have been introduced by the Swedish parliament has been fairly constant since the 1980s. The main difference is rather the advent of international league tables and performance comparisons between countries, municipalities and schools. To be a credible alternative, a given policy must not only pass certain normative ideological checks within the ruling political elites but also demonstrably contribute to improving the nation's standing on the global market. It is in light of this new comparative context that the new control regime has been enacted – as a tool to measure reform impact and to steer the lower levels of administration towards improved results. In our surveys, school headmasters report that they need to work more with implementation of reforms and with pedagogical leadership in relation to teaching in order to improve student outcomes. They also generally feel more pressure from the state than from the municipality to manage and improve the organisation (Johansson and Nihlfors 2012). Survey evidence also indicates that the work of both the School Inspectorate and the National Agency for Education is

appreciated by most school leaders, and attitudes towards state inspections generally echo international experiences, where it is seen as legitimate and supportive rather than as oppressive and coercive (De Wolf and Janssens 2007).

On the arena of discourses, school leaders have to balance politicians, administrators and researchers and adjust to the different theories for success that are put forward. Some of the ideas are conflicting, and one trend is that they should be evidence-based in relation to effective learning outcomes. Our interviews show that superintendents and school headmasters' primary goal is stability and incremental improvement over time, not changes or processes that create turbulence and conflict. This leadership style has prospered in the past, but now it faces discourses that demand instant success. This focus creates a tension for the school leader in relation to the school culture among the teachers. One such very clear tension during the last decade has been the change in focus of what is characteristic of a successful school. During the Social Democratic Party administration, the focus was mainly on social goals, whereas the current liberal-conservative coalition has been vocal in its desire to refocus education towards good academic knowledge. These changes have been sought in relation to international discourses.

The last arena for the headmaster to work on is the arena of the future. Here, one obvious conflict for school leaders is the organisational focus on stability in order to provide good learning opportunities and, at the same time, work for adapting the organisation to expectations and demands of future challenges. One challenge is the drive for evidence-based learning, based on the idea that there is a right method of teaching and learning. Introducing, for instance, evidence-based learning or other methods of learning that are not familiar to the school staff can sometimes create unrest and threaten the stability of the organisation for the school leader. Another problem for the headmaster is that in a political organisation, the highest level, that is, the parliament and government, has the right and responsibility to develop and implement future visions for the country's schools. Sometimes, these visions are driven not by country-specific challenges but by theoretical ideas from abroad, which are often grounded in other cultures; one example of this is the present teacher legitimation. It has been a demand of the teacher trade unions for at least two decades, but now that it has been decided, it also fits nicely with international trends in education. School leaders have to relate to all these changes and decide how to implement them in an already established and often complacent education culture that does not always see the need or sensibility in the reform.

6.5 Discussion: Centralisation and Decentralisation as Implementation Strategies to Improve Swedish Education Governance?

From the mid-1980s to today, a great number of governance-related reforms have been decided by the Swedish parliament. There are different explanations for why this has taken place. Earlier, it was common that the central level made the plans,

negotiated with different stakeholders and reached a conclusion. The local level has always been responsible for executing these decisions. The earlier reforms have had some success in giving a new social and geographical distribution to education, but social background was and still remains the best predictor of educational attainment (Lundgren 2007; Gustafsson and Myrberg 2009). Previously, new reforms were financed by economic growth. From the beginning of the 1990s, the economic situation made this impossible, and the solution was to shift focus to efficiency, productivity and quality. The Swedish model of social welfare was undergoing a transformation.

One of the answers to this situation of economic constraints was decentralisation and more competition. At the same time, the national level put forward demands for more evaluation and control. This happened in a time when superintendents, who had played a central role for a number of years, were no longer regulated by the national level. Since 1990, the municipalities have made their own decisions regarding organisation and administration.

During the 1990s, the superintendents balanced between government and municipal interests and between political and professional responsibilities. This could be done by formulating their own tasks, firmly establishing them with the chairperson of the education committee and drawing up a strategy with the trade unions (Nihlfors 2003; Johansson and Nihlfors 2012).

Both superintendents and headmasters consider themselves to have a double assignment: one based on national regulations and the other on their employer, the municipality and the school board.

The words decentralisation, deregulation and an increase in loc.l independence had positive overtones in the beginning of the 1990s. These were joined by recentralisation, increased control and school development contracts that play a role in formulating goals for the fulfilment of the school sector's objectives to improve teaching and learning.

The changeover from control to administration presupposes a sender and a receiver. The government is the sender, and it has appointed receivers on different levels. The education system can be described as a loosely coupled system, where municipalities, schools and professional groups have been allowed relative autonomy in relation to the state (Weick 1976). On the national level the most important actors are the National Agency for Education and the School Inspectorate. The next level includes the school owners: municipalities and independent schools. Their boards are the responsible components, but the school law regulates the responsibility of the school headmaster. Most municipalities also include a special school board and a superintendent. This creates a special situation of power and control between the school board, the superintendent and the headmasters. We find that systematic evaluations and systemic feedback do not seem to be the effective control measures they were meant to be in the system. This may partly depend on a lack of knowledge and competence, but also on a lack of interest in making the most of the knowledge that is generated in individual schools.

As a final point we would like to suggest that there is a need for improvement in the relation between national and local levels concerning responsibility for the quality

of teaching and learning; this is so, because the quality of local Swedish schools is questioned from a national political level.

6.6 Facts and Figures

- Sweden has more than 9.5 million inhabitants in 290 municipalities, 15% of which are born outside Sweden.
- Schools are financed by taxes from both state and local levels.
- The Swedish *Riksdag* (parliament) and government establish the goals and guidelines for preschools and schools through i.a. the education act and the curricula.
- The education system contains preschool (1–5 years old), preschool class (6 years old), leisure time centres, compulsory school (7–16 years old), upper secondary school (duration: 3–4 years), adult education, folk high schools (independent adult education colleges), higher vocational education and universities and university colleges. They all have their own curricula or regulation by law.
- Parents and pupils can choose between municipal schools and independent schools. Schooling in independent schools should have the same goals as the municipal schools but may, for example, have an ethnic or educational profile. They are all financed by tax money and free of charge.
- There are more than 10,000 preschools (of which 27% are independent), 4,600 compulsory schools (16% independent) and 1,000 upper secondary schools (50% independent). Each school has, by regulation in the education act, a leader called a preschool leader or headmaster.
- In Sweden, there are 98,000 preschool employees (54% with academic training), 86,000 compulsory school employees (87% with academic training), 36,000 employees in upper secondary school (77% with academic training) and around 5,000 employees in adult education (74% with academic training).

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