

Superintendents as Boundary Spanners - Facilitating Improvement of Teaching and Learning

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Abstract	Article Info
<p><i>Superintendents, functioning as the local school boards' chief executive officers, play a fundamental role in improving schools. While teachers and principals have been given a prominence in students' learning outcomes, the perspective of superintendents as instructional leaders is often forgotten. Based on a nationwide survey of Swedish school boards the study investigates the boards' expectations of their superintendents to influence student learning outcomes. The basic research question is: How may superintendents as boundary spanners facilitate school improvement? Boundary spanning is used as a theoretical and methodological framework to explore how superintendents may facilitate the local school system to become a more tightly-coupled system and strengthen the organization's capacity of school improvement. The study's findings indicate that superintendents have significant opportunities to influence political decisions and school improvement. Superintendents may exert an indirect instructional leadership and thereby tighten the couplings between different hierarchical levels in the school system. In their boundary-spanning roles, superintendents are expected to prioritize managerial assignments, which is a time-consuming task. Because the</i></p>	<p>Article History: <i>Received</i> February 27, 2020 <i>Accepted</i> April 02, 2020</p> <hr/> <p>Keywords: <i>Superintendent, School board, Boundary-spanning, Instructional leadership, School improvement.</i></p>



superintendent is not likely to be criticized or dismissed because of poor student results, windows of opportunities opens up in their entrepreneurial role, and thus a higher likelihood of working more effectively as instructional leaders.

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Introduction

Educational leadership can be identified on different levels and in various shapes in the school system. Whereas normally the concept of leadership is associated with teachers and principals, it can also refer to leadership and management of pedagogical activities at the national and district level, i.e., by national agencies and superintendents (Uljens & Ylimäki, 2015). Educational leadership, on these different levels in the school system, has a fundamental role in school improvement (Honingh, Ruiters & Thiel, 2018).

Hence, this means that both the local school board and its chief executive officer i.e., the superintendent, are very important in school development. Both are parts of a vertical governing chain and can influence (act as “boundary spanners”) both upwards and downwards in the school system. In their roles as boundary spanners and through boundary-spanning activities, superintendents are assumed to be able to exert an indirect instructional leadership and thereby strengthen connections between different hierarchical levels in the school system.

Boundary spanning has been used as the theoretical framework in several studies about leadership on the micro-level in specific schools (Bradshaw, 1999; Coldren & Spillane, 2007; Goldring, 1990;

Millward & Timperley, 2010). Studies with a boundary-spanning perspective on educational leadership at the macro-level are, however, rare. It is that void that this study attempts to address. Based on a study of Swedish local school boards' expectations of superintendents (Rapp, Aktas & Ståhlkrantz, 2020), this study aims to develop a theoretical understanding of how superintendents as boundary spanners may facilitate the improvement of teaching and learning. Its research question is: How may superintendents as boundary spanners facilitate school improvement?

As its starting point, the study ascertains the Swedish school boards' expectations of their superintendents to influence student achievements and in the coming section then the role of the superintendent is ascertained. Subsequently, a theoretical and methodological framework is presented and, in conclusion, outcomes are discussed.

The Superintendent

Although there are differences between school boards, not only between but also within countries, superintendents' roles and working conditions nevertheless are generally comparable (Addi-Raccha, 2015). Superintendents all over the world share, for instance, a commitment to devolve responsibility for education to municipalities and school boards (Björk, Johansson, & Bredeson, 2014). From a transnational perspective, globalization has enabled educators to create a common international context and to nurture shared patterns of thinking (Björk et al., 2014; Sundberg & Wahlström, 2012). Policy changes and the New Public Management movement have during the recent decades increased the scope,



complexity and intensity of the superintendent's role (Björk et al., 2014).

Superintendents are now confronted by complex, fragmented and difficult demands since they are expected to sort out contradictions between goals, expectations, needs and resources (Risku, Kanervo & Björk, 2014). As a result of transnational transfers of educational reforms, superintendents in almost all countries are trying to find a balance in the interplay and conflicting demands between centralization and decentralization, which can be described as "a Gordian knot of centralized government control over education and strengthen local representative democracy" (Björk et al., 2014, p. 469).

The superintendents' roles have also become more political, since different stakeholders, politicians and media challenge education changes at the local level (Björk et al., 2014). As a result, superintendents have seemingly become more politically astute. Thus, we can assume that micro-politics is a critical dimension of superintendents' leadership. The micro-political processes and structures (i.e., management decisions, school board policies, academic programs and instructional practices) will define the school district's political culture, "which may account for stability and resistance to change as well as the district's capacity successfully to implement educational reforms" (Björk et al., 2014, p. 470). The micro-political culture (involving patterns of interests, ideologies, decision-making and power distribution as well as ideologies, interests, power sources, and networks) exerts a powerful influence on the capacity to implement educational reforms and meet expectations for outcomes.

2.1. The Superintendent's Role in the Educational System

The term “loose coupling” can be used to describe the absence of agreement between members of an organization about the outcomes that they seek and the prescribed ways these outcomes should be reached (Weick, 1976). When there are ambiguous goals and no consensus about how these goals might be implemented, the organization can be described as a loosely-coupled system. An example of this would be a school in which, whilst espousing improving student achievement as its goal, its principal and teachers do not collect, analyze or use achievement data to review and refine its teaching and learning programs (Millward & Timperley, 2009). A tightly-coupled school, on the other hand, is a school where the principal and teachers are firmly focused on improving the achievement of students. There is a clear focus on developing teaching and learning programs that “identified and addressed the needs of the learners, constantly monitored their performance by measuring the students’ learning, and adjusted teaching programs as necessary to continuously enhance achievement” (p. 142). In a tightly-coupled school system every decision, whether it involved the recruitment of staff or the purchasing of resources, focusses on how these decisions could enhance the learning outcomes of students.

2.2. The Superintendent – A manager in a Political Organization

Through New Public Management reforms in the public sector, expectations of superintendents, as well as principals, has increasingly been based on managerial ideals, at the expense of pedagogical leadership responsibilities (i.e., leading and managing student learning and school development) (Jarl, Fredriksson & Persson, 2012; Risku et al., 2014). Moos, Paulsen, Johansson and Risku (2016) argue similarly that the political expectations of



superintendents nowadays are concerned primarily with management issues and assessment of resources and outcomes. As a consequence of increased demands on superintendents to serve as managers, a variety of tasks have been distributed to principals and teachers (Björk et al., 2014; Risku et al., 2014).

Superintendents are crucial to the educational work and good governance of schools (Hardy & Salo, 2018). Uniquely positioned in the chain of governance, superintendents are well-placed to “connect the top apex of the municipality (i.e., school district) organization with the operating level of schools” (Paulsen, 2014, p. 407). The superintendent’s leadership role is quite complex (Björk et al., 2014). Superintendents work in a highly political system with varying local contexts and across multiple fields with many different stakeholders (Hardy & Salo, 2018; Johansson & Nihlfors, 2014; Paulsen, 2014; Paulsen, Johansson, Moos, Nihlfors & Risku, 2014; Rapp, 2011). The superintendent is thereby placed at the interface between political and professional demands and the responsibilities towards school principals and teachers. The superintendent’s position can further be contextualized as in the “crossfire” between state demands for external control and the demands of local politicians for autonomy and democracy (Paulsen et al., 2014). Superintendents in practice are forced to perform a balancing act.

Although superintendents under the Education Act stipulations have the same mission and responsibilities, because of local contexts, cultures and politics there is a variety of ways that Swedish superintendents actually work in their local school districts/municipalities (Johansson & Nihlfors, 2014). In Sweden, superintendents experience high levels of autonomy and a great deal of discretion in defining their own priorities and duties. They do not

perceive that politicians interfere in their work and enjoy considerable autonomy (Johansson & Nihlfors, 2014).

Even if superintendents have a crucial role in the success of implementing educational reforms and school improvement, the impact of the local specific context cannot be neglected (Honingh et al., 2018). The superintendent's capacity to make a difference is dependent on multiple and diverse factors such as cultural norms and values of the society, the external milieu, their personalities and the organizational context (Björk et al., 2014). Differences between school boards, in turn, have an impact on how the superintendent interprets and implements educational reform policies as well as the superintendent's role and daily work.

2.3. The Superintendent and the School Board

Over the last decades school governance has become increasingly decentralized, which has resulted in a stronger emphasis on local school boards' responsibilities for managing schools (Honingh et al., 2018). Responsible for guaranteeing quality, monitoring results and intervening if needed, school boards have a central position in educational governance. Although boards are accountable for the performance of their schools, there seems to be little evidence of a relation between school boards and educational quality (Honingh et al., 2018). The boards possible influence is essentially indirect, whereas the superintendent's function is key to school improvement by "keeping the board aligned to all that takes place in the school" (p. 11). The connection between the school board and superintendent is however of great importance, due to students' learning outcomes (Honingh et al. 2018).



Even though evidence about school and student performance has been more transparent and more easily available and even though parents and other stakeholders have become more demanding regarding educational quality, school improvement has not been a priority on school boards' agenda. Furthermore, the boards do not appear to have high expectations of superintendents concerning school improvement and improvement of teaching and learning (Rapp et al., 2020). We get a completely different picture when the superintendents themselves are asked to state what they think the school boards expect should be their most important assignments. Outcomes from the nationwide study conducted by Johansson and Nihlfors (2014) showed that almost all Swedish superintendents think that school improvement is the school boards' highest-ranked expectation and they themselves consider leadership activities dealing with school improvement to be their most important assignment, emphasizing the focus on enhancing the quality of teaching. Superintendents' perception of their role as instructional leaders seems then to be clear (Johansson & Nihlfors, 2014). According to Johansson and Nihlfors' study, regarding educational decision-making, superintendents perceive the school board chairperson to be the most influential individual in the municipality. The next most influential individual in the decision-making process, according to the superintendents, were themselves. To some extent, the superintendents also viewed principals as being influential in school boards' educational decisions.

2.4 The Superintendent as a Middle-manager

Superintendents have an important role and function as serving as a link between the school board and the local schools. A main function for the superintendent is to filter and mediate between

political and administrative managers, on one side, and educational professional practitioners, especially principals and teachers, on the other. In their role as gatekeepers, superintendents mediate, filter and buffer expectations and demands from national school authorities and the district administration and politicians, in order to select the kind of external demands that should be prioritized and matched with internal resources. Despite “messages” from “upper levels” in the school steering system, it is not clear that these demands are imposed on schooling in practical life (Paulsen et al., 2014). As mediators, superintendents may “alleviate resistance to change” (Björk et al., 2014, p. 471). Buffering is an important mediating strategy for superintendents as middle managers. Through buffering, they are able to meet principals’ and teachers’ expectations of shielding that they will shield them from outside demands and pressures. One such example is superintendents buffering school professionals’ demands for parental involvement (Paulsen et al., 2014).

From their mediating and middle-managing position, superintendents operate the external boundaries of the organization (Paulsen, 2014), making sense of the various and complex demands imposed on schools by external agencies in order to fit the schools’ needs and goals. They have a coordinating and organizing role too, through mediating, negotiating and interpreting connections (Paulsen, 2014). Superintendents can also be referred to as gatekeepers with the power to select, and protect against, internal or external demands and pressure (Paulsen, 2014). Through their gatekeeping power, superintendents may decide that some incoming information or demands can be locked out, while others can be admitted. Gatekeeping, by selecting and protecting, is important for organizational learning, since the gatekeeper identifies what



information is relevant and then determines and prioritises what is on the agenda in the organization (Tushman & Katz, 1980; Tushman & Scanlan, 1981).

2.5. The Superintendent and Instructional Leadership

Focusing on the improvement of teaching and learning, instructional leadership plays a pivotal role in school improvement (Coldren & Spillane, 2007; Hallinger, 2005; Seashore Louis & Robinson, 2012). The practice of instructional leadership involves a variety of instructional activities such as developing a shared instructional vision of improved learning outcomes for students, monitoring students' learning and teachers' instructional practices and promoting professional learning of staff (Coldren & Spillane, 20017; Millward & Timperley, 2009; Robinson, 2007).

From a simple description of the principal's role, the concept of instructional leadership now has moved to a multi-level and multi-dimensional understanding (Björk, 1993). With educational leadership activities directly involved with teachers, through classroom observations, feedback to teachers, discussion of results and teacher-learning leadership, principals can exert a direct instructional leadership, while superintendents, on the other hand, exert an indirect instructional leadership (Robinson et al., 2011). Building the capacity of instructional leadership is thus a key responsibility for superintendents as well as principals.

Strong instructional leadership from principals seems to be related to a strong and collaborative instructional focus from district offices (Seashore Louis & Robinson, 2012). Research studies in instructional-effective schools indicate that superintendents use their "bureaucratic" positions in the formal organization to improve

instruction (Björk, 1993). Through a broad range of activities such as staff selection, principal supervision, establishing clear instructional goals, monitoring instruction and financial planning for instruction to improve instruction, superintendents enact an indirect instructional role.

The superintendent's role has thus been discussed from different perspectives and we will go further and present the study's theoretical and methodological framework.

Theoretical and methodological framework

Emphasising the importance of social, historical and educational policy context, national as well as global, this study is based on a critically interpretive approach within curriculum theory.

Governance of the school system, within the curriculum theory framework, can be illustrated as a chain of governance with different levels and arenas (Johansson, Nihlfors & Jervik Steen, 2014; Lindensjö & Lundgren, 2000). The critical approach is directed further towards power relations and the role of politics in governance.

The position of the superintendent in the school governance system can be regarded as an important link in an extensive network of different specialised stakeholders (Nihlfors & Johansson, 2013). Superintendents are in the front line of the political system and their working conditions can thus be looked upon as politically created (Lundgren, 1986; Moos & Paulsen, 2014). The historical and social context has a central role in shaping the superintendent's leadership role and leadership practice (Coldren & Spillane, 2007). In this study boundary spanning is used as a theoretical and methodological framework exploring school governance at a meso-level and



analysing the complexity of the superintendent's role in the school's chain of governance.

3.1. Boundary Spanning

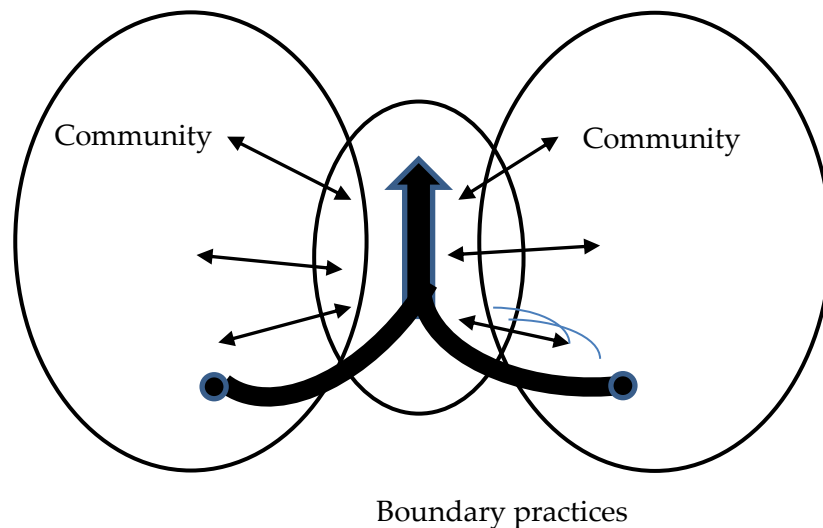
Boundary spanning is used as a theoretical and methodological framework to explore how superintendents in their role as boundary spanners, and through their boundary-spanning activities, may facilitate the local school system to become a more tightly-coupled system and strengthen the organization's capacity for improvement of teaching and learning. A distinction is hence made between "boundary spanners" and "boundary spanning". Boundary spanning is looked upon as a set of activities, processes and practices whereas boundary spanners refers to individuals undertaking boundary-spanning activities (Williams, 2010).

Building on Wenger (1998), we find in the school system different "communities of practices" that share histories of learning. While these communities of practice create boundaries, they also develop ways to create and maintain connections to the external environment and other communities of practice. Superintendents can participate in multiple communities of practice at once. Superintendents are members of the district's administrative leadership team as well as their own leadership team with the principals. This kind of "multi-membership" inherently has the potential of creating various forms of continuity across the boundaries of the practices involved (Wenger, 1998). Connections as boundary objects (e.g., documents, concepts and other artifacts) and boundary activities make it possible for different communities of practice to influence each other. Through boundary spanning these activities and objects can be used to traverse boundaries, making and sustaining connections between practices (Wenger, 1998). The

practice itself can, as a boundary practice, also become a connection. Boundary practices are routines that sustain connections between different communities of practice or constituencies (e.g., teachers and principals) and provide an ongoing forum for mutual engagement in some activity (Wenger, 1998).

Figure 1.

Boundary practices according to Wenger (1998).



3.2. Boundary Spanners

The local school district may as an organization be viewed as an open system (Addi-Racah, 2015). Within this open system there are individuals holding boundary-spanning roles, crossing internal boundaries and/or external environment boundaries and serving as connections between different constituencies (Wenger, 1998). The organizational boundaries are permeable and function as filters that screen inputs and outputs. The main function of boundary spanners



is thus to manage the permeability of the boundaries (Goldring, 1990). Boundary spanners facilitate transferences across boundaries and build relationships, interconnections and interdependencies across boundaries in order to manage complex problems (Williams, 2002). In their significant role as “cognitive filters”, boundary spanners help members of the organization to interpret the prevailing context and help shape the perceptions and preferences of others (Williams, 2010). Boundary spanners also serve as a vital link between the organization and the environment as they filter environmental perceptions and interpretations. The school’s external environment includes parents, community members, school district personnel, government agencies and other external entities upon which the school relies for many of its resources (Ng, 2013). Boundary role incumbents, as superintendents, represent their organizations to the larger environment not only in such tasks as acquiring resources, but also by maintaining and improving political legitimacy, and enhancing the organization's image and social legitimacy (Aldrich & Herker, 1976; Goldring, 1990). By scanning the environment for new technological developments, innovations in organizational design and relevant trends in related fields, boundary personnel also may contribute to innovation and change.

Boundary role occupants manage relations between the organization and environment through “buffering and bridging” (Goldring, 1990, p. 53). Information processing is one crucial buffering strategy, which can be defined as: “An organization's ability to adapt to environmental contingencies depends in part on the expertise of boundary role incumbents in selecting, transmitting, and interpreting information originating in the environment” (Aldrich & Herker, p. 219). By controlling the flow of information in and out of the organization, a boundary spanner assumes the role of

"gatekeeper" (Goldring, 1990). Since the organization relies upon their expertise and discretion, the gatekeepers' role implies a position of power (Aldrich & Herker, 1976). Boundary spanners are through their boundary roles exposed to large amounts of potentially relevant information and serve a dual function, acting as both filters and facilitators (Aldrich & Herker, 1976). As boundary spanners are responsible for regulating, processing and transmitting the information flowing from the environment to the organization and vice versa, boundary spanners are in the position to filter this information "by storing it, delaying it, acting on it, or referring it, in order to buffer external elements from the organization" (Goldring, 1990, p. 53). They further direct it to the organizational units that need it. Since the information that filters into the organization through boundary positions often is not raw data, but instead summarized by boundary role incumbents, it is therefore difficult to verify the information that filters into the organization (Aldrich & Herker, 1976).

3.3. Boundary-spanning Roles

Williams (2010, 2011) emphasises the complex role and competencies of those who are boundary spanners. Williams (2002; 2011) further identifies a number of key features of the boundary spanning role, including *reticulist*, *entrepreneur*, *interpreter/communicator* and *co-ordinator/organizer*, with each of these having a number of associated key competencies.

3.3.1. The Reticulist

Reticulism is the most prominent element of the boundary-spanning role. A reticulist is someone who possesses skills in creating, servicing and manipulating communication networks and is



skilled at identifying decision nexuses in an organization. This role is of foremost importance in understanding and managing relationships and interdependencies (Addi-Raccha, 2015; Williams, 2011; 2013). The reticulist aspect of a boundary spanner's role "responds directly to the challenges inherent in managing within a network mode of organizing, requiring the mobilization of a range of political, managerial, personal, strategic and technical competencies" (Williams, 2010, p. 15).

The reticulist manages policy problems within a prescribed political and organizational framework and penetrates the complex and shifting patterns of relationships between decision problems and the equally complex structure of social, political and organizational relationships among decision-makers (Addi-Raccha, 2015). As reticulists, boundary spanners need to understand the organizational environment in which they are situated, to know what actors are involved in, and communicate and negotiate with them (Williams, 2010). Attributes and skills needed to be an effective reticulist are possessing a critical appreciation of the environment and problems/opportunities presented, understanding different organizational contexts, knowing the role and playing it and having political skills to manage relationships between differential sources of power. This requires skills and cognizance of communication, prescience, networking, strategic and tactical skills, understanding complexity and the linkages between interests, professions, organizations and other factors as well as skills in negotiating, conflict resolution and risk-taking (Sullivan & Skelcher, 2002; Williams, 2013).

3.3.2. The Entrepreneur

The entrepreneurial element of the boundary spanner reflects the view that traditional approaches and conventional practices are not applicable to current policy problems and focus instead on the importance of developing new and effective solutions to complex problems. As an entrepreneur, the boundary spanner with new ideas, innovation, creativity, experimentation and lateral thinking is expected to make things happen (Williams, 2010; 2011; 2013). In the entrepreneurial mode, the boundary spanner needs to be proactive, ready to take advantage of windows of opportunity, some predictable and others unpredictable (Kingdon, 1984). The boundary spanner as an entrepreneur is ready for windows to open and has prepared strategies to take advantage of political, financial and other windows of opportunity and, moreover, is set to initiate and mediate sustainable solutions between different parties and coalitions (Williams, 2010; 2011). This aspect of the boundary-spanning role requires both risk-taking and resourcefulness (Williams, 2011; 2013). As entrepreneurs, “boundary spanners both advocate their proposals as part of a softening up process, and act as brokers to negotiate successful couplings between the necessary stakeholders; they are associated with creativity because of the free form of the process; they quite often bend problems to solutions (and therefore goals which are too tightly defined can be restrictive)” (Williams, 2010, p. 18). The attributes and skills needed to be an effective entrepreneur are creativity, social perceptiveness and whole-system thinking. The competent entrepreneur must then be insightful and able to act in a variety of social and political settings, able to argue persuasively, be a strategic team builder and be prepared to lead by example (Williams, 2011; 2013).



3.3.3 The Interpreter and Communicator

The third element of the boundary-spanning role is interpreter and communicator (Williams, 2010; 2011; 2013). A core activity for boundary spanners is managing relationships (Williams, 2011). This development of inter-personal relationships is part of “a process of exposure, exploration, discovery and understanding of people and the organizations they represent – a search for knowledge about roles, responsibilities, problems, accountabilities, cultures, professional norms and standards, aspirations and underlying values” (Williams, 2010, p. 19). This demands competencies to initiate and sustain effective interpersonal relationships, built upon an infrastructure of trust, communication, listening, empathy, negotiation, diplomacy and conflict resolution (Williams, 2011; 2013). With these skills, boundary spanners effectively collaborate with their environment, bringing together for collective action a range of external factors from different backgrounds, interests and world views (Addi-Raccha, 2015; Williams, 2011; 2013). This collaborative process needs co-ordination, planning and servicing, which are time-consuming but important parts of the job (Williams, 2013). When boundary spanners understand and manage the difference in organizational culture and language they are able to navigate effectively across boundaries (Bradshaw, 1999).

3.3.4 The Organizer

The last element of the boundary-spanning role, the organizer, relates to the management of the process of collaboration (Williams, 2010). The organizing role involves the planning, co-ordination, servicing and administration of partnerships, which often is time-consuming (Williams, 2010; 2011). The logistic inherent in this organization is complicated by the range of actors involved, which

causes a need for effective, equal and transparent communication, information sharing and decision-making processes (Williams, 2010; 2011). Being at the hub of these activities highlights the centrality of the boundary spanner's position (Williams, 2011).

Although these four aspects of the boundary spanner's role are separately defined, there is a complex interplay between them. The elements and their associated set of competencies may be combined and used in various combinations to handle particular issues and problems to the best effect (Williams, 2010). All boundary spanners have to deal with different forms of complexity and consequently need "an in-depth knowledge of the individuals and agencies that constitute a collaborative domain – their roles, responsibilities, cultures, histories and purposes – and the jigsaw of connections that tie, or potentially tie, them together to achieve some form of collective purpose and synergy" (Williams, 2013, p. 25).

3.4. Boundary spanning - A summary

Boundary spanning can be defined by the organizational structure of the education/school system with boundaries that are permeable (Richardson, 2002). Boundary-spanning activities are undertaken by actors at all levels, chief executives and managers as well as frontline staff engaged in service delivery (Williams, 2013). Furthermore, boundary spanning is extremely complex, "particularly when multiple and overlapping boundaries created by different agencies, sectors and professions are involved and when these often shift in time and space" (Williams, 2011, p. 27). Williams (2011) defines boundary-spanning activities as those that "revolve around people and organizations working together to manage and tackle common issues, to promote better co-ordination and integration of public services, to reduce duplication, to make the best use of scarce



resources and to meet gaps in service provision and to satisfy unmet needs” (Williams, 2011, p. 27). In the management literature, we find several examples of boundary-spanning activities in which managers are able to engage in promoting organizational performance and knowledge transfer (Benoliel & Schechter, 2017).

Through boundary-spanning activities, effective leaders may connect and sustain connections between the different communities of practice within their organization, engaging in internal activities aimed at coordinating the efforts of school members and enhancing continuous learning (Coldren and Spillane, 2007). Simultaneously, research has indicated that principals facilitate school outcomes when they engage in external activities aimed at managing the school environment to acquire resources (Benoliel, 2017). Principals may, on the one hand, maintain a tight boundary around the school, “creating an environment that strengthens the feeling of school staff belonging, protecting the school core from information overload, and enhancing exploitation of knowledge”. On the other hand, through keeping a loose boundary around the school, “principals may contribute to adjustment and innovation, promoting the exploration process by an increased awareness of new developments in the school environment” (Benoliel & Schechter, 2017, p. 887). Boundary activities, in combination with principals’ learning mechanisms, enable principals to balance these competing demands, serving as agents to develop the school’s capacity to innovate and reform (Benoliel & Schechter, 2017; Thomson, 2010).

Swedish School Boards' Expectations of Superintendents

Findings from a Nationwide Study

Aiming at an understanding and explanation of how superintendents as boundary spanners may facilitate improvement of teaching and learning, this study takes its departure from a nationwide study of Swedish school board chairs' expectations of superintendents conducted by Rapp et al. (2020).¹ A survey was distributed to chairs of local school boards in all Swedish 290 municipalities, with a response rate of 61 percent. The aim of the survey was to find out to what extent superintendents were expected to take responsibility for student results and what assignments the superintendents were expected to prioritise in their work.

According to the chairs, they are the ones who have the greatest influence on the school boards decisions. The superintendent is the one who has the second largest influence over the political decisions, according to the board chairs. Even if the chair is responsible for setting the school-board's agenda, it is the superintendent who prepares it and thus has an immediate influence on the school boards political agenda and decisions. The chairs were further invited to rank (scale 1-5) the most common agenda items for the boards'

¹ In Sweden, it is statutory that each municipality must have a politically elected board responsible for the local school activities. The members of this board are appointed every four years after the general elections and accordingly the chairs represent different political parties. However, party affiliation has not been of interest to the study and has therefore not been analyzed.



meetings. According to the responses, the most common agenda item is information from the administration (3.92), on second place items about finances (3.77) and on third place items about quality (3.38). Lowest ranked were items about student results (2.91), “decisions about evaluations” (2.80) and “school organization” (2.80).

The study’s findings showed that the chairs have high confidence in their superintendents. Almost all of the chairs stated that they obtained their main information and knowledge about the municipality’s school activities from the superintendent. According to the chairs, the board prefers information about student learning outcomes at the school level, to a lesser extent at the classroom level and to an even smaller extent at the individual level. The chairs further stated that the responsibility for student learning outcomes, first and foremost, lies with the principals. The second greatest responsibility lies with the teachers and then the school board, along with the superintendent. The chairs’ responses to the question about which group has greatest influence over student learning outcomes shows a slightly different picture. The teachers were now ranked as number one, followed by the principals, then parents in third place and the superintendent in fourth place.

In an open-ended question the chairs were asked to specify the superintendents’ three most important work assignments. The result showed that the school boards’ greatest expectation of the superintendents was to perform their leadership duties. The superintendent’s second most important duty was to maintain the budget and other financial tasks. Being responsible for student results was ranked as the third most important assignment.

To answer how the responsibility of performing the pedagogical leadership requirement compared to other

responsibilities, the respondents were asked to rank alternatives to the question of what could lead to a superintendent being criticized. The five alternatives given were 1) exceed allocated budget, 2) unclear leadership, 3) not loyal towards the board, 4) poor student results and 5) other. The chairs also responded, with the same five alternatives, to the question about what factors could lead to a dismissal of the superintendent. The result showed that the major reasons for superintendents to be criticized was if leadership is unclear, if the budget was not maintained and if there was disloyalty. Least risky for being criticized was weak student results. When the school board chairs were asked about what actions could lead to dismissal, the rankings are slightly different. Disloyalty is now ranked as number one, followed by unclear leadership and not maintaining the budget. Weak student results was the least risky aspect, according to the chairs. To conclude, unclear leadership and not maintaining the budget were the most risky factors for the superintendent to incur criticism, while poor student results was the least risky factor. The factors most likely to lead to dismissal were disloyalty, unclear leadership and not maintaining the budget. Weak student results is least risky even here. This indicates that the chairs do not expect the superintendent's primary focus to be student learning outcomes.

4.1. Superintendents as Boundary Spanners

Educational leaders, as superintendents, have a pivotal role in balancing the tensions between responding to top-down reforms and at the same time preserving some autonomy in their local school leadership role towards local improvement (Benoliel & Schechter, 2017). "While responding to social and political pressures, principals should buffer the staff from counterproductive policies, build school



improvement initiatives that address external reforms, and meet the needs of the school's students and community" (p. 887). Educational leaders also have to facilitate ongoing learning activities within the school environment despite distracting social, political, and economic forces (Kochan, Bredeson & Riehl, 2002). Through their gatekeeping role, educational leaders may translate external knowledge into opportunities for improving the ongoing learning and other activities in the organization (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). Coldren and Spillane (2007) described the facilitation of learning across the boundaries of an organization as boundary spanning. Managing the learning boundary may, for instance, "be balanced with arrangements for analyzing information, such that the information could provide guidance for productive action in schools" (Benoliel & Schechter, 2017, p. 888).

Even if the role of managers often is constructed in terms of directing people, a good part of their activities has more to do with boundary-spanning. In that role they are "able to make new connections across communities of practice, enable coordination, and – if they are good brokers – open new possibilities for meaning" (Wenger, 1998, p. 109). Effective educational leaders use their boundary-spanning role to connect and sustain connections between the different communities of practice within their organization (Coldren and Spillane 2007)" (Millward & Timperley, 2009, s. 142-143). In the case of boundary spanners, educational leaders as individuals rather than being simply routine followers, constitute the mechanism that links leader and teacher practice (Coldren & Spillane, 2007). Boundary spanners and boundary practices are, as defined by Coldren and Spillane (2007), significant instructional leadership tools through their functions as "mechanisms that enable leaders to make connections to teaching practice" (p. 372).

In the local school, the principal usually occupies a boundary-spanning role (Goldring, 1990). Coldren and Spillane (2007) have given examples of how principals as boundary spanners establish and maintain connections between principals' leadership practice and teaching practice and through instructional leadership influence how they shape teachers' teaching practice. Principals' leadership practices, that is their boundary activities, take place in fields of practice. Through these boundary activities, principals are constantly engaged in shaping these fields of practice as well as the boundaries that separate these fields. Superintendents' leadership practices may, in the same way as the principals' leadership practices, allow superintendents to manage their relations with diverse external factors, work with them toward school improvement and bring coherence to their environment (Goldring and Schuermann, 2009). It is through this process that superintendents, as well as principals, may influence their environment as they have opportunities "to address community-wide problems that are central to schools and the current imperatives of student achievement" (Goldring and Schuermann, 2009, p. 16). By engaging in boundary spanning, a superintendent can serve as an interface between the school, principals and school staff on the one hand, and the school organization's external environment on the other hand. Accordingly, the superintendent may "not only facilitate the exploitation of knowledge embedded in the school system, but also the exploration of external knowledge across multiple fields of interaction" (Benoliel & Schechter, 2017, p. 882).

Through boundary-spanning activities, using their discretion, principals seek for assistance from the local educational authority (LEA), as well as from their superintendent, in order to sustain their own work (Addi-Raccah, 2015). Principals gain support from their



superintendents and this allows them to interface more effectively with the LEA in order to protect the schools from policy incoherence (Addi-Raccah, 2015). Building personal and close relations with the superintendent makes it possible for principals to buffer unwanted LEAs' intervention (Goldring, 1990) "while still affording the receipt of assistance that they require for school effective functioning" (Addi-Raccah, 2015, p. xx). However, when negotiating and seizing opportunities to obtain assistance from the LEA principals do not take risks, since the principals may resist LEA intervention as long as they have the superintendent's backing (Southworth, 2008). Even if principals do not agree with the LEA and even if they object to its intervention, they pay great attention to their relations with the LEA (Addi-Raccha, 2015; Seashore Louis & Robinson, 2012). It is important to maintain proper relations, avoiding conflict because it is the LEA that provides resources. Principals thus play a double role towards the LEA and superintendents. On one hand, they buffer LEA intervention when the LEA's programs do not fit their school needs as judged by their professional knowledge and experience and, on the other hand, they collaborate with the LEA when they need additional resources for running the school (Addi-Raccah, 2015). For these purposes they count on the superintendent, mediating between the school and LEA.

Principals' relations with superintendents are not only characterized by discretion, but also by flexibility (Addi-Raccah, 2015). If principals build close and personal relations with the superintendent, they may count on assistance from them with discretion according to their schools' needs, which in turn strengthens the principals' dependency on the superintendent (Addi-Raccah, 2015). Through this relationship, superintendents may support principals in their relations with the LEA and contribute to

the possibilities of the principals bringing about a balance among the various demands imposed on the local school. "Being at the junction at which educational policy [is] evolving, principals may act to lead to a consensus and collaboration among all parties, while gaining legitimization from the superintendent" (Addi-Racah, 2015, p. 301).

With their position as middle-managers, superintendents can be looked upon as boundary spanners, as well. Uniquely positioned in the local school's chain of governance, superintendents may "strengthen their basis for professional influences by utilizing boundary-spanning opportunities due to their legitimate access to a range of social and political networks" (Paulsen, 2014, p. 408). As boundary spanners and through boundary activities, superintendents have opportunities to influence and shape not only the principals' leadership practices but also the political school boards' practices.

The outcomes from the study conducted by Rapp et al. (2020) indicates superintendents' boundary-spanning roles as *reticulists*, *interpreters/communicators*, *entrepreneurs* and *organizers* (Williams, 2002). In their positions, superintendents are positioned in a "structured social space" with its own properties and power relations, overlapping and interrelating with economic, power, political, and other factors. As boundary spanners, superintendents have several potential sources of power to draw upon (Awender, 1985). For the superintendent, first and foremost, professional expertise is a powerful tool. As *reticulist*, the superintendent has considerable power through information advantage and opportunities to influence the political agenda. The chairs of the Swedish school boards have high confidence in their superintendents and obtain their main knowledge about municipal school activity from them (Rapp et al., 2020). Johansson and Nihlfors (2014) also



have concluded that local school boards get their main information from the superintendent. This is in accordance with Awenders (1985) who argues that the superintendent is in the central communications cog in the organization, given that the superintendent is the one who generally processes information both for board members and for the personnel in the organization. Through their access to and control over the distribution of information, superintendents occupy a unique position in their organizations (Bradshaw, 1999). Because of their access to information and control over its dissemination, superintendents gain power and can be influential. Richardson (2002) emphasizes how superintendents through information transfer can be regarded as the most important information channel and filtering agent, since the boundary-spanning role of the superintendent includes controlling the flow of information in and out of the open and permeable boundary between the school system, the board of education, and the community.

Even if the chairs consider themselves to have the greatest influence on the school boards decisions, they still consider the superintendent to be the one who have second biggest influence (Rapp et al., 2020). The great trust and high expectations of the superintendent, at the hub, emphasise the role of the superintendent as *interpreter/communicator*, as well as *organizer*. Even if the chair is responsible for setting the school board's agenda, it is the superintendent who usually is the one who prepares the agenda for the board meeting and thus has an immediate influence on the political agenda (Rapp et al., 2020). Superintendents are then the ones who disseminate the school boards decisions to those individuals affected throughout the organization. Superintendents also carry and interpret needs and desires from principals and teachers to the board for consideration, but also provides principals and teachers with

accurate indications of the policies and instructions that the board wishes to convey to the organization.

Summary and Concluding Remarks

The boundary-spanning roles of reticulist, interpreter/communicator and organizer seem to be the three with the highest priorities, according to the findings from the nationwide study conducted by Rapp et al. (2020). These roles are also the most time-consuming (Williams, 2010; 2011; 2013). Superintendents are expected to spend a great deal of time on learning to know their role and playing it, managing relationships, communicating, networking, negotiating, coordinating, planning, serving and administrating. Cuban (1988) has stated that through history educational leaders have been depicted as focusing on their managerial duties. The movement of decentralization and New Public Management from the 1990s has further given greater focus on management issues, which can be seen as a distraction that takes attention away from leading teaching and learning (Jarl et al. 2012; Millward & Timperley, 2009). This is obvious even in the findings of the study conducted by Rapp et al (2020) in which the superintendents' management duties were prioritized. Expectations of the superintendents by the school boards rested primarily on managerial assignments, and expectations about influencing students' learning outcomes were lower ranked, along with a low risk of being criticized or dismissed because of weak student results (Rapp et al., 2020). These findings indicate a space of agency, according to superintendents, as instructional leaders. With their important role due to the success of their organizations as a catalyst for innovation and structural change (Aldrich and Herker, 1977), this space of agency may be used for entrepreneurial actions.



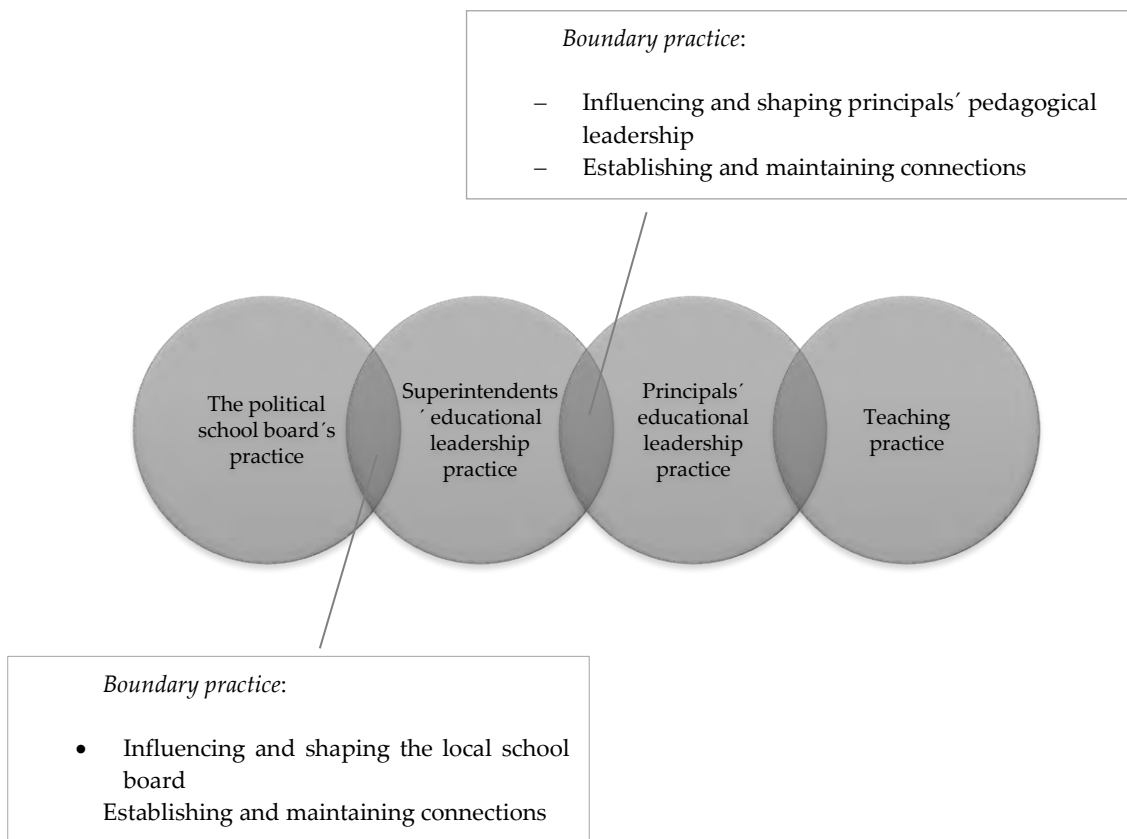
According to Moos et al. (2016), superintendents feel that they are very autonomous in their actions. The school boards low expectations about superintendents influencing teaching and learning and the low risk of being criticized or dismissed because of poor student results (Rapp et al., 2020) leads to entrepreneurial opportunities. As an *entrepreneur*, the superintendent as boundary spanner can make things happen (Williams, 2002). The opportunity to make choices about activities as well as their formal position and status enables them to control the allocation of resources and policy decision-making within their own organizations (Williams, 2013). As entrepreneurial boundary spanners, superintendents may focus on the importance of developing new and effective solutions to complex and challenging problems with a view towards innovation, creativity and experimentation. They must be strategic team-builders and have confidence in leading by example. The entrepreneurial role further demands a proactive approach as well as whole-system thinking. As entrepreneur the superintendent need already-prepared strategies to take advantage of political, financial and other resources when windows of opportunities open. This role not only requires readiness but also risk-taking, which in turn requires courage and an organizational culture of trust.

As boundary spanners, superintendents exert social influence downward as well as upward, influencing principals and teachers, as well as administrators and politicians at the district level (Paulsen, 2014). Through agency and discretion, superintendents have a capacity as educational leaders to stretch across boundary practices, influencing the political school board practice and principals' leadership practice and endeavouring to improve teaching and learning. Through effective utilization of boundary-spanning opportunities, several possible outcomes may be obtained. For

example, as boundary spanners superintendents may contribute to an organization’s learning capacity (Paulsen, 2014). Through boundary-spanning activities, superintendents may facilitate strengthening connections between people that work in an organization’s different functional units or linking internal milieus closer to external environments (Paulsen, 2014), as well as school improvement. Superintendents perceive that the school board hold high expectations of them, not only collaborating with the school board but also with the local community (Nihlfors & Johansson, 2014).

Figure 2.

Superintendents as Boundary Spanners.





It appears that there are significant possibilities to expand and strengthen the superintendents' boundary practices, with routines and professional leadership tools, and thus contribute to sustaining connections between educational leadership practices on different levels (Coldren & Spillane, 2007). With tightly-coupling and boundary-spanning practices, instructional leadership can create such a learning environment, required for the kind of organizational changes that raise student achievement (Millward & Timperley, 2010). Superintendents can be recognised as having autonomy and discretion to realise the local schools' concerns and needs, as well as interests and demands from district level. As instructional leaders and by facilitating ability of people and organizations to work together to manage and tackle common and complex issues, superintendents may undertake boundary-spanning activities and work effectively in raising student learning outcomes (Coldren & Spillane, 2007; Williams, 2011). Aspirations for strong instructional leadership though often fall short of the reality (Cooley and Shen, 2003). One explanation is that increased instructional leadership requires leaders to spend more time on the educational and less on the management duties, or at least to integrate instructional concerns into all aspects of their managerial decision-making (Richardson, 2002).

Making a shift to a stronger instructional-leadership role poses considerable professional and organizational challenges. The professional challenges include developing the capabilities required to engage in the practices described as instructional leadership while "the organizational challenges include aligning the organizational and systemic conditions that shape educational leaders' work to the

goal of stronger instructional leadership” (Seashore Louis & Robinson, p. 635). For superintendents to become more involved as instructional leaders, they need to see themselves as professional educational leaders in addition to their usual managerial responsibilities (Huber, 2011). Furthermore, they need to make use of their boundary spanning entrepreneurial role in their endeavours to improve teaching and learning. By courage and determination superintendents need to take advantage of the windows of opportunities which open up due to their discretionary power as instructional leaders. But the possibilities of boundary-spanning instructional actions are not immediately obvious and superintendents must initiate and develop them further (Coldren & Spillane, 2007). Spanning the boundaries between personnel and management is not always comfortable. The boundary spanner “therefore requires an ability to manage carefully the coexistence of membership, yielding enough distance to bring a different perspective, but also enough legitimacy to be listened to” (Wenger, 1998, p. 109).

The aim of this study is to develop a theoretical understanding on how superintendents as boundary spanners may facilitate improvement of teaching and learning. In their roles as boundary spanners and through boundary-spanning activities, superintendents are able to exert an indirect instructional leadership and thereby tighten the couplings between different hierarchical levels in the school system. Superintendents, who have a low risk of being criticized or dismissed as a result of poor student results, are expected to prioritize their boundary-spanning roles as reticulists, interpreter/communicators and organizers. This indicates a space of agency for the superintendents to capitalise on their entrepreneurial boundary-spanning role to work more effectively as instructional



leaders. While Williams (2011) stresses entrepreneurship and innovation as important capacities for boundary spanners, Addi-Raccha (2015) concludes that these aspects are marginal for educational leaders (Addi-Raccha, 2015).

Finally, the result of this study indicates how superintendents through their role as boundary spanners and through boundary-spanning activities can effectively facilitate improvement of teaching and learning. There is, however, a need for further, in-depth research on the way superintendents on macro-level can work effectively as instructional leaders and how through a whole-system approach they may tighten the couplings in the school's chain of governance. How can superintendents in their entrepreneurial boundary-spanning roles work effectively as instructional leaders? What activities do successful entrepreneurial superintendents undertake? What are the activities going on in the boundary practices wherein superintendents are involved? Which are the boundary objects?

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