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Local Quality Management for Developing Schools' Capacity Building: A Multiyear Study from Sweden

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Abstract

In recent decades, there has been a growing body of research that highlights local education authorities (LEA) as potential contributors to support school capacity building and result development. Despite this, there are few empirical studies that have explored what effects different strategies and policy actions from the LEAs actual have over time. Based on results from a five-year research project in a major Swedish municipality, the aim with this multiyear and multi-level study is to explore the effects of a LEA's quality management processes of six schools' capacity building. The results from the study show a clear strengthening of the schools' improvement agenda, improvement organization and improvement leadership of the six schools. Two LEA strategies can be distinguished as especially important to explain the school improvements: i) systematic and long-term data-based school improvement routines and processes; ii) quality dialogues for monitoring and support. Two conclusions can be drawn: i) the importance for the LEA to be responsive so its improvement strategies are integrated into the schools' local school improvement system; ii) the importance that the LEA work with multifaceted strategies containing aspects of control and accountability and learning and support.

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Introduction

In many school systems around the world, there is an increasing focus on strengthening the organizational capacity of school actors and schools to improve themselves and their students' academic performance. Consequently, school improvement and school effectiveness have become important issues at all levels of the school system. Traditionally, the school level has long been seen as the basic unit of change, which implies that researchers and policy actors sometimes tend to overlook the potential of districts and local education authorities (LEAs) as substantial contributors that can support school reform and school improvement. However, in the body of research concerning school improvement and school effectiveness, a number of studies do highlight this middle level within the school system (e.g. Leithwood, 2019; Leithwood & Azah, 2016). In the same way, several studies have pointed out that the construction and implementation of different forms of quality management systems and strategies have been an important way for LEAs to monitor school results and support school improvement work (e.g. Harris, 2001, 2011; Adolfsson, 2024a; Håkansson & Adolfsson, 2022). The LEA's potential to support schools' capacity for school improvement can be seen as particularly evident in decentralized school systems. Taking Sweden as an example, which constitutes the policy context for this study, LEAs, together with schools, have, in accordance with the Swedish

Education Act, been assigned a high degree of responsibility and accountability for assuring and improving educational quality (SFS, 2010). Accordingly, this actualizes questions concerning the interaction and relationship between the state, the LEA, and the local school linked to issues related to school governance, school leadership, and school improvement (Adolfsson, 2024b; Håkansson & Adolfsson, 2022; Adolfsson & Alvunger, 2020; Rorrer et al., 2008).

However, despite the growing body of research concerning the LEA's role, importance and potential for supporting school capacity building and strengthening student academic performance, there are few empirical studies that have explored the long-term outcomes. That is, we know very little about the effects different strategies and policy actions by the LEA actually have over time. Based on the analytical concept of "improvement capacity" (Stoll, 2009; Rönnström & Håkansson, 2021) and data from a multi-year research project in a major municipality in Sweden, this article explores the long-term effects of an LEA's quality management system and processes. The following research questions have guided the study:

1. What are the central strategies of the LEA's quality management system?
2. Considering the LEA's quality management, what long-term development of schools' improvement capacity can be distinguished?
3. Which quality management strategies can be distinguished as especially important concerning reinforcing schools' development of improvement capacity?

The article is structured as follows. After the introduction follows an overall description of the Swedish decentralized school system. After

that, in a previous research section, the study is contextualized by focusing on the LEA's role and potential importance for supporting schools. Then, the study's analytical framework is detailed. Thereafter, materials and methods are presented followed by a presentation of the results. The article ends with a discussion and some conclusions, including directives for further research.

The Swedish decentralized school system

The Swedish school system has been characterized by far-reaching decentralization since the early 1990s. This means that the responsibility for education is divided between the central government, school organizers and the principals. Accordingly, municipalities and independent school heads, together with the principals, have considerable authority over the schools for which they are responsible, which means that they are held accountable for ensuring that education is aligned with the national goals as well as legal requirements and school ordinances. Most public schools are organized by the municipalities, each having a school board, consisting of appointed politicians, and a superintendent which manage the Local educational authority. The superintendent and the LEA have the operational responsibility of leading principals, distributing resources but also in supporting schools' quality assurance work. According to the Swedish Education Act, (SFS, 2023), a school must be managed and coordinated by its principal. The principal acts as an educational leader and is responsible for working in accordance with the national objectives, which implies a continuous work for assuring and improving the school's educational quality. Due to the peculiarities of the Swedish decentralized school system detailed above, the LEA in the current study should be understood within the

tension and interplay between the national and local school level entailed by their position".

Previous research

Previous research has pointed out the local education authority as a potential important actor concerning create coherence and strengthened the couplings within the local school system. Among all, research points to the need for balancing overall and local strategies and getting different organizational levels to coordinatearound school improvement work with aim to reinforce conditions for a long-term and sustainable school development (Campbell, 2005; Hopkins & Woulfin, 2015; Moore Johnson et al., 2017). Other researchers use the concept of system leadership to illustrate how adaptive leadership at the macro level is based on an understanding of the complexity of educational contexts such as multiple and interrelated systems. System leadership can then be exercised for capacity building, system-wide change and improvement (cf. Harris, et al., 2021). Despite a growing knowledge linked to the function and value of the LEA in the school, there still seemed to be a need for further system-wide research, where the intricate interaction between different organizational levels is investigated: "Although a good deal of research exists about either school leadership or central office management, we were surprised at how few studies focus on the intersection between the two" (Moore et al. 2017, p. 8). That is, and in line with Harris (2011), the improvement reforms must be directed toward reinforcing the whole organization's capacity building. Leithwood (2010) and Leithwood and Azah (2016) have further explored the characteristics of high performing districts and point out nine crucial processes. These include for example sharing visions and missions; learning-oriented organizational

improvement; reinforcing professional development and leadership; using multiple sources of evidence to inform decisions, etc.

Accordingly, it appears that the impact of change initiatives from a superior level is largely dependent on how active the LEA's role was and the extent to which chosen strategies emphasized accountability around student academic performance or, for example, the building of networks between schools in the municipality/district (e.g. Fullan, 2005; Lee et al., , 2012; Seashore Louis, 2013, Campbell & Murillo, 2005). That is, a well-developed interaction between the system level, the school level and the classroom level has been identified as central condition, together with a number of strategies that reinforce improvement cycles of follow-up, analysis and development, as well as strategic leadership, organizational development, learning and school culture with a focus on the core of the school's work, teaching and learning (cf. Hopkins et al., 2014; Muijs, et al., 2014; Reynolds, et al. 2014).

Rorrer Et al. 2008) who conducted a research review based on around eighty research studies identify four roles that the municipality/district can adopt to promote improved academic performance and greater equivalence: a) providing instructional leadership, b) reorienting the organization, c) establishing policy coherence, d) maintaining equity focus. According to the researchers, these four roles are mutually dependent and in various ways (loosely or tightly) coupled in a non-linear process. How the roles are coupled is important for how the district can function as an institutional actor in a context of academic performance improvement and greater equivalence, but also in relation to capacity building at various levels. In particular, the concept of *instructional leadership* can be linked to the efforts to build up local capacity in the form of knowledge, skills, processes and an

organization that contribute to mobilizing staff, developing functions linked to change and creating links between the district level and the school level. Understanding and getting others to understand the reform idea is based on achieving a functioning communication, planning, cooperation, monitoring of targets, instructions, input data, transparency and accountability (Rorrer et al., 2008). Campbell & Murillo (2005) make similar conclusions by highlighting the opportunities LEAs have to support school improvement by, among other things, contributing consistently to professional leadership, strategic education planning, focus on and management of school improvement, joint commitment to improve school performance and stable and secure infrastructure for education (see also Leithwood, Sun & McCullough, 2019).

Without overlooking the profound body of research that have been discussed above, there is still need of empirical studies that study the long-termed effects of the LEA's quality management linked to schools' capacity building. It is in light of this knowledge need that this study wants to make an important contribution.

Analytical points of departure

Considering this study's specific research interest concerning the local education authority's potential to support schools' capacity building, there is a necessity to describe the studies theoretical underpinnings and analytical use of the concept of 'capacity building'.

Capacity building as a theoretical concept have been used repeatedly over time in the literature, but in slightly different ways. However, in this study, capacity building is understood as an organizations' ability and capability to continuously improve themselves and handle internally and externally changed conditions. Both individual and

collective learning as well as organizational development and various leadership aspects have been linked together with the concept. Stoll (2009) has defined capacity building as a generic concept and believes that capacity for school improvement encompasses individual, interpersonal, cultural, structural and organizational dimensions. More specifically she defines it as "... the power to engage in and maintain continuous learning among the teachers and the school itself, with the aim of strengthening student learning, impacted by individual teachers in a school, the school's social and structural learning context and the external context" (p.2).

Capacity building comprises a central focus when it comes to LEAs' quality management processes and strategies. Although there is a lack of unambiguous definitions of capacity building in previous research it is possible to trace important components that deal with "… creating the conditions, opportunities and experiences for collaboration and mutual learning" (Harris, 2001, p. 261; c.f. also Stoll, 2009). More precisely, it is also about how collaborative processes in schools are promoted and developed, as well as realizing the importance of a strong focus on teaching and learning.

For the purposes of this study, we use an analytical framework built on five categories that can be regarded as significant conditions of schools' capacity building based on previous school improvement research (Rönnström & Håkansson, 2021). These conditions for improvement, so-called improvement capacities, can be summarised in the following categories:

1) *Improvement agenda:* An ability to communicate and activate analyses and targets with practical consequences and participation from different groups in the improvement work (e.g. Kuipers et al., 2010; Sun & Leithwood, 2017).

2) *Improvement agents:* Individuals with the mandate, the desire and the knowledge to participate in the improvement work and who contribute to a high degree of participation among those concerned (e.g. Parr & Timperley, 2008).

3) *Improvement organization:* Includes coordinated arenas for joint work with analysis and collaborative learning before, during and after the improvement work, and contexts with opportunities to collaborate with external actors (e.g. Harris, 2001, 2011; Timperley, 2011).

4) *Improvement culture and history of improvement:* These are characterized by the division of responsibilities, trust in one's own ability and that of others, openness and deprivatization of educational and instructional practices and high expectations with associated support and resources (e.g. Dolph, 2017; Lee & Seashore Louis, 2019).

5) *Improvement leadership and improvement processes:* Distributed leadership among key individuals, suitable processes based on analyses and targets, and strategic planning and leadership with regard to the various phases of the improvement work (e.g. Leithwood et al., 2008; Day et al., 2016).

The different research-based categories above constituted an analytical framework over different aspects linked to schools' capacity building. This framework enables a more refined analysis of schools' development of their capacity building over time, in light of the LEA's quality management work. The same framework also become crucial when it comes to distinguish which, and in what degree, different strategies in the LEA's quality management system that seem to be

able to affect the development of different aspects of schools′ capacity building.

Research Design and Method

This study has a qualitative multi-level design (Bryman, 2002; Day et al., 2016) and is based on a five-year research project. In parallel with the research study, methodological development also took place in the form of evaluation of multi-level analyses and validation through feedback (see e.g. Andersen et al. 2018). The research project had a multi-method approach where a different variation of data was collected (cf. Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). However, in this study data from document analyses and recurring interviews with school actors at various levels (LEA officials, principals, and teachers) have been used.

The municipality in focus for this study is a city in Sweden with approximately 350,000 inhabitants. The city is characterized by inhabitants and areas with varying socio-economic levels and ethnic backgrounds. Consequently, the schools are diverse with concern to student composition and achievement. This implies that an important task of the work of LEAs in this municipality is comprised of dealing with a major equality problem.

In the first step, data received from the National Swedish Agency of Education in combination with data from the LEA in the current municipality guided a strategic selection of participating schools, based on schools' socio-economic conditions and student academic performance. In light of this school data, two of the schools was defined as high performing (schools 1 and school 2) and two as low performing schools (school 3 and school 4), while the other two participating schools (school 5 and school 6) could be labelled

somewhere in between. In this way, a cross section of the municipality's primary schools was created, which contributed to both the breadth and depth of the data collected. This in turn enabled an analysis of the relationship between the schools' results, socio-economic conditions and their quality assurance systems.

Table 1.
School characteristics

School	Grade	Location	Result level	Socioeconomic status (SES)
1	K-6	Suburb	High	High
2	K-9	Suburb	High	High
3	K-9	Suburb	Low	Low
4	K-9	City center	Low	Low
5	K-6	City center	Middle	Middle
6	K-9	Suburb	Middle	Middle

To get a thoroughly understanding of the LEA's quality assurance system, with its different strategies and activities, an analysis of central policy documents in combination of interviews with central LEA officials was conducted. The policy documents were consisted of descriptions of the LEA organisation, policy and vision, leadership and management structure, evaluations, school-development strategies and different functions' assignments and position within the organisation. The deepened understanding and insights of the LEA's quality assurance system comprised an important basis for the interviews with LEA officials and the subsequent school interviews.

In the first one and a half year, focus was directed towards collecting data and analyse the LEA's quality assurance. In the following three and a half years, three rounds of interviews with subsequent feedback

were conducted at each school. At the final round of interviews (year five), the respondents were also given the opportunity to retrospectively think over their understanding of the school's change with regard to key components in capacity building. The analytical framework, consisting of the five aspects of capacity building, comprised an outline for the interview-guide and the feedback to the schools. The continuous synthesizations of data and feedback to both school and administrative levels have been a part of the methodological approach, with the aim of validating preliminary analyses and generating new questions. The table below summarises the collected amount of data that has been used in this specific study:

Table 2.
Data Collection

Target groups – activities	Methods	Number	Documentation
LEA actors	Individual interviews	13	Transcriptions
Principals and assistance principals	Individual interviews	14	Transcriptions
	Group interviews	14	Transcriptions
"Expert teachers"	Group interviews	17	Transcriptions
Teachers	Group interviews	11	Transcriptions
Total number of informants: 175	Total number of interviews	69	Transcriptions

With aim to distinguish changes regarding different aspects of schools' capacity building in light of the LEA's quality management work, the first step of the analysis of the collected data were comprised of an analysis of the changes that could be distinguished over time of each school's capacity building. More specifically, this part of the analysis work comprised a close reading and, in a next step, a categorization of the interviews in combination of the schools' internal policy documents in light of the analytical framework. Based on the analysis of each school's development of their capacities, a comprehensive analysis of all six schools were conducted in the next step. Finally, in light of the research question regarding which quality management strategies that can be distinguished as especially important concerning reinforcing schools' development of capacity, these patterns of change were put in light of the results from the analysis of the characteristics of the LEA's quality assurance system.

Findings

In the first part of this section, the results are presented linked to the first research question concerning central strategies of the LEA's quality management system. The second part focuses on what long-term development of schools' capacity building that can be distinguished, as a consequence of the LEA's quality management. The third part discuss which quality management strategies that can be distinguished as especially important concerning reinforcing schools' development of improvement capacity.

Central strategies within the LEA's quality management system

Strategic framework for coherence and common sense

In recent years, the LEA in the studied municipality developed a central strategic framework for quality assurance and school development, with the aim of clarifying and pointing out central standards and processes linked to the LEA's and the schools' quality management, school improvement processes and quality assurance. The strategic framework can be seen as consisting of four main components: (1) common visions and direction (see above), (2) evidence and data-based school improvement, (3) leadership and professional learning, and (4) quality dialogues for assessment and development. These standards and processes aim to create a more coherent local school system linked to schools' leadership and school improvement. The interviewed principals in many ways confirmed this quite high degree of the LEA's standardization and regulation. However, at the same time, they expressed an understanding of this strong control:

> *(Principal 1) …everyone has to walk in the same direction and in the same line. It would take a lot for a principal to choose another way. That is, they, the LEA, will immediately notice that.*
>
> *(Principal 2) Yes, especially in the LEA's quality dialogues with the principals. In them, they directly find out if everyone is on track or if someone seems to take a side-track.*
>
> *(Principal 1) Yes, but this is a very large school organization, so I think they have to do this. I see this as a way of quality assurance.*

Data-based school improvement

Data use appears to constitute a central component in the LEA's quality management system. When LEA officials described the aim of using data in their quality management, two main perspectives emerged. The first perspective can be described in terms of control and quality assurance: *"we control the schools through evaluation, however the most important is that we don't tell them exactly what they should do, we are primarily interested in finding out what they have based their decisions on, with what data." (LEA official 2).* In other words, different forms of data enabled the LEA to monitor and check the schools' academic performance, make comparisons between schools, and evaluate and make decisions about school improvement initiatives. In addition, data is presented as an important way of achieving a neutral and research-based improvement effort disconnected from personal opinion and temporary, poorly supported school improvement strategies. As one LEA manager put it, *"After all, data is the neutral part. It's not about you as principal but about the results of the school. Because we have this data, and it's hard to argue against it" (LEA manager 2).*

The second aim of data use can be described in terms of development, learning and formative assessment. Officials from the LEA described that different forms of data, both quantitative and qualitative, comprised important knowledge sources for teachers' and principals' professional learning: "we will help the schools build up a capacity concerning their data use, in that way we want them to learn how to identify development needs in their organization" (LEA Official 3).

Quality dialogues for assessment and development

The quality dialogues take place four times a year with a specific focus and agenda. Like data use, these dialogues have both a monitoring and

a supporting/developing aim. In other words, the dialogues comprise both an important occasion for the LEA to get an extended understanding of the schools' results and to support the principals in their leadership and school improvement work. Some of the quality dialogues included school visits in the form of classroom visits and conversations with teachers and students. This was described as an important complement to the quality dialogue in the form of getting acquainted with the everyday work and exploring the extent to which the ongoing development work had reached the teachers and the teaching.

Leadership and professional learning

Another important part of the LEA's quality management system comprises a strong focus on developing and strengthening the leadership of the principals. The LEA officials described themselves as having a central function in the form of organizing professional learning meetings but also in the form of leading the principals' professional learning: *"An important task for the LEA officials includes developing the principals' leadership by challenging them and not just patting them on the back" (LEA manager 3).* In addition, a major part of the principals and the LEA officials underwent an extensive professional development programme with a focus on school leadership and school improvement. The programme was organized in the form of literature studies, seminars and training modules. This professional development programme is described by the principals and the LEA officials as having influenced the development of the LEA's quality management system to a great extent. Moreover, there are several contexts and activities, organized and led by the LEA, where principals are expected not only to receive information from the LEA but also to interact and learn together with other principals.

Long-term development of schools' improvement capacities

In this part, the schools' long-term development of their capacity building is discussed in light of the study's analytical framework.

Improvement agenda

In the analysis of the collected empirical material, certain patterns emerge with regard to schools' development of their capacity building. Over time, the empirical data points to that the improvement agenda seem to have strengthened in the six schools, however in varying degree. This means that the schools' ability to activate analyses, highlight and communicate results and development needs has strengthened. As was described above, an important focus in the LEA's quality management was on supporting schools' use of data as within their school improvement work. This also become evident in the interviews with principals and teachers concerning issues related to the development of their improvement agendas. Four schools seem to have developed a greater participation among the staff around the improvement agenda over time: *"Yes, there is now a living school development group where planning is done based on analyses. The commitments are now clearer" (Expert teacher, school 2),* while two schools (school 3 and 5) were moving much more slowly in a similar direction. At the four schools where we could distinguish a clear improvement of the agenda, the principals point out that the content of the improvement work has developed towards becoming more focused on what is of significance, i.e. teaching and how it affects student learning:

> *Just after working in this way for two years, I see an extreme effect, there is an ownership …, teaching and research practice are talked about in our staff rooms (principal, school 6)*

In contrast, in schools with a lower pace of development of their improvement agenda, the teachers appeared to not be as involved in the school's improvement work which implied that that the school improvement work were much more dependent on the school administration's ability to exercise clear and a more active leadership. Among other things, this comes to expression by the assistant principals stepping up and taking on extensive responsibility as the leaders of development processes in different work and subject teams. In other words, in these schools, the improvement agenda does not tend to be supported, communicated and incorporated in the same way as in schools with a well-developed improvement agenda.

Improvement agents

The school's development of its so-called improvement agents, i.e. school actors with the mandate, the desire and the knowledge to participate in the school's improvement work, constitute another central aspect of a school's overall capacity building. How principals choose to organize and work with their improvement agents was something that the LEA has taken an interest in both through the so-called quality dialogues and in the form of various improvement initiatives in form of, for example, different "process leading programs" for expert teachers. In line with this it was clear that the organization and processes around schools' expert teachers had developed at several of the schools, concerning clarifying and strengthened their mandates, responsibilities and assignments. For example, at school 6, extensive change work was carried out where the expert teachers were given a clear operational responsibility for the school's improvement work while the school administration had a clearer strategic responsibility. That is, considering the LEA's different leaderships programs for principals and expert teachers the findings

show that the skills and ability to run and lead the school improvement work over time had strengthened in several of the schools, which can be exemplified by a quote from a teacher at on of the schools:

> *I remember from the beginning that it was very vague what we would work with. But now we have a description of what is expected of us. But also ... we've attended a process leadership programme. So we work with these issues in particular, to understand our assignment better and I think that contributes a great deal (teacher, school 2).*

Overall, the findings accordingly show that the expertise of the improvement agents has increased over time in several of the schools, as a result of the LEA's quality management work, even if certain skills development needs seem to remain, especially when it comes to having a more combined effect of the schools' improvement work in relation to the development of the quality of teaching. However, relatively large differences still existed between schools with regard to the development of how their improvement agents are used in an appropriate manner. For example, in one of the schools (school 5), frequent changes of the principal had negatively impacted the school development work's continuity and structure, including the work of the improvement agents.

Development of the school improvement organization

The schools' work to develop their improvement organizations also comprised an important focus area in the LEA's quality management work. Here, too, it is possible to distinguish a positive development in most of the schools, including in the form that the schools have over time developed suitable contexts for teachers' data analysis:

> *I feel that it's more systematic, we work more based on data, look at the students' results and student surveys /.../ based on what we in our*

> *team believe is the problem, we look at data to confirm or disprove what we said ... and according to that we define our commitments (Assistant principal, school 6)*

However, in two of the schools (school 3 and school 5), there was an organizational development from a fairly basic level, while the other four schools (school 1, 2, 4 and 6) had a more stable development organization from the beginning. In the two schools with major organizational challenges, the improvement organization was characterized five years ago as being largely informal and individually based. In other words, there was possibly a development organization "on paper" but where the actual school development work was rather weak and to a large extent dependent on the individual teacher. Although it remained a lot to do regarding improving their development organization, the findings indicate that they are on the way to developing a clearer balance between top-down and bottom-up in the improvement work. In addition, it was clear that the principals worked to create greater involvement and participation among the staff by e.g. preparing, structuring and organizing meeting places for communication and learning:

However, in the organizationally "well-developed" schools, certain slumps could be seen over time, partly due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but also in some cases due to changes in the management structure. However, there have mainly been stable development organizations at these schools that have created stability and enabled a long-term perspective in the improvement work, regardless of changes in the management structure at the school.

School improvement culture and history of improvement

When it comes to the improvement culture and history of improvement of the schools, such as trust, openness and deprivatization of the teaching, it appears that these aspects are difficult for the LEA to address with its efforts and strategies. Just as the schools' organizations, the schools' have also had relatively different starting points with regard their improvement culture. Two of the schools were "encumbered" by earlier history and culture (school 3 and 5). For example, there were strong external expectations on the schools to improve their results, but at the same time there were limited conditions for development (such as having unqualified teachers). In addition, at one of the schools (school 5) it existed a fundamental lack of trust between the school administration and the teachers, which affected the school's capacity building a lot. Accordingly, it was clear that school cultural dilemmas like this was difficult for the LEA to handle.

Improvement leadership and improvement processes

As described earlier, at the initiative of the LEA, a comprehensive and joint continuing education initiative was implemented in the municipality with a focus on school leadership and improvement work. This training was also something that several LEA officials and principals regularly referred to. On an overall level, what characterises the six schools' development of their improvement leadership over time is a development towards a higher degree of distribution and decentralization of the leadership and improvement work, albeit from different starting points: "The whole concept is based on a large distributed leadership where you really rely on and have trust in the organization and the teachers" (Principal, school 2). Accordingly, two of the schools (school 3 and school 5) were initially characterized by a

quite centralized leadership to gradually develop in the direction of a distribution of the leadership, while other schools had a more stable improvement leadership throughout the period. The understanding of and respect for school improvement as long-term processes has generally increased, as has the acceptance of the need for adapted leadership from various actors. There, the leadership of the school improvement work has been consolidated and to some extent strengthened during the period despite changes in several school administrator positions. One challenge in many schools still appears to be how the distributed leadership should be organized, clarified and supported, both what can be tied to formally appointed assistant principals and to improvement agents, such as expert teachers and special education teachers:

> *The biggest challenge is that a lot of the school development work is still at our level (the principal level). There is still development over the previous year, when we had a non-functioning school development group. There were too few of us. Now we are building a school development group together with the principal. /.../ but we're not quite there yet (Assistant principal, school 1).*

LEA quality management in relation to school development of improvement capacity

Based on the presented findings in the two foregoing sections, the aim in this part is to make a comprehensive analysis of the schools' developed improvement strategies in relation to the LEA's quality management system.

The overall analysis for the six schools' build-up of the various aspects of the capacity building shows that the improvement agenda, improvement organization, improvement leadership and

improvement processes over time seem to have gradually been strengthened – however with a clear variation and strength between schools. The expertise, responsibilities and mandates of the improvement agents also developed to some extent over time, but the outcome varies even more between schools. Based on the same empirical material, it is clear that the LEA had much more difficulties in affecting the schools' improvement culture over time. At the same time, the schools' starting point in their improvement history with the degree of external and internal pressure seems to affect the pace and the possibility of developing this culture in the direction of result and quality improvement.

Two strategies of LEAs become particularly clear as possible explanations for the change and strengthening of the capacity building at the schools. Firstly, it is about a strong focus on data-based improvement work with organizational procedures concerning data collection, uniform results reports and joint continuous analysis work. However, the digital systems for student data and school reporting are to some extent disputed, which means that the significance of these is partly unclear. The data-based improvement work is strongly rooted between LEA officials and the school administrations, but the links to the teacher level are weaker. However, the strong focus that the LEA has on the use of data as a basis for its and the schools' improvement work in combination with extensive work to strengthen principal leadership seems to have had a clear impact on the schools' development of their improvement agenda, improvement organization and their improvement leadership with associated improvement processes. Among other things, this is expressed in the form of a greater degree of consensus with regard to e.g. priorities of resources, school development needs and what changes and efforts are

to be considered to be legitimate. The same strategies also seem to have involved a development of a common language and some shared "truths" linked to what counts as effective school development and good school leadership.

Secondly, the strategy with regular quality dialogues proves to create opportunities to regularly follow up the results, deepen the analyses and point out the direction of the school improvement work. At the same time, there is variation in how the principals translate and use the quality dialogues in local practice. Another aspect of LEA strategies that at least indirectly appears to have impacted the schools' improvement capacity is the so-called strategic framework. With this framework, there is clear substantive management and control that concerns the development of the schools' quality work, a strong focus on school leadership, as well as school documentation.

Discussion and implications

In the result section above, the findings linked to the long-term effects of an LEA's quality management work concerning supporting schools' capacity building have been analysed. In this final part of the article, the aim is to discuss how we can understand these results and what conclusions regarding conditions for LEA's quality management work that can be drawn.

As discussed initially, several studies have showed the important significance and role the LEAs can have in supporting schools' improvement of educational quality and strengthening equality: (e.g. Rorrer et al., 2008; Leithwood, 2010; Day et al., 2016). The results from this study confirm these studies and has demonstrated that the LEA, with a long-term and cohesive quality management work, appears to have an important function when it comes to supporting and

strengthening central aspects of the schools' capacity building. However, in what degree seemed to depend on schools' local contextual conditions and prerequisites. One such important prerequisite seems to be the school's degree of "receiving capacity". That is, if a school should receive and utilise support from the LEA in an effective way, some basic organizational and human resources appear to have to be in place, like an efficient organization and an established functioning school leadership in combination of a sufficient level of professional knowledge among the teachers etc. (Hargreaves, 2011; Timperley, 2011). Consequently, schools with a low degree of such receiving capacity may need a partly different, or maybe a more extensive, support from the LEA. This in turn raises question about how uniform or differentiated LEA strategies in relation to the schools should be.

Another important factor for LEA's ability to support the schools' capacity building, that is closely linked to the schools receiving capacity, tends to be how well the LEA quality management system ties into and is linked to the schools' local quality assurance work. In other words, the extent to which the LEA's strategies and activities are incorporated into and can constitute a support for the schools' improvement work seems to be crucial, rather than schools constantly adapting and (re-) acting in relation to LEA's quality management system. How well the LEA succeeds in this is also closely linked to the extent to which the LEA and school improvement processes reach all the way into the classrooms and succeed in generating actual effects on the teaching. Understanding this in light of a systemic school improvement approach (Harries et al., 2021; Hopkins et al., 2014), efforts to couple the LEA's and the schools' quality assurance work to

each other could be described in terms of strengthening the links between the organizational levels within the local school system.

In this effort to strengthen the couplings between the LEA's and the schools' quality work, with the aim of supporting the development of the teaching, the study's findings show that factors such as the schools' improvement history and improvement culture seem to be of great significance (Andersen et al., 2018). In other words, we also know that the local school context's social and psychological conditions with regard to e.g. school actor attitudes, dominant norms, the degree of trust and so on, will to a large extent affect the conditions and outcomes of the LEA's quality work. At the same time, this study showed that it is also these aspects of the schools' improvement capacity that tend to be the most difficult for the LEA to be able to affect with its quality management work (Lee et.al., 2012). It seems that more formal strategies, such as results follow-up, analysis of data and accountability, etc., are not the single way to address and be able to influence the school's capacity building, and especially the schools' improvement culture. In accordance with Lee et al. (2012), our findings indicate that, for instance, the data-based improvement work does not work in isolation, but needs to be backed up by more "soft" strategies that involve creating conditions for cooperation and support, dialogue and learning.

In the comparison between the schools' local quality assurance systems and their improvement work, it is clear that their quality does not seem to be dependent to which socio-economic area the schools are located in. In other words, in the study there were schools with well-developed and less well-developed quality systems in both favourable and less favourable school areas. Here, factors such as the schools' improvement leadership and improvement culture appear to play a

greater role. On the other hand, it was clear that schools located in disadvantaged areas were significantly more dependent on having a well-functioning quality system and a teaching practice of high quality that could effectively address and handle the often major challenges and problems. In more favourable areas, the students' academic performance was not as dependent on this as students were often having strong support from the home. It was also clear how the LEA made clearer demands on and was more involved in schools with low academic performance in the form of more follow-ups, more frequent school visits and more improvement initiatives. However, schools located in favourable socio-economic areas where the academic performance is often good tend to "get away" with a quality system that is not of good quality.

Implications with regard to the LEA's possibilities of strengthening schools' capacity building

In conclusion, in the light of the above discussion, a number of implications are raised with relevant issues also linked to the LEA's quality management.

- The study's findings indicate the importance of the LEA developing strategies and activities within the scope of its quality work that involve a development of all aspects of the school's improvement capacity. In several cases, this means a broadening of the LEA's quality management work where both more formal and traditional strategies are supplemented with more soft strategies where the focus in the capacity building takes place through mutual cooperation and learning.

- A further implication for the LEA's quality management is the importance of finding a balance between control and support.

Such a balance seems to be the most effective way of strengthening the links between the organizational levels and reaching all the way out to the teaching. The study's findings point to the importance of a mutual integration of the LEA's and the schools' quality work.

- The above aspect is also related to the question of how general or specific the LEA's quality work should be in relation to the local needs and conditions of the schools. With overly general strategies and efforts, there is a risk that the schools' actual development needs are not met. However, on the other hand, with excessively need-driven efforts, where the greatest resources are spent on schools with low academic performance, there is a risk of overloading the school's quality work. In other words, this is where LEA support goes on to become an obstacle to local school development work.

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