Prior research shows significant context-bound variation in superintendent leadership

“The superintendency is so very different from district to district that making generalizations is hazardous. .. Often they are more unlike than like each other” (Glass et al., 2000)

We ask how superintendents’ leadership may be expressed given the varying national contexts of the Nordic countries

Is there a common “Nordic” superintendent role, and what characterizes its properties?

Comparable superintendent surveys undertaken in Finland, Sweden, Norway and Denmark in 2009
School Districts and Superintendents

- Municipalities – the “entrepreneurial level” of the Nordic welfare states: Daycare, schooling, elderly care and coordination of healthcare services
  - Norway: 430
  - Finland: 345
  - Sweden: 290
  - Denmark: 96

- “The school superintendent is the holder of a position in the municipality’s administrative hierarchy between the chief executive officer (CEO) of the whole municipality and the school principals” (Johansson et al, forthcoming)

- Directly subordinate to a political committee or board
- Responsible for education within the entire municipality, and head of the school principals
The governance system in the Nordic countries

- A “mix mode” of local autonomy and indirect control and steering from the state’s side
  - A general move to decentralization of powers and authorities from the state to the municipalities
  - and in many cases further on to school level
- A massive growth of more subtle and indirect state-based steering instruments (except Finland)
  - Evaluation, inspection, coupling of resource allocation to assessments, public performance data
- This shift contextualizes superintendent leadership in the “crossfire” between state accountability and quality control versus local government priorities
  - Sweden, Denmark & Norway

Superintendents’ career path and knowledge basis

- Professional knowledge basis and work experience portrays a typical “educationalist”
- Career path is entirely bound to the school sector, - in many cases within the same municipality
- From teacher – to school principal – and then municipal (district) superintendent
- Interesting observation on the backdrop of two decades of NPM rhetoric of “generalist” management
**Ranked tasks and responsibilities**

- Ranked tasks (expected, prioritized and judged as interesting)
  - Budgeting and financial management
  - Planning and goal setting
  - Facilitating school development in general
  - Quality assurance (Denmark)
  - Linking policy goals to school development
  - Pedagogical leadership
  - Knowledge management
  - Change management

- External oriented tasks, such as evaluation of student achievements, external collaboration and community relationships are systematic low-scores

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**Leadership for Learning Issues**

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Preferred areas in relation to school principals

- Coaching – to strengthen and support principals (Sweden)
- Agenda setting and discussion of goals, quality and school results (Finland & Sweden)
- Working on the quality report and dialogue with school leaders along this line (Denmark)
- School development in general (Sweden & Denmark)
- Budget issues - both in purpose of control and as a set of enabling conditions (Finland, Norway & Sweden)

Preferred areas in relation to school principals

- Clarification of local policies and school vision (Finland & Norway)
- Conveying high expectations for staff and students (Norway)
- Supporting school principals individually (Norway)
- Promoting principals’ professional development (Finland)
- Making municipal policies for schools and giving advice to the political board (Denmark)
**Relationships to the learners**

- Enhancing issues of democracy, values and pupil influence (Sweden)
- Work active with special matters for the learners and fighting marginalization (Sweden & Finland)
- Give a lot of value to the parents’ and students’ opinions and see their participation in developing educational services as important (Finland)
- Helping parents with their problems with their children (Finland)
- Ensuring school safety (Finland)

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**Future research agendas**
Promising paths for further research

1. The relationship between the municipal superintendents and their respective school principals
   - School principal questionnaire 2010 (Finland, Sweden, Denmark and Norway)
   - Interview-based school principal study 2011 (Finland)

2. Follow-up interviews of the superintendent study in 2009 for in-depth investigation of themes exposed (Finland, Sweden and Norway)

3. Similar superintendent questionnaire as in 2009 in 2011 (Norway) and 2012 (Sweden)

The first research paper will be published as:

- Johansson, O; Moos, L; Nihlfors, E; Paulsen, J.M & Risku, M: "The Nordic superintendents’ leadership roles: cross-national comparisons”.
- In: John MacBeath & Tony Townsend (Eds.): International Handbook on Leadership for Learning.
- Forthcoming in 2011.