



Educational leadership at the municipal level in Iceland

What shapes it, its characteristics and what it means
for school practices

Sigríður Margrét Sigurðardóttir

Dissertation towards the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

June 2023

School of Education

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Menntaforysta á sveitarstjórnarstigi á Íslandi

Hvað mótar hana, hvað einkennir hana og
hvaða gildi hún hefur fyrir skólastarf

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Ágrip

Viðfangsefni þessarar doktorsrannsóknar er menntaforysta á sveitarstjórnarstigi á Íslandi. Í fyrsta lagi miðar rannsóknin að því að varpa ljósi á hvernig menntaforysta mótast af stefnu og stjórnsýslu ríkis, sveitarfélaga, skóla og alþjóðlegu samhengi. Í öðru lagi að því að skilja hvað einkennir menntaforystu á sveitarstjórnarstigi; hvernig aðstæður í sveitarfélaginu hafa áhrif og hvernig hún samræmist lagalegum skyldum þeirra. Í þriðja lagi hvernig forysta sveitarfélaga hefur áhrif á hvernig skólar takast á við margvíslegar áskoranir sem þeir standa frammi fyrir og eflast sem faglegar stofnanir. Sérstaklega er rýnt í forystu sveitarfélaga út frá því hvernig þau standa að rekstri skólaþjónustu.

Hugmyndafræði rannsóknarinnar byggir á félagslegri hugsmíðahyggju. Litið var á menntaforystu á sveitarstjórnarstigi sem tilvik. Blönduðum aðferðum var beitt við öflun gagna og úrvinnslu en meginþunginn var eiginlegur. Gögn voru meðal annars löggjöf, stefnuskjöl, vefsíður sveitarfélaga um skólaþjónustu, spurningakönnun og viðtöl. Tilviksrannsókninni var skipt í fjórar rannsóknareiningar. Mismunandi rannsóknaraðferðum var beitt í hverri einingu: skjalagreiningu, innihaldsgreiningu, spurningakönnun og tilviksrannsókn með þverskurði. Afraksturinn liggur fyrir í bókarkafli, tveimur tímaritsgreinum og drögum að tímaritsgrein.

Með birtingunum fjórum er leitast við að svara meginspurningu rannsóknarinnar: Hvernig mótast menntaforysta sveitarfélaga á Íslandi af starfsháttum, stefnu og stjórnsýslu ríkis, sveitarfélaga og skóla; hvað einkennir þessa forystu; og hvernig hefur forystan áhrif á skólastarf? Fyrsta greinin (bókarkafllinn) fjallar um stjórnunarhætti og stjórnsýslu ríkis, þar með talið skipulag menntamála á Íslandi; helstu áhrifavalda, svo sem Menntamálastofnun; og helstu áskoranir sem menntakerfið stendur frammi fyrir. Önnur greinin fjallar um það hvernig menntaforysta sveitarfélaga birtist í lögum, reglugerðum og námskrá. Í þriðju greininni er sjónum beint að menntaforystu í skólaþjónustu sveitarfélaga út frá sjónarhorni forsvarsaðila skólaþjónustunnar og leik- og grunnskólastjóra og að hvaða leyti þættir á borð við landfræðilega legu, skipulag skólaþjónustunnar og mannauður hafa áhrif á forystuna. Í fjórðu greininni er kannað hvað og hver mótast menntaforystu í sjö sveitarfélögum, hvað einkennir forystuna og hvernig hún hefur áhrif á skóla sem faglegar stofnanir.

Rannsóknin er fræðilegt og hagnýtt innlegg í áframhaldandi umræðu um skólamál á Íslandi og hvernig sveitarstjórnarstigið – og ríkið – leggja sitt af mörkum hvað varðar samfellu í stefnumótun, stjórnsýslu og menntaforystu. Helstu niðurstöður sýna að alþjóðleg áhrif hafa sett mark sitt á forystu ríkis og sveitarfélaga. Pólítískur óstöðugleiki, skortur á samræmi í stjórnsýslu og skortur á stuðningi og forystuhæfni ríkis hafa haft

áhrif á mótun menntaforystu á sveitarstjórnarstigi á Íslandi. Sveitarfélögum virðist almennt ekki hafa tekist að þróa menntaforystu sína á skilvirkan hátt og hún stjórnast fremur af því fólki sem ræðst til starfa en af stefnumörkun um menntamál. Sérstaklega þarf að huga að því að efla mannauð á sveitarstjórnarstigi, því meira sem sveitarfélögin eru fjær höfuðborgarsvæðinu. Svo virðist sem takmörkuð forystuhæfni bæði á landsvísu og á sveitarstjórnarstigi grafi undan getu skóla til að þróast sem faglegar stofnanir og veita sem besta menntun. Niðurstöður benda til þess að bæði ríki og sveitarfélög þurfi að axla meiri ábyrgð á stjórnsýslu menntamála og menntaforystu og vinna betur saman í þeim efnum.

Lykilorð:

Menntaforysta, forysta, stjórnsýsla, stefna, sveitarstjórnarstig

Abstract

This doctoral study focuses on educational leadership at the municipal level in Iceland. Firstly, it aims to understand how leadership practices are shaped by policies and governance at the national, municipal and school levels, within a global and transnational context. Secondly, it aims to understand the characteristics of these leadership practices: how they are shaped by the diversity of municipal contexts and how those practices harmonize with municipalities' legal obligations towards compulsory education. Thirdly, it seeks to explore how municipal leadership influences school practices in relation to the various challenges faced by schools. The focus is mainly on understanding municipal leadership through the practices of the school support services as an important platform.

The study takes a social constructionist epistemological approach. The methodological approach is that of an embedded single-case study, with the case being municipal educational leadership in Iceland. The study applies mixed methods but with the main body of data collected using qualitative research methods. The data included legislation, policy documents, municipal homepages, national survey and interviews. The study is broken into four units of analysis, each with sub-questions that feed into the main question in different ways. The different methods were applied almost consecutively, following the course of the units: document analysis, content analysis, national survey and a cross-case study.

The units correspond to each of the four papers that were generated from this study and present the findings. They were presented in a book chapter and three research journal articles, which of one is still in draft form, each feeding into the main question: How is educational leadership at the municipal level shaped by practices, policies and governance at the national, municipal and school levels; what characterises this leadership; and how does it influence school practices? Paper I focuses primarily on the national level and includes: the organisation of educational governance in Iceland; the influences of the main actors such as the Directorate of Education; and the main challenges that the educational system currently faces. Paper II focuses on the roles and responsibilities that national education legislation imposes on municipalities in terms of educational leadership. Paper III deals with the practises of educational leadership in the municipal school support services, as a key agent of educational leadership. This is explored from the perspective of municipal school support service leaders and preschool and compulsory school principals; it is related to how contextual and structural differences and human resources influence those practices. Paper IV deals with the main characteristics of leadership practices of school support services in seven

municipalities in Iceland, who shapes them and the ways in which they influence schools as professional institutions.

The study makes a theoretical and practical contribution to the continuing debate about schooling in Iceland; specifically, it contributes to the thinking around how the municipal level – and national level – might contribute in terms of policy, governance and leadership coherence. The main findings indicate that global influences have put their mark on leadership practices at national and municipal level. Political instability, lack of scaffolding, coherence in governance and leadership capacity at the national level, have affected the way municipal educational leadership has been established. The municipalities appear not to have developed leadership practices sufficiently for educational purposes. Their practices seem to overly depend on the people who are employed rather than guided by policy and strategic planning. Particular attention must be paid to strengthening human resources at the municipal level, especially in the more remote municipalities. It seems that limited educational leadership capacity and coherence at both national and municipal level undermines schools' capacity to develop as professional institutions and provide inclusive education. The study makes the point that both national and municipal levels need to take more responsibility regarding their educational policy, governance and leadership practices.

Keywords:

Educational leadership, leadership practices, governance, policy, municipal level

Acknowledgements

This doctoral study has now come to an end. I am thankful for all the great people who have supported me both professionally and personally throughout this phase.

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List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Meaning
MoEC	Ministry of Education and Children
MES-leaders	Municipal Educational School Support Service Leaders
NPM	New Public Management
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PISA	OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment
TALIS	OECD's Teaching and Learning International Survey (GTI)

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List of Original Papers

This study is based upon findings presented in the four publications listed below. The first three papers have already been published as part of the fulfilment of this study while the fourth one is in draft form.

- I. Sigurðardóttir, S. M., Hansen, B., Sigurðardóttir, A. K., & Geijsel, F. (2020). Iceland: Challenges in educational governance in Iceland: The establishment and role of the national agency in education. In H. Ärlestig, & O. Johansson, *Educational authorities and the schools: Organisation and impact in 20 states* (pp. 55–64). Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-38759-4>
- II. Sigurðardóttir, S. M., Sigurðardóttir, A. K., & Hansen, B. (2018). Educational leadership at municipality level: Defined roles and responsibilities in legislation. *Nordic Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 2(2–3), 56–71. <http://doi.org/10.7577/njcie.2760>
- III. Sigurðardóttir, S. M., Sigurðardóttir, A. K., Hansen, B., Ólafsson, K., & Sigþórsson, R. (2022). Educational leadership regarding municipal school support services in Iceland. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 1–21. <http://doi.org/10.1177/17411432221076251>
- IV. Sigurðardóttir, S. M. (in draft). The shaping and making of educational leadership in seven municipalities in Iceland: The school support services.

The papers are all reprinted in this thesis (Paper I–IV) by the kind permission of my co-authors and the publishers. The publishers own the copyrights of Papers I and III, but I was allowed to include the accepted papers in the thesis and to upload it to an online digital library of research publication in Iceland.

Declaration of Contribution

Paper I. Iceland: Challenges in educational governance in Iceland: The establishment and role of the national agency in education.

I was the leading author of this chapter. I planned it, gathered and analysed the documents and wrote the main text. My co-authors, Anna Kristín, Börkur and Femke, came in with helpful suggestions and comments on bettering the structure, text and ideas presented. The publishing company owns the right to the chapter.

Paper II. Educational leadership at municipality level: Defined roles and responsibilities in legislation.

I was the leading author of this article. I did the analysis on the legislative documents and wrote the main text. My supervisors and co-authors, Anna Kristín and Börkur, helped me plan and structure the article, develop the theoretical framework, choose the documents and structure the analysis, and supported the text writing. The authors own the publishing right to the article.

Paper III. Educational leadership regarding municipal school support services in Iceland.

I was the leading author of this article. The data gathering was in cooperation with the Research Group on School Support Services. As a group member I participated in developing the questionnaire used in the study. I led the work of the article, organised it, suggested the framework used, carried out the data analysis and wrote the main text. Anna Kristín and Börkur, my supervisors, and Rúnar from my committee, helped structure the article, assisted with the choice of questions from the questionnaire, and supported the text writing. My former co-worker, Kjartan Ólafsson, guided my work with the data analysis. The publishing company owns the right to the article.

Paper IV – a draft. The shaping and making of educational leadership in seven municipalities in Iceland: The school support services.

I am the author of this drafted article. The interviews with school office staff were conducted by me and partly by other members of the Research Group on School Support Services but I conducted the interviews with the principals. I planned the article, did the data analysis and wrote the main text.

1 Introduction

This thesis discusses an embedded single-case study that focuses on educational leadership at the municipal level in Iceland. Three levels of governance all contributing to municipal leadership are discussed within the global and international perspective. The topic was chosen because of my personal interest in the subject, a lack of research knowledge in this area in Iceland and because of the potential benefits of the study for wider debates about educational municipal leadership and its interaction with policy and governance, especially in Nordic and rural contexts.

Although officially I started this doctoral study in 2016, the journey towards this study began over 25 years ago, when I became a schoolteacher in Iceland's compulsory education sector. As my professionalism as a teacher grew, I enrolled in a master's programme in school management and leadership and shortly after that, took on a job as a principal in a school. In the master's study, I was interested in leadership at the school level: how the principal provides leadership that encourages the development of the leadership capacity of a school and the different groups within it, such as teachers, other staff, students, and parents; and how this is connected to school improvement (Sigurðardóttir, 2011; Sigurðardóttir & Sigþórsson, 2012, 2016).

Following the master's study, I went into academia where my understanding of school leadership changed and deepened. Through reading the literature (for example, Fullan, 2016; Harris & Lambert, 2003; Louis et al., 2010) and conducting my own research (Sigþórsson et al., 2017; Sigurðardóttir, 2018; Sigurðardóttir et al., 2017) it became clear to me that although leadership skills at the school level were important, leadership at the local authority level had to be considered. I began to understand that I had only been looking at a small piece of the puzzle and that the leadership provided by the principal and other individuals and groups within the school, was just a link in the leadership chain of the educational system.

When I first started teaching in 1998, the governance of compulsory schooling in Iceland had just been transferred from state to municipal control. This was in line with changes in the other Nordic countries (Moos et al., 2016b) where global and transnational influences of neoliberal ideas had brought in New Public Management (NPM) strategies. The latter interfered with the more democratic and social way of thinking and practicing education, traditional for the Nordic countries (Jónasson et al., 2021; Magnúsdóttir, 2013; Sigurðardóttir et al., 2014; Skúlason, 2008).

Nonetheless, these were exciting years, opening up new possibilities in education. The transfer was accompanied by other extended duties, i.e., regarding setting local

educational policies and monitoring education (Sigþórsson & Eggertsdóttir, 2008). The most significant of these was the transfer of school support services that became entirely the responsibility of the municipality (Hansen & Jóhannsson, 2010; Sigþórsson, 2013). This meant that the municipalities had to both run the schools and provide support to the schools so they, and the municipalities, could fulfil their obligations regarding inclusive education.

Decentralisation with its associated educational duties, called for increased administrative and professional infrastructure at the municipal level, including that of governance and leadership (Hansen & Jóhannsson, 2010). It brought more responsibilities to the municipal councils, school governing boards and principals than before and changed the nature of their work (Ásmundsson et al., 2008; Hansen & Lárusdóttir, 2013, 2018; Hansen et al., 2004a, 2004b, 2008, 2010). To be able to fulfil their obligations, some but not all municipalities sought to establish school offices, either on their own or in cooperation with other municipalities. Many of those offices hired professionals to provide the services and were run by superintendents (Hansen & Jóhannsson, 2010; Sigþórsson, 2013).

Despite the significant role municipalities were meant to play in the restructuring that followed the transfer, I observed in the shaping of my study that there was limited research focusing on the educational role and practices of the municipal level (see, however, Ásmundsson et al., 2008; Hreinsdóttir, 2013; Sigþórsson, 2013; Sæberg, 2009). The research that existed indicated that the municipalities were struggling with their leadership role (Ásmundsson et al., 2008; Sigþórsson, 2013). This lack of knowledge about the scope and nature of leadership at the municipal level in Iceland directed the focus of my doctoral study.

As the design of the study developed, I noticed that municipal educational leadership was a growing research field worldwide (Louis et al., 2010), not least in the other Nordic countries (Moos et al., 2016a). My initial readings drew attention to the effects of global and transnational policies on national and local educational policies, practices and governance (Ball, 2017; Dýrfjörð & Magnúsdóttir, 2016; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Gunter et al., 2016a; Moos, 2013b; Moos et al., 2016a, 2016b; Sigurðardóttir et al., 2014). Therefore, my research emphasis broadened from being on the relationship between municipal leadership and schools to also encompass the relationship with the state and global policy influences and governance.

In 2018, a research group was started at my workplace, the University of Akureyri, focusing on the practices of municipal school offices and school support services. As the group's research direction synergised with my doctoral study, I became a member of the group and was able to include part of the data gathered in my doctoral study. In fact, since I started to plan this doctoral study in 2016, interest in the role of municipalities in education has increased in Iceland. In 2021, 25 years had passed since municipalities took over the operation of compulsory schooling and the school

support services. This encouraged academics as well as state and municipal authorities, to look back and evaluate how education has fared under the jurisdiction of the municipalities (see Ólafsson & Hansen, 2022; Sigurðardóttir, Hansen et al., 2022; Sigþórsson et al., 2022; Svanbjörnsdóttir et al., 2021). My study has thus become even more relevant than when it was originally conceived. Given the fast -changing situation in regards to educational governance, Chapter 2 discusses recent and current (when writing up this thesis) policy changes.

1.1 The aim of the study

The aim of this study is to shed light on educational leadership at the municipal level in Iceland. More precisely, it aims at understanding how leadership practices are shaped by policies and governance at the national, municipal, and school levels, within a global and transnational context. It further aims to understand how leadership practices are shaped by the diversity of municipal contexts, and the extent to which those practices harmonize with municipalities' legal obligations towards compulsory education. Moreover, it seeks to explore how municipal leadership influences school practices in relation to various challenges faced by schools. The focus is mainly on understanding municipal leadership through the practices of the school support services as an important platform.

Governance, policy and leadership are key concepts in this study and provide a lens for identifying, describing, analysing and understanding the research topic with varying levels of depth. It is argued that there is no simple truth of how different players understand and sense the leadership practices at the municipal level, nor a single way of engaging in such practices (see Chapter 5). The study therefore recognises the importance of exploring the complexity of governing educational systems and understanding and establishing coherence between national, local, and school governance and leadership. At the same time, a critical stance is taken in regards to the power held by different actors and their influence on governance, leadership and school practices.

Figure 1 illustrates how this relationship between policy, governance and leadership is conceptualised in this thesis and how this connection and interaction is understood. Educational policy at national, local, and school levels interacts through governance practices and educational leadership. Global and transnational policy overarches and influences all practices at all levels. The focus of my study is the local level, as the dark frame suggests, hereafter most often referred to as the municipal level. The stance is taken that to understand, explore and describe municipal educational leadership in Iceland, a wide research angle must be used that allows for unexpected information and different truths to emerge.

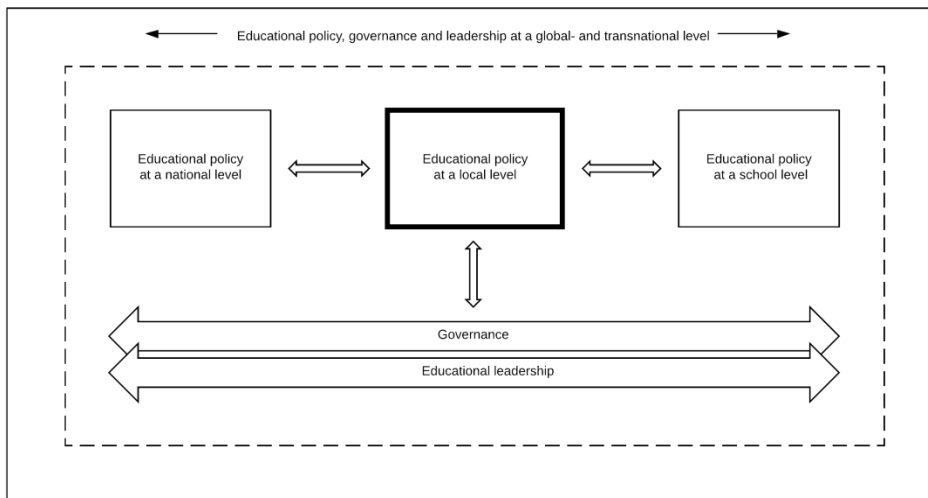


Figure 1. The interaction of policy, governance and leadership in education

Accordingly, the overall research question is: *How is educational leadership at the municipal level shaped by practices, policies and governance at the national, municipal and school levels; what characterises this leadership; and how does this leadership influence school practices?*

The study is broken down into four research themes that are described as units of analysis. The units also correspond to each of the four publications generated in this study. The units are as follows:

- *Unit 1* focuses primarily on the national level, including the organisation of educational governance in Iceland; the influences of the main actors such as the Directorate of Education; and main challenges that the educational system currently faces.
- *Unit 2* also primarily focuses on the national level and addresses the roles and responsibilities that national education legislation imposes on municipalities.
- *Unit 3* corresponds to the municipal level. It deals with the practises of educational leadership of the local school support services, as a key agent of educational leadership. This is explored from the view of municipal educational school support service leaders (hereafter MES-leaders) and preschool and compulsory school principals and is related to how contextual and structural differences and human resources influence those practices.
- *Unit 4* attends both to municipal and school levels. It deals with the main characteristics of leadership practices of school support services in seven municipalities in Iceland, who shapes them and the way in which they influence schools as professional institutions.

The overall results of the study are expected to provide valuable insights and understanding regarding the characteristics of leadership practices at the municipal level; how leadership practices interact with governance and policy; and how they can influence school practice. Knowledge about this makes it more possible for actors at national and municipal level in Iceland to take informed and systematic actions to strengthen municipal educational leadership in a way that supports the professional development of both principals and teachers and improves education for students. Furthermore, the study generates knowledge that can be used to guide educational governance and policy towards procedures that better support coherence and professionalism in educational governance, legislation and practice. Also, this study provides a steppingstone to further research on educational municipal leadership in Iceland and its complex interaction with policy and governance.

The study is based on the viewpoint that although knowledge of municipal leadership is growing in many parts of the world, there is still a lot to learn within the Icelandic context that can contribute both to the national and international knowledge base. Given the small population of most Icelandic municipalities compared to other countries, countries that face the challenges of providing school leadership in sparsely populated rural areas can make use of the findings and conclusions from this study when developing educational leadership at the local level.

1.2 Overview of the study

The thesis is divided into eight chapters, followed by References, Original Publications and Appendices. In Chapter 1, the introduction, the topic and research problem are outlined and placed within a transnational and national theoretical context, and the scope of the study is described. In Chapter 2, an insight into the Icelandic context relevant to this study is given. In Chapter 3, key concepts of the study are defined and addressed, providing the theoretical background and literature review, in an interwoven dialogue. The chapter is divided in two sections: the first concentrates on governance and policy perspectives and the second on leadership. In Chapter 4, the aim and scope of the study is taken up again, followed by the research questions. In Chapter 5, the methodology of the study is outlined. In Chapter 6, an overview of the findings from the four publications of the study are provided (presented in more detail in Papers I – IV). In Chapter 7, the findings of the whole study are summarized and discussed. Chapter 8 provides a summary and conclusion of the study as a whole and proposes future directions.

2 The Icelandic context: governance structure, policies and challenges

This chapter addresses the contextual background to the governance structure of the Icelandic compulsory school educational system, the policies it builds on and the challenges the system faces. This relates to the development of the system over the last decades and to the overall structure of the system, national governance and policies and the structures at the school level. The main focus however, since the municipal level is at the heart of this study, is directed to that level, including the school support services that are an important part of municipal educational responsibility.

2.1 Historical and contextual overview

The Icelandic population is small compared to most other nations and is now around 376,000 (Statistics Iceland, 2022). The population is mainly spread along the coastline, although distribution is uneven, with the Capital Region in the south-west of Iceland by far the most densely populated. Today there are only two levels of governance in Iceland: the national and municipal (Lög um aðskilnað dómsvalds og umboðsvalds í héraði nr. 92/1989; Sveitarstjórnarlög nr. 8/1986).

Compulsory education, sometimes referred to as *basic school* or *elementary school and lower secondary* (i. grunnskóli), comprises children aged from 6 to 16 in grades 1 to 10. Its purpose is to provide general education and preparation for further education at the upper secondary school level (Compulsory School Act No. 91/2008).

Until 1996, the state was both professionally and financially responsible for compulsory schooling and the applicable school support services. In the 1990s, Nordic and global emphases on decentralisation and empowerment of the municipal and school level, contributed to similar changes in educational governance in Iceland. These included increased centralization of defined goals for schooling and monitoring of its effectiveness. These actions were in line with New Public Management (NPM) approaches globally (Hansen, 2013; Ministry of Education, 1994; Sigurðardóttir et al., 2014). In a report delivered by a committee established by the Minister of Education on formulating educational policy at this time, it was suggested that:

In line with developments in neighbouring countries, the Education Policy Committee believes that the aim should be to increase the distribution of power in the school system, both at the primary and secondary school level. This means that decision-making will be brought as close to the

ground as possible, and the responsibility of municipalities and schools will be increased. At the same time, emphasis is placed on centralized goal setting and a harmonized assessment of students' academic achievement at certain stages of their learning process, so that the educational authorities, school children and the general public are constantly informed of whether the implementation of schoolwork is in accordance with current school policy. Finally, emphasis is placed on regular evaluation in schoolwork, in particular self-evaluation of institutions and quality management, and increased dissemination of information to the public about the success of schoolwork (Ministry of Education, 1994, p. 9, Sigríður Margrét Sigurðardóttir translated).

As a result, in 1996, compulsory schooling was transferred from state to municipal control, allocating financial and most professional responsibilities to the municipalities (Lög um grunnskóla nr. 66/1995).

As suggested by the aforementioned committee in 1994 (Ministry of Education, 1994), the transfer of compulsory schooling was followed by more emphasis on centralized control through the national curriculum and quality assurance. Additional national examinations in grades four and seven, and increased number of subjects being tested in grade 10, internal school evaluations and external evaluations were introduced (Hansen, 2013; Hansen et al., 2004a, 2004b; Sigbórsson, 2008).

Since the transfer of compulsory schooling to municipal control in 1996, the global emphasis on neoliberalism and NPM has gradually become more prevalent in education policy in Iceland (Dýrfjörð & Magnúsdóttir, 2016; Sigurðardóttir et al., 2014). True to NPM ideas, national legislation in Iceland puts the onus on schools' own evaluations, while the state and municipal authorities have responsibility for monitoring education (Ólafsdóttir, 2016). Detailed goal settings were introduced in the national curriculum published in 1999 (Ministry of Education, 1999), the number of national tests increased and the results published publicly, with increased comparisons made between schools and municipalities (Sigbórsson, 2008). Private schooling appeared in the Compulsory School Act in 1995 (Lög um grunnskóla nr. 66/1995). Over the last decades PISA, TALIS and other global OECD instruments have increasingly influenced educational policy imperatives at the national and municipal level (Dýrfjörð & Magnúsdóttir, 2016; Magnúsdóttir, 2013).

The NPM ideology can be seen in discourses in more recent policy documents and in the legislative emphasis on private schooling (Dýrfjörð & Magnúsdóttir, 2016). One clear sign of its influence on educational discourse in Iceland is in the only white paper on education (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014b). Published in 2014, the document is dominated by references to international comparisons, standardized tests, and a marked-driven education culture built on comparative information from PISA and TALIS findings provided by OECD (Sigbórsson, 2017; 2020). It is argued

that decentralisation, with its NPM emphases, have resulted in increased social and educational inequality (Sigurðardóttir et al., 2014).

At the time of the transfer, however, decentralisation was not based on much guidance or support from the state level to the municipal or school levels. The stance was taken that the municipalities and schools should develop their own capacity to deal with the new responsibilities (Hansen et al., 2004a; Ólafsson & Hansen, 2022). These included providing school support services (Hansen & Jóhannsson, 2010); developing internal school evaluations (Ólafsdóttir, 2016); local and school policy (Hansen et al., 2004a, 2004b; Hreinsdóttir, 2013); and the enactment of new national curricula and educational policies, such as inclusive education (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2017).

Decentralisation did not only apply to compulsory schooling but also to school support services that were also transferred to the municipalities in 1996. Previously, during 1975–1996, the state ran school offices in each of its eight regions. They were to ensure that the schools were kept running financially and professionally and were to provide the schools with support services, to children, parents, teachers and principals (Hansen & Jóhannsson, 2010). Those offices were managed by superintendents who had their legislative status within the compulsory school legislation. As part of the transfer in 1996, the state closed the state-run region school offices and conferred this responsibility on each municipality. The municipalities could now decide themselves, within the legislative framework, how the services were to be organized and the superintendent's role was removed from legislation (Hansen & Jóhannsson, 2010).

At the time of the transfer, various concerns were raised about the general operation of schools and the closing of the state run regional school offices, mainly related to the financial and professional capacities of the municipalities to take on this responsibility. There were concerns that the state would not guarantee enough financial resources to the municipalities. Furthermore, it was feared that the smallest municipalities would not have the capacity to fulfil their tasks and that this would result in inequality between schools and between students (Hansen & Jóhannsson, 2010; Sigþórsson, 1995; Sæberg, 2009). Recent studies (Svanbjörnsdóttir et al., 2021) indicate that those concerns have partly come true. Although the transfer of compulsory schooling is generally seen as positive (Sigurðardóttir, Hansen et al., 2022; Sigurgeirsson, 2022a, 2022b), the lack of infrastructure at the state level to support the municipalities in dealing with their responsibilities, has been criticised (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2017; Hansen & Jóhannsson, 2010; Hreinsdóttir, 2013; Ólafsdóttir, 2016; Svanbjörnsdóttir et al., 2021). Another concern has been declining scores on international comparison students' tests and relatively low scores compared to the other countries. PISA 2018 showed declining scores in reading among fifteen-year-olds and more so in the remote and less populated municipalities (Directorate of Education, 2019a).

A recent OECD report (2021) raises concerns about whether the national system is too fragile to realize large-scale strategic reforms such as the Education Policy 2030. The

report describes the national government approach in general as a “de facto ‘cascade’ implementation model” (p. 40). This refers to policy being defined by the national government, with the expectation that it is then implemented at the municipal level, followed by the school level; but communication between the levels on how to do that is fragmented. The process is “without a great deal of trialling, piloting, or interim reviewing to potentially course correct along the way” (OECD, 2021, p. 36).

As a response to the criticisms listed above, the state has taken actions to build more infrastructure or provide more guidance. Since 2013, there has been more emphasis on the systematic and proactive management of school evaluation (i.e., by publishing guidelines of internal evaluations) and a more systematic approach to external evaluations (Ólafsdóttir, 2016; Ólafsdóttir et al., 2022). This guidance could also be seen in the already mentioned White Paper (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014b). However, the state exercised and still exercises, a low stake evaluation approach with low accountability pressure (Ólafsdóttir et al., 2022).

Following the economic crisis in 2008, there have been turbulent times at the national policy level, with instability in national governance. This has resulted in rapid shifts of educational ministers and political emphasis. Those ministers have wanted to put their own mark on educational policy in their attempts to face educational challenges. In 2011 and 2013, the current national curriculum was published (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014a). The following minister put little emphasis on the enactment of the new curriculum. Rather, he focused on publishing the first white paper concerning education in Iceland in 2014 (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014b) and established the Directorate of Education in 2015 by merging the Education Testing Institute and the National Centre for Educational Materials (Directorate of Education Act No. 91/2015; Directorate of Education, 2016a). He also launched a new literacy development programme which he placed within the Directorate.

The next minister (in post in 2017–2021) did little to consolidate this programme, and her actions rather tended towards weakening the newly established Directorate. An evaluation of the literacy programme showed it had had little influence on school practice. This was argued to have been due to the limited preparation time the Ministry had allowed the Directorate and to the inadequate support given by the Directorate to the teachers (Frímansdóttir, 2020). The minister abandoned the programme and instead introduced a national professional development programme (i. Menntafléttan) (Sturludóttir et al., 2021) for teachers and principals, in cooperation with the universities, bypassing the Directorate. Additionally, the minister concentrated on developing a national Education Policy 2030 with an action plan (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2021; OECD, 2021).

On the first of February 2022, the current government changed the number and arrangements of its ministries: the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture was reorganised and the Ministry of Education and Children (hereafter MoEC) was created (Þingskjal 386 – 167. mál, 2021-2022) with a new minister. The minister has

announced considerable changes in the education system. They include further work in accordance with the Education Policy 2030 and forming new regulations concerning school support services. Furthermore, the abolishing of the Directorate of Education and establishing a new national agency that will be more concerned with school support services at the national level (Samráðsgátt, 2022). Exactly what these changes will bring is still unknown.

2.2 Educational policy and governance structure at the national level

Figure 2 illustrates the present educational governance structure of compulsory schooling at national, municipal and school levels in Iceland.

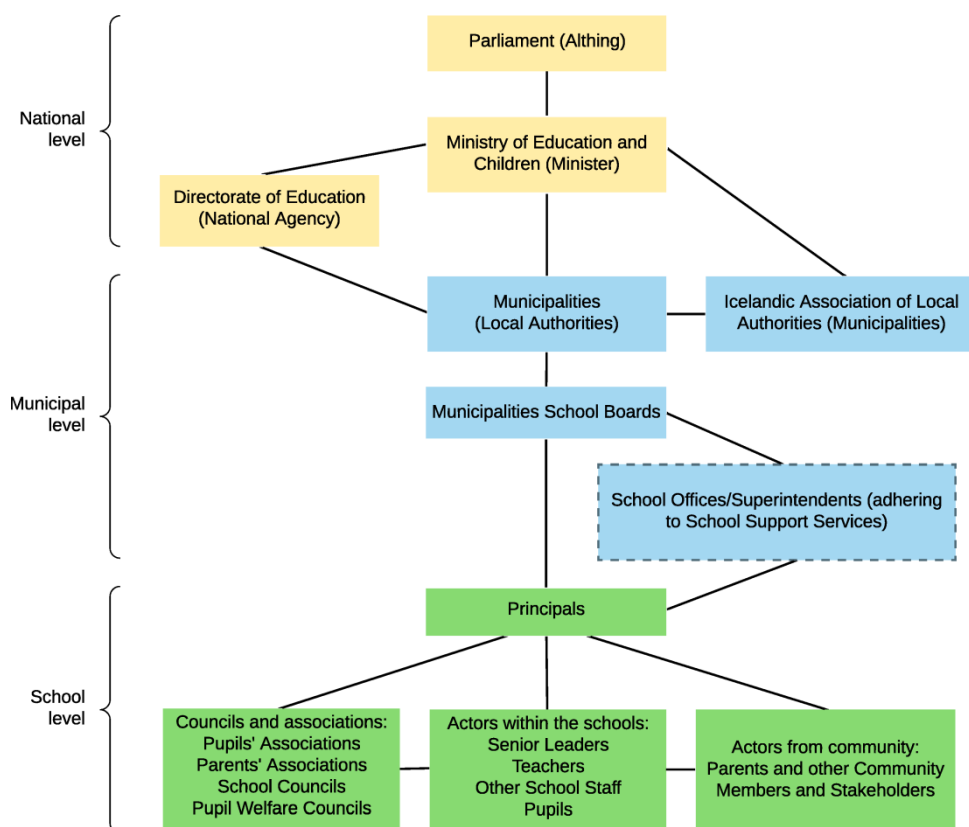


Figure 2. The governance structure of the Icelandic compulsory school system

The governance structure of compulsory education is determined by legislation passed by the Icelandic parliament (Compulsory School Act No. 91/2008), and state policy is further established in the national curriculum (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014a) at the MoEC.

Apart from the MoEC, the Directorate of Education is the only national educational agency in Iceland. It is largely an administrative institution, its main tasks regarding the compulsory school being: to provide educational material; to monitor and evaluate school progress; to oversee national examinations and international studies such as PISA; and to collect, analyse, and dispense educational information and guidance to educational authorities, professionals and the public. Additionally, the Directorate has assumed responsibility for certain administrative tasks from the MoEC and for new projects such as the implementation of the National agreement on literacy (Directorate of Education Act No. 91/2015; Directorate of Education, 2016a). However, as mentioned, the current Minister of Education and Children has announced the abolition of the Directorate of Education and the establishment of another institution with a broader service role, especially in terms of school support services. Its exact form and function, however, is still in development (Sverrisson & Sigurðardóttir, 2022). At the time of writing, the national government is forming legislation for the new institution.

The Icelandic Association of Local Authorities is an umbrella organisation for all municipalities and is a forum for co-operation between municipal authorities. The association's main tasks are to implement its policies, protect the interests of the municipalities, give information on certain aspects of local authorities, and publish material concerning municipal activities (Icelandic Association of Local Authorities, n.d.a). The association has a legal status in educational legislation, with the stipulation of actively working with the government on behalf of the municipalities in forming educational regulations (Compulsory School Act No. 91/2008).

2.3 Policies and governance structure at the municipal level

Municipalities (see **Figure 2**) in Iceland are territorially bounded administration units and communities that have the status of self-government according to national laws and regulations. They can span one or more cities, towns, villages or a countryside area. They provide some public services for their inhabitants, defined by legislation, as well as providing services that are not bound by legislation but are important to the inhabitants (Ministry of Transport and Local Government, 2017). Their main current tasks concerning education consist of running preschool and compulsory school within the legislative framework; and establishing their educational policies and providing school support services (Compulsory School Act No. 91/2008). The population of the municipalities ranges from more than 131,000 inhabitants in the capital city to fewer than 100 people in some sparsely populated areas, and 29 municipalities have fewer than 1,000 inhabitants (Association of Local Authorities, 2022). Most municipalities run their own compulsory schools although in rare cases, the least populated run their school in collaboration with a neighbouring municipality. In 2020, approximately 35% of the municipalities had less than 100 children. Due to the low population of children and/or geographically large areas, many municipalities run schools with less than 100 students (Association of Local Authorities, 2020). The educational responsibilities of the

municipalities in Iceland are summed up in the fifth article of the current Compulsory School Act No. 91/2008:

The operation of regular compulsory schools and the related costs shall be the responsibility of each municipality. Municipalities shall be responsible for the general organisation of schooling in their compulsory schools; the development of individual schools; the premises and equipment provided to compulsory schools; special classes in compulsory schools; specialist services; evaluation and quality assurance measures; the collection and dissemination of information; and the implementation of compulsory schooling in the municipality. Municipalities shall establish a general policy on compulsory schooling and make it known to their inhabitants.

As self-governing bodies, the municipalities have considerable autonomy concerning those tasks. However, the laws are not explicit in all aspects in terms of who bears the responsibility for all compulsory schooling functions. For example, there is lack of clarity regarding their responsibility for the implementation of the national curriculum, ensuring the national policy of inclusive education for all and for educational provision. Nor does the law explicitly state who has responsibility for school evaluations. This can (and does) lead to certain confusion and can partly explain why school evaluations have been found to be problematic (Ólafsdóttir, 2016; Ólafsdóttir et al., 2022), as well as the enactment of the inclusive education policy (see European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2017).

The municipal governing body is the municipal council. It is democratically elected every four years and assigns a mayor, also referred to as municipal manager. The mayor/municipal manager is either one of the elected politicians or professionally hired. The council is by legislation to appoint at least one school board that is to operate the affairs of schools in the municipality on its behalf. The school governing boards are appointed politically rather than professionally, and the boards are managed by politically appointed board chiefs. Concerning compulsory schooling, the tasks of school boards include promoting educational laws and regulations; ensuring that all students can attend school; supervising and guiding the schools within the municipality; overseeing and approving annual plans; ensuring that schools have access to appropriate school support services and premises; and making proposals for improvement to municipal councils and principals (Compulsory School Act No. 91/2008).

Compared to other countries that participate in the TALIS survey, Icelandic school governing boards have low responsibility for school tasks, while this responsibility is rather high among actors at the school level, i.e., principals, other school leaders and teachers (Ólafsson & Hansen, 2022). The boards can make suggestions to principals and municipal councils, but they have little formal power to demand that those are put

forward (Ásmundsson et al., 2008; Ólafsson & Hansen, 2022). There is also confusion over the role and power of the school governing boards, partly due to a lack of clarity in legislation on the role of school governing boards versus the role of principals (Ásmundsson et al., 2008; Ólafsson & Hansen, 2022). The board's leadership role is unclear, which is a hindrance for school governing boards when it comes to operating in accordance with latest international research on school board governance. In particular, there is a need to reinforce their role regarding professional support for principals (Ólafsson & Hansen, 2022). However, school governing boards tend to expand their roles by creating policies on matters that the Compulsory School Act defines as the task of individual schools (Ásmundsson et al., 2008).

Municipal councils, mayors, school governing boards and their chiefs should be the agents that provide educational leadership within the political sphere at the municipal level in Iceland. The context in which the municipalities operate, differs considerably depending on territorial size, population density, distances between residences, economic situation, educational background of its population, etc. (Eypórssson, 2019). One characteristic of Icelandic municipalities is their limited capacity to build infrastructure and honour responsibilities (Eypórssson, 2019). Strengthening their capacity to deal with their educational responsibilities has been on and off the agenda of the national government over the last 70 years. The government has seen the merger of neighbouring municipalities as a feasible option. This has resulted in a decreasing number of municipalities, although less than the politicians have advocated for (Eypórssson, 2014; Ministry of transport and local government, 2017). The amalgamation of municipalities is continuing, due to present governmental pressure (Samráðsgátt, 2019). Since the plan for this study began in 2016, the number of municipalities has dropped from 74 to 64. Forming regional councils around various tasks, including the school support services, has been another option many municipalities have taken (Eypórssson, 2019).

Reykjavík, the capital municipality has a unique status within the municipalities and the country, due to its many inhabitants compared to any other municipality. This puts the city in a leading position in discussions and policy settings in education at the preschool and compulsory level (Dýrfjörð and Magnúsdóttir, 2016).

2.4 School support services at municipal level

Legislation requires municipalities to provide school support services to students and parents as well as to school practices and school staff. Yet the municipalities have freedom in how they arrange these services (Compulsory School Act No. 91/2008; Reglugerð um skólalþjónustu sveitarfélaga við leik- og grunnskóla og nemendaverndarráð í grunnskólum nr. 444/2019). With the former state run regional school offices (cf. Section 2.1) as a model, many municipalities have established school offices (see **Figure 2**) to oversee their various educational responsibilities, including

school support services. Those offices often have permanent staff, run by professionally appointed superintendents who become the next in rank over the principals instead of the mayor or municipal manager (Sigþórsson, 2013; Svanbjörnsdóttir et al., 2021).

Other municipalities have made contracts with neighbouring municipalities regarding school support services or have formed regional councils (i. byggðasamlög) around it (Sveitarstjórnarlög nr. 138/2011), run by a regional superintendent. However, the bigger municipalities increasingly choose to establish their own school offices. This has led to regional councils for the school support services being abandoned, often leaving the smaller municipalities on their own to deal with their services. Other municipalities have a superintendent without having an actual school office or leave the organisation of the services up to individual principals or/and buy parts of this service from contractors. In those municipalities, the responsibility for services rests with the mayor or municipal manager, although in reality, the responsibility tends to fall on the principal (Sigþórsson, 2013; Svanbjörnsdóttir et al., 2021). As the arrangements vary, who bears the responsibility for school support services may differ, and it is not always clear (Sigþórsson, 2013; Svanbjörnsdóttir et al., 2021).

Superintendents are not mentioned as such in current legislative documents. Consequently, superintendents' professional titles can also vary. However, where they exist, they play an important part in educational governance at the municipal level. Within the school offices, other professionals such as teaching consultants, special education consultants, psychologists, speech therapists and department heads might work, depending on the scope of the office. Increasingly, superintendents also take responsibility of the social services within the municipalities (Gunnþórsdóttir et al., 2022; Sigþórsson, 2013; Svanbjörnsdóttir et al., 2021). The superintendent, and where applicable, other professionals in municipal and school offices, can be considered the agents who provide educational leadership within the professional sphere at the municipal level in Iceland.

Recent research suggests that policy on school services is vague and there seems to be a lack of common understanding within the school support services and between the services and school principals, of what it should entail. Only few municipalities have managed to build the necessary infrastructure for the services (Gunnþórsdóttir et al., 2022; Svanbjörnsdóttir et al., 2021; Þorsteinsdóttir, 2020). This is of concern as it has been demonstrated that school development and system improvement are more likely to occur in Icelandic schools where coherence and collaboration are exercised between the local policy, school support services, principals and teachers, than in schools where this is lacking (Þórsdóttir and Sigurðardóttir, 2020).

Although the organisation of school services differs between municipalities, their undertakings have generally emphasized diagnostic and clinical therapies over school-targeted consultancy aimed at enhancing teachers' and principals' professional capacity to deal with school practices (Sigþórsson, 2013). This tendency has been confirmed in

a report on the implementation of inclusive education in Iceland (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2017) and in a recent study on school support service practices (Gunnþórsdóttir, et al., 2022; Svanbjörnsdóttir et al., 2021). The focus is on individual support for students and parents, especially concerning various kinds of diagnoses, with little follow-up within the schools and the classrooms. The concern has been raised that this may prevent the optimum educational opportunities of students and the potential of school staff to develop their methods that support that (Gunnþórsdóttir et al., 2022; Svanbjörnsdóttir et al., 2021; Þorsteinsdóttir, 2020).

Teaching consultation and support for development work is largely neglected in school support services. The same applies to professional development which tends to be treated as a private matter for schools and individual teachers or principals (Svanbjörnsdóttir et al., 2021). In TALIS 2018, principals in Iceland rated their need for professional development higher than their colleagues in other Nordic countries. Comparison between TALIS 2018 and TALIS 2013 shows that principals find that support is increasing, but also that it is more difficult now than before to find time for professional development (Ólafsson, 2019). This limited support for principals is considered a general weakness at the municipal level (Ólafsson & Hansen, 2022; Róbertsdóttir et al., 2019; Sigurðardóttir, 2018). Principals have called upon the educational authorities at the municipal level to take more responsibility for supporting them and their schools (Róbertsdóttir et al., 2019; Sigurðardóttir, 2018).

Furthermore, school support services are ill suited to support the enactment of the national policy on inclusive education at the school level (Gunnþórsdóttir et al., 2022). Teachers feel that the service meets neither their own nor their students' needs within an inclusive educational system, and they have low expectations towards the services (Þorsteinsdóttir, 2020). In the current structure, the demands for diagnoses of students facing difficulties in their schooling are growing and waiting lists are persistent. However, there are also indications of a willingness, and in some municipalities an effort, to change this within the school support services, i.e., to reduce the emphasis on individual support and diagnosis and increase early intervention, support to teachers and school leaders' practices, their professional development and school improvement (Svanbjörnsdóttir et al., 2021).

A significant barrier seems to be a lack of co-operation between school support services, the social system services and health care services. Where co-operation exists, the emphasis tends to be on the grounds of social services, rather than being school-oriented (Svanbjörnsdóttir et al., 2021). This tendency can also be seen in the new law on integration of services for the benefit of children (Lög um samþættingu þjónustu í þágu farsældar barna nr. 86/2021), where school services are hardly visible.

Due to criticism of the school support services and the lack of transparency of the school support services in the new legislation, the current Minister of Education and Children has announced changes. Those regard new regulations about school support

services on the one hand and the establishment of a new institution for school development and school support services on the other, replacing the current Directorate of Education. The minister intends to seek broad consultation of the school community (Samráðsgátt, 2022).

These current events suggest that a more comprehensive co-operation with stakeholders, including researchers, is emerging within the educational field. In developing educational policy at the national level, such co-operation has not been seen for some time. Connections to the new law on integration of services for the benefit of children (Lög um samþættingu þjónustu í þágu farsældar barna nr. 86/2021) and the extensive dialogue that took place during the formation of the newly established educational policy (OECD, 2021) also indicate more integrated policy development. These movements underline the importance of looking into educational leadership at the municipal level and especially the school support services, to understand how the municipalities can better embrace changes that will follow and fulfil their obligation regarding compulsory schooling.

2.5 Governance structure at the school level

The governance structure at the school level places principals (see **Figure 2**) at the top with a large role in the governance of compulsory schools. Legislation places the responsibility of being leaders and managers on principals, with the freedom to organise and run their schools in cooperation with their teachers and other school staff (Compulsory School Act No. 91/2008).

According to the Compulsory School Act (No. 91/2008), the principal is responsible for forming the governance structure of the school and for involving the various stakeholders within the school and the community. The principal is to ensure that parents form parents' associations, and students form pupils' associations. The role of the parents' associations concerns working towards students' welfare, strengthening the home-school relationship, and supporting the school's work. That of the pupils' association concerns managing social activities and the welfare of students. Principals also establish school councils consisting of members from all those different groups, including teachers and other community members. The school councils serve as consulting forums on the schools' affairs between principals and the school community (Compulsory School Act No. 91/2008).

The principal must also establish a Pupil Welfare Council for the school. The council is a platform for coordinating the work of actors responsible for individual students' cases concerning school support services, guidance counselling and school health services and when relevant, the municipal social services and child protection authorities (Compulsory School Act No. 91/2008).

In a comparative study of TALIS countries (Ólafsson & Hansen, 2022), Icelandic principals have rather high responsibility for most school issues, except for budgeting and salaries, which are in the hands of local authorities and the Teacher Union. Budgeting is mainly in the hands of the local authorities, although the principal has some control over how budgeting is distributed within the school. The principal is almost solely responsible for appointing school staff. Principals, other school leaders and teachers have more than average responsibility for school issues, including teachers' involvement in deciding on learning materials and course offerings. Compared to other Nordic countries, their responsibilities are most similar to patterns of responsibility in Norway's schools (Ólafsson & Hansen, 2022). Part of the principal's responsibility for school governance is to decide upon the organisation of senior leaders within the school. Despite legislation being clear that principals should work in close co-operation with teachers (Compulsory School Act No. 91/2008), the principal has much freedom in how he/she involves teachers in the governance and leadership structure and work.

2.6 Summary

Icelandic governance structure involves national, municipal and school levels and is invariably influenced by transnational and global policies. During the last 25 years, Iceland has emphasised decentralisation in education, moving compulsory schooling and school support services from state to municipal control. With decentralisation, NPM influences have become more prominent in policy discourse. The state has provided a legislative framework for the municipalities but few structures to support the municipalities to take on the increased responsibilities they have acquired following decentralisation. The frequent changes of ministers over the last years have contributed to instability in educational policy at the national level that is likely to influence actions at the municipal level.

It seems fair to say that municipalities have significant responsibility for compulsory schooling in Iceland. Within the legislative framework, the municipal authorities run their respective schools, provide school support services, and set local educational policies. The legislative framework is, however, interpretative, so the division of responsibility between national, municipal and school levels is blurred in some instances. Although the contexts in which municipalities operate differ considerably, they all have to follow the same parameters. While municipalities in the capital area consist of one city or town, others tend to be more spread out geographically. Consequently, municipalities' capacities to deal with their educational responsibilities differ.

Research at municipal level in Iceland, although sparse, indicates that municipalities have difficulties in handling their educational leadership role. Due to the role of school support services in providing extensive support to schools, it is within these services

that professional and political agents at municipal level should have the best opportunity to exercise educational leadership in the Icelandic context.

The diverse municipal contexts, and municipalities' freedom regarding educational decision-making, have led to differences in the ways in which schooling and school support services are organised at the municipal level. As a result, some schools do not have school offices to turn to and seem to have little organised support. The diverse contexts that municipalities find themselves in are also likely to influence their way of providing educational leadership. This is the argument that is explored in the empirical part of the study, that is the leadership and enactment of educational policies at the local and school level. It enhances the understanding of what happens at the intersection between structures and actors at the various governance levels.

3 Policy, governance and leadership in educational settings

The fundamental aim of educational leadership is to influence school practices in a way that enhances students' learning and development. The focus of this study on educational leadership at the municipal level is predicated on this assumption. However, for the purpose of understanding leadership in its broader context, policy and governance are fundamental concepts. Therefore, three main academic fields are relevant to the research: policy, governance and leadership. In the following sections, those key terms are defined and addressed in relation to the main aim of the study. The conceptual framework for the research has been developed through engaging with the literature on those concepts which are informed by the perspective of social constructivism. The chapter explores, from a global, national and local perspective, how educational policy, governance and leadership interact and influence each other and ultimately influence school practices. It is divided into three sections.

Section 3.1 addresses educational policy and governance at the transnational and national level and how they are interwoven with leadership. The role of power in these processes is discussed. In Section 3.2, the focus moves to discussing educational leadership, leadership at the municipal level and its value for school practices. It then looks at how national and local governance, policies and leadership interact with and influence school practices. Section 3.3 is a summary of the main content of the chapter.

3.1 Policy and governance concerning education

In this section, the concepts of governance and policy are defined and discussed in relation to leadership and school practices and placed in a global perspective. However, these concepts are almost impossible to talk about without mentioning their relation to power and how they inevitably influence school practices. Consequently, the section begins with a discussion about how governance and policy are enacted at multiple levels in the educational system, not the least in relation to global and transnational influences. In particular, the contradictory governance approaches as manifested in NPM, are discussed and positioned within trends in Nordic education. In relation to this, the different drivers of accountability and development in educational governance are introduced.

3.1.1 Government and governance in relation to power and leadership

Government is defined as a group of people that holds the authority to conduct, or govern, a community or a group, and the individuals within, by setting obligatory rules and regulations and following up on them. Central to this is not only the application of rules and regulations but also working on the desires, beliefs and aspirations of people in order to influence their core values and beliefs (Foucault, 1982). Theoretically, the concept can be related to all governing bodies, whether at national, regional, municipal or global levels, as well as to agencies, organisations, institutions, religious groups and corporations (Dean, 2010). Wolman et al. (2011) define government in the public sector as the core unit that takes binding decisions on behalf of the residents within its territory, for whom it has legitimate authority. Here, authority is vested and rests on the power to make legal decisions and command their execution.

Governments in the public sector exist typically at national, regional and local levels of each country. This is the case in some of the Nordic countries (Moos et al., 2016a), although in Iceland, such governing bodies act only at national and local levels, where the local level represents the municipalities. The most common understanding of the term government is at the national level, and when referring to government in this study, it will be used in that way. Other governing bodies will be named after their function, i.e., municipal governing body.

It is widely accepted to see the role of governments and other governing bodies as “leaders of leaders” (Dean, 2010; Niesche & Gowlett, 2019; Moos et al., 2016a). Foucault (1982) saw the government as the “conduct of conducts” or holding the power to lead others to lead themselves in a more or less calculated, but often unpredictable, direction. This includes the exercise of power to structure the possible field of actions of individuals, groups and states and thus lead people’s behaviour and thoughts to a possible outcome. In other words, exercising power is “a way in which certain actions modify others” (Ibid., p. 788).

In Foucault’s opinion, power is not bound to a position or a person but exists wherever anyone can execute power and is bound in the relations and interactions between “partners, individuals or collective” (1982, p. 788). A significant notion here is the importance of freedom in power relations and the idea that the less freedom any governing party or a leader allows for, the less power it can exercise. At worst, power can transform into oppression, leaving no freedom to the governed. Accordingly, it is important that the governed can trust that they can act and take decisions (Foucault, 1982). However, as pointed out by Owens & Valesky (2022), it is crucial to distinguish between legal power rooted in official positions and the right to command and punish, and entrusted power as the power source that leaders draw on.

Legal power is hierarchal in nature and is associated with the vested authority that is granted to official positions such as ministers, superintendents or principals. Entrusted

power is associated with the entrusted authority and predicated on the idea that power resides in the people themselves (sometimes referred to as followers) who have chosen to grant authority to the leader at hand. Such power is voluntary and it is in the gift of followers to bestow or withdraw it. These two types of power are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and it is argued that those who are able to apply multiple sources of powers are in the best position to exercise leadership (Owens & Valesky, 2022).

Although power is not a main topic in this study, its close connection to governments, governance and leadership can help to explain why some policies are enacted more successfully than others, or why some leaders are more influential than others. As a result, it helps to understand how educational leadership at the municipal level might play out and influence school practices.

What governments and other governing bodies do to govern is referred to here as governance. Governance contains all processes of governing through which decisions are taken, whether through laws, norms, power or discourse (Bevir, 2012). It relates to the process of communication and decision making between the players engaged in a collective problem, leading to the construction, strengthening or reproduction of social norms and institutions (Hufty, 2011).

In educational settings, governance includes the passing of educational acts, further established in regulations and national curricula. It includes any action taken to support municipalities and schools to adjust to legislation and enact it at the local and school levels; it also pertains to the discourse used during this process. These decisions and actions are meant to “shape conduct by working through the desires, aspirations, interests and beliefs of various actors” (Dean, 2010, p. 18). By doing so, governance seeks to influence societal outcomes such as economics, culture, education, and the environment (Bevir, 2012; Wolman et al., 2011). As governance is an organic and complex process, every society grows its own way of making decisions and settling conflicts (Hufty, 2011). Although the intention of a government is definite, they shift and tend to have “relatively unpredictable consequences, effects and outcomes”, which underlines the uncertainty of the governance process (Dean, 2010, p. 18).

It is in the hands of each nation’s government to create educational legislation frameworks and policies that govern the lower levels, such as municipalities and schools. Nevertheless, it is generally accepted that neither nations, organisations, agencies nor individuals can be governed from any one point or government (Dean, 2010). Part of that recognition involves self-governance, which entails that within the national framework, municipalities and institutions are given freedom to govern themselves and decide how to fulfil legislation requirements (Dean, 2010; Moos, Johansson et al., 2016).

Self-governance allows room for developing relationships between stakeholders who are different between and within levels and for municipalities and schools to make

decisions and develop solutions that are context-oriented (Moos, Johansson et al., 2016). This means that each municipal governing body can, and inevitably will, follow up on requirements of the laws and regulations, and enact national policies in their unique way. Their actions, however, need to take into account the specific geographical and financial context of the municipality, the needs of its inhabitants, and the background and communications of those that have been chosen to govern.

An example of such context orientation is the organisation of schooling, including the formulation and execution of municipal school support services and their education policy. These are expected to be consistent with the framework of the law, including the national educational policy. As institutions within this system, schools are expected to work within both the national and local framework, i.e., set their school policies and curricula and organise schooling. Thus, as Moos et al. (2014) note, municipalities, the schools and the state system are linked in an educational governance structure; despite working relatively independently from each other, together they shape the national educational governance foundation.

3.1.2 The interaction of policy and governance in relation to leadership

Policy is not a fixed or single happening, but a process, “something ongoing, interactional and unstable” (Ball, 2017, p. 10) as well as its product or outcome. Policy is reshaped and interpreted through legislation and other documents, discourses, actions and practices (Ball et al., 2012). Making policy involves a technical and a political process of communicating as well as coordinating the goals of policymakers and the ways to achieve those goals. Policies can therefore be explained as actions which cover goals and the ways to achieve them. However, it does not guarantee that policy procedures are well formulated, justified, communicated or presented by the policymakers (Howlett & Cashore, 2014).

Educational policy is developed at all levels of the educational system by different actors who have different roles and interests (Ball, 2017). These actors can be from the municipal level, such as members of the school board and superintendents, and from the school level, i.e., principals, teachers, parents and students; they can also be from the private sector, charity organisations or teachers’ unions. Yet, due to their authoritative power, national governments have a specific status within public policymaking as the main actor (Dye, 2017; Howlett & Cashore, 2014).

According to Ball (2017), policy centres around reforms to change and improve a situation. However, policy decisions can also be reactions to changes that have already happened and the government wants to institutionalise by addressing those in legislation (Howlett & Cashore, 2014). Dye (2017) defines public policy from the point of the government as the choices made by it embodying whatever “a government chooses to do or not to do” (p. 2). This means that policymakers can, as part of their policymaking, decide to do nothing to change the current situation or to prevent an

ongoing change-process to occur (Howlett & Cashore, 2014).

Consequently, the intention of policymaking is usually to “change what people do and how they think about what they do” (Ball, 2017, p. 9). As noted, this happens through different means, such as legislation and other documents, discourse, actions and practices (Ball et al., 2012). Those means may be used for steering in a desired direction by favouring one topic, idea, or person above another, independently of truth or social reality (Ball, 2017). By applying those different means, governments and other governing bodies use oblique forms of power in multilevel settings. These forms of exercising power and leadership have been described as hard and soft forms of governance (Moos, 2009) and influence both formal and informal education.

Hard governance relates to the use of educational legislation to provide frameworks for guidance in the educational work performed at the lower levels. In most contexts, this legislation takes the form of educational acts that are followed by regulations and national curriculum guides. These are considered of fundamental importance for building a unified structure for educational systems at the national and local levels (Moos, Johansson et al., 2016). The more informal means of steering educational settings is often associated with soft governance (Moos, 2009). Soft governance includes the use of guidelines and indicators, statistics, benchmarking, comparison, and sharing of best practises that rest on widespread policy technologies (Nihlfors et al., 2013; Moos, 2009; Theisens et al., 2016; Uljens et al., 2013). Thus, soft governance relates to non-binding rules. It involves indirectly influencing people’s thinking and their understanding of themselves and the world through, for example, discourse, procedures, and guidelines (Moos, Johansson et al., 2016). Hard and soft governance can be seen as a spectrum of means of doing governance. Nations do not apply either hard or soft governance, but some combination of those.

Since the goal of soft governance is to indirectly influence people’s core values and beliefs, it is considered an effective way of leading, even more so than applying hard governance. Therefore, soft governance is increasingly practiced by policymakers, not least by governments and other governing bodies, and is associated with the transnational emphasises of NPM (Moos, 2009) (c.f. Subsection 3.1.4).

3.1.3 Multilevel enactment of governance and policy

Different actors, cultures and social interactions influence whether and how national and local policies, regulations and procedures are taken up (Scott, 2014). Thus, it is a long and complex process from establishing policy, regulations and procedures to leading the lower levels to actual enactment (Dean, 2010; Moos, Johansson et al., 2016). The measurement of policy outcomes is also complex as it can take more than a decade for the influences to appear (Borman et al., 2003).

For a long time, policy processes have been associated with the implementation of policies where the aim is to understand how, why and by whom educational policy is put into practice (Schofield, 2001). However, during the last few decades, research on policy implementation has changed and developed. In this regard, Schofield (2001) identifies three categories: “top-down and bottom-up models of policy implementation, and an identification of implementation variables” (p. 248). However, some analytical disparities have arisen, leading to the criticism that researchers are unable to address the more kinetic processes of implementation (Schofield, 2001). According to scholars, this inherent limitation has led to an oversimplification of the policy process or discordant policy procedures (Ball et al., 2012; Braithwaite et al., 2018. Hess, 2013; Hudson et al., 2019; Viennet & Pont, 2017) where implementation is seen as a linear and technical process. This linear lens ignores the human dimension (Ball et al., 2012).

Ball et al. (2012) argue that an approach that regards policy as implementation is based upon a conceptualisation of policy as dependent upon acts of problem solving that lead to policy texts such as legislation or other inscriptive documents and the implementation into practice through applying certain techniques. This is not only reductive but ignores important features, namely, relationships, context and different viewpoints (Ball et al., 2012). As Maguire et al. (2013) explain, due to the interpretation and translation that occurs along the way from state level to school level, the effects of policy programmes are neither instant nor obvious but peripheral and nuanced. How policy occurs at municipalities and schools is therefore multifaceted and should be regarded as an enactment rather than implementation. Enactment means, in Maguire et al.’s (2013) view, understanding and considering the whole complexity of translating policies into real actions. They see policy enactment as “a dynamic and non-linear aspect of the whole complex that makes up the policy process” (p. 6); it is sometimes influenced by resistance and reorganisation and is merged into other existing practices or more dominant policy programmes.

An important aspect of Ball et al.’s (2012) argument lies in the different ways in which the role and influence of the actors within the policy process are viewed. When looking at policy as something that can be put into practice through implementation, superintendents, principals, teachers and other practitioners are then simply cast as implementers of policy. According to Hargreaves and Shirley (2020), this reduces the local level actors to mere mediators between the national level and the school level, thereby failing to fully recognize these actors as an independent driving force. As Ball et al. (2012) point out, the local level is thus excluded from actively participating in the making of policy. This relates to the relationships and negotiations between the different parties at hand, the different context of each community and school, and different understandings and viewpoints of all those who take part in the process (Ball, et al., 2012). As a result, how and to what extent policies originating at the national or municipal level are enacted at the school level, depends on how stakeholders are involved in the enactment process (Maguire et al., 2013).

In the educational context, this is important in terms of the engagement of superintendents, principals and teachers. The distinction between policy enactment and the traditional view of implementation, is important in this study as it provides a lens to understand how governance at different levels influences municipal leadership and how that leadership in turn, effects school practices. It acknowledges the social constructionism of the enactment process and helps to understand how superintendents influence the enactment of legislations and educational policy at the municipal and school level.

The practice of leadership has been identified to be a potent component in enhancing education policy (Ball et al., 2012). Coming back to Foucault's (1982) argument, governance at all levels is seen as needing to happen in partnership with those governed: authorities must see themselves as *leaders of leaders*, using different resources of power to exercise influence (Dean, 2010). Yet the way in which governments govern depends on the perspectives held by those who make the systems and work in them (Sahni, 2003). This also means that governance, at both national and local levels, depends on the ideologies endorsed by those who are in a position to exercise the most power.

3.1.4 Globalisation and divergent approaches to policy and governance

It is generally accepted that although the legal power of education resides within nations, educational policy and decisions at the national level are increasingly affected by global and transnational organisations and institutions (Ball, 2017; Dean, 2010; Moos, 2013b, 2017). Ball (2017) states that today, governance "cannot be reduced to a matter of party politics or ideology" (p. 221); rather, it is built on a "global shift in public service discourses – in language, ideas, organisation, technologies, practices and experience" (p. 222). He argues that this global shift is driven to a great extent by neoliberal and NPM views on the purpose of education, which means that economic growth and marked principles of competition, underpin peoples' ways of thinking, acting, and understanding education and education policy. This effectively overshadows the social purpose of education.

Gunter et al. (2016a) state that from a leadership perspective, the NPM approach means an emphasis on managerial procedures and hierarchical structures that support those features. According to the authors, this ideology is built on the idea that individuals at lower levels cannot be trusted to properly fulfil their duties without close control. One of the consequences, they say, is a breach of trust between actors at the school level as well as between national, municipal and school levels.

England and countries such as the US and Australia, are seen as being at the heart of NPM, while others have adapted some of its methods and techniques. Consequently, the NPM has influenced national educational systems differently and to varying

degrees, depending upon traditions, cultures, and choices at the national level (Gunter et al., 2016b). This has happened worldwide, including in the Nordic countries, where the principles of NPM, it has been argued, are in contradiction to the existing culture and have not only changed but undermined existing ways of doing education (Moos et al., 2016b). Similarly, scholars (Dýrfjörð & Magnúsdóttir, 2016; Hargreaves and Shirley, 2020; Moos, 2013b; Sahlberg, 2010) have argued that these influences are threatening the very existence of more democratic and social ways of thinking about and practicing education, as has been the tradition in the Nordic countries of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden.

Following the Second World War, a certain revision of societal values occurred in the Western world. In the Nordic countries, a common emphasis emerged on establishing a democratic welfare state with equal rights, serving and protecting citizens and providing free education for all (Moos et al., 2013) and has been associated with the need to foster active citizenship. Moreover, it is based on the belief that the best way to educate children is by looking at the purpose of education from a comprehensive point of view, often referred to as *Bildung* (Moos, 2003; 2013a).

Both the notion of comprehensive education and *Bildung* refer to character building with an emphasis on developing the whole person in and for democratic and social settings (Moos, 2003; Wiborg, 2010). This builds on educational ideas inspired by scholars such as Dewey and Montessori (Moos, 2013a), ideas often contrasted with the scientific management of Taylorism that inspired educational systems in the UK and the US, and later turned into global neoliberalism and NPM (Moos, 2013b; Moos, 2003; Dean, 2010). In a study on common and different educational policy trends within the Nordic countries and in the UK and US, Moos (2013b) concludes that:

A number of Nordic trends are strong and different from mainstream NPM; strong state and local authorities, clinging to comprehensive education, collaborative and deliberative leadership and cohesive schools. These are strong trends, building on traditional values. (Moos, 2013b, pp. 222-223)

Arguments for and against the NPM approach on the one hand and the *Bildung* approach on the other, encapsulates current debates. NPM has largely taken over the discourse, causing contradictions and changing ways of doing education in these countries (Dýrfjörð & Magnúsdóttir, 2016; Moos et al., 2016b). This can be seen in the increased emphasis on national and international performance standards. The educational system has now opened up to competition and is subjected to increased accountability demands and steering (Moos, 2013b). While there are similarities in how Nordic countries have embraced these NPM emphases, cultural and situational differences affect how they have played out at the national and local levels in each

country (Moos, 2013b), leaving Finland the least touched by this trend (Sahlberg, 2010; Uljens & Nyman, 2013) and Sweden the most (Holmgren et al., 2013).

One of the consequences of NPM's influence is seen as the changes in methods of governance (Ball, 2017; Moos, 2009). Less emphasis is put on governing through legislation—*hard governance*—and more work is put into governing through *soft governance* to influence changes in the educational system (Moos, Johansson et al., 2016). One of its embodiments in many of the Nordic countries has been to increasingly bypass the municipal level altogether and instead, encourage states to negotiate with schools directly (Moos, Paulsen et al., 2016; Ólafsson & Hansen, 2022). At the same time, these trends also seem to be causing changes at the municipal level, influencing the role and leadership of superintendents and other main agents (Moos, Johansson et al., 2016).

Global institutions such as the World Bank, the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and unions like the European Union (EU) (Ball, 2017) are active contributors to soft governance (Moos & Krejsler, 2021). One of the main drivers has been OECD, with its 35 member countries, including the Nordic countries (Ball, 2017; Moos, 2009). OECD provides and analyses statistical data banks (like PISA and TALIS) on education. Those data banks are intensively used to compare countries and to argue for change. Another main contributor is the World Bank, which has seen opportunities in economic crises in many African and South American countries for enforcing its ideologies. In return for financial support, the World Bank has conditionally forced them to turn to privatization and neoliberal approaches to education at the national level (Ball, 2017). As those organisations seldom have legal power over education at national levels, they steer with soft governance (Ball, 2017; Moos, 2009; Moos & Krejsler, 2021).

The systematic decentralisation of school systems goes hand in hand with the forces of NPM which began in the 1970s in Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada and New Zealand (Caldwell, 2005; Karagiorgi and Nicolaidou, 2010), leading to a wave of school reform for decentralisation in the world (Addi-Racah and Gavish, 2010; Björnsdóttir et al., 2008; Eskeland and Filmer, 2007; Karagiorgi and Nicolaidou, 2010). A centralized educational system is one where state authorities have full control and power over educational policy and resources. Decentralisation, by contrast, can be described as the transfer of those powers and control from central to local educational authorities and to schools themselves (Caldwell, 2005; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; West & Ainscow, 1991).

It is important to bear in mind that the level of decentralisation within countries differs and in some countries, decentralisation has deep roots in educational history. Nevertheless, Fullan (1993) has argued that school systems need a balance of centralisation and decentralisation to be able to progress fully. This thesis is predicated on recognising that striking a balance between the two is subject to political and

ideological processes and that finding the right balance can be a struggle. In practice, with increased autonomy of local authorities and schools, governments have often tightened control and increased demands for accountability. This has been enacted through standardised curriculum, tests and evaluation systems to ensure a sense of a unified national education system (Caldwell, 2005). Partly following these trends, the role of local authorities in providing leadership and support to schools has become more important (Fullan, 2010; Ikemoto et al., 2014; Honig, 2012; Louis et al., 2010). In the context of Iceland, the ability of municipal authorities to live up to national educational requirements has been questioned (Hansen & Jóhannsson, 2010; Sigþórsson, 2013), as addressed in Chapter 2.

3.1.5 Different drivers of accountability and development

Scholars like Ball (2017), Gunter et al. (2016b) and Moos (2017) argue that the legacy of NPM with its overemphasis on standardisation, punitive accountability, individualistic strategies, technocratic homogenisation and ad hoc policies (built on neoliberalism and NPM views) has harmed educational systems worldwide. Fullan and Quinn (2016) refer to those as the 'wrong drivers' and say that educational systems with such drivers are doomed to fail as politicians impose solutions that are "crude and demotivating for the very people who have to help lead the solutions—teachers and administrators" (p. 3). They argue that it has resulted in confusion and overload, and the more the system leaders try to fix it with more of the same, the bigger the problem becomes. Ball (2017) describes this as the consequence of unstable governance, working intentionally and unintentionally against itself, resulting in chaos.

Fullan and Quinn (2016) argue that to deal with this and to succeed in school change, fundamental drivers need to be shifted to capacity building, with a focus on results, collaboration, pedagogy and coordinated policies. In their opinion, the leadership function of local and state authorities, as well as their responsibility for creating conditions that strengthen schools, must be foregrounded. The premises for success are that all organisations, political parties and individuals at all levels in the education system, work together coherently to gain success at the school level. Campbell and Fullan (2019) take this further and explain how "good politics plus good governance wrapped up in a system perspective is the future of public education" (p. 6). They put emphasis on the local level as the one that is closest to school practices and students, highlighting the importance of the school board and their work with superintendents and schools. This highlights that all those parties need to develop a governance mindset for maximizing leadership coherence and advantages for students.

These emphases on coherence between the political and professional parties and enhancement of their leadership and governance skills (Campbell & Fullan, 2019; Fullan & Quinn, 2016) are in alignment with other scholars (Hopkins, 2007; Lambert, 2003; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Louis et al., 2010; MacBeth et al., 2018) who argue

that in order to strengthen schools' capacity to provide students with a good learning experience, skilful employment of leadership is necessary at all governance levels—school, local and state.

3.2 Educational leadership

Educational leadership, especially in relation to the municipal level, is a pivotal academic field in this study and is addressed in depth in this section. In this regard, educational leadership and its relationship to school practices, i.e., for students and the development of professional learning communities, is defined and clarified. In addition, the kind of practices that are carried out by successful leaders at municipal level are addressed as well as the importance of developing leadership capacity at the municipal level and within the educational system. The section moves on to clarify who are the leadership actors at the municipal level and their role in strengthening school practices. Last, but not the least, it addresses how educational leadership, policies and practices at the state, local, and school levels interact and influence schools as professional institutions and students' learning.

3.2.1 Educational leadership defined

The concept of leadership tends to be defined according to researchers' perspectives and the phenomena that is the focus of the investigation (Yukl, 2013). Different traditions in language use between countries increase this ambiguity, generating challenges for both researchers and practitioners. Adding to this is the "belief that leadership is culturally, contextually, and situationally located" (Blakesley, 2011, p. 13) but at the same time "can be prescribed, standardized, and reduced to quantifiable traits or characteristics generalizable across contexts" (p. 13).

This complexity is described by Northouse (2016) who considers leadership as a complex process with manifold dimensions "whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (p. 6). As a process, leadership is seen as neither a trait nor a characteristic possessed by or bound to the leader, but a transactional occurrence that transpires between the leader and the followers. Leadership is therefore seen as an interaction between the leader and the followers where each gives feedback to the other and this then influences the outcome of the leadership and the actions taken (Northouse, 2016).

This further implies that leadership is not bound to the formally nominated leader in a group but is an interactive non-linear process that becomes accessible to everyone (Northouse, 2016). Thus, the leader becomes a follower and the follower a leader (Sergiovanni, 2009). It is a process that allows leadership to flow between and within the different groups and individuals (Lambert et al., 2016). Leadership in this sense is an organisation-wide phenomenon where proactive and distributed leadership is the premise on which organisations grow (Harris, 2010). As Lambert (2003) points out,

this way of understanding leadership rests on a constructivist approach where leadership is seen as happening in the complex interactions of social settings. This occurs in a community where everyone contributes and where people work together and learn to lead and how best to proceed through reciprocal learning (Lambert et al., 2016).

At the same time, leadership does not exist without the leader's influence on his or her followers and without people to influence, there is no ground for leadership. Consequently, influence is an inevitable part of exercising leadership (Northouse, 2016). This definition of leadership also stresses leadership as an act towards common goals where the leader is a part of a group with a common purpose. The leader uses his or her resources to strengthen the group to work together towards mutuality. To stress that leadership is about common goals helps the leader to behave ethically towards the led and to remember to work together with the group towards solutions, rather than forcing their own will onto the group members (Northouse, 2016).

Louis et al.'s (2010) explanation of the meaning of leadership has many resemblances with Northouse's (2016) as they see leadership in terms of two core functions: providing direction and exercising influence. However, what makes those functions complicated in practice is that each of them can be performed differently as can the different practices associated with the functions, leading to numerous leadership models with distinct consequences for practice (Louis et al., 2010). Or, as Fullan (2019) puts it, nuances in leadership styles determine the ways in which leaders who on the face of it, adhere to the same models, succeed or fail their tasks.

With regards to educational leadership, Hodgkinson (1991) defines it as "everything that consciously seeks to accomplish educational projects" (p. 17). However, the ambiguity of educational leadership is no less than that of other kinds of leadership (Blakesley, 2011). Based on Bush's (2011) notion, it relates to the practice of leadership within the educational sphere. Leadership in this sphere is seen as an important catalyst in school success and students' learning (Grissom et al., 2022; Gronn, 2010; Hall & Hord, 2015; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Harris, 2008; Fullan, 2020; Louis et al., 2010).

Research on educational leadership has for some time focused on the leadership of the principal. The principal is seen as a key person, holding the power to influence teachers to bring about changes in teaching practices (Sergiovanni, 2009) and student learning (Robinson, 2007, 2011; Robinson et al., 2008). Although the importance of principal leadership has been well established (Grissom et al., 2021), research has provided understanding of the importance of the principal in adhering to collective models of leadership above that of hierarchical ones, with leadership spread among people (Bennett et al., 2003; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Harris & Jones, 2021; Spillane, 2006), throughout and beyond the organisation (Louis et al., 2010).

This distributed way of understanding leadership has put the leadership role of other individuals who are not principals in the spotlight, i.e., teachers, students and parents, superintendents and politicians (Campbell & Fullan, 2019; Lambert, 2003; Moos, Johansson, et al., 2016), along with leadership at different levels in the system, i.e., municipal and state (Fullan & Kirtman, 2019; Hargreaves & Shirely, 2020; Hopkins, 2007; Louis et al., 2010). Educational leadership in this sense is believed to have the potential to work both as an impetus for releasing capacities that exist in the organisation (Fullan, 2016; Leithwood et al., 2008) and as a link for joining up the different factors that influence student learning (Louis et al., 2010). Thus, leadership can boost capacities within schools. It can provide a channel for different factors such as implementation and professional development programmes to reach the students (Louis et al., 2010).

A key factor in this synergistic leadership is enabling the contribution of each of the different groups that belong to the school community, namely, states, municipalities, principals and other school leaders, teachers, students and parents. This shared and distributed way of practicing leadership is argued to be more likely to lead to student learning and has a greater impact on professional development than when leadership is not shared (Louis et al., 2010). This seems especially to be the case “the more leadership is focused on the core business of teaching and learning” (Robinson, 2007, p. 9). Alongside this, school leadership needs to be contextually and culturally sensitive, within and between schools, districts, municipalities, countries and even world regions (Lambert, 2003; Louis et al., 2010; Lund, 2022; Khalifa et al., 2016; Wildy & Clarke, 2011).

A recent review of leadership studies by Harris and Jones (2021) echoes the important role that leadership plays in achieving educational improvements:

... that school, and system improvement can be achieved by changing key organisational processes, such as leadership, and by carefully building leadership capacity. The evidence reinforces that under the right conditions, leadership can make a positive contribution to organisational effectiveness and improvement. Also, the research shows how distributed leadership and instructional leadership not only reinforce each other but also positively influence organisational learning and student learner outcomes. Finally, to be effective, it has been posited that any leadership preparation and development programme must be contextually situated and culturally responsive (p. 9).

In relation to this study, educational leadership is acknowledged to be a force at all levels of educational governance, although the focus of this study is on the municipal level.

3.2.2 Leadership at municipal level for school practices

The global flow of decentralisation policies has led to increased educational responsibilities being given to local levels all over the world. Scholarly attention has therefore turned to the importance of researching leadership at the local level, such as municipalities and districts (Fullan, 2019; Fullan & Kirtman, 2019; Campbell & Fullan, 2019; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2020; Hopkins, 2007; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2019; Louis et al., 2010; Moos et al., 2016a). A longitudinal study focusing on educational leadership on state, district, and school levels (Louis et al., 2010) showed that to be effective, district leadership needed to be distributed. The study demonstrated that district leadership was a considerable contributor to both professional development and student learning at the school level. It was most successful when it contributed to principals' and teachers' feelings of being supported in their work. Conversely, scholars argue that when there is a lack of leadership capacity, understanding and support at the municipal level, improvements at the school level cannot be sustained (Fullan, 2016; Lambert, 2003, 2006; Lambert et al., 2016).

The teaching profession places great demands on teachers' competence and professionalism and demands collaboration with colleagues and other professionals, parents and students (Heikkinen et al., 2012; Schleicher, 2016). The willingness of teachers to take an active part in school and professional development and their ability to develop education, is crucial in school improvement (Nguyen et al., 2020). It is generally argued that to encourage teachers to develop their professionalism, systematic support is needed that focuses on enhancing the leadership capacity of the schools and schools as professional institutions and learning communities (Harris & Jones, 2021; Fullan, 2016; 2019; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Lambert et al., 2016). Therefore, school leadership should be directed to improving schools as professional learning communities (Harris & Jones, 2021). However, the focus must remain on how and if those strategies lead to enhanced student learning (Harris & Jones, 2019; Robinson, 2011).

The term 'professional learning community' is seen as a synonym for culture within a school where continuous learning among staff is encouraged and maintained for the purpose of strengthening students learning. Such practices create a community of people who, regardless of education or status, share their vision and experience and support each other in their work (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Huffman & Hipp, 2003; Sigurðardóttir, 2010; Stoll et al., 2006). The learning community is characterized by mutual trust and respect and the strengthening of networks and collaboration. Emphasis is placed on creating a channel through which ways can be found to improve practice and enactment of methods that improve learning and teaching (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Thornton and Cherrington, 2019), based on evaluation and assessment (DuFour & Fullan, 2013).

The professional learning community is seen as a complex and challenging phenomenon (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Fullan, 2016; Hall & Hord, 2015). The community exists within the struggle of the daily work of a school where everyone is included and willing to learn together, discuss ideas and their enactments. For such a community to prosper, purposeful support and guidance is needed (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Fullan, 2016; Hall & Hord, 2015). This support needs not only to come from within the schools but the municipal level that also needs to be an active participant in the process (Fullan & Kirtman, 2019; Lambert, 2003; Louis, 2015).

3.2.3 Practices carried out by successful leaders at municipal level

The emphasis on leadership coherence and harmony within institutions and governance levels, has resulted in numerous studies that seek to identify the core practices that successful leaders have in common, not only within professions, organisations and governance levels, but across levels (Fullan, 2019; Lambert, 2003; Leithwood et al., 2008, 2020; Louis et al., 2010). One such framework describes leadership practices of successful leaders at the district level (Louis, 2015; Louis et al., 2010) in the United States. Originally developed by Leithwood et al. (2008) and recently revisited by Leithwood et al. (2020), it identifies a principal's leadership functions that will contribute to successful leadership in most contexts. Louis et al. (2010, see also Leithwood et al., 2004; Louis, 2015) adjusted it to fit the district settings. For this study, the framework is synthesised in **Table 1**. The framework describes leadership practices that are distributed in nature, built on the notion that such leadership is more likely to lead to positive outcomes than leadership that is not distributed (Leithwood et al., 2004; Louis et al., 2010). Leadership practices are described and divided into four main categories: 1) *setting directions*, 2) *developing people*, 3) *refining and aligning the organisation*, and 4) *improving teaching and learning programmes* (Leithwood et al., 2008, 2020; Louis et al., 2010). Each of these includes three to five defining sub-practices that represent activities carried out at the district level by districts leaders.

Louis et al. (2010) found that the closer the district authorities matched these leadership categories, the more principals' feelings of self-efficacy were lifted. In turn, this increased the distributed leadership and professional development of teachers and student performance at the school level, improved. This leadership atmosphere provided conditions in which principals and teachers felt supported in their work, especially in aspects that research has shown encourage school effectiveness. A key component in this positive milieu was the establishment of trust amongst all parties (Louis et al., 2010).

As commented by Björk et al. (2014) and Johansson and Nihlfors (2014), district leadership in the United States is somewhat different from municipal leadership in the Nordic countries, due to the different function of the two levels in the governance chain

in each setting. However, this framework builds on a general idea of leadership practices (Leithwood et al., 2008, 2020) and is therefore used in this study as an analytical tool in some parts of the data analysis.

Table 1. Leadership practices carried out in the district context

Main categories	Subcategories/ practices	Elaboration on required leadership activities
Setting directions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building a shared vision • Fostering the acceptance of group goals • Creating high performance expectations • Communicating the direction 	<p>Creating a vision, defining a strategy, working towards shared ownership and integration into the school's culture to protect it against leader changes. Demonstrating outstanding practice, making clear it is expected from others, motivating people by encouraging, praising and explaining roles and purposes, planning and organising the trajectory. Work in this category builds shared understanding and provides the necessary stimulation for participants to want to do their very best.</p>
Developing people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing individualized support and consideration • Offering intellectual stimulation • Modelling appropriate values and practices 	<p>Trying to understand people and working towards developing their skills. Trying to stimulate teachers & staff to promoting their knowledge & skills to better meet organisational aims. Contributing to staff commitment, capacity and flexibility to continue to gain knowledge and skills. Promoting reflection, providing intellectual stimulation, guide and model preferred values & behaviour. Acting like a facilitator, caring about the professional and personal needs of people, provide individual support.</p>
Refining & aligning the organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building collaborative cultures • Restructuring the organisation to support collaboration • Building relationships with families, communities • Connecting the school & community 	<p>Knowing how to restructure and reculture the organisation by establishing working conditions that enable teachers to make the most of their interests, commitments and capacities. Promoting a collaborative culture, networking and team building. Learning to manage conflict, building proactive relationships with parents and community, and connecting the school to its broader environment. Providing consulting and delegating tasks and leadership.</p>
Improving teaching & learning programmes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staffing the programme • Providing instructional support • Monitoring school activity • Buffering staff from distractions to their work • Aligning resources 	<p>Leading efforts to improve teaching and learning programmes. Creating a supportive work environment for teachers to support institutional stability and strengthen the school. Finding appropriate teachers for the teaching programmes. Providing pedagogical support and professional development opportunities to promote teaching and learning. Monitoring school activity. Protecting teachers and other staff from distraction from their work.</p>

3.2.4 Developing leadership capacity at municipal level

Despite the existence of a body of knowledge about effective leadership practices (Leithwood et al., 2008; Louis et al., 2010), district-wide success at sustaining change and improvement efforts at school level is an ongoing battle (Fullan, 2016). One approach to improving educational settings and enhancing students' education, has been to develop leadership capacity on a broad skills level (Fullan & Kirtman, 2019; Harris & Jones, 2021; Lambert, 2003; Lambert et al., 2016).

Lambert (2003) has provided a matrix for developing leadership capacity at district level which functions as an analytical tool to understand and evaluate leadership capacity at the district level and to develop it further, which has been adapted for the purposes of this study. The matrix is presented in **Table 2**. The model identifies the skills needed to develop high leadership capacity at the district level itself; and it explains the actions needed to support the school to do the same, for the benefit of school improvement and student education. The matrix consists of four quadrants with six characteristics that are parallel between the quadrants (Lambert, 2003). The characteristics are: 1) *the role of the district leader and other district and school members in leadership activities*; 2) *the use of information and inquiry to inform practices*; 3) *programme coherence*, 4) *collaboration and common responsibility*; 5) *reflection and innovation*, and 6) *student achievement*. Each quadrant represents a certain level of leadership capacity within the district, where quadrant one shows the least developed leadership capacity and quadrant four, the highest leadership capacity.

The aim of local level leadership capacity is to develop widespread capacity at the district, municipal and school level so that school improvements at the local and school level are sustained, even when key persons leave (Lambert, 2003). Thus, the concept refers not only to the leadership capacity in the school community itself but also to the district and municipal level and beyond. According to Lambert (2003), leadership capacity thrives on collaborative learning at the municipal and school level and is a fundamental component for sustained school improvement. The matrix is underpinned by a constructivist conceptualisation of leadership, acknowledging the complexity of leadership. It gives way for surfacing and mediating perceptions, searching the meaning of general ideas, and reflecting and making sense of work and information in interaction with other people. It enables new information to be generated, leading to the structuring of new understanding and actions, based on shared ideas that benefit students learning and development (Harris & Lambert, 2003).

Understanding leadership in this way is underpinned by the belief that leadership is a learning process where the professional development of teachers and their leadership are two sides of the same coin; neither can be developed without the context for the other (Levin & Schrum, 2017; Lambert et al., 2016; Sigurðardóttir & Sigþórsson,

Table 2. District leadership capacity matrix

		Level of involvement	
Depth of leadership skills and understandings	<i>Low skills</i>	<p>Quadrant 1 – Low involvement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • District managers are autocratic • Actions are derived from external directives rather than shared vision • Top-down accountability systems emphasise compliance and standardisation (i.e., districts hand directives to schools, and schools report results to districts) • Direction is centralized in the form of mandates, resources, and rules and regulations, resulting in dependency relationships • Professional development is erratic and one-size-fits-all • Student achievement is low or directly correlated with ethnicity and socioeconomic status 	<p>Quadrant 2 – High involvement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • District managers take a laissez-faire approach • Because shared vision is lacking, there is fragmentation and poor programme coherence within and among schools • Schools and individual teachers design assessment with minimal systemic use of information and evidence for accountability and improvement • Direction is decentralized and school-based, with little emphasis on coordination or coherence • Professional development is a potpourri of unrelated training choices • Student achievement varies widely among district schools—some are doing well while others show little or no improvement
	<i>High skills</i>	<p>Quadrant 3 – Low involvement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • District administrators delegate some authority and resources to schools with trained leadership teams • District and school visions are coordinated • District and school leadership teams develop lateral accountability systems, but without broad engagement • Coordination is generally close, with greater autonomy for schools with skilled leadership teams • Professional development is focused on district vision and goals • Student achievement and development are improving and gaps among groups are narrowing 	<p>Quadrant 4 – High involvement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • District administrators model, develop, and support broad-based, skilled participation in the work of leadership • Shared vision results in districtwide programme coherence • An inquiry-based accountability system informs decision making and practice at classroom, school, and district levels • Organisational relationships involve high district engagement and low bureaucratization • During professional selection and development, administrators recruit and educate learners and leaders in partnership with schools • Student achievement and development are high or steadily improving in all schools, with equitable outcomes for all students

teachers and other school staff (Fullan, 2019; Harris & Lambert, 2003; Lambert et al., 2016; Levin & Schrum, 2017) school boards, superintendents, and other professionals in the municipal and school offices (Campbell & Fullan, 2019; Lambert, 2003). These efforts need to occur simultaneously as the different actors take part in school improvements for the benefit of sustained school change and student learning.

3.2.5 Leadership actors at the municipal level and their role in strengthening school practices

Municipal educational leadership in Nordic countries, including in Iceland, can be understood as the leadership provided at the municipal level by politically appointed or elected agents and professionally selected civil servants. Political agents are often mayors in the given municipalities, members or chairs of municipal councils and school governing boards. Professional agents are civil servants. They can be employees in the municipal offices working in administration and superintendents or other specialists, typically working within the school support services or school offices (Moos, Johansson et al., 2016). For effective educational governance, both types of agents need to work towards coherence in policy and leadership practices (Campbell & Fullan, 2019; Lambert 2003; Louis et al., 2010) between themselves and with school agents and other community members.

Political agents are usually not specialists in education; in addition, they come and go in accordance with the outcomes of political elections. They are supposed to engage in long-term policymaking as well as in the financing and administration of education. Yet their leadership is often distant from the actual schoolwork (Moos, Johansson et al., 2016). Several research studies indicate that local authorities too often lack the capacity to provide the necessary leadership and support to principals and schools (Ikemoto, et al., 2014; Louis et al., 2010; Campbell & Fullan, 2019). Establishing close working relationships between political actors and professional actors helps to tighten their relationships with each other and with principals and the school level, thereby minimising the distrust that can arise due to differences in educational visions and policy (Bottoms & Fry, 2009). Part of establishing such relationships is that the political actors value the professional actors and respect their professional judgement. Failing to do so can undermine the relationship between political and professional agents and lead to the breaking of trust, increasing staff turnover that again can lead to diminished professionalism at the municipal level (Bottoms & Fry, 2009; Whitaker & DeHoog, 1991).

Among the political actors, the school governing boards, led by a chair, play a central role in educational governance. Appointed by the municipal council, they oversee plans and structures, budget models, organisational development and professional management of quality and outcomes, on behalf of the municipal authorities. They do this in collaboration with other policymakers, superintendents and school principals

(Moos et al., 2014). School governing boards are increasingly being held accountable for educational quality (Honingh et al., 2018; Nihlfors et al., 2014), although their authority and accountability differ between countries, thereby influencing the space available for exercising leadership (Ólafsson & Hansen, 2022). According to Campbell and Fullan (2019), school governing boards have a key role in improving the school system at the local level but need to take more deliberate actions to enhance their own governance and leadership capacity.

Professional agents at the municipal level are chosen because they have professional expertise that relates to their working duties. Those working in the municipal offices are rarely experts in education *per se* but might have duties regarding for example, finances that affect school support services and schooling. Individuals working within school support services or as school superintendents and in other specialist roles, are hired because their area of expertise is believed to benefit education (Moos, Johansson et al., 2016).

Unlike political agents, the hiring of professionals is (usually) not tied to the comings and goings of politicians (Moos, Johansson et al., 2016). Superintendents tend to be the highest-ranking educational professionals within the municipalities; they oversee the educational system and are heads of the school offices. In Nordic countries, appointing a superintendent is generally not a legal requirement. Municipalities can choose how they organise their school support services and the role fulfilled by the superintendent can have a variety of names (Johansson, et al., 2016; Moos, Johansson et al., 2016; Moos, Kofod et al., 2016; Paulsen & Høyer, 2016; Risku et al., 2016; Sigþórsson, 2013). This also means that in municipalities where there is little infrastructure, i.e., no school offices or superintendents, political views can overshadow professionalism, resulting in negative consequences for school practices (Honingh et al., 2018). This is seen as a weakness in school governance in some Nordic countries (Moos, Johansson et al., 2016; Sæberg, 2008). A Norwegian study suggests that rural municipal leaders should focus on creating proximity between professional actors, both within the municipalities and with neighbouring municipalities. To do so, they need to build systemic competence and a purposefully tailored infrastructure, which reinforces interactions and relationships with and between principals (Forfang, 2020).

In most Nordic countries, superintendents nonetheless still play a significant role in the educational policy making in governance chain, especially at the municipal and school level (Nihlfors et al., 2016). From a Swedish perspective, principals and superintendents themselves see the superintendent as a link between the school leader and politicians and the top management of the governing body (Johansson et al., 2016). However, while school governing board members and their chairs in most Nordic countries feel that they can influence both school matters and the municipal council policy environment, principals do not feel the same way about school governing boards' decisions. This indicates that while the coupling between the boards

and the schools (professionals) is relatively loose, the coupling between the boards and administration and top political agents at the municipal level, is a tighter one (Kofod et al., 2014).

Superintendents in many Nordic countries face growing responsibilities, along with increased tension between managerial and accountability demands on one hand and their pedagogical leadership role on the other (Moos, Johansson et al., 2016). Superintendents in the Nordic countries are often former teachers and/or principals. This common professional ground helps superintendents to build a trusting relationship with principals (Johansson, et al., 2016; Moos, Johansson et al., 2016; Moos, Kofod et al., 2016; Paulsen & Høyer, 2016; Risku et al., 2016). However, much of their day to day work concerns administration, finances and dealing with political matters coming from their superiors and boards (Johansson et al., 2016). Their leadership role can therefore be seen as consisting largely of mediating between the relevant educational legislation, their superiors, school leaders, external stakeholders and their professional norms (Moos, Johansson et al., 2016). Therefore, building trust and positive and personal relationship with the actors involved is essential for superintendents in managing their complex leadership networks (Paulsen et al., 2016). Principals appreciate having a trusting relationship with the superintendent, being able to seek their support, feedback or coaching when needed and being able to delegate different tasks to the superintendent (Johansson et al., 2016).

Both professional and political agents at the municipal level have responsibilities concerning educational leadership, all be it in different ways (Moos et al., 2016). As addressed by various scholars (Campbell & Fullan, 2019; Ikemoto et al., 2014; Johansson et al., 2016; Moos et al., 2014), in order to maximise the potential at both municipal and school level to improve education, building internal leadership capacity and trusting relationship between professional and political agents and between them and school leaders is of vital importance.

3.2.6 The interplay between educational leadership at state, local and school levels

Researchers have identified a widespread lack of communication and strategic planning between the state, local and school levels, limiting the potential of schools to provide students with the best education (Campbell & Fullan, 2019; Fullan, 2016; Louis et al., 2010). Hopkins (2007) has argued that the whole school system needs to evolve together and build capacity within itself in a systematic and strategic way. Similarly, in Fullan's (2016) opinion, to improve education, the state and local levels must develop knowledge and understanding of system leadership. Fullan and Quinn (2016) explain that to achieve this, capacity building must be created at and between the state, local and school levels. A central theme in their argument is the significance of developing leaders at all levels in the system.

However, scholars have found it a challenge to empirically demonstrate exactly how leadership at different levels interferes with students' learning (Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Louis, 2015; MacBeath et al., 2018; Robinson, 2007; 2011). Built on longitudinal research, Louis (2015) and her team (see also Leithwood et al., 2004; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Louis et al., 2010) have provided a framework for how different ideas about leadership, policies and other practices at state and district (municipal) levels influence conditions at the school level and student learning. The framework, shown in **Figure 3**, published in Louis (2015, p. 9), is a useful tool to explain the flow between the main levels under study in this research, namely, the national, local and school levels. It helps put into perspective the complexity of educational leadership practices at the municipal level, how they are seen, how they interact with the school leadership and are influenced by state leadership, practices and policies.

The framework assumes that differences in student learning are functions of: the capacities, motivations and commitments of school personnel; the features of the school and district settings in which they work; and the external environment, such as the state's policies. It is assumed that leaders at all levels in the educational system have a significant role in identifying and supporting learning, organising social conditions and mediating external requirements so that schoolwork may lead to student learning (Louis, 2015). In line with the distinction made by Louis (2015), in this study the principal is positioned at school level. He/she is thus not defined as an agent in educational leadership at the municipal level.

Figure 3 (Louis, 2015, p. 9), illustrates how the state and district leadership, policies and practices interact and influence leadership at the school level, including the school leaders' actions. At the state level, these can be, for example, legislation, regulations, curriculum setting and standards, testing, evaluations and funding. At the district level, many of the same features are involved, with a focus on the local context and practical alignments that support student learning. Leaders' own professional learning experiences, such as formal preparation, mentoring and socialisation, also have a bearing on leadership at the school level, as do student family backgrounds and other stakeholder groups such as teachers' unions, universities, the media and local communities (Louis, 2015; Leithwood et al., 2004).

School leadership, whether formal or informal, helps to build school and classroom conditions, teachers' capacities, and a sense of professional community. School conditions are features such as goals, culture, structures, planning and school development. Examples of classroom conditions are classroom size, the content and nature of instruction, teachers' pedagogy and assessments. Numerous factors within and outside schools and classrooms, influence teachers' capacities and their sense of professional community includes both direct and indirect influences, although for simplicity, they are not all shown in **Figure 3**. For example, state and district features

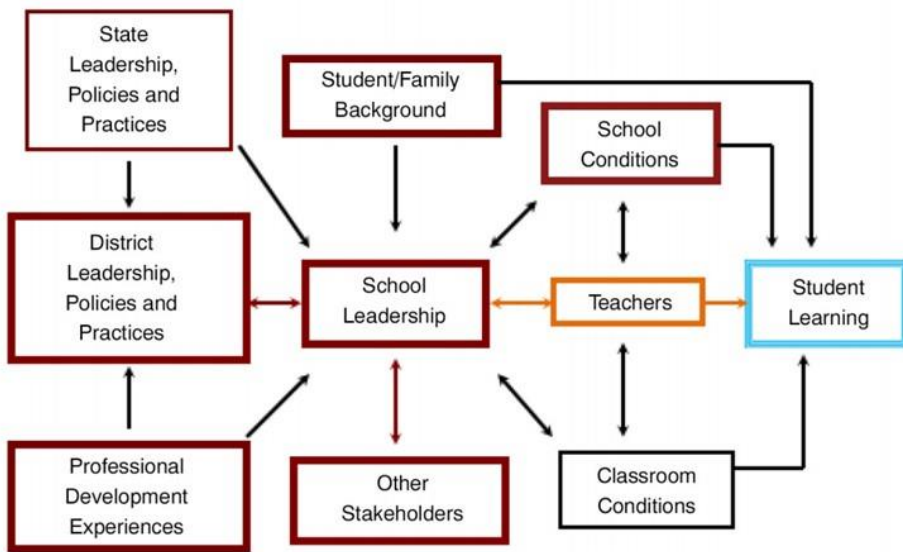


Figure 3. Sources of ideas about leadership in education that influence student learning

influence teachers’ professional community, school and classroom conditions directly (Louis, 2015; Louis et al., 2010; Leithwood et al., 2004).

As illustrated in the framework, school and classroom conditions, teachers’ professional communities, and student family background have a direct influence on student learning. Leadership, on the other hand, tends to have an indirect influence on student learning by influencing those and other conditions both directly and indirectly (Louis, 2015; Louis et al., 2010; Leithwood et al., 2004).

Policies at all governance levels aim at facilitating schools as professional institutions and learning organisations. An important part of this goal is to provide school support services that support this development of schools.

3.3 Summary

The theoretical background of this study consists of three conceptual fields: educational policy, governance and leadership. They are approached with the perspective of social constructivism which acknowledges the complexity of both the concepts, their interaction with each other and the educational field. In policy and governance, the central notion is the role of global and transnational and national policy, politics and governance in shaping educational leadership at the local and school levels and the challenges that modern educational systems face regarding transnational influences based on NPM. The process of governance is closely connected to the exercise of power to channel actions of those governed based on legal and vested authority. It is argued that governance needs to happen in partnership with those governed, and

authorities must see themselves as leaders of leaders, using different sources of power to exercise influence.

These influences are closely connected to the process of policymaking which happens in the complex process of translating policies into real actions throughout the different governance levels of the educational system. Enacting policy requires applying oblique forms of power and leadership that are often referred to as soft or hard governance. While hard governance relates to policy making through legislative framework, soft governance, one of the benchmarks of NPM, relates to indirectly influencing people's thinking and understanding of themselves and the world. The global influence of NPM on policies has come up against existing and divergent national policies. A central argument is that it is beneficial to address this by capacity building and coherence at the national, local, and school levels where leadership is the catalyst of change.

The educational leadership field, as discussed in this chapter, relates to the important role of educational leadership, especially that of local authorities, in school practices and students' learning. Leadership capacity needs to be built at the local and state levels as well, among both political and professional agents. For that purpose, it is claimed that the different leadership agents need to focus on coherence in leadership, governance and policy within and between those levels.

Being the level closest to the schools themselves, the municipal level plays an important role in providing educational leadership. It is argued that leadership at this level should be proactive, distributed and shared and should centre on supporting the principals and schools to build capacity for improving student learning and enhancing professional competence. The focus of such capacity building is reasoned to be about enhancing schools as professional institutions and learning communities with appropriate support. To deal with this, leaders at the municipal level would benefit from exercising leadership practices such as setting directions, developing people, refining and aligning the organisation, and improve teaching and learning programmes. The focus should preferably be on developing leadership capacity within the educational system at both municipal and school levels. Finally, in binding the interaction of policy, governance and leadership practices to the core of schooling, it is important to understand the sources of leadership within the whole educational system and how these influence students' learning.

The research discussed in this chapter has identified challenges to improving local leadership practices and what municipal educational leadership is, what influences it, how the differences play out, and how this leadership influences school practices in Iceland, is mostly unknown. This is the research gap my thesis aims to address.

4 Aims, research questions and scope of the study

The aim of this study is to shed light on educational leadership at the municipal level in Iceland. More precisely, it aims at understanding how leadership practices are shaped by policies and governance at the national, municipal and school levels, within a global and transnational context. It further aims to understand how leadership practices are shaped by the diversity of municipal contexts, and how those practices harmonize with municipalities' legal obligations with regards to compulsory education. In turn, it seeks to understand how municipal leadership influences school practices in relation to the various challenges faced by schools. The focus is mainly on understanding municipal leadership through the practices of the school support services as an important platform.

The overall research question is: *How is educational leadership at the municipal level shaped by practices, policies and governance at the national, municipal and school levels; what characterises this leadership; and how does this leadership influence school practices?*

4.1 The Units

The study considers three levels of governance: national, municipal and school levels. Each level has a say within municipal leadership, shedding a light on the complexity of governing educational systems. At the national level, the focus is on what educational leadership requirements and policies are imposed on municipalities and the influences of policy and governance on that leadership. At the municipal level, the focus is on understanding its educational leadership practices. At the school level, the aim is to understand how leadership at the municipal level influence practices at the school level. The international level is seen as the wider context, influencing all three levels and it is acknowledged that each level has interactive influences on one another.

The case study is broken into four research themes or units of analysis, each with sub-questions that feed into the main question in different ways. The two first units correspond primarily to the national level, the third to the municipal level and the fourth to the school and municipal level. The units also correspond to each of the four publications that were generated from this study. The units and their research questions are as follows:

Unit 1 (Paper I) – The organisation and practice of educational governance in Iceland at national and municipal levels; the influences of the main actors; and challenges facing the educational system.

- What characterises the organisation and practice of educational governance at national and municipal levels in Iceland?
 - What is the role of the influential actors, including the Directorate of Education, in the educational system?
 - How do these different actors affect educational governance, policies and educational practices?
 - What are the main challenges facing educational governance at the national and municipal level?

Unit 2 (Paper II) – The leadership roles and responsibilities imposed on municipalities by national educational authorities in Iceland.

- What educational roles and responsibilities does Icelandic national legislation emphasise concerning the educational leadership of municipalities?

Unit 3 (Paper III) – The educational leadership of municipal school support services in Iceland as an agent of educational leadership. This is explored in relation to whether contextual and structural differences and human resources influence those practices.

- To what extent do leadership practices in relation to the school support service in Iceland reflect Leithwood et al.'s (2008, 2020) framework of leadership, based on the views of MES-leaders, preschool principals and compulsory school principals?
 - To what extent do the views of MES-leaders and principals differ about their leadership practices in relation to these services?
 - To what extent do leadership practices differ, based on population density, geographical location, the structural arrangements of school support services and human resources?

Unit 4 (Paper IV) – The main characteristics of the leadership practices of school support services in seven municipalities in Iceland, what and who shapes them and the ways in which they strengthen schools as professional institutions.

- What and who shapes the municipal school support service' leadership practices in the seven municipalities?
- What are the characteristics of the leadership practices?
- How do those leadership practices contribute to strengthening schools as professional institutions?

4.2 Clarification of the study's scope

Figure 4 provides an overview of the study and explains how the units are bound together in relation to the national, municipal and school levels.

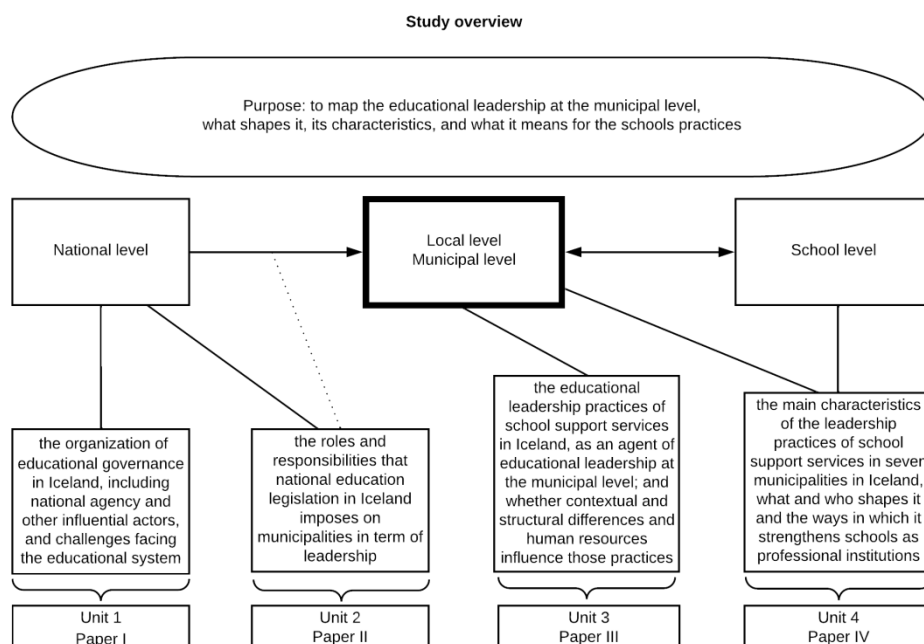


Figure 4. An overview of the study

The units follow one another consecutively. The first two units explore governance and the formal structure surrounding educational leadership at the municipal level. They provide the context for the more in depth exploration of actual leadership practices and interactions addressed in the third and fourth units. Unit 1 applies document analysis to its exploration of the Icelandic educational system, governance and influential actors at national and municipal level. Unit 2 applies content analysis to educational legislation, focusing on the policy demands on municipal educational leadership, how these might influence leadership and the extent to which these might mirror recent policy developments at the national level. Additionally, both Unit 1 and 2 address the surrounding international context.

In Unit 3, the focus moves to the actual educational leadership practices at the municipal level. Guided by Leithwood et al.'s (2008; 2020) framework of desirable leadership practices, survey data on leadership practices at the school support services is used to evaluate municipal school support services leadership practices. The views of MES-leaders and preschool and compulsory school principals are analysed in relation

to whether contextual and structural differences and human resources influence those practices.

In Unit 4, the focus is still on the municipal level but simultaneously addresses the school level. This is done by gathering interview data from superintendents and department heads at school offices and principals, on what characterizes educational leadership practices in seven selected municipalities and how it strengthens schools as professional institutions. The three first publications were published between 2018 – 2022 and the fourth is forthcoming.

The purpose of the study is to generate valuable insights and understanding of the characteristics and practices of educational leadership at the municipal level, how these interact with governance and policy and how they can influence school practice. Such knowledge should make it possible for informed and systematic actions to be taken at the national and municipal level to strengthen municipal educational leadership in a way that enhances education for all students as well as the professional development of both principals and teachers. Furthermore, the study generates knowledge that can hopefully be used to guide educational governance and policy towards procedures that better support coherence and professionalism in educational governance and legislation. Finally, the study provides a valuable research platform for further studies in the field.

5 Materials and Methods

This chapter discusses the methodology applied in this study. I start by discussing the epistemology underpinning the study, followed by a description of the methodology and methods used in the different research units. I clarify how research quality is dealt with and discuss the ethics and limitations of the study. I conclude by summarising the main points made in this chapter.

5.1 The epistemological approach

The epistemological stance underpinning this study is a social constructionist worldview (Bryman, 2001; Creswell, 2007). According to social constructionism, meaning is not discovered but constructed in a meaningful interplay between the individual or individuals and the surroundings (Bryman, 2001; Gray, 2017). Researchers adhering to this viewpoint believe that people search for an understanding of the world they live in and develop subjective meanings of their experiences that are shaped by historical and contextual situations and social interactions (Creswell, 2007; Hornung, 2015). As these meanings vary between individuals, the researcher searches for complexity of views, relying on the participants' understanding of the circumstances (Bryman, 2001; Creswell, 2007), and tends to develop theory based on those views (Creswell, 2007).

I see social constructivism as an appropriate epistemological approach for this study for several reasons. Firstly, I see policy, governance and leadership as happening in a constructivist process. Also, the ways in which meaning is constructed within a social constructivist approach (Creswell, 2007) fits with my aim of understanding municipal leadership from a broad perspective. Furthermore, it captures the process by which actions regarding educational leadership are developed and understood in an interplay with "the specific context in which people live and work" (Creswell, 2007, p. 21). I see municipal educational leadership as a multifaceted, context-linked phenomenon that has diverse meanings for different people: each one brings his or her part to a shared understanding. This means that superintendents, other participants at the municipal level and principals can express different views about leadership practices, both within their own occupational group and between groups. As a researcher adhering to social constructivism as an epistemology, I take an active part in interpreting the data and constructing this shared meaning.

As Gray (2017) points out, theoretical perspectives, research approach and research methods must take notice of each other and of the epistemology applied. On the spectrum of positivism to interpretivism, my theoretical perspective is rather towards interpretivism (2017).

5.2 Case study as a methodological approach

The approach adopted is what is referred to in the methodological literature as an embedded single-case study. Case study is widely applied as a methodology in the social sciences (Creswell, 2007; Flyvbjerg, 2011; Yin, 2018). Case study allows for gathering shared and diverse experiences that help to bring about a more multi-perspective understanding of the case in specific contexts (Lauckner et al., 2012; Stake, 2005). Case studies tend to be of qualitative origin. However, various methods are often used, including quantitative methods such as surveys, in order to gain a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon (Silverman, 2010; Yin, 2018). The research design also fits with Yin's description of an embedded single-case study where data is "gathered systematically from units of analysis at more than one level" (Yin, 2018, p. 51). These units are subunits within the defined case (Yin, 2018). In this study, those units concern educational leadership at the national, municipal and school levels. Gathering data on the units from different viewpoints and origins, in consecutive sections, feeds into the holistic picture of the defined case of municipal educational leadership in Iceland.

Case studies are often situated within the constructivist and interpretive paradigm as they involve constructing the meaning of the phenomenon under study by seeking out various perspectives. What I set out to do was to look beneath the obvious and seek in-depth knowledge and understanding of the case, rather than to seeking to establish generalisations. In line with constructionism, interpretivism seeks a construction of the 'social life-world' (p. 67) driven by cultural and historical contexts (Crotty, 1998). It calls for a research approach that is inductive rather than deductive in nature (Gray, 2017). Furthermore, I situate myself within the critical research spectrum (Terry et al. 2017) as I sought to examine dominant patterns of meaning and see language as creating reality rather than reflecting it. This falls well within constructivism, as it acknowledges that the way in which one understands the world and constructs meaning is personal (Madill et al., 2000). This also means it depends partly on the beliefs and expectations of those involved. As a result, it makes way for multiple truths regarding the subject studied (Bunge, 1993). This is relevant in this research as the intention was to look at municipal educational leadership from different angles and different viewpoints, allowing the different truths of, for example, superintendents and principals within the same and divergent municipalities, to build a broad understanding of the phenomena.

Quantitative and qualitative research have been viewed as based on two opposing theoretical paradigms, interpretivism and positivism, and therefore, as being incompatible (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Gray, 2017). However, in recent years, an increased number of researchers have argued for the use of a mixed method perspective, combining qualitative and quantitative data (Ivankova et al., 2006; McChesney & Aldridge, 2018). It is argued that a mixed method approach allows for more persuasive research findings. This is because it allows the scope and patterns of the phenomenon to be defined while at the same time, telling the story of how it manifests in daily life (Spalter-Roth, 2010). Thus, the appeal of mixed methods is that it

allows for an integration of both qualitative and quantitative approaches; as a result, the final product becomes more than the sum of its quantitative and qualitative components (Bryman, 2007; Teddlie & Sammons, 2010). Based on this, I decided to integrate quantitative data into my study. I see my use of quantitative data not as opposed to the main interpretivist paradigm but rather, as feeding into the understanding of the whole case.

Using a case study is not solely a decision about methodology but also “a choice of what is to be studied” (Flyvberg, 2011, p. 301). It entails defining the case, which requires defining the boundaries of the phenomenon or the social processes under study (Creswell, 2007). In this study, the case is educational leadership in Iceland at the municipal level. The case study approach allows for an in-depth examination of municipal educational leadership from different angles and the perspectives of different actors, as well as looking at how these interact with the state and school levels. In line with this, I consider my case study to be intrinsic (see Yin, 2018), as the primary interest is to gain a better understanding of municipal educational leadership in one country rather than generalizing to other countries. Although my primary purpose was not theory-building, I was open to the possibility of developing a theoretical framework later in the research process (Stake, 2005). As case studies are adaptive rather than closed, they allow for changes during the research process, as long as they are in line with the theoretical perspective (Yin, 2018). I adopted a cross-sectional approach, as I looked at municipal educational leadership at one point in time, rather than how it might have changed or developed over a longer period (Gray, 2017). At the same time, a certain amount of historical context surrounding municipal educational leadership in Iceland was essential in order to position the cross-sectional account.

5.3 Research methods, data collection, and analysis

The main body of research data was generated using qualitative research methods. Qualitative research fits well with this study’s aims as it is an active process that requires involvement in a dialectic between the research questions and the data at hand. It strives to make sense of and understand phenomena as they are truly practiced. In this research, I sought to understand the explicit context that lies behind the phenomenon under study and be aware of and open to the numerous roots of every incident. Qualitative methods allow for new evidence to shape and change the research questions or the course of the research (Braun et al., 2018). However, in order to gain a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon, other methods are also used, including a survey (Silverman, 2010; Yin, 2018). **Figure 5** provides an overview of the data collected for each unit of the study.

The different methods were applied almost consecutively, following the course of the four embedded units of analyses. For each unit, research questions were defined and then fed into the study’s main question to provide an overall understanding of the case.

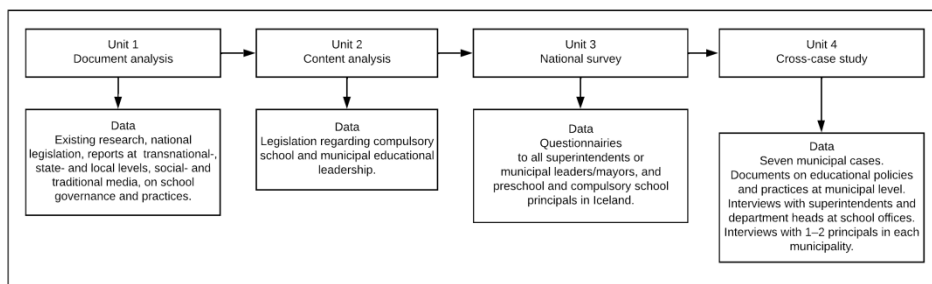


Figure 5. Data collected by Units

As described in previous subsections, over the course of the study, the perspective gradually moved from wide to narrow. Units 1 and 2 constructed a basic knowledge of educational governance and the policy environment at the municipal level and helped to situate municipal educational leadership within the Icelandic context.

Building on Units 1 and 2, a closer look was taken at the municipal level nationwide in Unit 3, based on responses from both municipal and school leaders. In Unit 4, an attempt was made to understand this leadership in more depth by examining seven municipalities in more detail. Through bringing all the subunits together, I was able to construct an in-depth understanding of how municipal educational leadership is manifested in Iceland and how it interacts with the school and national levels. Each publication corresponds to a unit in the embedded case study and is intended for an international audience.

Data for Unit 3 and part of Unit 4 was gathered in collaboration with a research group at the University of Akureyri, my workplace. The group goes by the name *Research Group on School Support Services* (i. Rannsóknarhópur um skóláþjónustu). It has been conducting research in the settings and on the practices of municipality school support services for a number of years. Its focus has been on the ways in which local authorities fulfil their legitimate duties regarding securing support services for schools. This research group was established around the same time that I was planning my data gathering for Units 3 and 4. As its focus overlapped in some ways with the research plan for my doctoral study, I was invited to participate. The questionnaire and the interviews at the municipal level were therefore included in my research design. Participating in the research group also had economic advantages, as the group had already secured grants for data collection and part of the analysis. I took part in conducting most of the interviews with the school office superintendents and the department heads in five municipalities. Below, I describe the units in more detail in terms of aim and methodology.

5.3.1 Unit 1: Document analysis

Unit 1 was the broad starting point of the research, providing the background and context for municipal educational leadership in Iceland. Its aim was to provide an

overview of the educational system and influential agencies at the national level; this would then generate knowledge about the organisation of educational governance at the national and municipal levels. In addition, the analyses sought to identify influential actors in the governance chain as well as recent developments. These included policy and political shifts in relation to the Directorate of Education and ongoing challenges in the education system that have influenced the structure and policies of education and therefore, inevitably, educational leadership at the local level. The overall aim was to capture the situation as it is today.

To build the contextual background for further study, document analysis (Bowen, 2009) was applied. As Bowen (2009) points out, documents analysis is often used in case studies, not least when applying mixed methods and when building a contextual background for further study. Thus, it fits well both within my research design and the aim of the unit. I systematically searched for, read and summarized a wide range of text documents. The aim was to identify and understand important concepts in the documents that showed educational policy emphases and to gain an overview of educational governance and the challenges therein. The documents included national legislation and regulations; bill drafts from the establishment of the Directorate of Education; other policy documents on educational policy at national and municipal levels; reports produced at the transnational, national and local levels; state audits since the transfer; debates and discourses on social and traditional media from around the time of the establishment of the Directorate of Education to the present; and prior literature concerning the matter.

5.3.2 Unit 2: Content analysis

In Unit 2, the emphasis was on the state level to provide insight into how the state pursues municipal educational leadership through legislation. The aim was to explore educational governance in Iceland by identifying the roles and responsibilities that national legislation imposes on municipalities in terms of educational leadership at the compulsory school level. This was examined through identifying significant educational leadership practices as well as policy and recent political developments concerning educational governance in Iceland.

A qualitative content analysis approach (Lune & Berg, 2017; Schreier, 2012) was used to identify the roles and responsibilities that the national education legislation imposes on municipalities in terms of educational leadership. Content analysis is a thorough, systematic investigation and interpretation of specific material to identify patterns, themes, biases and comprehensions (Berg & Lune, 2012).

All regulations referred to in the Compulsory School Act (No. 91/2008) were read through, and eight documents of particular relevance to the study, were chosen for further examination (**Table 3**). The analysis focused on a designated aspect in the data, defined by the research questions outlined for the unit (Schreier, 2012). This approach

Table 3. An overview of main legislative documents under study

Compulsory School Act No. 91/2008

Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Compulsory Schools:
With Subject Areas (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014,
originally published 2011)

Local Government Act No. 138/2011

Regulation on Compulsory School Pupils with Special Needs No. 585/2010

Regulation on Evaluation and Inspection in Compulsory Schools and
Municipal Councils Duty to Inform on School Work No. 658/2009

Regulation on Responsibilities and Obligations of the School Community in
Elementary Schools No. 1040/2011

Regulation on School Housing and Playgrounds No. 657/2009

Regulation on Specialist Services of Municipalities for Preschools and
Compulsory Schools and Pupils' Welfare Council in Compulsory Schools No.
584/2010

Rules on School Transport in Compulsory Schools No. 656/2009

allowed for latent meanings in the official documents under study to come to the fore, thus paving the way for interpretation of how municipal educational leadership can be described, even if the concept itself is not mentioned in the documents (Schreier, 2012). The text was analysed to search for specific words such as 'leader' and 'leadership'. Other than that, the approach meant that new themes relevant to the research questions could emerge from the documents (Lune & Berg, 2017).

During the coding process (Berg & Lune, 2012), ten themes were generated that were then reorganised and developed into six categories: 1) to provide comprehensive and inclusive education for all; 2) to provide housing, facilities and structure; 3) to evaluate the schoolwork and make it public; 4) to develop educational policy and follow up on it; 5) to support professional and school development that improves teaching and learning; and 6) to provide support to students with regard to learning and general well-being.

Results from Units 1 and 2 informed the design of Units 3 and 4, such as the design of the questionnaire and the choice of the municipalities.

5.3.3 Unit 3: National survey

In Unit 3, the viewpoint moved from the state level to the municipal level. The purpose was to shed light on the educational leadership practices regarding school support services at the municipal level in Iceland, from the point of view of actors from both municipal and school levels. A further purpose of conducting the survey was to provide an explanation for how those views might be shaped by four factors: the structural arrangements, human resources of the services, population density and geographical location.

Data was collected at the municipal level through sending an electronic nationwide survey to the main educational leaders responsible for school support services in each municipality and the school principals. As discussed in Chapter 2, school support services make up a significant part of a municipality's responsibility towards schools. The individuals who oversee these services are most likely to be the educational leaders at the municipal level. Accordingly, it was decided to reach out to these individuals in each municipality - superintendents if applicable, and if not, mayors (hereafter referred to as MES-Leaders) - in order to gain an understanding of municipal leadership practices.

For a more holistic understanding of school support service leadership practices, preschool principals and compulsory school principals were included in the survey. This was important as the views of those who provide support services at the municipal level have been shown to be different from the views of those who receive it at the school level (Bottom and Fry, 2009).

Permission was obtained from each municipal authority. Of the 72 municipalities contacted, 58 gave permission for the questionnaires to be sent out by responding to an email. In the other 13 municipalities, no answer was received and thus they did not participate in the study. In total, 45 MES-leaders received the questionnaire, of which 32 were superintendents and 13 were mayors. The acceptance rate and response rate in municipalities without any superintendent was far lower than in other municipalities. This group is therefore the least represented in the study and tends to represent municipalities with fewer inhabitants. **Table 4** provides an overview of the sample, responses and response rate.

As mentioned earlier, the questionnaire was developed with a research group conducting research on the settings and practices of municipality school support services. It consisted of 75 main questions and sub-questions and statements. Most of the questions were closed but fourteen were open. The themes of the questionnaire were: 1) the emphases stipulated in school support services policies; 2) the emphases on services to support students, parents, teachers and principals, including counselling at the school level; 3) cooperation with various stakeholders, organisations and the local community; 4) challenges regarding inclusive school policies; 5) employee conditions at school offices; 6) and various municipal educational leadership practices.

Table 4. Overview of participants and response rates

Participants	Sample	Responses	Response rate
Educational leaders at the municipal level; superintendents/mayors/offices department heads	45	36	80%
Compulsory school principals	170	101	59%
Preschool principals	224	130	58%
Total	439	267	61%

Questions and statements used in this study were selected based on how well they informed the four categories in the framework (Leithwood et al., 2008): *setting directions, developing people, refining and aligning the organisation, and improve teaching and learning programmes* (Appendix A). An exploratory factor analysis was applied to identify clusters of variables within each category that related to each other (Field, 2017) and to identify questions that did not fit in. All the questions and/or statements used were on a four-point ordinal rating scale; e.g., *strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree*. Additionally, respondents could choose a *don't know* option. Each question was given a value ranging from 0 (e.g., *strongly disagree, don't know*) to 3 (e.g., *strongly agree*).

Internal consistency for the 33 questions identified in the factor analysis was estimated with Cronbach's alpha. A common criterion for internal consistency is a score of 0,7 or higher which can be considered sufficient (see Field, 2017). The internal consistency for the sub-scales was well above this threshold, with the alpha ranging from 0,83 to 0,90. The measurement scales for the four different aspects of leadership were obtained by adding the responses to the relevant questions and the range of each scale was then adjusted to run from 0–10 (taking into account the different number of questions behind each sub-scale). The overall scale for strength of leadership was then constructed as the mean score of the different sub-scales (running also from 0–10). **Table 5** illustrates descriptive information on scales, means, standard deviations and number of responses (n) for each sub-scale, as well as for the overall leadership scale. It also shows Cronbach's alpha for each of the measurement scales.

Differences in respondents' views were analysed using the three different occupation positions presented (i.e. MES-leaders, compulsory school principals and preschool principals), population density, geographical location, school support service structural arrangements and human resources in the school support services. A one-way between-groups analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to determine any statistically significant differences between groups on the independent variables (the threshold for statistical significance was set at $\alpha = 0.05$). Where the independent variables consisted of more than two groups, a post hoc test (Tukey's HSD) was used to determine which groups were significantly different from one another (Field, 2017).

Table 5. Descriptive statistics for accumulated values of each leadership sub-scale

Leadership categories	Number of quest.	N/n	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.	Average mean	Cronbach's alpha
Setting directions	6	268/203	1.78	0.65	0	3	1.78	0.83
Developing people	7	268/209	0.94	0.62	0	3	0.94	0.86
Refining and aligning the organisation	10	268/230	1.10	0.61	0	2.90	1.08	0.88
Improving teaching and learning programmes	10	268/209	1.02	0.62	0	3	.99	0.90
Total of framework	33	268/203	1.20	0.55	6	2.95	1.20	0.89

The questionnaire was in Icelandic. For publication purposes, the questions and statements used were translated into English by me and validated by my co-authors.

5.3.4 Unit 4: Multiple case study

The purpose of Unit 4 was to shed light on the main characteristics of leadership practices of school support services in seven municipalities in Iceland, what and who shapes them and the way they strengthen schools as professional institutions.

A cross-case case study was applied, with the aim of going “beyond the case” (Stake, 2006, p. 8) of municipal school support service leadership practices. Such research seeks in a systematic way to gather information on a certain phenomenon or a quintain (a main case) by looking at multiple cases that each contribute towards the understanding of the quintain (Stake, 2006). The approach falls within the qualitative paradigm, is inductive in nature, and is congruent with the overall methodological approach of the overall study.

The themes (research questions) of the study were identified as being a search for 1) the main contributors to educational leadership practices at the school support services, 2) what characterizes these leadership practices, and 3) to understand how those leadership practices influence schools as professional institutions. To capture the patterns and differences in leadership practices, seven municipalities were chosen that represent municipalities of varying sizes in different parts of the country and with different forms of school services.

The data for Unit 4 was gathered in three steps. First, data was obtained from policy documents about the school services that were published on the websites of the seven municipalities chosen as cases. This included information about the activities and

policies of the respective school offices and school support services. This information was collected in 2019–2020. Second, data was collected by interviewing

superintendents and department heads at school offices in the five municipalities. The number of interviews depended on the size of the municipality and the complexity of the school service.

Third, data was gathered by interviewing compulsory school principals in seven municipalities and their perspectives used to understand leadership at the municipal level which is provided by individuals from the political and professional domains. In municipalities with more than two schools, principals were selected for participation. The interviews with superintendents and department heads, and one principal, were conducted in March and May 2019 in person. They were taken by teams of two, by me or other team members in the Research Group on School Support Services. Interviews with the other principals were conducted in December 2020, by me. Due to Covid-19 they took place on Teams. **Table 6** provides an overview of the municipalities, their population, form of school services, the interviewed, and the interview length. A total of 20 interviews were conducted with 21 participants. All were planned as individual interviews but in case A the superintendent requested that a department head joined in the interview.

Interviews with all participants were semi-structured. The same protocol was followed (Appendix B) when interviewing superintendents and department heads at the school services, although questions varied to some extent, depending on the context and the job position of the interviewee. The protocols were designed to get information on more context specific aspects as a follow up on in the questionnaire that had already been sent to MES-leaders and principals (see Unit III). The framework (Leithwood et al., 2008) presented in **Table 1** also partly guided the construction of the interview questions. When interviewing the principals, the protocol was adjusted for a follow up on the interviews that had already been conducted with the school support services staff (Appendix C).

The data was analysed according to a cross-case analysis process (Stake, 2006) and both commonalities and differences highlighted in each unit that could contribute to the understanding of the quintain. An analysis synopsis was generated where each case was identified together with key information sources and context information; the situational constraints and uniqueness among other cases were identified in relation to the research questions. This process made it possible to build robust knowledge on the educational leadership in each studied municipality. Therefore, the variance created between them due to different contexts could be explored, which helped in developing an in-depth understanding of municipal educational leadership in Iceland. The interviews were all in Icelandic as were the analyses. When written into the draft-article, they were translated into English by me and the translation was validated by my supervisors.

The study was conducted in accordance with the Act Data Protection and the Processing of Personal Data No. 90/2018. In municipalities with school offices, the superintendents were contacted and asked for permission for the municipality to be included in the study. The interviewees signed an informed consent to participate in the study (see Appendix D and E).

Table 6. Overview of municipalities, forms of school support services, and interviews

Municipal cases	Approx. number of inh.	Type of school support service	Interviewed, a total of 21 in 20 interviews	Length in minutes
A	130.000	Own school office with a superintendent with extended responsibility and permanent staff. Part of the service delegated to the welfare department that organises the service at five centers, each run by a department head.	Superintendent 1 with Department head 1 Department head 2 Principal 1 Principal 2	64 58 54 62
B	20.000	Own school office run by a superintendent with extended responsibilities. Permanent staff and department head, service agreements with other entities.	Superintendent 1 Department head 1 Principal 1 Principal 2	77 69 74 50
C	10.000	Own school office run by a superintendent with extended responsibilities. Permanent staff and department head.	Superintendent 1 Principal 1 Principal 2	58 44 65
D	3.500	School office in form of regional cooperation run by a superintendent. Permanent staff. Additionally, an own superintendent at municipal office.	Superintendent 1 Department head 1 Principal 1	49 30 41
E	1.500	Own school office run by a superintendent with extended responsibilities. Permanent staff and department head.	Superintendent 1 Department head 1 Principal 1 Principal 2	57 51 51 42
F	1.000	No school office, superintendent with extended responsibility at municipal office. The service partly bought from private entity.	Principal 1	65
G	450	No school office nor superintendent. The service partly bought from private entity.	Principal 1	54

5.4 Validity and reliability

The quality of a research study refers to notions of validity and reliability and can be addressed in multiple ways depending on methodological approach (Cohen et al., 2000). Validity refers to how true and correct the picture is that the researcher draws of the phenomenon (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995) and the reliability of the replication possibility of the study (Cohen et al., 2000).

One of the validity strengths of case studies is the use of multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2018). In this study, different types of data were used to construct an understanding of municipal educational leadership. This does not necessarily mean that

each unit of analysis provides a triangulation of the next one, but rather that it feeds into the main case to construct a holistic understanding. However, a triangulation is provided in and between Units 3 and 4 by generating data from both superintendents and principals and increasing the depth of the analysis between the units. This supports the construct validity of the study (Yin, 2018).

The aim of this study was not to generalise about municipal educational leadership in other countries and therefore has little external validity as such (Yin, 2018). Yet it should provide ideas of important issues to consider regarding municipal leadership in other countries (Lune & Berg, 2017). For external validity in this research, it was important to purposefully select different municipalities that represent the differences between them to gain a holistic understanding of the phenomenon (Yin, 2018, p. 55).

As a researcher, I played the main role in ensuring the quality of the research (Yin, 2018). Following the constructivist paradigm, it was important to be aware of how my beliefs and former experiences, both in the research field and in doing research, might influence the research quality. It is important to be mindful of systematically working against those subjectivities (Braun et al., 2018). Methods to address such issues in qualitative research include systematic data collection, triangulation when possible, and comparing findings with the findings of others; all these methods have been applied in this study.

My former experience as a teacher, principal and researcher can also be seen as beneficial to the study, since these experiences informed the construction of the research, helped me to recognise patterns and interpret answers. Furthermore, my experience of conducting case studies and working with a range of data types generated in the study, benefitted both the richness of the data generated and depth of analysis (Yin, 2018).

This research was conducted in an Icelandic context and by an Icelandic native speaker but is presented in English. Sometimes translation had to be done from Icelandic to English, which could cause biases and open up the possibility of meaning getting lost in translation. To address this challenge, the translations were discussed with supervisors and co-authors.

Reliability refers to whether it is possible for a different researcher at a later point in time to repeat the same study and come to the same conclusion. Although this is rarely a possibility in case studies due to their nature, not the least in a small country case like Iceland, it is important to get as close to this ideal as possible (Yin, 2018), particularly as ensuring reliability is considered fundamental to validity (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). In this research, a thorough and systemic documentation of the case study procedures has been provided (Lune & Berg, 2017) and kept in a protocol, and data maintained together in a database (Yin, 2018).

5.5 Ethical issues

All research deals with questions of ethics, and ethical issues arise at every stage. They cannot be overlooked as they relate directly to the truthfulness of a study and the concerned disciplines. Ethical issues typically address four areas: whether harm comes to participants, informed consent, invasion of privacy, and deception (Bryman, 2001). In this research, different ethical issues arose in the different units of analysis, depending on the different nature of the data collection. In Units 1 and 2, which build on analysing documents accessible to everyone, there were few ethical issues. Nevertheless, those documents are written by people, some in their own names. Consequently, it is important to treat those in a way that allows for critical analysis, but at the same time maintains the dignity of the owner of the discourse.

Unit 3 consists of a quantitative survey. In that case, emphasis was put on constructing the survey with basic background questions that would not reveal the identity of the respondents and would ensure that the research was untraceable to those who answered. The most challenging ethical issues arose in Unit 4, as an in-depth data search in each municipality required gathering information from individuals who should remain anonymous. This was particularly challenging as there is, for example, usually only one superintendent in each municipality. Furthermore, some of the municipalities are so distinct that it was a challenge to describe them without someone recognizing them. This is especially true for the biggest municipality, as there is only one quite like that in Iceland in terms of population and structure. Thus, it can be recognized. To minimize the recognition of individuals in that case and other cases, the sex of the interviewee was not mentioned and the framing of sentences carefully concealed individual schools, principals and staff in the school support services.

All interviewees received an informed consent sheet where the procedures and purpose of the research were outlined. They were informed about their anonymity, their freedom to withdraw from the research at any time, and the possibility of contacting the researcher for further information. The municipal leaders (superintendents and department heads) were primarily interviewed under the badges of the School Support Service Research Group and the principals under the badges of this doctoral research. Thus, and because the interviews with the principals were partly built on the information gathered in the former interviews, there were two consent forms, one for MES-leaders (Appendix D) and another for principals (Appendix E). Both the participating municipalities and the interviewees are given pseudonyms (Cohen et al., 2000). The case study followed the protocols provided by the Icelandic Data Protection Authority and Act No. 90/2018 on Data Protection and the Processing of Personal Data.

5.6 Summary

My epistemological stance is based on the social constructionist worldview. The intention was to look at municipal educational leadership from different angles and

different viewpoints. This allowed for different truths to emerge, for example, those of superintendents and principals within the same and divergent municipalities, to build a broad understanding of the phenomena. Apart from describing educational leadership in Iceland, the aim was to critically examine the influences of different policy levels/stakeholders on leadership. This allowed for a critical examination of the power of transnational and national policy at the municipal level and the municipal educational leadership. As the main purpose was to map and understand municipal educational leadership, within the complexity of the governance educational system and policy enactment, an inductive research approach was applied.

The study is defined as an embedded single-case study in that it constructs a holistic, in-depth understanding and knowledge of educational leadership at the municipal level. As the primary interest was to gain a better understanding of municipal educational leadership in one country, rather than to be able to generalize to other countries, it is also an intrinsic case study. In line with the embedded case study, data was gathered systematically from different units of analysis at the national, local and school levels.

The main body of research data was generated using qualitative research methods. Nevertheless, gaining a holistic understanding of the phenomenon under study requires multiple sources of evidence and in the case of this research, a quantitative survey was also used. The different methods were applied more or less consecutively, following the four embedded units of analyses. For each unit there was a set of research questions that fed into the main question and an overall understanding of the case under study. The research moves gradually from a wide perspective to a narrow one. Units 1 and 2 concern the national level, where Unit 1 is a background study of the educational governance structure in Iceland and Unit 2 is a content analysis of legislation. Unit 3 mainly focuses on the municipal level and is built on a survey sent to superintendents or municipal councilors, and principals. Unit 4 is an in-depth cross-case study of seven municipalities; it is based on a document analysis as well as interviews with the superintendents and department heads at school offices at the municipal level and principals in schools.

As a single-case study, the research does not capture all there is to know about municipal educational leadership. Still, it provides a holistic picture of municipal educational leadership in Iceland within the complexity of educational governance and policy. This can be used to improve educational leadership and coherence for the benefit of school practices and inclusive education, as well as a foundation for further research on the topic.

6 Results

The results of this study are presented in three published papers and one draft-paper, corresponding to the units within this embedded case-study. Together, the papers depict educational leadership at the municipal level, especially relating to what shapes it, its characteristics, and meaning for school practices. In the following, their input to the study is clarified and the main outcomes presented.

6.1 Paper I – corresponding to Unit 1

Paper I is the broad starting point of the research, providing the background and context for municipal educational leadership in Iceland, using document analysis. The chapter sets out to explore development in educational policies in Iceland, especially changes in governance during the last 25 years and the establishment and role of the current national agency, i.e., the Directorate of Education. Furthermore, it investigates who the main players in the field are and explores the major challenges that affect educational governance in Iceland.

The chapter describes the challenges facing the governance system such as teacher shortages, balancing quality assurance, managing curriculum implementation, and providing school support service and professional support at the municipal and school levels. It argues that despite those pressing challenges, the main challenges are political instability and ideological disagreement. Although rooted in the Nordic model of education, NPM emphases in policies, together with instability in educational governance, have undermined the educational system. A part of this regards the public debate concerning the establishment, actions and purpose of the new Directorate of Education, which needs to (re)gain trust from the municipal and school levels. The main challenges in educational governance are therefore to unite the educational field around a robust education policy. For that purpose, it is argued that the state level must take more responsibility to support the work of the local and school levels.

6.2 Paper II – corresponding to Unit 2

Paper II narrows the focus to the actual leadership practices by offering insights into how the state pursues municipal educational leadership through legislation. The study applies qualitative content analysis. The aim is to explore educational governance in Iceland by identifying the roles and responsibilities that national legislation imposes on municipalities in terms of educational leadership at the compulsory school level. This is examined regarding significant educational leadership practices as well as policy and recent political developments concerning educational governance in Iceland.

Paper II reveals that policy aims with regard to educational leadership of municipalities, are opaque in current national legislation. Nevertheless, a desired approach to municipal educational leadership is apparent that aims to build infrastructure that supports the principal and the teachers in their schoolwork. Vague definitions and explanations of responsibilities between state and municipalities allows space for the municipalities to pass responsibility to another party. This can diminish the capacity development of the people involved. Current legislation shows an emphasis on traditional Nordic educational values, but NPM and transnational influences are increasing. It is argued that the educational system is quite dependent on the political emphasis at any given time, making it difficult for both municipalities and the state to facilitate a cohesive leadership. It is suggested that closer attention be given to coherence about policy, leadership and actions between the state, municipal, and school levels as well as within each level, and on municipal educational leadership.

6.3 Paper III – corresponding to Unit 3

In Paper III, the viewpoint moves from state level to municipal level. Results from Paper I and II informed the design of the study and data was gathered with a questionnaire. The aim is to shed a light on the educational leadership of school support services at the municipal level in Iceland, as an agent of educational leadership at the municipal level. This is explored from the perspective of MES-leaders and preschool and compulsory school principals and in relation to whether contextual and structural differences and human resources influence those practices. The leadership practices are measured against a framework of desired leadership practices.

The results indicate that there is space for considerable improvement of the various leadership practices regarding school support services at the municipal level in Iceland. The school support services provide limited support and leadership regarding the professional development of teachers and principals, support to new teachers, or support for refining and aligning pedagogical and assessment work. Geographical location, population density and the structural arrangements of school support services do not seem to make much difference in leadership practices, but human resources do. The findings indicate that within the biggest municipality, there are structural barriers above that of the other municipalities that might work against their advantages of having better access to qualified staff.

It is suggested that municipal authorities should purposefully work towards improvement in their leadership practices and engage more in, for example, the development of professional capacity within school support services. It is important that the state cooperates in finding appropriate solutions, especially in rural areas. There is a difference in views between MES-leaders and principals that indicates a different understanding of what school support services leadership should consist of and aims for, suggesting a lack of dialogue and mutual trust. A stronger focus on creating a shared understanding and proximity between the municipal and school levels regarding the development of leadership in this domain, is suggested.

6.4 Paper IV – corresponding to Unit 4

In Paper IV, the viewpoint remains at the municipal level but narrows down to seven municipalities that were chosen as cases to understand in more depth leadership practices at this level. The focus moves also to the school level and the article takes into consideration how those leadership practices influence school practices. The characteristics of municipal leadership practices are investigated in different contexts, using the school support services as a lens, as well as who shapes this leadership and the ways in which it might strengthen schools as professional institutions. The emphasis is on the influence of both political and professional actors on this leadership. Data consists of interviews with people in the school support services and with principals and of documents from municipalities homepages regarding policy emphasis and practices in school support services. A cross-case analysis was used to identify patterns and shapes of these leadership practices.

The study found that leadership practices in school support services are generally poorly developed, although there are differences between municipalities. One municipality stood out as having the most developed leadership practices. This seemed to be connected to a decade of stability in educational policy and to having a superintendent with a clear and school-oriented vision for the school support services. Furthermore, unlike most other municipalities, the superintendent had systematically applied the working procedures of a professional learning community while developing the educational system within the municipality. In some of the other municipalities, when a political agent or a professional agent took action, lack of consistency and the absence of a systemic approach to policy and leadership tended to undermine the impact of their efforts. A contributing factor was also difficulties in attracting people with the right skills, especially in remoter municipalities. Also, there was limited emphasis on capacity building in the school offices. Adding to this is that the direction within school support services tends to be focused on providing clinical support to students. This is reflected in leadership actions that do not conform with desired leadership practices that emphasise school-based consultancy and support for professional capacity building. The findings indicate that when municipal educational leadership practices resembled desired leadership practices, principals were more content with their municipal authorities, superintendents and the support they and their school received. In these instances, principals were able to articulate more clearly how they were working in partnership with their superiors on developing their schools as professional learning institutions.

7 Discussion

The aim of this study was to shed light on educational leadership at the municipal level in Iceland. The research explores how educational leadership at this level is shaped by practices, policies and governance at the national and school levels within a global and transnational context; what characterises this leadership; and how it influences school practices. In this chapter, the findings from Papers I–IV are examined and discussed in relation to the contextual and theoretical backgrounds and literature presented in Chapters 1, 2 and 3. The discussion is divided into two sections, which in turn are divided into subsections. Section 7.1 discusses the governance, policies and leadership practices at the national level and how they shape municipal leadership. Section 7.2 discusses educational leadership at the municipal level and how it shapes school practices. As the issues raised are intertwined, there are some overlaps between sections. I address the overall findings of this doctoral study by referring to it as the study or my study. When I address findings pertaining to one of the publications generated by this study, I refer to it as Paper followed by its number.

7.1 National governance, policies and leadership

This subsection discusses how policy enactment, governance and leadership of the educational system in Iceland influence and shape municipal educational leadership and its consequences for school practices. This is discussed in relation to four areas: 1) national governance and policy enactment in the education system in Iceland, 2) global policy influences and instability at the national level, 3) the limited leadership capacity at the national level and 4) the importance of transparency and cooperation concerning leadership practices.

7.1.1 National governance and policy enactment in a decentralized education system

For over 25 years, the focus of national policy and governance in Iceland has been decentralisation in the educational system. The biggest step was the transfer of compulsory schooling from state to municipal control in 1996. The transfer resulted in many positive changes in schools. By gaining more autonomy, principals found it easier to be heard by their local authorities than by the national authorities and it became easier to get resources for schools (Hansen et al., 2004). However, as the findings of this study indicate, available resources differ between municipalities where some of them have been unable to provide sufficient support or infrastructure (see also Svanbjörnsdóttir et al., 2021). Limited leadership capacity seems to be one of the

ongoing challenges at the municipal level which has various consequences for the schools (also discussed in more detail in Section 7.2).

Since the transfer, there have been considerable policy changes and increased societal demands that are reflected in educational laws, regulations and other policy documents set at the national governance level, as discussed in Papers I and II. As “leaders of leaders” (Dean, 2010; Foucault, 1982; Moos et al., 2016a; Niesche & Gowlett, 2019), national authorities have obligations towards the enactment of those legislations. Those obligations include discourse and actions that support municipalities and schools in enacting legislation requirements at local and school levels (Dean, 2010). However, my study reveals that the state appears to have left the municipalities mostly on their own to fulfil legislations and to organise both schooling and support. This is further confirmed in a recent OECD report (2021). Furthermore, the state largely ignores differences between municipalities in Iceland, particularly the significant differences in population density, geographical location and territorial size. This is despite concerns raised at the time of the transfer (Sigþórsson, 1994).

The findings of this study indicate that the national authorities’ approaches have been based on emphasising narrow policy implementation rather than policy enactment (Ball et al., 2012; Hudson et al., 2019; Schofield, 2001). As Ball et al. (2012) point out, seeing policy process in such a linear and technical light indicates an oversimplification of the process from national to municipal and to school levels. My findings indicate that this is what has happened in Iceland following the transfer of compulsory schooling from state to municipal control. The role of the state has been to create legislation, regulations and national curriculum with an implicit expectation that the policy will be realized at the municipal and school levels. In doing so, the more complex human dimensions of policy enactment, that scholars like Maguire et al. (2013) and Ball et al. (2012) argue for, tend to be overlooked, and by implication, the social constructivist nature of policy enactment processes. Thus, the state appears to ignore the whole complexity of translating policies into real actions and the interplay between existing practices or policy programmes. Even linear implementation processes involve applying a plan and certain scaffolding techniques (Ball et al., 2012) but there is little evidence of this in the Icelandic state’s policy procedures.

One obvious consequence of the fragile process of policy enactment described above, is the weak provision of school support services. As Papers I and II indicate, vagueness in legislation has been compounded by reluctance on the part of national authorities to take on responsibility for the professional development of school principals and teachers, as well as for school development. At the same time, as demonstrated in the papers, little infrastructure is provided by national authorities either to support municipalities in taking responsibility or in straightening the course when they are found to be going astray (see also Gunnþórsdóttir et al., 2022). This indicates that the importance of leadership practices is overlooked at the municipal level as well as at the

national level, with limited systematic responsibility being taken. Therefore, school development and the professional development of principals, teachers and other school staff have not been systematically addressed in the Icelandic educational governance system, despite attention being drawn to the limitations and consequences for school practices in a range of studies (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2017; Hansen & Jóhannsson, 2010; Hreinsdóttir, 2013; OECD, 2021; Ólafsdóttir, 2016; Ólafsdóttir et al., 2022; Svanbjörnsdóttir et al., 2021). It seems that national authorities could exercise their power to lead others to lead themselves (Foucault, 1982) in a more constructive way than is the case today. Based on above, it is argued that there is a general weakness in the way that decentralisation is carried out in Iceland that affects policy enactment, governance and leadership at the national level as well as throughout the system.

7.1.2 Global policy influences and instability at the national level

It is well established that decentralisation of the educational system in Iceland in the mid-1990s was influenced by transnational and global changes (Hansen, 2004, 2013; Jónasson et al., 2021; Sigurðardóttir et al., 2014). The origin of these changes can be traced to other Nordic countries as well as Anglo-Saxon countries such as the USA, England and Canada, with the introduction of neo-liberal and NPM ideas (Hansen, 2013; Magnúsdóttir, 2013; Moos, 2017; Moos et al., 2013; Moos & Krejsler, 2021). The limited infrastructure mentioned above can be seen as reflecting NPM and neoliberalism which promotes the idea that the state should provide as little infrastructure as possible (Dean, 2010). In line with these ideas, detailed goal setting of the curriculum and external and internal evaluations (see Dýrfjörð & Magnúsdóttir; Ólafsdóttir, 2016; Sigþórsson, 2008) were introduced in legislation.

An example of global and transnational influences can be seen in how OECD reports educational data and how comparisons based on PISA and TALIS have become a part of the normal discourse on policy imperatives, both in the media and among academics. This indicates how global and transnational organisations have been successful in steering educational discourse and norms (see Ball, 2017; Moos, 2017) in Iceland through their soft way of doing governance.

As indicated in Papers I and II, the discourse of NPM has been taken up in part irrespective of which political parties govern, both at national and municipal level. Therefore, in Iceland (see Dýrfjörð & Magnúsdóttir, 2016) as in many other countries (see Ball, 2017; Moos & Krejsler, 2021), the discourse of economic growth and principles of competition have been normalised in peoples' ways of thinking, talking, acting and understanding of education and education policy. This study establishes, especially in Paper II, how steering with soft governance has increasingly been applied in Iceland. While in some ways it answers the call for increased support and guidelines on behalf of the national level, it is important that educators and education policy

makers are aware of the origins of these ideologies, discourses and actions and what they really mean for education.

The amalgamation of neo-liberal and NPM ideas, Nordic traditions including Icelandic traditions, has created a new reality that maybe was not carefully thought through. Certain weaknesses began to appear in the system e.g., lack of professional support at the school level described in Papers III and IV, the question of responsibility for internal and external evaluations (Ólafsdóttir, 2016) and falling PISA scores (Directorate of Education, 2019a). Despite the influence of NPM, the Icelandic state has exercised low-stakes accountability (Ólafsdóttir et al., 2022) built on Nordic traditions of trust regarding the lower governance levels (Moos & Krejsler, 2021). As my study shows (see also Svanbjörnsdóttir et al., 2021), municipal authorities only partly comply with legislation regarding school support services, yet the national authorities have only addressed this to a limited extent.

As reported in Papers I and II, the measures taken by various ministers and governments to address this problem have been inconsistent and there has been a lack of a comprehensive overview. Actions at the national level in Iceland have tended to depend on the political vision of the national educational authorities in charge at any given time, rather than a strategic long-term vision. Adding to this instability has been the frequent change of ministers and policy directives since the economic crisis in 2008, where each minister has sought to put his or her own mark on policy imperatives. This instability in politics and ministers' policies and actions, has been a challenge for education in Iceland and can be argued to have undermined not only municipal leadership practices but leadership practices at the national level as well. Recent developments, where ministries have been reorganised and the Directorate of Education is being restructured or even abolished, only support this argument.

The political shifts at the national level reflect a period characterised by what Fullan and Quinn (2016) describe as ad hoc policymaking. The period has been one of political instability within national authorities, characterized by contradictions and inconsistency. As Fullan and Quinn (2016) observe, the more ministers try to fix the system with more of the same, the bigger the problem becomes. This is what Ball (2017) has described as the typical result of unstable governance, working intentionally and unintentionally against itself, with the tendency of resulting in chaos.

Furthermore, some of those measures taken at the national level to address the educational challenges of the last decade, indicate a certain bypassing of the municipal level (see Paper II). This can be seen in other Nordic countries as well (Moos, Paulsen et al., 2016). The literacy programme launched by a former minister and hosted at the Directorate of Education and the professional development programme initiated by another former minister of Education, Science and Culture and hosted by the universities, are examples of this. This bypassing of the municipal level is another example of the quick fix policy that characterises national governance: it interferes with

municipalities responsibilities', taking away their responsibility instead of empowering them to do better, and risks the division of those responsibilities between the two levels becoming even more blurred (see Paper II). In this unstable governance, it is not only the municipalities that have been bypassed but also the Directorate of Education, the national agency that should stand closest to the educational ministry and the minister.

These global and national policy shifts illustrate the instability that has characterised part of educational policy in Iceland. Both municipalities and schools are in a difficult position, receiving little support from the national level to develop leadership practices in the way that scholars such as Leithwood et al. (2008, 2020), Louis et al. (2010) Lambert (2003) and Fullan and Quinn (2016) have argued for. To address this, as Fullan and Quinn (2016) argue, national authorities need to put the emphasis on developing their consistency and capacity in policy, governance and leadership practices. This includes taking responsibility for creating conditions that strengthen local authorities and schools, especially in terms of their leadership practices. In that regard it is important that the national level strikes a balance between how they steer with hard and soft governance (see Moos, 2009) and that the ideologies, intentions, actions and consequences are openly discussed and evaluated.

7.1.3 Limited leadership capacity at the national level and its consequences

The parliament and the MoEC provides municipalities and schools with a framework, mainly through national laws, regulations and curriculum guides. The analysis of educational legislative documents in Paper II shows that no explicit reference is made to municipal leadership in policy documents. Instead, the leadership of municipal authorities can be revealed by looking behind their roles and responsibilities outlined in the legislations. These reveal that the national authorities have high expectations of municipal educational leadership and expect it to be distributed in nature. As argued in Paper II, these expectations laid out in the documents correspond in many ways to the leadership practices described by Louis et al. (2010) as being desirable at the local level to enhance school improvement and students' learning. The legislation states clearly that all municipalities should facilitate an infrastructure that sustains inclusive education and supports principals and teachers in their work and professional development. This must be done in a way that enhances their school's professional capacity. As demonstrated by Louis et al. (2010) and Campbell & Fullan (2019), such an extensive task does not come about without appropriate and coherent leadership and governance practices at both the municipal and national level.

I have already argued that the need for infrastructure and guidance at municipal and school levels for the enactment of national policy, is underestimated. This study indicates that this is also the case with leadership practices, despite the important role of national governments to lead others to lead themselves (see e.g. Dean, 2010;

Foucault's 1982). Thus, if one accepts Lambert's (2003) argument that leadership capacity is necessary for school improvement, such efforts at the national level must be directed at procedures that strengthen municipalities in their leadership actions. Based on this study, it is argued that the educational system is too dependent on individuals within the system and their visions, actions and capacities, including individual ministers, municipal leaders, school board, superintendents, principals etc. Thus, such capacity building is essential if educational improvement is to be institutionalised. The aim should be to develop capacity that ensures systematic progress, regardless of shifts in key political and professional actors.

As discussed in subsection 3.2.4, Lambert's (2003) matrix (**Table 2**) proposes the skills needed to develop high municipal leadership capacity. In the context of leadership at the national level, this would involve the skills necessary to develop leadership capacity at the national level itself, and the leadership actions needed to support the municipal and school levels to fulfil their educational role. Measuring national activities (see Papers I and II) against the leadership capacity matrix, indicates that leadership at the national level closely resembles what Lambert (2003) calls the laissez-faire approach to leadership (within Quadrant two). According to Lambert (2003), laissez-faire leadership is likely to lead to limited and uneven leadership capacity at both the national level and the municipal level, as well as the school level.

One of the main characteristics of laissez-faire leadership (Lambert, 2003) is that other members at national, municipal, and school levels are entrusted to fulfil their obligations without much support, quality assurance or measures taken (cf. Subsection 7.1.2). As Lambert (2003) explains, this lack of interference allows those who already have ambition, resources and capacity, to blossom while those who lack these capacities, continue to do what they do without interference or support to change their practices. This pertains to the national level, but as discussed further in Subsection 7.2.5, also to the municipal level, and eventually to the school level. The study indicates that this approach to leadership leaves each municipality free to govern their schools and their support system as they think best or have capacity for, in some ways irrespective of whether or not they manage to fulfil educational legislation. This approach is much in line with a recent OECD report (2021) on Icelandic educational policy processes which describes them as occurring "without a great deal of trialling, piloting, or interim reviewing to potentially course correct along the way" (OECD, 2021, p. 36).

As highlighted by Lambert (2003), there are various consequences to limited leadership capacity at the national level concerning the municipal and school levels. Based on my study, (discussed further in Section 7.2.) Icelandic municipalities are grappling with their educational leadership practices and leadership capacity. My findings also indicate that Icelandic schools are struggling with national policy enactments, partly because of the lack of support for educational policy enactments due

to limited infrastructure, governance and leadership capacity at the national and municipal level. National enactments include implementing the national curriculum (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2020), planning, executing and following up on reforms based on internal (Directorate of Education, 2019b) and external (Ólafsdóttir et al., 2022) evaluations, and providing inclusive education (Gunnþórsdóttir et al., 2022).

Tackling this limited leadership capacity requires that all layers of governance need to work together and take common responsibility for their part in the educational system. The failure of one layer influences the others. This works in and between institutions as well as in and between the national, municipal and school levels (Fullan & Kirtman, 2019; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Lambert, 2003). It is therefore essential for Icelandic national authorities to address the obvious municipal contextual differences (further discussed in Subsection 7.2.2). As Papers III and IV reveal, the situation is most challenging for municipalities that are more remote, less populated and/or further away from the capital, as they have less access to various resources, especially human resources. The national level must work with the municipal level on tackling this.

7.1.4 The importance of transparency and cooperation in leadership

As scholars such as Helterbran (2010) and Lambert (2003) have pointed out, leadership must be developed openly so that the different actors can begin to see and perceive themselves as leaders within the system. As revealed in Paper II, this is currently not the case, given the absence of discourse about municipal and national leadership in legislation and other policy documents. One exception to this is the White Paper on education reform (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014b) released in 2014 (cf. Chapter 2) in which this neglect is acknowledged and a reference made to the need for “strong leadership” (p. 26) within national education authorities as the premise for the stated reforms. The White Paper also highlights the importance of identifying leaders at various other levels in the system for successful reform, including the municipal and school levels.

Whether the leadership referred to in the White Paper and the ensuing actions were in line with what is generally seen as desirable leadership practices to improve education or not (see Leithwood et al., 2008; Louis et al., 2010), the longstanding silence regarding educational leadership in the governance chain was briefly broken. In the launching of the education policy for 2021–2030 (Þingskjal 1111–278. mál, 2020–2021), no mention was made of leadership. This seeming lack of concern reflected in the absence of any discussion about developing leadership practices at any level, is surprising given that the importance of leadership for education and educational reforms has been repeatedly highlighted by research (Fullan & Kirtman, 2019; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2020; Louis et al., 2010; OECD, 2021).

The need for all organisations, political parties and individuals at all levels of the education system to work together has been persuasively argued by others (see for example, Fullan and Quinn, 2016; Campbell and Fullan, 2019; Louis, 2015). In that process, national governance bears responsibilities. This means improvement both in governance and leadership. In this regard, as stated in Paper I, there are signs that the MoEC is increasing the emphasis on collaboration between different institutions, within and between governance levels (i.e., municipalities, the Icelandic Association of Local Authorities, the Icelandic Teacher Union, and the universities providing teacher education).

Since Paper I was written, this emphasis on collaboration has continued with the current minister. A more cooperative approach is involving the future role and structure of school support services as well as the Directorate of Education mentioned above. Considering the importance of cooperation and coherence in leadership and governance (Campbell & Fullan, 2019; Fullan and Quinn, 2016), this is a positive sign for education in Iceland and a necessary premise for further educational development and leadership capacity. However, as my analysis of the last decades demonstrates, this increased collaboration between stakeholders will not change in the long term unless it is addressed in a systematic way. A focus on developing governance and leadership capacity within the national authorities should empower local and school levels and facilitate the fulfilment of their responsibilities.

7.2 Educational leadership at the municipal level

This subsection discusses the nature of municipal leadership practices, primarily in relation to school support services and governance and its influence on school practices in regard to various challenges at the school level. The leadership is discussed in relation to five areas: 1) the characteristics of the municipal educational leadership, 2) contextual differences, including size, location and human resources, 3) the roles of the different political and professional leadership actors, 4) coherence in governance and 5) leadership capacity building at the municipal level.

7.2.1 Characteristics of municipal leadership practices

The results of this study suggest that educational leadership practices at the municipal level are generally underdeveloped in Iceland. As revealed in Paper III, leadership practices within school support services scored rather low in terms of the framework presented in Table 1 (Leithwood et al., 2008, 2020; Louis et al., 2010). The lowest score was in the category of *developing people*, and scores for *refining and aligning the organisation* and *improve teaching and learning programmes* were not much higher. Based on this, and further findings presented in Paper IV, it must be concluded that there is generally little emphasis on those leadership practices at the municipal level, and a tendency to indifference regarding these practices at the school level. This is

consistent with other Icelandic studies on school support services (Gunnþórsdóttir et al., 2022; Sigþórsson, 2013; Svanbjörnsdóttir et al., 2021). Thus, it can be concluded that the responsibility for practicing leadership in these domains tends to be put on individual schools while municipal authorities take little responsibility for those leadership practices.

Although the findings presented in Paper III suggest that municipalities are generally better at providing leadership in the category of *setting directions* than in the other categories within the leadership practices framework (Leithwood et al., 2008; 2020; Louis et al., 2010), the overall findings of this study suggest that policy is unclear and is not predicated on the nature and practices of school support services. Furthermore, there is seldom an explicit enactment plan; instead, direction is set by the available human resources and traditional allocation of financial resources that upholds a clinical rather than consultation-based approach to service provision.

As outlined in Paper III, there is a mismatch between providers of school support services, MES-leaders and the principals who receive these services in terms of how leadership practices are rated. Paper IV shows that a written policy regarding school support services seldom exists; in rare cases, a common understanding of the school support services is negotiated between the schools and the support service or between actors within the services themselves. This confirms the findings in Gunnþórsdóttir et al. (2022) and there seems to be little effort either by municipal authorities or school support services to clarify the aims and policies of the school support service. This results not only in a mismatch in terms of how leadership practices within school support services are perceived, both at municipal and school level, but also in a lack of clarity in policymaking regarding those services.

As pointed out above, and in findings discussed in Papers III and IV, supported by other research studies (Hansen & Jóhannsson, 2010; Gunnþórsdóttir et al., 2022; Svanbjörnsdóttir et al., 2021), the approach within school support services is dominated by a traditional focus on individual students and the clinical diagnosis of their differences and needs. This is enacted through prioritising psychologists above teaching consultants and allocating funds accordingly. It has been argued that this constitutes using diagnosis as a voucher for funding, which is an inefficient use of funds (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2017). This effectively means that municipalities perpetuate a traditional clinical focus which values the expertise of psychologists, speech therapists and special education consultants over teaching consultants. As Gunnþórsdóttir et al. (2022) and Svanbjörnsdóttir et al. (2021) have found, pressure to continue with this approach comes not only from schools but from parents, who see diagnosis as a means to get more funding and support for the individual student.

Thus, the municipal school support service system finds itself caught in a loop, where certain leadership practices are reenforced and others neglected, despite ample

indications that the dominant practices are not in the best interests of schooling. In line with other scholars and educational bodies (e.g. European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2017; Gunnþórsdóttir et al., 2022), it can be argued that the main emphasis of the school support services (clinical diagnosis) is at odds with the more school-based and empowering emphases of desired leadership practices as put forward by Leithwood et al. (2008, 2020) and Louis et al. (2010). This means that even though municipal leaders may have considerable leadership skills, their emphasis will neither necessarily lead to the right capacity building within the schools nor enhance the quality of students' education. This indicates the need to reconsider the municipal leadership approach for educational benefits.

7.2.2 Municipal leadership practices in relation to context and human resources

Findings from Paper III revealed little difference in educational leadership practices regarding the school support services by geographical location, population density or structural arrangements. The only geographical differences in leadership practices were found between the capital city and the other municipalities, indicating more difference within the city itself than between the city and other municipalities. In coming back to Paper I, such differences are unsurprising given that one third of Iceland's population lives there, and decisions made in the city influence other educational settings across the country (Dýrfjörð & Magnúsdóttir, 2016). Moreover, the city can attract people with expertise beyond other municipalities. This puts the city in a dominant position in terms of supplying school support services and the potential for providing the desired leadership practices described by Leithwood et al. (2008, 2020) and Louis et al. (2010). There are indications (see Paper IV) that the city has put more emphasis on *developing people* and *improving teaching and learning programmes* (Leithwood et al., 2008, 2020; Louis et al., 2010), than most other municipalities.

However, school support services have developed differently in the different service centres across the city. One centre was found to be exceptionally oriented towards school-based consultation. It focused more on the schools' and teachers' practices than the other centres, which upheld, in various proportions, the traditional individualised and clinical focus described above and illustrated in other Icelandic studies (Gunnþórsdóttir et al., 2022; Svanbjörnsdóttir et al., 2021). Depicting coherence in educational governance and leadership as articulated by Campbell & Fullan (2019) and Fullan & Kirtman (2019), those findings indicate that the city struggles to provide overall coherence in the services. This again indicates that structural hindrances caused by complexity in services and governance, such as within the city, might in some way overshadow its privileges in terms of high population and access to human resources. This finding echoes those of scholars such as Louis et al. (2010), Landy (2013) and Nutter (2021) who have shown that as municipalities grow and as a result require more complicated structures, their leadership practices can suffer.

At the same time, Paper IV reveals that more remote, geographically large and sparsely populated municipalities face other kinds of challenges, such as access to resources, especially human resources. As found in Paper III, human resources did make a difference in how educational leadership was rated by MES-leaders and principals. Paper IV further suggests that leadership practices are dependent on the people that municipalities can attract to the school support services and on the extent to which municipalities manage to support those people's professional development (cf. Subsection 7.2.1), rather than a deliberate policy and service strategy.

Although difficulties in attracting people with appropriate skills and visions is a common concern of municipalities, Paper IV indicates that these difficulties escalate with increased remoteness, i.e., increased distance from the capital. In that sense, this study's findings support concerns highlighted in earlier studies (Hansen & Jóhannsson, 2010; Sigþórsson, 2013) that remote and less populated municipalities are disadvantaged in terms of certain educational infrastructures when compared to the more densely populated municipalities. This study also indicates, however, that this disadvantage could be mitigated by adopting an approach that prioritises the development of human capacity.

The extent to which – in relation to weak leadership at the municipal level – the expertise, interests and capacities of those working in the system at any given time, shape the practices of the school services, rather than deliberate policies and leadership for their enactment, has already been discussed. A further drawback is that this reliance on impermanent human resources leaves the services vulnerable to changes in personnel (see Lambert, 2003). When individuals, both superintendents and other specialists, develop the service to a large extent based on their own capacities and values, when those people leave, the service suffers. This instability extends to both professional and political agents, as found in Paper IV, undermining the continuity of the services and its leadership (see also Campbell & Fullan, 2019; Fullan & Quinn, 2019; Louis et al., 2010).

This study further indicates that there is a shortage of people with the right skills and capacities in the educational system in Iceland, especially in the more remote municipalities, and a lack of strategy to educate such personnel to work in the system. These circumstances indicate that there is a need to revise strategies for recruiting staff. In addition, there seems to be a lack of understanding among the municipal authorities, of the importance of systematically developing the capacity of those who already work within it, to ensure continuity of services when key individuals leave. As Lambert (2003) and Campbell and Fullan (2019) have argued, municipal authorities must take on the responsibility for the professional development of current and future personnel in the educational field and support them to grow as leaders. It is vital that municipal authorities realise that this is their responsibility, rather than the responsibility of individuals, schools or the state, although all these actors have a role to play.

Given the complexity of recruiting competent people for educational leadership, it can be assumed that there are no quick fixes to address the main challenges faced by the municipalities. Both densely and sparsely populated municipalities face challenges, albeit different ones. However, this study raises concerns about how many municipalities have become what Louis (2015) refers to as silos, in other words, units that are isolated from each other. At the time of the transfer of the school support services from state to municipal control, neighbouring municipalities tended to form regional school offices that worked across municipalities to provide the school support services. As discussed in Papers III and IV, the more densely populated municipalities, in particular, have chosen to withdraw from such cooperation and establish their own offices, resulting in more fragmented services, limited coordination and a lack of coherence and collective responsibility (Gunnþórsdóttir et al. 2022).

These are all signs of what Louis (2015) refers to as weak relations and Lambert (2003) describes as limited leadership capacity. In the Icelandic context, it is likely that the high number of rather small municipalities makes it more complicated to overcome the territorial barriers between municipalities and develop the desired leadership practices across them. The limited capacity of many of the smaller municipalities to fulfil legislative requirements, is a reality that needs to be addressed. These smaller municipalities have less financial and professional strength to overcome challenges in comparison with the more densely populated municipalities. National and municipal authorities must take responsibility for this situation.

7.2.3 The leadership roles of superintendents, principals and municipal authorities

Since the municipalities took over responsibility for school support services, superintendents' position has not had a legal status in Iceland. Moreover, as Paper IV underlines, echoing findings presented by Svanbjörnsdóttir et al. (2021) and Gunnþórsdóttir et al. (2022), although most municipalities choose to hire superintendents, qualifications for the job and their areas of responsibility are ill defined.

It seems that these ill-defined roles contribute to the rather poorly developed educational leadership practices at the municipal level (see Paper III). This also means that many principals and schools are left to their own devices, especially in smaller municipalities. The lack of clarity regarding the qualifications needed for the superintendent's position means that holders of this position are not necessarily candidates that come from the field of education. They may be former teachers and principals, but they may also be lawyers, psychologists, social workers etc. Yet, as Paper IV reveals, much in line with Moos, Johannsson et al. (2016), superintendents are particularly valued when they have deep educational knowledge, form close relationships with principals and provide support and educational leadership. At the

same time, as demonstrated in Paper IV, some superintendents and department heads struggle with building such tight relationships, more so if they do not have the educational background and experience to engage with principals' and teachers' work.

Furthermore, it is becoming increasingly common for superintendents to take on duties that pertain not only to school support services but also to the social or welfare system as well. The limited cooperation and integration of school support services with these other services for children are considered as a weakness of the educational support system (Gunnþórsdóttir et al., 2022). Giving superintendents such a wide remit is therefore intended to address this weakness. Yet as findings from Paper IV indicate, expanding the duties of superintendents generates complications that need to be addressed. Although this arrangement could be seen as supporting coordination between services to address students' needs, it also creates more distance between superintendents and principals in the governance chain. The varied roles and increased duties of superintendents seem to make it more difficult for them to build and maintain support for the close relationships with the principals that scholars advocate (see for example, Forfang, 2020; Johansson et al., 2016; Paulsen et al., 2016). Furthermore, as Paper IV indicates, it seems that superintendents themselves underestimate the importance of their department heads or deputy superintendents taking on an active leadership role towards principals and schools. When the superintendent's role expands, it becomes less clear who has responsibility for leading and supporting the principal; the risk is that no one takes on this responsibility.

As other Nordic studies have found (Moos, Johansson et al., 2016; Paulsen et al., 2016), this study has identified superintendents' close relationships with principals, municipal councils and school boards as hugely important. Weak relations with either their superiors or the principals may lead to more difficulties in mediating between their superiors, school leaders, external stakeholders, legislation and their professional norms. Similarly, findings from Paper IV indicate that superintendents struggle more in their leadership practices if their relationships with the municipal council and school boards are distant.

This study indicates that in more densely populated municipalities with a superintendent and functioning school offices, the role of principals is different from that of principals in the more sparsely and remote municipalities without such infrastructure. Although all principals have the same responsibilities according to legislation (Reglugerð um skólaþjónustu sveitarfélaga við leik- og grunnskóla og nemendaverndarráð í grunnskólum nr. 444/2019), in those latter cases, their responsibilities tend to expand, encompassing the roles that superintendents have in other municipalities. The findings presented in Paper IV indicate that in those cases, as well as being the leader of the school, the principal becomes the professional agent that provides municipal educational leadership.

Louis et al. (2010) have shown that leadership in smaller municipalities tends to be more vulnerable to changes in principalship than bigger municipalities with more support. In this regard, Paper IV shows that changes in principalship in the two least populated and remote municipalities meant significant changes in educational leadership for those municipalities. In those two cases, the change of principals actually led, in the short term, to stronger educational leadership within the municipality. However, the institutionalisation of desirable changes in line with what Campbell and Fullan (2019) and Lambert et al. (2016) argue for, requires systematic development in leadership and governance. Given that there is little sign of such institutionalisation in Icelandic municipalities, generally individual principals' efforts are unlikely to survive their departure.

This study indicates that there is a lack of clarity in the educational leadership provided by the municipal councils and school boards in Iceland. As in the other Nordic countries (Moos, Johansson et al., 2016) their leadership tends to be conducted at a distance from principals and the actual schoolwork. This is also the case in small municipalities, as Paper IV indicates, despite there being very few governance layers between municipal councils, school boards and principals. This draws attention to the generally low engagement (see e.g., Ólafsson & Hansen, 2022) of municipal councils and school boards in educational matters in Iceland. Thus, engagement and leadership practices would benefit from improvement; hence the argument made in this thesis that school support services and schooling should not be built on coincidences, or principals making the best of the situation. The study draws attention to the legislative duty of municipal authorities to apply desirable leadership practices and governance to ensure educational quality in every municipality and every school.

7.2.4 Coherence in governance and leadership in relation to trust building

The four papers that form the findings of this study all indicate that coherence in leadership and governance in Iceland is fragile. The findings presented in Paper IV show that the municipal councils and/or the school governing boards tend to lack what Campbell and Fullan (2019) refer to as the leadership and governance mindset that can inspire and support all the different actors in question. Instead, it seems that too often municipal councils and/or the school governing boards actions disrupt rather than support the daily challenges faced by actors in the school offices and schools. As Fullan (2016) points out, changes take up a lot of energy, and as outlined in Paper IV, sometimes cause disunity and mistrust between the parties involved, which then affects how they are enacted. Inconsistency in policy (Ball, 2017) results in the decisions of one municipal council or school board being sometimes reversed by the next council or board, causing even more confusion and instability.

This study reveals that there is a limited tradition of or knowledge about how to establish deep and meaningful working relations between political and professional agents at municipal and school levels in Iceland. This finding might explain the differences between MES-leaders experience of leadership practices on the one hand and the compulsory school principals on the other hand, as outlined in Paper III. As Campbell and Fullan (2019) argue, this lack of deep meaningful relationships has a negative effect on principals' experience of municipal leadership practices which in turn, can lead to frustration towards the school support services and vice versa. This demonstrates the need for an honest discussion with principals and teachers on a common vision and the role of, and expectations towards, municipal leadership practices versus that of the schools.

In most but not all of the municipalities involved in this study, principals stated that they felt the municipal authorities and superintendents trusted them. However, this was not always the case. As discussed in Paper IV, in two of the municipalities, the way in which the authorities, superintendents and/or municipal office staff acted towards their principals was experienced as distrusting and disempowering. As Foucault (1982) argues, the less freedom any governing party or leader allows for, the less power they can exercise. By micro-managing principals, the municipal leadership actors diminish their power instead of increasing it. Such micro-managing reflects neoliberal and NPM emphases in leadership practices, whereby the lower level is not trusted to properly fulfil their duties without close control. As Gunter et al. (2016a) point out, this breaches trust between actors at national, municipal and school levels. Finding the balance between being demanding and progressive on one hand, and maintaining good relations on the other, is a challenge that needs to be addressed.

Findings from Paper IV suggest that trust is increased when superintendents focus on working closely with principals. By prioritising the development of deep professional relations between the different actors, superintendents help to overcome the distrust that can develop through, for example, ideological differences (Bottom and Fry, 2009; Forfang, 2020). As indicated in Paper IV, it seems that adopting professional learning community practices also helps to build trust and overcome disunity between the municipal and the school level. This is in accordance with Þórsdóttir and Sigurðardóttir (2020) who found that adopting a professional development approach made it more likely that developmental work initiated at the municipal level was taken up at the school level.

This study shows that Iceland lacks an institution at national or municipal level that could provide professional support to municipal councils, school boards or school offices to develop their practices. The findings indicate that this is detrimental to compulsory education in the country. Although it can be argued that the Icelandic Association of Local Authorities could take on this role, the municipalities have not been willing to grant the Association this power. Rather, they have chosen to organise the service on

their own terms (Icelandic Association of Local Authorities, n.d.b). However, this study reveals that most municipalities have not lived up to the responsibility of developing the necessary leadership practices or capacity. What is perhaps surprising, is that this does not only apply to small and remote municipalities; some of the bigger municipalities struggle as well. Many municipalities seem to have underestimated the challenges involved in overhauling their governance structure and leadership practices so that they can fulfil their role properly. This is especially true with regards to their responsibility for systematically applying work procedures that develop their own practices and that of their employees, skills and mindsets that have been shown to have positive impact on educational settings (Campbell & Fullan, 2019; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Louis et al., 2010).

Out of the seven municipalities under study in Paper IV, one stood out for its systematic attempts to change their focus and work procedures under the benchmark of professional learning community. This municipality also seemed to have developed a leadership style that was closer to the desired practices described by Leithwood et al. (2008, 2020) and Louis et al. (2010). Thus, as Louis et al. (2010) have also proposed, it can be argued that desired leadership practices are closely linked with the practices of professional learning communities. Systematically applying those procedures across a municipality can be a way to support leadership development.

Although there is a lack of national or municipal agencies' provision for overall school support services at the national and municipal level, there are institutions and private entities that offer support to municipalities and schools, both school and professional development as well as pedagogical and school-based support. Paper IV reveals that purchasing such support was a way for the least populated and remote municipalities to access the desired school support services. This was especially true with regards to improving learning and teaching, but in some cases also administrative tasks that the principals felt they did not have time or capacity to deal with. Based on this study, it can be argued that these services corresponded better to the schools' need for instructional support and professional development than some of the services offered by school offices. It might seem that the former is more sensitive to the needs of the schools than the latter, which tend to focus more on students' individual needs while neglecting to provide support for teachers in developing their teaching practices. However, such institutions and private entities, especially the private ones, do not have a leadership role in education within municipalities and it is unclear what their contribution to leadership capacity building within the municipality would or should be.

Paper IV indicates that there are differences between municipalities in terms of the extent to which political actors engage in educational matters. Such differences are greater when each elected municipal council and appointed school board have different ideas about whether and how they should engage in educational matters. This points to a lack of consistency in governance (Campbell & Fullan, 2019) at the

municipal level, as discussed earlier. It also points to a lack of understanding of the political actor's role in the educational leadership chain, as Fullan and Quinn (2016) warn. As a result, whether political actors' engagement has positive consequences for the schools' support services and schools or not relies too much on happenstance. The overall consequence is too many struggling municipalities, superintendents, principals and schools.

At the same time, this study also provides examples that can be learnt from: these examples can form a basis for the implementation of systematic steps to build the governance and leadership capacity needed to move towards more consistent success. As Louis et al. (2010) have also shown, appropriate leadership actions from municipal leaders, school governing boards and/or superintendents, can help overcome the negative effects of governance complexity. However, as Campbell and Fullan (2019), Lambert (2003) and Louis (2015) argue, these leadership practices need to be coherent throughout the governance chain. Based on this study, it is argued that the lack of coherence in the system is one of the greatest weaknesses in municipal educational leadership in Iceland.

7.2.5 Leadership capacity at the municipal level

The findings from this study indicate that municipal leadership capacity reflects characteristics of all four quadrants of Lamberts' (2003) matrix of leadership capacity. However, based on the findings presented in Papers III and IV, it seems to resemble most strongly Quadrant 2, followed by Quadrant 3, which reflect limited leadership capacity.

As already mentioned, Lambert (2003) relates Quadrant 2 to the *laissez-faire* leadership approach. In her view, *laissez-fair* leadership means that municipal authorities assume the high involvement of principals and teachers in educational activities and leadership practices. This is independent of whether or not the school staff has the necessary capacity. These characteristics are arguably dominant in at least four out of the seven municipalities studied in Paper IV. However, the resemblance to the *laissez-fair* approach is most clear in the two remote and sparsely populated municipalities without school offices and/or superintendents. In those two municipalities, political actors tend to be passive and put the onus of municipal leadership responsibility on individual principals, teachers and other school staff. The findings from Paper IV, supported by scholars such as Lambert (2003; 2006) and Leithwood et al. (2010), indicate that if the principal can withstand this responsibility and the municipality is well off and prioritises education in their budgeting, this can turn out well for the school. However, as findings from Paper IV also show, such conditions vary considerably between schools, principals and teachers and if they are not in place, this approach can lead to a lack of stability in school practices.

Another characteristic of the laissez-fair approach, as noted in Paper III, is that while MES-leaders assume high involvement in leadership activities at the school level, they have rather limited understanding of what leadership practices are required on their part. The absence of a coordinated municipal and school policy accompanied by inconsistent and uncertain school support services are also associated with the laissez-fair approach, as reflected in all the papers in this study. In practical terms, this translates into an overemphasis on individual students' diagnosis within the school support services and the tendency for priorities being contingent upon what individual staff members consider to be important, sometimes irrespective of whether it coheres with the schools' plans.

The second most common tendency within the seven municipalities (Paper IV) seems to be that leadership capacity adheres to Quadrant 3 (see Lambert, 2003). This is characterised by more vision setting, strategic plans, accountability measures and shared leadership structures than would be in Quadrant 2. In the municipalities resembling Quadrant 3, there is more shared understanding of educational direction than in municipalities that resemble Quadrant 2. At the same time, within these municipalities, trust is invested in and responsibilities conferred upon, certain leadership groups, which leaves others with few opportunities to practice leadership, despite relatively high leadership potential within the schools and educational system. While this approach results in positive developments with regards to leadership capacity, it excludes many teachers and even some principals, or people within the support services who could provide invaluable leadership. This approach is especially evident in some municipalities with school offices. There tends to be certain coordination in that superintendents tend to arrange meetings with the principals as a group and initiate development programmes that are common for all the schools. At the same time the responsibility for much of the pedagogical and professional development and support is left to individual schools to arrange on their own and school office staff are left to decide their own course and development.

Findings from Paper IV indicate that most municipal authorities from time to time do show characteristics of Quadrant 1, which Lambert (2003) defines as autocratic leadership. This will often include the imposition of structural changes concerning the school support services or principals or the work of individual school. Autocratic leadership is also associated with a lack of trust (Lambert, 2003) which, as mentioned, was found in two of the municipalities. Lambert (2003) states that autocratic leadership may sometimes be useful, i.e., when capacity within the schools is low. However, findings from Papers III and IV indicate that this approach is adopted more because the governing bodies, and/or professionals at municipal and school offices, lack the capacity to address topics at hand in a more constructive manner. Thus, they seem to fall into autocratic leadership as a default position, independent of the leadership capacity within the schools. As Lambert (2003) argues, this risks breaches of trust between the schools and the municipal level and creates frustration among principals.

Fortunately, there are also signs of high leadership capacity (Lambert, 2003), especially in two of the municipalities. The great contextual differences between the two, shows that municipal location in itself does not influence municipal leadership practices or capacity. High leadership capacity can be seen in one of the remote municipalities without a school office, where the principal had negotiated and organised the school support services with his/her teachers and succeeded in building capacity within the school to be self-supportive. This is an example of a constructive response to municipal isolation and limited availability of school support services. The same constructive approach and development towards high leadership capacity was also observed in the municipality with a school office which adhered to professional learning community procedures. Here the approach was more widespread than in the remote municipality and the superintendent had purposefully modelled and supported broad based and skilled participation in the work of leadership. This municipality seemed to be the most coherent in terms of governance practices (see Campbell & Fullan, 2019) between the municipal council, school board, superintendent, principals and other stakeholders. It seemed to constitute a culture of cooperation that ran throughout the municipality between the school services and social and health services. Yet it transpires that its success has had much to do with the individual superintendent, which begs the question of what will happen when he leaves the job (see Fullan, 2016 and Lambert, 2003).

This study has established that developing desirable leadership practices (see Leithwood et al., 2008, 2020; Louis et al., 2010) and leadership capacity is complex (Lambert, 2003) even within a single school, let alone within a school office, an entire municipality or at the level of national governance. However, throughout this study it has also been argued that municipalities need to and can take systematic steps towards developing their leadership capacity for sustained school improvement and enhanced student learning. This does not only apply to professionals (Moos et al., 2014) such as superintendents and principals but also to elected or politically appointed actors (Campbell & Fullan, 2019) such as school governing boards.

Each and everybody in the educational governance chain has the right and responsibility to develop their leadership skills (Lambert, 2003). This means that those in charge need to develop their leadership role and embed a culture of cooperation, negotiation and excellence which will endure when key persons leave. Indeed, it has been suggested that leadership capacity and school improvement are intertwined (Sigurðardóttir & Sigþórsson, 2016). This study underlines that the most successfully developed leadership practices and capacities at the municipal level have occurred in conjunction with a systematic emphasis on building professional learning communities at municipal and school levels.

8 Summary and conclusion

In this section, I begin by summing up the overall findings and conclusion of this study. I move on to discuss its contributions and limitations and highlight directions for further research in connection to this study and municipal leadership generally. I close this section by reflecting on this research journey and what it has meant for me personally.

8.1 Municipal educational leadership: summing up and conclusions

The goal of all schoolwork is to provide students with the best education possible. The different strategies for educational improvement are underpinned by theories and beliefs about how this is best done and supported. This study is underpinned by the assumption that the municipal level plays an important role in educational leadership practices. In this regard, it is argued that there is considerable space for improvement. This space is discussed in relation to a broader national and global and transnational context and to that of the schools, to understand how improvements can come about. Various scholars have demonstrated that a premise for enhancing students' education is to develop governance and leadership practices that are distributed in nature and support schools to establish a professional learning community within the whole educational system. The study reinforces these views by shedding light on municipal educational leadership within Iceland and connecting those with policies, governance and leadership at the national level, within a global and transnational context. It further establishes how those leadership practices influence schools' ability to tackle pressing challenges and fulfil their educational responsibilities. By doing so, this the study helps to delineate the complexity of the educational system in Iceland, thereby hopefully supporting further development.

Looking back on the decentralisation in the educational system in the mid-1990s, it is argued that the national authorities oversimplified the policy procedures needed to develop capacity at the municipal level, to take on their extended role of schooling and school support services, not least in light of the contextual differences between municipalities. The state set legislation but overlooked the need to put infrastructure in place to support its enactment. This lack of infrastructure and policy enactment has characterised national educational policy since the transfer of compulsory schooling to municipal responsibility, even though there are recent signs that this might be changing.

This study suggests that political instability and individualistic actions on the part of educational ministers has undermined national governance. It has arguably led to

unrelated fixes within the educational system that can be associated with global NPM trends. Thus, national governance has lacked coherence, exhibiting a leadership style that could be described as a *laissez-faire* approach, indicating weak leadership capacity. This leads to differences between municipalities in terms of school support services and diverse and often limited leadership capacity at the municipal level, resulting in a struggle to accommodate students' educational needs at the school level.

This study demonstrates that the educational system in Iceland, including at the municipal level, needs to apply more systemic strategies to improve policy enactment, governance and leadership practices. For that purpose, political and professional agents at both national and municipal levels need to step up to their leadership roles. The results of this study suggest that the focus should be on developing educational leadership practices that support leadership capacity and professional learning communities' cultures within their schools, as well as at their own levels. The study draws on an example of a municipality where such capacities have been strategically applied and developed through the work procedures of professional learning communities, with promising results. Applying such procedures seems to provide more coherence in governance and correspond better with desired leadership practices and high leadership capacity. Thus, this study indicates that educational leadership and governance capacity building needs to take place simultaneously.

The study further indicates that quality in school support services is to a great extent predicated on human resources; therefore, national and municipal focus needs to be on developing human resources at all levels. While rural municipalities undoubtedly face more challenges in attracting people and supporting their professional development than municipalities close to the capital city, this is an overall challenge throughout the educational system in Iceland. The study highlights a general weakness in the system in terms of systematically building people's capacities and providing coherence in leadership practices that ensure continuity even when key persons leave.

The study also sheds light on how silos have developed, both within levels and between them, that hinder communication and relationships. As regards municipalities, those silos tend to build walls between and within governing bodies, school boards, school offices and schools. At the national level, these are even more evident in political instability where ministers apply instant and short-term fixes to address educational challenges. The study reveals that developing desired leadership practices and capacity within each level of the educational system, is essential to address those weaknesses. Furthermore, the study indicates that the high number of municipalities in Iceland, many of which have a very low population, exacerbates those barriers. It is argued that both the municipalities and the state need to work together to overcome these barriers.

This study shows that municipalities seldom emphasise desirable leadership practices described by frameworks proposed by Leithwood et al. (2008, 2020) and Louis et al. (2010), such as *developing people, refining and aligning* the school support services or

the schools, or focusing on actions that *improve teaching and learning* within the schools. This is often more in the hands of principals or teachers themselves. The lack of municipal educational governance and leadership capacity means that strategic leadership practices are rarely at the heart of the municipalities' governance. This applies not only to political agents such as municipal leaders and school governing boards but to professional agents such as superintendents, department heads etc. Thus, clear policies for school services or other aspects of education are rare, as are the ensuing systematic actions and appropriate leadership practices that would lead to effective enactments.

Furthermore, those municipal leaders' practices reflect a more general acceptance of a clinical approach in the practice of school services. These are even contrary to the convictions of superintendents themselves who believe that a more school-centred approach is needed. However, this study's findings suggest that they tend to be overwhelmed by the scope of the task and lack the resources to act on it. Making improvements would need to include fighting traditions, uniting political and professional views, addressing the lack of resources, challenging controversial professional views within the school support services, and meeting demands from principals, teachers and parents. Furthermore, when municipal authorities, superintendents and school offices take deliberate actions to change course within the services, their actions tend to reflect limited systematic leadership skills. Consequently, they ignore the need to develop a shared vision about the aims and means to achieve them and the deep relationship between the municipality and its schools. This highlights the importance of municipal authorities, both political and professional agents, to develop their own leadership skills. Furthermore, focusing leadership practices on the activities related to those clinical emphases contradicts in many ways desirable leadership practices. This then increases the risk that even when actors at the municipal level have leadership skills, they will not have the right impact on the schools as professional institutions nor on students' education.

As a result of municipalities' limited capacity for setting direction, individual schools are left to develop people, refine and align the schools and improve teaching and learning on their own. The lack of follow up on internal and external evaluations both at national and municipal levels, leads to schools developing differently depending on their different context. This is especially true in terms of access to human resources and whether the principals have the leadership capacity needed to develop their schools as professional learning communities.

This study indicates that limited leadership capability in *setting directions* within municipalities, might have reinforced the emphasis on children's individual problems, one that focuses mostly on building capacity within school offices for providing diagnosis. At the same time, capacity to follow up advice from school-based consultancy is limited. Other desirable leadership practices such as refining and

aligning the schools to change practices; develop professional capacity of teachers and other school staff; and developing teaching and learning, including that using research-based evidence to inform practice, have been neglected. As this doctoral study has emphasised, some municipalities have managed to develop practices that better support the schools. However, while some schools manage well, others are struggling due to difficulties in attracting well educated and capable teachers and principals, poor finances and other resources.

The study suggests that educational decentralisation faces a central dilemma: it has given municipalities the freedom to orchestrate education but this has not ensured good and equal education for all. It seems that the national authorities have assigned an enormous task to the municipal authorities, especially given the different contextual factors. By taking on this responsibility, municipal authorities commit themselves to doing it well, which includes taking responsibility for developing the capacities that are required. This study suggests that neither the state nor the local authorities have really understood what decentralisation entails in terms of their own responsibility, nor have they recognised the enormity of the task. Neither of them seems to have taken responsibility for the enactment of policy in terms of governance or leadership. For the benefit of students' education in Iceland, this need to change.

8.2 Contributions, limitations and further research

This overall study sheds light on leadership practices at the municipal level, how they are influenced by what happens at international, national and school levels and how such practices eventually influence schools. The study opens a channel for analysing the concept of educational leadership within different governance levels, which has not been studied in such depth before in Iceland and to examine this in relation to policy and the complexity of the governing system. The study is limited to one case, municipal educational leadership in Iceland, and therefore cannot be used for generalisations about municipal educational leadership in other systems in other countries. However, the results can be used to improve educational leadership and school practices in other contexts as well as provide the basis for further research on the topic.

The sparse research on municipal educational leadership in the Icelandic context has made it difficult for Icelandic researchers, policy makers and practitioners alike to take part in the international discussions happening in many other parts of the world, including in other Nordic countries. This research provides a platform for such a dialogue on, and comparison of municipal education between countries. Given the small population of most Icelandic municipalities, this research can be useful for other countries that face challenges when developing educational leadership in rural contexts, such as other countries in the Arctic.

The findings provide a platform and tools for both national and municipal levels to investigate and understand in depth their own leadership practices and to take strategic

steps to develop leadership capacity. The study also highlights how the responsibilities of characters and actors at each major governance level of the education system relate to and ultimately affect, what is done - or not done - in the smallest units of the school system: the classrooms. Furthermore, this doctoral study highlights the knowledge that politicians and government officials could learn from and consider when making major decisions about the education system. It provides them with a resource for coherent policy making and legislation, and their enactment.

Little background information existed on municipal educational leadership practices in Iceland as well as on how this leadership connects to national and school level. Thus, this study aimed for a broad understanding of the phenomenon. However, a case study can never capture all there is to know about municipal educational leadership. The survey helps to provide a broader picture, as it was sent to the whole population of MES-leaders and principals and had a rather good response rate. However, it was only possible to look more closely into seven municipalities. Although this has provided valuable in-depth information about those municipalities, it does not guarantee that other perspectives do not exist, especially as not all stakeholder groups were included in the case study interviews.

Further research into educational leadership and governance at both national and municipal levels should address a wider group of stakeholders, such as politicians and professionals, as well as teachers and students. Although the study took into consideration the influence of municipal leadership on schoolwork, a more in-depth study of those influences is needed to fully understand this relationship. Furthermore, although this study has touched upon leadership capacity at the national and municipal level, it would be beneficial to research this capacity more thoroughly. That would give a deeper understanding of how municipal leadership capacity can be enhanced in different contexts and its influence on students' education. For that purpose, a longitudinal study would be valuable.

8.3 Closing comments

As I wrote in the introduction to this thesis, unbeknownst to me, the journey of this doctoral study started a long time ago, when I first became a school teacher. At that time, I thought, based on my teacher education and youthful confidence, that I knew a whole lot of things about teaching and learning; I gradually understood how little I knew. One step at a time, I have deepened and widened my understanding. As I write this, the doctoral study has been with me for nearly seven years, giving me a rare opportunity to deeply engage in knowledge searching in an area that I knew relatively little about before. It has moved my knowledge and research focus from a school level perspective, focusing on leadership and professional development of principals and other school community members, to the local level. From there, it has forced me to

consider how the national level and the transnational and global levels are connected through policy and governance, but also through leadership.

Engaging in this doctoral study has also been challenging. When I started, I thought I knew where I was heading. Since then, I have both lost tracks and changed tracks, but somehow always managed to come back to the core: municipal educational leadership. Now as I reach the end of this specific journey, I would have wanted to do some things differently. I might even want to interpret some of my publication findings differently, based on new and different perspectives that I have learned and understood along the way. During this time, I experienced the challenge of doing a doctoral study based on papers. The first two papers were already written in 2018, although Paper I was not published until 2020. This is already a long time ago and I did not know all that I know today, insights that have changed and deepened my perspectives. One challenge was that Paper I, and partly II, focused on the national educational system, policy development and current challenges. As this study so clearly shows, Iceland has faced frequent changes and instability in politics and policy developments. This simply means that already when Paper I was printed, some of the shifts had already taken place and even greater changes have happened since. By trying to follow these, I constantly felt like I was running behind.

Nevertheless, I am pleased to have taken this journey, knowing that I must stand by my doings, but also knowing that this thesis is just another milestone in a search for further knowledge, both for me and for the educational field. I have supported my arguments for what characterises municipal educational leadership in Iceland in a way that I hope will be useful for further governance, policy and leadership development at the national and municipal level, and even in transnational contexts. However, I realise that this is my interpretation of the truth. It is based on my viewpoint and understanding at the present, on present research knowledge and present context. The exciting thing is that those aspects are subjects to change ...

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Original Publications

Paper I

Paper I

Paper II

Paper II

Paper III

Paper III

Paper IV

Paper IV

Appendix A – Survey questions

Appendix B – Interview protocol for interviewees at municipal level

Appendix C – Interview protocol for principals

Appendix D – Informed consent for interviewees at municipal level

Appendix E – Informed consent for principals

