Understanding Collaboration Between a Local Education Administration and Principals from the Perspective of Contradictions

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Despite the recognition of the local education administration (LEA) as a pivotal actor in the enhancement of quality, previous research incorporating both the LEA and school principals remains scarce. The current study aims to enhance the understanding of different types of discursive contradictions in collaboration and explore the possible consequences of contradictions between the LEA and principals. Using a qualitative study design, this study draws on interviews with superintendents, LEA managers, qualitative strategists, and principals. The theoretical framework is based on discursive manifestations of contradictions. The results reveal that different types of contradictions are discernible in the collaboration between the LEA and principals. The empirical findings show disparate contradictions, including contradictory interpretations of the LEA's role and mission, the ambiguous division of responsibilities, and the asymmetrical distribution of knowledge and communication. A central conclusion is the importance of LEAs and principals working together to negotiate their interpretations of contradictions, which could enable opportunities for contradictions to become a positive driving force for improvements. The study enriches the knowledge of contradictions in collaboration, thereby offering valuable insights for propelling further research on school improvement.

Keywords: Cultural-Historical Activity Theory, discursive manifestations of contradictions, local education administration, principals.

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Introduction

Although previous research recognizes the local education administration (LEA) as a pivotal actor in enhancing quality in education, previous research incorporating both the LEA and principals remains scarce. At the same time, a substantial portion of the accountability for outcomes and quality is often assigned to the LEA (Farrell & Coburn, 2017; Hooge et al., 2019). This study addresses an important but understudied aspect of educational change: collaboration between an LEA and the principals through the perspective of discursive manifestations of contradictions (Engeström & Sannino, 2011). The overarching aim of the current study is to enhance the understanding of different types of contradictions in collaboration and to explore the possible consequences of contradictions in collaboration between the LEA and principals. Contradictions are difficult to observe in practice, and this study explores discursive manifestations of contradictions in the participants' articulations. As Engeström and Sannino (2011, p. 371) argue, 'Contradictions are to an important extent manifested and constructed in patterns of talk and discursive action with the help of which actors try to make sense of, deal with and transform or resolve their contradictions'. Accordingly, the concept of contradictions in this study explores participants' articulations that reveal these discursive contradictions. Contradictions can function as a positive driving force for improvements; however, this potential can be realized if the participants engage in a shared interpretation of these contradictions. Without this collaborative effort, contradictions may escalate into conflicts that hinder their own as well as shared assignments (Engeström, & Sannino, 2011).

Numerous educational systems have incorporated an intermediate level positioned between the national and local school levels with various terminologies (Greany, 2022). However, in the current study, the term 'local education administration' (LEA) denotes the intermediate municipal administrative level positioned between individual schools and the state. The present study focuses on one Swedish LEA, which in this case, comprises a superintendent, LEA managers, and quality strategists. The quality strategists should provide specialized support to principals, while the superintendent and LEA managers are responsible for leading and coordinating operations and strategic initiatives across both the schools and municipal levels.

The emergence of a broad international consensus strengthens the notion that LEAs can play a pivotal role in improvement processes, leadership, teaching, and learning (Anderson & Young, 2018; Fullan, 2016; Leithwood, 2010; Leithwood et al., 2019; Stein et al., 2010; Trujillo, 2013).

Nevertheless, some researchers have argued that previous studies tend to overlook the potential contributions of LEAs in change processes (Iatarola & Fruchte, 2004; Rogers, 2022). Well-functioning collaboration between different administrative levels and leaders is widely recognized as central to facilitating positive change processes and improving student outcomes (Addi-Raccah & Gavish, 2010; Adolfsson & Alvunger, 2020; Fullan, 2016; Harris & Jones, 2019). Anderson and Young (2018) have conducted a comprehensive review of research on LEA effectiveness over the past three decades, emphasizing several critical factors, including a focus on instructional leadership, professional development, the capacity to support change, and fostering participants' efficacy. However, they contend that prior research provides limited guidance for how collaboration between the school and the LEA can be organized. This limitation may be attributed to the fact that much of the research on effective LEAs has been conducted within the context of large urban districts within the United States.

High international demand for improved results and education quality in recent decades has contributed to a culture that tends to emphasize the control of quality and focus on responsibility for results for both principals and the LEA level (Honig, 2008; Hooge et al., 2019; Rogers, 2022). Several researchers, from both decentralized and centralized educational systems, contend that many improvement initiatives do not achieve the anticipated outcomes (Bentley, 2010; Daly et al., 2013; Blossing & Ekholm, 2008; Fullan, 2016). This has precipitated a situation in which many educational systems find themselves ensnared in the 'hurricane of accountability' as a reactionary measure to augment results (Moos et al., 2011, p. 200).

Prior Nordic research incorporating the LEA level has undertaken nuanced examinations of various dimensions of educational governance, collaboration, and leadership. These inquiries have addressed the roles and relational dynamics of superintendents in connection to the school level (Henriksen, 2018; Paulsen et al., 2014): 1) the utilization and practices surrounding data-driven decision-making (Prøitz et al., 2021); 2) the intricate balance between autonomy, control, and trust in the context of educational leadership (Paulsen et al., 2016; Wermke et al., 2024); and 3) the perspectives of principals and LEAs concerning school reform and the advancement of school improvement initiatives (Pyhältö et al., 2011; Vennebo & Aas, 2022). However, there is a paucity of empirical research examining how LEAs and school levels navigate challenges related to

collaboration and demands for change where several professionals are included (Addi-Raccah & Gavish, 2010; Adolfsson & Alvunger, 2020; Daly et al., 2013; Håkansson & Adolfsson, 2022).

Background

To provide a contextual foundation for this study, it is imperative to examine the governance framework of the Swedish education system. This system operates as a politically regulated entity characterized by a distribution of authority and decision-making across national, municipal, and local school levels. The governance model incorporates various stakeholders, including the parliament, government, educational authorities, municipal political boards, superintendents, middle managers, principals, teachers, and ancillary school personnel.

At the national level, the government, in conjunction with relevant authorities, is tasked with formulating overarching educational objectives, legislative frameworks, and curricula alongside mechanisms for ensuring compliance with these standards. Conversely, municipally elected school boards possess significant autonomy in determining how educational institutions within their jurisdiction are organized to operationalize these national directives. Sweden's 290 municipalities, each governed by elected school boards, are responsible for interpreting and implementing national policies in alignment with local contexts.

Historically, the governance of Swedish education has undergone a shift from a predominantly centralized, rule-based model to a goal- and performance-oriented management framework. This transformation was markedly accelerated by the decentralization reforms of the 1990s, which devolved substantial authority to municipalities. Other decentralization processes conducted by governments of respective countries have frequently involved the delegation of authority to individual schools (Jarl & Rönnberg, 2019).

At the municipal level, the LEA level is charged with the dual responsibility of ensuring adherence to national objectives and maintaining equitable educational quality across schools. Principals, in this context, are vested with extensive responsibility for their respective schools' outcomes, including organizational management, economy, and quality improvements. However, the Education Act (SFS 2010:800) specifies what must be accomplished without prescribing how these tasks should be executed. This regulatory framework underscores the autonomy of principals in managing their schools while emphasizing the LEAs' overarching obligation to ensure parity and

excellence across the system. According to Jarl and Pierre (2018), this multi-level governance can contribute to the emergence of value conflicts, not only between the state and LEAs but also between political leadership and professional educators.

Literature Review

Bennett and Anderson (2005) offer a perspective on collaboration while exploring the partnership and relations between the LEAs and the school level. The study is based on interviews with leaders in secondary schools and at the LEA level. In the study, a successful collaborative partnership meant that the actors had 1) common goals, 2) shared responsibility, and 3) a clear division of labour in which both levels could contribute with their expertise. In the study, the partnership between the LEA and the school level sometimes tended to be a 'one-way street' where the LEA made demands on the school level to deliver results, but the mutual exchange between the various actors was low. This study describes the difficulties in developing a common view of the collaborative benefits of working together. In the UK context, Swaffield (2005) examines what contributes to positive and productive relationships between teachers and LEA advisers in school improvement processes. The results indicate that developing positive and productive relationships required trusting relationships, 'commitment to a common purpose, mutual respect, honesty and openness' (Swaffield, 2005, p. 51) and effective dialogues where all partners actively shared perspectives.

The research conducted by Addi-Raccah and Gavish (2010) provides critical insights into the relationship between the LEAs and principals within the Israeli educational context. The study systematically examines principals' perceptions of power dynamics between schools and LEAs, with a particular focus on the implications of school-based management (SBM) reforms. The study contrasts the experiences of those operating in localities that have implemented SBM reforms with those in jurisdictions that have not. Key areas of investigation include the decision-making authority of LEAs, their influence on school improvement initiatives and student outcomes, the integration of pedagogical considerations, and the mobilization and allocation of resources. The findings reveal that in contexts characterized by a high degree of decentralization under SBM, schools exhibit significant dependence on LEAs for resource provision. In contrast, in localities without SBM implementation, LEAs tend to assume a facilitative role in supporting resource

mobilization. These results underscore the nuanced interplay between governance structures and educational resource management.

Several Nordic studies investigate aspects of systematic quality work (SQW) and include descriptions of collaboration between actors and levels (Andersson & Liljenberg, 2020; Henriksen, 2018; Håkansson, 2016; Håkansson & Adolfsson, 2022; Liljenberg & Andersson, 2021; Prøitz et al., 2021). A notable contribution from Nordic scholarship to this field of research is the study conducted by Prøitz et al. (2021), which presents a longitudinal investigation conducted across two municipalities in Norway. The study critically examines the governing approaches of the LEA administrators in their utilization of data, particularly concerning their collaborative interactions with school-level personnel. The researchers posit that, within the context of a decentralized educational system, the LEA administrators retain a degree of professional autonomy, allowing for the interpretation and application of various governance strategies in their engagements with school staff. The findings of the study delineate two distinct governing styles. The first is characterized by strategies focused on questioning, follow-up, and the measurement of outcomes. In contrast, the second style emphasizes the use of results as a common platform for dialogue, fostering a sense of shared responsibility for educational outcomes. The researchers contend that these differing governing styles, alongside the attendant relationships and interactions, have a tangible impact on the operational dynamics at the school level.

To further highlight collaboration and interaction in a Swedish context, Adolfsson and Alvunger (2017) examine how different actors navigate the complex interplay between external demands and internal needs in a medium-sized municipality. Their study precedes two follow-up research projects in which administrators, principals, and teachers are included. Adolfsson and Alvunger (2017) emphasize the importance of collaboration and effective communication between different levels. The results provide important insights into how the principals endeavoured to strike a balance between external demands and addressing internal needs emanating from their respective units. Another challenge was the dual governance role of the LEA, which involves ensuring equivalent quality across the municipality while preserving the autonomy of principals concerning their unit's operations. In the realm of SQW, principals expressed a desire for enhanced transparency and support from the LEA, coupled with a preference for more collaborative structures that facilitate collaboration with the LEA.

Another study that has examined the LEAs and school level in SQW is by Liljenberg and Anderson (2021), which includes a municipality that had made progress in its SQW. These findings provide vital knowledge including how these actors managed their collective responsibility. The study reveals that the LEA had successfully created and utilized artefacts that positively influenced the principals' comprehension and management of responsibility. The study identifies several factors contributing to successful collaboration between different levels, including the principals' recognition of the need for artefacts in improvement work and the LEA's adoption of a 'humble' approach. This approach involved the LEA participants actively listening to the principals' opinions and demonstrating a willingness to revise artefacts as necessary.

In previous research involving SQW and collaboration, it is common for challenges to emerge between steering, leading, and supporting. Håkansson and Adolfsson's (2022) study contributes with vital clues regarding these themes, as they investigated how one municipality at the LEA level exercised governance, support, and control at the school level in quality management. The study identifies the strategies that were employed, and the findings show that the LEA endeavoured to utilize negotiation and dialogue with units that exhibited significant needs. Moreover, it identifies several challenges: 1) discerning the individual needs of different schools, 2) tailoring leadership to cater to different units, and 3) identifying and implementing strategies that would stimulate uniform results across the municipality.

Recurring findings in previous studies that include LEAs show the importance of mutual trust and communication. One such example is Andersson and Liljenberg's (2020) study, which examines a municipality to understand the perspectives of principals and LEAs on intra-organizational trust. The empirical findings reveal that the LEA's adoption of a collaborative approach towards principals engendered a conducive environment for mutual investigation and learning among the participants. This approach significantly mitigated the previously prevalent negative spirals of mistrust. The principals expressed a desire for autonomy in adapting SQW to their respective units, encapsulated in the sentiment 'they tell us what, but not how' (Andersson & Liljenberg, 2020, p. 473).

Despite including different school systems, these previous studies show the emergence of several common themes regarding the collaboration between the LEA and school level: 1) different views

on mission, division of labour, roles, and responsibilities between the LEA and school level; 2) the balance in controlling and supporting the principals, which is particularly prominent in SQW; and 3) challenges in developing trust, strategies, and communication between principals and the LEA. Several researchers (Adolfsson & Alvunger, 2020; Håkansson & Adolfsson, 2022; Liljenberg & Andersson, 2021; Pyhältö et al., 2011) underscore the urgent need for more empirical research that scrutinizes collaboration between actors and levels.

Aim and Research Question

The overarching aim of the current study is to enhance the understanding of different types of contradictions in collaboration and to explore the possible consequences of contradictions in collaboration between the LEA and principals. To address the identified research and practice gaps in previous research, the present study addresses the following research questions:

- RQ1) What different types of contradictions are manifested in the collaboration between LEAs and principals?
- RQ2) What are the possible consequences of contradictions in collaboration between LEAs and principals?

Theoretical Framework

Discursive Manifestations of Contradictions

In this study, the theoretical framework of 'discursive manifestations of contradictions' (Engeström & Sannino, 2011) is used as a framework to identify different types of discursive contradictions manifested in articulations. This theoretical framework is based on the cultural–historical activity theory (CHAT) (Engeström, 2001). CHAT enables an investigation of what participants do, how the collaboration and work develop, and what types of contradictions have emerged. The present study embraces the definition provided by Engeström (2001), which means that contradictions are historically developed and can be influenced by the multivoicedness of the participants, who often bring different perspectives and historical experiences. The identification and analysis of discursive manifestations of contradictions can increase participants' opportunities to understand both the origins and management of these contradictions. A deepened joint understanding of these contradictions can mean that their activities and practices are changing. For identified

contradictions to function as drivers for improvement or change, the collaboration between participants needs to be characterized by continuous collaboration, negotiations, and dialogues where learning is developed together (Engeström & Sannino, 2011).

The present study uses the theoretical framework of discursive manifestations of contradictions (Engeström & Sannino, 2011) to identify four different types of discursive manifestations of contradictions in articulations: 1) double binds, 2) critical conflicts, 3) conflicts, and 4) dilemmas. The different types of discursive manifestations of contradictions can be metaphorically described as different layers of an onion, where different types of contradictions can develop into a new type of contradiction depending on how the participants interpret and handle the contradictions (Engeström & Sannino, 2011). The occurrences of many dilemmas can indicate that something is problematic and uncomfortable but has not yet developed into the acute situation of, for example, a conflict or a critical conflict (Engeström & Sannino, 2011). The Methods section describes how the framework of the discursive manifestations of contradictions has been used and what defines the different types of discursive manifestations of contradictions.

Research Methodology

Sampling and Data Collection

The present study is qualitative (Yin, 2014), focusing on a medium-sized rural municipality in Sweden, according to SKR (2023) classification. In the municipality, 52 schools are distributed among 50 principals. The case was chosen based on the following: 1) the superintendent and LEA managers wanted to deepen their understanding of the LEA's role and collaboration, 2) there were preunderstandings of challenges in the collaboration between the LEAs and principals, and 3) the case is a medium-sized rural municipality that characterises a large proportion of Swedish municipalities. The selection of participants is based on 'knowledgeable people' (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 219), including participants who have deepened knowledge and experiences of collaboration between the LEAs and principals. The chosen principals work in preschool, and elementary and upper secondary schools, and several professions were selected at the LEA level who work actively together with the principals.

The empirical data is based on semi-structured individual interviews with seven LEA managers, including the superintendent, and five quality strategists. Additionally, semi-structured group interviews were conducted with three preschool principals, six elementary school principals, and three upper secondary school principals. The semi-structured interview guide was formulated based on CHAT, such as contradictions, division of labour, rules, and tools (Engeström, 2001). All interviews have been audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and subjected to analysis. Each interview spanned a duration of 60 to 90 minutes. An overview of the interview type, roles and number of participants is provided in Table 1.

Table 1

Overview of interview type, roles and number of participants.

Interview type	Role and number of participants
Individual interview	Superintendent (n=1)
	LEA manager, Preschool (n=1)
	LEA manager, Elementary School (n=1)
	LEA manager, Upper Secondary School (n=1)
	LEA sector manager (n=2)
	LEA assistant manager (n=1)
	Qualitative strategist (n=5)
Group interview	Principals, Preschool (n=3)
	Principals, Elementary School, year 1–6, (n=3)
	Principals, Elementary School, year 7–9, (n=3)
	Principals Upper secondary school (n=3)

Identification and Analysis of Discursive Manifestations of Contractions

Engeström and Sannino (2011, p. 374) delineate the first category of discursive manifestations of contradictions, termed *double binds*, as 'pressing and equally unacceptable alternatives'. The identification of double binds is feasible when participants employ rhetorical questions, articulate 'we must', and project a sentiment of helplessness. The resolution of double binds could involve participants negating the contradiction or endeavouring to reformulate the contradiction to transfigure the contradictions. This study has incorporated all the rhetorical questions that encompass contradictions, irrespective of whether they manifest helplessness. According to Engeström and Sannino (2011, p. 277), the second category of contradictions, termed *critical conflicts*, can emanate from 'facing contradictory motives in social interactions, feeling violated or guilty'

with the employment of metaphors. The resolution of a critical conflict could involve participants discovering a new sense or negotiating a new meaning.

The third type of contradiction, *conflicts*, encompasses arguing and criticizing. The linguistic indicators that may signify a conflict are 'no', 'I disagree', or 'this is not true'. The resolution of conflicts could involve a compromise or participants acquiescing to authorities. The fourth category, termed *dilemmas*, is characterized as the 'expression or exchange of incompatible evaluations' (Engeström & Sannino, 2011, p. 373). Linguistic indicators such as 'but' or 'on the one hand … on the other hand' may signify the presence of a dilemma. The participants may also express dilemmas through hedges or hesitations. Elements of denial or reformulation can be methodologies for managing this type of contradiction. In summary, double bounds or dilemmas can develop into more acute and direct contradictions, such as conflicts (resistance and disagreement) or critical conflicts (feeling violated), if these contradictions are not identified or managed (Engeström & Sannino, 2011).

The analysis of discursive manifestations of contradictions was conducted following the reflexive thematic analysis approach delineated by Braun and Clarke (2019). The initial phase, termed *data familiarization and writing familiarization notes*, involved an exhaustive listening of the audio recordings from the interviews, followed by comprehensive transcription. The texts were then examined for patterns and deviant patterns, with a particular emphasis on discursive manifestations of contradictions between the LEAs and principals.

The subsequent phase, *systematic data coding*, entailed marking codes within the text that provided answers to the research questions. Linguistic cues were utilized to identify contradictions based on the four distinct types. This was followed by multiple readings of all transcribed interviews, during which additional contradictions were marked that were not identified with various linguistic cues (Engeström & Sannino, 2011).

During the *generating initial themes from coded and collected data* phase, each professional occupation was allocated to a matrix into which pertinent codes and themes were included. The *developing and reviewing themes* phase involved a review of the themes within the formulated contradictions. The *refining, defining, and naming themes* phase required a thorough examination of the themes to ascertain

if the themes were congruent with the content of the codes. This led to the creation of a matrix for each profession with the identified contradictions and a matrix in which all professions and their contradictions were included (Yin, 2014). In the final *writing the report* phase, a between-professions matrix was compiled, incorporating all professions to facilitate the analysis and interpretation of the different themes based on purpose, research questions, and theoretical framework. A matrix was then created for all professions, indicating the number of different types of contradictions, along with the themes to which the different types belonged. The contradictions need to be understood based on the local history, according to CHAT, which means that the results section begins with a brief description of the history of the local case.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted by an insider researcher employed within the selected LEA. Brannick and Coghlan (2007) and Fleming (2018) assert that insider researchers can offer profound insights into organizational practices, emphasizing several advantages inherent to this role. Specifically, they argue that: 1) the research is often perceived as directly relevant to professional practice, 2) the participants may experience greater comfort when engaging with an insider researcher, and 3) the researcher's pre-existing understanding of the subject matter can facilitate the design and implementation of the study. However, these researchers also highlight several challenges associated with the insider researcher role, including: 1) concerns about the confidentiality of participant responses, 2) the necessity for the researcher to remain critically aware of personal biases, 3) the potential for other municipalities to discern the study's context, and 4) the possibility that participants may anticipate favourable outcomes. Throughout the research process, I have engaged in continuous, critical reflection regarding both the opportunities and challenges associated with my position as an insider researcher.

The present study follows ALLEA's principles for research (2023). Informed consent included a description of the study's purpose and method, that participation was voluntary, and what the results were to be used for. To protect the participants, a code key was used. Individual interviews were conducted with LEA managers and the superintendent, who are all referred to as LEA managers, regardless of their specific area of responsibility because the superintendent wanted the answers not to be distinguished from the other managers. The principals were interviewed in groups because it could contribute to an increased sense of trust among the principals.

Results

This section contains three main parts: the local history of the selected case, a description of different types of discursive manifestations of contradictions, and the possible consequences of these contradictions in the collaboration. In this study, the concept of the LEA includes the superintendent, LEA managers, and qualitative strategists. If these different professions at the LEA express the same understandings, the LEA is used as an overall concept.

Local History of the Selected Case

Before 2015, collaboration with the chosen LEA was characterized by a high degree of principal autonomy and a low degree of control from the LEA. This approach was encapsulated by the metaphor of 'Let all flowers bloom. We should be here, and the principals should manage their affairs out there' (LEA Manager 4). In 2016, a superintendent initiated a comprehensive audit of all improvement processes that revealed minimal impact on student outcomes, metaphorically described as 'just minor ripples, so to speak' (LEA Manager 4).

In 2017, the LEA published a joint visionary document that signified a concerted effort to enhance instruction quality. During this period, the LEA continued to implement mainly general initiatives across all the units, and there was a high degree of external experts who tried to teach the principals predetermined knowledge. The role of the principals during this period was marked by a high degree of autonomy with minimal LEA control and a low degree of targeted support. Both the LEA managers and principals describe how the LEA principals' high degree of control increased after the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, the principals wanted to retain their high degree of autonomy: 'There is even still, this culture of "Let all flowers bloom. Don't come here and control us!"' (LEA Manager 4). Trust between principals and LEAs has varied and is fragile: 'There was trust between principals and the LEA during 2017–2019, but in 2020, the trust collapsed' (LEA Manager 1). According to one of the LEA managers, the collaboration between the principals and the LEA managers can be described as: 'I was a knight trying to get into the great knight's castle, but they (principals) never lowered the drawbridge for me. I had to stand outside the moat and call in' (LEA Manager 2). However, according to the LEA manager, collaboration between the LEA team and the principals has developed from autumn 2023 onward:

We are like a family with siblings and parents, and we have different roles. Sometimes, you disagree a little and do not think alike. However, we like each other, and we have a professional mission and we try to become even more professional and understand the mission together. (LEA Manager 2)

Different Types of Discursive Manifestations of Contradictions

This section elucidates the different types of discursive manifestations of contradictions identified in the data. Overall, few dilemmas (hesitations or incompatible evaluations) or double binds (rhetorical questions) appear in the interview data, although a high degree of critical conflict (contradictory motives or feeling violated) and conflict (resistance or disagreement) does appear. Double binds and dilemmas are described briefly in the current study to provide an in-depth understanding of the contradictions that have emerged as conflicts and critical conflicts.

A *double bind* can be identified by its expression of facing pressing and equally unacceptable alternatives, and the resolution can include transformation (Engeström & Sannino, 2011, p. 375). Few double binds are identified in the interview data, mainly with the LEA managers and the quality strategists expressing a few double binds. For the LEA, double binds contain the difficulty of continuously distributing resources fairly between schools and how the LEA managers can gain increased ownership of the SQW. Double binds for quality strategists mainly contain the difficulty of being a broker between LEA managers and principals, where the principals and the LEA managers sometimes have different expectations of them.

The *dilemma* is the type of contradiction that is the most unusual in the interview data. The dilemma refers to the 'expression or exchange of incompatible evaluations', where the solution to the dilemma is denial or reformulation (Engeström & Sannino, 2011, p. 375). Some LEA managers and some quality strategists express a few dilemmas, which are mainly about the complex division of labour between the LEA, quality strategists, and the principals regarding the SQW. In addition, the principals express some dilemmas concerning the difficulty of organizing meetings between LEAs and principals that provide mutual learning. The principals from the preschools constitute the group with the fewest discursive manifestations of contradictions in the interview data, followed by the principals from the upper secondary schools. But overall, the data procured from the interviews predominantly exhibit conflicts and critical conflicts.

Critical Conflicts

The interview data also contain a high degree of *critical conflicts*, which include personal and emotional accounts that can contain metaphors with contradictory motives. Critical conflict guides the participants in how they can handle these situations, which means that the participants need to negotiate a new shared understanding or develop a new personal sense. The critical conflicts in the empirical data primarily concern 1) standardized improvement processes, 2) the LEA's support for principals, and 3) the LEA's high expectations for rapid improvements.

Standardized Improvement Processes

The principals strongly criticize the LEA's use of standardized improvement processes for all principals and units regardless of their different local needs. One principal explained, 'You're supposed to vaccinate everyone with it, although it's not certain that it's needed' (Principal Elementary School 3). The preschool principals further contend that these generalized improvement processes often fail to align with the specific requirements of different units, leading to a disconnect between the proposed improvements and actual operational needs. As one preschool principal states, 'It kind of lands beside the unit, and the educators don't feel that it becomes a support for them' (Principal Preschool 2). For school improvement processes to be deemed relevant by principals, they must closely align with the realities of the educational landscape and anticipate future needs. As an elementary school principal suggests, such improvement processes 'must not be too far from reality and tomorrow' (Principal Elementary School 3).

Quality strategists acknowledge that principals often struggle to see the relevance of these standardized processes to their specific units. As one quality strategist describes it, 'It somehow becomes, well, semi-skimmed milk-improvement areas' (Quality Strategist 2) because the initiative must suit the needs of all schools. One quality strategist posits that principals' lack of involvement in shaping these improvement processes may hinder their ability to see how these initiatives can support their schools: 'If you have not been involved in developing this material, you may not see what the thought behind it is. We have often overturned them instead' (Quality Strategist 1).

LEA's Support for the Principals

Principals across various school forms assert that support from the LEA should be more consistent and integrated with their routine operations. An LEA manager posits that the provision of support to principals is primarily predicated on the principle, 'You call, and we'll play' (LEA manager 4), implying that principals must proactively request support. The principals express criticism of the increase in personnel at the LEA level, which has led to an expectation for principals to provide an increased amount of data to various professionals within the LEA. The principals emphasize the need for a paradigm shift, where the principals control, to a greater extent, what support they want from the LEA, which is encapsulated in the phrase, 'We need to turn the tables' (Principal Elementary School 1).

One of the quality strategists perceived that LEA support for principals is highly complex: 'We do a bit too many things that create stress instead of the feeling that this is getting better. We do not go hand in hand' (Quality Strategist 3). One of the quality strategists believes that the LEA should give more support to the principals to deconstruct processes into more manageable segments, as suggested by the metaphor, 'Eat the elephant in smaller bites but chew it thoroughly' (Quality Strategist 2). One of the quality strategists suggests that the reluctance of principals to accept LEA support could be attributed to the high-stress environment and fast pace of the units, as reflected in the following quote: 'You don't have the patience to take a helping hand' (Quality Strategist 3). One of the quality strategists describes the collaboration and support between the specific LEA and principals as follows: 'It's a strong culture in this municipality that if the LEA says, "Jump", you do it' (Quality Strategist 2). One quality strategist notes that LEAs' high degree of control and low support have had repercussions on the collaboration between the LEAs and the principals: 'I think we've clipped the wings of the principals a bit by serving so much that they don't dare to make their own decisions' (Quality Strategist 3).

LEA's High Expectations for Rapid Improvements

In the preceding four years, the principals noted that the LEA has high expectations for rapid and numerous improvement processes. This has led to principals' perceptions that 'the wheels are spinning faster and faster' (Principal Elementary School 2), and principals struggle to discern 'the common thread' (Principal Elementary School 1). The LEA's efforts towards school improvement are perceived as ephemeral:

> It's something that becomes interesting and flares up, and you put a lot of energy into it for a short while, and then, it disappears because you don't hold on and out. To make room for the next sparkler. (Principal Preschool 1)

The principals report a high workload: 'Are we being cheeky if we claim that it's us who are pulling the heavy load?' (Principal Elementary School 3). The rapid pace and insufficient collaboration between the LEA and the principals contributed to the sentiment that 'principals are a bit like marionettes. Do this, give me that information!' (Principal Elementary School 2). The principals express difficulty in understanding the interconnections between various processes: 'It's like constantly new processes are falling on us that we should enter, or we have new goals to work with. It goes against what we all know' (Principal Preschool 1). The principals believe that there are too few opportunities for collaboration between LEAs and principals, which leads to the question, 'Who decides which processes are important? We are chasing all balls at once' (Principal Elementary School 1). The preschool principals articulate a desire for increased dialogue with LEA, specifically in the justification of their priorities and focus: 'Why do we do what we do? Then, the experience becomes – Oh, now that ball came and it becomes an ad hoc there' (Principal Preschool 2).

Some of the quality strategists claim that the LEA has unrealistic expectations for rapid improvements: 'We want to put out so much that it becomes a sausage machine. There is no real chance for the principals to process it' (Quality Strategist 2). Several of the principals are critical of the high pace that the LEA has created: 'Hold onto your hat! Stay calm in the boat! Touching on lots of things on the surface, it will not be a learning that lasts' (Principal Elementary School 2). The LEA's high-stress environment influences principals: 'The faster you run up here, the faster you run down there' (Principal Elementary School 1). The principals express a desire for a more patient LEA: 'What we need from our LEA is that they are secure and stable trees with roots deep in the ground that send calm, secure signals to politics' (Principal Elementary School 2).

In summary, the critical conflicts between LEAs and principals mainly include the criticism that LEAs primarily use standardized improvement processes, which do not always suit local needs. The second theme within critical conflicts contains criticism of the LEA's lack of support for the principals. In addition, within critical conflicts, a third theme also emerges, which includes the

LEA's high expectations and stress that the principals should be able to implement improvements in a short time.

Conflicts

Within the collected interview data across all groups, a significant degree of conflict is evident. These conflicts are manifested through linguistic indicators such as the use of terms such as 'no', and 'but' and through instances of criticism and argumentation. These elements suggest that various groups are frequently required to either reach a compromise or acquiesce to authority. The conflict within the interview data pertains predominantly to three key areas: 1) LEA's role, 2) communication and learning, and 3) SQW.

LEA's Role

In the current study, the principals primarily perceive their LEA as a supportive entity; however, a mutual lack of understanding about each other's roles remains. As one elementary school principal states, 'I think that we don't know much about each other's jobs, no' (Principal Elementary School 1). And a LEA manager notes, 'The principals have a very good understanding of their role, but they don't have a good understanding of the LEA's role' (LEA Manager 1). One preschool principal expresses,

> However, we are the implementers, I think to some extent. In addition, if one were to be a bit critical, I think it's not an easy task, and it may not be that there are equivalent conditions for all principals. (Principal Preschool 3)

Upper secondary school principals feel that the LEA exercises a high degree of governance. One principal notes, 'However, I have experienced that it has been quite a lot governed from above, which may not truly align with the Education Act and the principal's role, so to speak' (Principal Upper Secondary School 2).

Quality strategists observe principals' ambivalence towards LEA roles, arguing that excessive governance risks create a negative culture. They noted that principals are unsure of what support they could receive from the LEA. This is confirmed by the principals, who express uncertainty about what they can ask for and how the support should come to them. LEA managers acknowledge the contradictions between LEA members and principals because of their different

roles and missions. They also note that principals request a lot of support because of their insecurity, even regarding issues that they should be able to handle themselves.

Communication and Learning

The principals from all school forms assert that the LEA predominantly employs strategies and tools that facilitate the one-way transfer of information and knowledge, primarily fostering vertical collaboration from managers to principals. Given the paucity of tools that encourage horizontal communication or collaboration among principals, the principals bear a substantial burden of information: 'No, these occasions of information, I have felt, I am just tired and do not bring anything with me that I can use because it does not become a dialogue' (Principal Elementary School 1).

Some of the quality strategists note the lack of collaborative learning between principals and the LEAs: 'No, do we learn that much from each other here? It is more about listening to each other' (Qualitative Strategist 2). The principals from all the school forms critique communication strategies for not fostering collaborative learning among principals. Instead, learning among principals primarily transpires if principals initiate telephone contact with each other. The low degree of collaborative learning opportunities among principals leads them to retreat and concentrate solely on their respective units. When principals have historically criticized how the LEA and its principals collaborate, the LEA has tended to regard criticism as 'complaint meetings' (Principal Elementary school 2), and these meetings have not sufficiently altered the tools or strategies employed between principals and the LEA.

Principals from all school forms express uncertainty regarding the purpose of the principals' learning meetings, which transpire between the principals and the LEA. Occasionally, principals attend a meeting without having had the opportunity to prepare: 'One can come to a meeting and not have a clue what it will be about' (Principal Elementary School 4). Some LEA managers report that they have initiated more collaboration with principals concerning the content of the principals' learning meetings. However, the principals maintain that it is predominantly the LEA that decades the content and strategies employed at these meetings.

Systematic Quality Work

In the Swedish education system, the LEAs tend to use the term 'systematic quality work' (SQW) instead of 'school improvement' or 'change'. In the current study, SQW includes how LEAs and principals analyse, initiate, and follow up on their work and goals. The principals articulate that the LEA exhibits an excessive focus on templates within the SQW: 'However, one of the problems becomes that we also get stuck a lot in the writing' (Principal Elementary School 3). The principals challenge the actual readership of their improvement plans: 'However, how important is it, who am I writing for?' (Principal Elementary School 3). Similar findings can be discerned by the LEA managers, who assert that SQW is marked by negative 'paper hysteria', and the LEA manager queries, 'No, for whom does one write? I think we can capture quality aspects in entirely different ways than writing a lot of papers which we hopefully read' (LEA Manager 3).

The principals perceive an overabundance of goals in SQW: '36 goals for our type of school – it's almost one goal per week, and that becomes difficult' (Principal Upper Secondary School 2). The principals do not perceive ownership of their improvement work: 'There are many goals to relate to, and should we be able to garner support from LEA, or is it they who govern our work? That is a very big question' (Principal Upper Secondary School 1). The principals describe that the LEA is stressed because they want to increase the students' results. The high stress on results not only impacts both the collaboration between the LEA and principals, but it also leads to the principals, in turn, placing stress on their staff. The high pace engenders feelings of inadequacy for the principals in their mission.

In summary, a large proportion of conflicts involving collaboration revolve around different views on the role of the LEA. Moreover, a low degree of mutual communication and collaboration between the LEAs and principals or among principals can hinder collaboration and mutual learning. The conflicts in SQW primarily pertain to the LEA's unilateral focus on templates and written products, and these templates are not perceived as meaningful for the principals. Moreover, the principals are assigned numerous goals that have been mainly formulated by the LEA.

What are the Possible Consequenses?

Discursive manifestations of contradictions between the chosen LEA and principals have historically decreased when the principals have experienced that the LEA is more receptive to the principals' criticism or needs. Few forums or strategies are available that involve joint learning or

negotiation between the principals and the LEAs and questioning and criticism have not always been interpreted or managed together. The lack of joint negotiation of dilemmas and double binds has historically meant that these contradictions tend to develop into more extensive and acute contradictions. At the same time, the LEAs are trying to understand why the principals are critical towards their collaboration, but the lack of mutual dialogue means that the LEAs have difficulty seeing how the LEAs and the principals together can improve the collaboration. Historically, the LEA's support tends to be perceived as negative steering by the principals. The empirical findings show that collaboration is impeded by contradictory interpretations of LEAs' roles, ambiguous division of responsibilities, and asymmetrical distribution of knowledge and communication. Collaboration between the LEAs and principals does not contribute to a sufficiently high degree to strengthening principals' perceived ability to improve results; instead, the principals describe becoming passive and experiencing stress, uncertainty, and inadequacy.

Discussion and Conclusions

The current study aims to enhance the understanding of different types of contradictions in collaboration and to explore the possible consequences of contradictions in collaboration between LEAs and principals. To summarize, the main findings concerning the research questions of the current study can be encapsulated as follows. Regarding RQ1: What different types of contradictions are manifested in the collaboration between LEAs and principals? Conflicts and critical conflicts appear almost exclusively in the interview data. The conflicts pertain to 1) the LEA's role, 2) communication and learning, and 3) the SQW. In addition, the critical conflicts primarily encompassed 1) standardized improvement processes, 2) LEA support for principals, and 3) LEA high expectations for rapid improvements. The results of several critical conflicts indicate that the LEA and principals need to 'find a new sense and negotiate a new meaning' and, in the case of the conflicts, focus on 'finding a compromise, submitting to authority or majority' (Engeström & Sannino, 2011, p. 375). Moreover, the presence of few double binds or dilemmas may be a sign that the previous dilemmas and double binds have developed into more acute contradictions.

Concerning RQ2: What are the possible consequences of contradictions in collaboration between LEAs and principals? A central result shows that the development of different types of discursive

manifestations of contradictions has been affected by the degree to which the principals have experienced that the LEA has actively listened to their needs. The results of the current study show that several conflicts and critical conflicts have emerged, which indicates that principals and the LEA have not, to a sufficiently high extent, together identified, interpreted, and analysed the contradictions in the collaboration. Both the principals and the LEA describe a few opportunities for collaboration in which the LEA and the principals together have identified contradictions, which are almost exclusively the LEA that has historically interpreted and determined how contradictions are to be understood and managed. This means that there is a risk that contradictions lose their function as a positive driver for change and that contradictions could contribute to dilemmas and double binds developing into critical conflicts or conflicts (Engeström & Sannino, 2011). According to the principals, the strong top-down management structure from the LEA also involves limited locally adapted support for the principals. In summary, the numerous discursive manifestations of contradictions have negatively affected collaboration as well as the principals' perceived ability and opportunity to improve the results.

Compared with previous research on effective LEAs, several aspects occurred to a low degree in the current study. Leithwood (2010) emphasizes well-functioning communication and learning with collaborative structures that enable in-depth learning. Compared with the current study, several challenges regarding communication between LEAs and principals are made visible, and the current collaborative structures do not contribute sufficiently to collaboration or joint in-depth learning, according to the principals. Both Leithwood (2010) and Anderson and Young (2018) emphasize the participants' capacity and sense of effectiveness, and in that study, several principals in the current study described that they are unable to realize what the LEA expects of them, which contributes to descriptions of inadequacy. However, Bennett and Anderson (2005) claim that collaboration is necessary but not sufficient for a partnership between the LEA and the school level, but there needs to be common goals, a clear division of labor, and shared responsibility. The challenges that emerge in the studies by Bennett and Anderson (2005), Swaffield (2005), and Prøitz et al. (2021) have several similarities with the results of the current study regarding difficulties in creating mutual collaboration, forming learning relationships and using supporting governing styles between the LEA and school levels.

The results of the current study have several similarities consistent with prior Swedish research on challenges in collaboration in studies by Adolfsson and Alvunger (2017, 2020) and Håkansson and

Adolfsson (2022), with the following challenges: 1) effective communication, 2) transparency between levels, 3) balance between directing and supporting principals, and 4) balancing demands from the LEA and the unit's needs. The results of the current study also indicate principals' preference for autonomy in interpreting how SQW should be implemented, which is in line with the study by Liljenberg and Andersson (2021), who show the importance of principals' participation and influence in the development of new methods and tools, coupled with a humble approach from the LEA. This is also found in the results of the current study. The vital differences between previous Swedish studies and the current study are particularly prominent in the study by Liljenberg and Andersson (2020), where LEAs and principals continuously learn, interpret, and develop the work together. This differs from the results of the current study because the principals do not describe that they work together with the LEA to a sufficiently high degree.

The empirical findings of this present study contribute to the understanding of the identification and analysis of different types of discursive manifestations of contradictions in collaboration. By gaining in-depth knowledge of these types of contradictions, the participants can gain an understanding of how these contradictions can be understood and managed. An in-depth understanding of discursive manifestations of contradictions is important for both practitioners and researchers to be able to interpret and influence change processes and collaboration. By reviewing the theoretical framework used, the current study intends to make a theoretical contribution by testing the framework of discursive manifestations of contradictions (Engeström & Sannino, 2011). The theoretical framework of Engeström and Sannino (2011) includes 'helplessness' as a clue for identifying double binds. In the current study, I have chosen to include all double binds, regardless of whether they expressed helplessness. A possible development of the theoretical framework could be to identify helplessness and agency as two dimensions that can be examined in the context of different types of contradictions. However, in summary, in the current study, the theoretical framework proved to be a fruitful tool for identifying different types of discursive manifestations of contradictions and fulfilling the purpose of the study.

The present study's data collection, empirical data, and analysis are described in detail, which strengthens the study's reliability. Through a detailed description of how the different types of discursive manifestations of contradictions have been identified and analyzed, the possibilities for interpretations to be well anchored in empirical data increase. This study is conducted in a Swedish

rural municipality, which implies limitations on the possibility of far-reaching external validity; however, high validity is achieved in the study because the study has a design and analysis that conforms to the purpose, research questions, and theoretical framework. By providing rich descriptions of the empirical data, the study increases the opportunities for practitioners and researchers to compare empirical patterns in the study with their contexts. (Larsson, 2022). The interpretations contribute to existing knowledge by comparing the study's results with those of previous research. Currently, a large part of the previous research has provided limited guidance for decentralized and Swedish education systems. The present study contributes to previous research investigating collaboration between professions in a decentralized school system. As described in the background of this study, the Swedish decentralized school system means that several actors formulate, realize, and follow up national and local goals, which can mean value conflicts, thus requiring continuous dialogue and joint interpretations. The present study calls for further research that examines different types of contradictions from different theoretical frameworks, as this can contribute to a deeper understanding of contradictions in collaboration. The present study suggests that further research, possibly involving observations over a longer period, could be beneficial for investigating different types of contradictions and collaboration between LEAs and principals. In conclusion, according to CHAT, contradictions can function as vital drivers for improvement, but both researchers and practitioners need to identify and use these contradictions as important prerequisites for improvement. As the modalities of collaboration among different participants can influence collaboration and contradictions, the current study advocates for more research on the current topic, especially in decentralized school systems.

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