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(Not) Just Another Brick in the Wall: How Middle Managers in Swedish Local Education Administrations Exercise Various Forms of Power

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Abstract

Middle managers, such as school form managers and school area managers, have come to play a crucial role in local public administration in Sweden. We need to understand the forms of power they exercise, as middle managers – in contrast to chief education officers and principals – they do not have a legally defined mandate. This article draws upon new institutionalist perspectives to enhance knowledge and understanding of how chief education officers, middle managers, and principals perceive middle managers to exercise *power over*, *power to*, and *power with* in administrations and in relation to other officers. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with respondents in four local education administrations across three municipalities in Sweden. The results show that middle managers in the study exercise all three types of power, and that not only regulative but also normative and cultural-cognitive perspectives contribute to explaining the expansion or limitation of their power. Notably, the institutional perspectives can coexist to different degrees, depending on the context and situation, with implications for the relative administrative power of middle managers. Without a clearly defined legal mandate, their exercise of power raises urgent accountability concerns.

Keywords:
education;
middle manager;
new institutionalist perspectives;
public administration;
power

Practical Relevance

- How municipal organisers articulate the municipal mandate of middle managers is critically important, particularly in view of the state mandate assigned to school principals.
- Municipal organisers may express the municipal mandate through job descriptions and the system of delegation.
- Municipal organisers must ensure that power and responsibility are aligned. Decision-making powers should be clearly linked to defined areas of responsibility.
- Establishing a municipal mandate for middle managers within the administration is not sufficient on its own; municipal organisers must also actively foster their legitimacy among school principals.

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Introduction

The behaviour and interactions of government officers play a pivotal role in shaping public services, making it essential to understand the actors involved and their respective roles within governance processes (Adolfsson and Alvunger 2020; Frederickson et al. 2015). The number of officers employed in the Swedish public sector has increased in recent years (Hall 2012; Laxgård 2025; Statistics Sweden 2025). More specifically, the number of school leaders within local education administrations and schools has grown, driven by the expansion of school units, the broadening of leadership responsibilities, and enhanced administrative oversight (Ärlestig and Leo 2023). A decade ago, Johansson and Nihlfors (2014) conducted a survey of chief education officers in Swedish municipalities, asking them to rank the influence of various actors. That study did not account for a group of school leaders positioned between chief education officers and principals – middle managers such as school form managers and school area managers.[1] This omission was likely due to their limited presence in Swedish municipal administrations at the time.

Since then, this category of school leader has contributed to the aforementioned increase in public sector officers. These individuals are granted authority by the municipality, which acts as the local organiser and provider of education. While both chief education officers and principals are also mandated by the municipality, they additionally hold authority conferred by the state through legislation. Principals received a more explicit and strengthened mandate in the 2010 revision of the Education Act. Chief education officers' roles were reaffirmed and clarified in an amendment to the same act in 2018 (The Swedish Code of Statutes 2010:800). According to Roos, Johansson and Svedberg (2022), the legislators' ambition was to clarify mandates and responsibilities and to better manage the intricacies of Sweden's diverse and decentralised educational system. From a traditional, rules-based perspective on governance, administrative power is inherently hierarchical. Such power (Hysing and Olsson 2012; Weber, Gerth and Mills 1958; Wilson 1887) is frequently attributed to chief officers. To borrow a metaphor from Pink Floyd, officers become "just another brick in the wall", each brick occupying a fixed hierarchical position. The benefit of clearly defined hierarchical structures lies in their capacity to facilitate accountability and promote transparent, predictable decision-making processes. Within this framework, middle managers appear to possess limited power, operating in the narrow spaces between public officers who hold stronger mandates conferred by the state.

However, power is not solely derived from one's hierarchical position (Bengtsson 2012; Dahl 1991). Indeed, expertise and knowledge constitute significant sources of power for junior officers (Peters, Erkkila and von Maravić 2016). In the absence of a legally regulated mandate, middle managers may seek and utilise alternative sources of power. Their largely unregulated and embedded role within municipal structures could, paradoxically, confer considerable power. Positioned between elected councillors and teachers in schools, they operate at a significant distance from both groups. The behaviour of public officers may be shaped more by their roles than by their formal positions (Magee and Frasier 2014). Roles refer to "conceptions of appropriate goals and activities for particular individuals or specified social positions" (Scott 2014, p. 64), highlighting the importance of normative expectations. This, however, raises concerns about accountability, transparency, and predictability. The absence of formal regulation may render middle managers more susceptible to institutional values and relational dynamics, such as the institution's logic of appropriateness, which influences perceptions of suitable behaviour (March and Olsen 1984). Different sources of power may yield varying degrees of success depending on the context, as shaped by prevailing norms.

In this article, I seek to describe and analyse the power exercised by middle managers within four local education administrations across three Swedish municipalities, drawing on qualitative interviews with chief education officers, middle managers, and principals. The aim is to deepen understanding of their role in local education governance, given that they are neither chief officers (Huang and Villadsen 2023; Högberg 2007) nor street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 2010). Neo-institutional theory provides valuable analytical tools for exploring the interplay between institutional and organisational principles in public administration. I examine the forms of power exercised by middle managers in Swedish local education administrations, the institutional

perspectives that underpin these practices, and the sources that legitimise their power. First, the empirical foundation rests on three forms of power – *power over*, *power to*, and *power with* – which illuminate the diverse ways in which education officers exert power. Second, the analysis is guided by three institutional perspectives – regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive – based on Scott's (2014) institutional pillars, which help explain why middle managers may or may not exercise certain forms of power. While the regulative perspective situates power within formal structures, the integration of normative and cultural-cognitive dimensions offers a more nuanced understanding. Third, the sources of power link these perspectives to the empirical data, illustrating, for example, how personal experience can serve to legitimise power in specific contexts.

Previous Research

Research on Swedish public administrative leadership is surprisingly limited in scope (Blom 1994; Madestam, Sundström and Bergström 2018; Vogel and Masal 2015). Primarily focusing on Sweden at the local level, previous research on education officers has focused on Swedish local education administrations (Håkansson and Adolfsson 2021; Liljenberg and Andersson 2023; Nordholm 2016), the dynamics of power in educational settings (Adolfsson and Alvunger 2020; Hudson 2007; Johansson and Ärlestig 2022) and the actors who exercise such power (Grimm, Norqvist and Roos 2021; Johansson and Nihlfors 2014; Ståhlkrantz and Rapp 2020; Xia, Shen and Sun 2020). Studies have demonstrated how local education authorities collaborate with schools and how national governance influences local governance (Håkansson and Adolfsson 2021; Jarl, Nordholm and Wermke 2024; Liljenberg and Andersson 2023). Research has also examined the relationship between officers and principals (Andersson and Liljenberg 2020; Liljenberg and Andersson 2020) and the distribution of power within educational organisations (Grimm, Norqvist and Roos 2021). Furthermore, we know from previous research that there are no formal regulations or directives governing the competencies of chief education officers; administrations appoint chief education officers and middle managers, and it is thus they who determine their competencies (Liljenberg, Ärlestig and Nordholm 2023). Additionally, there is research on the role and expectations of chief education officers (Bredeson, Klar and Johansson 2011; Jarl, Nordholm and Wermke 2024; Johansson and Nihlfors 2014; Rapp, Aktas and Ståhlkrantz 2022; Roos, Johansson and Svedberg 2022; Ståhlkrantz and Rapp 2020). A few studies have taken an interest in middle managers themselves (Antonsson 2024a; Liljenberg, Nordholm and Ärlestig 2022; Liljenberg, Ärlestig and Nordholm 2023), yet the bulk of existing research either does not take them into account or merely considers them as part of the local education administration. Research on the role of middle managers in education is limited, although there are a few recent exceptions (Adolfsson and Alvunger 2020; Antonsson 2024a; Svedberg and Ärlestig 2024). However, these studies do not explore the power of these managers.

Notably, previous research indicates that when principals in Swedish schools seek support from the municipality, they are more inclined to approach middle managers rather than the chief education officer (Adolfsson and Alvunger, 2020), which may inadvertently grant greater influence to the former.

Governance of the Swedish Local Education System

In the Swedish education system, municipalities hold significant power for adaptation and implementation (The Swedish Code of Statutes 2017:725). Local self-governance is pronounced (Ehn 1998; Lumby 2013; The Swedish Code of Statutes 2017:725; Woods 2016). Power is shared between councillors and municipal officers, as well as among the officers themselves (The Swedish Code of Statutes 2017:725). Decisions are made by politicians and local councillors, while officers and professionals prepare, concretise, implement and follow up on these decisions (Jarl, Nordholm and Wermke 2024; Johansson, Lindgren and Montin 2018). Municipalities vary in demography and size; this, coupled with the freedom to decide how to organise public services, results in different ways of organising local administrations (Antonsson 2024b). Not all municipalities have administrations dedicated to education, but

those that do sometimes have middle managers between the chief education officer and principals (Blom 2019; Johansson et al. 2016).

Figures 1 to 4 illustrate the organisational structures of the four local education administrations across the three municipalities included in this article.[2] Three administrations have one layer of middle managers between the chief education officer and principals; one has two layers. LEA A1 and LEA A2 are part of the same municipality. Each municipality has one or more education committees composed of indirectly elected councillors with delegated decision-making authority. LEA A1 reports to two separate committees: one responsible for preschools and another responsible for compulsory schools. LEA A2 is accountable to a joint committee overseeing both upper secondary education and labour market policy. Both LEA B and LEA C have a single committee responsible for all forms of schooling.

Figure 1. An organisational chart of LEA A1, including the chief education officer, middle managers, and principals

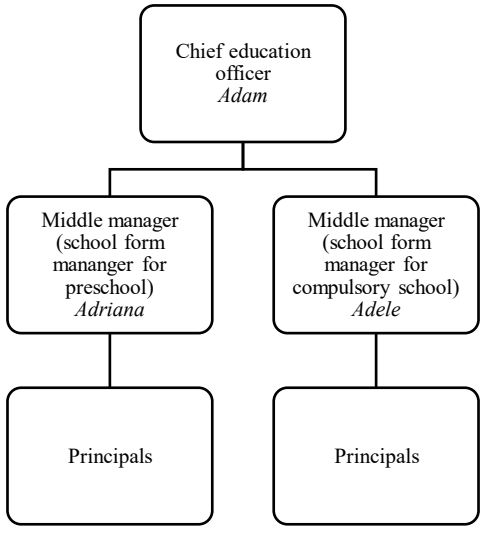


Figure 2. An organisational chart of LEA A2, including the chief education officer, middle managers, and principals

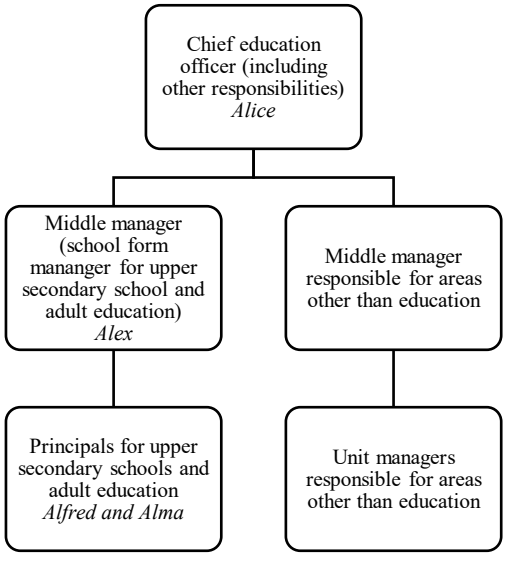


Figure 3. An organisational chart of LEA B, including the chief education officer, middle managers, and principals

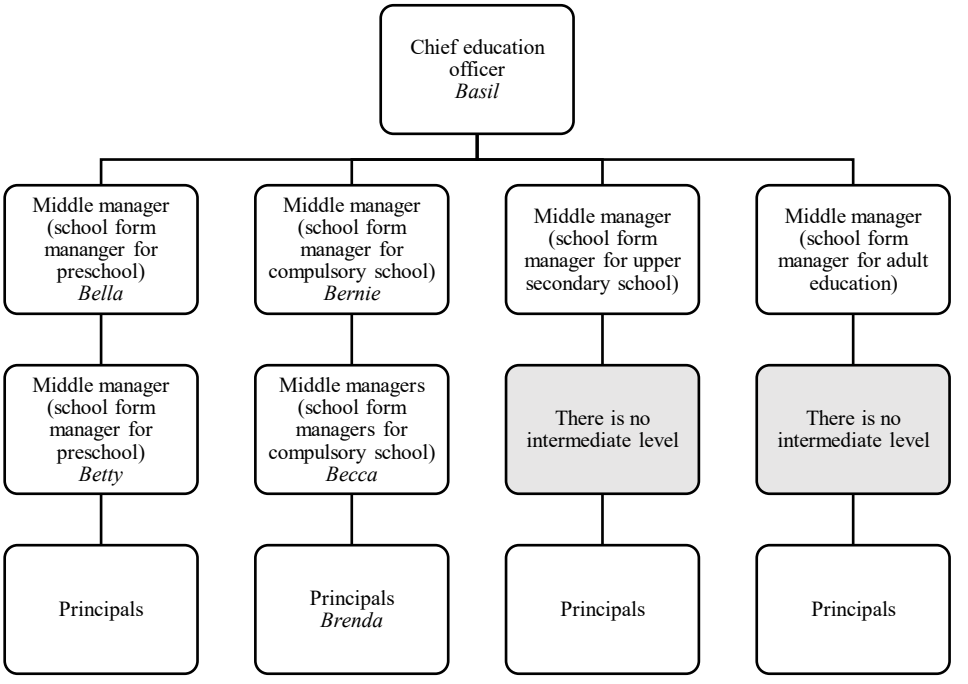
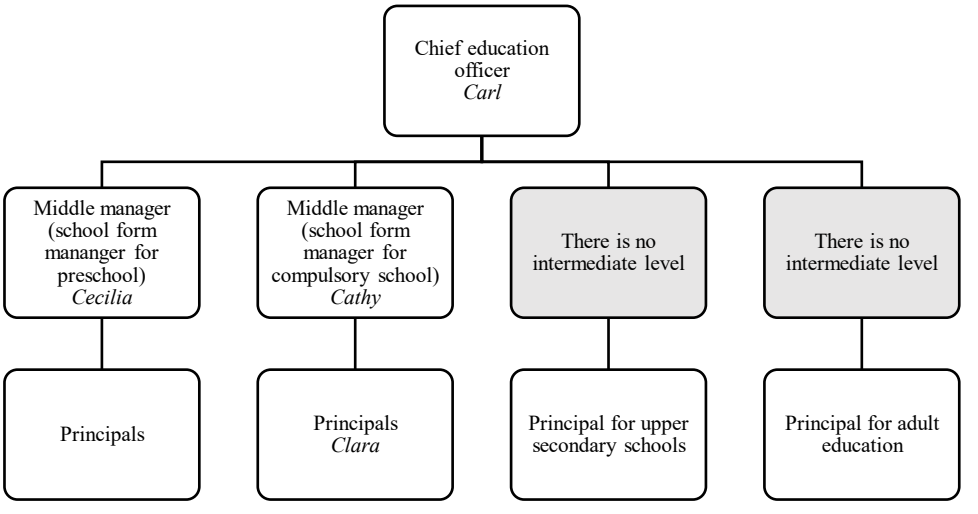


Figure 4. An organisational chart of LEA C, including the chief education officer, middle managers, and principals



Institutional Perspectives and Forms of Power

Over the years, a substantial and expanding body of literature has examined different perspectives on power (see, for instance, Bachrach and Baratz 1962; Dahl 1957; Lukes 1974; Weber, Gerth and Mills 1958). Much of this literature focuses on the power dynamics between politicians/local councillors and government officials (Svara 2006; Weber, Gerth and Mills 1958; Wilson 1887). From a new institutionalist regulative perspective, power resides within formal structures, influencing the nature of power. Note that Figures 1–4 illustrate formal structures within each administration but do not necessarily reflect the actual roles undertaken by the officers. Adding normative and cultural-cognitive perspectives to the regulative perspective provides a more comprehensive understanding of why middle managers may or may

not exercise various forms of power. These three perspectives constitute or support institutions (Scott 2008; Scott 2014), and they legitimise the exercise of power. National education governance relies on regulative arrangements, while the local level depends more on normative and cultural-cognitive elements (Adolfsson 2024). The three perspectives have also previously been used to study educational leaders (Adolfsson 2024; Adolfsson and Alvunger 2020). They can be described as follows:

1. Regulative pillar: Officers conform for reasons of expediency, guided by laws, rules, and sanctions enforced coercively. Legitimacy is based on legal sanction (Scott 2014). The exercise of power is legitimised by rules and regulations.
2. Normative pillar: Officers conform for reasons of social obligation, driven by binding expectations and appropriateness. Legitimacy is based on moral governance (Scott 2014). The exercise of power is legitimised by what is perceived as appropriate and possible, primarily due to present relationships.
3. Cultural-cognitive pillar: Compliance is based on taken-for-grantedness and shared understanding, with symbolic processes constructing social reality. The mechanism is mimetic, involving the mimicry of existing practices. Legitimacy is based on actions being comprehensible, recognisable, and culturally supported (Scott 2014). The exercise of power is legitimised by what is ingrained in the walls, due primarily to what has been deemed proper over the years, likely decades.

Public officers can have *power over* others and the *power to* produce outcomes or resist change (Galiè and Farnworth 2019; Pansardi 2012; Pansardi and Bindi 2021). Hierarchical governance depends on top-down control, similar to *power over*, where power is exerted through laws, regulations, authority, and command systems (Lu, Qiu and Wu 2024; Meuleman 2021). However, hierarchies may falter due to rigidity, goal drift, or poor decisions (Lu, Qiu and Wu 2024). In contrast, *power with* involves people working together to reach shared goals (Galiè and Farnworth 2019; Pansardi 2012; Pansardi and Bindi 2021). Bureaucratic decision-making is characterised by "dialogue, inclusion, negotiation, and shared power" (Berger 2005, 6). In welfare bureaucracies, teams can function as performative tools, cushioning structures, and so-called "moral corsets", referring to co-learning and moral pressure to comply with team norms (Jacobsson and Hollertz 2021, 244). Teamwork prioritises unity in thinking and acting over a breadth of competencies, expanding normative control and establishing acceptance of restricted discretion (Jacobsson and Hollertz 2021). Collaboration can be a key strategy for middle managers, allowing them to work within or across teams to solve challenges and improve common understanding (van Niekerk and Jansen van Rensburg 2022). Yet, when norms are too constraining, resignation may be the only option (Jacobsson and Hollertz 2021).

Power can be exercised through various resources (Giddens 1979), including the acceptance of others (Grimm, Norqvist and Roos 2021; Haugaard 2018). Those exercising power and leadership require such acceptance, making the creation of authority a shared effort (Woods 2016). Holding a leadership position means being *in* authority, but not necessarily being *recognised* as an authority (Grimm, Norqvist and Roos 2021; Haugaard 2018) – a distinction that requires sources of power beyond formal position. For public officers, professional expertise can serve as one such source (Svara 2006), along with the ability to alter others' incentives and reputations (Dowding 2019).

In sum, the middle managers in this study may possess various forms of power. *Power over* refers to formal authority exercised over others. *Power to* involves being in a position of authority and being recognised as such. *Power with* denotes shared authority. The findings also shed light on the absence of these forms of power – highlighting instances in which middle managers lack *power over*, *power to*, and *power with*.

Methods and Methodology

This study is situated within a single-country context. It is based exclusively on interviews conducted over 13 weeks in 2023 with education officers from four local education administrations across three Swedish municipalities. Given the aim of exploring perceptions of power, qualitative interviews were deemed an appropriate methodological approach. The

interviewees are comprised of chief education officers, middle managers, and principals in order to explore perceptions of the middle manager role from the perspective of middle managers themselves, as well as those of their superordinates and subordinates. I carried out a total of 18 interviews, each lasting between 35 and 97 minutes (Table 1).

Table 1. The interviewees

Officer/ principal	Local education administration	Position	Years worked in the municipality	Years as a middle manager
Adam	LEA A1	Chief education officer	2	N/A
Adele	LEA A1	Middle manager (*skolchef*)[3]	10	1
Adriana	LEA A1	Middle manager (*skolchef*)	5	5
Alice	LEA A2	Chief education officer	2	N/A
Alex	LEA A2	Middle manager (*skolchef*)	3	3
Alfred	LEA A2	Principal	31	N/A
Alma	LEA A2	Principal	5	N/A
Basil	LEA B	Chief education officer (*skolchef*)	5	N/A
Bernie	LEA B	Middle manager	2	4
Bella	LEA B	Middle manager	9	20+
Becca	LEA B	Middle manager (second-tier)[4]	19	2
Betty	LEA B	Middle manager (second-tier)	4	4
Brenda	LEA B	Principal	2	N/A
Carl	LEA C	Chief education officer (*skolchef*)	6[5]	N/A
Cathy	LEA C	Middle manager	5	5
Cecilia	LEA C	Middle manager	1	1
Charlotte	LEA C	Middle manager	5	5
Clara	LEA C	Principal	14+	N/A

Informed consent was considered in the research process. The participants received written information along with a brief oral explanation and were asked to complete a consent form for participation as well as a separate form relating to GDPR compliance. I conducted individual semi-structured interviews, primarily at the respondents' workplaces, with a few held via Zoom. Regardless of their position, the role of the middle manager remained central throughout the discussions.

Participants were asked about power both directly and indirectly (see Appendix I).[6] From the outset, I adopted the new institutionalist theory as the overarching framework for the study. The categories – *power over*, *power to*, and *power with* – are empirically and theoretically derived. As I encountered these concepts, I recognised their relevance to the material and found them useful for presenting the findings. Additionally, institutional perspectives emerged organically throughout the course of the analysis.

I recorded the interviews and kept notes during the process. The interviews were transcribed shortly afterwards using electronic transcription, followed by manual verification. Triangulation was not employed. I have utilised qualitative content analysis, and the data were coded using

NVivo, where the material was organised into the categories *power over*, *power to*, and *power with*. This proved to be a delicate task, as certain excerpts could reasonably fit into more than one category and therefore required careful consideration. In some cases, the same piece of information was coded under two categories. For example, the following quotation (not included in the article) by chief education officer Carl can be coded as both *power to* and *power with*: "It applies to appointments too. They are not allowed to appoint a principal by themselves without my involvement." This statement suggests that middle managers possess the *power to* appoint principals, but only insofar as they exercise this authority *power with* their superordinate.

The interviews were conducted in Swedish, and quotations have been translated into English. When translating, I aimed to remain as faithful as possible to the original quotation, while ensuring the result adhered to the conventions of the English language.

Findings: Power Aligning with and Contradicting Expectations

Alignment with hierarchical expectations

At times, the actions of middle managers align with hierarchical expectations, consistent with the regulative pillar, regarding their *power over* others, their *power to* act, and their *power with* others in collaboration.

Regarding *power over* others, second-tier middle manager Becca describes the challenges associated with her position, including her inability to make decisions involving other managers within the administration. This leaves her powerless when they choose not to act on her requests. Middle manager Alex in LEA A2 expresses a comparable sentiment:

> Perhaps my most significant task is to navigate the complexities of our flat organisational structure. I do not have any direct underlings […]. [A]ll staff are based in schools and work on behalf of the schools […]. I am in constant coordination with my colleague, the administrative manager, which occupies a considerable portion of my time. (Middle manager Alex)

The chief education officers and middle managers were asked who most influences the work of principals. The responses varied. In LEA C, a middle manager argued that, legally, the person responsible for ensuring compliance with education regulations – that is, the chief education officer in LEA B and C – holds this influence. Although first-tier middle manager Bella initially claims to be the most influential, she concedes that she needs the chief education officer's approval. The same applies to first-tier middle manager Bernie, as shown in the second quotation below.

> I would say that I am the one. The reason is that, since joining LEA B, I have worked diligently to establish the conditions necessary for principals to exercise pedagogical leadership in preschool education. Naturally, this has been done with the consent of the chief education officer. We began this work before a second-tier middle manager was in place. (First-tier middle manager Bella)

> The direct influence primarily rests with the second-tier middle manager, but after that, it is me. It is difficult to assess, as in many respects I hold a veto within my sector – though not over my superordinate, who holds an even stronger veto. (First-tier middle manager Bernie)

The two examples illustrate instances in which power is exercised in accordance with hierarchical expectations. Concerning the power to act, middle manager Adriana in LEA A1 highlights the limitations inherent in her position – a perspective echoed by second-tier middle manager Becca in LEA B, who also emphasises the implications that follow.

> I have assignments that are constant and non-negotiable. At the same time, I have a superordinate who listens, with whom I can engage in dialogue, and who communicates that dialogue to the committee. However, I am governed by national policy documents, and I must remain attentive to them. I receive directives that I am obliged to carry out, which means I cannot freely pursue my own ideas. I can make suggestions, reflect, engage in dialogue, and exert influence – but I am not at liberty to make decisions entirely on my own. Absolutely not. (Middle manager Adriana)

> [Y]ou find yourself in this intermediary position – you see many things that need to be addressed, but you lack the mandate to act. That is what makes it so challenging. (Second-tier middle manager Becca)

Based on middle manager Adriana's statement and the structure of the Swedish system, it can be inferred that her assignments originate from both the national level and the municipal committee – in this case, the committee for preschools. It also appears that her superordinate functions as an intermediary between her and the committee, which may, in turn, influence how tasks are interpreted and executed.

Middle managers' access to and involvement in committee work varies across the LEAs, shaping their ability to raise issues with decision-makers. In LEA A1, chief education officer Adam states that not all middle managers are required to participate in all committee meetings. In contrast, in LEA A2, chief education officer Alice and middle manager Alex describe Alex as actively engaged in the working committee, regularly attending meetings and speaking on all education-related matters. In LEA B, chief education officer Basil states that first-tier middle managers attend all meetings and are given time to present, while second-tier managers are rarely in attendance. In LEA C, chief education officer Carl reports limited middle manager involvement. According to middle manager Cathy, she presents at committee meetings, but not regularly. Her colleague, middle manager Cecilia, states that they are invited when the matters under discussion specifically concern middle managers. Thus, access to the committee varies among middle managers.

Financial responsibilities vary across local education administrations. In LEA B, chief education officer Basil states that middle managers have "full economic responsibility" for their sector, a view echoed by first-tier middle managers Bernie and Bella, with Bernie noting they are held accountable by councillors. Principal Brenda adds that second-tier middle managers collaborate with principals on budgets. In LEA C, middle managers Cathy and Cecilia also report financial responsibility, though Cecilia consults the chief education officer. Cathy notes that they lack the mandate to reallocate funds between school forms. Chief education officer Carl confirms that budget overruns require his approval, though he believes middle managers could exercise more flexibility than they currently do.

Organisers are responsible for the systematic and continuous planning and evaluation of education, including the analysis of results and the development of education (The Swedish Code of Statutes 2010:800). The findings show that middle managers at various levels are involved in this process. In LEA B, chief education officer Basil describes first-tier middle managers as having a clear leader role in relation to principals, while second-tier middle managers lead principals in their quality work. Principal Brenda notes that second-tier middle managers collaborate with principals on quality work three times a year.

Finally, with regard to *power with*, there are numerous instances in which middle managers collaborate in ways that align with the expectations associated with their position. For example, middle managers may work within the same school form and at the same hierarchical level, but oversee different geographical areas. This arrangement requires both independence and cooperation. Middle manager Adele in LEA A1, however, expresses a desire for uninterrupted power over her schools and principals:

> It is, in fact, entirely separate […]. When I accepted this position, I made sure that I would have full leadership over these schools. (Middle manager Adele)

Middle manager Adele underscores the importance of leading in a structured and systematic manner. In LEA B, a pronounced hierarchical structure shapes patterns of collaboration, making expressions of *power over* more apparent. For instance, chief education officer Basil states that he does not maintain a relationship with second-tier middle managers; he interacts only with first-tier middle managers, not their subordinates. Similarly, principal Brenda notes a lack of direct interaction with the chief education officer. Paradoxically, this hierarchical arrangement can make it easier for middle managers to exercise power within clearly defined areas, free from interference by a superordinate.

Disruption of hierarchical expectations

Middle managers at times exercise *power over*, *power to*, and *power with* – even when this deviates from expectations associated with their hierarchical position, as defined by the regulative pillar. These dynamics may be interpreted through the lens of the regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive pillars.[7] While these pillars can coexist, their interplay offers

varying degrees of explanation as to why power is exercised. In the following sections, I present examples that illustrate how each institutional pillar contributes to the legitimisation of power. Beyond hierarchical position, factors such as relationships, mandates, agreements, expertise, and perceptions of appropriateness and feasibility also play a legitimising role – thereby underscoring the relevance of all three institutional perspectives.

Middle managers may, at times, hold more power than their superordinates, as illustrated by a quotation in which a middle manager, when asked which superordinate most influences principals' work, refers to established practices.

> I believe I probably have the most day-to-day influence. At the same time, the first-tier middle manager is meant to have a more strategic [influence], and the chief education officer holds overarching [influence] […]. But his mission is carried out through us. So, I do think I have the greatest influence overall. (Second-tier middle manager Becca)

It becomes clear that all three institutional pillars – regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive – play a role. Although they coexist, tensions may arise, particularly when accountability must be assigned. A recurring theme in the interviews is the strong mandate of principals. As first-tier middle manager Bella puts it, the principals are "the big bosses". Similarly, second-tier middle manager Betty underscores principals' power while downplaying her own position.

> Here I am, with 15 managers [read: principals] who already hold power […] and then there is the first-tier middle manager, so I am a relatively minor, sidelined figure. Yet, [I] still wield significant influence. (Second-tier middle manager Betty)

Given their hierarchical position above principals, middle managers might be expected to wield considerable power. However, the findings suggest their power is constrained by the principals' mandate, as regulated by the Education Act (The Swedish Code of Statutes 2010:800) – a key component of the regulative pillar. Furthermore, as a second-tier middle manager, Betty lacks a clearly defined mandate and reports to an additional superordinate: the first-tier middle manager between her and the chief education officer. Despite the strong regulatory framework, Betty's claim to "significant influence" points to the relevance of normative and cultural-cognitive elements. The Education Act and its implications emerge as a recurring theme. Chief education officer Alice reflects on how the unique structure of the education sector affects the exercise of *power over*:

> I reflect on the distribution of power […] I have served as a middle manager at all levels within the state and at the highest level in the municipality, yet I have never encountered a challenge quite like the one posed by the Education Act. […]. There is no equivalent in any other organisation to a unit manager or principal who would say, "You are not entitled to make that decision for me under this Act." […] I believe this is a major source of the complexity faced by middle managers in schools – and that complexity extends up to me. […] In my view, the Education Act obstructs, or indeed creates confusion. (Chief education officer Alice)

Drawing on experience from other sectors, chief education officer Alice describes education as a particularly complex domain, largely due to the detailed regulations in the Education Act. This makes the absence of a formal mandate especially problematic. Principals determine the internal organisation of their schools, as stipulated in the Swedish Code of Statutes (2010:800). In LEA A1, middle managers navigate a continuous balancing act; through dialogue with principals, they assess when to intervene and when to step back, effectively determining the extent of their *power to* act. This suggests that while the regulative pillar remains important, it is not the sole guiding force. The emphasis on dialogue points to a growing normative influence, and potentially also a cultural-cognitive one, as such interactions shape organisational culture and influence how power is exercised. Reinforcing the regulative pillar, middle manager Adriana stresses that principals are superordinates and key decision-makers, with responsibilities beyond the remit of middle managers.

> We are not "super-principals" who resolve every issue. [The principals] hold the responsibility and the mandate, and therefore, they are the ones in charge. (Middle manager Adriana)

While middle managers in LEA A1 appear to enjoy a degree of autonomy in matters related to systematic quality work, the situation in LEA C stands in contrast. The following two quotations serve to illustrate these differences.

> In my work with principals, I consider myself to have a high degree of autonomy. When it comes to systematic quality work, I have been given the freedom to organise it as I see fit. […] I have developed the entire annual plan, the documentation template, and everything else. In this respect, we have had complete freedom – absolutely complete freedom. (Middle manager Adele)

> Not without resistance. In terms of the pedagogical aspect – where a clear stance has been taken in this municipality – a platform has been established outlining how principals and educators should work with pedagogical documentation and an annual calendar. A significant effort has been made. If a school form manager were appointed who did not wish to work in accordance with this approach, I believe it would lead to considerable conflict. (Middle manager Cecilia)

Thus, while systematic quality work is mandated by law and must be carried out by all local education administrations, the examples provided illustrate differences in execution. In LEA A1, the normative and possibly cultural-cognitive dimensions appear to guide the approach, with middle managers granted considerable autonomy. In contrast, LEA C has introduced its own regulatory measures, supplementing national regulations and shaping how systematic quality work is conducted.

Turning to *power with*, the traditional organisational charts presented in the article suggest that the administrations resemble straightforward line organisations. However, in practice, chief education officers and middle managers often support one another, indicating a more collaborative dynamic than the charts alone might suggest. For instance, middle manager Adele contributes to systematic quality work and the structuring of objectives. Middle manager Alex reports offering educational expertise to compensate for his chief education officer's lack of prior experience in the field. Meanwhile, middle manager Adriana works closely with a fellow middle manager, enabling them to exercise varying degrees of power across different areas:

> We are invited to meet with the committee and discuss matters with our chief education officer. For example, when the topic is finance and budgeting, I tend to take on more responsibility, as that is my area of expertise. Next time, the discussion might focus on systematic quality work, where my colleague excels. […] We support one another in this way. (Middle manager Adriana)

Similarly, in LEA B, second-tier middle manager Becca collaborates closely with a second-tier middle manager colleague within the same school form. Although their units are formally divided, certain tasks allow one to assume broader responsibility, enabling a shared exercise of power. These structures reflect regulative frameworks, yet officers often assume informal responsibilities, highlighting the normative pillar's influence. In such cases, expertise becomes a source of power, allowing normative considerations to outweigh formal regulations. Regardless of formal allocations, when one middle manager exercises greater power, the other's power often diminishes. These variations reflect experience and interpersonal dynamics, aligning with the normative pillar, where power is legitimised by what is perceived as appropriate and feasible.

Clash of institutional perspectives

The findings reveal a key tension between institutional perspectives: the extent to which middle managers can – and should – intervene in principals' decision-making. This issue, evident across several local education administrations, highlights how some officers emphasise regulative institutions, while others rely more on normative and cultural-cognitive perspectives. According to chief education officer Alice, middle manager Alex avoids intervention, citing the Education Act to justify principals' autonomy. This interpretation limits both Alex's *power to* act and the organiser's ability to set expectations for how principals should manage their schools. In contrast, Alice argues that the regulation does not significantly limit middle managers' power, a view supported by her colleague, chief education officer Adam. Alex, however, maintains:

> My principals oversee a large number of staff, which makes them the primary superordinates. They must persuade others that decisions are sound, that decisions are to be implemented […], and I must work alongside them. (Middle manager Alex)

A similar concern arises in LEA B, where chief education officer Basil questions who holds the *power to* structure and make decisions regarding the internal organisation of schools:

> We're suffering […] a "principal illness". Since the introduction of the new Education Act in 2011, it has spread like wildfire among Sweden's principals. Principals were finally given the freedom to act as they pleased, as the Act states they have authority over the school's internal organisation. (Chief education officer Basil)

Some principals interpret the Education Act as granting them full control over internal organisation, thereby limiting the influence of middle managers, local education administrations, and even councillors. Middle manager Cecilia in LEA C similarly asserts that public power rests with principals, not with her. This interpretation is particularly problematic in LEA B, where hierarchical structures are pronounced, unlike LEA C, which promotes flatter organisational models. In LEA A1, middle manager Adriana describes a continuous balancing act, involving ongoing dialogue about the appropriate scope of middle manager involvement. However, several chief education officers reject this restrictive reading of the Act. While the Act forms part of the regulative pillar, its varied interpretations underscore the role of the normative pillar in shaping power dynamics. The cultural-cognitive pillar may also influence perceptions, as power can be legitimised by what is "ingrained in the walls". Prior experience as a principal may further shape middle managers' identity and perceived authority. For middle managers to exercise power effectively, they must be recognised as authoritative – whether through formal position or perception. When their mandate is unclear and they supervise principals with strong mandates, a lack of perceived authority can significantly limit their influence.

Concluding Discussion

Both a theoretical and an empirical paradox emerge from this article. In brief, the theoretical paradox lies in the fact that none of the three pillars alone can adequately explain the power of middle managers. Rather, they must be considered collectively, not least since the pillars encompass contrasting elements, such as regulations and norms. The empirical paradox concerns state regulations. In its efforts to assert control over education governance, the central government has introduced regulations targeting both principals and *skolchefer*. The local level has consequently responded by appointing other officers – who are not subject to state regulation – to oversee governance processes and carry out the necessary work.

Theoretically, the paradox lies in the fact that none of the three institutional pillars alone is sufficient to explain the power exercised by middle managers, nor to reliably categorise groups of middle managers in distinct categories of administrative power. Take the regulatory pillar, for instance; although it remains highly relevant, its explanatory capacity has somewhat diminished in the 2020s. The traditional legal-bureaucratic model is based on uniform and enduring rules that govern the relationship between public administration and citizens. Officers are expected to act with neutrality, integrity, and impartiality. However, the rigidity of this model represents a significant weakness (Rothstein, 2023). While it is well-suited to routine tasks in stable environments, it proves inadequate when faced with challenges that demand innovation and adaptability (Petersson, 2021), rendering it increasingly ill-suited to developments within the Swedish educational governance system in the 2020s.

In theory, the regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive perspectives legitimise the exercise of different forms of power. The findings in this article provide examples of how middle managers exercise *power over*, *power to*, and *power with*, though the statement carries nuances. The forms of power can shift depending on the situation and are sometimes constrained. There is a need to look beyond the regulative lens. In this article, I show that normative and cultural-cognitive perspectives are vital for understanding how power is exercised by middle managers in Swedish local education administrations. Notably, when multiple dimensions govern institutions, complexity inevitably arises. I demonstrate that when middle managers act beyond their formal hierarchical roles, their exercise of power can be legitimised with recourse to any of the three institutional perspectives, which may serve as interpretive frameworks at best. These perspectives help explain the structures intended to constrain actors; however, individuals may still make decisions that challenge or circumvent these constraints.

Figures 1 to 4 illustrate that the number of middle management layers between chief education officers and principals ranges from none to two. Fewer layers may facilitate clearer

lines of accountability. In the findings section, I highlight the opaque distribution of power in LEA B. While accountability is strengthened when "authority, mandates, responsibility, rules, standards, goals, and expectations" are clearly defined and consistently applied, ambiguity undermines its effectiveness (Olsen, 2014: 107). Operating amid role ambiguity and multiple stakeholders, middle managers may make poor decisions without consequences – or be held accountable for decisions they did not make. This risk can be mitigated if institutions succeed in aligning middle managers' norms with those of the municipality (DiMaggio and Powell 1991; Hall and Taylor 1996).

Empirically, while the regulation of principals and *skolchefer* has, to some extent, reinforced state control, my findings indicate that it has also had significant implications at the local level. In effect, the state's governance dilemma has merely been relocated to the municipal level, at a time when the traditional legal-bureaucratic model no longer functions as the sole governing mechanism. The emergence of often-powerful middle managers has introduced additional complexity into the governance structure – not primarily at the central level, but locally. In other words, the state's attempt to reduce complexity has, paradoxically, increased it at the local level. The growing number of middle managers is, in itself, a paradox. Furthermore, Table 1 illustrates that, in certain cases, the formal mandate of the *skolchef* does not reside with the chief education officer, but has instead been delegated to middle managers within the local education administration. This introduces an additional layer of complexity, as it cannot be assumed with certainty that the state mandate is held by the most senior officer. Additionally, the expanding presence of middle managers has given rise to uncertainties regarding the scope of their power, as well as pressing concerns about conflicting expectations and accountability.

First, let us examine the opportunities and challenges middle managers face in attempting to exercise *power over*, *power to*, and *power with*, and how regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive perspectives shape their ability to enact these different forms of power.

Echoing previous research, I demonstrate in this article that while responsibilities are often delegated downwards, power tends to remain concentrated at the top. Middle managers are assigned tasks by chief education officers, but do not always hold the mandate to exercise *power over* subordinates. Nonetheless, they possess a degree of budgetary power, formally held by the municipal executive committee but sometimes delegated. Despite lacking a clearly defined legal mandate, their hierarchical position and financial power render them powerful actors. In this context, the principal's formal mandate becomes comparatively less significant. For some middle managers, budgetary control is a key source of power; for others, collaborative forms such as *power with* are more central. In some cases, the absence of budgetary responsibility can even be experienced as a relief. Overall, the type of power exercised by middle managers varies and is shaped by local norms and cultural-cognitive factors.

Furthermore, in this study, I highlight variations in perceptions and interpretations of power, particularly concerning who has the *power to* act. One contested area concerns schools' internal organisation. As recounted, chief education officers believe middle managers can do more, while middle managers argue that principals control internal organisation and that principals' tangible power circumscribes their own. Although middle managers are hierarchically above principals, their interpretation of their role can constrain their actions. Thus, multiple institutional pillars are at play. While certain regulations position middle managers above principals, others – such as those concerning defined mandates or the absence thereof, as well as normative and cultural-cognitive perspectives – may serve to invert the hierarchical structure entirely.

In line with previous research, middle managers also exhibit varying degrees of *power with*, shaped by a context informed by regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive perspectives. The findings present contrasting examples: one chief education officer enforces a strict hierarchical structure, while another promotes a flatter, consensus-driven approach. The data suggest that close collaboration fosters broad co-determination, whereas hierarchical models provide clearly defined mandates within more limited domains. Furthermore, shared power can either facilitate equitable distribution or obscure underlying imbalances. Given the varied contexts in which middle managers operate, their performance may differ across environments. A manager

undervalued in a hierarchical setting might thrive in a collaborative one, while someone suited to hierarchy may struggle elsewhere.

Second, let us consider how expectations sometimes come into conflict. The types of power middle managers exercise are linked to their roles. They face conflicting expectations from both chief education officers and principals, and risk subordination to both, as each holds a stronger state mandate. While chief education officers believe middle managers could assume greater authority, middle managers often feel constrained by principals' mandates. For instance, consider the example of middle manager Alex, who is willing to relinquish his power in favour of the principals, even when this contradicts the opinion of chief education officer Alice. These perceptions shape the kinds of power middle managers can exercise, echoing previous research stating that actors' perceptions influence governance outcomes. Middle managers must also navigate which institutional logic – regulative, normative, or cultural-cognitive – takes precedence. Middle managers often experience role conflict, such as uncertainty over whom to follow and whether to prioritise broader local school governance or their specific school form or area.

Third, let us consider the issue of accountability within this context. As previously noted, in response to emerging needs, many municipalities have appointed non-regulated officers to take on responsibilities that fall outside the scope of formally regulated roles. Building on this article's findings – that power may not reside with the one initially assumed – the issues of accountability and predictability become pressing. Although accountability and predictability are common features of the regulative pillar, the influence of normative and cultural-cognitive perspectives raises concerns about whether these aspects are adequately safeguarded. Middle managers' actions are partly shaped by personal interests, whether focused on children's welfare, career progression, or external agendas. When they deviate from established practice, perform poorly, or act with questionable intent, their relatively unregulated power can lead to unpredictable outcomes for professionals and citizens, potentially causing greater disruption than more tightly governed actors. However, suppose power rests with competent and well-intentioned officers. In that case, their involvement can be beneficial – provided they exercise their power wisely and in ways that serve the best interests of the municipality. Nevertheless, the overall difficulty in determining who, in reality, holds power within the system remains a significant challenge, as it complicates the vital issue of accountability – a fundamental principle of any democratic framework.

In this article, I have adopted an exploratory rather than a comparative or generalising approach. In doing so, I have laid the groundwork for a more extensive comparative study to be undertaken in future research. To conclude, I demonstrate that middle managers possess various forms of power, and that both the scope and the manner in which this power is exercised vary considerably. In the discussion, I also highlight two paradoxes – one theoretical and one empirical – which underscore the complexity inherent in the governance of education and its scholarly examination. What remains clear is that middle managers are powerful officers, far from being "just another brick in the wall".

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

Notes

[1] A school form manager (*verksamhetschef*) is responsible for a specific type of school, such as preschools or compulsory schools. A school area manager (*skolområdeschef*) is responsible for a number of schools within a specific geographic area. A principal (*rektor*) is the head teacher responsible for a specific school, and a chief education officer (*förvaltningschef för utbildning*) has the utmost responsibility for all municipal schools within a municipality.

[2] The figures do not depict managers responsible for human relations, finances, and other such functions.

[3] The term *skolchef* (plural *skolchefer*) is specific to the Swedish education system and is therefore retained in its original form, as there is no direct equivalent in English. All organisers are required to appoint a *skolchef*, whose role is to ensure compliance with the regulations governing education.

[4] A second-tier middle manager is positioned on the organisational chart between middle managers and principals.

[5] Carl has worked in the municipality for six years this time around, but has also worked in the municipality twice before.

[6] This article constitutes the final article in a doctoral thesis. A separate article draws on the same data but focuses on autonomy and its domains. This article instead explores different forms of power through three institutional perspectives.

[7] Hierarchical position is part of the regulative pillar, although the pillar also encompasses other aspects.

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Appendix 1. Interview Guide

This version of the interview guide was used with one of the middle managers. Slight variations of this version were used in other interviews depending on the respondent's position.

Respondent

- How long have you held your position?
- Why did you apply for/obtain the position?
- What was your line of work in the past?
- Where have you worked previously? When?
- What is your educational background?

Organising the Local Education Administration

- Describe the organising of the local education administration.
- Why does the organising of the local education administration look like that?
- Who is the superordinate of whom?
- Who are your subordinates?
- Who is the superordinate of principals?
- Is there yet another layer of officers (superordinates) between you and the principals?
- Are you a *skolchef*?
- Are there other *skolchefer* besides you?
- During your time at the administration, has there been a change in the organising? If so, what changes have there been? Describe. The changes could regard units that have been moved or positions that have been added or removed.
- Has the reorganising resulted in new tasks for you? Provide examples.
- Why were you assigned those tasks?

Function and Mandate

- Imagine I am you arriving at work tomorrow; what do I usually do?
- What are your work tasks?
- What tasks do you spend the most time on?
- What tasks do you wish you could spend more time on?
- Are there tasks delegated which are not accounted for in the delegation order?
- Do you have a job description or similar?
- Who or whose interests/needs are you meant to work for?
- Do you work for the same interests/needs as the chief education officer, or can there be a difference?
- Are there situations you wish you could solve but cannot, as you do not have the mandate required?

Relationships at Work

- From what I understand, there is one school form manager for preschool, one for compulsory school, and a school nutrition manager; how closely do you and the other officers work?
- To what extent do you work as a team?
- Do you work more closely with one of them? Why is that?
- How closely do you and the chief education officer work?
- Do you simply enter the chief education officer's office when you wish to talk, or do you schedule an appointment?
- Do you discuss matters in the corridor?
- Do you know how the other school form manager and the school nutrition manager cooperate with the chief education officer?
- Tell me how you work with the principals.
- Do the principals raise ideas they wish to forward to the administration? What could they be about, and how are these initiatives handled?
- Do you know how the other school form manager works with her/his principals?
- Do you work more closely with the chief education officer or the principals?
- Why do you work more closely with the chief education officer or the principals?
- Do you present matters to the committee?
- Are you in any other way in touch with the committee? With whom and in what context?
- Do you seek direct contact with anyone on the committee? When? (working committee, presidium, chair, councillors[7])
- Do you know how the other school form manager works with the committee?
- Is there a link between the principals and the chief education officer?

- Is there a link between the principals and the committee?
- Who else do you meet at work?
- What other functions are most valuable to your function?
- Who are you in regular contact with?
- How often are you approached by:

  Politicians?

  The chief education officer?

  Principals?

  Guardians?

  Where, when, and why is that?
- When you need advice, who do you speak to? Both regarding less and more serious matters.
- In those instances, do you consult the delegation order?
- Are there situations when you have to handle contradictory expectations? From whom? Provide an example of a situation.
- How frequently do you visit schools?
- Tell me about those visits.
- Does the principal accompany you during the visits?
- Are you in contact with anyone at the schools except the principals? In what context?

Autonomy (Mandate and Authority)

- How great do you consider your autonomy to be?
- Are you satisfied with this autonomy?
- Is there a situation in which you would have wished for more encompassing autonomy?
- Has there been a situation in which you have maximised your autonomy (or perhaps even exceeded it)?
- Why are you satisfied/not satisfied with the autonomy? Provide examples of situations.
- Given that there is another school form manager in the administration, how similarly or differently do you think you work?
- How much room is there to perform the job differently?
- What is the most difficult about being a school form manager?
- What does a school form manager like you have to:

  Know?

  Understand?

  Know in this municipality?
- Many municipalities do not have middle managers. Think freely, what significance is there in having (or not having) a middle manager?
- What difference do you make in the chain of governance?

Governance/Power (Practice)

- Would you primarily describe yourself as a head or as a leader? Why is that?
- In what situations do you consider yourself a head, and in what situations do you consider yourself more of a leader?
- In what way do you exercise power?
- Principals are regulated in the Education Act, but, looking at how principals are affected by actions at the municipality level, would you say that you or the chief education officer has more influence on principals' work?
- Do you think the governance performed by the administration would differ if there were no middle manager level?

Last

- Is there anything else you would like to add?
- Could I get in touch if questions arise?
- Thank you.