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This article reports an empirical reconstruction of a successful ten-year multi-level and district-led school regional developmental turnaround process (2003–2012) in Finland. Successful development was identified using PISA data. The reconstruction is based on policy documents and interviews with principals, superintendents, and district leaders. Results show that PISA 2003 shook the region while previous national policies provided a mediating frame for later development initiatives supporting a shared process. Features of the multi-level and multi-professional top-down and bottom-up process were: clear ambitions and goal-setting, commitment, care, and coherent, systematic development-driven initiatives. The study was based on non-affirmative education theory.

**Keywords:** educational leadership · multi-level school development · non-affirmative education theory

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# Educational leadership for sustained multi-level school development in Finland

– *A non-affirmative approach*

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## Introduction

Finland has become known for a high level of performance in schools. There has been less focus upon existing regional variation within the country and upon changes over time. This article contributes to this lack by aiming to understand a regional turnaround process in Finland from an educational leadership perspective.

Over a ten-year period (2003–2012), the district of Åland, a Swedish-speaking region in the south-west of Finland, improved its level of achievement in mathematics in schools. In 2003, the schools in this region performed below the national PISA mean score in mathematics in Finland. PISA 2009 data showed that the schools were over-performing, that is, from a national perspective the results were higher than could be ex-

pected given the socio-cultural composition of the schools (Uljens & Korhonen, 2012). The results remained at this higher level in PISA 2012, while the PISA results in the country as a whole decreased (Harju-Luukkainen et al., 2014). The obvious question, lacking an answer, is: how might this regional turnaround be explained?

Table 1. PISA results in mathematics in the district of Åland and in Finland 2002, 2009, and 2012

	2003	2009	2012
Åland	526	536	534
Finland	544	541	519

In this study we will reconstruct educational leadership practices, policies and initiatives on different levels that turned out to be successful.

### Previous research

The literature on school effectiveness, school development, educational leadership research, and malleable factors featuring successful schools and districts paints quite a coherent picture. A Nordic research team (Nordenbo et al., 2010) recently carried out a large scale meta-analysis of internationally highly-regarded quantitative and qualitative empirical research on *school factors* explaining school achievement. The meta-analysis was based on Scheerens's (1997, 2000) model of empirical relations connected to school performance, and Uljens' (1998) theory of school *Didaktik*. These approaches, like others (e.g. Scheerens, 2012; Hallinger & Ko, 2015), perceive institutional education as a *multi-level* and multi-dimensional activity system based on educational intentions, processes and reflection (evaluation) at classroom level, school level, and policy-administrative level. Seashore, Leithwood, Wahlstrom and Anderson (2010), who view transformational leadership as a network of influence and

control, concluded that principals' impact on pupil achievement occurs primarily *indirectly* through their influence on teachers' motivation and working conditions (see also Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Seashore, 2015). In this study we explore how to approach the indirect and multi-level character of leadership influence on learning.

In explaining schools' success, research points at a variety of factors (Hattie, 2009). A conclusion for decades (e.g. Coleman et al., 1966) has been that a pupil's social and cultural background is one of the strongest predictors of school achievement. However, from an educational leadership perspective it is of greater interest to understand how malleable factors such as leaders' leadership, teachers' teaching and pupils' studying explain success and change over time.

In a meta-analysis, Nordenbo et al. (2010) found evidence that the consistently strongest malleable predictors concerning pupil performance were: 1) teacher-related factors (e.g. behavior and beliefs, self-efficacy, subject knowledge, organizational action), 2) management and leadership activities, 3) curriculum and scheduling, and 4) school culture and climate (disciplinary climate, achievement/progress orientation, interrelational climate, social norms and values). These four dimensions were visible in quantitative studies (e.g. Kitchen, 2006; Lindsay 2006; Picucci et al., 2002; Pressley et al., 1994; Ringsmose & Mehlbye, 2004; Taylor et al., 2000; Towns et al., 2001, 2000; Willis, 1996), in qualitative studies (Trauffer & Trauffer, 2002; Grisay, 1994), and mixed studies (Sammons et al., 1997) alike. More recent results support these results (Hallinger & Wang, 2015).

Nordenbo et al. (2010) concluded that when the principal "demonstrates strong leadership, especially in the areas of curriculum and instruction, and is able to involve other staff members in leadership activities and positions ... (and) the principal's behav-

ior is supportive and egalitarian and neither directive nor restrictive, and that the principal is 'resource supportive', e.g. in deciding textbooks and contents of the teaching," this had positive effects. It was also beneficial if there was support and respect for staff and pupils, and warmth in teacher-pupil relationships, and if teachers could obtain assistance, advice, and encouragement, felt accepted by their colleagues, and had a sense of ownership. Also, if the school is perceived as a community, this contributes positively to achievement, supporting the view of leadership as distributed over levels and those involved (Leithwood, 1994; Spillane, 2012). Explicit communication of educational goals to staff, a shared vision of common goals, visible leadership, priority of staff development, and allowing teachers to experiment with the teaching when based on principles or ideas, were all beneficial (Kitchen, 2006; Picucci et al., 2002; Pressley, 1994; Taylor et al., 2000; Texas, 2000). Dialogical leadership and communication with teachers was important (Florida, 1994), but also that teachers and leaders were certified. More general collective teacher efficacy, commitment to school mission, commitment to professional community, and commitment to community partnerships, as well as established good relations with parents and guardians, all support pupils' high academic achievement (Ross & Gray, 2006). In addition, high staff morale, that is, strong internal support and teachers informing their planning with research and professional development, was more frequent in successful schools. Successful schools also focus on individual pupils' academic achievement, especially low performers, and reduce rote learning while inviting parents and guardians to support the mission of the school.

Quantitative studies generally show small direct effects of leadership on pupil achievement (Rogers et al., 2006). Sometimes there

are even negative effects which may be explained by challenging school environments that demand more active policy-adapted leadership affecting instructional leadership (Hallinger & Ko, 2015).

### **School leadership between local realities and collective policies**

Although parental education predicts school performance well, some of the best scoring PISA pupils in Finland are found in rural regions with a relatively low parental educational level. These districts, located in the eastern and northern parts of Finland, are characterized by high unemployment, a weak economy, high municipal taxation, and low scores on happiness indexes. In these regions, success in schools is considered, especially by girls, to guarantee a possibility for individual success later in life.

These high-performing pupils in economically weak regions may be compared with districts from where some of the lowest-scoring PISA pupils in Finland come. These too are rural districts with parental educational levels below the national average. However, these lower-performing PISA municipalities demonstrate a strong economy, a low unemployment rate, and score high on happiness indexes (McRae, Bennett & Miljan, 1988; Helliwell, Layard & Sachs, 2013). From the pupils' perspective, academic success in school does not necessarily appear worth pursuing, as this does not hold any evident promises for later success in life. These findings point to a need to develop how school success is related to not only parental education but also to regional conditions.

In addition, new education policies have resulted in new forms of evaluation, governance, leadership, and curriculum construction, at all levels of the school system. State and federal policy changes influence legislation (Russell, Meredith, Childs, Stein & Pri-

ne, 2015). Stronger policy-driven accountability expectations may put principals under pressure from above (Hallinger & Ko, 2015). These policies operate on and between transnational, national and regional levels in complex ways. How such developments affect schools vary, partly depending on how these trends are mediated and adapted to at the nation state level. Making sense of educational leadership at a regional or district level thus requires that attention is paid to the *policy culture of the country* in question. In turn, regional authorities mediate between broader contextual influences and individual schools.

In this study, discursive institutionalism (DI) (Schmidt, 2008) is made use of to grasp the multi-level and dynamic character of leadership. This approach starts from normative and cognitive ideas at a philosophical, policy and program level. These ideas occur as either a coordinative or a communicative discourse, depending on the prevailing political system. This approach can help reveal how those involved position themselves in relation to these ideas (e.g. curricular aims and contents) and how they are reconstructed.

DI is utilized to identify the policy culture in Finland as representing a *coordinative* orientation within a tradition of political consensus with broad governments. By contrast, simple polities, that is, predominantly right or left-wing governments, display a communicative discourse between politics and the public, trying to convey ideas. Coalition governments provide more independence for the educational administration. To exemplify: in Finland the national curriculum is accepted not by the parliament or the Ministry of Education, but by the National Board of Education as the central governing authority. This reflects an institutionalized form of trust on the part of political powers towards the administration. Another example: the

responsibility for the evaluation of learning results is located at the municipal level. In such a polity, it is not odd that teachers' autonomy is trusted. This policy tradition may explain why Finland has been reluctant to adopt, in fact has even resisted, the implementation of international accountability initiatives (Sahlberg, 2015; Uljens, Wolff & Frontini, in press). National policy traditions are not easy to change, but as they vary across states and over time and mediate transnational movements, these policy cultures cannot be overseen in aiming at understanding leadership for school development.

### **Non-affirmative theory of education as framing research on school development**

Despite the strengths of Schmidt's (2008) version of institutionalism, a limitation in it can be seen, as DI does not contain any explicit theory of education. Therefore, this study is anchored in non-affirmative, general education theory (Benner, 1991; Uljens, 2015; Uljens & Ylimaki, 2015). This is an approach aimed at foundational and system-wide understanding of institutionalized education (eg. Saeverot, 2015; Siljander, Kiveliä & Sutinen, 2012; Oettingen, 2006). This approach offers us a position concerning two fundamental questions: a) how the relationship between education and politics, as well as between education and the economy, is explained, and b) how pedagogical leadership as educational influence is explained in a leadership-teaching-studying-learning process. Regarding the first question, this position assumes *non-hierarchical* relations between education and politics, as well as between education and the economy. Regarding the second question, a *non-affirmative theory of educational influence* is accepted (Benner, 1991; Uljens, 1998, 2015; Uljens & Ylimaki, 2015). This is a conceptual correlate or re-

response to an insight from comparative research showing that a feature of successful school systems is a *system-wide* approach to all matters involved (Darling-Hammond & Rothman, 2010; Fullan, 2010; Hallinger & Wang, 2015; Sahlberg, 2015).

The principle of non-hierarchical relationships between, on the one hand education, and on the other hand politics, as well as all other societal forms of practices, means that education is both sub- and super-ordinate in relation to these other practices (Benner, 1991; Uljens, 1998, 2015). Assuming a non-hierarchical nature of these relationships means that they are constitutively open. These open relationships consist of negotiations of the meaning of practices, values, knowledge and politics behind initiatives, or overt in initiatives. The principle of non-hierarchicality assumes that the future of a democracy is dependent on an education that promotes it, that is, an educational practice that is allowed to question established norms and knowledge, but in such a way that education simultaneously prepares youth for future political participation, yet in a non-determined way.

To defend a non-hierarchical approach as a theoretical point of departure does not mean that all western societies empirically operate in a non-hierarchical fashion. Rather, to what extent this occurs is an empirical question. In fact, top-down oriented and outcomes based hierarchical education policies are frequent.

This is why educational leadership, teaching, and school development are considered as *mediating* activities between different *epistemic* practices (theory of teaching, learning, content matter, law, administration, cultural practices, architecture, IT, etc.) and *value dimensions* (ethics and politics). In this mediation, those involved position themselves differently (Tigerstedt, 2012) depending on their personal preferences, professional

competencies and responsibilities as well as their position, tradition and existing norms (Saarukka, 2014).

Furthermore, a theory of educational leadership must explain influence (Yukl, 2002). This study is based on a view that education in democratic educational institutions is primarily about influencing others in a *non-affirmative* way. In this process, the concepts of *recognition*, *summons to self-activity*, and *Bildsamkeit* are significant (Benner, 1991; Schaffar & Uljens, 2015; Uljens, 1998, 2015; Uljens, & Ylimaki, 2015).

*Non-affirmative* pedagogical leadership, at different levels, is about calling attention to, questioning, or problematizing contemporary practices, existing values, or knowledge. The same is done with future ideals. As with existing societal norms, future ideals are taken seriously but questioned for educational purposes in order to create a reflective space for the Other. These norms and ideals are not simply affirmed. In one word, education is then about *summoning* (German: *Aufforderung*) the Other to self-activity. This means that the educator and leader as a moral practitioner takes a position, but in such a way that a reflexive space is co-constructed for the Other to establish or re-establish his or her own relationship to himself or herself, others, and the world. The learner's activity is called *Bildsamkeit*. *Bildsamkeit* is the learner's intentional activity in relation to the summons.

Furthermore, the principle of non-affirmative influence is based on the concept of *recognition* (Honneth, 2003; Fraser & Honneth, 2003). To *recognize* the Other means to accept the Other's freedom or non-determinedness, but also to acknowledge the Other's empirical life-word. In addition, as the individual's self-worth, self-esteem and self-awareness depend on how the individual is received this points towards an ethical demand. These dimensions are important in any pro-

fessional culture. The leader is confronted with the fact that the Other's self-development is related to how the individual is summoned (Honneth, 2010; Ranciere, 2010). Thus educational development work is viewed as systematic interruption, that is, an *intervention* in the Other's relationship to himself or herself, other people, and the world (Honneth, 2003). The position acknowledges the necessity of the subject's own agency as a necessary requirement for transcending a given state. To what extent educational leaders and teachers live up to non-affirmative education is an open, empirical question. It may even be that applied policies invite leaders and teachers to the opposite, that is, to affirmative activities making use of others in order to reach intended aims.

Against this conceptual framework, this study shows a specific region in Finland developed into a nationally top-performing one regarding its pupil achievement in mathematics. In focusing upon the regional level working with professional and school development, together with school heads and teachers, we see this as a broad version of a professional learning community (Harris & Jones, 2010).

## Methods

### Unit of analysis

Given a system-wide approach, we see school development as occurring simultaneously on different levels and consisting of a multitude of initiatives. In this study, 'region' as the unit of analysis means that district and regional governance is seen as the coordinating and mediating level, being influenced and framed by a national and transnational governance system (laws, policies, governance, curriculum, evaluation) and embedded in a local culture and economic system in the way it leads the schools' development work.

How regional governance of education is organized varies between countries (Moos, 2013). However, to use a district or municipality as the unit of analysis in Finland is defensible, given the constitutional autonomy of municipalities in Finland reflecting wide responsibilities on all matters involved, and them having a significant role in developing curricula and evaluation. The municipal education boards also make the decisions to establish or close down schools. The superintendent works closely with school principals. The semi-independent region of Åland with its even larger autonomy is not a typical municipality in Finland. With respect to autonomy, this region is, in fact, much more self-sufficient than ordinary municipalities. Despite of this, Åland was selected due to its success in improving school achievement.

### *The design of the study: selecting a successful district in Finland*

To identify "a successful district" is relative to its own educational context and preconditions. Therefore we observe that there are clear differences between, first, what size the variation is between schools' achievement levels *within* each Nordic country. Finland, for example, has remarkably few schools performing below the Pisa average of 500p. Second, there are differences between the Nordic countries with respect to how the variance between schools' achievement levels is connected to the schools' socio-cultural composition. Välijärvi and Malinen (2003, p. 127) pointed out that in Finland only 6% of the between-school variance in reading proficiency could be explained by the schools' socio-cultural status, while this was 20% in Iceland and 61% in Sweden, the OECD average being 55%. These results suggest that a) variance between schools in Finland is smaller than elsewhere, and b) that school variance in Finland must be explained

mainly by other factors than the schools' socio-cultural status (SCES).

How small is the difference, then, between the highest and lowest performing schools in Finland? In PISA 2003, the best Swedish-speaking PISA school in Finland reached 600p in math while the lowest had a mean of 438p. As the schools' SCES varies, it is necessary to eliminate this effect for school developmental reasons. After having controlled for pupils' socio-cultural home backgrounds, the variation between schools' mean score in literacy, measured in PISA 2009 in Finland, is around 100p (Uljens & Korhonen, 2012). It is reasonable to expect that this remaining variation of 100p partly depends on variation in the schools' educational culture, leadership, and development, as well as on other factors.

If there is a sustained improvement over time in the achievement level of a district or a municipality, *after* having controlled for the socio-cultural pupil composition in this district, then it is of interest to understand how this improvement is connected to initiatives at the district level.

#### *The district selected for this study*

In this study we have selected a district (Åland) that demonstrates a validated steady improvement in achievement level over more than six years. PISA data is valid for describing differences between countries and between regions within countries, not between individual schools. We identify three measurement points: 2003, 2009 and 2012.

In PISA 2003, the district of Åland, a region in the south-west of Finland, was a lower-performing district in mathematics in Finland (526p). The national PISA 2003 average in Finland was 544p, while the average for Swedish-speaking schools in Finland was 534p (Väljjarvi et al., 2007). So, the results for Åland were below the mean in Finland and also below the mean in Swedish-speak-

ing or bilingual regions in Finland. However, when controlling for SCES, no statistically significant differences between Swedish and Finnish-speaking pupils could be observed in mathematics, literacy, and problem-solving, only in natural sciences (Brunell, 2009, p. 69). In addition, in comparison to other Swedish-speaking districts in Finland, the Åland region performed equally well when controlling for SCES (Brunell, 2007, p. 32). In PISA 2003, the pupils in Åland performed according to what could be expected given the parental educational level.

The rise of the achievement level is seen six years later, in PISA 2009. When our research group received the PISA 2009 data, it was realized, in 2011, that Åland was the only over-performing Swedish-speaking or bilingual district in Finland, demonstrating an achievement level higher than what could be expected given the socio-cultural composition of the schools in this region (Uljens & Korhonen, 2012). In contrast to high-performing, "over-performing" is here defined as a performance level that is higher than an estimated mean value calculated for a region or school given the sociocultural composition of that school or region.

In PISA 2012, mathematics was again the *main* focus, as it was in 2003. Comparisons over time were now possible. In PISA 2012, Åland was not only over-performing relative to the SCES composition of schools but nationally top-performing, achieving better results in mathematics than Finland as a nation, thereby demonstrating sustained success (Harju-Luukkainen, Nissinen, Stolt & Vetenranta, 2014).

#### *Some key characteristics of the governance system in Åland*

The Åland Islands, or Åland, is located between Finland and Sweden in the Baltic Sea. The Åland Islands consist of an archipelago

of small islands and one bigger island called “Fasta Åland.” Åland has a population of approximately 28,000 inhabitants. The Act of Autonomy of Åland was passed by the Parliament of Finland in 1920. Later the legislation was renewed, and the current Autonomy Act, the third, is from 1993. The official language in Åland is Swedish. Åland’s own Parliament (Lagtinget) has the right to pass legislation in certain areas. The most important of these are: education; culture and the preservation of ancient monuments; health and medical care; the environment; the promotion of industry; internal transport; local government; policing; postal communications; and radio and television. The Finnish state takes care of foreign affairs, judicial matters, state taxation, customs, surveying and the coast guard. The general educational level of Åland is lower than in the country as a whole. While 30% of the population of Finland has only completed compulsory education, this is 37% in Åland.

In total, about 650 teachers work in the school system in Åland. In the region there are 9 schools grades 1–9, and 14 schools grades 1–6. In the compulsory schools, 412 primary school teachers were working in 2011. The number of teachers increased by 20 between 2008 and 2011 in the compulsory schools. During the same time, the rate of qualified teachers rose from 77.1% to 91.5%. Official statistics reveal that about half the teachers received their teacher education and training in Finland. A vast majority of the rest of the teachers received their teacher education in Sweden.

### Collection and analysis of data

#### *Interview Data*

Professionals (N=20) in the district administration and schools (government officials, superintendents, and principals) were interviewed twice in two focus groups (group 1: government officials, group 2: superinten-

dents and principals). Two interviewers were present on both occasions. The interviews lasted 65–75 minutes and were carried out at the facilities of the regional governance in Mariehamn in December 2011 and May 2013.

#### *Policy documents*

In the reconstruction of the school developmental initiatives leading to the increase of school performance, thirteen national and regional official documents (laws, policy, curriculum, evaluation, statistics, agreements) were analyzed (see Appendix 1):

- National laws (1994–1998), (n=4)
- National curricula (1995 and 2004), (n=2)
- National statistics (n=1)
- Regional (Åland) curriculum (n=1)
- Regional policies on evaluation (n=2)
- Regional official statistics (n=2)
- Agreements on work in the education sector (n=1)

#### *Analysis*

The analysis of the policy documents and the interviews in the study apply hermeneutic content analysis (From & Holmgren, 2000; Patterson & Williams, 2002). In contrast to empirical phenomenological analysis, the intention in this study was not limited to describing participants’ experiences as such, rather these were analyzed parallel to the policy documents in order to create a wider picture of the developments in the region.

All interviews were transcribed and analyzed on a case by case basis. In the readings of the interviews, core themes concerning educational initiatives and practices were identified – what was done and how were initiatives understood to bring forth change? In the hermeneutic content analysis attention was turned to questions concerning changes in significant practices, relationships and interpretations of how policy initiatives

have had effect. A leading motive in the analysis was *temporality* and the *multi-level* perspective. How were the international PISA results perceived? How did the national policy culture mediate and frame the local work? Theoretically, the idea of non-affirmativity was directing the readings and reconstruction: to what extent were interactions between levels and the people involved directed from the top? In what sense was a bottom-up influence present? The topics and themes were contrasted with the picture growing out of the document analysis in a temporal perspective. How were new initiatives introduced? Similarly, the meanings of the documents were controlled by how respondents in the interviews contextualized initiatives. The interviews thus reflected multiple voices on the relationships between the people involved and initiatives at different levels and among different professional groups.

## Results

### The three phases of successful school development

A significant result of this study was that it was possible to identify three discernable periods of school development work between 1995 and 2013. These were: a) getting used to decentralized practices (1995–2000), b) making use of evaluation results for development purposes (2001–2004), and c) an in-

tentional, full-scale school development program (2005–2013).

The initial interpretation that grew out of the preliminary analysis of the two focus group interviews was that an external occurrence, that is, the PISA 2013 results presented in December 2014, resulted in a local PISA shock. We perceived this occurrence as being the main reason that gave rise to the subsequent intensive development work. This perception did not change after a second interview round one year later (2012). Only after we started analyzing the core initiatives along a time-line and identifying in detail which initiatives and decisions were made with reference to national initiatives on curriculum and evaluation in the 1990's, a different picture established itself. The significance of the PISA 2003 results remained, but the previous period, going all the way back to 1995, was significant for how the PISA results were perceived in Åland. In essence, this region kept to a decentralized pattern of working with curriculum development and educational evaluation after the second wave of curriculum decentralization that was introduced in the mid-1990's in Finland. One indicator for the policy to keep to a decentralized working mode was that the national, new curriculum, reflecting a recentralization introduced in 2004 in Finland, was not reworked for local needs as in the rest of the country.

Table 1. A multilevel reconstruction of leadership for school-development in Åland Islands, Finland over 18 years (1995–2013)

	<b>1995–2000</b> <b>Developing decentralized practices (curriculum, law, evaluation)</b>	<b>2000–2004</b> <b>Mapping the territory and making use of evaluation results and initiation of systematic school development</b>	<b>2005–2013</b> <b>Establishment of systematic school development</b>
<b>Transnational level</b>		Pisa 2003	Pisa 2006, 2009, 2012
National level – Acts	Compulsory Education Law, (including requirements for evaluation) 1998		
– Curricula	National curriculum with decentralized responsibilities 1994		New Curriculum 2004
– Evaluation		National sample based evaluations	National sample based evaluations
<b>Regional level, Åland</b> – Acts	Compulsory Education Law 1995		
– Curricula	Regional curriculum, including decentralized responsibilities 1995, including demands for evaluation	2 revisions of the curriculum from 1995	5 revisions of the curriculum from 1995
– Evaluations		8 subject evaluations	6 subject evaluations
		6 evaluations of study abilities	10 evaluations of study abilities
		3 Åland evaluations in Mathematics	2 Åland evaluations in Mathematics
– Work descriptions, recruitment, and employment conditions		<b>Principals</b> – strict recruitment – evaluation/5 years – new demands on principals <b>Teachers</b> – coordinated further education for teachers	→
<b>District level and school level</b>		Recruitment of school librarians	The leadership of the principal regulated – employee discussions – classroom visits  Developmental meetings with principals.  Multi-professional co-operation.

### 1. Developing decentralized practices 1995–2001

Table 1 shows that Åland received a new compulsory school act, compulsory school decree, and curriculum in 1995 (Grundskolelag, 1995:18; Grundskoleförordning, 1995:95; Ålands landskapsstyrelse, 1995). On the national level, a new curriculum with a decen-

tralized responsibility was launched in 1994 (Utbildningsstyrelsen, 1994). A new legislation for basic education emerged on a national level in 1998 (Lag om grundläggande utbildning 21.8.1998/628; Förordning om grundläggande utbildning 20.11.1998/852).

The Åland superintendents and principals in the interviews refer to the development

work with the curriculum as being important for explaining the reasons for the success in PISA 2009. Åland's curriculum from 1995 was supplemented a total of eleven times by 2013. These revisions have been taken as selective measures, and in most cases they have concerned individual subjects. Also, sections on the learning environment, the pedagogical environment and pupil evaluation have been revised. It is to be observed that the bases for the curriculum originated in 1995, and that the curriculum reform in Finland from 2004 (Utbildningsstyrelsen, 2004) was not implemented in Åland. As Åland has chosen to hold on to the bases for the curriculum from 1995, the changes in the performance level can hardly be traced back to any serious curriculum work. The interviews emphasize that the Åland school districts follow the same curriculum at the same time that the curriculum gives schools a great room for action. This took place after pressure in 1995 from the municipalities, which wanted more room for action for the schools. The Government of Åland replied by distributing the responsibility to the school districts, and in this way decentralization of curriculum work to individual schools took place. Against this background, development work continued in Åland after 2003.

## **2. Mapping the territory by making use of evaluation results and initiation of systematic school development**

The curriculum in Åland was revised twice during the period 2000–2004. Evaluations have marked everyday life in school in Åland, and in 2000–2004 knowledge has been measured a total of seventeen times in Swedish, mathematics, languages, confidence, health and well-being, equality, and PISA. The results from the evaluations led to selective measures which showed a need for school development. The evaluations also

showed great variety between rural and city schools, and schools in the archipelago. Investments in evaluation and school development have been emphasized as an explanation for the success in PISA 2009.

The Finnish National Board of Education in Finland offers municipalities the opportunity to buy results from evaluations. Åland chose to make use of the national evaluation for all its schools. In addition, they have developed tools of evaluation of their own such as Ålandsprovet (the Åland test) in mathematics which is continuously realized in Åland. Ålandsprovet was developed by a group of math teachers in Åland (see Ålands landskapsstyrelse, 2000; Ålands landskapsstyrelse, 2011).

When the remarkable PISA results from 2003 were reported to the public in December 2004, the regional authorities in Åland, together with the municipalities and the schools, had already established a developmental attitude to external evaluations. Moreover, a constructive approach toward school development had been developed through Ålandsprovet. The results from this test are used only for internal school development and no ranking lists are published.

### *Further development measures*

Åland Islands introduced a new principal agreement around the turn of the millennium. This agreement makes demands on pedagogical leadership. The effect of the new principal agreement became visible in 2004, when a natural replacement between generations took place within the sector. A more pronounced image of the demands on principal positions appears. The interviews underscore that the principal agreement placed a greater emphasis on pedagogical leadership and gave the principals a reduced teaching load. The principal agreement presupposes that the principal visits the classroom, and implements the results of dis-

cussions with co-workers, and that the principal's work is evaluated every fifth year. All principals in Åland have temporary employment, and they will continue to have a lesser teaching load than their colleagues on the mainland (Tjänste- och arbetskollektivavtal för undervisningssektorn; UKTA, 2014). All principal positions in Finland and Åland have a teaching load which is determined by the size of the school.

In 2001, school librarians were employed in most schools in Åland. All schools in archipelago municipalities do not have their own school library, but schools are often placed in the same building as the municipal library. In the interviews, it is emphasized that the number of book loans from the school library is high.

### 3. Intentional, full scale school development program 2005–2013

#### *The curriculum*

Åland kept to the decidedly decentralized curriculum, as opposed to the recentralized curriculum that Finland introduced in 2004 (Utbildningsstyrelsen, 2004). Åland continued to revise and supplement the original curriculum from 1995 during 2005–2013. Åland Government has revised and clarified the following sections in the curriculum:

- View of learning and pedagogical environment from the academic year 2005–2006
- Mathematics from the academic year 2005–2006
- Local geography and history from the academic year 2007–2008
- Civics from the academic year 2007–2008
- History from the academic year 2007–2008
- Religion/Philosophy of life from the academic year 2007–2008
- Teaching methods from the academic year 2009–2010
- Physics and chemistry from the academic

year 2010–2011

- Compulsory school attendance and schooling rights from the academic year 2007–2008
- Health literacy from the academic year 2011–2012
- Instructions for assessment from the autumn semester 2013

The revisionary work has been organized by creating horizontal discussion arenas and striving for a more precise content, greater coherence, and common goals. The interviewees emphasize that the curriculum has developed toward common goals, homogeneity, cooperation, and discussion in the different districts. This is also shown when teachers in different subjects have been brought together and horizontal network collaboration has been created. Consequently, curriculum work has aimed to reduce variety and to develop a greater homogeneity as regards content and goals.

The extensive evaluation continued during the period 2005–2013, and eighteen further knowledge measurements have been implemented, in Swedish, mathematics, languages, confidence, health and well-being, equality, digital competence and IT, and Pisa (Ålands landskapsstyrelse, 2011). The regional level in Åland's school system (Ålands landskapsstyrelse) has become more active regarding evaluations. Evaluations have been carried out on a yearly basis. The reason given for the evaluations is that schools would be able to live up to a common established standard. The schools have maintained a traditional methods freedom in teaching. Great trust exists between the different levels in the school system. Open, trusting, internal dialogue takes place, despite a yearly follow-up and inspection. The school leaders and principals themselves in Åland stress that evaluations are important for success and development.

### Further development measures

#### *Teacher recruitment*

The advantage of being able to recruit teachers from both Finland and Sweden is emphasized in the interviews. The teachers are trained either in Sweden or Finland and they are equally distributed between the two countries. This is seen as something positive in the interviews, where it is emphasized that the different educational backgrounds complement each other in school. The interviews underscore that the teachers with a Finnish educational background have good subject knowledge, while teachers with a Swedish educational background are more innovative. It is also pointed out that the latter act more collegially and are more interested in new ways of working. It is possible to discern more subject-focused thinking in the teachers with an educational background in Finland. Both groups are seen as complementing each other, and as offering variation in school for the benefit of the pupils. In Åland comprehensive school, the degree of qualification for teacher employment has increased from 71.1% in 2008 to 91.5% in 2011 (Ålands statistik och utredningsbyrå, 2011b).

#### *Principals*

Both superintendents and principals feel that a substantial change has taken place in leadership. Previously, principals were recruited among teachers with long professional experience. The job of principal was seen as administrative work rather than as pedagogical leadership. The principals stress that they are not merely administrators, but also leaders for an important sector. A leadership-oriented self-image has emerged. A visible leadership has been put into practice, and focus is placed on the schools' proper task, which places pupils at the center and sees work as joint planning by pupils and teachers. In accordance with expectations in the principal

agreement, a new everyday leadership praxis has emerged. Principals incorporate class visits for the purpose of following the teaching on the ground. They also implement co-worker discussions with all the teachers at the school. Pedagogical dialogue has increased accordingly, and work teams have been strengthened. The principals feel that the teachers believe in themselves. The principals exhibit strong quality thinking, and can see the advantages of and often visit in-service training. They participate in discussions, development issues, and recruitment, and ensure that the dialogue reaches the whole staff.

#### *Resources*

Åland has provided good economic provision for schools and education. According to the financial statistics from 2011 (Utbildningsstyrelsen, 2011), the flat rate on the mainland is approximately 78,000 per pupil, while the flat rate in Åland (Ålands statistik och utredningsbyrå, 2011) the same year was circa 12,000 per pupil. Part of the difference in the flat rate per student can be explained by the Åland Islands being a sparsely populated area, and an archipelago municipality with higher costs for school and education. Nevertheless, the regional agencies experience favorable economic provision compared with the wider world, and the challenges experienced are not identified as being based on economic conditions. The interviews reveal an awareness of the positive economic conditions, which of course bring benefits and produce creativity. School authorities in Åland have provided more resources for special education, which makes it possible for the schools to support low-performing pupils at an early stage. Most classes have access to assistants and companion teachers. Pupils' social welfare staff work efficiently, and have the opportunity to cooperate with social services and psychologists.

The number of academically very low-performing pupils is considerably reduced. Investment of resources has been made to divide classes that are already small in size.

### *Pupils*

The basis of pupils in the municipalities has become more variegated. The superintendents and principals note in the interviews that pupil well-being is not at its best, despite efforts in this area. Every other year, investigations into this issue are carried out, and no significant improvement has been seen. It has rather showed that, for instance, girls do not show a high degree of well-being at present. The principals who work in the field feel that there are still many social problems as there are too many child protection reports and more frequent contacts with the social services. The dialogue between parents and guardians and school is seen as strong. The parents and guardians know the pupils' performances, and also dare to challenge uncertainties. Parents and guardians want the pupils to perform well in school, regardless of their own educational background. The superintendents sometimes feel that the school has failed in its communication with parents and guardians, as these people more often turn directly to the superintendents. A major problem for Åland as a whole is the great difference between the performance of girls and boys in school: the former perform very well while the latter have two marks lower in most subjects. The interviewees noted that the difference is not unique to Åland, but that it is higher than in the rest of Finland according to the PISA results. It is this issue that will now be examined. Many pupils today have adapted education, as simultaneously major workforce immigration from other European countries has occurred. Today, 15% of the pupils also have another native language than Swedish. It will be a challenge for teachers to reach all pupils. Much

remains to be learned, and the superintendents point to deficiencies in teaching material, curricula, and in-service training as regards this issue.

## **Six features of successful school development in Åland**

In a parallel analysis of the two transcribed focus group interviews with principals, district leaders and government officials, we were able to identify six features of the process that cut through the data. We see a certain temporality among the first four categories below.

### **1. Shared authentic concern, care and responsibility**

The interviews with the professionals reflect how the PISA2003 results in Åland began a self-critical reflection and developed a growing awareness about their function as teachers and principals. The transnational evaluations challenged the professionals and their pedagogical self-conception. However, instead of resulting in a feeling of disengagement and passivity, quite the opposite feeling was evinced. There was an interest in engaging, in doing something about the situation: "...I think that every teacher and every principal felt a responsibility; something has to be done, we cannot be that bad, we have to become better." The dominant professional approach can be called a caring one. The spirit in the interviews is positive and the participants express no negative feelings about the new, demanding situation. The challenge to pedagogical self-conception, and the expectations communicated, seem to have led to a personal concern and shared responsibility for the situation among the pedagogical professionals on all levels: "we cannot hide anymore with that we have so much else to do, clearly we have a lot to do, but there are good conditions for pedagogi-

cal discussions.” The impression given is that the schools’ response reflected an authentic concern for the situation.

## **2. Communicated expectations as proactive and trusting leadership**

The principals and superintendents in the interviews explain how they perceive that the regional government in Åland communicated clear expectations: “after the results in math came we understood that Åland was left behind. It was like a shared power, you know, the government said that something has to be done.” Obviously, the local government’s proactive initiatives were perceived as reflecting a form of responsibility. The principals did not feel that the local government shook responsibility off their own shoulders, turning it over to the schools in a blaming manner. Instead, the principals’ experience was that the government offered the schools an opportunity: “we got the ball back, that has been a rather healthy insight, to take that ball.” Schools were supported and felt empowered and trusted: “Although the authorities communicate expectations this is done in a way that recognizes the importance of each.” Finally, it should be mentioned that a government official at the regional administration quite obviously took an active role for many years. This clearly shows the importance of personal commitment.

## **3. Coherence made through inclusive dialogue**

Furthermore, the participants describe how they feel that the developmental actions are carried out in a culture aiming at coherence, through open, top-down and bottom-up communication in regular meetings and discussions at all levels. The patterns of communication are perceived as clear, and the participants are able to describe how communication works between the different administrative levels: “But then the government first

invite the superintendents from the region once a month and then the superintendents invite the principals every second week; we try to keep it to three hours but mostly the meetings goes on for four. We still have to work on the connection between the compulsory school and the senior high school.”

The principals apply the same open, coherent communication in the schools as the government and the superintendents do, and there seems to be a positive atmosphere: “I think that the implementation of these new things or measures is carried out; it works much better now than it did before. It actually reaches all the teachers on the classroom floor and everybody gets to know about everything that happens. The information flows in all directions much better now than some ten years ago.” The coherence and the shared understanding is expressed as reaching down to the personal level: “...and now I feel that there is a much more focused thread and an open discussion.”

## **4. Multi-professional co-operation**

It is worth observing that the principals say that it is not only schools that feel responsible for the learning results of the pupils; other municipal operators do too, and there is a communication process that involves health care, youth organizations, and social services: “perhaps, I have the feeling that they (health care and social services) are beginning to realize that we are needed in their job and they in ours. And I think that the contacts are very tight today.”

## **5. Increased focus on co-operation between parents and guardians and school**

The parents and guardians are mentioned in the interviews several times in a trusting and open way. The small archipelago society, where everybody knows each other, enables quick and informal information patterns be-

tween the schools and the parents and guardians, and the parents and guardians mostly share the commitment of the schools to improve learning results, although a small parallel discourse also makes it clear that the parents mostly seem interested in their own child only. The principals report that they see parents and guardians as resources more clearly today: "I think it has to do with the leadership, that we as leaders have the courage to talk aloud about what a resource the parents are; you now, communicate to the parents that they are a resource."

### **6. Pedagogical leadership in a recognizing but non-affirmative way**

The focus group interviews often begin in the past, with the participants explaining why their models for functioning have changed, and they talk about how things used to be, and give examples, such as that a principal used to be an older teacher who in the end of his or her career served as a part-time principal. The role of the principal was, previously, mostly managerial. The principals held common meetings, but the discussions were not goal-orientated and the teachers mostly "ran their own race." The leaders' challenged pedagogical self-conception did change their way of carrying out their duties: "I am not supposed to teach less, and I can and should become better, be on the edge, inspire and spread enthusiasm."

All of the participants in the interviews are pedagogical leaders and they are, as a result of the new work descriptions, clearly conscious about being pedagogical leaders ("we are not teachers in the same way as earlier, it is strongly emphasized that we are pedagogical leaders") and they say that they are aware of their duties.

Our interpretation is that while the district level took a lot of initiatives, this was done in an atmosphere of trust. We see this

as an example of summoning to self-activity in a non-affirmative fashion. For example, when principals started visiting classrooms, this resulted from a clear demand from the administration (new work description), but when put into practice it was an expression of recognizing the teachers' work – it was considered important to acknowledge the teachers and their everyday work. In this way, principals were recognizing the teachers, but in a non-affirmative way – teachers' work was considered so important it had to be acknowledged and "seen," but how teaching was to be developed was an open question and discussed, but not in predetermined way.

## **Discussion**

This study describes school development as a multi-level process including influences from transnational, national, regional and school levels over a long period of time. These results show how district level leadership is crucial in terms of taking, mediating and listening to initiatives.

The school development process was initially occasioned by the PISA 2003 results, as these were perceived unfavorable. Initially, the results had an energizing effect (Mintrop, 2003). Later, however, the process was driven by ambitions developed and shared by all involved. The later process was free from typical accountability-oriented policy practices, using pupil evaluation to misrecognize education professionals. In our interpretation, the national policy tradition in Finland mediated the transnational results. The policy tradition in Finland introduced school development using evaluation data many years before the PISA results reached Åland. We believe that the national policy, in combination with an experience to work with evaluation data in a developmental fashion, had already established itself by the PISA

2003 results. The results demonstrate the strength that lies in shared commitment and developmental teaching, evaluation, and leadership practices distributed across levels and professional groups, where different professionals own the initiative and mediate between interests. The results support Fullan's (2010) interpretations of capacity building, collaborative work, pedagogical discussions, systemness and non-judgmentalism as the right drivers. However, this study reminds us that these drivers may flourish more easily within an education policy discourse typical for Finland: district and regional authorities do, by constitution, have the right and responsibility to evaluate their schools, and national authorities in Finland apply sample-based evaluation procedures, thereby not mapping each school's success.

Success in school development is considered relative to the actual governance system. Looking at the separate initiatives, this study confirms much previous research on school development. In sum, the results show that in terms of school development, distributed and shared practices between administration, principals, and teachers, were successful, building upon trust. Systematic, long-term collaborations of around a decade, between schools, the district level and national authorities, appear important in explaining the success. The policy in Finland to carry out and to offer results from national evaluations to districts was an important enabling service. The opportunity was offered from above, so to speak, but was combined with trust in the local authorities' interests to make use of such results.

Intentional and focused developmental work was crucial. An open communication and distributing responsibility for curriculum and evaluative work created an atmosphere of common concern and care for the situation. While teachers cared for pupils' progress, principals were increasingly en-

gaged in teachers' work. The district and regional authorities cared for the principals' professionalism by, for example, renewing the principals' work descriptions. No new instructional methods were implemented. Trust and collaborative coherence-making between all levels in the school system was important. A rather important factor is a systematic evaluation program used as a developmental tool. The reconstruction of the school development process gives an example of how a whole school community of practitioners can improve by using trust and recognition as drivers for improvement.

Åland is a Swedish-speaking, semi-independent part of Finland. Today, both language groups in Finland perform equally well in tests. The educational level of the Swedish and Finnish speaking populations is identical. Rather, attention should be drawn to the fact that this region is economically well off, but represents a low educational level. Despite this, a turnaround process was successful. It may be that the independence of Åland means that there is a tradition of having the right, but also the obligation, to take care of one's own issues. It may be that this tradition in part explains why this region felt more responsibility than others to get involved in development of education. Also this region has better financing than others for schools. On the other hand, few of the initiatives received increased funding. About half of the school teachers in Åland are natives that received their teacher education in Sweden. A recent survey among teachers pointed out that Åland teachers indeed represent a more critical teacher-culture compared with Swedish-speaking teachers in Finland in general. However, there were no significant differences between those teachers in Åland educated in Finland and those educated in Sweden (Uljens & Mertaniemi, 2015).

The turnaround was generated by developing a future-oriented development cul-

ture of commitment, care, and coherence, making use of many different monitoring vehicles. As shown, initiatives at the national level during the first period also prepared the region for later self-directed developmental work. Authorities indeed turned the Åland school system into a professional learning community. In doing this, a system-wide approach was adopted, where governance by contact rather than contract was frequent. Expectations were negotiated into ambitions, and ambitions were made into renewed practices.

## Appendix I

- Grundskolelag (1995:18) för landskapet Åland (Compulsory School Act for Åland Islands). Ålands lagsamling. Utbildning, kultur och idrott.
- Grundskoleförordning (1995:95) för landskapet Åland (Compulsory School Decree for Åland Islands). Ålands lagsamling. Utbildning, kultur och idrott.
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