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Organizational Professionals Challenging Principal Autonomy and Professionalism?

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Abstract

Swedish principals have traditionally enjoyed a high degree of autonomy, with extensive responsibility for local schools. However, changes in governance and the expansion of central administration have challenged the conditions for principal autonomy and work. Through a multiple-case study of six Swedish municipalities, this paper aims to expand knowledge of the expansion and work of organizational professionals and their implications for traditional professionals. The findings illustrate that principals perceive this expansion as both controlling and supportive. Principals' perceptions vary according to organizational professionals' training, experience, assignments, and approaches to local decision-making. Although the expansion of organizational professionals may challenge principal autonomy at a general level, at the level of practice, principals express navigating these challenges to preserve professional autonomy. Overall, the study demonstrates that it is possible for principals and organizational professionals to develop a mutual understanding of how to control quality and improvement work without undermining principals' professionalism.

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Keywords

Organizational professionals, local education authority, principal autonomy, principal professionalism

Introduction

Since the 1990s, changes in the management and control of many public sectors have led to the expansion of central administration (Alvehus & Andersson, 2018; Hall, 2025). This expansion has involved the employment of professionals tasked with both supporting and controlling traditional professionals (Cronin et al., 2018; Mik-Meyer, 2018). However, previous research shows that despite this dual mandate, professionals in central administration tend instead to "begin[s] to direct other entities of the organization" (Alamaa et al., 2024, p.12). As a result, this expansion has redefined work and decreased autonomy among traditional professional groups (cf. Frostenson, 2015).

These changes in management and control, including the expansion of professionals in central administration, have also been implemented in the field of education (Ball et al., 2011; Jacobsen & Buch, 2016; Lingard & Sellar, 2013; Prøitz et al., 2021), where they have been further reinforced by efforts to address declining student outcomes and growing disparities within and between schools (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2023). In addition, international educational policy increasingly stresses the need for actors at all levels to be accountable for school improvement and student outcomes (Darling-Hammond, 2004).

In Sweden, where this study is situated, these changes in governance—the expansion of professionals at the local education authority level (i.e., intermediate level), and recent policy recommendations stressing actors' shared responsibility for educational improvement—have reshaped the conditions for principals' work and autonomy (Adolfsson & Alvunger, 2020; Antonsson, 2025; Nordholm et al., 2024; Paulsen et al., 2014).

In this paper, we therefore focus on how principals, whom we regard as a knowledge-based occupational group (cf. Evetts, 2009a), perceive the expansion and work of a group of professionals at the local education authority level assigned to quality and improvement work. There is an ongoing discussion of such professional groups. For example, Alamaa et al. (2025) and Noordegraaf (2007) conceptualize them as hybrid professionals. We understand them as organizational professionals, defined as an ideal type of workers who are "responsible for organizing" (Noordegraaf et al., 2014, p.21). At the general level, the expansion of organizational professionals can be regarded as a development based on organizational professionalism (Evetts, 2009b).

Organizations are maintained by their personnel as well as by their institutional environments (Linde & Svensson, 2021). Although individuals are influenced by the organizations in which

they are embedded, they still have sufficient agency to act in alternative ways (Battilana, 2006). Thus, an interplay emerges between organizations, professions, and their institutional contexts, ultimately leading to tensions. Drawing on qualitative data from a multiple-case study of six municipalities, this paper explores tensions at the intersection of organization and profession (cf. Parding, 2007). It aims to expand knowledge about the expansion and work of organizational professionals and their implications for traditional professions within education. The following research questions guide the study:

RQ1: How do principals perceive the expansion and work of organizational professionals?

RQ2: What do the expansion and work of organizational professionals tell us about challenges to principal autonomy and professionalism?

While previous research has studied relationships between managers and controllers or HR experts (Forsberg & Cregård, 2023; Liff & Andersson, 2021), this study explores principals' perceptions of organizational professionals who operate within the same domain of expertise as principals themselves. Research on the expansion and work of organizational professionals—and its consequences for traditional professions in education—remains limited, underscoring the significance of this study. The Swedish case is of particular interest, as the managerial changes described above contrast sharply with Swedish principals' historically strong decision-making authority and professional influence (Wermke et al., 2022). Theoretically, this study contributes by deepening the understanding of organizational professionals and their influence on traditional professions' autonomy and professionalism in education. To contextualize the study, the next section reviews research on principal autonomy and professionalism in the evolving landscape of Swedish education, followed by a presentation of the study's theoretical framework.

Principal autonomy and professionalism in a changing Swedish educational landscape

According to Noordegraaf et al. (2014, p.23), professionalism is socially constructed and can be understood as the outcome of "consciously enacted professionalization projects." In Sweden, principalship originally functioned as a rotating assignment among teachers, grounded in the tradition of *primus inter pares*—the first among equals (Ullman, 1997). However, an extensive transformation of the Swedish school system and changing ideas about governance in the public sector, together with the work of strong interest groups, contributed to separating the principal's role from the teaching profession. Through this process of stratification (Alvehus & Andersson, 2018), Swedish principals initiated a professionalization project that positioned them as leaders of public education (Jarl et al., 2012). Despite detailed state regulations, external control was weak, leaving principals with a high degree of local autonomy (Wermke et al., 2022).

Today, within Sweden's decentralized and goal- and results-oriented school system, educational managers and other professionals at an expanded local education authority level work on behalf of locally elected politicians to prepare and implement decision-making proposals (Jarl, 2025). In addition, local education authorities and principals share responsibility for systematically following up on students' results, allocating resources according to students' needs and improving education in local schools (SFS 2010:800). To fulfill these responsibilities, principals depend heavily on the economic, administrative, and professional resources provided by the local education authority, which adds further complexity to their work (Nordholm et al., 2023; Richard, 2024). In fact, increased control by local education authorities—over finances, recruitment, and areas targeted for improvement—has contributed to tensions between principals and these authorities (Antonsson, 2025; Liljenberg et al., 2023; Ståhlkrantz & Rapp, 2026). In some cases, local education authorities respond swiftly to political pressure by overruling principals' decisions, thereby constraining principal autonomy (Adolfsson & Alvunger, 2020; Liljenberg & Samuelsson, 2025).

The expansion of central administration within local education authorities has further challenged principal autonomy. It has both increased principals' administrative workload and given them less time to focus on what they consider to be the central role of their profession—to improve educational quality (Liljenberg et al., 2023; Jerdborg, 2023; Ärlestig & Törnsén, 2014). In this study, the organizational professionals at the local education authority level are assigned responsibility for quality assurance and improvement—areas previously overseen by principals and teachers. This shift raises concerns that principal autonomy and context-sensitive decision-making may be downgraded in favor of standardized decisions formulated by organizational professionals. This resembles what Ärlestig (2014) calls the power struggle between actors at different levels who all seek to improve education.

Theoretical points of departure

In this section, we outline how the study is informed by two interconnected theoretical points of departure: autonomy at the level of practice and professionalism.

Autonomy at the level of practice

Autonomy in education is widely understood as a multidimensional phenomenon operating on different levels (Frostenson, 2015; Kim & Weiner, 2022). As noted earlier, Swedish principals have traditionally exercised autonomy in their decision-making about educational improvement. Today, however, principal autonomy can be seen as increasingly challenged by changes in governance and administration, as well as by the formal allocation of responsibility for educational improvement to local education authorities. Importantly, though, this does not necessarily imply that principal autonomy is equally limited at the level of practice (cf. Frostenson, 2015).

For the purposes of this study, a clear definition of autonomy at the level of practice is required. We therefore draw on Wermke et al. (2022), who build on Ingersoll's (2003) theorizing on power distribution and control in organizational decision-making. Wermke et al. conceptualize principal autonomy as a two-dimensional phenomenon. The first dimension concerns decision-making power, while the second relates to ensuring appropriate foundations for those decisions. Because autonomy is linked to the locus of power within the organization—that is, "who control the most important *decisions* that are to be made" (Wermke et al., 2022 p.737, original emphasis)—this conceptualization is particularly relevant for our analysis. Furthermore, autonomy is understood as relational and negotiated among actors and within specific contexts (Nordholm et al., 2025). Decision-making authority is therefore not merely a matter of acting independently; it also involves the capacity to exert influence through both formal and informal power relations.

In relation to practice, Cribb and Gewirtz (2007) caution against the normative assumption that autonomy is inherently positive and control inherently negative. Rather, they highlight the complexity of the relationship between autonomy and control, describing both as "always in process" and ubiquitous, as they are "constantly being made and remade, negotiated and renegotiated in all of our daily interactions" (p.205). In addition, Wermke et al. (2022) argue that in complex educational contexts, expanded decision-making authority combined with intensified control may increase the risks borne by individual principals. The more decisions principals are expected to make, the greater their accountability—and the greater their risk. From this perspective, restricted autonomy that reduces individual risk may, at times, be experienced as favorable. Schulte (2023, p.43) further conceptualizes autonomy as individuals' capacity for critical reflection on their options, freedoms, and constraints. Such reflection "does not take place in a vacuum but is bound by norms, which again are produced by (and in turn keep alive) social-cultural, emotional, political, professional, etc. normative systems." In other words, principal autonomy at the level of practice is shaped by both individual capacities and contextual conditions that enable or constrain action.

Expertise, autonomy, and authority are regarded as key dimensions of professionalism (Noordegraaf, 2020, p.207). Principal autonomy can thus be understood as an expression of professionalism. According to Evetts (2009a), the discourse of professionalism can "be analyzed as a powerful instrument of occupational change and social control at macro, meso and micro levels and in a wide range of occupations in very different work, organizational and employment relations, contexts and conditions" (p.20). Hence, we draw on understandings of principal autonomy (Wermke, et al. 2022) and professionalism (Evetts, 2009a, 2009b; Noordegraaf, 2020) to discuss challenges to principals related to the expansion and work of organizational professionals at the level of practice. In the following section, we outline the research design and methodology.

Research design and methodology

This qualitative multiple-case study (cf. Yin, 2009) forms part of a larger project designed to develop knowledge about how local education authorities organize and manage quality and improvement work. Even though the Swedish school system is highly decentralized and heterogeneous and includes many independent school providers, the scope of the present project is limited to municipalities, in line with its overall research objectives.

Six municipalities were strategically selected (Flyvbjerg, 2011) to reflect national variation (Sveriges Kommuner och Regioner (SKR), 2022) in terms of (1) municipality classification, (2) the number of inhabitants, and (3) geographic location. This selection also reflected differences in organizational structures, such as personal and financial resources. Table 1 provides an overview of the municipalities included in the study. To protect anonymity, further identifying details are omitted.

Table 1

The six municipalities involved in the study

Municipalities	Inhabitants	Classification
A	Medium	IV
B	Medium	II
C	Small	III
D	Medium	II
E	Large	III
F	Small	IV
Inhabitants: Small: < 15,000 inhabitants, Medium: 15,000–60,000 inhabitants, Large: > 60,000 inhabitants		
Classification: II: Municipalities near large cities with many commuters, III: Municipalities with or near medium-sized towns, IV: Municipalities with smaller towns or rural municipalities		

The larger project generated data through semi-structured interviews with superintendents and deputy superintendents (who serve as principals' line managers), principals, and local education authority representatives assigned to quality and improvement work (organizational professionals) in the six municipalities. In addition, approximately 100 hours of observations were conducted, capturing interactions among principals, superintendents, deputy superintendents, and organizational professionals. The present study builds on the 81 semi-structured interviews, while the observational data served as a complementary source for contextualizing and validating interview accounts.

The respondents (see Table 2) were recruited through a multi-step process. First, we interviewed superintendents and/or deputy superintendents. Based on their descriptions of various local education authority organizations, we identified and interviewed a selection of organizational professionals assigned to educational quality and improvement work. Finally, we interviewed all principals in the smaller municipalities (C and F), while in the larger municipalities (A, B, D, and E), a selection of voluntary principals participated.

Table 2

Study respondents

Municipality	Superintendents and deputy superintendents	Organizational professionals	Principals
A	2	2	10
B	3	2	12
C	1	2	6
D	2	2	8
E	2	3	11
F	2	3	8
(N = 81)	**12**	**14**	**55**

All interviews started with the respondents describing their professional background, formal education, work experience, and current assignment. They were then asked to reflect on both the present situation and developments over time, particularly changes in central administration and in the roles of organizational professionals. Subsequent questions were tailored to each respondent category and addressed various aspects of how local education authorities organize and manage quality and improvement work, how this relates to the needs of local schools, how it affects principals' work, and how collaboration functions within each organization. Examples of questions posed to principals include: How has quality and development work at the local education authority level changed over time, and what has it meant for you as a principal? How would you describe the local education authority's current quality and development work that you are involved in? How are development needs and initiatives identified and decided upon? What support do you receive as a principal in the quality and improvement work that you are responsible for? What challenges have you identified based on the fact that local education authorities and principals have overlapping responsibilities for quality and development work? The interviews lasted 60–75 minutes and were audio-recorded and then transcribed verbatim. All respondents provided written informed consent prior to participating in the study.

Analysis

First, we read the interview transcripts several times to establish a strong understanding of the respondents' statements. We then conducted an initial descriptive analysis to capture the titles, positions, educational background, work experience, and assignments of organizational professionals and to detect patterns of frequency and similarities between local education authorities (Saldana, 2009). At this stage, we also identified additional parts of the transcripts that were relevant to addressing the study's research questions.

In the second phase of analysis, we conducted an inductive qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) with the goal "to provide knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon under study" (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992, p.314). We followed Graneheim and Lundman's (2004) analysis procedure. In the first step of coding, meaning-bearing units capturing descriptions of organizational professionals and their work, their relation to principals' work, and relations between the two groups of professionals were identified. In the second step, the meaning-bearing units were condensed and coded into sentences describing principals' perceptions of organizational professionals and their work. Each statement was assigned one or more codes. Examples of codes include *mutually supportive, experiencing administrative relief, perceiving work approaches as controlling, and perceiving neglected professional competence.* In the third step, codes were compared and sorted into categories and further clustered into two broad themes. These themes were labeled depending on whether principals perceived the expansion and work of organizational professionals as *controlling* or *supportive*.

In the third phase, we increased the abstraction of the analysis by directing our focus towards principal autonomy and professionalism. Drawing on the work of Wermke et al. (2022) and Noordegraaf (2020), we re-coded the meaning-bearing units by asking two questions: (1) In which areas do organizational professionals make decisions or exert influence? (2) What does this tell us about principal autonomy and professionalism? The outcomes of the analysis are presented in the following section.

Results

We present the results in three sections. The first section outlines the contextual background for the organizational professionals identified in the study, offering a frame of reference against which the findings can be interpreted. The subsequent sections then present two themes that capture how principals perceive the expansion and work of organizational professionals, integrated with an analysis of how principal autonomy and professionalism are manifested at the level of practice.

A myriad of titles, positions, and ways of organizing

The descriptive analysis revealed considerable variation in the organizational professionals assigned to quality and improvement work within local education authorities. Across the municipalities, titles, positions, and organizational arrangements varied widely. In some cases,

these differences reflected municipal size; in others, they did not. Despite this variation, there were significant similarities between the formal education and work experiences of the organizational professionals. All interviewed professionals held university degrees; most had degrees and prior work experience in education, and a smaller number had backgrounds in the social sciences. A detailed overview of titles, formal education, work experience, and areas of responsibility is provided in the appendix.

The medium and large-sized municipalities (A, B, and E) had established specialized units dedicated to quality and improvement work. These units were directed by managers to whom several organizational professionals reported. Meanwhile, in the small municipalities (C and F) and in one of the medium-sized municipalities (D) there were no such units, and, overall, fewer managers and organizational professionals. Thus, while certain similarities were evident, the organization of quality and improvement work also differed across municipalities, reflecting variations in local context.

Principals perceiving the expansion and work of organizational professionals as controlling

The analysis revealed how the principals sometimes strongly questioned the expansion of organizational professionals. They interpreted this development as an expression of increased control that reduced principal autonomy and reinforced managerialism. Traces of such managerialism were particularly evident in municipalities with large, specialized units comprising several organizational professionals.

The principals expressed doubts about the relevance of these units, arguing that professionals positioned within them were too distant from local schools and lacked the contextual knowledge necessary for meaningful educational improvement. The principals perceived that the positioning of organizational professionals in such units was impeding their possibility of receiving accurate support. According to the principals, distanced organizational professionals led their work in an unwanted, managerial direction.

> P7 Municipality B: I'm dubious. I think the idea is good, but we are too far from each other, and often it's the principals who have to provide the unit [with data or information] instead of the other way around. They send emails, and the principals must answer a lot of things; they miss what the unit is supposed to do. […] But it's easy for such a unit to get too far from reality.

Similar perceptions were expressed in municipalities without specialized units, particularly when organizational professionals were disconnected from the principals' daily work. Principals raised concerns about the decision-making mandates assigned to these professionals. They argued that organizational professionals sometimes defined areas of improvement de-

spite lacking sufficient knowledge of local conditions and needs. In this sense, principals experienced managerial governance as overriding their local decision-making authority and, consequently, their autonomy.

Although principals acknowledged that organizational professionals' expertise could represent a strategic resource, they often perceived this potential as overshadowed by a discourse of control. They contended that the direction and pace of quality and improvement work were frequently grounded in standardized models rather than adapted to the realities of principals' work. When organizational professionals exercised control over improvement processes, principals felt that their professional knowledge and locally identified needs were marginalized.

Thus, when hierarchical structures of authority and managerialism prevailed, and organizational professionals were given decision-making mandates in areas that previously belonged to principals, the principals perceived their autonomy as being challenged. These perceptions prompted feelings of frustration, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

> P2 Municipality A: We have discussed a lot in the last year, among the principals, who controls who. We don't want to feel like we are a class that gets homework; it can't be like that. So, we have searched for […] signaled quite clearly that we need greater participation because there is a great deal of respect for the work that is done, but the problem is that it does not matter how good it is, unless it is anchored with us.

Principals also highlighted concerns about competence, particularly when organizational professionals lacked formal training in education. Such situations were interpreted as a deficit in relevant expertise and, by extension, as a challenge to professional authority. One example involved a quality developer with a degree in political science who worked in Municipality C as the representative of a regional network. However, the principals lacked trust in this representative, arguing that a principal would have been better suited for the role. The following excerpt illustrates this skepticism:

> P1 Municipality C: I don't remember her/his title, if s/he is […] I think her/his current title is development manager, but before it was organization developer or something. […] Okay, but s/he […] is not even from the field of education.

The principals' lack of trust eventually led the quality developer to withdraw from interfering with the principals' day-to-day work. As a result, the distance between the quality developer and the principals increased. This withdrawal enabled principals to make more independent decisions, thereby strengthening their autonomy at the level of practice. A similar example of decision-making authority initially being assigned to organizational professionals without formal training in the field of education was found in Municipality F. In this municipality, the superintendent tasked an ICT strategist and a school economist with developing the local education authority's program for systematic quality assurance, rather than involving the

principals. In the interviews, the principals described this decision as a signal that their professional knowledge was not sufficiently valued. They questioned the competence of the organizational professionals involved and, in doing so, challenged the hierarchical authority and managerial logic underpinning the decision.

> P6 Municipality F: Now we're going to work like this with systematic quality work, and the principals maybe have more knowledge, but maybe just don't have time to do it; it gets a bit tricky. […] that the wrong professions should do the work, rather than the ones who are better […] or maybe […] [laughs] do the work that you would have liked to be involved in and do yourself.

Being bypassed in important decisions and in the initiation of development work, as illustrated above, reinforced principals' doubts about whether their competence was recognized within the organization. It also raised broader questions about who controls principals' work. Some principals argued that organizational professionals gradually expanded their mandates, effectively taking over decision-making in additional areas.

> P1 Municipality D: They have kind of come up with their own assignments and their own plans: "This is what all principals should work on now," and "We need to give lectures [to principals] about this." And we have been like, "No, wait a minute, [laughs] this doesn't fit at all." So, I have had to train myself in civil disobedience, […] I have had to train myself in saying "No" and holding back.

Thus, the principals questioned organizational professionals when they perceived them as too demanding and controlling. When the principals felt controlled, their mistrust of organizational professionals increased. They emphasized the importance of organizational professionals acting as partners in dialogue rather than as directors of their work. However, several principals suggested that the latter role—characterized by control—had become increasingly prominent within their organizations.

> P8 Municipality E: Earlier, we had a quality developer who is no longer working here, and instead, we have a controller. I think that the two roles symbolize or communicate two different ways of thinking about and working with development. A controller is a controlling function that wants statistics and data, and "This is how we do it," while the quality developer is perhaps more involved in the development process.

In summary, principals' perceptions of being controlled emerged most notably when organizational professionals—especially those lacking formal training in education or prior experience as principals—acted as their superiors and exercised decision-making authority in areas previously under principals' jurisdiction. By questioning the expansion and work of these professionals, principals tried to reclaim their autonomy.

Principals perceiving the expansion and work of organizational professionals as supportive

The analysis also showed that, in addition to expressing concerns, principals described the expansion and work of organizational professionals as sometimes being beneficial to their practice. In the data, this was visible when organizational professionals relieved principals of their administrative duties, such as by collecting and compiling statistics related to educational improvement.

> P2 Municipality D: We get that from central administration, from the planning strategist. And it comes in really nice columns and so on. It's the final grades, or the June grades, and then we get it divided into different columns, both subject by subject, and back in time, points, averages and so on.

Through this form of support, the principals were able to direct their focus toward analysis, strategic planning, and the implementation of school improvement processes. In this way, the principals still controlled the decision-making within the areas they regarded as the essence of principalship without having to waste time on more general administrative tasks. Hence, in these situations, organizational professionals did not challenge principals' autonomy but rather supported them in maintaining professional control. This approach seemed to facilitate principals' recognition of the organizational professionals' competence, encouraging exchange based on trust and legitimacy.

> P3, Municipality A: They are skilled, they are talented, and therefore we have also become more and more dependent on them in some way, in terms of, "Help us with this, is there any information around this?" and so on. And then they start to deliver and are quickly even slightly ahead. So yes, they are skilled, but it could have been the opposite experience, in terms of them being disruptive. Or that they are working on activities that you don't think go hand in hand with what we need. But that's not the case.

When such collaborative conditions prevailed, organizational professionals were able to question principals' decisions without the principals perceiving it as an attempt to take control and overrule them.

> P8, Municipality A: So very supportive too. And developing. They have the mandate to sometimes ask these slightly difficult questions so that we can develop to the best.

These examples show that it is possible for both parties to acknowledge the other's competence. A similar case was identified in Municipality E, where organizational professionals offered support to teachers rather than to principals. Principals expressed a desire for similar

support and even considered jointly hiring a professional to assist them with school improvement processes. This reflects a form of collegial authority in which principals are willing to invite organizational professionals into their work—provided this occurs on their own terms.

> P5, Municipality E: We tested the idea: "What if we could hire someone together that our five units could share? What could that look like?" We have been thinking about that, because as principals we all feel that having someone that kind of sets up good strategies and supports us in how to think is important. We thought that would be good, because that's what quality work is all about.

Even more strikingly, in areas such as jurisdictional documentation and systematic quality assurance—formally assigned to principals but not traditionally associated with their core professional identity—principals sometimes actually delegated control to organizational professionals. To manage uncertainty and risk, they sought confirmation and guidance from these professionals. In doing so, principals appeared to voluntarily relinquish a degree of autonomy in order to strengthen their decision-making in areas perceived as complex and high-stakes.

> P8, Municipality B: When you get to know the organization developer and understand what kind of person s/he is and how s/he is into details, you realize that s/he knows a lot and is a person that you really can learn from and get support from. Since then, we have turned to her/him a lot. You can ask her/him a lot, and s/he explains what s/he means, and then it becomes easier to understand. So, s/he is … S/he controls our quality work, I would say.

In other words, principals' perceptions of support emerged when organizational professionals relieved the principals of their administrative duties, contributed expertise that strengthened principals' decision-making, and acknowledged principals' contextual knowledge and authority. While the two themes presented above—control and support—differ in terms of how expertise, autonomy, and authority are configured, principals in both cases sought to maintain influence over their professional domain. The findings indicate that principals' perceptions of organizational professionals are closely tied to whether they experience their autonomy as being challenged or reinforced, and to how their expertise is recognized and negotiated. When organizational professionals intervened in what principals perceived as the core of principalship, principals resisted. Conversely, when they contributed complementary expertise without encroaching on principals' autonomy, they were accepted and even valued.

Our findings highlight how principals and organizational professionals can build collegial authority and reciprocal trust. Increased administrative workloads appear to make principals more willing to delegate tasks they consider peripheral to the essence of principalship. Such selective delegation reflects elements of professionalism. Thus, the findings suggest that principals' expertise and authority continue to shape—and at times delimit—the work of organizational professionals.

Discussion

As a result of changes in governance at a general level, the presence of organizational professionals has expanded across public sectors, thereby challenging traditional professions (Alamaa et al., 2024; Alvehus & Andersson, 2018; Cronin et al., 2018; Hall, 2025; Mik-Meyer, 2018). This multiple-case study, drawing on empirical data from six Swedish municipalities, set out to deepen our understanding of the expansion and work of organizational professionals and their implications for principals, who are typically regarded as traditional professionals within the field of education. The findings revealed a myriad of titles, positions, and organizational arrangements for organizational professionals within local education authorities. Moreover, they showed that principals perceived the expansion and work of organizational professionals as both controlling *and* supportive. These differing perceptions were related to organizational professionals' training and experience, their formal assignments, their approaches to principals' decision-making, and to principals' own understandings of the essence of principalship. Although these results may not be unexpected, they are significant in demonstrating how autonomy is negotiated among actors and within specific contexts (Nordholm et al., 2025). They are also powerful in the way they illustrate that there is no "best" way of organizing organizational professionals. Rather, principals' perceptions depend heavily on how organizational professionals engage with principals' contextual knowledge and their responsibility for local decision-making.

This study reinforces previous research portraying principalship as a demanding and complex role (Nordholm et al., 2023; Richard, 2024), not least in relation to the expansion of organizational professionals. It also confirms that societal and policy demands for improved educational outcomes remain strong (Darling-Hammond, 2004), alongside recurring calls for education systems to respond to emerging challenges (OECD, 2023). One organizational response to these pressures has been the expansion of central administration at the intermediate level, mirroring developments in other public sectors (Hall, 2025). Furthermore, such expansion can be seen as creating new career pathways for principals within the educational bureaucracy (cf. Alvehus & Andersson, 2018). In this study, the organizational professionals and principals were assigned to work within the same areas of expertise—areas where principals previously were autonomous. Notably, several organizational professionals were trained in education and had prior experience as principals, suggesting that principal expertise remains valued. In this sense, the expansion of organizational professionals may be interpreted as an extension of the historical trajectory of principals' professionalization project, rooted in the tradition of *primus inter pares* (Jarl et al., 2012; Ullman, 1997). However, this development raises a critical question: does it represent a "consciously enacted professionalization project" (Noordegraaf et al., 2014, p.23), benefiting all principals, including those still working in the local schools, or has it become an implicitly enacted project that primarily advantages former principals who transition into administrative roles?

At a general level, the expansion of organizational professionals can be understood as an example of an organizational answer to societal demands to improve education based on managerialism, emergent in the logic of organizational professionalism (Evetts, 2009b). In some instances, the principals in our study interpreted this expansion as signaling a need to be directed and controlled "by other entities of the organization" (Alamaa et al., 2024, p.12). In other cases, however, principals perceived their knowledge as being acknowledged and valued by organizational professionals, which fostered collaboration and mitigated tensions. This latter finding adds nuance to research from other public sectors that emphasizes the dominance of central administration.

Even though changes in governance and administration have challenged principal autonomy at a general level, in this study, principals expressed an urge to maintain their decision-making in areas they understood as representing the essence of principalship (cf. Liljenberg et al., 2023). The findings show that principals actively sought to shape their working relationships with organizational professionals—directing them to provide support and relieve administrative burdens where appropriate. In some cases, organizational professionals appeared to accept a subordinate role, enabling principals to preserve autonomy (cf. Wermke et al., 2022). In other instances, principals distanced themselves from organizational professionals in order to safeguard their authority.

Thus, our findings show that the implications of organizational professionals for principal autonomy and professionalism are played out in diverse ways. Given that these positions are hierarchically constructed and separated from schools, one might expect principals to understand the expansion of organizational professionals in education as a power struggle between actors at different levels (cf. Ärlestig, 2014). However, our findings suggest a more nuanced picture. Principals did not invariably regard such dynamics as zero-sum. In some situations, they even initiated collaboration and leveraged organizational professionals' expertise to strengthen their own decision-making—particularly in high-stakes areas such as jurisdictional compliance, where accountability entails heightened risk (cf. Schulte, 2023). The study, therefore, indicates that it is possible for principals and organizational professionals to create a mutual understanding of who controls "the most important *decisions* that are to be made" (Wermke et al., 2022, p.737, original emphasis).

Swedish principals generally possess extensive academic training and express a desire to engage in informed, reflective practice. They also expect their professional knowledge of local contexts to be respected. Yet, changing conditions contribute to high turnover rates among principals (Richard, 2024). If principals are to fully utilize their knowledge and prioritize what they perceive as stimulating and enriching, local education authorities need to reinforce rather than undermine principal autonomy, preferably by relieving principals of their many time-consuming administrative duties. While principals in this study expressed a willingness to embrace their formal responsibility for local decision-making, there is a risk that their work becomes intellectually impoverished if organizational professionals gain excessive influence

over core professional domains. Such a development could, paradoxically, generate further demands for central administration to prescribe, monitor, and correct tasks that principals might otherwise have managed effectively under more favorable conditions. Based on our results, we therefore urge local education authorities to remember that what is perceived as efficient in the short term can have unforeseen consequences in the long term.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study—in line with previous research—has shown that the expansion of organizational professionals can, under certain conditions, undermine professionalism. However, it also shows that principals strive to remain influential actors who actively navigate and, where possible, capitalize on changing organizational arrangements. While this study is situated within an educational context, the patterns identified may be analytically generalizable to other contexts in which managers work alongside organizational professionals with overlapping areas of expertise.

Considering the limited research on organizational professionals and managers with overlapping areas of expertise, the need for additional studies is paramount. Moreover, future studies in education could apply a quantitative design and thereby achieve additional insights into differences according to contextual prerequisites, such as municipality size or what the expansion of organizational professionals assigned to quality and improvement work in education could actually mean for student outcomes.

In decentralized school systems, politicians and managers at the intermediate level are powerful actors. For the future of education, it is crucial that these actors foster conditions for constructive collaboration between organizational professionals and principals, grounded in mutual trust and professional legitimacy. Finally, we encourage these actors to reflect carefully on a fundamental question: What do future schools require—principals who function as mere implementers of externally defined directives, or principals equipped with the resources and authority to make both urgent and strategic decisions in the service of educational improvement?

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Appendix

Appendix A: Organizational professionals assigned to quality and improvement in education

Municipality	Titles	Formal education and work experiences	Focus of quality and improvement work
A*	Manager of the learning and health unit	Education, principal, teacher	Deputy superintendents, principals
A*	Quality strategist	Education, principal, teacher	Principals, teachers
A**	Developer of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and learning; Developer of work experience program and knowledge; Scientific leader; Special education teachers		Deputy superintendents, principals, teachers
B*	Organization developer	Education, principal, teacher	Deputy superintendents, principals
B*	Manager of student health and development unit	Education, principal, teacher	Principals
B**	Pedagogical developers in math, reading, writing and ICT; Developer of work experience program and knowledge; Special education teachers		Principals, teachers
C*	Organization developer	Political sciences	Principals
C*	Manager of pupil health and ICT strategist	Education, teacher	Principals, teachers
D*	Organization developer	Political sciences, coordinator	Deputy superintendents, principals
D*	Planning strategist	Public administration, administrator	Deputy superintendent, principals
D**	Developer of ICT, Special education teachers		Principals, teachers
E*	Quality controller	Education, teacher, refugee coordinator, integration expert	Deputy superintendents, principals
E*	Manager of pedagogical development unit	Education, principal, teacher	Principals
E*	Manager of student health unit	Education, principal, teacher	Principals
E**	Developers of work experience program and knowledge; Pedagogical developers in Swedish as second language, math, reading and writing, science, ICT, democracy and human rights; Special education teachers		Principals, teachers
F*	ICT strategist	Education, teacher	Principals, teachers
F*	School economist	Economy	Superintendent, principals
F*	Regional strategist	Education, principal, teacher	Superintendent, principals
*Respondents **Others described in the interviews (formal education and work experiences unknown)			