Chapter 8
Principals' Understandings of Education Based on Research:
A Swedish Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Principals' responsibilities for quality in schools and preschools have, during recent years, been accentuated in Sweden. The Swedish Education Act of 2010 can be interpreted as an attempt to improve the orientation and effectiveness of teaching in schools, as it states that education should be based mainly on research and proven experience. The purpose of this chapter is to illuminate how principals understand and relate to the Education Act of 2010. The empirical foundation of the chapter consists of examining policy documents and two surveys sent to principals and heads of preschools. The findings reveal that the principals show different understandings of the term research basis. Three significant areas of manifestations emerged from the data: keeping up to date with new knowledge, building a scientific culture, and practicing research-based knowledge. However, a challenge for principals is to foster a critical evaluative approach to research.

INTRODUCTION

The acquisition of knowledge is a topic that engages many people in various ways. Principals' responsibilities for the quality in schools and preschools have been accentuated during the last years in Sweden, where quality often is equated with measurable learning outcomes. The Swedish parliament declared in the Swedish Education Act (SFS, 2010:800) that education shall be based on research and on proven experiences. As such, what is understood by "based on research?" In the preparatory work for the Swedish Education Act of 2010, it had been highlighted that, in addition to knowledge and skills, basic education must give students the capacity for independent and critical assessment, the ability to solve problems, as well as the ability and interest to follow the development of knowledge, both nationally and internationally (Prop. 1992 / 93:1; Bet. 1992/93:UbU3). There is also a communicative aspect, as education should also develop the students' ability to exchange information in a scientific way.

The purpose of this chapter is to illuminate principals' understandings of an *education based on research* and what this will involve with regards to their readiness to lead educational work on that basis. In this text, the term *school* includes all educational institutions from preschools to upper-secondary school. The unit of analysis of this article will be principals and schools. The terms *principal, teacher*, and *student* will be used as general terms, denoting a person's occupation and/or role within the school setting.

As a leader, the principal's charge is now more clearly stated with regards to his/her responsibility for developing the school into a high-quality institution (made evident by the Swedish Education Act) and the national curricula. However, emphasis on educational development as well as developing and ensuring high quality within the institution is not new to the Swedish policy. As early as 1946, the School Commission Report highlighted the importance of the principal leading the educational work at his/her school as well as the importance of the principal's freedom to leave his or her mark on the school (see also SOU, 1948:27, p. 221). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) is an example of an agency that has great influence on policymakers (Moos, 2013). International studies, such as OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), and national research, such as the Swedish Schools Inspectorate assessments, demonstrate results that are too low and not satisfying (Skolverket, 2013a). For example, the PISA 2012 results have shown a declining trend in mathematics, reading comprehension, and science since 2003 (OECD, 2013). The mean score declined to below OECD average in 2012, and Sweden ranked as number 38 among 65 participating countries, while the ranking in 2003 was number five. When compared with Swedish national subject tests (in mathematics, English, and Swedish), the trend

for the success rate is on the same level, with only small fluctuations since 2003 (Skolverket, 2013a). Since principals are responsible, they are held accountable by the government and society in general for the results presented after each report and inspection on international and national levels. This is one of the reasons that the leaders of the schools have increasingly come into the spotlight in recent years. As the focus in this chapter is on education based on research, I will not elaborate upon Swedish results further, just point out what Swedish principals have to deal with. In any case, the PISA results have to be taken seriously. As background, I will first briefly describe the Swedish context and educational system. Then I will provide a short, historical exposé of school management in Sweden and the current state of school leadership.

BACKGROUND: THE SWEDISH CONTEXT

Sweden is one of the world's northernmost countries and is sparsely populated. There are about 9.6 million inhabitants in a total area of 528,447 km^2, the third largest country in Western Europe. Most of the people live in three big cities: Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Malmö. The living standard in Sweden is above OECD average (OECD, 2014). Sweden is a constitutional monarchy with parliamentary democracy (see "Sweden in Brief", n.d.).

All education in Sweden is free for all and funded by public authorities by taxes (Ministry of Education & Research, 2008). Education is compulsory for all children aged 7 to 15/16 and is organized by the municipalities in Sweden. In 2011–2012, there were 3,850 municipal schools, 5 state Sami schools, and 761 independent schools at the compulsory school level. A majority, 87%, of compulsory school pupils attended municipal schools in 2011–2012 (see Skolverket, 2013b).

The Education Act of 2010 is valid within the whole educational system except for university

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