

**Principal Turnover:  
When is it a Problem and for Whom?  
Mapping Out Variations Within the Swedish Case**

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**Abstract**

*Principal turnover has become topic of discussion, attracting attention not only in media, but also among scholars. Research indicate that high turnover rate is problematic for several reasons. First, it jeopardises stability of school management, which is crucial for schools, not only to function well but also to develop as organisations. Second, since studies indicate that principals have an important, yet indirect, effect on student learning, it is reasonable to expect high turnover to impact negatively on both student and school performance.*

*The aim of the study was to map out and describe national variations in principal turnover in Sweden and thus provide a basis for practice-oriented research. To determine the level of turnover and the extent to which particular municipalities or types of municipalities are facing substantially higher turnover than others, statistical data from Statistics Sweden (SCB) were used.*

*Results show that the average principal has worked in the same municipality for approximately six years and changed schools less than once. Yet, results differ between different types of municipalities, i.e. metropolitan, urban, rural and sparsely populated areas. The results raise fundamental, yet often, overseen questions, namely: When and for whom is principal turnover a problem?*

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**Introduction**

Since the ability of an educational system to attract and retain qualified principals is crucial to a school's functioning over time, principal turnover (e.g. principal mobility within and exit from the school system) has become an issue of concern among policymakers worldwide. This is especially true in countries where the level of turnover is considered high, as it is in Sweden (NAE, 2015; 2019).

The concern about principal turnover stems from general knowledge about the importance of school leadership (Wahlstrom et al., 2010; Seashore Louis, 2015), as well as studies focusing particularly on consequences of principal turnover (e.g. Béteille et al., 2012; Mascall & Leithwood, 2010; Miller, 2013; Ronfeldt et al., 2013)<sup>1</sup>. These studies indicate that a high turnover level is problematic for several reasons. First, it denies schools the stability they need, not only to function well, but also to develop as organisations. According to previous research on organisational change and school development, implementation and improvement processes take approximately 5–7 years (Sannerstedt, 1997; Fullan, 2001). Second, since principals are shown to have an important, yet indirect, effect on student learning, it is reasonable to expect a high turnover level to have negative impact on student and school performance. Findings from studies focusing on consequences of principal turnover indicate that principal turnover may have negative impact on student

<sup>1</sup> See Snodgrass Rangler (2018) for review.



achievement (e.g. Béteille et al., 2012; Mascal & Leithwood, 2010; Miller, 2013). Other studies suggest that high principal turnover is related to higher teacher turnover, which in turn may have negative impact on student achievement (Ronfeldt et al., 2013). Third, high levels of principal turnover generate a constant need to search for more individuals to assume leadership positions (Gates et al., 2005). This makes principal turnover time consuming, and thus costly.

Awareness of these and perhaps even other problems related to principal turnover has warranted researchers within the field of educational administration and leadership to conduct studies aiming at better understanding of this area of concern. Thus, research on principal turnover “has begun to shed light on what helps explain patterns of turnover and the extent to which turnover is bad for schools and student achievement” (Snodgrass Rangel, 2018, p. 119). However, when it comes to dealing with issues related to principal turnover, current research is insufficient due to the relational and context dependent nature of practice. Therefore, in order to understand principal turnover, it is necessary to investigate the sites and the landscapes in which it occurs. This calls for practice-oriented case studies, and research designs that allow for exploration of important dimensions and relations within the local educational complex. The need for such research is substantial since hitherto principal turnover has, to a large extent, been treated as a general problem and solutions offered have not been very sensitive to variations within the local context. However, this type of research presupposes knowledge about the occurrence and distribution of principal turnover. Without such knowledge, it is difficult to select relevant cases.

The overall purpose of the research project is to gain knowledge about principal turnover in Sweden. In this particular study, we seek to describe variations in the level of principal turnover, and thus provide a basis for practice-oriented research as a means to solve problems related to principal turnover.

The article is structured as follows: First, there is a brief summary of previous research on principal turnover, followed by a short presentation of the Swedish case (contextual background and previous measures on the level of principal turnover in Sweden). Then, the research inquiry (data and methods) is described before moving on to the sections in which the results are presented, and discussed in terms of implications and limitations. The article ends with a conclusion section and some future prospects.

### **Previous Research on Principal Turnover**

In recent years, principal turnover has received an increasing amount of attention among scholars within the field of educational administration and leadership. This has resulted in a growing body of knowledge on the matter. A large number of studies have focused on its causes (e.g. Béteille et al., 2012; Loeb et al., 2010; Miller, 2013; Ronfeldt et al., 2013), and a wide range of determinants have emerged from such research. Some main findings based on research conducted within the US context are summarised, synthesised and discussed in a recent review of literature on principal turnover (Snodgrass Rangel, 2018) in which the determinants are divided into four major groups: 1) the principal's characteristics, 2) the school and students' characteristics, 3) the nature of the position and 4) policy. The first group includes factors such as principals' sex, race, age, experience, education and satisfaction (Snodgrass Rangel, 2018, p. 99–



103). The second includes school performance, school conditions (e.g. student discipline problems, teacher abuse and disrespect), school level and size, school urbanity and student characteristics (e.g. socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity and need for special education) (p. 104–109). The third includes degree of autonomy, relationships, and the changing nature of the position (p.103–104). The fourth includes principal's salary, accountability policy, district expenditures, challenges hiring and firing teachers, teachers' or teacher characteristics (e.g. teacher certification, qualification and experience), school type (e.g. public or charter school); district retirement incentives, and professional development initiatives (p. 109–113). Similar results are presented in another report, based on a review of 35 major studies on principal turnover (Levin & Bradley, 2019). In this report, the determinants are divided into five major groups: 1) Inadequate preparation and professional development, 2) Poor working conditions, 3) Insufficient salaries, 4) Lack of decision-making authority and 5) High-stakes accountability policies (Levin & Bradley, 2019). From the research presented and reviewed in their report, Levin and Bradley (2019) conclude that schools with "higher percentages of students from low-income families, students of color, and low-performing students" (p. 4) are more vulnerable to principal turnover than others.

In other parts of the world, principal turnover is less investigated; and in Sweden as in other Nordic countries, research on the subject is scarce. In 2007–2008, Ekholm et al. (2009) investigated principal turnover in fifteen municipalities in a province located in the west-central part of Sweden. During that year, 18 per cent of the principals in the current province left their positions. When these principals were asked about their reasons for leaving, the most frequent answers were retirement and school reorganisations. The

principals whose answers did not fall into any of these two main categories announced either that they had chosen to retire earlier or that they had applied for and got other jobs (as principals or as teachers), as a response to various working or life conditions, e.g. a desire for new challenges, heavy work load, changes within family situation (Ekholm et al., 2009). Since Ekholm et al. (2009) reported their study, questions related to principal turnover have mainly attracted the attention of Swedish authorities, e.g. the Swedish Work Environment Authority<sup>2</sup>, the Swedish Schools Inspectorate<sup>3</sup> and the Swedish National Agency for Education (NAE)<sup>4</sup>.

However, issues related to the causes and consequences of principal turnover have also been tapped upon by researchers interested in principals' working environment and health issues (e.g. Corin & Björk, 2016; Corin & Cregård, 2019; Leo et al., 2019). In an ongoing research project on organisational conditions, stress-related psychological illness, mobility and potential for improvement, Leo et al. (2019) seek answers to questions related to principals' experiences and management of internal and external demands and expectations, and access to support. Preliminary results from this project suggest that Swedish principals are often very lonely in their positions that demands and expectations from national level often clash with demands and expectations from local level, and that administrative support is insufficient (Leo et al., 2019). Moreover, principals' working conditions seem to be changing. According to tentative results from a qualitative study based on group interviews that were carried out as part of the previously mentioned research project, there

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<sup>2</sup> See Swedish Work Environment Authority (2011).

<sup>3</sup> See Swedish Schools Inspectorate (2019).

<sup>4</sup> See NAE (2016).



is an increasing number of parents who claim their children's rights to special and individualised education; and an increasing number of complaints reported to the Swedish Schools Inspectorate (and as a result thereof, an increasing amount of time is spent on documenting student cases in order to meet the inspectorate's demands). Additionally, there is an increasing number of threats from parents, who claim they will report the school (to the inspectorate or media) or remove their child from the school if the school fails to meet their demands. All together, these changes are creating an increasingly stressful working situation for the principals, whilst there is a perceived lack of support and trust from the levels above, creating a situation that may cause principal turnover (Leo et al., 2019). These results reflect those found in broader studies on managers in the public sectors (e.g. Corin & Björk, 2016; Corin & Cregård, 2019). According to Corin and Björk (2016), who have studied managers' psychosocial working condition among human service managers, there is an imbalance between high level of job requirements and lack of resources to meet these demands: "Work overload, conflicting and unclear goals and tasks, emotional demands, restricted control, and lack of supervisory and organizational support generally characterized the managerial assignment" (p. 3).

### **Fundamental but Forgotten Perspectives on Principal Turnover**

Despite the increasing number of studies, Snodgrass Rangler (2018) claims that "our understanding of principal turnover remains relatively weak" (p. 116). Based on her review, she points to methodological problems such as lack of strong research designs (that do not permit the attribution of causality) and inconsistencies between and within studies, as well disregard for variation. With

reference to the work of Boyce and Bowers (2016), Snodgrass Rangler concludes that “principals, whether they leave or stay, are not monolithic or interchangeable; rather, principals vary in terms of the conditions under which they leave and in terms of how effective they are at improving student achievement” (Snodgrass Rangler, 2018, p. 113).

This conclusion is reflected in a report (Pwc, n.d.) based on a number of revisions carried out in Swedish schools during 2017–2018. According to those revisions, municipality’s size, organisation and local regulatory documents have a decisive impact on the conditions for support, mandate, powers and distribution of resources and that local school’s access to and quality of the support is, to a large extent, dependent on factors such as the size of the school or the school’s geographical location in the municipality.

Yet, the solutions (to the presumed problem of principal turnover) often tend to be general rather than specific, in Sweden as elsewhere; e.g. return to state controlled schools’ (Nilzon, 2019) extended and improved initial education and in-service training for teachers and principals (SOU, 2018) and shared leadership (Wahlstrom et al., 2010). This tendency to forget, or neglect the fact that “not all are the same”, is problematic. No matter how good general solutions like those just referred to might be, they run the risk of obscuring the local practice perspective in ways that may hamper the search for appropriate solutions. From this perspective, acknowledgement of variation comes across as a fundamental but often forgotten, or overseen, perspective within the field of educational administration and leadership. Against this backdrop, measuring not just the level, but also variations in levels of principal





turnover, becomes an important step in the knowledge building process.

## The Swedish Case

### Contextual Background

Swedish principals work within a school system that is centralised and decentralised, tax-financed and regulated through the Education Act (2010). “The parliament has legislative power, and the government implements the decisions of the parliament through national agencies and school owners, superintendents, principals, and teachers in the governing chain described in the steering documents” (Ärlestig et al., 2016, p. 104). The school owners, henceforth referred to as organisers (whether represented by a municipality or a private actor), are responsible for allocation of resources and administration. The organisers are also the employers of school personnel and hence responsible for the staffs’ professional development (EACEA, 2018).

As in many other European countries, international trends based on ideas about school decentralisation, quality, accountability, marketisation and new public management (Holm and Lundström, 2011; Lundahl et al., 2010) have influenced and transformed the Swedish educational landscape in which principal practices take form. The majority of the schools are still municipality organised. However, the number of independent schools, or ‘free schools’, as these are called in Sweden, have rapidly expanded since free school choice was introduced in 1992. From a principal perspective, these international trends have created a changed labour market, with not only new possibilities to affect working conditions and salaries but also new demands and expectations. In recent years, external

evaluation has increased, and so has its influence on local schools as the Swedish School Inspectorate has received greater powers (Novak, 2018; Rönnberg, 2011). Together with high expectations and individual accountability, this has put greater pressure on principals from national political bodies and agencies, as well as the municipality (Ärlestig et al., 2016; Nihlfors & Johansson 2013).

There is no national principal rotation system. Principals are seldom (re)moved from a position, or even moved from one school to another.

It is also worth noticing that mobility is generally high in Sweden compared to other European and OECD countries (TCO, 2016).

### **Previous Measures on Principal Turnover in Sweden**

According to analysis carried out by the Swedish National Agency for Education based on TALIS<sup>5</sup> in 2013, more than one out of four Swedish principals changed schools between the year 2013–2014 and 2014–2015 (NAE, 2015; 2016). In addition, half of the principals stayed in their current school for less than three years, and every fifth principal was new within the profession (NAE, 2015). Analysis indicated differences between municipality-run ‘public schools’, and privately-run (independent) ‘free schools’. In the former, 52 per cent of the principals had at least five years within the profession. In the latter, the corresponding number was 41 (NAE, 2016). In the reporting, differences are explained with reference to school reorganisations, which seem to be more common in municipality-run ‘public schools’.

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<sup>5</sup> Teaching and Learning International Survey



Moreover, recent measures based on TALIS 2018 suggest that Swedish principals are less experienced than their peers in other countries (OECD, 2019). According to these measures, the average Swedish principal has nine years of work experience in the role, of which seven are at the current school, whereas the OECD average is ten years, of which seven are at the current school. However, variation between countries is extensive. For instance, in countries like Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, the average principal has remained in the profession between fourteen and sixteen years, whereof ten to fourteen are within the current school. In contrast, in Korea, the average principal has remained in the profession only three and a half years, whereof less than two are in the current school (OECD, 2019).

Obviously, principals in the countries listed above work in different educational systems, and under very different conditions<sup>6</sup>. The reasonableness of these comparisons, although often made in international assessments, can therefore be discussed. Nevertheless, they indicate that the level of principal turnover is, if not high, then at least higher than in many other countries.

The numbers presented above are often referred to and quoted in the media as evidence of the disturbing situation initially referred to in this paper. However, these measures do not provide a comprehensive picture since they only cover a small part of the population. Reporting based on data received from TALIS 2018 relies on survey responses from 340 out of 4,700 Swedish principals (NAE,

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<sup>6</sup> Within the Nordic context, differences are smaller. In Norway, Denmark, Iceland and Finland, the average principal has remained in the profession between eight and twelve years, whereof approximately five to seven are in the current school (OECD, 2019).

2019), whereof 116 (out of 3,600 in total) work in compulsory schools<sup>7</sup> and 174 (out of 1100 in total) work in upper secondary schools. In addition, these measures provide little knowledge about national variations in level of principal turnover. Hence, questions like when and for whom principal turnover is a problem remain unanswered.

The study presented in the subsequent section of this article is part of a larger research project aiming to better understand the reasons behind principal turnover and its impact on local school practices within the Swedish context. It rests on the assumption that not all schools and principals are the same, and it views knowledge about variation as a prerequisite for purposive context sensitive and practice-oriented case studies aiming to provide better understanding of principal turnover, and accordingly more targeted solutions.

### **Data and Methods**

According to the definition used in this article, principal turnover occurs when a principal leaves and “does not return to the same school from one year to another” (Snodgrass Rangler, 2018, p. 96). As the definition is used within the study, attention is directed towards the ‘mobility’ rather than ‘stability’ aspect of turnover. That means counting the amount of departures, rather than the proportion of time a principal stays at the same school or the proportion of time a principal remains at one school, relative to the full number of years within the profession.

Statistical data received from Statistics Sweden (SCB) and quantitative descriptive analysis were used to determine the level of

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<sup>7</sup> Swedish compulsory schooling is equivalent to ten years of school attendance for all children from the year they turn six.

turnover and the extent to which particular municipalities or types of municipalities are facing substantially higher turnover than others.

The data covers the period 1980–2017 and consist of statistical information about the total population of 18,273 Swedish comprehensive school principals registered in the SCB database during that period. The data provide general information such as gender and age group; and specific information relevant for the study, i.e. number of principals, number of years worked, and number of school and municipal changes (Box 1).

Box 1.

*Variable Definitions*

*Number of persons:* Number of specific individuals who have been active in the municipality/county under the current school form. An individual can thus exist in several municipalities/counties.

*Number of working years:* Number of years individuals are present in the current municipality/county under the current school form.

*Number of school changes:* Number of times a new individual starts a new school. Entry into the labour market is not considered a change. The value falls on the municipality/county where the new school is located.

*Total:* All principals who were in the register between 1980 and 2017.

*Those who left the profession before 2017:* Those who were not included in the register in 2017.

*Active 2017:* Those who were included in the register in 2017.

The data allow for measuring principal turnover, in terms of occurrence and distribution of movement (from and between schools) across groups.

A classification of Swedish municipalities developed by The Swedish Board of Agriculture (SBA) was used to distinguish between different types of municipalities. According to this classification, Sweden's 290 municipalities are divided into 47 metropolitan areas, 46 urban areas, 164 rural areas and 33 sparsely populated areas (Box 2).

Box 2.

*Municipality Classifications according to SBA.*

*Metropolitan areas:* Municipalities in the metropolitan regions of Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö. One hundred per cent of the population are located in areas with more than 10,000 inhabitants or within 60-kilometre radius, which is assumed to be the limit for frequent commuting, from the three major cities.

*Urban areas:* Municipalities with a population of at least 30,000 and/or where the largest urban area has at least 25,000 inhabitants. Smaller municipalities bordering these larger municipalities and where commuters, as a proportion of the night population, exceed 50 per cent are also connected to the respective metropolitan areas.

*Rural areas:* Municipalities that are not included in the two previous classifications (metropolitan areas and urban areas) and which at the same time have a population density of at least five inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>.

*Sparsely populated areas:* Municipalities that are not included in the other three classifications and which have a population of less than five inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup> (SBA, n.d.).



Analysis was guided by the following questions:

1. What is the level of principal turnover?
2. How does the level of principal turnover vary between a) different municipalities and b) different types of municipalities?

### Results

The analysis was carried out in two steps. First, the level of principal turnover was calculated based on information about the whole study population, e.g. all comprehensive school principals registered between 1980–2017, and about those active in 2017. Second, variations in level of principal turnover were calculated based on municipal statistics.

#### Levels of Principal Turnover 1980–2017

Two different measures were used to establish the level of turnover on national level: the number of 'years worked in the municipality' and the number of 'school changes per person'. In addition, the number of 'school changes per year worked' was calculated, in order to enhance comparability between groups. As illustrated in Table 1, the average principal had worked approximately seven years in the municipality and made less than one school change ( $M = 0.93$ ). The average number of school changes per year worked was  $M = .13$ . Differences between men and women were slight.

Table 1.

*Number of years worked, school changes and school changes per worked year, depending on principals' sex.*

	N	Years worked in the municipality Mean	School changes per person Mean	School changes per year worked Mean
Men	7807	7.41	0.94	0.13
Women	10466	6.82	0.92	0.14
Total	18273	7.07	0.93	0.13

However, there were considerable variations between different age groups (Table 2). For instance, principals born in the 40s and 50s had worked longer in the municipality and made more school changes than principals born later as well as earlier. Now, since the principals' age, for natural reasons is likely to regulate the amount of years within the profession as well as the amount of school changes, it is difficult to make comparisons based on these two measures (i.e. 'years worked in the municipality' and 'school changes'). Hence, the additional measure, 'school changes per worked year', was used to make comparisons between different age groups.



Table 2.

*Number of years worked, school changes per person and year worked, depending on principals' belonging to certain age groups.*

		Years worked in the municipality	School changes per person	School changes per worked year
Year of birth	N	Mean	Mean	Mean
-1929	989	6.82	.24	.04
1930-1939	1703	7.63	.57	.08
1940-1949	4223	8.17	1.01	.12
1950-1959	4986	8.54	1.27	.15
1960-1969	3434	5.96	.97	.16
1970-1979	2580	4.27	.70	.16
1980-	350	2.65	.39	.15
Total	18273	7.07	.93	.13

As illustrated above, the average number of school changes per worked year was greater among the younger principals. The greatest number of changes per worked year ( $M = .16$ ) was found in the groups of principals born in the 60s and 70s. The smallest number of changes per worked year ( $M = .04$ ) was found in the group of principals born before 1930, followed by those born in the 30s ( $M = .08$ ). These measures suggest that there is a tendency among younger principals to change schools more frequently than their older peers. This tendency is confirmed by the pattern displayed in Table 3, where

the group of principals active in 2017 is compared to the group of principals who left before 2017.<sup>8</sup>

Table 3.

*Number of years worked, school changes per person and per year worked. Differences between principals who were employed after 1980 and left before 2017, and principals active in 2017.*

	N	Years worked in the municipality Mean	School changes per person Mean	School changes per year worked Mean
Principals who were employed after 1980 and left before 2017	12126	5.68	.75	.13
Principals active in 2017	4637	6.07	.76	.16

### Municipal Variations in Principal Turnover

In the second step of the analysis, attention was directed towards Sweden's 290 municipalities and the various types of municipalities previously described, in terms of metropolitan, urban, rural and sparsely populated areas. In contrast to the measures presented in the previous section, those presented in this part of the study focus solely on principals active in 2017. Yet, these data are somewhat limited due to SCB's disclosure control, which in the current set of data applies to 30 of Sweden's 290 municipalities. Consequently, some values presented in this section are based on the sample of 260 municipalities.

<sup>8</sup> The groups were pre-defined by the data available. See Box 1 in the previous section of this article.

The descriptive statistics presented in Table 4 provide an overall image of the current population. Within the sample of 260 municipalities for which there are statistics available, the number of principals varied between six as the least and 293 as the most ( $M = 22.65$ ). The total number of school changes made by principals within the sample varied between none and 269 ( $M = 21.30$ ).

Table 4.

*Descriptive statistics based on information about principals active in 2017.*

	Min.	Max	Mean
Principals <sup>a</sup>	6	293	22.65
School changes <sup>a</sup>	.00	269	21.30
Years worked in the municipality <sup>b</sup>	2.00	16.43	6.07
School changes per person <sup>b</sup>	.00	3.33	.96
School changes per year worked in the municipality <sup>b</sup>	.00	.83	.16

a. The sample includes principals in 260 municipalities. The remaining 30 municipalities are missing due to SCB disclosure control.

b. The sample includes principals in all 290 municipalities.

Additionally, the average number of years worked in the municipality varied between 2.0 as the least and 16.43 as the most ( $M = 6.07$ ); the number of school changes varied between none and 3.33 per person ( $M = .96$ ); and the number of school changes per year worked in the municipality varied between none and .83. ( $M = .16$ ).

When the extremes (i.e. outliers) are selected and analysed (Table 5), it becomes evident that the majority of the municipalities with considerably higher levels of turnover are municipalities sited in rural areas. Almost three-quarters (21/29) of the municipalities above

the upper 10th percentile were municipalities located in these areas. Additionally, many of those with the lowest level of turnover were located either in rural or in sparsely populated areas. In fact, approximately half (15/29) of the municipalities below the lower 10th percentile were located in rural areas, and approximately one-third (10/29) were located in sparsely populated areas.

Table 5.

*Number of municipalities above the upper 10th percentile and below the 10th percentile, according to 'average number of school changes per year worked' in the municipality<sup>9</sup>*

Type of municipality	Number of municipalities above the upper 10 <sup>th</sup> percentile	Number of municipalities below the lower 10th percentile
Metropolitan areas	3	2
Urban areas	2	2
Rural areas	21	15
Sparsely populated areas	3	10
Total	29	29

Furthermore, principals in rural areas had worked longer (M = 6.39 years) within the municipality and changed schools more often (M = 1.04 times) than principals in sparsely populated, urban and metropolitan areas. It also shows that variations were smaller in sparsely populated areas than in all other types of municipalities, e.g. the standard deviation for school changes per person = .15 for municipalities in sparsely populated areas (Table 6).

<sup>9</sup> See *Appendix 1* for a list of the municipalities.



Table 6.

*Variations in principal turnover, based on information about principals active in 2017. Means demonstrating differences between principals in metropolitan, urban, rural and sparsely populated areas.*

	N	Years worked as principal in the municipality		School changes per person		School changes per year worked in the municipality	
		Mean	Std.	Mean	Std.	Mean	Std.
Metropolitan areas	47	5.08	1.19	.76	.24	.15	.04
Urban areas	46	5.84	1.52	.95	.41	.16	.05
Rural areas	164	6.39	2.41	1.04	.56	.17	.08
Sparsely populated areas	33	6.17	2.63	.88	.15	.15	.14
Total	290	6.07	.96	.68	.53	.16	.08

In summary, results show that the average principal had worked approximately six or seven years in the municipality, depending on age, sex and when active (i.e. registered) during the period 1980–2017, and made less than one school change. A slight trend towards greater mobility may be discerned in the data, indicating an increasing mobility within the profession.

Yet, there are differences between municipalities and between various types of municipalities. In general, principals in rural areas had worked longer within the municipality and changed schools more often (per person and per worked year) than principals in sparsely populated, urban and metropolitan areas.

Regarding variation, rural and sparsely populated areas stand out as particularly interesting: rural areas because they are over-represented in the group of extremes (i.e. they appear more often on

both sides of the upper and lower 10th percentiles than other types of municipalities), and sparsely populated areas because they display considerably smaller variations in between themselves than all other types of municipalities and therefore come across as more homogenous in this regard.

### **Implications and Limitations**

With regard to the general trend towards a higher turnover indicated in the study, it seems reasonable to step back and consider some of the trends previously referred to in this article (e.g. decentralisation, quality, accountability, marketisation and new public management). For instance, with the expansion of school market and free schools, it has become possible for many principals to choose, and change, between several different employers beside the municipality organiser without leaving the region where they live. With this expanded choice, principals are in a better position to influence their working conditions, including the salaries (which have become immensely differentiated since the transition from a national collective pay system to local individual salary setting in 1996). Nonetheless, at the same time, there is an increased pressure on principals not only to perform well but also to handle many, often incompatible, demands and expectations. Together, these and other trends on national and international level have transformed the landscapes in which principals navigate, and thus created new enabling as well as constraining conditions for principals' professional practices. However, when it comes to understanding variations in principal turnover as they appear in the data reported here, such general knowledge is less useful if it is not somehow linked to more specific and context sensitive knowledge. In order to



understand why principals in rural areas work longer and make more changes (per person and per year worked), and why municipalities in rural areas are among those with the highest and the lowest levels of turnover, specific knowledge about these types of areas must be considered. Just as specific knowledge about sparsely populated areas is needed for understanding why sparsely populated areas are more homogenous in this sense.

This required knowledge is missing today since, as previously pointed out, research on principal turnover is insufficient (and perhaps inappropriate to the national context). Similarly, research on educational leadership in rural and sparsely populated areas is also lacking (Bæck, 2015; Lund, 2020; Surface & Theobald, 2014). However, some statements can be made based on studies carried out within the broader field of research on rural and sparsely populated schools. For instance, it has become evident that local policymakers in rural or sparsely populated desertification areas, sometimes relate differently to national educational objectives (such as students' academic performance and schools' goal achievement) than what is usually the case in other types of areas (Nihlfors & Johansson, 2015)<sup>10</sup>. Moreover, teachers working in schools situated in these areas "face different working conditions than those faced by teachers in urban schools" (Pettersson & Ström, 2019, p. 181). In a summary review of literature on teacher professional collaboration in rural schools, Pettersson and Ström (2019) identify a number of features common to

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<sup>10</sup> A specific concept applicable to municipalities in these areas derived from this study: 'good-enough municipalities'. The concept refers to municipalities demonstrating a tendency to settle with results beneath what could be expected according to the preconditions, where academic knowledge is not strongly valued, and where the strive to save a school from closure sometimes overshadows national objectives such as pupils' academic performance and schools' goal achievement.

schools in rural areas: “geographic isolation, a low number of teachers and students, multi-grade classrooms, diverse learning needs among students, lack of support staff, multifaceted working tasks for teachers and scarce professional development opportunities” (p. 181). Also identified were some challenges often faced by rural schools, for instance, “ongoing demographic and social changes, shrinking population, financial constraints and the constant fear of school closures” (p. 181). If, and to what extent, such characteristics are relevant to the matter of principal turnover within these areas is an empirical question, yet to be answered. Some future prospects are described in the next section, but first the limitations of the study will be addressed.

As always, there are limitations to a study. In this case, results, and thus the possibilities to make knowledge claims, are limited to certain group of principals, namely Swedish comprehensive school principals registered in the SCB database during 1980–2017 regardless of organiser (e.g. municipality or independent actor); this excludes other groups of principals (e.g. principals working in preschools, upper secondary schools and adult education) and principals active outside the current time span. The sample was conditioned by data availability (e.g. years worked in the municipality, not as principal), as was the definitions of the groups, and thus the possibilities to make comparisons (e.g. between principals active at various time slots)<sup>11</sup>. Consequently, it was not possible to measure and compare levels of principal turnover in various school forms, nor was it possible to compare levels of principal turnover in municipality-run ‘public schools’, and privately-run ‘free schools’, although that might have been relevant

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<sup>11</sup> See Box 1 in the Data and methods section.





since previous measures have indicated variations in mobility between principals working within these different types of schools (NAE, 2015).

Moreover, the data did not provide information about variations within municipalities, between schools and/or between individual principals, where the greatest variations are likely to be found.

According to local statistics received from a municipality under investigation (Theelin, 2019), there are schools which have kept their principal for a very long time (27 years as the most) and there are schools which have had many changes (ten in 15 years as the most). Results from this pilot study clearly illustrate the importance of mapping out variations on several levels in the educational system. The study presented in this article must therefore be seen not as the last, but rather a first in a line of several.

### **Conclusion and Future Studies**

At large, the results presented in this article are in line with those previously presented by the Swedish National Agency for Education (2015; 2016) and OECD (2019), although they are not completely comparable due to differences in types of data and measures used.

Moreover, previous measures on principal turnover in Sweden do not provide knowledge about national variations. In that sense, the current study adds to previous knowledge about principal turnover in Sweden. At the same time, the study serves as an illustrative example of the point already made, with reference to Boyce and Bowers (2016) and Snodgrass Rangler (2018), that all (municipalities, schools or principals) are not the same. Furthermore,

it serves as a reminder not only about variation as such, but also that variations tend to become greater as we move closer to principal practices. Hence, linking big data with small data, and alternately zooming in and zooming out, becomes particularly important.

Of equal importance is altering the perspectives. Given the current knowledge about school leaders' impact on teachers, and indirectly on student performance (Wahlstrom et al., 2010; Seashore Louis, 2015), it is no surprise that policymakers in Sweden, as in many other countries, are concerned with turnover and mobility among principals. However, principal turnover cannot be assumed to always be a problem, or a problem for everyone, everywhere. Sometimes, a change in leadership is just what it takes for a school to develop, just as a change of workplace is sometimes just what is needed for a principal to choose to remain in the profession. Moreover, with regard to the importance of altering perspectives, principal turnover can be treated as a sign of an anomaly or maladministration (e.g. an unhealthy environment, too many or too difficult tasks and/or lack of education, support), or it can be treated as a problem in itself.

Conclusively, in order to understand if, when and for whom principal turnover is a problem, it is necessary to investigate the locations and landscapes where it occurs. That means studying principals' professional practices and its enabling and constraining arrangements, as well as other interrelated practices, mutually shaping and being shaped by one another (Kemmis et al., 2014).

Since the variations presented in this article cannot be explained by the data itself or by results from other studies relevant to the matter, further research is required. Therefore, the study will be



followed up by several municipal case studies based on conscious selection, informed by the results presented in this article.

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## Appendix 1.

*Principals active in 2017. Municipalities above the upper 10<sup>th</sup> percentile and below the 10<sup>th</sup> percentile according to 'average number of school changes per year worked' in the municipality.*

Municipalities above the upper 10 <sup>th</sup> percentile				Municipalities below the lower 10 <sup>th</sup> percentile			
Municipality	Type of municipality	N	M	Municipality	Type of municipality	N	M
Dorotea	Sparsely populated area	.	0.83	Boxholm	Rural	.	0.00
Ydre	Rural	.	0.62	Dals-Ed	Rural	.	0.00
Härnösand	Rural	13	0.40	Munkfors	Rural	.	0.00
Hagfors	Rural	6	0.37	Norberg	Rural	6	0.00
Torsås	Rural	.	0.33	Bjurholm	Sparsely populated area	.	0.00
Perstorp	Rural	7	0.31	Norsjö	Sparsely populated area	.	0.00
Gnesta	Urban	6	0.29	Arjeplog	Sparsely populated area	.	0.00
Ljusnarsberg	Rural	.	0.29	Åmål	Rural	12	0.02
Nora	Rural	6	0.29	Älvkarleby	Urban	6	0.03
Vilhelmina	Sparsely populated area	10	0.29	Bräcke	Sparsely populated area	6	0.03
Simrishamn	Rural	18	0.28	Svalöv	Urban	12	0.04
Falkenberg	Rural	29	0.28	Hällefors	Rural	.	0.05
Sunne	Rural	12	0.28	Strömsund	Sparsely populated area	8	0.05
Lycksele	Sparsely populated area	7	0.28	Åsele	Sparsely populated area	.	0.05
Osby	Rural	12	0.27	Gällivare	Sparsely populated area	13	0.05
Öckerö	Metropolitan area	9	0.27	Värnamo	Rural	18	0.06
Eda	Rural	7	0.27	Bromölla	Rural	8	0.06
Mora	Rural	17	0.27	Töreboda	Rural	7	0.06
Tierp	Rural	6	0.26	Vansbro	Sparsely populated area	6	0.06
Halmstad	Urban	63	0.26	Överkalix	Sparsely populated area	.	0.06

Orust	Rural	15	0.26	Olofström	Rural	8	0.07
Surahammar	Rural	12	0.26	Ronneby	Rural	15	0.07
Varberg	Rural	46	0.25	Sjöbo	Rural	17	0.07
Tibro	Rural	7	0.25	Degerfors	Rural	6	0.07
Kramfors	Rural	10	0.25	Huddinge	Metropolitan area	37	0.08
Sigtuna	Metropolitan area	28	0.24	Haninge	Metropolitan area	44	0.08
Strängnäs	Rural	25	0.24	Hörby	Rural	13	0.08
Nybro	Rural	18	0.24	Vännäs	Rural	8	0.08
Härbyda	Metropolitan area	37	0.24	Ljusdal	Sparsely populated area	14	0.09