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“How can you measure something like aromatic salt?” Competing discourses on school development within a municipal quality improvement model

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ABSTRACT

This study explores discursive encounters between school leaders, teachers, and local education authority (LEA) officials within a local school improvement initiative in Sweden. Using a primary school case, the research examines how competing discourses, focused on results-oriented accountability and professional autonomy, are interpreted and enacted locally, and how this shapes interactions between teacher leaders, principals, and LEA officials. Drawing on field notes from a meeting and interviews with key stakeholders, the analysis employs critical discourse theory to investigate discursive patterns, tensions, and the emergence of shared understandings. Findings reveal that a results-driven discourse emphasizing measurability and accountability intersects with a counter-discourse valuing collective processes, professional judgement, and holistic teaching practices. This intersection represents a process of hybridization, producing ruptures and moments of mutual understanding that reconfigure the “chain of effects”. The study demonstrates how dialogue-driven hybridization can transform competing discourses into shared resources for school improvement.

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School improvement; local education authority; result dialogue; discourses; accountability; professional judgement; systematic quality development work

Background

Collaboration across levels and roles toward shared goals has become a key concern in addressing complex societal challenges (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012). Swedish public administration is rooted in traditions of trust and dialogue between citizens and authorities (e.g., Rothstein & Stolle, 2008). Collaboration in the school system reflects this tradition of dialogue, professional autonomy, and trust, yet is influenced by transnational and national goals. This creates tensions as overarching ideals intersect with local autonomy and central expectations (e.g., Liljenberg, 2025; Liljenberg & Andersson, 2023; Ståhlkrantz & Rapp, 2022).

In recent years, a growing focus on school improvement and the interactions between different tiers of leadership has emerged in policy, research, and practice. In Sweden, this development unfolds within a decentralized school system that grants authority to municipalities to fulfill the national goals supported by the National Agency for Education. In parallel, school systems are increasingly influenced by transnational policy agendas that tend to promote a culture of

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measurability, often emphasizing student achievement and performance indicators. These ideas frequently travel across contexts and intersect with national and local governance structures.

Since 1995, Swedish compulsory school students have participated in approximately forty international large-scale assessments. These studies provide data on student achievement and school quality in a global context. Among the most prominent assessments are the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). These recurring assessments constitute a vital evidence base for researchers and policymakers to identify strengths and weaknesses in education (Skolverket, 2014; OECD, n.d.; IEA, n.d.-a, n.d.-b). This creates a governance environment where autonomy coexists with centralized expectations, linked to research on leadership, organization, communication across levels, and the negotiation of roles, trust, and alignment (cf. Adolfsson & Håkansson, 2024 Nordholm et al., 2025;).

When transnational policy is recontextualized nationally and locally, educational discourses can be seen as “travelling” (Nordin & Sundberg, 2016). Collaboration across levels – between local education authority (LEA) officials, principals, and teacher leaders – has become a cornerstone of school improvement policy. Yet there may be a need to deepen our understanding of how central and competing policy discourses, with their ideological underpinnings, are interpreted and enacted in local practice as actors from different levels of the school system interact. These processes are crucial, as they shape the conditions for school improvement. The aim of the study is to study how central discourses are interpreted and enacted at the local level by teacher leaders, principals, and LEA officials, and to explore how these discourses interact and relate to one another. This is done through an in-depth study of collaboration within a municipal school improvement model, as expressed both in interactions between LEA officials, principles and teacher leaders, and in interviews with these actors.

Context of the study

This study is conducted in a major Swedish urban municipality. The local school administration for compulsory education has long worked to develop the city’s quality assurance system, aiming to strengthen outcomes and adapt quality efforts to local school contexts. Central to this work is a framework for the pedagogical governance of primary education, called *Shared Pedagogical Governance/Support* (SPGS).

A key element of the system is the “results dialogues,” held twice a year between the LEA and individual schools. Ahead of these meetings, each school submits a report analyzing its performance outcomes as well as ongoing and planned improvement efforts. Before the report is written, teachers first reflect individually and collectively on their teaching, using student results as a starting point. The principal and leadership team then prepare the report drawing in part on these reflections. The report serves as background and a starting point for the results dialogue held between LEA officials and school representatives at the local school. At these meetings, school representatives and LEA officials discuss findings, provide feedback, and jointly identify areas for development to be revisited at the following dialogue. This cyclical process of reflection, reporting, and dialogue forms the core of the SPGS framework and aligns with the work carried out by many LEAs in Sweden.

Previous research: collaboration among governance levels in education

This review aims to synthesize research on collaboration between municipal education authorities and school-level actors, with a particular focus on risks and tensions in quality work within the framework of the LEA. Several studies have examined collaboration between municipal school authorities and local school leaders in Sweden. At a broader level, this aligns with a prevailing trend in international research over the past decade, which has sought to advance understanding of how various layers or subsystems interrelate within an educational system. Within what is

often referred to as the fourth-generation of school improvement, attention has been directed toward examining how the synchronization of local governance and leadership – both across and within different levels of systems and schools – can foster educational development (cf. Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009). Current state-of-the-art literature in the field further underscores the importance of maintaining a sustained focus on the cultivation of professional learning communities, representing a form of profession-driven school improvement, and emphasizes learning not only within the classroom but also for teachers and stakeholders operating at other levels of the system (cf. Hopkins et al., 2014; Muijs et al., 2014).

Recent research in Swedish contexts indicates that education authorities, through long-term and well-organized improvement efforts, can contribute to strengthening schools' capacity and quality. A key factor appears to be balancing formal strategies with softer approaches that foster collaboration, trust, and learning (Adolfsson & Håkansson, 2024). Håkansson and Adolfsson (2022) have examined how local education authorities (LEAs) in Sweden support and control schools through quality management systems, and how these systems gain legitimacy in relation to national school governance. Drawing on interviews and observations in a large municipality, the study identifies three central strategies – data use, leadership, and dialogue – that strengthen connections between the municipality and schools.

Internationally, there is also research that specifically focuses on school development through collaboration between different levels of the school system. For example, Setlhodi (2020) explores how collaboration between school governing bodies (SGBs) and school management teams (SMTs) in underperforming South African schools can contribute to improvement. Genuine collaboration is built on participatory planning, mutual respect, and open communication. Similarly, Leechman et al. (2019) examine school councils and leadership teams in Australian faith-based schools, highlighting that trust-based collaboration, shared vision, and clearly defined roles are key to educational outcomes in locally governed contexts.

In addition, there are also studies that specifically draw attention to risks and tensions in quality work within the framework of the LEA. Liljenberg and Andersson (2023) explore how principals in low-socio-economic communities perceive autonomy and control within a centralized local education authority (LEA) system. Despite constraints from uniform, digitalized, and non-contextual administrative practices, principals adopt pragmatic, innovative strategies to expand autonomy and support students. The study emphasizes the need for context-sensitive LEA governance to improve outcomes and leadership support. Liljenberg (2025) further investigates how soft governance shapes systematic quality work, focusing on dialogue meeting routines intended to promote participation and accountability. Findings reveal a strong emphasis on bureaucratic accountability and limited genuine professional dialogue, with routines often becoming performative. The study underlines the importance of LEA capacity to ensure that activities lead to improvement rather than merely having symbolic value.

Ståhlkrantz and Rapp (2022) highlight the same delicate relationship between LEA governance and local school governance, pointing to tensions between local autonomy and central control in collaborations between municipal administrations and principals. Their case study of a superintendent and four principals in a Swedish municipality, using an institutional perspective, shows how principals are governed through regulative, normative, and cognitive elements of the LEA system. Principals respond with adaptive strategies such as bridging and buffering to meet system demands while safeguarding their schools' mission and student well-being. The study illustrates the ambivalent position of principals: expected to act autonomously to improve student achievement, yet embedded in a tightly controlled, sanction-oriented accountability system. Irisdotter Aldenmyr et al. (2025) have specifically examined the position of teacher leaders within comparable systematic quality work and found that a significant gap often emerges between the ambitions and insights of the teacher leaders and those of the wider teaching staff.

Overall, these studies presented above indicate that collaboration for school development, organized by municipal actors and enacted in interaction with local leaders, often begins with dialogical

intentions but risks shifting toward hierarchical approaches where dialogue becomes symbolic and control dominates. One possible explanation for this can be that goals are interpreted differently across various levels. As national or transnational ideals travel through the school system, they are recontextualized and negotiated in relation to other ideals and local traditions. In a school context, transnational goals – such as expectations for schools in different countries to compete with one another – intersect with prevailing assumptions about teachers' everyday work. Lidström (2025) uses institutional discourse analysis to study how the teaching profession is reshaped through discourses on teachers' "core tasks." She explores how discursive practices in education are both maintained and transformed, highlighting the influence of embedded ideas and ideologies. Ideological structures thus reflect and reinforce normative beliefs and values within a globalized educational context, showing how schools and local actors are influenced by educational reforms. In the current school system, there is strong emphasis on the "core task" of teachers – relating to an urge to isolate teachers from disturbing tasks and allow them to focus on students' results and achievements. Teachers, however, resist by emphasizing social and moral responsibilities as essential parts of their role, which cannot easily be removed from their core duties. Lidström (2025) highlights a dynamic that may help explain why dialogical approaches to collaboration within school improvement initiatives often lose their dialogical character, giving way to more controlling relationships between municipal education leadership, school-level leadership and teachers. Mutuality is lost in clashes between discourses with differing ideological foundations, resulting in actors talking past one another. In discursive interaction, however, one can identify the shaping of "semantic magnets" in moments where actors from various perspectives start to use the same concepts and language (Lidström, 2025, p. 98; Nordin & Sundberg, 2016).

Given the current state of research, our impression is that Nordic scholarship focusing on cross-level interaction within local school systems constitutes an emerging field. Recent literature reviews further indicate that collaboration and professional dialogue should not be regarded as peripheral activities but as integral components of school improvement efforts (Van der Kleij et al., 2023). While previous research has examined collaboration between governance levels in education, there is still limited understanding of how the dominant discourse of results orientation shapes these interactions and influences the balance between different ideological approaches. Specifically, little is known about the mechanisms through which varying interpretations of policy goals affect cross-level collaboration, as well as the conditions under which professional dialogue can foster genuine school improvement. The present study aims to extend previous research in this area by adopting a discourse-analytical perspective to examine how the language practices of actors operating at different levels of the school system shape and integrate distinct discursive types.

Theoretical perspective: discourse analysis as an ideological identifier

What is heard and experienced in conversations is always situated within a broader context shaped by power, structure, politics, and organizational dynamics. Understanding interactions requires attention not only to the content of communication but also to how social hierarchies and institutional arrangements shape which arguments dominate. Kwon et al. (2009) emphasize the importance of analyzing decision-making by considering contexts, individual skills and hierarchical positions. In this study, we focus on discursive actions intended to guide practice within a school improvement agenda.

Fairclough (2003) conceptualizes language as a form of action, noting that individuals "have knowledge and opinions," and that "informing, advising, promising, warning, and so forth are ways of acting" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 27). Similarly, T. A. van Dijk (1997), a central figure in critical discourse analysis, emphasizes the functional role of discourse, highlighting how communicative events convey ideas, perceptions, or emotions within social practices. This approach allows analysis at both collective and individual levels: discourses structure shared practices, while individual

speech acts are grounded in personal intentions. In this study, participants act as representatives of their organizations with defined roles, which shape the types of speech acts they are mandated to perform.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a theoretical and methodological approach that examines the relationship between language, power, and ideology. It is based on the assumption that discourse is not a neutral medium but a form of social practice (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk 2001). CDA aims to uncover how linguistic choices contribute to the reproduction or transformation of power relations and social inequalities. Rather than focusing solely on linguistic structures, CDA is problem-oriented and seeks to identify ideas, values, and perspectives embedded in discourse (Fairclough, 2003).

In discourse theory, the term discourse refers broadly to socially patterned ways of using language that shape and are shaped by social practices (Fairclough, 1992, 2003). A discourse type is a configuration of discursive elements – such as genres, styles, and discourse – that regulate what can be said, by whom, and in which contexts (Fairclough, 1992). While a discourse may describe a general ideological orientation (e.g., neoliberalism, democratization), a discourse type operationalizes this orientation in concrete communicative practices.

When discourse types from different social practices intersect, struggles for discursive hegemony may emerge; yet, discourse types can also form hybrid discourses, reflecting shared language and mutual understanding (Fairclough & Chouliaraki, 1999, p. 94). This is particularly relevant where administrative and school leadership practices meet, as their shared responsibility for systematic school improvement constitutes a joint practice grounded in both mutual understanding and the pursuit of common goals.

Discursive institutionalism offers a complementary lens, examining institutional change through the interaction of ideas across multiple levels. This framework conceptualizes discourse as the exchange of ideas translating individual cognition into collective action (Lidström, 2025; Nordin & Sundberg, 2016; Schmidt, 2010). It aligns with Habermas's (1987) theory of communicative action and deliberative democracy, emphasizing the evaluation of ideas through reciprocal communication, relational trust, and normative claims to truth.

Methods

The empirical data used in this study comes from the LEA officials' work with one compulsory school in the municipality, the Skutaschool. The school has preschool class and up to 9th grade. In the municipality, schools' "socioeconomic weight," are identified. This, along with the number of students at the school, influences the allocation of resources. The variables included are the educational background of guardians (90% of the value) and students born abroad with parents born abroad (10% of the value). The index used for "socioeconomic weight" has a mean value of 100, meaning that schools with a value higher than 100 face greater challenges than schools with a value lower than 100 concerning these background factors. The socioeconomic weight at the time of the study was 174, which defined the school as rather challenged.

The data consists of field notes from one result dialogue and six transcribed interviews:

- **Result dialogue** with the LEA officials George, Roger and Nina, the principals Vera and Nancy, a visiting principal from another school (Jay) and the teacher leaders Bea, Gee, Klara, Tess and Natalie. (2,5 h)
- **Interview with the principal** of the school, Vera (1 h)
- **Interview with the deputy principal**, Nancy (1 h)
- **Single interviews with three** LEA officials, George, Roger and Nina, that participated in the result dialogue analyzed (1 h each)
- **Group interview with three teachers leaders**, Klara, Bea and Mona (1 h)

The results dialogue was observed in February 2024, before the interviews were conducted. One of us researchers attended the dialogue as a passive participant and took field notes. The dialogue focused on actions carried out at the school over the preceding months, as a follow-up to what had been raised in the school report. The subsequent interviews with the LEA officials were conducted in May 2024 by two researchers. The teacher interview and the principal interview were conducted in May 2025, by one researcher, while the deputy principal interview was conducted by two researchers. Interview material was transcribed with Amberscript, and quotes were rewritten into written rather than spoken language for readability. In total, 12 individuals contributed to the dataset, eight of whom were interviewed, with seven also participating in the observed results dialogue.

This corpus functions as an empirical study material, focusing on oral discourses within the discursive practice of school improvement at Skutaschool. In this study, the methods used for data collection are interviews with stakeholder groups represented in one observed results dialogue, from which field notes were taken. For the purposes of this study, it is justified to delimit the material to include actors who work in or with school improvement at the school in question. These actors share a common context around which the discursive expressions are oriented, which strengthens the credibility of the analysis insofar as we can assume that the informants' reflections refer to the same work processes, meetings, and conditions. However, we as researchers have been present in the broader context over an extended period (two years), gathering impressions and conducting observations and interviews with many actors within the municipality. Thus, the specific communicative events related to the school represented in this study possess a degree of representativeness within the wider context (Denscombe, 2017). A crucial part of understanding the wider school improvement context is our participation in 16 results dialogues at six schools over more than a year. Each dialogue lasted around 2.5 h, including breaks. We recorded the dialogues and took notes; the notes form the basis for the current analysis, though the audio recordings have been revisited to clarify interpretations. The overall design of the study draws on methodological strategies such as research-based follow-up and developmental evaluation, both characterized by methodological flexibility and the capacity to examine non-linear, dynamic change processes (cf. Patton, 2015). As researchers, we have had the opportunity to follow the phenomena under study over an extended period without direct involvement in processes or decision-making. Nevertheless, as part of the design, we have continuously provided feedback to the schools and engaged in discussions of preliminary findings and interpretations with the actors involved (cf. Adolfsson & Håkansson, 2021; Patton, 2015). This continuity has enabled the development of trustful relationships, where informants have gradually taken part in our analyses, offered feedback, and confirmed or adjusted our interpretations – an approach aligned with core principles of research ethics, emphasizing transparency, respect, and reciprocity.

For this article, the field notes derive from one results dialogue at Skutaskolan, focused on the actions the school had pursued in recent months. Our work with field notes taken from the results dialogue in this study at hand is consistent with the guidance provided by Phillippi and Lauderdale (2018). They emphasize that field notes are an essential component of qualitative research because they provide contextual detail, document interactions, and support analysis beyond language-based data. During the meeting, one of us acted as a passive observer and took notes on who said what, focusing on the substance rather than verbatim transcription. These notes were later condensed into a short narrative, written with attention to central content and including brief, verbatim excerpts of key statements.

Phillippi and Lauderdale (2018) also highlight that field notes can be integrated with other data sources, such as interviews, to enrich understanding of the phenomenon under study. In our case, the condensed narrative was complemented by interviews with participants, which were recorded and transcribed. This integration enabled us to construct an example that illustrates how a school's quality work unfolds in collaboration with municipal leadership. According to Phillippi and Lauderdale (2018), such integration strengthens the depth and trustworthiness of qualitative findings.

Thus, our use of field notes goes beyond mere description; it serves as an analytical resource that contextualizes the data and enhances the rigor of the study.

The study has a limited scope in terms of traditional claims to generalizability, given the nature of this kind of qualitative research and its relatively small empirical base. In discourse-oriented studies like this one, however, we see value in identifying and illustrating the presence of a particular discourse, and in showing concretely how it takes shape in practice. This is further supported by the discourse's demonstrated grounding in previous research and in key contemporary policy. Against this backdrop, we will now present our method for analysis, with the aim of clarifying how the empirical material was approached with regard to the study's central theoretical assumptions and relevant previous research.

Method for analysis

We adopted Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as our analytical framework because it offers a powerful lens for examining the interplay between language, ideology, and social practice. Our focus was not on micro-linguistic features such as syntax or grammar, but on *discursive practice*, understood as the processes through which texts are produced and consumed. Within these processes, we focus on the meanings, values, and assumptions embedded in participants' statements – and their relation to social practices (cf. Fairclough, 1992). Fairclough distinguishes between discourse analyses that pay close attention to linguistic detail and those that do not; although we acknowledge the value of detailed grammatical analysis, this was not undertaken in the present study (Fairclough, 2003, p. 2). Our approach aligns with CDA's problem-oriented nature, prioritizing the identification of ideas and ideologies rather than purely linguistic categories (Fairclough & Chouliaraki, 1999).

The analytical process followed three steps:

1. Identification of Discursive Constructions and Discourse Types: We repeatedly read transcripts and field notes to identify recurring concepts, metaphors, and evaluative statements, paying particular attention to key terms such as effect chain, results, analysis, freedom, and collective responsibility. These served as indicators of dominating discourses (Fairclough, 2003), namely a results-oriented discourse emphasizing measurability and accountability, and a counter-discourse highlighting holistic teaching and professional judgment.
2. Coding at the discursive practice level: We examined the content of meeting and interviews in relation to the social practice level, that is, how these discourses relate to various governance logics in Swedish education.
3. Analysis of Discursive Struggles and Hybridization: Finally, we analyzed interactional sequences to identify discursive ruptures (moments of resistance or challenge) and points of convergence where hybridization occurred (cf. Fairclough & Chouliaraki, 1999).

The concept of *discourse* refers to the broader ideological frameworks shaping education, whereas *discourse type* denotes the patterned ways these frameworks are enacted in informants' statements and professional interactions. Employing both concepts enables us to connect what is said (discursive practice) with why it is said (social practice), a linkage central to CDA's multi-level approach (Fairclough, 1992, 2003). The discursive patterns identified – a results-oriented discourse, a counter-discourse, and a hybridization of discourses – thus encompass the same components Fairclough associates with discourse type. For readability, however, we use the term discourse in the running text, while acknowledging that these types are closely related to the overarching discourses dominating the social context of education.

It should also be noted that the excerpts presented in the results section should be understood as representative of the broader data set. This implies, for example, that the teacher voices that dominate one of the discourses presented in the results section are primarily those respondents who articulated this discourse most clearly within the qualitative material. At the same time, we do

not claim that teachers, principals, or LEA officials more generally contribute to these discursive patterns in a similar manner.

Results

Results discourse – *the core of teaching and the focus of school improvement*

The three municipal administrative representatives articulate a form of results-oriented, teaching-focused discourse that largely revolves around the idea that student outcomes serve as the indicator of whether a school and its professionals are satisfactorily engaged in school development. A clearer sign of successful school development is when teachers demonstrate an ability to analyze and act systematically in accordance with their analysis. Roger talks about trust between the administration and the school's local professionals – a trust built on everyone striving toward the shared goal of improving quality and results:

It's about trusting each other; we wish each other well without it becoming too watered down. But still, if we build that trust capital, it becomes easier to be clear and straightforward. The main purpose is, of course, that the school's quality and results should improve. (Roger)

Nina operates within the same discursive landscape and notes that a systematic way of reflecting on one's own teaching has become a more natural part of how teachers think and act:

(...) The role of the lead teachers has, I feel, become much more focused on that kind of task. What do our GPS (SPGS) say? What is successful teaching? How do we find out what's going on? It's not just school leaders but also lead teachers actively working on this in a completely different way than before. (...) I also think the school as an organization has previously been quite immature here – school development was something a bit clever we did on the side, like it wasn't part of the daily work. But I think it has become a natural insight for many today that ... what I learn should also change my teaching, and how do I find that out? That's more normal now than it was before. (Nina)

George refers to “effect chains,” a term used in the school development model, representing a way to systematically investigate the effects of different teaching actions. The focus is on student outcomes, which are expected to improve if the “effect chain” thinking gains traction:

Yeah, well, the goal – and as we've outlined in our effect chains, which are a logic of change – is that students should have better chances to succeed in school. So that has to be the goal of school development work. Teaching quality should improve. Students learn more, results increase.

(...) If you can find a clear connection between the school's results, the analysis they have done, and the measures they plan to implement – and you can find that connection in the conversation, or better yet in their analysis, that they can describe it – then you can focus more on the actual doing. “Okay, what are you going to do? How will you organize the school development work around this language development effort? What do you think will be important? Have you used the GPS (SPGS) when planning the professional development?” But the risk if you don't work systematically is that you might never get there. (George)

According to George, a results-oriented discourse also relates to the expectations and governance perceived by the administration from school politicians. His addition, introduced with “but,” suggests he sees problems or a need for nuance regarding the distinctly results-focused goals. The administration's way of handling this is by breaking down the expectation of improved results into interim targets:

That the results should improve if you talk about it ... There's a very clear expectation from our politicians too that results should improve. So the student is always the focus. But we've tried to set interim goals along the way. (George)

Deputy principal Nancy centers on results when discussing school development, contrasting the lack of improved outcomes with the development initiatives undertaken at the school that apparently do not lead to improvement:

What we ask ourselves, and what the whole municipality's Children and Education Office asks, is what they often say – when we do so many good things, many great development projects, and we get so many valuable insights and we're so smart out in the schools – why doesn't the grade results curve just turn? (Nancy)

Nancy also mentions the administration's strategy of creating interim goals as a positive approach, referencing feedback received during results dialogues: "You seem to be doing the right things, but we don't see the results, so then they sort of break it down." Nancy's vision for improving results involves more clearly defined responsibility roles within the staff:

Something has to happen. (...) I've been thinking about giving them more specialized assignments. (...) You have this assignment this year. This is the goal. Time to set clearer goals for each person. (Nancy)

According to Nancy, appointing individuals responsible for different types of tasks could contribute to more visible results in the school's development efforts. She further discusses the type of leadership, competencies, and approaches needed to move the work forward:

Analytical ability and analytical competence and leading with statistics and data-driven development is required. (Nancy)

Here, a discourse emerges with a focus on increased student results, coupled with demands for greater accountability, analytical capacity, and statistical foundations for the work.

Nancy builds on the messages she perceives the school receives from the municipal leadership's guidance and the focus she believes the school should have on improving its results. For her, it is a matter of translating theoretical knowledge and distinct goals into action:

But it's really the organizational, the professional perspective, the analytical ability, the will and ability to create an action plan and make progress. (...), like driving a process. Yes, linking (...) numbers to concrete actions. (...) I see the pictures in the PowerPoint from the management. I see the arrows and the movement and such. It's there theoretically. Like how you should think and act. (...) (Nancy)

In the statements from the administrative representatives and the deputy principal, a discourse oriented toward student results emerges, linking effective school development to responsibility, analytical ability, and partly allowing statistics to guide how school development efforts should be prioritized. This type of discourse encompasses not only ideological ideas about school development but also assumptions about what schools and the teaching profession should prioritize. A "core mission" crystallizes around teaching, analysis, and measuring knowledge.

A counter-discourse – teaching as a holistic practice and school improvement as a collective movement

Teachers at the school base their perspective on what they perceive as an emerging understanding of a more fragmented view of school development. The idea of increased individual accountability, where some leading teachers specialize and work systematically and analytically towards result-oriented goals, is seen as a notion that challenges the more collective responsibility that the teacher leadership group has developed together:

It was very scattered. Everyone went in different directions. Now we've managed to pull the school together. (...) The concern is that we're becoming scattered again. (...) Now we've entered this sense of security. Those of us in the UG (DG) (development group) have gotten through all these bumps along the way. And that was our task as lead teachers initially, to be part of the UG (DG) (...) And if we are to be specialized, then it becomes very solitary work. But we want this strength as a group, to work together on development. (Bea)

This concern relates to new ideas about how school development should be conducted, but also reflects a counter-discourse against a narrower, more systematic focus on student results in relation to teachers' efforts and methods. The strongly emphasized results-focus – related to terrains around "teacher core tasks" and limiting teachers' assignments to identifying successful teaching actions leading to improved student outcomes – provokes resistance among the teacher group. This

resistance appears to arise from the school leadership's talk about new ways of driving school development that are more based on individual mandates and responsibilities: "... they want more control and want somehow to take it back again."

A more systematized school development agenda is, in the teacher leaders' interpretation, also embedded in various discourses about the school's mission and teachers' work:

We don't share the same view of the work at the school. That's the problem (...) We need what we want to have in order to succeed at our job. It's not what management thinks we need, looking at results and statistics and treating (the students, our note) as customers (...) whereas we see children and young people and future citizens in a society (...). We will never buy their agenda, that statistics is all that matters or these numbers that we see. (Bea)

In the emerging counter-discourse, "numbers" become a symbol for the mindset that the teachers resist:

We've said that statistics and being able to follow up is great, but just like you said (...) statistics can't influence our everyday work that way. Absolutely, we raise our everyday work and try to make it understandable with numbers at intervals to see development and so on. (...) We have to act on things in ways that perhaps can't always be put into a table, and that's a bit what we struggle with ... We work with people and people we work with can feel bad. (Klara)

At the same time, there is an expressed understanding of the part of the school system where statistics and result reporting are required. In the teacher discourse, this is interpreted as partly another discursive practice – a practice that concerns them but cannot dominate their own practice:

They (the administration, our note) have to control. They need this. But we don't need this locally in the same way as the administration does because we are a school. And they're not. They don't work in the school; they work with something completely different. Their mission looks different. They need key figures and key cards and need to come here for result dialogues to get this. And we can give them that, but we can't live and work in it. (Bea)

Principal Vera, when speaking about school development, takes as her starting point what she perceives as criticism of, and an expectation for something different in, her leadership. Thus, a counter-discourse to a narrower idea of effective, results-focused school development emerges:

My approach, or how to think about and act on school development, is not entirely obvious to many. So I get questioned sometimes. Some new people who come in might say: "But do you tell us how it should be now? How hard can it be to put your foot down?" (...) That's how it's been my whole career. Many want quicker decisions (...) It can't be unclear. And they point out that things take too long before they happen. And I have stubbornly tried to explain that for me it's not about whether I can or can't decide if we should change something or develop something at school that I believe in. It's about employees feeling the need for it and feeling that it's a gain if we go into it, and that it takes time. So the answer to the question is still that I want to let it take this time. I want to make sure that the people at the school, we agree on what it is we need to develop. And I guide that from within in a way that's not so visible at first. (Vera)

Vera aligns with a discourse that strongly focuses on the professional teachers' experiences, needs, and perspectives. She also speaks of the collective shared strength and will as the core of school development:

(...) then that is something they are proud of. It's that we do this together. It's participation. We have systematic quality work that isn't just about how Vera points with the whole hand but that we do this together. And I usually say that I want to bring out my employees. They're the ones who should set the tone for those who step forward based on our common decisions. (...) Then it's like what the employees are proud of. It's that we drive this school forward, together. It's collective. (Vera)

Vera's emphasis on the teacher collective's importance can be seen as part of a leadership and school development discourse where collective and consensus are central values. This also affects attitudes toward and views on collaboration with the municipal administration. Vera testifies to a development from feeling controlled by narrow goals to now being able to develop in line with and with support from the input the school receives during result dialogues:

Our feeling was that it was more of a control function and that we felt questioned. So I know that at first I did really badly and couldn't express myself. I felt like I couldn't describe anything. (...) You got nervous and felt, "What do they really want to know?" (...) But maybe it's mostly us at the school who perceive it as control. And we didn't see any gain in it at all, we just felt bad, basically. (...) Then there was more and more structure from the leadership. And then these reflective questions came a bit more. (...) But then something happens. And in the last three, four years (...) it's been incredibly positive occasions where we feel that here we grow because leadership is interested in how we think. So the teachers are super eager to tell and also get questions to take back some challenges with them. (Vera)

Vera's increasingly positive attitude toward the school development system and especially the result dialogues seem to stem from a sense that reflection and interest in the teacher group's perspectives have gained more space in the conversations. This idea of the importance of result dialogues and the role of leadership in the school's development contrasts somewhat with Nancy's idea, which is based on narrower analyses with sharper focus on results, data-driven bases, and individual persons responsible for the analytical work based on specialized competence. Vera's interpretation is that leadership does not want to steer and control, but that the underlying ideology in the quality development system is rather about giving the teacher profession an increasingly strong mandate in their own development:

Yes, my observation then is that (...) we need to use our freedom much, much more at the school to find different solutions for students to reach where they need to be. And that's exactly where we are now, and there's strong pressure from the leadership (...) And that suits me perfectly because I'm always trying to think about stretching the limits a bit. Even if you don't go outside the big frame itself. But there's a lot of freedom that's never used in schools, because it's a very regimented world built on positions in the schedule. (Vera)

Ideas that students reach passing grades through systematic changes in teachers' instruction can be said to dominate results-focused discourses. George from the administration, who takes his starting point in a result-oriented discourse, makes a turn in the quote below, which can be seen as in line with Vera's talk about teachers' freedom. George concludes that teachers themselves must engage to defend and safeguard their professional autonomy; otherwise, someone else will claim the right to steer the profession:

You always have to think about student results, student learning. But it's probably possible to include more perspectives. (...) So far we're also struggling a lot with: "Yeah, but what's the gain of building such a thorough quality work? What does it give the individual teacher? Why is it important that I analyze my teaching?" Otherwise, someone else will do it for you and you lose your freedom. I try to convince as many as possible that analysis is a way to professionalize. It's a way to actually get more room to act for the profession, not that you do it for someone else, but for yourself. And if you do it well and credibly, then you'll get more room to act in the classroom than you otherwise would. (George)

Here emerges a discourse whose ideological core is about developing the teacher profession, focusing on analysis of one's own practice, rather than a results-oriented discourse that fragments a results focus from other professional activities. However, this discourse is conditional: only when the municipal leadership sees that sufficient professional capacity exists is teacher autonomy possible to enact:

(...) if a school becomes skilled at analysis, both backward and forward. Yeah, then they get strong autonomy, then we can trust that school's plan, it seems wise. They've done the work. It sounds reasonable that they get to focus on this number sense work in early years for a few years. But a school that doesn't have control, that hasn't done analysis, where the result dialogue shows they're pulling in different directions. That school we can intervene with our own "Collaboration for Best School" process (Samverkan för bästa skola – a government initiative in Sweden, supporting schools with weak results, our note), called "Process Support for School Development" (Processtöd för skolutveckling) – and then the school's autonomy decreases. (George)

The counter-discourse against a narrow results focus and a systematized, limited teacher role based on statistics and analysis strongly advocates for the teacher profession's autonomy and freedom. Within this space of freedom, the teachers – together with principal Vera, who most clearly

articulates the counter-discourse – want to broaden the focus and see the school’s and teachers’ mission from a holistic perspective. Here, results do not become the sole decisive measure of a school’s quality or the success of its development efforts. The teacher group feels constrained by an overly narrow interpretation of the goal- and results-based management led by the municipal administration. The administration representatives appear in the teachers’ talk to act in a parallel discursive practice with its own logic of results-driven governance, but which does not necessarily have to condition the teachers’ complex, multifaceted practice. What emerges in their discourse is a hybridized narrative, where statistics and results management are given a defined role with some importance, but do not dominate or displace the pedagogical rationality that the teachers base their work on.

Principal Vera reproduces in her discourse similar notions of collaboration with the LEA officials that was earlier characterized by a feeling of control but is now rather characterized by a desire to give teachers freedom and autonomy. At the same time, deputy principal Nancy represents a more results-driven discourse, where statistics, systematics, and accountability dominate. Is there a story about when and how these two discourses collide, compete with each other, and what has led to their partial hybridization? We here conduct a discourse-analytical reading of field notes from a result dialogue between the administration, principals, and teachers, held roughly one year before the interviews were conducted. All interviewees except the teacher Mona participated in the result dialogue.

Hybridization of discourses and the creation of new shared understanding

Based on Norman Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis (CDA), we can analyze the result dialogues by focusing on how two discourses referred to above, representing different ideological standpoints and power relations, emerges and compete with one another. Among the teachers and headteachers in the meeting, a broad, rich teacher narrative discourse emerged during the meeting. This discourse is characterized by expansive and rich language, emphasizing process and narrative, which suggests a construction of reality centered on wholeness, development, and experience. The focus in this discourse, primarily articulated by the teachers, highlights collaboration, continuity, and a nonlinear understanding of developmental processes. This discourse can therefore be said to contribute to constructing a professional identity among teachers that values process and engagement over measurable outcomes (see Irisdotter, 2006).

Field notes excerpt: “Powerful narratives “interweave,” with a clear chronology. Describes collaborative assessment and teacher teams”

Among the LEA officials, a more narrow, precise future-planning discourse emerges. This discourse emphasizes the concept of the “effect chain,” which signals a clear, measurable, and linear model for how activities are expected to yield specific outcomes. The “chain” metaphor conveys a structured process with distinct steps or links that lead to a predetermined goal. This discourse focuses on planning and demonstrating concrete results for the future, which partly contrasts with the narrative discourse’s focus on process as an end in itself. Within this discourse, measurability and objectivity are considered primary indicators of success and efficiency, fostering a different kind of professional identity, one driven by control and accountability for delivering measurable outcomes (see Irisdotter, 2006; Smith & Benavot, 2019).

Field notes excerpt: “Discussion of effect chains. Measurability. Focus on teaching. Questions about what various activities are expected to lead to”.

When these two discourses meet in the results dialogue, a discursive struggle occurs, but so does hybridization. Hybridization is evident when the administrator leading the results dialogue introduces the concept of the “effect chain,” causing a clear breakpoint between the two discourses – a discursive rupture.

Field notes excerpt: “Teachers challenge the administration by asking how one evaluates and measures whether an activity “leads to something.”” Natalie says: “Here’s a curious question. How can you measure

something like aromatic salt?” (“Aromatic salt” is a metaphor used at the school, for doing something in the beginning of a lesson that awakes the students and make them interested, our note). Natalie continues to draw comparisons with, for example, grades and assessment, where it’s clearer how you can “measure” results and get a kind of “receipt” that you’ve reached something. But how do you know that the purpose of “aromatic salt” has been achieved, that something is actually finished? The administrative representative George says that he has a lot to say about this. “Can I elaborate on it?”, he asks. “Yes”- several participants emphasizes that this is something they want to hear more about. George responds that the effect chain does not necessarily need to be measurable. He emphasizes that the results chain doesn’t have to consist of quantitatively measurable proof that something has been achieved. One can also talk about qualitative goals and experiences of achievement within a results chain. Sometimes it can be quite straightforward to establish that a goal has been reached in a process. The aromatic salt-project can for example be assessed through observation. The aim is to spark interest, and observing the students in the classroom can be one way of examining whether it worked and made a difference. As George elaborates on his thoughts about how qualitative goals can be seen as parts of, and taken seriously within, the discussion of the “results chain,” several murmurs of agreement can be heard among the participants. The feeling in the room is that many are beginning to understand the results chain – and George’s way of speaking about it – in a new, more inclusive way. Later in the conversation, Natalie returns to the point, saying that she can now include much more in her assessment of quality development and in what counts as relevant.

A new understanding emerges, wherein teachers’ professional experience also can be seen as an adequate source to tell whether something has been “fulfilled” or has “led to something” or not. The teacher’s professional judgement can also be seen as a form of evaluation.

This rupture reveals an underlying conflict between different ideological positions: the teachers’ process-oriented, narrative approach and the administration’s linear, goal-oriented perspective. The discursive rupture highlights that the “narrow, precise future-planning discourse” faces resistance within the teaching cohort; the term “effect chain” has limited acceptance and understanding, suggesting that this discourse conflicts with the teachers’ values and perceptions of the role of education.

At the same time, the teacher’s challenging question to the administration acts as an invitation to hybridization. Following the discursive clash that involved a questioning of the meaning of the “effect chain”, the concept was subsequently expanded to include teachers’ own observations as valid indicators of impact. This can be understood as a form of recognition of teachers’ professional judgment, where “effects” are allowed to reflect what they themselves perceive as positive outcomes. The teachers’ own use of the term “effect chain” in the following conversation indicates an openness to integrating certain elements from the future-planning discourse, but on their own terms and in their own language. This appropriation signals that hybridization is not a simple compromise but an expansion of meaning: the “effect chain” remains as a guiding metaphor, yet its interpretation broadens to encompass both quantitative and qualitative indicators, allowing multiple perspectives to coexist within the same conceptual frame.

The two discourses represent a dimension of ideological difference regarding the value of process versus outcome in education. Fairclough’s (2003) critical discourse analysis helps us understand that these discourses are not only different ways of talking about teaching but also reflect different ways of understanding knowledge, value, and purpose within the educational system. The introduction of the concept of the “effect chain” triggers discursive tension, opening up the possibility of hybridization, where teachers begin to incorporate elements of outcome-focused evaluation into their work. Likewise, the narrower discourse of measurable knowledge is challenged as teachers express frustration with the key concepts used by the school administration.

Hybridization appears in this example as a dynamic process in which ideological differences between a results-oriented discourse and a holistic counter-discourse are exposed. The friction that arises when the concept of the “effect chain” is questioned creates a space for negotiation where the concept is renegotiated and expanded. Through linguistic actions, the meaning of the concept is broadened to include both quantitative and qualitative indicators, which in turn legitimizes professional judgment as a form of evaluation. Hybridization thus entails an expansion of

meaning and an ideological shift, where governance logic and professional experience are integrated into a new type of discourse.

Concluding remarks

In this study, we have explored how central discourses are interpreted and enacted at the local level by teacher leaders, principals, and LEA officials, and how these discourses interact and relate to one another. Analysis reveals two dominant discourses: a results-oriented discourse emphasizing measurability and accountability, and a counter-discourse highlighting holistic, collective approaches. The former frames school improvement through grades and quantitative measures, while the latter values professional judgment and qualitative indicators. At the local level, these discourses are reconfigured through a process of hybridization that produces shared understandings of key concepts. It is important to note, however, that this hybridization was preceded by a point of rupture, when one participant questioned a concept and, in doing so, a particular way of thinking about the aims and means of school improvement. For the shared understanding to emerge, a moment of conflict was required. This dynamic aligns with “fourth-generation school improvement,” which stresses coordination across system levels (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009) and supports educator autonomy and professional learning (Hopkins et al., 2014; Muijs et al., 2014). The hybridization of discourses combines systematic, results-oriented strategies with teachers’ qualitative insights.

Municipal representatives primarily advance the results discourse, while teacher leaders safeguard the counter-discourse. Both serve as rhetorical frameworks negotiated in interviews. While the two dominant discourses presented in the results are formulated on the basis of interview material, the hybridization of discourse is described as a phenomenon emerging specifically in the interaction between the study’s various actors. This does not preclude the possibility that the same actors may draw on different lines of reasoning in other situational contexts. For the purposes of this study, however, we have chosen to foreground the hybridization process as it manifested during the particular interactional event under examination. The results dialogue illustrates how initial resistance, followed by dialogue and conceptual expansion, can transform discursive formations. In this example, the concept of the “effect chain” emerges as central to mutual understanding through a process of hybridization. This is comparable to the shaping of “semantic magnets,” as described by Lidström (2025, p. 98), where actors from different practices begin to use shared concepts. Such consensus reflects the dialogue tradition in Swedish public institutions (Rothstein & Stolle, 2008) and resonates with communicative and deliberative ideals (Habermas, 1987; Schmidt, 2010), although these ideals face challenges in governance contexts shaped by competition and control (Liljenberg, 2025; Ståhlkrantz & Rapp, 2022).

The study contributes knowledge on how discourses with conflicting ideological underpinnings can coexist and interact through dialogical processes. This supports research stressing the need to balance formal strategies with softer approaches fostering trust and collaboration (Adolfsson & Håkansson, 2024). Hybridization can be seen as a dynamic process that broadens how we understand governance concepts. The term “effect chain,” originally tied to measurable logic, becomes a concept that participants use and debate during the dialogue, exploring its meaning and implications. In this way, micro-level interactions in results dialogues turn into spaces where policies are reinterpreted and reshaped. These observations highlight the value of dialogue as a way to build shared understanding in school improvement.

For those involved, this means allowing different, ideologically grounded views of school aims to surface and be critically discussed. At the same time, it is important to recognize and work with varied interpretations of key concepts. Such dialogue can create new shared perspectives and help bridge ideological divides in efforts to improve schools.

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