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Manifesting student-centric schools: perspectives and challenges for quality development in educational systems

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Abstract

The purpose of the paper*:* Is to share findings from the first phase of a qualitative study to understand how municipalities can successfully implement a systematic approach to ensure student focus in education at all levels of the value chain from policy documents to classroom planning and management; one in which the core values are used to guide development over time.

Methodology: This paper is based on an interactive research design in which a qualitative multi-site case study of an educational system in a Swedish municipality was conducted to explore the following questions:

1. How is the municipality's quality steering model described, communicated, and visualized in the schools?
2. How is the quality steering model used at all levels of the municipality to ensure "student in focus 100%"?

Findings: Initial findings show that the municipality's systematic quality model provides an important framework for communicating planning and follow-up through clarity of purpose, goals, roles, and responsibilities. Moreover, the student is the focus throughout the daily work of the school, but this is not visible in the documentation and written reports. Among the factors that were found to contribute to this include a lack of shared terminology, and a lack of connection between goals at different levels. Further, the school's culture is not communicated in standard reporting, which hides a part of the quality puzzle. Among the questions that remain to explore are: what role does language play in the communication of quality at different levels of the educational system? In what ways does the language in policy documents match and support the work of educators in the classroom?

Research limitations/implications: This study is conducted in a Swedish municipality therefore findings are not generalizable. The site was chosen based on the depth of development of their systematic quality assurance system and steering model, which provided an important research opportunity to learn more about the challenges and

opportunities for schools and municipalities to implement systemic quality improvement models.

Originality/Value: This paper has significance to support municipalities in their work with systematic quality systems in education.

Keywords: educational systems, public sector, quality improvement, student focus, quality culture

Paper type: Research paper

1. Introduction

The national agenda for education in Sweden requires all schools to establish a systematic quality assurance system[1] to secure and support the learning and development of all youth through quality-driven school development practices (Skolverket, 2025). The purpose of the systematic process is to plan, follow up, analyze, document, and develop education through shared processes and knowledge development that are built on a strength-based approach to leading. According to the policy directive, each municipality is responsible for developing their own systematic quality system for schools to support work at the school level, which is carried out through the collaboration of teachers, pre-school teachers, other staff and students under the principal, who is responsible for the work. This delegation reflects a distributed approach to systematic quality in education based on shared responsibility and involvement.

While the policy directive is clear, ongoing research demonstrates that implementation of school driven quality development through systematic quality assurance systems is difficult, and Swedish schools continued to deteriorate in equivalence and goal fulfillment in because of school inspections (Nystedt, 2020). Too often educators fall into the traditional trap of standardized reporting as a measure of quality and fail to understand the importance of creating a culture of student-centric learning based on guiding principles (Ehren et al., 2013; Snyder, 2023; Westling Allodi, 2013). Some studies show that school leaders do not emphasize the need for a systems perspective or a focus on the customer as important to achieving quality (Ingelsson, et al 2022). Nor do school leaders draw sufficiently on the tools and processes that are available to support systematic quality processes (Bäckström et al., 2024). There remains a need for further understanding about how to implement systematic quality steering models that are aligned with a student-centric orientation to shift the focus from reporting and compliance to learning, growth, and development.

In keeping with the Swedish national requirement for systematic quality assurance systems in education (Skolverket, 2025), one municipality in Sweden has developed a process-oriented, value-based steering model, based on the Cornerstone Model (Bergman & Klefsjö, 2008; Bergman et al., 2022) that aims to support quality development in all aspects of the municipality's services and activities. The Cornerstone Model includes six interdependent components: 1) focus on customer, 2) focus on processes, 3) let everyone take an active part, 4) base decisions on facts, 5) improve continuously, and 6) develop committed leadership (Bergman et al., 2022). The model is value-driven in which all aspects should be guided by the "corners" in the model that form the foundation for purpose, actions, decisions and continuous development. This model is well-known in the

[1] The systematic quality assurance system in this article is a translation of the Swedish Systemtatiskt Kvalitetsarbete as articulated by the Swedish National Agency for Education. https://www.skolverket.se/styrning-och-ansvar/styrning-och-kvalitetsarbete/systematiskt-kvalitetsarbete

field of quality management and serves as the basis for the Swedish Institute of Quality award systems in education.

In the case site, the steering model is supported by all levels of the school system (from politicians to schools) through two interconnected Educational "Platforms" The Central leadership platform is developed by an educational committee closely aligned with political leadership, which provides the overall strategic direction for schools, including the educational values, mission, and goals. The Central leadership team is responsible for executing the Platform (Level 1) as a framework to support school development. Within this framework, each school develops its own unique Platform (Level 2) that is aligned with the Central leadership platform, giving schools autonomy to develop and ensure quality at the school level. The school platforms serve to communicate how the schools will work to meet the goals of the overall educational plans (Platform Level 1) for the community, requiring alignment between the two. Principals are responsible for implementing the model and creating the conditions to engage teachers, staff and students in developing a high-quality learning environment that is in keeping with the goals, values and vision of the municipality.

The overall quality in the Municipality's systematic quality assurance system (supported by the steering model) is based on a coordinated interplay between the municipality's Central Leadership team from the Department of Education and all school Principals. However, findings from internal evaluations indicate the need for further improvement in the implementation of the steering model to improve the interplay between the different steering levels. Reports indicated there appears to be a lack of implementation and shared understanding of the steering model and its role in supporting a culture to promote student success and well-being. A needs assessment that was conducted in 2012 by the Municipality indicated that despite competent teachers, the goals for education were often not achieved. Among the contributing factors identified was a lack of clarity among school leaders and the areas of role responsibility. Findings from surveys and dialogue with educators also indicated a fragmented picture of how to support systematic quality-driven school development and what it means for the child to be the center for all development. This analysis concluded that schools lacked systems for improvement and clear leadership.

This finding is not uncommon as other studies reinforce repeated challenges of implementing systematic quality assurance systems at all levels of an (Ehren et al., 2013; Nystedt, 2020; Westling Allodi, 2013). This leaves questions about how the different levels of an educational system are aligned to ensure 100% student success. ***The purpose of this paper is*** to share findings from the first phase of a qualitative study to understand how municipalities can successfully implement a systematic approach to ensure student focus in education at all levels of the value chain from policy documents to classroom planning and management; one in which the core values are used to guide development over time.

2. Theoretical Framework

In this paper, systems theory serves as the theoretical lens to understand more fully how school municipalities can successfully implement quality management principles to support systematic quality in education. Quality management is rooted in systems thinking where continuous improvement can respond to changing conditions over time and keep organizations on the sustainability path (Snyder, 2023). For schools, systems theory offers a way of life, in which workers focus on a common vision and a few operational goals, as they work together in teams or work units that function

interdependently (Dalin, 1998; Murgatroyd & Morgan, 1993; Snyder et al, 2008). Systems theory enables professionals to respond to the uniqueness of their own school in natural ways, for it enables them to make better use of resources, professional talent and community interests (Mårtensson & Snyder, 2023; Shaked, & Schechter, 2017; Snyder and Anderson, 1986; Snyder & Björkman, 2016). Common improvement goals are shaped by all professionals and reflect a reading of what the school's particular student populations need for success (Dalin, 1998; Senge, et al., 2000).

Similarly, Shingo Institute (2017) articulates the importance of a framework based on guiding principles that serve as anchors in a systematic process of continuous improvement. Specifically, they state that, "*Sustainable results depend upon the degree to which an organization's culture is aligned to specific guiding principles rather than depending solely on tools, programs or initiatives*." (Shingo Institute, 2017, p. 9). From a systems perspective, continuous improvement is strengthened when all members of an organization understand not only how tools and processes are implemented, but why they have been selected. By understanding the purpose of the tools and processes, organizational members are better equipped to ask questions regularly about how well they are meeting their goals. This empowers individuals and creates a collective strength through participation that is critical to ensure quality. In the context of quality-driven education, tools and processes are the practical components of a systematic quality assurance system that interlinks the decisions and actions in schools with the strategic plans, goals and needs of students.

3. Methodology

A qualitative single-site case study was conducted in a Swedish municipality to explore the following research questions:

3. How is the municipality's quality steering model described, communicated, and visualized in the schools?
4. How is the quality steering model used at all levels of the municipality to ensure "student in focus 100%"?

Interactive Research Design (IRD) (Ellström, et al 2020) was used to establish a collaborative approach used in the case study. IRD aims to create a partnership between researchers and practitioners in the co-production of knowledge. The approach includes two systems that interact, including the Research System and *The Practice System*. Through a series of interactive seminars, the research system examines problems using theoretical concepts and data collection methods. The practice system provides knowledge and perspectives based on local theories of understanding and concrete examples. The roadmap for conducting Interactive Research is non-distinct and left up to the research to design the process based on the context of the study object (Johansson & Wallo, 2019). Throughout the study, data are collected using interviews, focus groups, and document analysis, which are then analyzed and discussed from the two different IRD systems.

3.1 Case description

The municipality where the study is conducted is a smaller municipality in the middle of Sweden. This education system is responsible for schooling of all ages from one year to grown-ups, which are divided into early childhood education, elementary school, middle school, high school and adult education. In this study, all grade levels from ages

one to 19 were included, excluding adult education. The case site was chosen for their quality steering model based on the Swedish model for quality referred to as Cornerstone model (Bergman et al., 2022), and their interest to continue to improve how the system facilitates a student-centric orientation at all levels of the system. All school Principals and superintendents were included from the case site, as well as the steering documents for the municipality and the individual schools.

3.2 Data collection

Data was collected through interviews, focus-group workshops, and document analysis. Respondents included the Central leadership team (N=5) and school Principals (interviews N= 8, workshop N=20) from all levels of schooling (nursery school to high school). Adult education was not included in this portion of the study.

3.2.1 Workshops

Two seminars were held in January-February 2024, one with the Central leadership team from the Municipality, which included five people: the superintendent and three assistant superintendents, and one quality process leader. The second workshop took place with 20 school Principals during a regular professional development meeting. The purpose of the workshops was to gain an understanding about the strengths and weaknesses in the systematic quality system for ensuring student-centric schooling.

3.2.2 Interviews

Thirteen individual interviews were conducted to create a current picture of the challenges and opportunities of the municipality's quality work for school operations to ensure a student-centric focus, and to increase understanding of how they work with schools in practice. *The first round of interviews* took place with five municipal leaders (Central leadership team). The purpose of the interviews was to gain insights into how they work with the implementation and support the systemic quality model to ensure a student-centric focus throughout all levels of the system (from politicians to the classroom). *The second round* included eight Principals representing all grade levels of the school system (excluding adult education). The purpose of the interviews was to gain insights from school Principals about what makes their schools attractive, and what systems and processes they use from the municipality's student-centric quality management system. Interviews lasted one hour each and took place via Microsoft Teams and were recorded simultaneously with real-time transcription. The interview protocol was based on five open-ended questions in which respondents described their perspectives and provided examples from their work.

3.2.3 Documents

Four main document types were included in this study, representing both the system level for education in the municipality, as well as individual school-level. The documents were used to gain greater understanding of how the quality system described, coordinated, and implemented at all levels of the educational system from politicians to classroom. The following documents from the municipality were used: Educational Platform for leadership and steering, which includes the goals, vision and mission, the Systematic Quality Management Steering system. At the school level, documents included school-specific Strategic Planning documents, and Systematic Quality reports.

3.3 Data Analysis

In case study research, data analysis involves both direct interpretation of raw data and categorical aggregation (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018) to derive understanding and knowledge about the case based on the identification of themes and patterns (Stake, 1995). To ensure validity and trustworthiness in the analysis, data is further triangulated by perspective, setting, or time (Denzin, 2012). In this study, data were analyzed in five stages. In the first stage, data were analyzed from interviews with the Central leadership team (group 1) and Principals (group 2) and workshops with the respective groups. Data were first analyzed separately using direct interpretation (Stake, 1995) to identify themes and patterns about the strengths and weaknesses in the application of the municipality's systematic quality system to ensure student-centric schooling. *In the second stage*, the themes and patterns derived from the direct interpretation were further analyzed using heuristic coding (Saldana, 2021) to generate categorical codes at the aggregate level. *In the third stage*, interview data were triangulated using "person triangulation" (Denzin, 2012) to compare the themes, patterns and codes from each of the aggregated data sets to identify consistency, referred to as "correspondence" in Stake's approach (Stake, 1995). *In the fourth stage*, documents were analyzed using a content-analysis approach (Bowen, 2009) based on manifest (what is explicitly stated) and latent variables (underlying meaning). This analysis included a review of the documents, by level, to identify consistencies and discrepancies between the language used to articulate the processes and goals of the quality management system and practical implications for application at the different levels of the educational system. In the final stage, coding themes from the aggregate categories were triangulated with the content analysis of the documents to identify consistency and discrepancy between policy and practice in the systematic quality educational system.

3.4 Ethics

This study was conducted in partnership with the case site and followed research ethics guidelines, including informed consent, anonymity, researcher bias, and data management. All participants were invited to participate and gave informed consent both prior to the interviews and workshop participation, as well as at the start of the data collection process. Participants were informed in writing and verbally of their right to refuse an answer and the possibility to end an interview if they felt uncomfortable. All data remained anonymous, and data analysis reflects an aggregation of perspectives based on the combining of findings from the individual data sets to the aggregate. All data is stored on a secure server and unable to be shared to preserve anonymity. To control potential researcher bias, validation meetings were conducted with different respondent groups following initial data analysis. The results were further analyzed as a group to gain a deeper understanding of the findings within the case site context. Each step of data collection and analysis was used to inform the next steps in the research process.

4. Results

4.1 Workshops

The first workshop was held with the Practice System representatives that included the five-member Central leadership team. During the workshop, the leaders articulated a concern about how to ensure student-centric schooling given based on data that indicated student well-being was less than optimal. Among the questions raised by the Central

leadership team were: “how can we ensure that everyone in the municipality is working to ensure that each and every student has what they need to succeed?”. Despite the articulated goals and visions of quality in the Level 1 Educational Platform, there was a lack of visible evidence that demonstrated 100% student-centric engagement throughout the educational system. Among the data that gave rise to concerns were complaints from students and parents, and a fragmented picture of student well-being as represented by national questionnaires. However, questions were raised about the validity of the questionnaires to measure student well-being based on the limited number and phrasing of the questions. The Central leadership team also indicated challenges empowering some school Principals to “own” their school’s platform and systematic quality improvement initiatives. Further, initial training for new teachers in the steering model and the purpose of the educational Platforms (level 1 and 2) was not sufficient and required more time for integration of new staff in the school’s systematic quality work processes. Finally, the uniqueness of each school’s individual Platform generated variation that posed challenges for measuring quality development at the municipal level.

In a second workshop with Principals, focus aimed to get a deeper understanding of the principal’s perspective of their work to ensure student-centric schooling. As illustrated in Figure 1, fives themes emerged that describe how they work to align all systems, what makes them attractive and what are important in their student-centric work.

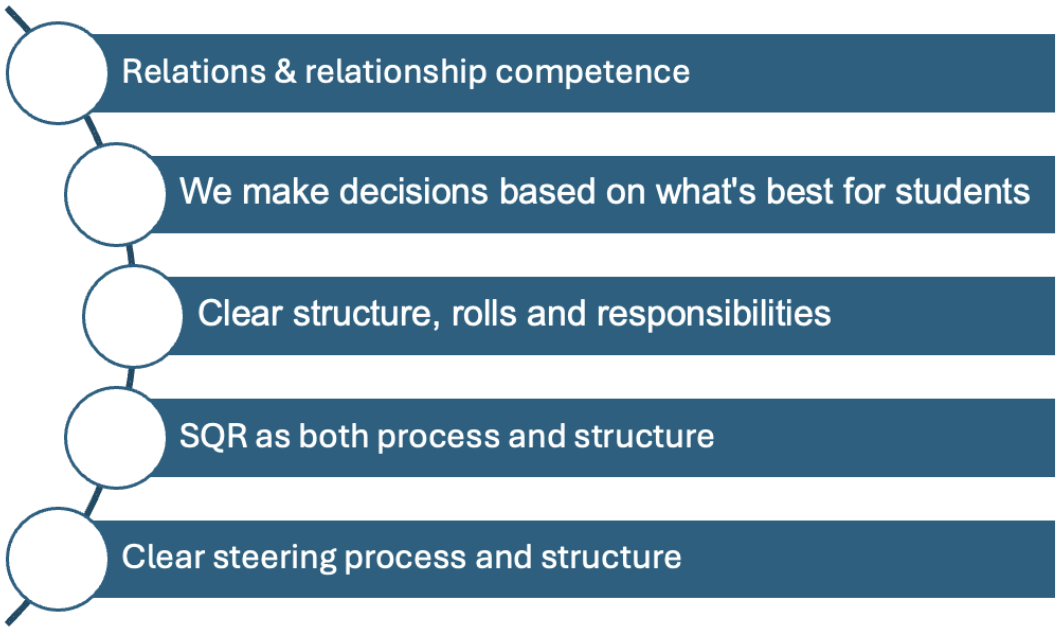

Figure 1. Five themes emerged from the second workshop with Principals.
*SQR= Systematic Quality Reports

Comparing the findings between the two separate leadership levels, it was evident that the focus for ensuring student-centric work was appropriately different depending on the level. The Central leadership team was concerned by a lack of visible evidence about how the school’s worked toward student-centric schooling, while the principals clearly articulated that the primary factor for developing student-centric schooling was drawn from the quality of relationships with all persons, including students and parents. They

also indicated the importance of clear structures and roles within the school and the municipality that supported their efforts toward student-centric schooling. Central to this was the Platform at both the Department level and school level.

4.2 Interviews

Several themes appeared related to both strengths, see Tabel I, and challenges, see Table II, among both the Central leadership team and the principals. There were different themes between the two groups, which to some extent can be related to the management structure and work assignments. Among the similarities, both groups identified the importance of relationships and a relationship culture that was important. Embedded within this was the close distance between the two leadership levels that supports dialogue, accessibility to one another, and simplifies decision making. Both groups also identified the important role that the steering model provided them through a clear structure and articulated processes, as well as clarity of responsibilities. However, different perspectives about how the steering model was used was also identified. For example, the Central leadership team talked about the usefulness of the steering model to support an overarching steering and management, while the principals described the model in terms of process. Another difference identified between the groups was the focus on goal setting. While the Central leadership level talked about the importance of connecting guiding principles and goals, the principals focused more on the importance of relationships and clarity of purpose and process as supportive to their work with quality.

Table I. Strengths in the Systematic Quality System for ensuring student-centric schooling

Summary from interviews with the Central leadership team	**Summary from interviews with the principals**
Clear steering and management structure	Clear positions and processes thanks to the steering model that include clear chain of command
Clear roles	The feeling of trust between professions thanks to clear positions and processes: clear mission
Clear goals	Regular dialogue and conversations
Trust	Educational perspective/pedagogy that promotes the student at the centre
Process orientation	Strong image of participation, respect for positions, professional knowledge
Systematics/Platform/system view	Empowered/autonomous leadership that has the flexibility to control school activities based on context, conditions, etc.
Simple management structure that creates closeness to each other and short decision-making paths	Shared image-responsibility to secure the student-centric approach "it takes a village to raise a child"
Decisions that are made are student-centric	Activity-adapted structures (i.e. schedule, work meetings, working groups, etc.)
Empowered Principals - distributed or assigned ownership that can contribute to business-driven development	Building strong relationships between teachers and students is central; a relations-oriented culture

Openness, vulnerability, self-awareness that the platform is a constantly ongoing development process, that the goals cannot always be achieved with the platform, but it creates a direction that is most important	Close collaboration with administration and politicians
The good example: well-developed roles and relationships between the board and the principal level	Feeling heard and seen through strong relationships at all levels. i.e. teacher-student; teacher-teacher; teacher-Principal; Principal-superintendent; Principal-educational steering board
Work with issues that are based on the principles and the goals	Competent staff and variety in professional knowledge who work together as a team
	Different structures (for meetings, follow-up, etc.) that build collaboration between teachers and school staff as well as with administration and the education steering committee

The two interview groups also identified challenges with the steering model. As presented in Table 2, the language used by the Central leadership team reflected more focus on finances, recruitment and lack of common perspectives between the principals. This is perhaps expected given that their roles are to ensure the overall quality for education in the municipality. Contrary to this, principals articulated challenges implementing the model in their school that arose from a lack of clarity about certain processes, variation in engagement, and a different focus at the school level. At the same time, the two groups identified common challenges that included:

- Strained economy
- Recruitment: difficult to recruit teachers with the right values and orientation
- Management restructuring that required time to develop new relationships
- New staff who do not understand the platform
- Lack of formal processes to constantly develop competence in quality work
- Lack of a common picture of well-being at school level
- Lack of a common understanding of the platform's use and value to everyone

Table 2. Challenges in the Systematic Quality System for ensuring student-centric schooling

Summary from interviews with the Central leadership team	**Summary from interviews with the principals**
Finances	The processes need to be explained in different ways for different employee groups
Recruitment	Staff who have been involved for a long time do not have the same need for the steering model because it is in their spinal cord. However, new teachers do not see how the model is connected because it isn't visualized sufficiently
Management restructuring at the top-level	Variation in the leadership of the systematic quality model in the school and engagement of staff

New staff who do not understand the platform	Smaller units have greater organizational challenges to ensure the student is at the centre
Lack of formal processes for continuous development of competence in quality work	Units are different and therefore have different needs and goals
Lack of a common picture of well-functioning school at the school level	To hold on and perceiver - need to get the platform's role back in operations since covid
Lack of a common understanding of the platform's use and value for everyone	Recruitment of staff who see the importance of relationship skills
Do Principals have the right conditions to be able to drive quality work?	Employment model in the municipality means that not all employees are involved in dialogue and planning around the student (i.e. kitchen staff, janitors, etc.)
How well is the platform adapted to the principal's everyday life?	

4.3 Document analysis

Understanding the application and effectiveness of the quality steering model from a systems perspective includes an examination of the alignment between policy and steering documents and how the policies are interpreted and implemented in practice. In this section, findings from an initial document analysis are provided in which the language was used as a central factor to indicate potential alignment or misalignment with implementation as described by the Central leader team and Principals during the interviews. Four primary documents were included that represent different levels of the case sites systematic quality assurance system: 1) description of the municipalities steering model, 2) the Department of Education platform for the Municipality, 3) the individual school platform, and 4) the individual schools Systematic Quality Reports (SQR).

4.3.1 Steering Documents

In figure 2 three levels of the steering model are visualized in a set of steering documents. The highest-level steering document illustrated on the far-left details the overarching goals and principles for the municipality, as well as strategies and values. The document also details expectations for how educational plans should be designed and assessed. The Central leadership committee is illustrated in the middle of Figure 2, and details the organizational structure, and model for leadership and steering of all schools. This includes a description of roll responsibilities from the superintendent to the classroom teacher. Also included in this document are details of the educational model for systematic quality work. The third layer of the steering model is represented by each school Platform (illustrated in the far right of Figure 2), which describes the school's vision, mission, goals and values, as well as the organizational structure of the school and primary processes. Also included are details of how the school will be assessed each year by the Central Leadership team. The arrows on top of the figure represent the strategic planning and the arrows on the bottom represent the follow-up which are included in the Systematic Quality Reports (SQR).

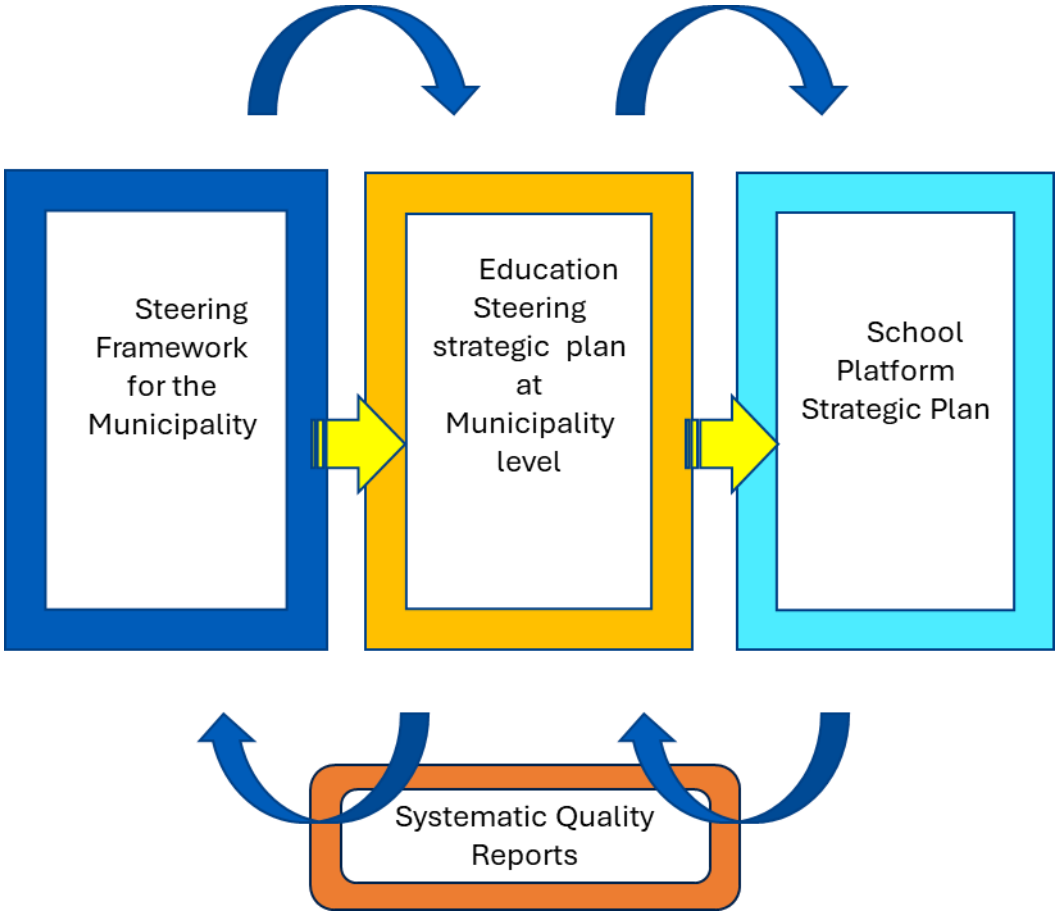

Figure 2. Steering documents and the relations between the different levels in the Municipality.

In a content analysis of the steering documents, it was evident that the terminology used in the three levels of documents was different. This can contribute to a lack of shared understanding between the different levels of the system, resulting in miss-communication and variation in expectations. For example, in the Executive Platform, the term "education" is used as a primary focus. Whereas in the school platform, "teaching and student well-being" are the primary focus. There is no clear visualization or communication about how these are aligned. Evidence from interviews with school Principals illustrated how these terms are used differently. For example, education is a broader term that focuses on whole-child development, whereas teaching is used to bring focuses to subject-specific development. Schools that changed from a subject-specific focus to a whole-child development focus have different values and outcome measures identified in their school plans. This lack of clarity about how the terms are used between the levels and what they mean can contribute to a lack of communication across levels.

Further, the use of different terms in different documents makes it more difficult to see the connections between the school programming and practice and the overall values and principles articulated for the municipality. Referring back to the case sites description of student-centric education in the steering document, the first three factors are value-laden (i.e. "Feel safe, enjoy, and experience a positive learning environment; Can develop their skills and knowledge every day and understand the connection to the larger global context and their future; Understand, respect and practice the democratic principles in the Swedish society"). Yet the outcome measures that were articulated by both interview

groups were based on student academic achievement, school presence, and graduation rates. This suggests the need for reviewing how the language of the steering documents is aligned with the values, principles and goals for education in the case site to create the conditions for assessing schools based on a holistic picture. Moreover, the alignment of language is critical to communicate expectations between levels.

4.3.2 School Quality Reports

The second document analysis included on individual school SQR that are submitted yearly by the principals to the central office leadership team. The SQR is a school-based document used to show they work systematically to develop and improve their daily operations to achieve their school goals and the goals outlined by the municipality. The SQR is a part of the mandatory systematic quality work that all schools and preschools in Sweden must implement.

The analysis of the SQR aimed to identify what kind of information is communicated to the central office staff about the individual school quality work and contribution to the common goal of student-centric education. The analysis revealed a clear lack of connection between the individual school platform and SQR to the overall educational platform outlined by the executive leadership committee. Specifically, little to no reference was made to the link between the school's individual goals and values to the overall goals and values of the municipality. It was not clear from the systematic quality reports how the school's systematic quality work is linked specifically to case site's goals of a student-centric education. Several reports (but not all) base the outcomes on statistics, i.e. grades, safety surveys, national tests, the proportion of students in need of special support, e.g. new arrivals and children/students with diagnoses.

Lacking in this quantitative-based outcome approach is an understanding of how the school is working to support a student-centric learning environment. This can help to explain why the central office leadership team lacks understanding of how Principals and teachers are working at the school from a student-centric perspective. This suggests a need to revisit the kind of information that is included in the SQR to ensure a holistic picture of the school's quality work that is aligned to the overall goals, mission, and values of the case site.

5. Analysis and discussion

Based on the findings from interviews, workshops and document analysis, and data triangulation, four factors were identified as important for municipalities when implementing a systems-oriented quality steering model. The factors, which are outlined in Figure 3 include, 1) a shared understanding and language, 2) alignment of the different quality Platforms with respect to the vision, values and goals, 3) clearly articulated purpose, structure and expectations of the SQR that reflect all aspects of the student-centric educational orientation espoused by the municipality; 4) recruitment and continuous professional development of the systematic quality framework and how it can be integrated at the school level to support continuous improvement throughout the year. Below is a further description of these factors.

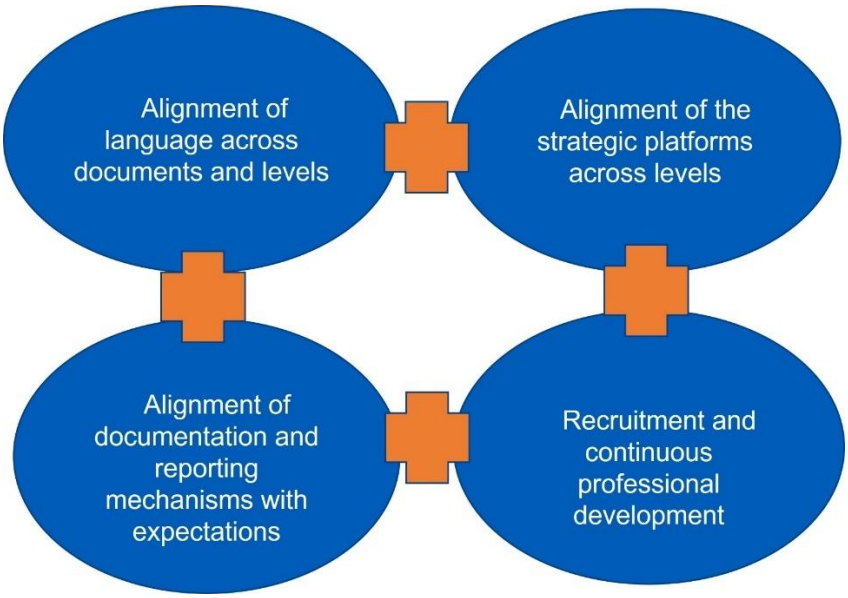

Figure 3: Factors for implementing systematic quality assurance systems in education

Developing a systematic quality assurance system in a school municipality requires a shared understanding of the vision, mission, goals and values and how they are aligned at all levels (Murgatroyd & Morgan, 1993; Snyder et al, 2008). Further, it requires an alignment of language between the levels to facilitate communication (Mårtensson & Snyder, 2023; Senge et al., 2000). Aligning language, rather than developing a shared language, recognizes that each level of a system has its own terminology that reflects the unique purpose and tasks. For example, Central leadership staff use terminology aligned with leadership, planning and steering of an organization to fit their oversight role for all schools. School principals use pedagogical terminology as well to reflect their oversight on teaching and learning.

A second factor that was identified as central for achieving a systems approach to quality is the role, function and use of the different Platforms, including what they communicate and how they are used to present a whole picture of student-centric education. This finding is supported by a quality management perspective and the use of systematic work processes and clarity of rolls and responsibility (Bergman et al., 2022; Snyder & Björkman, 2016). It was clear from the interviews that the systematic quality model (Platform) provides a clear structure, clarity of roles and responsibilities, and processes that have improved the way in which the principals communicate with the central and executive leadership teams. There is a strong perception that the platforms also help to interconnect different levels and generate a close relationship between leadership roles and levels. At the same time, questions emerged about the consistency of how the platforms are designed and implemented in the schools.

Each school developed its own Platform, with the school principal responsible for determining how it would be used throughout the academic year. This autonomy proved to be both a strength and a weakness within the quality system. On the one hand, the ability to tailor Platforms to each school's unique needs and context was a clear advantage. On the other hand, it led to inconsistencies in the content, structure, and implementation of the Platforms across schools. In some schools, the Platform outlined clear goals and a vision aligned with the overarching educational objectives set out in the main steering

document. In contrast, other Platforms lacked clearly defined goals or a strong connection to the central policy. Approaches to development also varied: while some principals engaged the entire staff in the creation process—fostering shared ownership—others developed the Platform independently. Across most schools, there was a noticeable lack of ongoing professional development related to the content of the Platform, contributing to gaps in knowledge about systematic quality work. Similarly, while some schools had well-established routines and processes for developing and implementing the Platform as part of their quality assurance practices, others lacked such structures entirely.

A third critical factor in establishing and sustaining a systematic quality assurance system in education is the effective recruitment and ongoing professional development of the individuals responsible for implementing the system. Snyder & Anderson (1986) and others (Dalin, 1998; Murgatroyd & Morgan, 1993) argued the centrality of continuous professional development to create the conditions for shared leadership. Others point to the importance of dialogue and reflection for empowering staff to be responsive to the needs of students as part of an approach to school development (Halinen, 2023; Senge, et al. 2000). As highlighted in interviews with both central-level leadership and principals, recruiting staff who align with the core values and knowledge underpinning the case site's design has often proven challenging. Key qualities sought in new staff included a relationship-oriented approach to teaching, learning, and quality development; a student-centered mindset; and a solid understanding of the case site's systematic model for quality improvement. Recruiting new staff requires dedicated time for onboarding, particularly in relation to the school's and case site's approach to quality work. New hires also introduce a new dynamic into schools where teachers have been in place for many years and have developed a deep working knowledge of the systematic quality model. In many cases, this led to an imbalance in the school's quality processes, as more experienced teachers had to slow down or pause their work to allow new colleagues time to catch up.

Based on the findings, several important questions emerged--chief among them: Do principals have the necessary conditions to effectively lead quality work at the school level? This includes access to the right staff, adequate resources, and ongoing professional development in the systematic quality framework. In follow-up dialogues with central leadership and principals, it was clarified that all new teachers and principals attend an introductory meeting, during which the municipality's Educational Platform and systematic quality model are presented. However, it remains the responsibility of each principal to integrate new teachers into the school's specific platform—a process that requires time and attention, often taken from teaching and learning activities. In many cases, this time was either unavailable or not prioritized.

6. Conclusions

Educational systems have been striving for years to "achieve quality" based on measurable factors such as student achievement. While this is an important indicator of success for society, it does not address the bigger question of leading and sustaining continuous quality improvement (Mårtensson & Snyder, 2023). In some countries such as Sweden, a systematic approach to quality is required of all municipalities to support planning and evaluation of schools. Ensuring the successful implementation of a systematic quality assurance system and steering model to create schools based on a student-centric focus requires more than just policy and structure: it requires a culture of participation and ownership and clearly articulated and well-designed processes that

connect the values and goals with customer needs and continuous improvement. Research demonstrates that this is easier said than done (Snyder et al., 2008).

The study presented in this paper is part of a larger ongoing project designed to develop knowledge and understanding of how schools can fully implement the systematic quality system in school systems to support sustainable quality development in schools from a systems perspective. This study was conducted in a Swedish municipality therefore findings are not generalizable. However, the case site was chosen based on the depth of development of their systematic quality assurance system and provided an important research opportunity to learn more about the challenges and opportunities for schools and municipalities to implement systemic quality improvement models.

Findings from this initial phase provide insights that can be used by school leaders and municipalities to create the conditions necessary for integrating a systems approach by developing a sense of community. Based on analysis of the data, the following were identified as important to achieving systems orientation and community:

1. Begin with recruitment and continue with in-service training to ensure that staff possess skills and values in relationship-orientation.
2. Continuous professional development to ensure that all staff understand and know how to use the school's platform as a quality continuous improvement tool.
3. Develop routines and processes for how schools can use the quality platform continuously throughout the year and not merely as a reporting tool.
4. Develop a shared understanding of language to communicate across leadership levels.
5. Align the school's vision, mission and goals with the central municipality vision, mission and goals.
6. Develop a common language for communicating across role groups, levels and professional perspectives.

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