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Context-Responsive Leadership:
Examining Superintendent Leadership in Context

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Abstract: It is widely acknowledged that context matters, that it affects leadership practices. A large body of descriptive studies documents common elements in the work of school superintendents. What is less well known is how superintendents' leadership may be expressed very differently given the varying contexts in which they work. The purpose of this cross-national study was to identify the specific variations in context which influence superintendents' leadership, and to examine how superintendents respond to these variations in context. Structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with 12 superintendents- six from across Sweden and six from Wisconsin, in the United States. The findings illustrate that the work of superintendents is paradoxically similar but different. Superintendents described common

primary work priorities, challenges and contextual variations which influenced their practice. Yet, differences in district size, organizational culture, community characteristics, and geographic location significantly influenced their leadership practices. Despite their challenges, all superintendents responded to and shaped the context of their work. The study provides illustrative examples of superintendent leadership in situ, and supports the argument that leadership is both embedded in and influenced by context. The study also furthers the authors' emerging theory of context-responsive leadership.
Keywords: superintendent; leadership; context, cross-national; interview study.

Liderança responsiva ao contexto: exame da liderança de diretores no contexto
Resumo: É amplamente reconhecida a importância do contexto e do quanto ele produz efeitos nas práticas de liderança. Um elevado número de estudos descritivos tem registrado elementos comuns no trabalho de diretores escolares. O que é menos estudado, no entanto, diz respeito às formas diferenciadas de liderança dos diretores conforme o contexto no qual eles trabalham. A proposta deste estudo transnacional foi identificar as variações específicas nos contextos que influenciam as lideranças dos diretores, bem como investigar a maneira como os mesmos respondem às variações no contexto. Entrevistas estruturadas e em profundidade foram realizadas com doze diretores – seis deles da diferentes regiões da Suécia e os outros seis do estado de Wisconsin, nos Estados Unidos. Os resultados mostram que o trabalho dos diretores é paradoxalmente semelhante e diferente. Os diretores descrevem prioridades comuns de trabalho, desafios e variações de contexto que influenciam sua prática. Contudo, diferenças no tamanho do bairro, na cultural organizacional, nas características da comunidade e de localização geográfica influenciam significativamente suas práticas de liderança. Apesar de seus desafios, todos os diretores reagiram e modificaram o contexto de seu trabalho. O estudo apresenta exemplos ilustrativos da liderança dos diretores *in situ*, e defende a ideia de que a liderança é tanto incorporada quanto influenciada pelo contexto. O estudo igualmente reforça a teoria de liderança responsiva ao contexto, sustentada pelos autores.
Palavras-chave: diretores; liderança; contexto; pesquisa transnacional; entrevista.

Liderazgo que responde a los contextos: análisis del liderazgo de directores en contexto
Resumen: Se reconoce ampliamente la importancia del contexto y de lo mucho que influye en los liderazgos. Un gran número de estudios descriptivos han registrados elementos comunes en el trabajo de los directores la escuela. Es menos estudiado, sin embargo, las diferentes formas de liderazgo de los directores en relación al contexto en el que trabajan. El propósito de este estudio fue identificar las variaciones transnacionales en contextos específicos que influyen en los estilos de dirección de los directores, así como investigar la manera en cómo responden a los cambios contextuales. Entrevistas estructuradas y en profundidad se llevaron a cabo con doce consejeros - seis de ellos de diferentes regiones de Suecia y los otros seis del estado de Wisconsin, EE.UU.. Los resultados muestran que el trabajo de los directores es, paradójicamente, similar y diferente. Los directores describen las prioridades comunes en el trabajo, los retos y como los cambios en el contexto afectan sus prácticas. Sin embargo, las diferencias de tamaño de los distritos, la organización cultural, características de la comunidad y la ubicación geográfica influyen significativamente en sus prácticas de liderazgo. A pesar de sus desafíos, todos los directores respondieron a los cambios en el contexto de sus trabajos. Este estudio proporciona ejemplos de liderazgo de los directores sobre el terreno, y sustenta la idea que el liderazgo es influenciado e influye en el contexto. Este estudio también refuerza la teoría de los liderazgos sensibles al contexto, que es sustentada por los autores.
Palabras clave: directores; liderazgo; contexto; investigación transnacional; entrevista.

Introduction

In this paper, we examine the intersection of context and superintendent leadership as a dynamic interaction expressed through specific practices and anchored in the way a leader behaves within particular contexts, rather than in any predisposed style. Research on leadership in education (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Louis, 2010) and other fields (Yukl, 2002) has acknowledged the influence of context on leadership behavior. For instance, Louis et al., noted, "Leadership success depends greatly on the skill with which leaders adapt their practices to the circumstances in which they find themselves, their understanding of the underlying causes of the problems they encounter, and how they respond to those problems" (p. 94). Hallinger, Bickman, and Davis (1996) reported that principal leadership is affected by both personal and contextual variables. Yet, they also reported that a principal can influence school effectiveness "through actions that shape the school's learning climate" (p. 527). Little research, however, has focused on the interaction between superintendent leadership practices and the predominant contextual variables in which they operate. Even less research has focused on the manner in which superintendents work to recognize, understand and shape the contextual influences found within their school districts. Thus, the purpose of this article was to better understand how major contextual factors influence superintendent leadership, and how superintendents respond to these contextual influences by examining superintendent leadership in two distinct settings: Sweden and the United States. Accordingly, we utilized interview data from 12 school superintendents (six from Sweden and six from Wisconsin, in the United States) to address two major research questions:

- What variations in context influence the nature of superintendents' leadership?
- In what ways do superintendents respond to these differences in context?

Theoretical Perspective

Examining the intersection of context and leadership in order to better understand superintendent leadership practices is not a new approach in the field of educational leadership. From a theoretical perspective, this paper is situated within contingency theories such as Yukl's multiple linkages model (Yukl, 2002). Hoy and Miskel (1982) referred to contingency theories as the "merger of trait and situational approaches" (p. 222). Thus, according to traditional contingency theory, one type of leader is more likely to be effective under one set of circumstances, while under another set of circumstances a different type of leader is required (Hoy & Miskel). The assertion that "leadership effectiveness depends on the fit between personality characteristics of the leaders and the situational variables such as task structure, positional power and subordinates' skills and attitudes" (Hoy & Miskel, p. 235) may be helpful for matching a particular type of leadership to a particular situation. However, it does not take into account the dynamic nature of educational leaders' work environments. For instance, Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins (2008), suggested that successful leaders of turnaround schools employ a core set of leadership practices in concert with each stage of school improvement. Leithwood et al. added that, "The ways in which leaders apply these leadership practices- not the practices themselves- demonstrate responsiveness to, rather than dictation by, the contexts in which they work" (p. 31).

To explore the degree to which context explains the nature of superintendents' professional work and leadership, this paper moves beyond these theories to a more holistic understanding of context, including the environmental, organizational, and psychological dimensions affecting leadership. Adopting a perspective in accord with Leithwood et al. (2008), we examined the manner in which 12 superintendents were influenced by and responded to contextual dimensions affecting

their leadership. Of particular interest to us was how the superintendents pushed back and re-shaped contextual factors rather than considering them immutable factors destined to constrain their leadership practices and the learning environment.

Background

Scholars agree that context matters in terms of leader behavior and its effects. A synthesis of research by Leithwood, Louis, Wahlstrom, and Anderson (2004) noted, "There is a rich body of evidence about the relevance to leaders of such features of organizational context as geographic location (urban, suburban, rural), level of schooling (elementary, secondary), and both school and district size" (p. 10). In a subsequent report, Louis, et al. (2010) re-affirmed the influence of poverty, size, level and location on educational leadership practices.

Numerous studies have been conducted on superintendent leadership in particular. Reports on accountability systems in school districts across the United States indicate that superintendent leadership is a major factor in determining how districts respond to the increased demands for academic achievement (Fuhrman, 2003; Goetz & Massell, 2005). Other studies have documented the work priorities and challenges of superintendents (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005; Bredeson & Kose, 2007; Bredeson, Kose, & Johansson, 2004; Cooper, Fusarelli, & Carella, 2000; Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000; Johnson, 1996; Petersen & Barnett, 2005; Orr, 2002). While these descriptive studies documented common elements in the work of superintendents in Sweden and in the United States, what is less well known is how differences in context might account for different views superintendents have about the nature of their work and the ways in which their leadership may be expressed. As Glass et al. (2000) reminded us:

> The superintendency is so very different from district to district that making generalizations is hazardous. In fact, there is no such thing as the *superintendency*; instead, there are many superintendencies. Often they are more unlike than like each other. (p.15)

In addition to these investigations of superintendent leadership in context, recent studies have described the manner in which context influences school principals. Emphasizing the need for principals to deal with micro and macro-contextual influences when making important decisions, Dempster, Carter, Freakley, and Parry (2004), reported that, "Decentralization, intensification, and complexification are now all part of the contemporary school context and that context is figuring prominently in the way principals go about their decision-making" (p.164). Hallinger (2003), supporting the notion that context is intimately intertwined with school leadership, concluded, "it is virtually meaningless to study principal leadership without reference to context" (p. 346).

Researchers from fields such as organizational and social psychology have also explored the relationship between leadership and context. Emrich (1999) concluded:

> Several scholars maintain that leadership resides in the eyes of followers. If they are correct, then context may be a critical determinant of what followers see-- acting as a lens that brings into focus those qualities that are consistent with their implicit theories and romanticized notions of what it means to be a leader. (p.1004)

Vroom and Jago (2007) argued, "Variance in the behavior [of leaders] can be understood in terms of dispositions that are situationally specific rather than general" (p. 20). Notwithstanding the relatively recent literature cited here, we concur with Gronn and

Ribbins (1996) who emphasized the need for further research aimed at elucidating the relationship between context and leadership:

> Our argument is that the significance of context continues to be badly under-theorized in leadership, but that, if re-conceptualized as the sum of the situational, cultural, and historical circumstances that constrain leadership and give it its meaning, context is the vehicle through which the agency of particular leaders may be empirically understood. (p. 454)

It is not unreasonable to suggest that superintendents must uniquely enact their roles in accordance with such contextual factors as district size, community demographics, organizational culture, history, geography, and local political realities. For example, regardless of school district size, superintendents cite financial issues as the most challenging problem(s) they face (Bredeson & Kose, 2007; Bredeson, Kose, & Johansson, 2005; Glass et al., 2000). From these descriptive studies, one might conclude that how superintendents deal with financial issues varies little in their daily work routines and responsibilities. Yet, we are not convinced that superintendents in large urban districts do the same financial work as administrators in small, rural districts. School district size, governance structures, complexity, and fiscal authority, among other contextual dimensions, influence the ways in which superintendents respond to fiscal challenges and how they understand their roles as district leaders. Thus, at the outset of this study we were interested in the cross-national variations as well as the within-category variability at the dynamic intersection of context and superintendent leadership.

The cross-national nature of our study provides a unique opportunity to examine superintendent leadership and superintendents' work in two different cultural/national contexts. Yukl (2002) suggested that, cross-cultural research allows researchers to consider a broader than usual range of variables and processes, providing new insights and strengthening emerging theories. Reporting findings from the Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE) research program, House, Javidan, Hanges and Dorfman (2002) reported that, "Societal cultural values and practices affect what leaders do" (p. 8). House et al. also suggested that cultural values and traditions are likely to be internalized by leaders and reflected in their leadership behavior. Failure to lead in a manner that reflects societal norms, they suggested, may limit the effectiveness of the leader's behavior. Cross-cultural leadership practices have also been the focus of researchers from across 14 nations participating in the International Successful School Principal Project (ISSPP). One study emanating from the ISSPP (Moos & Johansson, 2009) found differences among the leadership practices of principals in three Nordic countries (Denmark, Norway and Sweden) and their counterparts in Australia, England and the United States. While studies emanating from these two large cross-cultural research projects have focused on business leaders and school principals, lessons learned about the importance of testing theories across national and cultural contexts are also relevant to the study of superintendent leadership.

A comparison of the major, education-related contextual differences between Sweden and Wisconsin is provided in Table 1. To begin our description of leadership in context we briefly describe these five variations in national education contexts: curriculum; governance; fiscal dependence; school board partisanship; and licensure.

Sweden has a national curriculum with academic and social goals, both equally important. The curriculum is promulgated through national legislation, thus schools and the professionals in them must address both the letter and the spirit of the curriculum. Wisconsin does not have a federally-legislated curriculum. Nonetheless, there are similarities among curricula across the 50 states in the US. The press for accountability nationally and at the state levels, always with an eye

toward state standards and testing measures, clearly has affected local curriculum development, instructional practices, and assessment measures.

Table 1
Major Contextual Differences Between Sweden and Wisconsin

Contexts for Superintendent Leadership	
Sweden	Wisconsin
• Curriculum- national with academic & social goals	• Curriculum- standards-based, primarily locally developed
• Governance-national framework from Parliament, National Agency	• Governance- state authority to DPI, delegated to legal entities-school districts
• Fiscally dependent	• Fiscally independent
• School board- partisan	• School board members-nonpartisan
• No license requirements for superintendents	• Pre-service & license requirements for superintendents

In terms of governance, school districts in Wisconsin are independent legal entities empowered by the state legislature, and are delegated authority for schooling through the state constitution and by the Department of Public Instruction (DPI). In Sweden, the National Agency for Education carries out the Parliament's directives for compulsory education using local municipalities to set local policies and implement educational processes and structures that meet the requirements stipulated in the national curriculum.

School districts in Wisconsin are fiscally independent from municipal and city government. As such, they develop their own budgets and tax rates. In Sweden, the school district is fiscally dependent as it is one of many sectors that the local municipality governs and allocates funds to on an annual basis.

Another major difference is the political nature of school boards. In Sweden the school board is partisan, representing the political make-up of the government. Thus, national elections can change the existing representation of a local school board. Though candidates may espouse different political views, school board members in Wisconsin run as non-partisan candidates for election to local boards.

Lastly, Sweden does not require a professional qualification or certification to be a superintendent. Thus, the creation of formal preparation programs and professional development programs for school district leaders at universities is a developing concept. In Wisconsin, superintendents are licensed by the state certifying that they have the requisite knowledge, skills, and dispositions to successfully meet their professional responsibilities as district administrators.

Research Design and Methods

In this study, qualitative research methods were employed to permit the exploration of the superintendency as understood and expressed in the words of these experienced administrators. Interviews were conducted with a nominated sample of 12 superintendents, six in Sweden and six in Wisconsin. In each case, these administrators were identified and recognized by their colleagues (e.g. superintendents, professional association leaders, and university faculty) as highly effective district leaders based on measures of student performance in their respective districts, and professional

interactions and leadership exercised in their regions. The interviews were conducted between February and August 2007. They were structured and in-depth, lasting from 90 minutes to two hours. All interviews were conducted in English, digitally recorded, and transcribed for analysis. Interview transcription was completed by mid-September. As English was a second language for the Swedish superintendents, and we wanted to be certain questions were clearly understood, Swedish superintendents received a copy of the interview protocol prior to the interview.

Swedish and Wisconsin superintendents were selected for this study in particular because the researchers had conducted prior studies on superintendents in these locations over the past 15 years. The interview questions for this study were developed based on these earlier investigations. Participating superintendents, six males and six females, were employed in three classifications of school district—large city/urban, small city/suburban, and small town/rural. Nine superintendents were in their first superintendency, while three had been superintendents in multiple districts. Tenure in their current positions ranged from two years to 20 years. The average number of years was seven while the median years of tenure was five. Table 2 provides an illustration of the superintendents' professional backgrounds and the number of years they had held their current positions.

A limitation of the sample is that it did not include the largest school districts in Sweden or Wisconsin, nor were any districts considered inner-city, with dense populations of poverty and cultural or ethnic diversity. Our respondents did, however, contrast their work and leadership with that of their inner-city counterparts. This information is recorded in the findings section of the paper. Notwithstanding this limitation, the largest district was a city with a population of 210,000 with approximately 25,000 students, half of whom were students of color from various racial, ethnic, and language groups. The smallest district, located in a municipality with fewer than 2,500 inhabitants, had little ethnic, racial or socio-economic diversity.

The interview protocol included questions in five broad areas: a) personal background; b) roles and work priorities; c) factors that influence superintendent work; d) setting direction for the district and working with community partners; and e) capacity building and professional learning. The interviews provided over 200 pages of single-spaced interview text. Our research team began the analysis with each person reading the interview transcripts to indentify contextual factors influencing the superintendents' leadership and the strategies they employed in response to these factors. Next, using open coding, we independently analyzed the data and generated initial categories. Based on these initial codes and categories, we then used the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to refine our analysis and identify common themes. Any differences in the initial coding and the creation of categories among members of the research team were discussed and reassessed until we agreed upon the codes for data, the analytic categories, and the themes related to the guiding research questions.

Findings

At the outset of this study, we were interested in learning how context may affect superintendents' work and concomitantly account for differences in their leadership practices. Our review of previous research provided strong evidence that the study of leadership absent context was meaningless. Thus, we were somewhat surprised by the initial responses given by several superintendents, located in two different countries, in very different local settings, to the following question: "As you think about your superintendent colleagues in the area, in what way(s), if any, is your job/role as superintendent different from theirs?"

Table 2
Superintendents

Interview No.	Name	Gender	District Location	District Size	Yrs. in Current Position	Professional Background
1	Ingre Nilsson	Female	Sweden	Large	5	superintendent in another district for 7 years, principal, teacher educator
2	Lars Jensen	Male	Sweden	Small	3	principal for 12 years, teacher
3	Sigrid Akar	Female	Sweden	Small	2	principal, university lecturer
4	Ole Olofsson	Male	Sweden	Large	3	superintendent in another district for 12 years, principal, teacher
5	Elisabet Tomasson	Female	Sweden	Medium	5	district administrator, district area principal, pre-school commissioner, pre-school director, teacher
6	Tomas Johansson	Male	Sweden	Medium	6	deputy superintendent, university lecturer, teacher, union board member, principal
7	Henry Scott	Male	Wisconsin	Small	20	principal, associate principal, guidance counselor, teacher
8	Maria White	Female	Wisconsin	Medium	4	assistant superintendent (in two districts), director of instruction, district principal, principal, assistant principal, curriculum coordinator, teacher
9	Seth Johnson	Male	Wisconsin	Medium	9	superintendent in two districts for 6 years and 7 years, assistant superintendent/director of instruction, associate principal, teacher
10	Blake Young	Male	Wisconsin	Large	9	assistant superintendent in two districts, principal, assistant principal, teacher
11	Kaylee Jones	Female	Wisconsin	Medium	15	assistant superintendent, human resources director, principal (elementary school & middle school), curriculum coordinator, teacher
12	Sydney Taylor	Female	Wisconsin	Small	5	district level coordinator, principal in two elementary schools, TAG/LA coordinator, teacher

As Seth Johnson, a male superintendent from a medium-sized Wisconsin district noted, "Well, they are more alike than different. I think the differences are more in what I will call application." Another superintendent from a medium-sized district, Maria White, responded in a comparable fashion: "I think our jobs are quite similar."

Notwithstanding their initial responses, each of the twelve superintendents then moved beyond simple comparisons of formal role responsibilities and tasks to explanations of important differences explained by variations in context. These variations in context fell into five major areas. As can be seen in Table 3, these included: 1) school district size; 2) organizational culture; 3) community characteristics and geographic location; 4) financial situation; and 5) political climate.

Table 3

Contextual Influences and Context-Responsive Leadership Strategies

Contextual Influence	Leadership Strategies
School District Size	In smaller districts • Perform a variety of operational duties • Interact directly with school community members • Develop personal relationships and trust with all community members In larger districts • Perform strategic roles • Interact indirectly with school community members • Work through principals and leadership teams to establish trust
Organizational Culture	• Identify and be sensitive to organizational traditions, norms, symbols, communication styles, relationships, processes and capacity for change • Adapt leadership approach to unique organizational culture • Seek opportunities to build relationships and develop trust • Communicate through direct, frequent, and personal interactions in smaller districts • Communicate through other district leaders, communication specialists, and local media outlets in larger districts
Community Characteristics & Geographic Location	• Understand and be sensitive to local norms and expectations • Identify and manage community expectations for communication, academic performance, superintendent involvement in the community, and level of involvement in setting district direction • Identify and prepare for demographic trends and geographic influences • Establish partnerships and personal relationships with local businesses and community organizations • Monitor the community's readiness for change • Balance the district's needs with the community's needs
Financial Situation	• Monitor the community's ability and willingness to fund school initiatives • Identify and communicate the impact of changes in demographics, legislation and funding • Promote district successes and highlight needs • Identify initiatives for raising district funding • Demonstrate fiscal stewardship
Political Climate	• Develop strong relationships with board members and other key stakeholders • Provide school board with information required to develop realistic expectations and make informed decisions • Utilize board members to inform the general public • Use various media outlets to manage public perception and use bad headlines as catalysts for reform

It is important to acknowledge at this point in the presentation of our findings that our separation of variations in context is solely for narrative convenience. We recognize that elements of context, though individually identifiable, are overlapping and nested in complex interrelationships with leadership and administrative work.

School District Size

The most frequently described differences in context related to the size of the school district and the community. Nine of the twelve superintendents reported that differences in school district size were a major factor influencing the nature of their work. Swedish superintendent Ingre Nilsson captured the paradox of similar yet different jobs when she stated, "It is different in some ways. A lot of things are similar, but the big difference is in the size of the municipality." One of her Wisconsin counterparts in a large, city school district described how size affects the work and leadership of superintendents in the following way:

> There's a large difference of being a superintendent in a small school district in Wisconsin and me and other people who work in school districts of my size. As I mentioned earlier, I don't do any hands-on. I have somebody that does everything with my guidance. If I'm a small school superintendent in Wisconsin, I do everything myself. Those are two completely different skill sets. (Blake Young)

Superintendent Johnson saw similarities in the jobs of superintendents, but also clearly recognized differences in context related to size, especially urban, inner-city districts. Referring to Milwaukee, the largest urban district in Wisconsin with an enrollment over 100,000 students, he said, "That is a different world. It is a quantifiably different job." Blake Young, superintendent of the largest district in our sample, agreed with this assessment, noting "In America, we really have two completely different sets of school systems. Milwaukee and Chicago and Kansas City are our urban school districts where there are enormous struggles… I think we as a country don't know how to deal with."

The issue of school district and community size, affected various aspects of superintendents' work. For example, in smaller districts superintendents reported that they had to do, and be involved in, nearly all aspects of leadership, whereas their colleagues in larger districts were more focused on leading through others. A Swedish superintendent from a small district, Lars Jenson, noted, in small districts, "It is much easier to talk to politicians. It's very easy to talk to company leaders and to students." A small-school district superintendent from Wisconsin, Henry Scott, added, "It's important for me that I know all the teachers and principals and all the stakeholders, the key people in town. I can get my arms around that." Another superintendent located in a small-town district commented on the amount of contact she had with the community: "There are just so many opportunities to be involved and so many different ways to contribute. We have a span of control here that really makes people feel that they can participate in decisions and make a difference" (Sydney Taylor). Superintendent Johnson described how the size of his medium-sized school district affected his work: "One of the things I like about this sized school district is you do not have to be overly structured because you can look everybody in the eye. I mean this is an amazing thing! I can put the entire leadership team around the conference table. That's a great thing!"

One Swedish superintendent from a medium-sized city, who was previously a superintendent in a smaller district, Tomas Johansson, described how being in a larger district affected his work, "I'm more independent now. My freedom is bigger. Nobody comes in with small

issues and bothers you, which they did when I worked in the smaller community." Blake Young described one of the advantages of being a large-city superintendent as follows:

> One of the things that makes my job a little bit different to some other superintendents is that I've been very fortunate to have a great staff. So, I have been able to think long-term. That's not always a privilege that a superintendent has in our country. So, I've been able to think about things and begin to set things in motion that I knew were ten years before…fruition.

Ingre Nilsson, female superintendent of the largest Swedish district studied, noted how her work changed when she moved from a community of 25,000 inhabitants to her current district with a population over 100,000. She described her former district, where she was more involved in operational details and tasks in the organization, as having a "doing culture." She contrasted this with her current district noting, "Here I am working a lot with my leadership team. I think it is more of a talking culture."

Lastly, there were important differences between superintendents in small and large districts in how they established relationships and developed trust with others in the school district. In small districts, frequent interaction and work with professional and support staff made it easier to build relationships and establish trust. In the larger districts, developing relationships and trust across the districts was accomplished through others- administrative cabinets, leader teams, and other school leaders.

School district size was an aspect of context frequently mentioned in our interviews. Variations is size, large, medium or small, influenced the behaviors of the superintendents in terms of their day-to-day responsibilities, the way they were able to interact with the community and their approaches to building trust. Generally speaking, in smaller districts the superintendents had a more direct roles in each of these aspects of leadership, while in the larger districts the superintendents often developed strategies to work through others.

Organizational Culture

Community and school district size also influenced organizational culture, the second major variation in context. Size often accounted for the development of unique organizational and political cultures anchored in history, norms, traditions, and symbols. For example, in one of the largest school districts, the superintendent greeted us in his formal office located in a separate municipal building downtown, where we sat around a conference table for the interview. No students, staff, or schools were in sight. In the smallest district, it was difficult at first to find the superintendent when our research team arrived at the high school, where his office was located, as he was sitting in a common area having coffee and talking with students. His ability to interact with students and staff on a daily basis created a highly interactive, informal culture in this district. A female superintendent contrasted the organizational culture between her previous and current school districts this way:

> I think it's another culture here. In [school district] we want to do it in our way, in a [school district]-way, and sometimes we do it more complicated when we want to do it in another way. But I think it's connected to that self-esteem. It is very strong here. (Elisabet Tomasson)

Another superintendent, reflecting on administrative positions she had previously held in other school districts, summarized cultural differences affecting the work of superintendents this way: "Well, I think every district is unique, because every district has its own politics and its own culture" (Keylee Jones).

In addition to the cultural differences between Sweden and Wisconsin described earlier in this paper, differences in organizational culture were expressed in such areas as local traditions, norms and symbols, communications, relationships and organizational processes. Each of the superintendents was sensitive to existing organizational cultures, and adapted his or her personalized leadership styles in ways that respected that culture. As Superintendent Scott noted, "It's a different culture. It's a different environment, so you've got to respect the environment." Superintendent Young stated, "You can't go into a culture and impose yourself on that [culture]. You have to adapt your style to lead within that culture. If you're there long enough, you can eventually move that culture a little bit." Being sensitive to cultural differences did not mean these leaders had to accept the existing culture as immutable, however. Superintendent White reported,

> I think you have to be aware of the situation, consider the big picture, but in this role you have to be a little bit gutsy and you have to know when to act and sometimes you've just got to move and tell people 'we're moving.'"

Differences in culture were also reflected in communication styles. In the smallest districts, communications were grounded primarily in personal interactions that tended to be informal, direct, immediate, frequent, and consequential. Superintendent Jensen explained, "The community is small, so bad news travels fast. There is a short distance between inhabitants of this municipality and the school board and the director of the municipality and you have to behave in this system." In the largest districts, the superintendent and communication specialists used local television and print media to communicate critical messages to the larger community while they relied heavily on principals and other professional staff to relay information within the organization.

Variations in culture were also apparent in relationships that superintendents developed in their districts. One of the most consistent behaviors of these successful school leaders was developing and maintaining personal relationships and trust among professional staff and stakeholders in each of their communities. As Superintendent Jones noted, "Being responsive to a distinct culture is not just customer service. It's how you interact with people." As another superintendent noted,

> You don't have chemistry with every person, but you work at it and even if we disagree I can still like you. You know, we don't have to dislike each other if we disagree. We can disagree passionately and still like each other. And if you can get your staff, community, and board to recognize that; if that can be the way they communicate instead of making it personal, then you can really make progress. So, somebody must have some of those people skills rather than just coming in here to be a great money manager with a wonderful curriculum. You've got to get your arms around the whole thing. It's a big picture thing, because we've got people here. (Henry Scott)

In both large and small districts the superintendents described countless opportunities for building relationships and establishing trust, especially for superintendents new to their districts. Superintendent Taylor described building new relationships this way:

> There is such a learning curve, a steep learning curve, in terms of just people and who they are and how they are connected. And so, the ability to walk into just about any building or any place in the community and have a connection to the people I

see has been a wonderful change. I think my own confidence level in terms of being patient with the long haul makes me appear less stressed to people, and which in turn, I think, lowers their stress level, increases trust, all of those wonderful things.

Organizational processes, and sometimes-unique cultural patterns, also contributed to variation in the cultural contexts in which these superintendents practiced. For example, Superintendent Young, who had formerly served as an administrator in one of the largest school districts in the United States, where clear authority, control, and hierarchy reigned, described how he learned about differences in organizational culture from his administrative assistant:

I had been here a couple of weeks and I say to my secretary, it's like noon. I said, "I'd like a meeting at 1:00 with these people." She said, "I can't do it." I said, "What do you mean you can't do it?" "Well, I have to call them. We have to work out when you all have a common time free. I'll sit down with their secretaries and we'll discuss it. We negotiate a time and then sometime we'll be able to put this together for you." That's when I knew I was in a different place.

Adjusting to unique organizational and cultural realities was critical to success. Not being able to acknowledge and deal effectively with various cultural differences could, as Superintendent Scott mused, lead to failure:

I've spent significant time with [neighboring superintendent]. I've talked a lot about how I probably would get fired in [neighboring school district] for some of the things I initiated. He'd definitely get fired here for trying to play the political game.

Superintendent Scott continued by explaining how his leadership practices were linked to his district's cultural context:

This is a culture where people work together. We always settle our contracts on time. We get our referendums passed. We don't have this internal conflict with our community like so many places do. And I think that's about working on relationships. That's about making sure that you've not just accomplished bricks and things, test scores and improvement in the learning environment for children, but you're establishing a culture of productivity.

The organizational culture in which the superintendents worked influenced their work. The superintendents endeavored to both identify and be sensitive to these cultures and adapted their approaches to suit their environments. Yet, these superintendents did not merely resign themselves to working within their organizational cultures. They actively sought opportunities to establish relationships and build trust with stakeholders in their local community through various forms of communication, and participation in district and community activities.

Community Characteristics and Geographic Location

Our analysis of the relationship between context and leadership revealed acute sensitivity to local norms and expectations. Differences in the type of community- small rural, suburban, small town, and university town--accounted for many of the differences in the actions and the expectations of community stakeholders. Geographic location and community type affected the demographics of each community as well as the professional and other labor pools available to the

school district. For example, in one university town where the level of education, especially postsecondary, was high, there were 70-80 applicants for every open teaching position. As this superintendent, Ole Olofsson, noted, "The big difference around here is you have a lot of skilled people, and they have different views on how to develop things and you have to organize so that these people can lead each other." In contrast, attracting highly qualified teachers and administrators in remote villages and rural areas in Sweden and Wisconsin was a continual challenge for other superintendents. Small community size at times also created unrealistic expectations for the superintendent in the district. Superintendent Jensen, from his small village in the mountains of northern Sweden with few other professionals and executives, described the intense community expectations this way:

> There are many parts in the community where they say, "You must be here because I'm the highest chief in so many areas." So when you have some people who work with theatre and they are thinking something, "Well, you must be here because we are…You must listen to us." And when you have those who work with sports, they would like me to be there to listen to them, and if you have unemployment boards, who will speak about, "Well how do we manage to deal with unemployment in the north part of Sweden?" Someone has to be in those meetings, and it's me.

Geographic location also affected the ways in which superintendents communicated with families and the larger community. For instance, in Wisconsin where local school revenue is tied to enrollment numbers, and where parents can choose in which school to enroll their children regardless of school district residency, superintendents are keenly aware that their schools need to be competitive and attractive to students and their parents. As Superintendent White noted, "They can shop around and choose." In these highly competitive environments superintendents worked at being part of the larger community through their personal and professional relationships with local businesses, banks, community agencies, the Chamber of Commerce, and area realtors. Superintendent White described the situation in her suburban Wisconsin school district as follows:

> I felt we had to tell our story because we had a good story. We have good teachers. We have a successful track record, but we also changed a lot of our instructional programming to, frankly, give parents things we thought they wanted. I think that they want to know you, and know that they can trust you, and that they know the school district.

In another suburban district the superintendent had worked for years establishing communications connecting the school district to the interests and needs of community members. As the expectations of parents and others changed, new strategies for communication included developing district websites with live video streaming, news blasts, emergency contact information, grade check capabilities, and communication forms. New strategies for reaching out to senior citizens and residents without school-aged children were also developed. One superintendent from an affluent suburban district described how his work with the local school board in setting a clear agenda and communicating it to the district was critical to his overall success in leading the district:

> I worked hard with the board to try and ensure their active part in setting that agenda. So, sometimes I may slow issues down to ensure they're fully understanding and supporting. In a community this size, Friday night cocktail party is just as likely

> to include that conversation, and I want them to be not just conversant, but to be able to explain with some detail and passion as to why it's important. (Seth Johnson)

The characteristics of the community and geographic location also influenced superintendents' leadership practices. The superintendents particularly worked to identify and manage the community's expectations for academic performance, influencing district direction, and the superintendent's involvement in the community itself. In response to these expectations the superintendents established personal relationships and partnerships with local businesses and community associations, monitored the community's readiness for change, and balanced the district's needs with those of the community.

Financial Situation

One of the most noticeable differences in contextual variations between Sweden and Wisconsin centered on local school district finances. Only one Swedish superintendent mentioned budget and finance as a major problem or challenge. Though Swedish superintendents worried less about annual revenues and budgets, they were very conscious of their responsibility for the fiscal stewardship of resources. Responding to a question about ways in which his work had changed over the past five years, Superintendent Johansson noted that, "It's much more focused on economical matters than it used to be. It's also that we have our eyes from the community around us, that we prove that we're doing a good job. It's more of a focus than it was five years ago."

In contrast, all of the superintendents in Wisconsin, regardless of district wealth, described fiscal challenges created by state-imposed revenue caps limiting local district taxing authority, the increasing proportion of high-need students, and increasing costs of services for children with identified disabilities. In Wisconsin, the fiscal context is the product of shifting demographics, state and local politics limiting revenues. Adding to this milieu are new demands placed on all public school districts, with special attention to closing the achievement gap between students who have traditionally been successful and students who have traditionally struggled—the economically disadvantaged, children of color, non-English speaking children, and children with disabilities. As one superintendent experiencing this change in demographics noted:

> We have shifting demographics. We have over 33 languages spoken in the school district [4300 total student enrollment]. We are changing demographically in that way. We are both increasing in socio-economic status and in free and reduced lunch status. We have about 15% now of our children that are on free and reduced lunch. We also have million dollar homes that are being built in our community, so like most of our nation, we are becoming more polarized, haves and have-nots. (Kaylee Jones)

As Superintendent Jones further explained, the fiscal strain confronted by these superintendents was real, but it did not affect their commitment to provide appropriate and challenging educational opportunities for all children. She noted:

> We really believe that if we are not preparing all kids at the highest levels of success that their personal opportunities for success are going to be limited and in many cases become a have-not in an information society and so we need to prepare them, the future of our state and our nation really are dependent upon a really highly educated citizen in the global economy.

As noted earlier in our findings, enrollment drives the revenue that each district receives from the state to support education. Thus, declining enrollments, either due to aging populations or to competition for students from neighboring school districts, virtual schools, and/or private, independent schools, creates the proverbial "double whammy" for superintendents to address—revenue caps limit taxing authority, rising fixed costs, and state financial support is reduced due to enrollment declines.

Yet, these superintendents were not passive in their responses to fiscal constraints. While they illustrated that the need to demonstrate fiscal stewardship was critical, small-town superintendent Henry Scott described his successes in working within a tight fiscal environment:

> When I arrived, we had three failed referendums, and we haven't had a failed referendum since. We have had four large successful referendums, and part of this is I tried to establish a relationship with the community. So I established a lot of relationships because the way you win referendums, the way you win people over for tax levy increases is in between the crisis. Establish the relationship and communication between the needs and that's what we've been trying to do here.

The fiscal context within each school district required superintendents to be careful stewards of resources, architects of organizational transparency in matching resources to needs, effective communicators, long-range thinkers and planners, and leaders who built relationships and trust both within and outside their organizations. Specific strategies the superintendents employed in response to the influence of the fiscal context included monitoring the community's ability and willingness to fund school initiatives, identifying initiatives for raising district funding, and promoting district successes while highlighting ongoing needs.

Political Climate

Superintendents described situations that illustrated the interaction between context and leadership in various political contexts- national, local district/municipality, and system. The most immediate political context that superintendents interacted with regularly involved policy discussions and decisions by the local school boards or municipal governments. Earlier in the findings, we described two major differences between Swedish and Wisconsin school governance. In Sweden, the school board is partisan, representing existing political parties and their constituencies, whereas in Wisconsin school board elections are non-partisan and do not ostensibly represent particular political parties. In Sweden, local school board representation can be impacted when national elections change the existing political make up of the government. This can result in some tension and instability at the local school district. Additionally, local school districts in Sweden are part of the municipal government and thus are fiscally dependent entities. In Wisconsin, school districts are independent political and governing entities that are delegated powers by the State.

The superintendents revealed a capacity to push back against or shape the challenges presented by variations in external political forces and local politics. "Pushing back," meant refusing to be positioned as passive victims of political contingencies. Instead, superintendents endeavored to shape the political realities and environments in which they worked. For instance, Superintendent Johansson found opportunities to shape the political environment by working local political and media issues in his medium-sized urban district:

> Meetings with the media... I think that is one of the opportunities I have. Even if it's a bad headline, you can manage to change the attitude. So, I'm not afraid of the media. It's more a tool for us. If we do it correctly, if we use it for our aims, it can

be a good way of doing it. But not as reactions all the time, but use it instead of
react, to act.

In the United States, the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has been
a dominant external, political influence in school districts. Suburban district superintendent Seth
Johnson described how he helped professional staff and community stakeholders deal with this
powerful political influence by leading responsively:

From the beginning with NCLB we told people how we are going to approach it.
And we backed up and took a look at it and decided out of the gate we would search
through NCLB for things that are good for kids, and we would do everything to
maximize them. We would look at those things that were more compliance related
that weren't harmful for kids, but didn't have much leverage for them. We would do
the minimum we had to comply, to avoid sanctions. And… if we saw implications
or results that were negative, we would actively fight them. And we stayed with it. I
mean the issue around narrowing the curriculum; we just simply find another way.

Other strategies superintendents used to respond to political influences included working
closely with school board members and keeping them informed, forming leadership teams, acting as
a buffer, communicating frequently and directly to various constituencies, developing personal and
trusting relationships with board members and key community members, helping make people feel
they could participate in decisions that can make a difference, and "positioning the board" to engage
parents and the community so there is a voice in state legislation and in the community. This
combination of strategies demonstrated the superintendents' willingness and abilities to both
successfully navigate and shape the political climates in which they operated.

Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose of this cross-national study was to examine the relationship between context—
geographic, political, demographic, organizational, psychological, and cultural—and the professional
work and leadership of twelve school superintendents. From an empirical perspective, we were
interested in exploring the degree to which various aspects of context in Wisconsin and in Sweden
helped to explain important differences within and across work priorities and demands reported by
superintendents in earlier studies.

Superintendents as Leaders
In earlier studies (Bredeson & Johansson, 1996; Bredeson & Kose, 2007), using self-
reporting survey design, we documented superintendents' work priorities and the critical roles they
defined for themselves as district leaders. In the current study, none of the superintendents revealed
much about their leadership behavior or perspectives when asked what they hoped their
professional colleagues would mention if they were to write a piece about their contributions as
superintendents. As one superintendent succinctly noted, "It's not about me." There was mention
of such personal leadership qualities as generosity, honesty, forthrightness, caring, and creativity, but
the real clues to their leadership were attached to the context of their daily work and their
participation in these systems of meaning and practice.
Our findings connecting context and leadership illustrate what we refer to as context-
responsive leadership (CRL). The construct of context-responsive leadership resonates with other

studies of educational leadership (Emrich, 1999; Gronn & Ribbins, 1996; Hallinger, 2011; Hargrove & Owens, 2002; Leithwood et al., 2004; Louis et al., 2010; Vroom & Jago, 2007). The interview data in this study support the conclusion that leadership absent context is meaningless. Within multiple contexts, superintendents' leadership finds expression in interactions and relations with others. Variations in context constitute opportunities as well as constraints to an individual's capacity to motivate and engage others in collaborative efforts to achieve organizational goals. While superintendents must be responsive to variations in context, they also have the capacity to shape various contexts in their daily work.

Differences in national traditions, political/governance structures in education, geography, organizational culture, and demographics notwithstanding, our data indicate that superintendent leadership is characterized by three dominant themes. First, each superintendent kept, "the main thing the main thing." That is, each understood that children and young people were the focus of their professional work, and each worked to keep their systems and their processes child-centered. The second theme, a focus on vision and mission, related to the interaction with context. Given that change and uncertainty were constant companions of these superintendents, each worked to clarify, communicate, and protect a collective vision and mission of their systems dedicated to the care, nurturing, and development of all children. A clearly focused vision also helped these superintendents shape the context of their professional work. They pushed back against the forces of narrow special interests, irrelevant political diversions, and economic setbacks thereby shaping a clear and positive context that gave others direction and support. Establishing trust and meaningful relationships with others, both inside and outside of their organizations, was the third dominant theme that typified superintendent leadership. Leadership and followership are inseparable elements of the fluid conversation in communities of practice among formal leaders and others in these educational systems. These themes reflect similar findings in Leithwood, et al. (2004).

A Leadership Paradox

Given our predisposition at the outset of this study to describe any differences in superintendent leadership that might be explained by context, we were presented with a bit of an empirical jolt when a number of our respondents told us there were more similarities than differences in the work of school superintendents. Clearly, there are many similarities in superintendents' daily work identified by our respondents. We believe, however, that this paradox is grounded in their assessment of primary work tasks and responsibilities attached to the formal role of superintendent rather than to personal expressions of leadership in unique contexts of practice.

Superintendents from both countries focused on student success and achievement, though Wisconsin superintendents were much more focused on student achievement and measures of academic performance than were their Swedish counterparts. No Child Left Behind in the United States continues to command an important component of the superintendent leadership agenda as well as providing the language (e.g., "achievement gaps", "accountability", and "standards") found lacking in Swedish superintendents' responses about their responsibilities centered on child development and student success.

Superintendents also helped to: establish an educational vision and agenda for action; support the development and growth of principals, team leaders, and other staff to build organizational capacity; deal with various internal and external political forces; and develop relationships among internal staff, external stakeholders, and school board members.

Only in the area of the budget (economy), particularly on the revenue side, did we see major differences between Swedish and US superintendents. Revenue caps in the state of Wisconsin, decreasing enrollments, and an open enrollment policy have resulted in many superintendents having to focus on the management of decline in their districts. In Sweden, superintendents must

also be careful stewards of their resources, but a vibrant economy and the politics of school funding have to date spared them significant deliberations over the management of decline in their districts.

Despite the similarities in work, accomplishing these tasks was more than mindless administrative imitation. In each case, these tasks became opportunities to express leadership values and purposes that engaged others to work toward a collective vision. Thus, differences in context were not apparent in general administrative tasks, but became manifest in leader intent and interactions within various situations of practice. The one exception in our findings to the leadership paradox was when these superintendents described their urban, inner-city school counterparts. In contrast to their own superintendencies, they described the urban superintendency as "a different world" requiring a different leadership skill set.

When we pressed superintendents to think about any differences between their work and that of their neighboring counterparts, they identified five variations in context that they believed influenced their work: 1) school district size, 2) organizational culture, 3) community characteristics and geographic location, 4) the financial situation, and 5) the political climate.

The most frequently mentioned, and perhaps most obvious difference in context they could point to, was that of district size. As district size increased, the superintendent had significantly more administrative/support staff to carry out his/her primary responsibilities. However, the trade-off was that district structures concomitantly became more formalized, while personal contacts and relationships were primarily accomplished through other leaders.

Local and organizational cultures also accounted for important differences in superintendent behavior and leadership. For example, in smaller districts the superintendents communicated through direct, frequent and personal interactions, whereas their counterparts in larger districts had to rely on organizational communication systems and processes that were less personal. Regardless of size, however, all 12 superintendents were sensitive to the organizational traditions, norms, processes and capacities they encountered, and adapted their behaviors in concert with these contextual variants.

One important aspect of organizational culture not heretofore discussed, but nonetheless important, was the superintendent's tenure within the district. Clearly, those superintendents who had a decade or more of experience within a district had created a network of relationships and systems that they relied upon to accomplish professional goals. They could more easily shape and push-back against forces in the external environment that threatened to derail or obstruct the system's vision and mission.

Community characteristics and geographic location- in a university community, suburban area, or isolated, rural area - were also identified as a factor that influenced superintendent leadership. The superintendents sought out and managed community expectations for communication, academic performance, participation in direction setting, and their own involvement in community activities. Activities associated with this approach allowed superintendents to develop trusting relationships with other stakeholders, monitor the community's readiness for change, and balance the district's needs with those of the community. Geographic locations revealed differences in demographics, as well as in local politics and culture that formed community expectations and school district needs.

The superintendents were able to further develop community trust of themselves and the district as a whole by demonstrating fiscal stewardship. To do this they transparently communicated to stakeholders the manner in which taxpayer money was being used to address the district's short and long-term needs, while monitoring the district's ability and willingness to fund school initiatives.

Political strategies, personal temperaments, and leadership behaviors that work effectively in one district may not be directly transferable to another district. The relationship developed between

superintendents and their governing boards, as well as the tenure/experience of school board members, also accounted for differences in superintendent leadership behaviors. Long-term relationships with board members were part of the organizational/human capital supporting the work of superintendents. School board instability, intra-board controversies, and inexperience, as one superintendent noted, "take more time and energy."

An Emerging Theory: Context-Responsive Leadership

At the outset, we conceptually grounded our study within the family of contingency theories of leadership. However, we have come to see the relationship between context and leadership as a reciprocal one, and believe our findings provide empirical evidence that supports our emerging theory of context-responsive leadership. We conceive context-responsive leadership as practical wisdom in action, which reveals a complex mix of knowledge, skills, and dispositions appropriately deployed by effective leaders as they engage in fluid conversations with dynamic situational variables. Context-responsive leadership is expressed through action, the way the leader behaves, not any one predisposed style consisting of de-contextualized qualities or leader actions.

We highlighted five key variations in context to illustrate context-responsive leadership in situ. These included school district size, organizational culture, community context and geographic location, the fiscal context, and the political context. Within these varying environments, the context-responsive view of leadership accounts for superintendents' anticipatory and responsive engagement with dynamic situations of practice. From this perspective, leaders who employ context-responsive leadership strategies recognize that contexts vary and can both enable and constrain their behavior. Context-responsive leaders also know when, where, why, and how to push back or reshape elements of context in order to provide a more favorable environment for achieving priorities and goals. Our interview data provide evidence that the work and leadership behavior of superintendents is deeply embedded in context—geographic, political, demographic, organizational, cultural, and psychological. These 12 superintendents exhibited context-responsive leadership in which they were actors who continually navigated and interacted with uncertain and challenging situations of practice.

There is a dual challenge as we advance our emerging theory of context- responsive leadership. First, our theory needs to specify and clearly elaborate individual elements and concepts, and their inter-relationships in the theory. In this paper, we have illustrated key strategies these context-responsive superintendents used across five dynamic contexts of practice. While it is tempting at this point to develop a new taxonomy of leadership behaviors, we agree with Leithwood and his colleagues' conclusion:

> Impressive evidence suggests that individual leaders actually behave quite differently (and productively) depending on the circumstances they are facing and the people with whom they are working. This calls into question the common belief in habitual leadership 'styles' and the search for a single best model or style. We need to be developing leaders with large repertoires of practices and the capacity to chose from that repertoire as needed, not leaders trained in the delivery of one 'ideal' set of practices." (2004, p. 10)

Accordingly, our second challenge then is to identify key behaviors and attributes of context-responsive leaders while not completely abstracting them into a list of de-contextualized leadership qualities. For example, we know that context-responsive leaders are contextually literate, that is they are sensitive to and aware of critical elements of context, purpose, and actions. They engage in fluid conversations with situations of practice, recognizing variations in context situated in such

interactive dimensions as time and historic moment, place, and people. They understand that variations in context can both enable and constrain their behavior, and they respond to such variations in an appropriate time and manner. Lastly, we know that context-responsive leaders both react to, and, when appropriate, take action to shape their contexts of practice.

Implications for Practice and Further Research

This paper has advanced the emerging theory of context-responsive leadership as a useful approach for examining how variations in context affect the nature of school superintendents' professional work and leadership, and how superintendents work to shape their educational contexts to further the realization of goals for their districts. Superintendents who are able to recognize and effectively respond to their contexts are able to enjoy a great deal of success. All the superintendents in this sample demonstrated a number of common approaches that we have come to characterize as context-responsive leadership. These superintendents were able to see beyond micro-contextual issues to the larger, more complete picture. They held long-term perspectives and were willing to patiently develop the relationships and trust required for dealing with contentious issues. Above all, however, these superintendents demonstrated an acute ability to know when and how to push back and shape their contextual environment through actions like promoting the district's successes and educating stakeholders about the needs of the district, while educating themselves about the expectations and needs of their communities.

While the findings of this study provide a useful construct from which to view superintendent work and leadership behaviors, many questions remain unanswered at this stage. Further research is required to determine, for example, the ways in which context-responsive leadership may be expressed in larger, more representative samples. Furthermore, while some have explored the socialization and professional learning requirements of educational leaders (Bredeson, Klar, & Johansson, 2008; Eraut, 1994; Orr, 2006), research is still required to determine how leaders can best acquire the complex mix of knowledge, skills and dispositions required to become a context-responsive leader. Finally, research needs to be conducted to determine more specifically how superintendents utilize and hone their context-responsive skills in practice to advance district goals, particularly student development and academic performance.

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