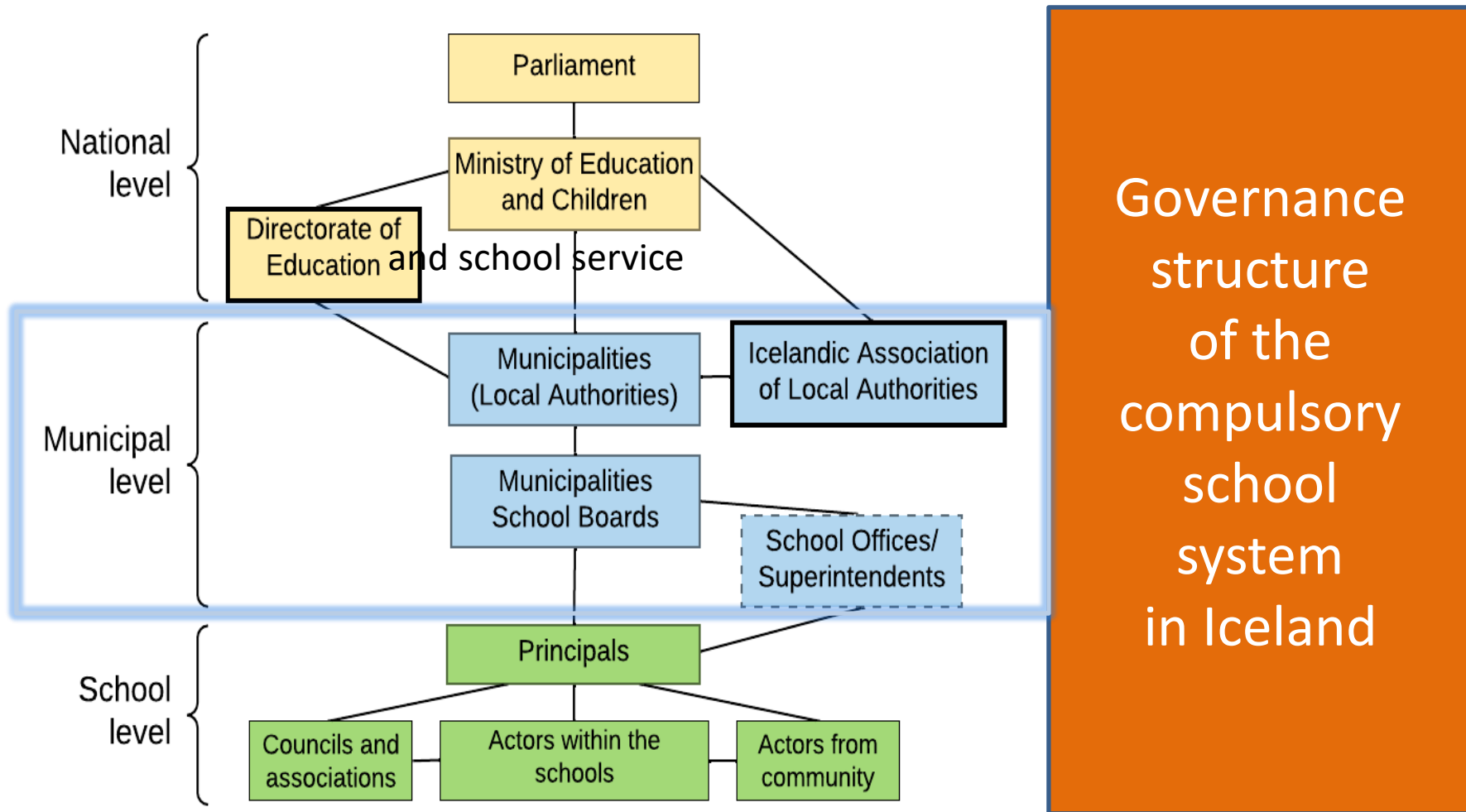


# Towards Inclusive Education: Navigating Decentralization in Iceland

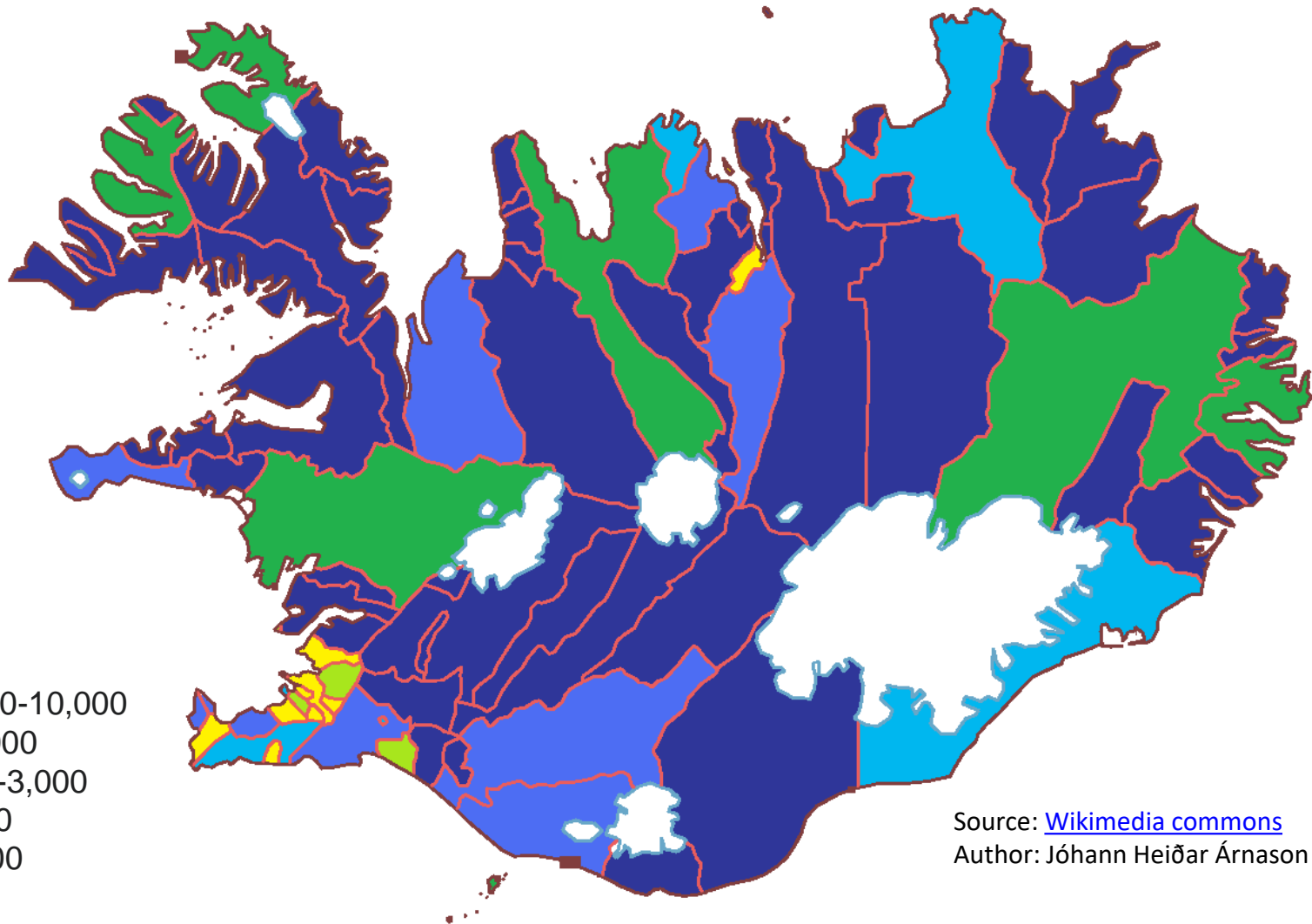
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WELS 2024 4<sup>th</sup> of September



Governance structure of the compulsory school system in Iceland

Yellow: 10,000+  
Light green: 6,000-10,000  
Green: 3,000-6,000  
Light blue: 2,000-3,000  
Blue: 1,000-2,000  
Dark blue: 0-1,000



Source: [Wikimedia commons](#)  
Author: Jóhann Heiðar Árnason

## Aim

- To understand the implications of decentralisation for municipal educational leadership and its impact on school practices and inclusive education.

# Key concepts

## Policy, governance, decentralisation

- Policy as a process, outcome and steering (Ball, 2017), multilevel enactment (Maguire et al., 2013)
- Governance as a process of governing through which decisions are taken (Bevir, 2012).
- Coherence of policy, governance and leadership (Campbell & Fullan, 2019; Fullan & Quinn, 2016)
- Decentralization as the transfer of state powers and control to local authorities and schools (West & Ainscow, 1991)

## Inclusive education

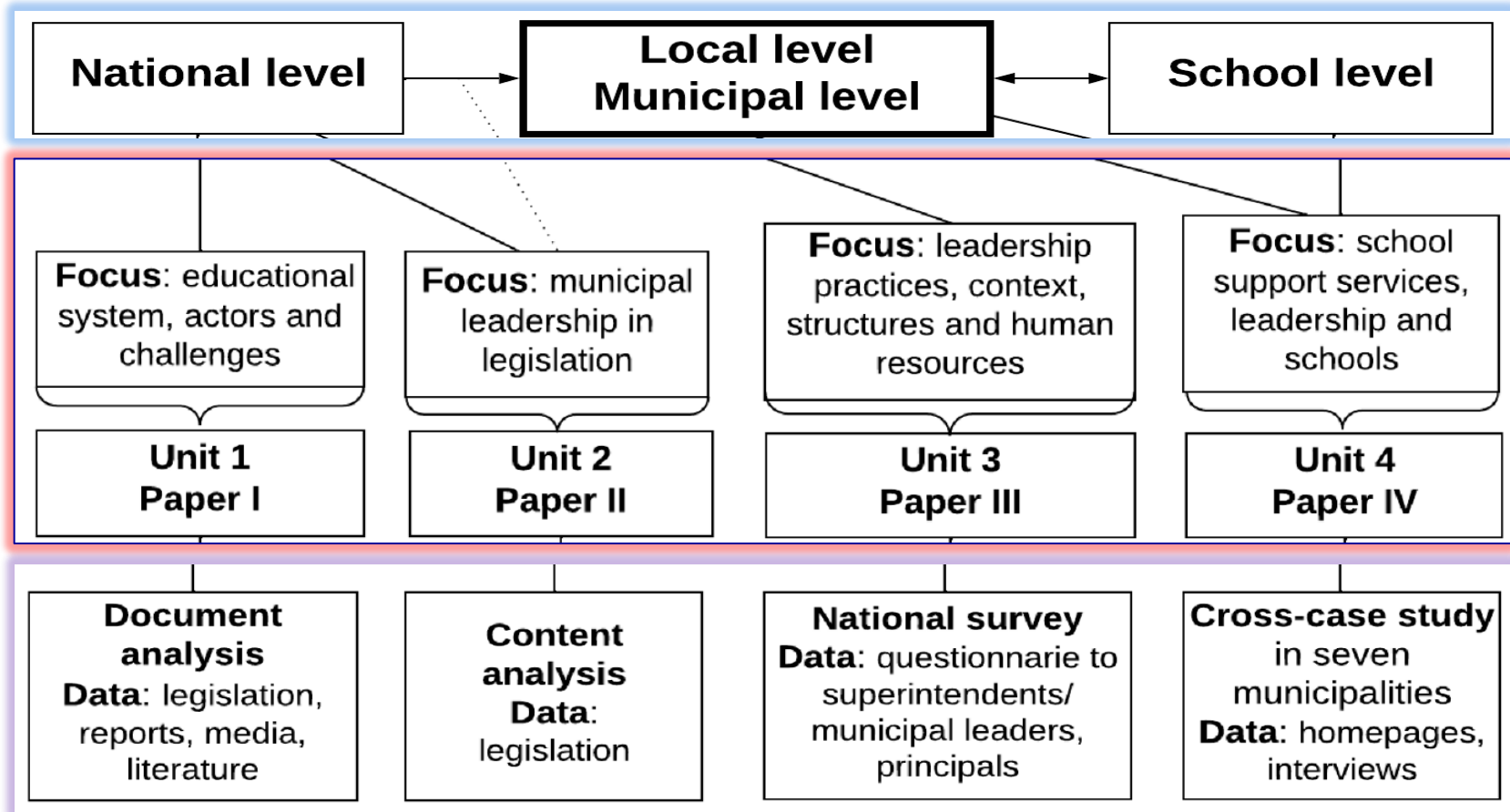
(Magnúsdóttir, 2016; Magnúsdóttir et al., 2021)

- Comprehensive approach, equal access and opportunities, diversity within the classroom, a supportive environment
- Political and social dimensions
  - inclusion is not just about physical integration
  - Addresses also inequalities in education
  - Fosters social justice

## Educational leadership

- Core functions of providing direction and exercising influence (Louis et al., 2010)
- Successful distributed leadership practices (Leithwood et al., 2008, 2020; Louis et al., 2010)
  - Setting directions - Developing people - Refining and aligning the organisation - Improving teaching and learning programmes
- Leadership capacity learned and enhanced at all levels for sustained school improvements, even when key persons leave (Lambert, 2003).
- Focus on strengthening students' learning (Robinson, 2011)

# Study overview – embedded single-case study



## Findings and discussions – the national level

- Political inconsistency, ideological differences and limited (supportive) infrastructure – result in restraints in the capacity to meet requirements (Campbell & Fullan, 2019; Lambert, 2003; Louis et al., 2010; Maguire et al., 2013)
  - Lack of cohesion (Fullan and Quinn, 2016)
  - Individualistic actions on the part of educational ministers (Ball, 2017; Fullan and Quinn, 2016)
  - Limited enactment policy (Maguire et al., 2016)
  - Rather low leadership capacity at the national level – laisses fair (Lambert, 2003) – legislation but little follow-up and support to the lower levels – “it’s all yours”

## The features of educational municipal leadership

- Low general resemblance to the desired leadership practices framework (Leithwood et al., 2008, 2020; Louis et al., 2010) and leadership capacity framework (Lambert, 2003)
  - Space for improvement regarding both frameworks but varies between municipalities
  - Focus on individual support to students (clinical diagnoses provided by psychologists)
  - The municipalities have become silos (Louis, 2015)
- Leadership practices are dependent on human resources
- A weakness in the Icelandic educational system in terms of
  - Systematically building people's capacities (Lambert, 2003; Leithwood et al., 2008, 2020; Louis et al., 2010)
  - Providing coherence in policy, governance and leadership practices – between legislation and actions (Campbell & Fullan, 2019, Fullan & Quinn, 2016)
  - Ensuring continuity when key persons leave (Lambert, 2003)



# Implications: School practice and inclusive education

- Much left to the principals and teachers to deal with most educational leadership practices that concern capacity building
  - Especially in more remote municipalities
- Variation in municipal support and leadership and in school practices
- Struggles to ensure consistent educational opportunities across municipalities and schools
- Struggles in enforcing legislation
- Unequal access to resources across municipalities, especially human resources

# Implications for decentralization of educational systems and inclusive education

- **Balancing empowerment and equity:**
  - Decentralisation can empower local authorities but must include robust frameworks to preserve equity, inclusiveness, and consistency in education.
- **Leadership development:**
  - Leadership capacity is critical. The Icelandic case shows that decentralisation must be paired with leadership development and capacity-building initiatives at all levels to manage new responsibilities effectively.
- **Reducing gaps:**
  - Decentralization can create differences in educational quality across municipalities. National policies must include strategies to monitor and reduce these gaps to ensure all students, regardless of location or background, receive a high-quality education.
- **Maintaining coherence and trust:**
  - To avoid fragmentation and maintain educational standards, consistent policy frameworks, clear communication, building trusting relations between all levels and ongoing national support are essential.
- **Cultural and contextual sensitivity:**
  - Decentralisation strategies should be tailored to each educational system's cultural and contextual needs.

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# Thank you