School Leaders as Coupling Agents – Mediating Between External Demands and Internal Values

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Abstract
The Swedish education system has undergone an extensive transformation and a new policy context characterised by external control, marketing and managerial accountability is now in place. In previous research, the new context has been presented as something school leaders have to balance against democratic professionalism but eventually give way to. This article intends to make this picture more nuanced by exploring how school leaders make sense of and respond to external demands related to the new policy context. The article takes institutional theory and the concept of coupling – the relationship between the environment of schooling and the participants and practices in local school organisations – as its theoretical starting point. Findings from three compulsory schools show that school leaders make symbolic responses to external demands but also transform these demands to make them fit with norms and values that prevail in their local organisations, thereby preventing neoliberal influences from gaining ascendancy. Substantial changes in practice due to altered understanding were also detected. However, ideas about professional accountability and democratic values still remain the guiding principles and few indications of managerial accountability can be detected.

Keywords: education policy, accountability, pedagogical leadership, coupling mechanism, decoupling

Introduction
From the early 1990s onwards, the Swedish education system has been greatly influenced by neoliberalism. Sweden has gone from having one of the most centralised and uniform school systems in the OECD to one of the most decentralised and liberal in terms of marketisation (Blossing and Söderström 2014; Bunar 2010; Lundahl et al. 2013). There is a new policy context that includes freedom of choice, deregulation, evaluation and managerialism. As a result, decision-making at the local level has been strengthened and schools have become increasingly semi-autonomous units (Lundahl et al. 2013) with responsibility for results as well as for the improvement of practice. To ensure quality, there is an increased need for scrutiny and evaluation and various regulatory approaches have been introduced or intensified, including regular supervision by the Swedish Schools Inspectorate (SSI)
and systematic quality assurance at the local level and at the municipality or independent school operator level. The altered context has imposed new demands on teachers and school leaders, who have been described as being under tension in a situation in which the logic of the market is increasingly taking precedence (Fredriksson 2009; Holm and Lundström 2011; Jarl 2013).

The body of research on the new context is growing rapidly, but it does not yet provide a comprehensive picture. As Lundahl et al. (2013) have noted, there is little discussion about the continued presence of values from older policy contexts. Although the influence of neoliberalism has been extensive, the shift has not been all-encompassing. Democratic thinking, social justice and equality from the older Welfare era still prevail (Blossing et al. 2014). Arguably, there is also a lack of research highlighting the ways in which the new circumstances affect the internal operation and life of schools. This article intends to contribute to an increased understanding of these issues by applying a micro-level lens to institutionalism.

Decoupling (Meyer and Rowan 1977, 1978) has been a fruitful concept for understanding organisational responses to environmental change. In recent years it has been suggested that early ideas of decoupling need to be nuanced, not least due to the impacts on school governance and administration of the neoliberal accountability movements that have been seen in the education sector (Coburn 2004; Hallet 2010; Spillane and Burch 2006). School leaders and teachers respond to pressure from the institutional environment by using a range of coupling strategies that go well beyond decoupling (Coburn 2004, 2005; Diamond and Spillane 2004; Hallet 2010). From this starting point, the present article puts school leaders’ agency in the spotlight, exploring what happens when the new policy context meets the values and norms of school leaders and local school organisations.

The study asks the following question: How do school leaders make sense of, and respond to, external demands related to the new policy context, and how do they take action and handle the tension between these demands and internal (personal and organisational) norms and values?

The article begins by giving a background to the expected role of school leaders, with reference to previous studies and literature. This is followed by the theoretical framework, and the design of the research applied in this investigation, before moving on to the findings and analysis and concluding with the implications of this work.

**Swedish school leadership – in transition**

Following the decentralisation of decision-making and introduction of management by objectives in the 1990s, economy and administration now characterise the work of school leaders in Sweden (Ekholm et al. 2000; Jarl et al. 2012). However, besides managing teachers and being economically accountable Swedish school leaders are expected to be responsible, together with teachers, for improvements in educational
practice (e.g. Lgr 11; SFS 2010:800; SOU 2004:116). In the Swedish context, this aspect is known as pedagogical leadership; it can be understood as a component of democratic professionalism (Sachs 2001), which emphasises collaboration between teachers, school leaders and students. In the Anglo-American context, instructional leadership is a close term (Louis et al. 2010; Salo et al. 2015). According to Törnsén and Ärlestig (2014), pedagogical leadership implies leading and providing the prerequisites for the core processes of teaching and learning, and analysing the relationships between the qualities of a school and student learning outcomes.

Several studies have concluded that school leaders experience difficulties when taking on pedagogical leadership roles (MacBeth et al. 1996; Möller 2005; Skolinspektionen 2012). After investigating the Swedish upper secondary school sector, Holm and Lundström (2011) stated that marketisation has transformed institutional logic and, in the process, changed the professional identity of principals from a pedagogical role to one that is more economically- and service-oriented. Jarl (2013), who discussed pedagogical leadership by principals in relation to current management reforms, came to a similar conclusion.

However, research has also shown that not all school leaders feel pressurised by external demands for managerial accountability. Some consider it reasonable that school owners, politicians and other authorities want to know what is going on in schools. To legitimise the process of regular supervision they use it as an opportunity to learn rather than control (Ek 2012). Such leaders benefit from external demands, integrating them with local development work. Moos (2005) found that school leaders appear to have “an option” of overriding managerial accountability at the local level. In order to counteract external influences, school leaders withdraw into a “protective cocoon” (Sugrue and Furlong 2002). They judge that the new circumstances pose no threat to their current activities and they therefore maintain existing internal structures. This may be perceived as inappropriate by external authorities, but it is not uncommon when school cultures and identities are being challenged.

From a historical perspective, school leadership has always been a balancing act and pedagogical leadership a constant challenge (e.g. Ekholm et al. 2000; Svedberg 2000). This is a reflection of a school culture in which teachers are sovereign in the classroom (Berg 2003) and a historical collegiate tradition in which pedagogical leadership was regarded as the responsibility and domain of the teachers (Johansson and Bredeson 2011). Since this culture still prevails to some extent, many school leaders rarely visit classrooms, nor do they consider it their duty to do so (Björkman 2008; Johansson and Bredeson 2011).

Thus, the findings of previous research show that school leaders’ professional identities are changing to a more economy-focused role, although some resistance can be seen. From this basis, this article sets out to explore the ways in which school leaders, acting as the primary agents in the coupling mechanism that balances
pressure from the institutional environment with internal norms and values, experience the current situation and act on their own terms.

**Theoretical framework**

School leaders are subject to multiple influences, both within their own schools and in a broader institutional context (Meyer and Rowan 2006). To gain a better understanding of how they deal with these influences, the theoretical starting point is institutional theory (Meyer and Rowan 1977, 1978) and the microfoundations therein (e.g. Powell and Colyvas 2008; Weick 1995; Weick Sutcliffe and Obstfeld 2005). Institutional theory seeks to understand how structures, norms and patterns of social relationships in organisations both change and resist change by emphasising the ways in which organisations are linked to the broader social and cultural environment and thus need to seek legitimacy in relation to other organisations (e.g. Coburn 2004). Because organisations exist in organisational fields, the formal and informal expectations, regulations, norms, values, laws and so forth that impact on organisations tend to converge towards structural similarity (DiMaggio and Powell 1991; Scott 2001).

Since the late 1970s, researchers have used the image of education organisations as “loosely coupled” systems (Weick 1976) to explain the relatively weak connection that exists between the institutional environment and the instructional activities taking place in schools. Loose coupling and decoupling concepts have provided educational scholars with powerful analytical tools with which to explain the similarities between school organisations (Rowan 1982), the inconsistencies between formal structure and classroom practice (Meyer and Rowan 1978) and why reforms fail to produce fundamental structural change (Binder 2001). It has been argued that schools respond to pressures in the institutional environment by making symbolic changes in formal structures (Meyer and Rowan 1977, 1978). Through these changes a school can preserve its legitimacy and mask underlying uncertainties and variations, buffering instructional activities from environmental pressure. As a result, the core work becomes decoupled from both the institutional environment and the school’s administrative structure. This contributes to preserving teacher autonomy and distancing school leaders from instructional practice (Driscoll 1995). However, with growing managerial accountability there is empirical evidence that the institutional environment exerts an increasing influence on the core work of schooling – teaching and learning (Coburn 2004, 2005; Diamond and Spillane 2004; Hallet 2010). As highlighted in the introduction, this has prompted a revision of the decoupling proposition (Rowan 2007). Coburn (2004) took this on board when studying the ways in which teachers responded to new instructions about the teaching of reading and identified five different coupling mechanisms. Similar coupling mechanisms have also been used by other researchers (Spillane and
Callahan 2000; Oliver 1991). The five coupling mechanisms identified by Coburn (2004) are:

- **Rejection** – dismissal of new ideas
- **Decoupling** – symbolic responses with no effect on the internal operations
- **Parallel structures** – parallel approaches that balance different pressures and priorities
- **Assimilation** – interpretation and transformation of messages from the environment to make them fit with teachers’ pre-existing understanding, leading to superficial changes in organisational structures and routines
- **Accommodation** – restructuring of pre-existing understanding to accommodate new information in response to pressure from the environment, leading to substantial changes in the core work of teachers

It has also been argued that, to better understand coupling strategies, we must revisit the micro-macro interface that links organisations to their environment (Binder 2007; Hallet 2010). To do this, and to discover how principals respond to changes in the institutional environment and how this is reflected in practice, sensemaking theory is a useful point of departure. According to Weick (1995), sensemaking is the process through which people in organisations, as both individuals and collectives, select information from the environment, interpret it pragmatically and act on the basis of those interpretations to develop cultural and social structures. Weick, Sutcliff and Obstfeld (2005) describe sensemaking as a retrospective process that tends to arise when the current state of the world challenges the expected state and no single way to act is considered obvious. To handle such a situation, people as individuals and collectively try to reduce complexity in order to construct new understandings and interpretations. In doing so, new information is incorporated into existing cognitive frameworks. Thus, principals interpret the meaning of information from the environment through their pre-existing frameworks and practices (Spillane 1999; Spillane et al. 2002).

As previously highlighted, teachers and school leaders have been described as being in a state of tension as neoliberal influences increasingly take precedence (Fredriksson 2009; Jarl 2013; Moos 2005; Møller 2005). However, the actions of teachers and school leaders are not determined solely by market forces. Policy reforms take place in an institutional and historical context and must be implemented in local school organisations with their established norms, values and “standard operating procedures” (Hill and Hupe 2002, 35). As Binder (2007, 547) stated, “organisations are not merely the instantiation of environment, institutional logics ‘out there’, … but are places where people and groups make sense of, and interpret, institutional vocabularies of motive”. Response is thus rooted in the past and in the range of actions believed possible within each organisation. Both personal
and contextual aspects are therefore important influences upon school leaders’ decisions and actions.

**Methodology**

This article draws on a four-year-long qualitative research project whose overall aim was to investigate school leadership arrangements at the local school level within the new policy context. The research project employed a case study design (Yin 2009). The case represents how school leaders’ respond to changes in the institutional context given the assumption that school leaders operate within local schools and that their actions are governed by both personal and organisational preconditions. Initially, a purposive sampling method was used in order to include schools with different forms of leadership arrangement (Cohen et al. 2010; Yin 2011). As proposed by Stake (1995), school managers at the municipality level were approached with a request to identify schools of potential interest in relation to the aim of the overall project. Following discussions with school managers, six principals were contacted. Based on each principal’s description and perception of his or her school, three schools were selected that represented strategic contrasts regarding school type, structural arrangements, school culture and history of school practice, dimensions that previous research and theory have considered significant (Coburn 2004; Spillane and Burch 2006; Vaughan 1992; Weick 1995). All three are public compulsory schools located in somewhat different socio-economic contexts. Below are descriptions of the schools based on findings presented in previous articles (Liljenberg 2013; Liljenberg 2015).

**The case schools**

*West School* is a primary school with students from preschool class up to grade 6, located in a large urban area. The local area, and likewise the school, is multicultural. Lars, the full-time principal, has worked at the school for some years. The school also has a part-time deputy principal. There was previously a strong class teacher tradition at the school, but since Lars became principal a more collaborative working culture has been developing. There has also been an increased focus on school improvement during this period.

*South School* is a full compulsory school, with classes from preschool to grade 9, located in a monocultural area outside a small town adjacent to a larger urban area. A school director and two full-time principals manage the school in a shared leadership structure. In 2012, Karen resigned as school director and Carina took over her position. The teachers work closely together between classes and a shared working culture characterises the school. There is a distinct focus on school improvement and on development of the teaching practices.

*North School* is a lower secondary school with students in grades 6 to 9, located in the same large urban area. The local area is relatively culturally mixed. Anne, who is
now the full-time principal, has worked at the school for several years, initially as a teacher. A subject tradition and an individualistic teacher culture are strongly rooted in the school. There is no clear focus on school improvement, although individual initiatives can be observed.

**Empirical material**

This article is based on empirical material (Table 1) consisting of audio recordings of semi-structured interviews with school leaders and teachers \((n = 43)\), using interview guides consisting of open-ended questions, and field notes and audio recordings from observations of formal school meetings \((n = 53)\), such as school management group meetings and teacher team meetings. The article draws primarily on the interview data. However, conversations in the school meetings were a useful complement in contextualising the analysis and validating the answers given in the interviews.

Table 1. Interviews and observations in the three case schools

| School       | Semi-structured individual interviews | Observations of school meetings |
|--------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| West School  | 1 principal (3 interviews)             | 10 teachers                     |
|              | 1 deputy principal                    | 14                              |
|              | 1 school manager                      |                                 |
| South School | 1 school manager (new in 2012)        | 2 principals                   |
|              | 10 teachers                           | 17                              |
| North School | 1 principal (3 interviews)             | 12 teachers                     |
|              | 10 teachers                           | 22                              |

All interviews and significant parts of the audio recordings from observations were transcribed verbatim and subsequently systematised, coded and analysed in several phases. Initially, the empirical material was read several times in order to obtain an overall picture of the school leaders’ responses to new regulations and norms brought about by the new policy context, and how these were reflected in practice. In this phase, open coding (Miles and Huberman 1994) was used, with codes that described, with little interpretation, school leaders’ experiences of pressure from the environment. Next, the concept of pattern coding was applied and the initial codes were grouped to identify key themes in the data (e.g. approaches to school improvement, the role as school leader, the relationship between school leaders and teachers, attitudes to change). In the third phase, the level of abstraction was increased and the analysis was connected to elements in the sensemaking process identified by Weick (1995) (pragmatic interpretation, complexity reduction, establishment of coherent cognitive frameworks) and to categories of coupling...
mechanisms (decoupling, assimilation and accommodation) inspired by previous research (Coburn 2004). Using this procedure, it was possible to learn not only about the school leaders’ sensemaking, but also about the different approaches that each school leader adopted according to his or her interpretation of the situation in the local school context and the teachers’ responses. By doing both within- and cross-case analysis (Miles and Huberman 1994), it was possible to identify similarities and differences between school leaders and schools but also to increase understanding and add weight to the overall conclusions. From a broad neoliberal perspective, three aspects (supervision, evaluation and accountability) that were addressed in interviews in all three schools were selected for analysis. Interview and observation excerpts are used to give the reader an opportunity to evaluate the interpretations made in this study. They also provide a rich description of the internal work and life of the three schools.

Results

*Experiences of regular supervision by the Swedish Schools Inspectorate*

The interviews reveal that *West School’s* experience of the regular supervision provided by the SSI was positive. The school did not receive much criticism; however, student results were lower than expected and the current organisation did not fulfil the requirement to have appropriately educated teachers for all subjects. To address this, Lars responded by reorganising the school. His response can be interpreted as a desire to meet the requirements and avoid further sanctions. However, he also believed that it would be good for students’ results. The permissive atmosphere and openness to change in West School allowed him to introduce an organisation in which all children had different teachers for different subjects. However, not all teachers agreed that this was wise and one of the more improvement-oriented teachers resigned, using the argument that their students could not cope with that many relationships, a reaction to the unknown that can be regarded as very pragmatic. The interviews and observations indicate that the outcome of the reorganisation was a disappointment. The school environment became rowdy and the weaker students became anxious. The principal thus had a new situation to handle. To reduce complexity, he reverted to an arrangement similar to that previously in place. This meant that the school did not fully satisfy the requirements for certified teachers in all subjects. To justify the new arrangements, Lars emphasised:

> Reality is not like an abstraction, or consistent with a theoretical model. We have to understand that and not be afraid when there are new things to deal with. We must listen, take in, and reinterpret.
It can be concluded that, in order to make sense of the situation, Lars re-interpreted the requirements and did not take external demands as absolute rules. He thus made the demands fit into the specific context and his own conceptual framework. This can be regarded as an example of assimilation as a coupling mechanism.

The last time South School had regular supervision by the SSI the school did not receive any comments. Karen, who as the school director had a major impact on the prevailing norms of the organisation, thought that it was important to live up to the policy documents. She said:

We have to follow the law. We cannot follow our own rules, and we do not do that. I think this is one of South School's major qualities. The things we do, we know that they are the right.

To ensure that the school would also meet requirements in the future, Karen had appointed a development leader who was well briefed on the policy documents and worked closely with teachers to adjust practice according to the new requirements. This can be understood as an attempt to ensure that the approach she thought was right prevailed in the organisation.

South School was due to have its next regular supervision within a few months after the end of the study. Carina, who was the school director at the time, thought that adherence to inspection recommendations was the best course of action. Her reaction can be understood as a result of her cognitive framework and the normative rules prevalent in South School. She advocated a course of action that coupled the outcome of the inspection closely to improvement practices. This can be understood as an example of accommodation as a coupling mechanism. Carina’s interpretation was that the SSI pays attention to things that actually need to be improved and thus for Carina integrating the points that might be raised into the work of improvement made sense to her. She said:

We get a kick in the butt to do something. Maybe we are very well aware of it, but in the everyday struggle we have not done anything about it. In this way we have to deal with it and I think this is good. It is good that an important topic comes up on the agenda. It is also an advantage if we not only amend the paperwork but actually do something about it.

When North School had their regular supervision they were criticised for the way they worked with fundamental values. However, Anne did not agree with the criticism. In a workplace meeting, she responded to the criticism by saying that:

According to the Swedish Schools Inspectorate's opinion, we lack a holistic approach about how to work with fundamental values, as if we just did things when something had happened. You know, as if we did not have a common approach and worked preventively.
In Anne’s opinion, the school addressed abusive treatment appropriately and they did not need any new methods or a different approach. However, some of the teachers thought differently. One explained:

I think it is little vague. Up to now we have been working much on intuition. We have not had any model like A, B or C but rather acted out on urgent situations. We tried for a while to talk about values with the new students but I must say that I am really bad continuing with it.

In response to the teachers’ criticism, Anne justified her way of working by saying that improvement was not primarily her task, but something the teachers worked on together with the students in their daily activities. Her role was to deal with the issue at an organisational level. She thus placed the responsibility on the teachers, setting herself outside the process. In an attempt to make sense of the situation, she stated that the criticism they got at an organisational level had helped them become more systematic in their work. However, interviews with the teachers indicated contradiction and ambivalence. From their point of view, the systematic nature of the work had been improved primarily through new ways of documentation. A teacher explained it thus:

We discuss how to fill in the form. But we never discuss what to do with the students to change the situation. . . . I do not think it is strange that this happens; it is much easier to describe a problem than to come up with a solution.

It can be concluded that in Anne’s framework for understanding it was only necessary to make sure that the documentation complied with the rules. Adjusting the documentation can thereby be understood as a pragmatic reaction which reduced complexity. Although some of the teachers perceived a need for improvement, the way in which Anne separated her work from that of the teachers gave legitimacy to her approach. The fact that the school had an individualistic teacher culture and the teachers were unfamiliar with taking shared responsibility did not open up alternatives. To conclude, implementation of the remarks made by the SSI was restricted to documentation, thus buffering them against making a deeper impact on the internal work of the school; this can be understood as an example of decoupling.

Experiences of the requirements imposed by systematic quality evaluations

In West School, Lars fully understood and welcomed the fact that the municipality wanted to follow up, and have a more systematic approach to, monitoring the quality of work. Lars believed that in order to be strategic and to set directions for improvement he needed to analyse school activities at close quarters.
My interpretation is that this gave him a solid basis for the improvement work and a direction for the school that he could communicate to the teachers. He said:

> With the new mission that we have from the government, from the SSI and the Swedish National Agency for Education and from society it is not possible to continue working as we have been doing in the schools, because then we will fail. Now we have a school that is governed by objectives and this means that we have to think and work in different ways, otherwise it will be a mission impossible. Many teachers say that it is impossible for them to cope with all the things they have done before and to this add all the new things they are required to do. Rather, we have to go on with a new way of thinking.

Among other things, his work had resulted in organisational routines that include changes in teachers’ work. However, there were tensions in the organisation when dealing with these new routines, something Lars was aware of and, as identified in the observations, tried to handle by discussing the issue with the teacher leaders in school management group meetings. He explained:

> This spring, I introduced a new structure for how to make plans for classroom work, a structure that all teachers were to follow. A few months later, two of the teachers came to me and said: ‘We do not manage to do it. It is too much. Can we get out of it?’ It is difficult for them, but improvements take time and I am patient. In two years we have come a bit further. I am continuing in the direction I believe in.

It was clear that, to make sense of the new governance regime, Lars’ fundamental assumptions about how to plan and follow up school activities had been restructured. Since he had added this new information to his pre-existing knowledge structures, it made sense for him to respond to external demands by providing new organisational routines and following up these routines more closely than in the past. I interpret Lars’ response as an example of accommodation.

The reactions of some teachers showed that the new routines did not fit with their existing knowledge structures. Although the teachers thought that the principal had good ideas for improving the school, they reacted with resistance when it came to their teaching practice. From a sensemaking perspective, asking to be excused from the new routines can be understood as a pragmatic interpretation intended to reduce complexity. Yet Lars did not give in to the teachers’ requests but maintained the new routines.

In South School, systematic quality work was not something new; however, with the implementation of the new curriculum in 2011, following up the results was intensified. One year ahead of implementation, the school had started to develop common matrices for assessment and evaluation. This approach to the environmental pressure imposed by an increase in evaluation was something that Karen, who was the school director at the time, had pushed through. However, she
stressed that it was important that the way they worked made sense to all teachers. She said:

The teachers must feel safe in how to work with evaluation and assessment. South School is way ahead of other schools in this area and it is important that we keep our position. To do this, we educate the teachers continuously. No one should say that they do not know how to use matrices in this school.

During the observations, Karen’s direction for how the work should proceed was confirmed. Assessment and evaluations were identified to be recurring issues during the development meetings. In one of the meetings, the development leader stressed the importance of supporting each other by saying that:

It can be very difficult to transform the assessment matrix for grade 6 to grade 2. It is difficult and we have to help each other out in our different subjects. But we are the best at what we do and if we discuss it in our subject meetings we can manage it.

In the interviews, the teachers argued that the new requirements for monitoring students’ results had affected the way they thought about assessment and thus how they worked in the classroom. The teachers felt they had developed new ways of thinking about student knowledge and were now better at assessing each student at the individual level, starting work from there, and giving formative feedback to the students to develop them further. However, the focus on results has also had negative consequences. A teacher explained:

Teacher: It is sometimes a disadvantage to be so focused on the objectives that we are. They start to control our work. Our students are very goal-oriented and want to receive high grades. It affects us a lot.

Interviewer: What are the consequences?

Teacher: Sometimes I think we forget to be creative and open minded. We become so focused on keeping up with everything, tick off, assess and measure. But we talk a lot about that now and it is our future improvement area.

Hence, there seem to be tensions in dealing with this more result-oriented practice. Yet Karen and the principals stressed that their purpose in having a clear focus on matrices had been to help both teachers and students to improve. They tried to create meaning and shared understanding through close discussion with the teachers. One of the principals explained:

I have tried to get the teachers to relax and tell them that it is impossible to work faster than the students can handle. We talk about enjoyment and about how to engage our students and motivate them, and about letting go of the stress. . . . But of course the new curriculum with all objectives and core contents it put pressure on the teachers and they become easily stressed.
It can be concluded that pressure arising from the requirements for monitoring and evaluating had changed how both teachers and school leaders worked and thought about results and systematic quality evaluation. School leaders and teachers had integrated their new and pre-existing knowledge, resulting in new ways of working with students, to be understood as an example of accommodation as a coupling mechanism. However, the teachers felt under strong pressure to deliver measurable results, with the risk that performative accountability took precedence to the detriment of teaching professionalism.

In North School, monitoring students’ results and evaluating the work was something the school was familiar with, Anne argued. Interviews with teachers and observations confirmed that the school often did evaluations. Yet the teachers revealed a different view as to how these were used for further analysis. A teacher explained:

> Of course we do. We often make evaluations. However, we do not follow up the evaluations and continue the work if we have not seen any improvement. It often ends with the evaluation. In my opinion, if we start up a new improvement process and we see no result of it, we have to take advantage of the evaluation and do something new.

From the teachers’ narratives it became clear that their routines for following up results were insufficient; a lack of support in their work made them handle the situation pragmatically and they continued working on the basis of their pre-existing frameworks. A teacher explained:

> I do not know how much it is done, it is difficult. In my opinion, it is much talk and little action. In order to save oneself, you continue with how you have been doing it and what you believe in. I think it works out fine.

It can be concluded that, although there was increased pressure to follow up results, systematically North School had not altered its way of working. Thus, there was no consensus view of how to work with the outcomes of evaluations in order to improve practice. The individualistic teacher culture meant that systematic quality work in North School was a parallel structure decoupled from improvement in the instructional work. From Anne’s description of the yearly quality report it became clear that in her opinion the instructional work was primarily the teachers’ responsibility, a factor that affected the process and hence the result. She said:

> They [the teachers] get questions from me that I want them to answer and then I add their answers to the quality report. I can see that the teachers are not used to analysis, it is evident in their responses. It takes time but we are getting better and better. But does it make any difference what we do? It would be embarrassing if it did not.
Experiences of the increased focus on managerial accountability

In the new policy context, there is an increased focus on managerial accountability. School leaders are increasingly driven by efficiency rather than values (Gewirtz and Ball 2000), as keeping to budgets, increasing competitiveness and monitoring results are priorities (Jarl et al. 2012; Uljens et al. 2013). This section focuses on how the school leaders make sense of their role as pedagogical leaders in the light of the new system of governance.

In West School, Lars prioritised pedagogical leadership. He stated that he had never felt himself governed in his pedagogical work, by his superiors, by politicians or by the SSI. He did not think that the new policy context had affected his way of thinking about his role or his leadership. My interpretation is that the prevailing culture and Lars’ strongly-held democratic values made this possible. The observations showed that Lars in conversations with a teacher helped them attain power over their own situation and their own learning processes without compromising professionalism. He described his leadership like this:

> I believe in a democratic leadership. It is important to communicate and to listen. That is how I think about my leadership. I see conversations as my most important tool. Every time I meet a new person I try to focus. I want to give that person my full attention to convey the feeling that I have seen them.

Lars emphasised that the policy context was changing rapidly and he considered it important for school leaders to have some basic values to hold on to. Of course, he felt the pressure of keeping to the budget and meeting the expectations of the municipal administration but said reflectively:

> We cannot see the changes in society and the new policies as something that we have to stay away from and keep at a distance. Rather, we have to test the limits and not be afraid of doing it. Of course, when you have a formal role you have to stay within the outer boundaries.

From Lars’ description it was clear that his response to pressure from the environment depended on how it fitted with his internal values. It made sense to him to restrict the influence of managerial accountability. He knew that there were certain things he could not ignore, but he considered it appropriate to challenge new requirements when they did not fit with his democratic values. His response to messages from the environment can thus be understood as assimilation.

In South School, Carina stated that the municipal administration had tried to define areas for improvement at the local level. Carina’s view was that improvement was much better when it came from within the organisation. She argued that a top-down approach led to fatigue in the organisation and took time away from things
that really needed to be done. Because of this belief, it made sense to her that she should act as a filter for the many things that came from the municipal administration. She said that some might regard this as insubordinate but, from her perspective, it was necessary since she thought that the administration had tried to impose an excessive degree of control over the internal operations of local schools.

However, she emphasised that it was also part of her role to ensure that she and her staff did not ignore any external criticism they might receive. In her opinion, the atmosphere of pressure imposed by the requirements of the administration needed to be transformed into a culture in which everybody took responsibility, engaged in pedagogical discussions and welcomed feedback from both teachers and school leaders. She therefore focused on building a certain atmosphere within the school, a direction confirmed by the observations. In doing so, she interacted closely with the teachers while maintaining professional responsibility as a pedagogical leader. She explained:

> The school leader must act as a role model, give praise and say well done. ... If they distance themselves from the teachers they cannot do a good job.

The teachers shared this view and, because of the culture that prevailed at the school, they were willing to accept the responsibility they were given. A teacher explained:

> It is we who work in the classroom that know best about how to improve the instructional practice. If we are given a free hand to do it, we discuss it together and decide together. This is how I think it should be done. Maybe it is a simple and tactical plan by very clever leaders.

Carina’s vocabulary was clearly influenced by her strong beliefs and her conviction that she, as the leader, has to create space for bottom-up processes. It also became clear that her reactions to pressure from the environment were dependent on how this pressure harmonised with her beliefs and the school’s internal values. She counteracted external control when she found it necessary but was still open to external influences. As a coupling mechanism, her approach can be understood as assimilation. The culture in South School also assisted Carina in acting as a pedagogical leader.

In North School, Anne approached her leadership in a somewhat different way. For her, school leadership was mainly about being an administrator, taking care of the budget, work environment and employment issues, and organising. To her the appropriate role behaviour as a school leader was to ensure that the structure of the organisation promoted effective working. Her behaviour can be understood on the basis that this was what she thought the municipality prioritised. Anne’s approach to school leadership was confirmed in the observations. Consequently, she
devoted a majority of time in work meetings and management group meetings to administrative matters. The teachers confirmed this leadership approach and said that they missed, and wanted more, pedagogical leadership. However, Anne said:

I participate very little in practice and I do not think that I should. As a teacher, I was used to solving most things myself, and this is the way I think it must be.

When it came to her personal pedagogical leadership style and ideas about ways of improving practice, she reflected as follows:

I looked briefly at Hattie’s research and asked myself, am I a principal who builds strong relationships or am I a principal who brings about development? Of course, you want to be someone who does both . . . but the question is how much do I interfere and do I really make an impact?

Thus, Anne was aware of shortcomings in her pedagogical leadership but at the same time she believed that individual teachers had to take most of the responsibility. This approach was supported by the school culture. Anne’s approach can also be understood as arising from a historical tradition separating school leaders’ work from that of teachers’, known in Sweden as “the invisible contract” (Berg 1995). Based on Anne’s background, i.e. being a former subject teacher and now school leader in a school with an individualistic culture, concentrating on administration was consistent with her framework for understanding. Because of her internal beliefs and values, engaging in pedagogical practice was not an alternative that made sense to her. Thus, Anne’s approach to pedagogical leadership decoupled pedagogical practice from the increased pressure of managerial accountability imposed by the institutional environment.

**Discussion and conclusions**

Decoupling as a response to external pressure has been used since the 1970s to explain how pedagogical practice can withstand change (Meyer and Rowan 1977, 1978). However, in recent years the influences of neoliberalism have intensified the pressure and researchers have argued that it has had a large impact on school leadership and teacher practice (Holm and Lundström 2013; Jarl 2013; Møller 2005). The findings of this article, which aimed to explore what happens when the new policy context meets the values and norms of school leaders and local school organisations, run partly counter to those of previous research by suggesting that environmental pressure enters schools through values and deeply held beliefs embedded in local contexts. By using sensemaking theory and coupling theory (Meyer and Rowan 1977, 1978; Weick 1995), the study concludes that school leaders, as the primary coupling agents, interpret pressure from the environment through their pre-existing frameworks and practices. How school leaders respond to pressure
is also influenced by the values and norms of each local school organisation and the teachers working there. In the article, I have shown that school leaders use a variety of coupling mechanisms in response to environmental pressure (Table 2). Even if resisting environmental pressure entails the risk of sanctions, school leaders sometimes disregard these in favour of internal norms and values. In line with Coburn’s (2004) findings about teachers, this highlights school leaders’ agency as they integrate their pre-existing frameworks of understanding with environmental messages in order to decide upon actions.

Table 2. Results in the three case schools

|                        | West School | South School | North School |
|------------------------|-------------|--------------|--------------|
| Regular supervision    | Assimilation| Accommodation| Decoupling   |
| Systematic quality evaluations | Accommodation | Accommodation | Decoupling |
| Managerial accountability | Assimilation | Assimilation | Decoupling   |

Looking at the first aspect selected for analysis, namely regular supervision by the SSI, the findings show that the school leaders saw benefits in this. Their positive attitude can be interpreted as an expression of gratitude for somebody showing an interest in the school and can be something to hold on to during improvement work. However, requirements for actions were not seen as absolute musts despite the risk of sanctions if they were not followed. For Lars in West School, following the requirements methodically made sense initially but, as it was incompatible with students’ needs and teachers’ opinions, he transformed the message from the environment to fit the organisation’s values and beliefs. In South School, obeying the laws and responding positively to environmental pressure was considered the right thing to do; however, Carina revealed later that this was particularly in relation to the SSI. Requirements at the municipal level were considered far more negotiable. In North School, the individualistic culture resulted in the requirements of the SSI becoming decoupled from pedagogical practice, showing that environmental control is no guarantee of a change in practice, a finding in line with that of previous research applying an institutional perspective (e.g. Driscoll 1995; Meyer and Rowan 1977, 1978).

The second aspect, systematic quality evaluations, was something the school leaders supported and devoted time to. In agreement with some of the Danish school leaders that Moos (2005) interviewed, the leaders in the West and South Schools took on board aspects of the institutional environment they considered positive and integrated them with local activities. New demands and frameworks for monitoring, assessment and evaluation were thus used as tools for improvement but also to reinforce a shared working culture. The teachers’ response was different in the two schools, but in both cases there was a need for sensemaking (Weick 1995) in
order to maintain a common approach. In North School, on the other hand, the prevailing norms and Anne’s approach to school leadership meant that she divided the responsibility for evaluations between herself and the teachers. Anne handled the documentation, delegating the operational work to the teachers. This led to decoupling. The requirements for systematic quality work thus had no clear impact on teaching in North School. The conclusion to be drawn is that the school leaders interpreted the requirements imposed by systematic quality evaluations less as a series of demands than as a set of useful tools. Thus, they identified opportunities for making interpretations such that internal values and norms were not contradicted.

Regarding the third aspect, increased managerial accountability, the study found few elements of school leadership that had developed this focus as a result of environmental pressure. For all school leaders, professional accountability and democratic values, which are characteristic of school leadership in the Swedish context (Ekholm et al. 2000), were considered important and to be held on to. In contrast to previous research findings (Jarl 2013; Skolinspektionen 2012), leaders in the West and South Schools demonstrated pedagogical leadership which was well accepted by the teachers. The dominant values characterising both leadership and school culture in these schools were participation, shared responsibility and decision-making. These values appear to have counteracted neoliberal influences. In North School, on the other hand, Anne made a distinct division between the work of a school leader and that of a teacher, and a more individualistic leadership practice was apparent. The norms and culture of North School were consistent with the tradition of sovereign teachers (Berg 2003; Björkman 2008; Johansson and Bredeson 2011). Historically, this approach has served to decouple environmental pressure from the core work of schooling (Meyer and Rowan 1977, 1978), thus limiting the opportunities available for school improvement. This study has shown that the extent to which school leaders focus on managerial accountability depends on local norms and values. In addition, difficulties in taking on pedagogical leadership were generally linked not to the new policy context but to deeply rooted norms and values. Conditions for collective sensemaking in school organisations therefore have a major impact on the extent to which school leaders can shape their leadership at the local school level.

In conclusion, in examining how school leaders as coupling agents make sense of the new policy context it became clear that when it came to decisions affecting the schools’ internal work and life, values and norms deeply rooted in the local organisation had a major impact on the sensemaking processes that led to appropriate behaviour. It can be argued that the school leaders in this study were not primarily governed by the new policy context. Rather, they expressed agency when acting in accordance with their pre-existing frameworks but also when they altered these frameworks and reinterpreted messages from the environment in order to improve local practices. The contribution made by this work is, of course, limited by
the constraints inherent in every qualitative study. However, it highlights the need for a closer examination of how school leaders engage with the new policy context, and for a more comprehensive investigation into the influences of neoliberalism on the Swedish education system at the local school level.
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