Policy and identification: Exploring the influence of identity perceptions on school leader sense-making in the Swedish school-age Educare

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Abstract
Understanding and implementing educational reform policies is a daily practice in the professional lives of school actors. The discrepancy between how reforms are intended and later realised in the local context constitutes an ongoing discussion spanning multiple areas of research. This article adds to prior research by exploring the role of organisational identity perceptions and identification in school leader sense-making within the process of implementing policy in the Swedish extended education system. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with selected school leaders (n = 11). Findings showed that school leaders made sense of the policy in contrasting ways depending on values assigned to perceived core attributes of the managed educational programme. Findings also suggest that school leaders’ identification or nonidentification with traditional identity-aspects of their organisation, and prospective identity-outcomes of the policy, influenced actions taken in response to the policy demands.

Keywords
extended education, identification, organisational identity, policy implementation, school leader, sense-making

Introduction
Change to educational practice through policy implementation is a constant process that involves multiple actors in school organisation, district management and government agencies (Rigby et al., 2016). Demands put forward by legislators in recent times have increased the pressure on local actors to alter and reconstruct their courses of action in more complex ways than before (Spillane et al., 2006). While these policies enable means for and outline the direction of practice, teachers and school leaders modify the requirements according to their specific situation (Cohen et al., 2007). Prior research on processes where school actors make sense of and shape policy demands in local settings has shown that an agent’s prior knowledge, beliefs and contextual factors play an important role in how policy is understood and implemented (Coburn, 2001, 2005; Spillane et al., 2002a). This line of research has also illustrated that school leaders are highly influential in interpreting policy messages (Spillane et al., 2002b), framing and making sense of problems and solutions associated with policy (Coburn, 2006) and decoupling external policy demands to fit with the values and norms of the school organisation (Liljenberg, 2015).

This article focuses on school leaders within the Swedish system of extended education and examines responses and interpretations associated with the implementation of a teacher certification policy. The objective of the extended education programme in Sweden, the school-age ‘Educare’, is to complement the work being performed in elementary school, offering students a more group-based, situated and leisure-oriented learning experience (Skolverket, 2018a). In recent times, the educational programme has been the recipient of several policy-enforced changes. According to prior research, these changes have led to a structural transformation of control documents and organisational practice, shifting the school-age Educare from a traditionally leisure-oriented practice towards a more school-based culture (Haglund, 2016).

The teacher certification policy is the latest in a line of policies aimed at changing educational circumstances within school-age Educare. The national agency for education in Sweden received criticism when evaluating the educational levels of personnel working within the educational programme, stating that only 24% held the right qualifications (obtained by completing a teacher education programme) to teach in the school-age Educare, and claiming that because of this, school development became harder for school leaders to enforce (Skolverket, 2018b). In the summer of 2019, a prior exception regarding the requirement of formal eligibility when hiring for school-age Educare was removed and replaced with a teacher
certification policy (Skolinspektionen, 2018), making school leaders unable to tenure unqualified personnel and placing the responsibilities of planning and executing teaching solely on those with the proper educational background. This article explores how school leaders managing school-age Educare in Sweden make sense of these changes to manage staff responsibilities. This is accomplished by focusing on the influence of school leaders’ perceived identity-properties of the educational programme, and how these kinds of perceptions might shape how the policy demands are interpreted and enacted.

Points of departure in theory and prior research

Sense-making, school leaders and identity

When confronted with ambiguous events in organisational life, and not knowing how to act in the proper sense, actors try to understand and give meaning to the situation by the ongoing social and retrospective process of sense-making (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1995). This is a socially constructed process where actors extract cues from their different social surroundings (Maitlis, 2005) and connect them to prior cognitive frameworks (Coburn, 2006) in order to understand the situation, enable action and create new situations in which cues can be extracted (Weick, 1995). Furthermore, sense-making is a context-dependent process (Evans, 2007; Spillane et al., 2002b). Actor’s interpretation and enactment of extracted cues relies on contextually dependent conditions, traditions and values, which interrelate to the beliefs, experience and values of the individual actor, providing meaning to the situation (Weick, 1995).

Encountering organisational events that bring a sense of uncertainty might trigger actors into reflecting upon identity-related aspects of themselves and the organisation, which in turn shapes how the situation makes sense and is acted upon (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991; Weick et al., 2005). Prior research investigating these processes within educational settings has shown that school leaders’ sense-making is guided by both individual role identity and context-dependent aspects. A school leader’s professional role identity and micro-institutional context are considered important influences in the process of translating and implementing educational policy, where leaders rely on their professional expertise and context as a way to conceptualise and interpret the policy message (Mizrahi-Shtelman, 2019). When connected to the perceived ideology and identity of the school organisation, role identity has been shown to guide the way in which school leaders make sense of demographic changes in schools (Evans, 2007). Similar findings have been made by Spillane et al. (2002b) in their study of how district-enforced accountability policies were made sense of and enacted by school leaders. Multiple contextual and environmental features of the school organisation, accompanied by the leaders’ perceived professional role of intermediary between the district level of management and school personnel, steered the way in which the school leaders implemented the demands.

Organisational identity and identification with organisations

In this article, the level of analysis is aimed at individual school leaders’ perceptions of the identity of their managed educational programme, and the ties these perceptions have to the individual school organisation. In order to examine how these individual perceptions connect to the organisational level in making sense of policy demands, I utilise the concepts of perceived organisational identity and identification. Organisational identity can be defined as self-identifying claims or referents expressed by members when talking about or acting in regard to their organisation (Whetten, 2006). According to Albert and Whetten (1985), these claims constitute members’ understanding of what is central, distinguishable and enduring about the organisation. The identity is closely tied to its image, which has been conceptualised in various ways in prior research. It has been described as the way members perceive their organisation to be viewed by outsiders (Dutton et al., 1994), external actors’ perception of the organisation (i.e. the reputation) (Brown et al., 2006) or as a concept of desired future image (Gioia and Thomas, 1996). The identity of an organisation is not necessarily a stable notion among its members, notably in times where the organisation is going through change (Gioia et al., 2000). When there is a disruption to the perceived core attributes of the identity (Elsbach and Kramer, 1996), or to the alignment between perceptions of the image and identity, members may perceive this as an identity threat and take measures in order to make sense of the situation (Ravasi and Schultz, 2006) and restore the alignment (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991).

The concept of organisational identification connects the individual member perceptions to the larger organisational entity (Ashforth et al., 2008). The way in which individuals identify with core attributes of the organisation, and compare it to preferred attributes (expectations), influences actions and behaviour within the organisation (Foreman and Whetten, 2002; Reger et al., 1994). It also plays a role in the process of members’ sense-making of identity-changing events, illustrating the importance of perceived organisational tradition, culture and history (Ravasi and Schultz, 2006) and members’ resistance to change when strategic goals are not in line with these perceptions (Humphreys and Brown, 2002). Actors’ notion of a contradiction between current and future ideal identity and the level of congruence between the two trigger them into responding with measures to decrease the gap (Foreman and Whetten, 2002). Actors might also ‘dis-identify’ with aspects of the organisation by distancing themselves from negative associations that might be related to the organisation identity, and by this define their own self-distinction (Elsbach and Bhattacharya, 2001).

Methods

Study design

The research approach of this study was interpretive and designed as a qualitative semi-structured interview study in
order to examine the school leaders’ narratives concerning sense-making of the policy demands. The article was written as part of a larger research project on organising processes connected to policy implementation in the Swedish extended education system.

Sample
The study’s sample consisted of 11 deputy and primary school leaders, responsible for implementing the teacher certification policy in 11 different school-age Educare programmes across seven municipalities of the southern regions of Sweden. The respondents were selected based on a purposeful sample (Marshall, 1996), motivated by wanting to examine school leader sense-making in similar organisational conditions with regard to the demands of the policy. Therefore, only school leaders managing an organisation with a qualification level for certification among personnel within 10%, over or under, the national average of 39% (Skolverket, 2019) were asked to be part of the study. The previous experience of the respondents varied with respect to years in the profession and educational background. Three of the respondents had less than 2 years of experience working as administrators, while three had worked between 15 years and 20 years in the profession. On average, respondents had worked 7 years as deputy or primary school leaders at the time of the interviews. A majority (9 of the 11 respondents) had an educational background in educational sciences and were former teachers at different levels of the educational system in Sweden. The two school leaders without a background in teaching were both closely affiliated with school practice and had long experience working in educational settings. The school-age Educare programmes of this study were located in areas with different levels of socio-economic status, ranging from low-income city areas to middle-class, smaller towns in rural areas. A majority of the managed programmes explored in this study were located in rural areas, with low- to middle-income residents.

Data collection
Data collection was initiated with a pilot interview conducted with a school leader meeting the criteria of the purposeful sample in order to support and revise the questions and structure of the interview protocol. First contact was then made with executives at the educational administration of each municipality to receive contact information for school leaders matching the sample of the study, which was followed by an invitation letter to potential respondents. The recorded interviews, which were carried out through the fall semester of 2019, were conducted in spaces of the respondents’ choosing (all taking place at the respondents’ workplaces), and varied in length from 45 minutes to 70 minutes.

Data analysis
The recorded interviews were transcribed in Swedish and later translated to English. Analysis of the data was continuing throughout the research process, assembling note and network-based themes of basic and a more organised nature (Attride-Stirling, 2001). In the later stages of the process, the material was analysed through a theoretical filter based on the sense-making perspective and the theoretical concepts of organisational identity and identification, giving rise to more specific themes, which were assembled along with the initial themes. All of the material was then read for a second time and checked for coherence between the different stages (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Findings
The findings are presented in a chronological fashion, starting with a description of cues extracted by respondents from their organisation when trying to make sense of the basic imperatives of the policy. Second, the school leaders’ narratives concerning motivations behind actions (or non-actions) to meet the demands are presented, which is followed by a closer examination of the school leaders’ beliefs and values relative to the identity of the educational programme, tied to the prospective and ideal views of their organisation.

A history of various groups of personnel within the organisation
All of the interviewed school leaders interpreted the teacher certification as a restrictive policy, which constrained mainly two aspects of the inner workings of the school-age Educare. First, achieving educational responsibilities for content and planning of teaching requires personnel to have the right qualifications, that is, a proper teacher education; and second, the hiring of additional personnel for tenure positions requires school leaders to find people with these qualifications. A prior exception in the hiring policy of the school-age Educare, which was not in place in other school venues, enabled school leaders to hire personnel without teacher qualifications. This, in many cases, rather large part of the staff with employment spanning decades had according to many of the school leaders an intrinsic role in day-to-day work and was considered an obvious part of the organisation:

School leader 4: It is hard recruiting qualified teachers to the school-age Educare. And it is not necessarily the case in my experience that just because you have the right educational background, you automatically become better equipped than someone who does not have it.

School leader 2: When pushing for development in the school-age Educare, if you take a look at my school, then even if I don’t have staff with the right qualifications, I still have good enough people to bring quality at the same level as if I had them.
The school leaders saw this group as part of an informal structure of the school-age Educare. In some organisations, they provided a role as ‘doers’, performing the more practical and leisure-oriented aspects of the educational objectives. This could, for example, involve recess duty, being present in the ‘voids’ of the school day (walking to lunch, putting on clothes, etc.) and being responsible for crafts and play activities in the afternoon. In others, they held a more comparable role to teachers in the organisational structure, being considered equal or in some cases above the teachers with the right educational background.

Changes to the organisation: From a flat to a hierarchical structure

In order to meet the demands of the teacher certification policy, many of the school leaders restructured their staff from a relatively flat organisational structure, built horizontally between those with and without access to certification, to a more hierarchical structure. Personnel with the proper educational background now had the option of becoming certified and therefore had a formal responsibility to plan and implement the educational objectives. A couple of the school leaders took the distribution of responsibilities a step further and made selected personnel ‘group leaders’, accountable for the quality and overall planning in school-age Educare departments.

Others did not consider distributing the responsibilities a worthy solution to meet the requirements. Either they already had a system of ‘working teams’ (with more of a horizontal structure) which they kept after the policy was enforced or they made the arrangements surrounding these teams more formal. The primary reasons for not making the changes were grounded in beliefs regarding what it ‘is’ to work at the school-age Educare, and personal values concerning equality and work group hierarchies:

School leader 8: I know that colleagues in other municipalities have made this kind of solutions. The certified personnel gets an administrative position and is expected to spit out educational plans. I do not want that. The ones who possesses real competence in school-age Educare wants to be close to the students and represent the team as a colleague.

School leader 7: I am not really into hierarchies, I would rather see this team solution ( . . . ) I can go to school-age Educare and help out, eat with the children, play with the children or whatever is needed if I have the time for it. I love to do that. I want us to be equal in this, without hierarchies ( . . . ) I have seen what these solutions do to us people, and what it does to an organisation.
**Embracing changes or taking a step back**

The school leaders elaborated on what the policy changes meant for their organisation in terms of quality and future endeavours. These prospective reflections unveiled two distinct lines of thought, grounded in different sets of beliefs concerning the identity of the educational programme. One group of school leaders saw the changes as desirable, claiming that it would strengthen the professional role of the personnel and increase the organisational status of the school-age Educare as a school establishment:

School leader 3: To me, this is a guarantee. It gives us status, it becomes clearer that the mission of school-age Educare is tied to the work and goals of the ordinary school, and that we are working together. School-age Educare is not just about playing in the afternoon, we have our curriculum and values, and it is a part of the school system.

School leader 4: This gives us legitimacy, a seriousness, more than it has been before. The way I understand the control documents, it gives us a higher ambition level than it used to be, and this is something I don’t think everyone has fully understood. Instead, they think ‘School-age Educare is just school-age Educare’.

A more opposing view of the policy changes came from a couple of school leaders expressing that the certification policy is yet another reform aimed at decoupling school-age Educare from what it used to be, and is supposed to be. Some expressed a fear of the educational programme turning into an extension of the school objectives, instead of a complementary programme to ordinary school. The future solution for the problems of school-age Educare, according to some of the school leaders, is to take a step back and further separate it from ordinary school:

School leader 6: I don’t know, but maybe we should split it up again? It should not be tied up to school, we are the LIC and we govern ourselves. Here, you only work with objectives tied to school-age Educare. Maybe we could elevate the quality and attract more people into the profession by doing it that way instead?

School leader 8: I often think about when school-age Educare became part of the ordinary school system. How the people working there struggled in different contexts in order to find their role. This is not over yet. Maybe it would have been better to just go back to the way it was, school-age Educare was school-age Educare, with its own leader that managed the organisation (...) I think that there were good intentions behind this policy, but sometimes these things evolve into something other than what was intended.

**Discussion**

By exploring how school leaders in the Swedish school-age Educare made sense of a teacher certification policy that posed constraints on the responsibilities of the work staff, and focusing on the role of identity perceptions, this study resulted in a couple of key outcomes. Prior research on the role of identity in school leader sense-making in the process of school change has illustrated that it (in different ways) is an interrelated process between leader identity and contextual dependent aspects of school organisation (Evans, 2007; Mizrahi-Shtelman, 2019; Spillane et al., 2002b). Adhering to this line of research, this study contributes a complementary perspective, demonstrating an example of how the interplay between school leaders’ perceived identity beliefs of their educational programme and identification (or nonidentification) with traditional aspects of their managed organisation may influence the way in which policy is enacted.

The school leaders of this study seemed to interpret the certification policy through a lens of desired organisational identity and image (Gioia and Thomas, 1996), which furthermore uncovered a discrepancy in how they made sense of the policy. A majority of the school leaders claimed that the prior non-hierarchical structure and assorted work staff were attributes that were enduring and distinctive to school-age Educare as an educational programme, shaping the managed organisation. When the demands of the policy arose, these organisational attributes served as contextual cues (Weick, 1995) to the school leaders when trying to make sense of the policy – dividing responses into two opposing groups, who were guided by different notions. The responses from the first group of school leaders seemed to be married to beliefs concerning the value of moving away from tradition, claiming that the policy-enforced changes to the core attributes of school-age Educare were desirable. It enabled the school leaders to make changes to the work staff structure, and strengthen the position of certified workers. This was partly motivated by the policy aiding the school leaders in nudging the programme towards a more preferred, school-oriented identity, and by this achieving what they conceived to be increased professional and organisational status. The responses from this group could be interpreted as them understanding the policy as a tool to align a desired image of school-age Educare with an organisational identity which they identified themselves as closer to (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991; Dutton et al., 1994; Foreman and Whetten, 2002). Simultaneously, they appeared to distance themselves from traditional aspects of the organisation in order to make sense of this position, defining school-age Educare on aspects of what it should not be (Elsbach and Bhattacharya, 2001).

The responses from the second group of school leaders appeared to be founded on tradition-bound beliefs, ascribing higher value to identity attributes that reflected enduring aspects of the educational programme. The implications of the policy message seemed to pose an
identity threat (Elsbach and Kramer, 1996) to the enduring and distinctive attributes of school-age Educare, resulting in the school leaders taking measures to keep and refine the structures and practices they acknowledged as threatened by policy demands. In comparison to the less tradition-bound group of school leaders, this group did not seem to make sense of the policy through a lens of an increase in organisational status and alignment with a desired school-oriented identity. Instead, the cues drawn from cultural and traditional aspects (Ravasi and Schultz, 2006) of school-age Educare were assigned higher value than potential organisational outcomes of the policy. They seemed to ‘dis-identify’ (Elsbach and Bhattacharya, 2001) with the identity that could potentially emerge from adhering to the policy demands, and articulated what could be interpreted as a form of resistance to the changes.

Conclusion

School leaders and other school actors interpret, transform and enact demands from educational policy, and make sense of changes to school practice, based on their individual situation (Cohen et al., 2007), prior knowledge and contextual peculiarities (Coburn, 2001, 2005; Spillane et al., 2002a), and perceptions of different levels of identity (Evans, 2007). Building on this prior research, this study has demonstrated how a perspective of perceived organisational identity and identification can shed light on the ways in which school leaders might interpret and act on educational reforms. School leaders’ identification, or nonidentification, with a perceived organisational identity shaped by enduring and distinctive attributes might be an important variable to take into consideration when investigating or reflecting on the outcomes of, or sense-making within, educational policy implementation. In this article, the school leaders’ notion of a ‘gap’ between the current and the ideal identity of the educational programme appeared to shape how they made sense of the policy and what actions followed, either in the direction of an identity facilitated by policy demands or towards solutions that maintained an identity closer to perceived traditional aspects. Further research should study these processes within a wider scope of school forms and in different national settings, since this article is limited to school leader perceptions within the system of extended education in Sweden. It might also be of value to examine the role of identification and organisational identity perceptions in collective and contested processes of educational policy implementation, in order to investigate the dynamic properties that might be embedded in the process.

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