Approaching change through pragmatic routines: a case study of a municipal response to a teacher certification reform in the Swedish School-age Educare

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ABSTRACT

During the last decade, the Swedish School-age Educare has been the object of multiple government-enforced reform initiatives in order to clarify its purpose and increase educational quality and equivalence. In 2019, a teacher certification reform was imposed on the educational programme, concretizing responsibilities between categories of staff and regulating hiring procedures in order to raise the level of formally qualified personnel. At the same time, Sweden was (and still is) battling a severe teacher shortage, with teachers certified towards the School-age Educare being one of the scarcer categories to acquire. Through a single-case study, this article explores a local municipal response to this policy dilemma by focusing on the ways in which the reform demands are translated and made sense of in terms of organizational routines. The findings show that actors make sense of demands based on prior knowledge and beliefs connected to identity and qualitative endeavours of the educational programme, which in turn shape ‘scripts’ to routine performance. However, when these scripts collide with performative constraints connected to organizational capacities, pragmatic routines are designed in order to partly sustain apprehensions from the initial reform translation, which in turn shapes further routinized action.

Introduction and aim

In this article, the local response to a teacher certification reform within the Swedish School-age Educare (SAEC) is explored, focusing on actor perceptions and performance related to hiring routines. With its roots in the ‘working cottages’ of the 1800s, The Swedish SAEC has a long tradition within the Swedish public education system and has, since the 1990s, been adhering to the national education act and been regulated by the curriculum of the elementary school system (Skolverket, 2016). It is an extended education programme, and not obligatory for students to attend, although the vast majority of Swedish students between the ages of 6–9 (83.4%) are enrolled, as well as 20.6% of ages 10–12 (Skolverket, 2020). The primary aim of the SAEC is to complement the objectives of the ordinary school, vitalize learning, participation and student development, as well as provide students with a meaningful leisure-time before and after school hours (Skolverket, 2016). The SAEC is managed in the same way as other government regulated educational practices in Sweden, with the primary head of school operations being the municipality, or a board of directors (in case of private schools), while school principals are responsible for the quality and results of individual schools (Skolverket, 2018). While extended education holds various meanings in different parts of the world (Haglund & Anderson, 2009; Klerfelt & Stecher, 2018), the Swedish SAEC share many similar, as well as some disparate, institutional characteristics when compared to its Nordic equivalents. Although comparable in relation to systemic peculiarities of countries such as Norway, Denmark and Iceland (i.e. sharing fundamental values and connection to the ordinary school), the Swedish SAEC has advanced the furthest towards being an integral part and complement the goals of the ordinary school-system (rather than complementing the home situation; Pálssdóttir, 2018). As a result, the educational programme has taken steps away from previous traditional practices rooted in social-pedagogy and care towards a ‘schoolification’; encapsulating the objectives of the ordinary school-tradition. This development has in turn raised further questions surrounding educational quality within the educational programme (Lager, 2018).

In recent time, the transformation explained above has been further advanced as a result of several government-enforced reform initiatives aimed towards concretizing the objectives of the educational programme, as well as creating prerequisites for improvement and educational quality in relation to the educational system as a whole. Criticism was raised from the Swedish school inspectorate in 2010...
(Skolinspektionen, 2010), revealing inadequacies concerning the programmes’ educational content and local management. In 2011, the regulatory documents for the educational programme underwent considerable changes, and the learning assignment and connection to pre- and compulsory school became more evident through the enforcement of the new curriculum (Skolverket, 2011). The primary aim of the educational programme, according to the changes, is to complement the educational work being performed in surrounding school forms, by ‘stimulating student development and learning and provide students with a meaningful leisure time’ (Skolverket, 2016, p. 22). In order to further clarify this purpose and create prerequisites for increased quality and equivalence, the Swedish national agency for education and the incumbent government enforced an individual part of the curriculum dedicated to the School-age Educare (Skolverket, 2016).

When evaluating this effort in 2018, the Swedish National Agency for Education (2018) found that a crucial obstacle in successfully implementing the new parts of the curriculum, and therefore raising educational quality, were the low levels of formally competent personnel within the School-age Educare (24% in 2018). Another conclusion drawn from the evaluation centred on the fact that there had been no prior governmental efforts put forward to solving this issue.

Following these concerns, an extension of a prior, general teacher certification reform was imposed in the summer of 2019 (Skolverket, 2019), changing prior exceptions in the education act in order to regulate who can be hired and be responsible for teaching in the School-age Educare. The government intentions behind the extension were founded on similar rationale as its predecessor – by ensuring that all students were taught by teachers with the proper qualifications, as well as raising the professional status of teachers in target of the reform (SOU 2017:51). In turn, the extension of the reform further separated the Swedish SAEC from portions of its Nordic equivalents (i.e. Norway and Iceland), in relation to their lack of demands for teacher qualification in the SAEC (Pálsdóttir, 2018). The primary certification reform (enforced in 2011) was accompanied by a series of government-enforced changes to the Swedish educational system, which ensued as a result of factors such as decreased ranking in international student assessments, declining student results and disparity in equivalence between municipalities and between schools (Fransson, 2012; Skolverket, 2015). Government agencies re-centralized essential parts of the educational chain of management (Adolfsson, 2013) by measures of emphasizing instruction, concretized curriculum, standards, accountability of school actors and increased monitoring of educational quality – and by these measures emulated international policy trends of systemic and large-scale interventions towards school improvement (Hopkins et al., 2014).

With the extension of the certification reform in place, only personnel with the proper educational background and a teacher certification (issued by the Swedish National agency for Education) can be tenured upon hiring, and subsequently responsible for teaching in the School-age Educare. Although the intentions of the reform were perceived as rather uncomplicated, school management in Swedish School-age Educares experienced a hard time following demands due to lack of resources, mainly in the form of personnel both within and outside their organizations (Andersson, 2020a). Following this policy dilemma, the attention of the present article is directed towards how actors at different levels of management and staff within a Swedish municipal case make sense of the reform demands and contextual constraints brought forward by the teacher certification policy.

As seen with the case of the School-age Educare, new reforms are enforced frequently to enhance educational quality (Cuban, 1990) with school actors having to organize and implement demands, sometimes with insufficient recourses (Rigby et al., 2016). The circumstances shaping the outcomes of particular policy endeavours can be described as a product of a complex process involving the policy message, the local policy actors, their interactions and the peculiarities associated with their social and organizational surroundings (Honig, 2006, 2012). The relationship between policy and implementation in practice has also been conceptualized as a co-dependent relationship, where one frames and shapes the other in a continuing process (D. K. Cohen et al., 2007). Research focusing on the translation and enactment of educational policy in local school practice has shown that the process is dependent on the agency of actors involved, perceptions of their environmental circumstances and their interactions on different levels of management and teaching (Spillane, Diamond et al., 2002a; 2Spillane, Reiser et al., 2002; Coburn, 2005, 2006; Louis & Robinson, 2012; J. Cohen et al., 2020). However, the response to policy demands by policy actors are also shaped by the differing organizational circumstances, with arrangements either constraining or enabling changes to school practice (J.P. Spillane et al., 2012). Alongside the agency-driven aspects of policy implementation, the primary formal arrangements of interest in this study are the organizational routines that structure and direct the work being performed within organizations (Feldman & Pentland, 2003). Organizational routines have earlier been proven a useful tool in understanding the interplay between
government regulations and the inner workings of school organizations (Sherer & Spillane, 2011). The purpose of this study is to explore actor understandings of routine performance within the inner workings of a municipal response to the teacher certification reform in the Swedish School-age Educare; with particular attention being directed towards routines connected to hiring and attaining qualified personnel. This is achieved by focusing on the ways in which actors at different levels of the organization make sense of the performance of organizational routines in response to circumstances surrounding the school context and the demands of the reform.

**Prior research and theoretical framework**

The study is anchored in theoretical and empirical literature from two separate but interrelated lines of research: organizational routines and their role in educational change and sensemaking in educational policy implementation.

**Organizational routines and change in educational settings**

An organizational routine is, according to Feldman and Pentland (2003, p. 96), best defined as ‘a repetitive, recognizable pattern of interdependent actions, involving multiple actors’. They provide both stability and change to organizational life, and serves as a useful tool for research on processual aspects of organizing through this dualistic property (Becker, 2004). Feldman and Pentland (2003) proposed a conceptualization of routines as divided entities with an ostensive- and a performative aspect. The ostensive aspect is defined as the routines general idea or abstraction (Ibid.) which are used by organizational actors to guide or direct them towards specific realizations of the routine (Pentland & Feldman, 2005). The ostensive aspect should not be viewed as a single ‘script’ or ‘guide’ towards the routines successful execution, since multiple understandings may vary within and between organizations because of context dependency, multiple interpretations by various actors and differing situations (Feldman & Pentland, 2003; Pentland & Feldman, 2005). The performative aspect is the actual actions taken by actors in order to perform the organizational routine (Feldman, 2003). Feldman and Pentland (2003, p. 102) define this aspect as ‘inherently improvisational’ and the actual enactment of the routine in practice. These two aspects are co-dependent in the process of routine change over time as the ‘performance create and recreate the understandings while the understandings constrain and enable the performances’ (Feldman, 2003, p. 729).

This conceptualization of organizational routines has been proven a useful analytical tool in prior research focusing on different aspects of change and stability within educational organizations. Sherer and Spillane (2011) investigated the role of organizational routines in changing school practice and found that routines, holding aspects of both agency and structure, can be locally designed as a response to problems in school practice and as a facilitator of both stability and change. They concluded that routines structure and stabilize practice through ostensive aspects of organizational routines, while change occurred as a product of individual agency (the performative aspect). They also showed how routines enabled conditions for accountability at different levels of the school organization, holding actors accountable for expectations of improvement initiatives. Similarly, while exploring how schools leaders respond to a changing policy environment, Spillane et al. (2011) showed that organizational routines were designed by the administration in order to align classroom instruction with government initiatives. The researchers conceptualized the routines as coupling mechanisms, since changes established following attempts to breach the gap was not purely symbolic, but actually had an impact on school practice. Furthermore, a study by Ottesen and Møller (2016) investigated the interplay between legal obligations concerning student psychosocial environment and professional discretion in Norwegian schools, through the lens of organizational routines. They found that ostensive aspect of routines acts as a ‘script’ for appropriate action following professional discretion, opening up for a wide variety of actions in schools. Simultaneously, change-related work and state inspections (serving as a performative aspect of routines) modified actor conceptions of the ostensive aspects, with the researchers concluding the importance of agency in stabilizing and changing schools through routines.

Other studies on routines and change initiatives in schools have provided insight derived from cases where lack of clear or collectively communicated ostensive aspects of routines might lead to insignificant change to school practice. Hubers et al. (2017) investigated the implementation of data team interventions and how it was developed through organizational routines over time in schools. Results showed that school leaders did not clarify the ostensive aspects of the routines in question, and therefore did not establish a clear vision to how data use were to be implemented successfully. Teachers were left to perform the routines based on their own capacity, leading to diffuse routinized data use and minimal results in terms of change to practice. Researchers concluded that the development of organizational routines in school improvement is reliant on
advancing ostensive aspects. Liljenberg and Nordholm (2018) made similar findings in their study on the relationship between aspects of organizational routines in improvement work within Swedish schools and preschools. They concluded that in order to improve schools and make a substantial change in practice, the ostensive and performative aspects of organizational routines need to be aligned, and also that leaders play an important role in creating measures for a mutual understanding between administration and staff concerning routine performance in order for this to happen.

**Sensemaking and reform translation in educational settings**

In exploring reform translation through the lens of organizational routines, the focal aim of this study is directed towards actors understanding of routine performance, and not the actual performance itself. In order to capture these perceptions, the study draws on a sensemaking perspective (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005). The perspective has been widely applied in research on educational reform implementation and highlighted numerous ways in which teachers (Coburn, 2001), school leaders (Carraway & Young, 2015; Coburn, 2005, 2006; Jennings, 2010; Spillane, Diamond et al., 2002b) and wider organizational communities (M. I. Honig, 2003; Pyhältö et al., 2018) make sense of and enact reform demands. Sensemaking is the process where actors translate and understand ambiguous or unfamiliar instances in order to apprehend, or ‘make sense of’, their situation (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). It is a social process embedded in contextual properties (Coburn, 2006), and rooted in identity construction (Weick et al., 2005) through actors’ beliefs of both professional (Mizrahi-Shtelman, 2019; Spillane, Diamond et al., 2002) and perceived organizational identity and image (Andersson, 2020b; Dutton & Duiker, 1991; Thurlow & Mills, 2009). By extracting cues from their environment (Weick, 1995) and interpreting them based on prior experiences, knowledge and beliefs, actors bring meaning to the situation that guides further action (Maitlis, 2005). As an ongoing process facilitated by retrospective accounts (Weick, 1995), these actions in turn create new situations in which actors can extract additional cues (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). In combining the sensemaking perspective with the theoretical concept of organizational routines (Feldman & Pentland, 2003), the framework provides a dynamic approach to the process in which reform demands are made sense of in terms of routinized work in the studied educational organization.

Prior research concerned with policy- or educational quality–related issues within local Swedish School-age Educares has illustrated versatile hardships and change conditions spanning both professional and organizational aspects of the educational programme. School-age Educare actors statements regarding obstacles and challenges facing them in their daily practice and change work towards the aims of reform demands and control documents has been conceived to be highly grounded in perceptions of identity and contextual conditions of the educational programme. The apprehension of being an ‘underdog’ in the Swedish school system (Hjalmarsson & Löfdahl Hultman, 2015) has been shown to shape daily practice and professionalism in personnel, as well as being considered a consequential object of constraint in fulfilling the programme’s mission (Haglund, 2018; Haglund & Boström, 2020). Mainly, the organizational constraints articulated by teachers have been in the form of constrained budgetary resources, a lack of and high turnover of qualified personnel, absent management and a subordinated position to ordinary schoolteachers (ibid.). Teachers have also been shown to recontextualize and enact policies concerning systematic quality development in relation to traditional and contextual aspects of the educational programme (Lager et al., 2016), making sense of demands based on apprehensions of logics adherent to the educational institution. Similar findings have also been shown with school principals. When recontextualizing systematic quality work in the School-age Educare, principals together with teachers has been shown to enact norms and traditions inherent to the educational programme (in the form of a social pedagogical discourse) in to practice (Lager, 2018). Similarly, principals appear to make sense of and take action in regards to reform demands based on prior conceptions of the School-age Educares identity, and the level of identification (or disidentification) with goals of the policy (Andersson, 2020b).

**Methods**

The present study was conducted as part of a larger research project on the local implementation of teacher certification in the Swedish School-age Educare. Prior studies within the project had a more concentrated research interest towards the role of school leaders’ in the implementation process, giving rise to additional questions of more organizational character (Andersson, 2020, 2022). Prior research on reform translation and enactment of policy demands in schools has also illustrated that these processes are a social endeavour (Coburn, 2006), encompassing different layers of organizational actors (Honig,
Therefore, in order to explore a wider range of policy actors’ and their sensemaking relative to policy demands and ostensive routine aspects, this study used an exploratory and interpretive single-case study design (Stake, 1995), thus being able to give a more rich and in-depth description (Dyer & Wilkins, 1991).

**Sample**

The municipal site was chosen based on a purposeful sampling strategy to acquire a ‘typical’ case (Patton, 2014) with respect to the national municipal average of certified School-age Educare teachers, which was 37% in the year 2019. A middle-sized (20–100 thou. inhabitants) municipal case within 3–5% of this average was chosen. The case was however not chosen based on attempts to generalize the results of the study to a wider population, but rather because of research interests in typical implementation settings, and understanding the peculiarities in such a case in itself (Stake, 1995). Concerning this, the sampling strategy was also carried out because of large inequalities between Swedish municipalities regarding the levels of certified personnel (Sveriges kommuner och regioner, 2018, 18), therefore illustrating a non-extreme sample (Robinson, 2014) relative to resources significant to the demands of the policy. While the municipal site was purposely chosen, participants within the municipality were not. Influenced by prior research on policy enactment in school organizations (e.g. Coburn, 2005; Spillane, Diamond et al., 2002) and studies carried out within the larger research project, school principals were chosen as a starting point because of their role as central figures in the implementation process and the performance of the hiring routine. Based on the theoretical assumptions of sensemaking being a social and systemic process (Weick et al., 2005), and the unawareness of which informants were actually involved in the organizational routine, the next and following line of participants were selected through a snowball sampling strategy (Noy, 2008). Through this line of action, a pallet of actors with differing roles within the municipal school- and managerial system came to be part of the study (see Table 1).

**Data collection**

Data collection occurred during the fall semester of 2020 between the months of October and December. Since the aim of the study was to explore experiences and perspectives of respondents, the primary source of data during the case study were gathered using intensive interviewing (Charmaz, 2014). This interview technique was chosen due to its reliance on both flexibility and control within the interview setting, allowing emergent themes to develop in the interaction between respondent and researcher (ibid.). The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions focusing on participants position and role, their understanding of the ‘idea’ behind the performance of the hiring routine, the influence of (and on) other organizational members and their views on the influence of policy demands. The first round of data collection consisted of interviews with 10 participants at different positions within the municipal organization and varied in length between 50 and 90 minutes. After the first round of coding and analysis (see Data analysis), there was a second round of interviews with four of the participants, which ranged between 30 and 50 minutes in length. The third and last round of interaction with the participants came in the later stages of data analysis in order to check for participant validation (Birt et al., 2016), which took no longer than 15–20 minutes per interview. At occasion, informants brought up documents which were important to the understanding of the routine. These were collected after the interviews. Because of national restrictions and limitations to meeting respondents due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the primary interviews were accomplished through video calls via Zoom, and follow-up interviews through telephone. The study has been pursued according to the guidelines from the Swedish Ethics Review Authority (Etikprövningsnamnden, 2021). Participants were prior to interviews informed about the purpose and terms of the study, assured of anonymity and voluntary participation, and asked for explicit consent of participation.

**Data analysis**

The study was informed by analysing procedures used within grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). Data analysis took place throughout the whole process of the study using the constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The individual interview recordings were all transcribed and coded between interviews. The first step in analysing the transcripts and documents was executed through

| Table 1. Informants and roles within the hiring routine. |
|--------------------------------------------------------|
| Informants – (abbr.) | Role within the hiring routine |
|----------------------|--------------------------------|
| Principals – (P1, P2 and P3) | Executing the routine |
| Teachers – (T1, T2 and T3) | Advising the principal on hiring procedures |
| Dep. Director of Education – (DML) | Overall responsibility for principals and quality in municipal schools |
| Development leader – (DL) | Coordinates educational efforts towards personnel within the municipality |
| HR-representative – (HR) | HR- and administrative support towards municipal management |
| Union-representative – (UR) | Representing members in legal questions regarding employment and profession |
initial coding (Charmaz, 2014) where each line was examined in order to explore key actions and meanings in the data, which through comparison between codes and interviews illuminated the analytical path forward. The next step involved more focused coding, creating categories, which were tested and compared against prior sets of and forthcoming data. The last step involved connecting codes and more focused categories in order to create a theoretical understanding of the data. These steps were, together with memo writing, repeated throughout the case study until the process reached a sense of theoretical saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Efforts to keep the analysis closely tied to the empirical data, therefore having a theoretically sensitive approach, were made by adhering to a theoretically agnostic and pluralistic reasoning throughout the process (Thornberg, 2012). This approach was essentially conducted by keeping a critical and reflexive approach to, without refuting, pre-existing research and theory, treating prior concepts as provisional and modifiable (Ibid.). In the later stages of the analysis process, selected informants from different layers of the organization where contacted in order to discuss key interpretations of the empirical findings. By conducting this kind of member checking (Carlson, 2010; Stake, 1995) the informants were able to give their opinion on the accuracy and recognition of the analysis, and provide participant validation to the findings of the study. To further guard against researcher bias in the process of analysing the data, there were also several instances of peer debriefing (Robson, 2002) organized as guiding sessions from senior researchers.

Results

Independent of hierarchical position within the municipal structure or function connected to hiring routines in the School-age Educare, all interviewed participants shared a common aim tied to their performance and the demands of the certification reform, acquiring qualified and/or certified personnel. This collectively expressed overarching purpose was in turn further concretized in perceptions of routine efforts. The results are structured as a pendulum motion, where ostensive and performative aspects connected to routines and reform demands are explained in the first section, which is followed by a paragraph elaborating on how these aspects appeared to have been made sense of. This is then repeated, illustrating wider changes to routines impelled by contextual circumstances, and followed by a discussion on the interrelated process of reform demands, routine designs and organizational sensemaking.

Structuring and performing hiring routines ‘the right way’

All of the respondents expressed a similar perception of what they considered the ‘right’ way of performing routines in order to acquire personnel to the School-age Educare. Since the enforcement of the certification reform, little over a year prior to the interviews, the scope for action in relation to who can and cannot be hired for tenured positions as a School-age Educare–teacher had changed. The prior exception in regards to teacher certification in the educational programme made it possible for the participants to hire personnel without the proper educational background for teacher positions in cases where options were limited or non-existing. In the present day, with certification reform in place, this was not considered an option and participants explained the proper performance of hiring routines in terms of strict candidate selection and the appropriate order of actions. Applicants without proper educational background and certification were no longer suitable for the position as teacher in the School-age Educare, and could no longer receive a tenured position on these positions. These reform-induced changes were perceived by many of the informants to be a collective endeavour that was negotiated between different actors within the municipality. Ostensive aspects (Feldman & Pentland, 2003) of the routine execution were often articulated by actors who were involved, but not actually performing, the routine, and were mostly motivated based on interpretations and documentation related to reform demands and technical circumstances:

DML: If you lack the proper teacher certification, you can be hired fixed-term, if someone is on parental leave or something similar. However, you cannot be hired as a tenured teacher in the School-age Educare.

UR: The right way would technically be to hire certified teachers, with the right certification. Step 1 is to find someone with these qualifications, and step 2 is to keep advertising the position until you find someone.

HR: Newly hired will be categorized by a systems code indicating that they are certified teachers, and therefore tenured. In cases where un-certified applicants are hired, they cannot be categorized with this code, because they are not qualified according to the education act and therefore only up for a fixed-term hiring.

This course of action in relation to acquiring personnel was by many informants declared as the official or ‘right’ way of carrying out hiring routines, since it adhered to current laws and regulations connected to the process. Actors involved in the actual performance of the routine, mainly school leaders
and teachers, explained their actions and motivations based on similar perceptions. The more emphasized task within the routine performance was often that of applicant sorting and selection:

P2: Well, now I do not tenure anyone without the proper background. If someone decides to leave their employment and I have to advertise the position, and there is no applicants with a teacher certification, I will not tenure that person or hire them as a School-age Educare teacher. You are not qualified according to the education act.

T1: First off, I read the applications and check for anyone with a teacher certification and reply to anyone who has one. I literally reply to everyone. Content of their resumes does not matter. Then I invite them for an interview.

P3: The certification is important to us. We do not have enough people with the right qualifications within our organization today. That is one aspect that we have to be vigilant about when choosing whom to hire.

Constructing a legitimate professional- and organizational identity through educational quality

The municipal actors understanding of the ‘right way’ of performing hiring routines were, as stated above, in many cases driven by ostensive aspects (Feldman & Pentland, 2003) derived from a collective intention to adhere to government-enforced policy- or law demands, primarily from the recent enactment of the teacher certification policy. These ostensive aspects of the routines served as a map to actors within the municipality, guiding the managerial work and performative aspects of the hiring routines. When further exploring how these ostensive aspects and policy-driven intentions became the actors’ collective blueprint to hiring School-age Educare teachers, an interpretive process emerged from the answers; that of identity construction by enabling educational quality through certified personnel. The sensemaking of ambiguous instances in organizational settings requires one or several sensemakers (Weick, 1995) concerned with the implications of certain events to their future identity. The ostensive aspects of the hiring routines, i.e. the ‘map’ to performance, seemed to be partially grounded in perceptions of identity construction connected to professional and organizational features of the School-age Educare. Many informants highlighted the fact that the School-age Educare historically and in the present day were composed of high amounts of personnel without proper educational background, and in many cases no educational background what so ever. This was made possible due to earlier exceptions in hiring laws, and a large national shortage of School-age Educare teachers. According to many of the informants this constituted a primary problem in developing and assuring educational quality within the School-age Educare:

P2: Many of our non-certified workers are very productive and competent workers, but in the role of ‘doers’, not as planners or developers of the educational program It is not hard to plan and execute a single session, but maintaining educational quality over time is exceptionally harder. We see this in our goal completion.

T2: It is common to hire other types of personnel, rather than teachers. This is not a good thing, since they lack the educational background and therefore knowledge on the methods and pedagogical implications of the School-age Educare. And when they are hired they are supposed to make a qualitative contribution, that is not realistic.

In relation to these constraints on maintaining and developing educational quality, several actors drew on retrospective accounts of the School-age Educare being considered a ‘secondary’ form of education by others, both within and outside the educational system. Many described a sense of historical negligence from government policymakers for prioritizing other school forms in terms of both resources and reform changes, placing the School-age Educare at the very bottom of the educational hierarchy and giving rise to many of the hardships related to quality work. The changes being made in the last years containing an individual section within the education act, and a focused attention to educational quality within the educational programme were seen as important factors in order to legitimize the School-age Educare in terms of both the organization and the people working there. The teacher certification policy was expressed as the next important initiative in order to further legitimize these aspects:

P2: We have become visible to upper management now and there is a larger interest in the actual percentage of certified teachers within the School-age Educare. We have been forgotten for many years.

DML: We have a shortage of teachers in Swedish schools, so making this a more apparent profession through a teacher certification is very positive. It legitimizes and professionalizes the profession, and maybe that will lead to more people wanting to work within it.

T2: It is an important part. If we all are supposed to be teachers in elementary education then we all should be certified, not just pre-school teachers and ordinary teachers. That is a question of equality.

UR: First, the certification has legitimized the profession. It gives it a little more weight against the ordinary teacher profession that was always a clearer
form. Having both a separate section of the education act, and a teacher certification makes it more apparent to what the School-age Educare is for and who works there. That is how I would like it to be.

In relation to the problems associated with the lack of certified personnel, many of the informants perceived the ‘right way’ of performing hiring routines as a path to solving these issues. The cues extracted by the actors in order to make sense of their actions ranged from current personnel settings, comparisons to others within the educational sector, social aspects in educational management and perceptions of the historical deficiencies in government policies. All together, these cues appeared to constitute building blocks in the ongoing construction of a more legitimized professional and organizational identity, further facilitated by adhering to reform demands in the routine performance.

Adapting to contextual circumstances by designing pragmatic routines

Although perceived as a straightforward response to reform demands and a solution to prior complications in the educational programme, the municipal actors apprehension of the ‘right way’ to executing hiring routines were also expressed to be somewhat of a utopic routine design, which was not considered a standalone script to face contextual circumstances. Informants, executing or planning the hiring routines, recollected three contextual cues in the form of constraints that stood in the way of performing them the ‘right way’. First, there were budget constraints within the municipality limiting the amount of certified School-age Educare teachers that could potentially be hired.

P1: The school voucher system does not cover 100% certified teachers, and that is the truth. I think it covers around 60% at tops.

DL: Principals have harsh budget constraints. It is not an easy time marinating it 100% certification is not a possible option.

Second, informants expressed that the amount of potential personnel with the proper educational background and certification is not large enough on a national level in order to fill the vacant positions. Since there is still a legal option to hire personnel to other positions in the School-age Educare (e.g. leisure leaders and student assistants), this became a common solution when no certified options were available. This constraint was exemplified through performative aspects where school leaders and teachers recollected actual instances of difficult hiring processes, and by the accounts of upper management and the union when elaborating on municipal-level difficulties in managing the teacher shortage.

P2: We usually have many applicants, around 50 for each vacant position as a certified School-age Educare teacher. Most of them are completely unqualified. Ex cashiers at a grocery store and so on. I have to sort them out.

UR: Well, then reality comes in to play. There is only a certain amount of qualified School-age Educare teachers and exceptionally more positions that need to be filled. That is the main problem.

P3: The overall problem is, we don’t get certified applicants

Lastly, because of a prior exception in the education act, schools were allowed to tenure personnel without a teacher education in the School-age Educare in cases where there were no other options. Since the enforcement of the teacher certification reform, this was no longer a legitimate path. Because of this, schools within the municipality had a large portion of uncertified personnel tenured on positions labelled ‘un-qualified teachers in the School-age Educare’.

DML: Then we have older employments, personnel who were hired before all this was enforced. We reasoned with HR, what should we do with them? Should we terminate their employments? That would have been too much work, together with the unions; no, we do not touch those positions. Many old employments are not done in the correct way.

Even though the contextual constraints were considered large obstacles in the pursuit of municipal goals and reform demands, the informants did not abandoned the original ostensive aspects of the hiring routines. Instead, they were combined with routines designed to avoid some of the problematic aspects, facing them from within local organizational settings. The deputy municipal leader of education, together with other actors in the municipal administration, had acknowledged the problems school leaders were having with acquiring certified and competent personnel, expressing that this might affect educational quality within the School-age Educare. A competence enhancing intervention to the unqualified portion of the personnel within the School-age Educare was planned, which resulted in them arranging an internal education series focusing on the basics of working within the educational programme.

DML: We need to increase educational quality in the School-age Educare. In the last year we conducted an internal training programme for those without qualifications. We have also recognized that this needs to be an annual event, there are a lot of employees who need it. The content ranged from regulatory documents and what they are for, how to plan and perform educational content and basic information on working with children with special needs. In other words, the parts that school leaders
expressed as challenges caused by a shortage of qualified teachers.

HR: Because there are not enough educated alternatives in the job market, we have to strengthen the people we have with internal initiatives, and through those initiatives have a better working organization. If you do not have the competence or qualifications with you, then this needs to be compensated.

Many informants acknowledged that this might not be an absolute solution to the problems caused by the teacher shortage. Instead, it was perceived as a necessary measure in order to make sure of a 'minimum level' of competence within the educational programme, and therefore ensuring a certain degree of educational quality. By making it annual, it was also considered by many to be a more long-term, strategical effort that might make a qualitative difference. The second routine design addressed the problem of tenured personnel not having adequate teacher qualifications, which contributed to routines to prevent similar situations to occur in the future. School leaders were to continuously select un-certified personnel, independent of position, that had worked at the school for at least 3 years and were considered 'particularly competent' in terms of educational skills. These were then given an opportunity to study half time at a distance-based teacher education with the goal of becoming certified after 3 years, and at the same time working full time, receiving full salary and getting time of for mandatory study-related occasions. However, the opportunity is not exclusive to tenured personnel, and becomes a tool for school leaders when considering whether to keep un-certified staff.

P1: It becomes a counterclaim! If you are going to work here and you want us to continue our cooperation, then you must enrol in this university education. If they do come in, we will pay for literature, all days on campus and additional days to study since you work full time during the studies. I never say no.

P2: The core personnel, the ones who are competent, I would like to send all of them to this university education. Every one of them is fantastic at their job, but with education, they will become even better.

The designed routine was until this year funded by the individual schools when appropriate candidates were selected, although recently the municipal administration took over the financial and administrative aspects of the process.

**Making sense of ‘the pragmatic way’**

The actors appeared to make sense of their strategically designed routines on the basis of prior knowledge connected to actual performance, pragmatism and the shortcomings of the ‘right way’. A common perception among the actors, which was embedded in prior experience of hiring sessions, circled around what they called the ‘catch-22’-scenario of the teacher shortage. Schools without higher percentages of certified personnel were actively sorted out by job seekers with proper educational background.

P2: If we educate and certify our personnel internally, it will generate more applicants with certification actually wanting to work here. ‘That’s where I want to work because I won’t be alone!’

By performing the pragmatic routines, and giving personnel opportunities to study on site, the actors believed they would reach a higher percentage of certified teachers and become more attractive in future recruitment endeavours, and therefore being able to perform hiring routines the ‘right way’. The actors also made sense of the routines based on prior experience and values connected to the competent but not yet certified personnel working within the municipal School-age Educares. As educational quality, and identity construction connected to issues surrounding it, was an important of how routines were to be executed, many actors within management took comfort in knowing that they could keep personnel which they considered as important to future work,

DML: It is better if they achieve their education here with us and perhaps stay here rather than going somewhere else. If we have competent personnel that we really believe in, and that we know is utterly qualified in conducting qualitative education then that is the best option. We will give them a tenure when they are done with their education.

T3: As a teacher myself, well aware of what it takes to work here and what competencies are needed it is a great way of first testing out the occupation to see if it fits you, and later getting the opportunity to attain certification.

DL: It is a major incitement for already hired personnel without all of the qualifications and it is an investment on our part, even though there is always the risk of them leaving us afterwards.

By acquiring certified personnel through this routinized performance, the actors could come closer to quality goals set by the reform demands and themselves, and keep personnel that they already knew were competent workers. Following this, it appeared as the pragmatic routine designs emanated from failure to perform what the actors perceived to be the proper or ‘right’ way of hiring certified personnel. Feldman and Pentland (2003) theorized that extensive aspects, or the understanding, of organizational routines constrain its performance, while performance through agency recreates what that understanding constitutes. It becomes a co-dependent relationship between the routines aspects, which might both stabilize and change the routine over
time. The municipal actors in this case study seemed to express what could be interpreted as two collectively perceived ostensive aspects connected to the overarching aim of identity construction through legitimizing personnel related aspects to educational quality and development, and attain this by adhering to reform demands through long-term strategies. The first ostensive aspect, the ‘right way’ as articulated by the actors, of the routine performance was complicated due to contextual circumstances beyond the power of the municipal actors. The failure of successfully performing the routine was apparent to the actors even before the teacher certification policy was enforced, although this did not turn the actors away from labelling them ‘the right way’, due to how the reform demands were made sense of. By designing new interrelated routines and simultaneously adhering to the beliefs that constituted the complicated routine performance, it became plausible to retain both. In this way, sensemaking as a retrospective and ongoing process (Weick, 1995) connected to the prior ostensive aspects of the routines appeared to play an important role in how the pragmatic ways of performing the routines were articulated in ostensive terms, but also in their understanding of the performance and continuous sensemaking.

Discussion and conclusions

The findings described in this article illustrate how actors within a Swedish municipality respond to a teacher certification reform in the School-age Educare; and how demands are made sense of (Weick, 1995) in terms of performance connected to hiring routines. The policy dilemma, constituted by a perceived contradiction between government-enforced demands and attainable resources, stood in the centre of actor responses and the processes involved. Conclusively, the reform demands were translated and made sense of by the actors in terms of their ability to facilitate qualitative endeavours of the educational programme and aided in identity construction towards a preferred self-image in terms of both professional- and organizational legitimacy. This understanding of the reform demands translated into the ostensive routine aspects (Feldman & Pentland, 2003) of what actors referred to as ‘the right way’ of performing the routines. However, these ostensive aspects were not easily transferable into existing practice, since contextual constraints in varying forms made the performance of these routines impossible for actors to pursue as a stand-alone strategy. Following this, the organizational actors collectively created pragmatic routines alongside the prior ostensive scripts, enabling them to detain parts from their initial sensemaking that translated to additional ostensive scripts, which guided the performance of routines that aligned with conditions in their environment. As explained by Feldman and Pentland (2003), ostensive aspects of organizational routines constrain the actual performance of them, which is apparent in this study through the collective perceptions of the ‘right way’ of routine execution. In addition, the actual performance of routine shapes and recreates ostensive aspects over time, which was seen in this study as a response to contextual constraints through failure of execution and a detainment of beliefs attributed to the initial process of sensemaking.

The locally designed nature of the pragmatic routines as a response to reform demands and the agent-driven aspects of the process aligns and adds to results from prior research on educational change through routinized work. Routines have been shown to stabilize practice through ostensive aspects, acting as scripts to actors’ performance of routines in educational practice, while individual or collective agency has been conceptualized as the main factor behind organizational change through performance (Ottesen & Moller, 2016; Sherer & Spillane, 2011). Routines have also been shown to act as coupling mechanisms between a changing policy environment and practice, by agents design of routines to align with these demands (Spillane et al., 2011). Furthermore, the alignment of ostensive and performative aspects of routines has been considered essential if change is to happen in school organizations (Hubers et al., 2017; Liljenberg & Nordholm, 2018). This study illustrates how ostensive aspects of routines acts as a stabilizing force to practice, not only by acting as scripts to performance but also as a vessel for beliefs connected to identity construction brought forward by organizational sensemaking. Similar to prior studies, the perceived performative aspects of routines (not aligning with conditions in actual practice) act as an agent-driven catalyst for change within the municipal case. However, this study has illustrated how this process in some cases might be driven by actors ‘revised’ ostensive aspects statically aligned with intentions from reform demands, resulting in a difference in performance through pragmatic routines. Similar to Spillane et al. (2011), routines are designed by the actors to align practice with reform demands, although in this case (since conditions did not allow routines to be performed ‘the right way’) the construction of pragmatic routines sanctions a performance ‘close to’ intentions of the reform and enables the ongoing process of identity construction. Therefore, the process behind the alignment of ostensive and performative aspects of routines in response to reform demands might, at least in this
case, be influenced and steered by identity- and contextually apprehended aspects stemming from organizational sensemaking.

Aside from the theoretical contributions, the results of the study also have implications for educational reform (and the policy dilemma) when discussed in relation to prior research encompassing questions of quality and change in the Swedish School-age Educare and extended education. In particular, the case study highlights possible ways in which contextual and actor-dependent factors, related to professional and institutional peculiarities of SAECs, might play an important role in how large-scale reforms with similar intentions are enacted into organizational practice. Perceptions of being an ‘underdog’ in terms of the educational programme or associated profession when compared to other school forms and teachers has earlier been shown to constitute a powerful constraint on actors conceived possibilities of fulfilling the mission of the programme, as well as coping with recent government-enforced demands (Haglund, 2018; Haglund & Bostrom, 2020; Hjalmarsson & Löfdahl Hultman, 2015). These prior studies have also highlighted constraints inherent to capacities of the programme, uncovering similar hardships connected to budgetary resources and personnel as the municipal actors of this study. In this study, the apprehension of these constraints, together with beliefs of educational quality through identity construction served as catalysts for change through routinized work, as well as attempts to distance the educational programme from the underdog-position through pragmatic routines. The conceptualization of pragmatic routines in this study might hold considerable implications for both national and local policymakers. The actors’ engagement and construction of pragmatic routines seems to constitute a trajectory between reform demands and contextual constraints (such as deficient recourses), driven by the process of organizational sensemaking. Even though the pragmatic routines are a partial solution to, and are paving a path towards, the qualitative educational properties postulated by the demands, they indicate a misalignment between government initiatives and municipal capacity. Additionally, while this study encompasses a case within the Swedish SAEC, being at the forefront of modifying its practice towards educational goals of the ordinary school system when compared to its Nordic equivalents (Pálsdóttir, 2018), it might contribute some guidance in the similar systemic reform intentions in other contexts. Policy makers could, prior to enforcing imperative demands, create or support conditions for local actors to take action in a more frictionless manner. They might also consider, in similar cases where pragmatic routines are in use and couple aims of the reform, subsidizing these efforts in order to economically relieve municipal budgets. National policy-makers could also view these results as a partial indicator to the difficulties facing actors active within the School-age Educare, and consider how historic organizational aspects might intervene in present situations where policy demands and accessible resources are not aligned. As shown in previous studies on the implementation of new courses of action in the School-age Educare (Andersson, 2020b; Lager et al., 2016; Lager, 2018), actors’ shape and exact demands based on prior knowledge as well as traditions and norms inherent to the educational programme, which further affirms the severity of these implications.

Limitations to the study

The present study is highly context-dependent as it was conducted as a single-case study in a Swedish municipal site, aimed towards a specific educational programme. Therefore, the results are not generalizable to other cases or similar reform situations. However, future research should aim to further explore and investigate the theoretical and policy-related implications of pragmatic routines as adaptive tools in other school forms, policy contexts and national settings.

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