Relations between an improving Swedish LEA and school principals with joint quality and improvement responsibilities

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ABSTRACT
This study addresses a fundamental but neglected aspect of efforts to ensure quality and improvement in a decentralised school system: the relationship between the local education authority (LEA) and local school principals. Empirically, it is based on analysis of relevant documents and interviews with key actors in a Swedish LEA (a municipality), selected as a deviant and successful case. The data analysis is rooted in the theoretical concepts of sense-making and framing. The results show that to handle the joint responsibility the LEA introduced new artefacts for quality and improvement work. These included an expanded support unit for quality and improvement, a visionary document for all educational units and a system of tools and forums to expand quality work at local school level and stimulate collaboration between LEA-level actors and school principals. The principals saw a need for most of the artefacts and regarded them as useful. However, the analysis also reveals some negative resonance concerning relevance for the local schools and expectations of uniformity. In addition to presenting and discussing these findings, issues concerning trust and relationships are highlighted in this paper.

KEYWORDS
LEA; principals; joint responsibility; quality and improvement; frame analysis

Introduction and aim
Responsibility for educational change and students’ learning outcomes is being increasingly assigned to the local education authority (LEA) level in many countries (Farrell & Coburn, 2017). International analyses of centralised school systems have shown that provision of resources and strategies for school improvement by an active LEA, together with advice and support for principals, can improve practice and close gaps in achievement of diverse groups of students (e.g. Leithwood & Azah, 2017; Park, Daly, & Guerra, 2013; Rorrer, Skrla, & Scheurich, 2008; Sun & Leithwood, 2015). In the decentralised Swedish school system, LEAs and principals have legally defined joint responsibility for ensuring quality and systematically improving schools within the authority’s jurisdiction. However, research on quality and improvement in decentralised school systems, such as the Swedish system, has primarily focused on either the...
state or local school level (Nordholm, 2015a), while important processes and relations at the intermediate, LEA level seems to have been neglected.

There are indications that Swedish LEAs have varying capacity to meet their obligations. In its final report, the School Commission appointed in 2015 noted that the Swedish school system has clear weaknesses, and highlighted shortcomings in the blurred division of roles and responsibilities between LEAs, principals and teachers as a major cause of problems (Utbildningsdepartementet, 2017, p. 111). In addition, the Swedish Schools Inspectorate state that a high number (9 out of 10) LEAs show deficiencies in their quality and improvement work (Skolinspektionen, 2014).

To improve practice clarifications in roles and responsibilities, new systems and structures may be needed, but beyond this an understanding of how these developments are understood is also needed. Research of sensemaking has a long history of unfolding how people create meaning of educational policy implementation. Coburn (2005, 2006) argues that school leaders play a significant role in this process, acting as gatekeepers by “shaping teachers’ access to policy ideas”, and providing interpretive framing plans that influence teachers’ understanding of problems to be solved. In addition, Vermeir, Kelchtermans, and März (2017) and März, Kelchtermans, and Vermeir (2017) have argued that artefacts can play a critical part in education policy implementation, especially artefacts introduced from a LEA perspective aiming to influence roles and responsibilities between LEAs, principals and teachers.

In summary, research conducted in centralised school systems state that active LEAs can make a difference. Yet, research about processes and relations between LEAs and principals in decentralised systems with joint responsibility, as the Swedish one, is still scant. Therefore, the aim of this study is to increase knowledge of a potentially important but neglected aspect of school quality and improvement efforts, namely how LEAs and principals handle their joint responsibility for quality and improvement work. To narrow the analysis, we focus on one LEA selected as a deviant and successful case. The research question posted for the study is: What artefacts did the LEA introduce and how did the principals respond to these artefacts?

In the following sections, we briefly review previous research on LEAs, present our theoretical framework, the empirical material (including information on artefacts introduced by the LEA), and methods applied to acquire and analyse it. We then present the results, particularly in terms of principals’ responses to the identified artefacts and the associated “resonance” (positive and negative) that were evoked among the principals and the LEA officials. Finally, we discuss the findings and present conclusions.

**International and national research on LEAs**

Extensive international research on LEAs is primarily oriented towards policy implementation and shows that an active LEA provides resources and strategies for school improvement, together with advice and support for principals to improve implementation of new policies (e.g. Campbell & Murillo, 2005; Coburn, 2005, 2006). To add to the international research base about LEAs, Leithwood (2010) reviewed 31 articles on high-performing school districts, and identified three attributes that seemed to be especially important for good performance. These are: a district culture that builds and maintains good communication and relations, a broad focus on student achievement, and job-embedded
professional development for teachers and leaders. These attributes also have claimed importance for LEAs to close gaps in achievement between diverse groups of students (Leithwood & Azah, 2017).

Rorrer et al. (2008) further addressed the complexities of how district-level actors can contribute to successful, systemic improvement of educational practice. Through narrative synthesis of previous findings regarding district leaders, they found that provision of instructional leadership is important for improving achievement and advancing equity at district level, together with establishment and maintenance of appropriate organisational orientation, policy coherence, and a focus on equity. Further important underlying factors they identified included orientation towards improving district culture, alignment of organisational structure and processes, mediation of national and local policies, and active promotion of equity. However, these studies are done in centralised school system and yet we need to know more about LEA level actors in decentralised systems.

Hooge, Moolenaar, van Look, Janssen, and Sleegers (2019) addressed the role of district leaders in improving educational quality in the Dutch school system. Using quantitative data obtained by interviewing principals in 23 school districts they found that focusing on goals for teaching and learning processes had the most positive impact on the districts’ social capital, probably due to direct alignment with the daily work and main concerns of school leaders and teachers. Offering support by establishing a web of social relationships between the central office administrators and school principals seemed to be particularly successful. In the Norwegian school system, which is more similar to the Swedish one, Proitz, Mausethagen, and Skedsmo (2019) identified various ways that LEAs approach and use data related to school leaders and teachers to improve practice, and concluded that they reflect LEA-specific characteristics in terms of policies, strategies and quality development systems. However, the approaches also depend on individual LEA officials’ understandings of data use and “reasonable” ways of working with school leaders to improve data use. These understandings extend from strong emphasis on relationships with school leaders to improve data use to a more direct and confrontational approach to improve students’ learning outcomes. Proitz et al. (2019) further stress the importance of more richly detailed studies to improve understanding of LEA officials’ practical work and its consequences. We agree to this and add that we also need to know more about what constitutes the social relationships between LEAs and principals that make them become successful. So far, few studies have investigated the content and artefacts that in addition to the people “are in play” in these relationships and networks.

As already mentioned, there has been limited analysis of Swedish LEAs, but a few studies have considered school boards, superintendents and their importance for organising quality and improvement work at the LEA level (e.g. Hanberger, Lindgren, & Lundström, 2016; Moos, Nihlfors, & Paulsen, 2016). Other studies have considered quality and improvement work in the relationship between LEAs and local school principals and teachers (e.g. Adolfsson & Alvunger, 2017, 2020; Nordholm, 2015b). Nordholm (2015b) studied sensemaking in a municipality-led temporary organisation introduced to support the implementation of a new curriculum. He concludes that lack of communication between LEA officials, principals and teachers resulted in an instrumental and pragmatic task-solving approach, although LEA officials had an idea of
a critical learning process with open-ended discussions. Adolfsson and Alvunger (2020) conducted a study of quality and improvement work in a larger Swedish municipality, finding communication challenging but still a key component. Moreover, they argue that absence of clear goals from the LEA level contributed to a gap between LEA initiatives and the needs of local schools, but also to the fact that support rather was perceived as control.

To conclude, studies of quality and improvement work in decentralised school systems have foremost focussed on the complexities in the relationship between LEAs and principals, identifying not functioning power relations, lack of transparency and sometimes conflicting demands. Apparently, it is difficult for LEAs to take the initiative and develop practices that provide support for a “well working” joint responsibility. We also conclude that there is a lack of studies considering both LEAs’ and principals’ perspectives in the joint responsibility for quality and improvement work, especially studies that describe what such a work consists of.

**Theoretical perspective**

To investigate the joint responsibility of LEAs and principals in a decentralised school system we take our theoretical point of departure in sense-making theory (Weick, 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005) and frame analysis (Benford & Snow, 2000; Coburn, 2006; Vermeir et al., 2017).

From a sensemaking perspective, a joint responsibility for quality and improvement work can be understood as a “new situation” for LEAs and principals to handle. In the context of organisations when everything goes on as usual, people tend to work as autopilots, but when new situations occur people become conscious and try to decide which course of action to take based on previous experiences (Weick et al., 2005). How LEAs and principals strive to take responsibility for their quality and improvement work arguably depends on their previous experiences and understandings of work conditions. According to Weick (1995), if common sense-making can be fostered, people will be better prepared to deal with changes and new situations. Otherwise, they tend to rely on their own assumptions and adapt what is new to “how they use to do it” in the organisation. Since Weick presented his fundamental notion of how people notice and select information to make sense of it, there has been growing literature on the process of sense-making (Anagnostopoulos & Rutledge, 2007; Coburn, 2006; Spillane, 1999; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002; Vermeir et al., 2017). Here, as part of our conceptual lens we build on Vermeir et al.’s (2017) and Coburn’s (2005, 2006) theoretical development of sensemaking theory. We especially use Vermeir et al.’s work on implementation practices of educational artefacts and Coburn’s (2006) work on how local actors define or frame problems during policy implementation.

According to Vermeir et al. (2017) it is important to understand that roles and responsibilities in educational settings are not only persons and social culture, but also material, i.e. artefacts. As artefacts are active tools carrying meaning and messages that create (inter)actions between people, they must be rigorously considered in analysis to develop a nuanced understanding of policy implementation. According to Vermeir et al. artefacts are important and do, so to speak, not stand alone. They are defined or framed by different actors during implementation.
On a related note, Coburn (2005, 2006) has used so-called frame analysis developed from previous research of frames (Benford & Snow, 2000) to capture sense-making processes of educational policy implementation concerning reading instructions. Coburn argues that implementation can be recognised as an interactive process consisting of, on the one hand, frame alignment, and on the other hand, resonance (Coburn, 2006). The frame alignment is defined as an action taken by someone that produced a frame, “in an attempt to connect these frames with the interest, values and beliefs of those they seek to mobilize” (Coburn, 2006, p. 347). Resonance refers to the degree to which a frame is able to motivate the addressed part to act, a process that according to Coburn often is problematic in terms of aversion, negotiation and conversion. Commenting on Coburn (2006), Vermeir et al. (2017) state that frames embed artefacts. Consequently, the implementers’ as well as the users’ understandings of frames are important aspects to capture when investigating implementation.

To put this theoretical argument into context, LEAs as producers of frames (artefacts embedded in LEAs understandings), are aiming at solve something in the local school context. The first step in an analysis aiming at understanding this process is thereby to look at these frames and investigate how and why they are created. However, understanding the frame alignment is just one part of the process of mobilising policy. The other part involves resonance, i.e. the response to the frame alignment. As noted regarding previous research, there are studies documenting problems of educational change and policy implementation, noting complexities and difficulties due to conflicting demands (e.g. Kelchtermans, 2007; Park et al., 2013). In this study, however, we use a tool box based on the work by Coburn (2006) and Vermeir et al. (2017), striving to unfold the implementation process in more detail by first focusing on the LEAs perspective of the actions taken when producing and implementing the artefacts, and second on how the principals respond to these artefacts.

**Method and data**

As mentioned before, empirically this paper is based on a case study of a Swedish LEA selected as a deviant case, in a successful sense. A deviant case, Flyvbjerg (2001, p. 77) argues “is selected to obtain information on unusual cases which can be especially problematic or especially good in a more closely defined sense”. Our selection of LEA is based on two facts. First, a majority of LEAs show deficiencies in their quality and improvement work (Skolinspektionen, 2014, 2015). What those do that manage to remedy their shortcomings are thereby of interest. Second, previous research has foremost focussed on unsuccessful cases, unpacking tensions and conflicting demands. Consequently, a deviant case obtaining information regarding an LEA that has made progress in its quality and improvement work can make a noteworthy and unusual contribution to the understanding of what a functioning joint responsibility contains. The selection of LEA is based on the Swedish Schools Inspectorate’s regular supervision reports. According to the Inspectorate, the LEA studied developed from having several remarks on its systematic quality work, to no remarks in 3 years.

The selected LEA is part of a municipality with about 40 000 inhabitants. On a national scale, this is about the size of nearly half of the Swedish municipalities. The case study focussed on the LEA organisation and the compulsory schools within
the municipality. Data were acquired from an initial analysis of documents providing information about the artefacts introduced by the LEA: organisation maps, LEA officials’ assignments, as well as characteristics of the quality and improvement work. Information was also acquired from semi-structured individual interviews with the responsible LEA officials (n = 3) and with a strategic selection of principals working in different school areas and with various years of employment (Table 1). At the time of the study (November 2018-June 2019), the municipality had 20 compulsory schools and 16 principals (some principals were responsible for more than one school). Eight of the 16 principals were interviewed in the study. The interview questions covered topics such as organisational issues, tools, relationships and mandate. Each interview lasted 60–75 min and was audio-recorded then transcribed verbatim.

**Analysis**

The first analytical step focussed on the full frame alignment, i.e. the meaning structure of the artefacts introduced by the LEA during the improvement period. This involved mapping the artefacts by systematically reading documented descriptions of them (or the artefacts per se if they were documents) and their features to capture the kinds of actions taken by the LEA. Further, in the interviews with the LEA officials, we focussed on discovering their views of why and how the artefacts were developed and implemented. This analysis enabled us to identify the artefacts’ intended uses.

The second analytical step focussed on the principals’ sense-making of the artefacts to capture the resonance, i.e. principals’ individual or collective responses to frame alignments. This involved reconstruction of their views of the artefacts, as well as the implementation and possible uses to elucidate their thoughts and meaning structure about the artefacts and the problems they were supposed to help solve in the local school contexts. It showed, *inter alia*, that different kinds of artefacts evoke different kinds of resonance.

**Results**

In total, we identified nine artefacts reflecting an innovative policy or goal introduced to improve aspects of the LEA- and local school-level quality and improvement work. The nine artefacts were classified into three categories. The first includes artefacts intended
to convey the overarching idea of the quality and improvement work, in terms of
directions and organisation. The second includes artefacts introduced to improve
systematic documentation at the LEA level and in the local schools. The third includes
several kinds of forums introduced to improve communication between schools and
between principals and LEA-level actors. In this section, artefacts of the three categories
and the resonance they evoked among the principals and the LEA officials are presented
under three headings: the overarching aim and organisation, tools for systemic doc-
umentation, and forums for communication.

The overarching aim and organisation

The three artefacts in the first category signal the LEA’s concept of ideal quality and
improvement work and the organisation established to promote it. The leading artefact
in this category is a “visionary document”, mainly authored by a former director of the
LEA, that addresses three prioritised themes and approaches: inclusive education,
formative education and collaborative learning. The document states that inclusive
education involves participation by (and for) all, and that “a child’s or student’s
difficulties in education should be seen as tied to certain contextual conditions” so
“changes in the situation should enable the child or student to achieve the goals of the
education.”

The stated crux of formative education is to ensure that “all children and students
always know what the goal of the teaching is; where they are in relation to the goal, and
what to do in order to approach the goal”. Finally, the document frames a vision of
collaborative learning in which, children and students are activated as resources for
each other (…) and similarly, all teachers and principals are activated as resources for
each other in a professional learning system”. Without explicitly stating how to imple-
ment them, the document stressed that these approaches should permeate all forms of
education in the municipality. The document was printed and given to all teachers and
principals. It was also launched at a big event that everyone engaged in education in the
municipality was invited to attend and a leading North American researcher in educa-
tional science gave a lecture.

From the LEA officials’ perspective, the visionary document legitimised their actions.
LEA official C stated that “with the visionary document it became much easier to follow
up on things, as we knew what we wanted, as LEA”. The principals and teachers
acknowledged its clear focus on teaching and learning. They also appreciated the signals
that the LEA intended to promote equal education for all students across all schools in
the municipality, while giving scope for the professionals to realise the vision in
practice, as Principal E emphasised:

...the visionary document, and the goals in it, I think it’s crucial. And a strength, as in
some way it signals confidence and trust to all employees. We think you can do this. We
trust you. It’s not written like: “You must do this or you must do that, or it has to be this
way.” It tells us what to do, but not how, so we can shape [the practice] within the
profession.

The second artefact was a reorganisation of the LEA and introduction of a Support Unit
(SU) for quality and improvement. The unit’s main task was to support all schools and
preschools to fulfil the joint responsibility for quality and improvement work. It was quickly established, using the visionary document: the LEA officials involved said they did not know how to organise the unit and its work, but the document provided the intended direction and goals. They argued that their job was to put the three prioritised approaches into practice, map what the schools actually did and provide support for improvement. As stated by LEA official B:

These [the three themes] are our goals (...) and we’ve included various forums and times in the ‘annual cycle’ where we receive information from schools and preschools, but also specific time-lines for providing feedback.

In many cases, the principals spoke positively about the SU. They were impressed by its work so far and the support it provided them. Principals with relatively little experience particularly appreciated the ease of contacting the SU and its willingness to try to help or recommend someone more knowledgeable to approach when necessary. “I think we have very good support from SU, our LEA is very good I must say” as Principal G expressed it. However, some principals also reflected on the expansion of the unit and new positions at the LEA office. They claimed that sometimes when they asked for specific support or data about their school, the LEA officials said they did not have time to provide what they wanted. The principals found this strange, saying “Who do they work for?”, although accepting their prioritisation.

The third artefact in this category was the so-called “annual quality and improvement cycle”. As mentioned above, it was implemented by the SU as a guide for “when to do what” for everyone engaged in the education system. It was presented figuratively as a wheel, to signal the cyclical nature of the activities (for example, surveys of student satisfaction) and show when they should occur, and how feedback should be presented (for example in documents or dialog). The idea was to provide teachers and principals an overview of the processes they were involved in and what was expected of them. LEA official A stated that for new principals this was especially helpful:

When I introduce new principals and explain the improvement cycle, the systematic, they become lyrical, “God, how easy to understand. This I will be able to relate to.”, they say.

Also the principals that had been working for a while appreciated the cycle. They were all well aware that a better structure had been needed in the quality and improvement work at the LEA and local school levels, and thus more control. Most of the principals found this acceptable as there was an openness for discussion. However, the principals who were less well prepared found the increased expectations harder to keep up with, as stated by Principal B:

But right now, I can say that there is also a small … one mustn’t lose the tow. We must be able to keep up with them [the expectations] in the schools.

To summarise, the meaning structure, or frame, of the artefacts categorised as conveying the overarching aim of the municipality’s education system signals the rationale of a “new vision”. The visionary document, introduction of the SU and the figurative annual cycle were intended to set the agenda for the future and set out required change. From the LEA’s perspective the artefacts clearly conveyed expectations, and changes that would benefit everybody. The principals mostly agreed,
probably mainly because they recognised the need for a better structure, but also because there was scope for their professional interpretation. However, some negative resonance was detected regarding the SU’s prioritisations and additional work for principals.

**Tools for systematic documentation**

The artefacts introduced by the SU to improve systematic documentation were documents intended to help principals realise the new vision. They were called “support materials”, indicating that they could be used if necessary. However, the first document (“the plan for improved quality of teaching”) presented requirements that were not optional. The document is highly structured, and the initial paragraph explains the purpose of the plan and its importance for principals. Using questions listed in the document, the principals were supposed to evaluate their schools’ current teaching quality and strategies for improving it. The evaluations were expected to state deviations from criteria listed in the second chapter on knowledge requirements of the National curriculum. To improve practice, the principals were supposed to prioritise (with reasons) three improvement areas, describe an action plan, and outline how proposed actions should be evaluated. Finally, it emphasised that the principals had responsibility for ensuring “that the plan was established and well understood among the staff”. The plan was to be evaluated annually in accordance with the annual cycle. The importance of this was stressed by LEA official B as follows:

They should produce a new one every year. It doesn’t have to be completely different from the previous year, but they still have to do a new analysis based on the results and ask themselves, “Should we keep our areas of improvement or adjust them?”

The principals could see the benefits of the “plan for improved quality of teaching”. However, principals that had their own well-developed models reacted stronger and would rather have continued using them but recognised that following the same structure enabled comparisons of schools, discussions about reasons for differences in results, and appropriate adjustment of future allocation of resources. However, creating a document with the same template for all principals neglects differences between schools. Consequently, for example, principals in charge of several smaller schools and leisure centres had to write unreasonable numbers of plans. They had raised this problem, and had been welcomed by the SU to adjust to their situation.

The second artefact in the systematic documentation category was a set of several documents included in the support material addressing specific challenges, such as student transitions from primary to secondary school, student influence and participation, assessment and grading. The documents had a similar structure to the plan for improving quality of teaching, focusing on the principals’ responsibility for establishing a strategy for evaluating their school’s status, and asking them to formulate (and follow up) internal improvement strategies. Although the principals regarded the work done by SU as well-intended, some negative resonance was identified as some principals expressed doubts about the support material’s value. This was mainly due to its abundance, associated increases in workload, and mismatches with current improvement processes in the local schools. Some principals wanted stronger matching to needs
of the local schools while others chose to follow the SU’s recommendations more superficially, as described by Principal A:

We get things [from the SU], but we have to relate it to what suits our schools. Of course, they want to achieve a lot, so they send a lot [of stuff]. But we are principals. Just as teachers may not always be easy to boss about, we principals make our own decisions. So, it [telling us] may not always be easy either. I think we work differently with support materials … Not many, but some may think: “No, now it’s enough. I’m working on this.” It’s probably like we have to keep it away from us and from our teachers, so they get a reasonable level. We have to be the ones that screen it, I think.

A third kind of artefact in this category, was a set of student and educator surveys introduced by the SU. The SU created the surveys, based on questions operationalised from the visionary document, and distributed them to the principals. Survey results were analysed at both school and municipality levels. The SU also created quality indicators to monitor progress in fostering “student learning identity”, a concept described in the visionary document. LEA official B explained the intention of the material by saying it was created to:

Monitor proportions of students who have a “positive learning identity”, because we see that the concept of learning identity is essential. To us it simply means students seeing themselves as people who can learn, tackle challenges, learn how to compete, and approach school work and learning [well]. So, it’s a fairly new goal that we believe we have to think about, and ask ourselves, “How do we follow it up?

However, these indicators became controversial even during their development. The teachers the SU worked with to develop useful indicators talked about them with their colleagues in the local schools, and the idea met such strong resistance from union representatives that the SU withdrew it. In contrast, the principals had a rather different attitude to proposals that the SU drafted, at least partly due to their open and trustful relationship with the SU, as Principal C noted about a similar proposal.

These kinds of things [ways to monitor progress] may be proposed because they simply want us to go out and try them. Not in a tick-box sort of way, with obligations to submit a document with results and so on. It’s more: “Now we want you to try what we talked about.” And we do. It goes hand in hand with what we do, so we feel it makes sense to us.

In summary, elements constituting the meaning of the artefacts concerning documentation were largely messages from the SU to the principals and teachers concerning strategies for evaluating processes. They included pre-printed checklists to ease both the procedures and comparisons of schools. To a large extent, the principals found the tools for systematic documentation satisfactory as they facilitated their work and gave them support, they needed. However, the uniformity of demands and lack of some proposals’ relevance for local schools aroused negative resonance among the principals.

**Forums for communication**

The last category includes artefacts providing forums for communication between schools and between principals and LEA-level actors. Four such artefacts were identified (“result dialogues”, “opponent dialogues”, “seminars” and “reference groups”) with specified participants and arrangements. LEA official A explained that in the “result
dialogues” they met the principals at the start of every semester to discuss their schools’ results. LEA official C described her role in these meetings as acting as a kind of opponent, which sometimes required tactful handling and communication.

...sure, I document, but also question things, very delicately. After all we have a dialogue about the results and if something stands out, if you look at it a bit differently, I'm there commenting.

The SU also arranged meetings with a similar structure where the principals were supposed to oppose each other’s plans for improving teaching quality. They were supposed to prepare for the meetings by reading another principal’s plan and evaluating it in terms of what should be included. The LEA officials summarised the meetings as “really worthwhile” and stated that the principals “thought it was very good to have another principal see what they had written”. According to LEA official A, the principals also valued the possibility of getting some input about what was going on in different schools.

However, the principals expressed somewhat different ideas about these forums. They appreciated the result dialogues as they had, together with the LEA officials, opportunities to explain and discuss their schools’ results. They saw benefits of the more critical questions as they gave them new input for their analyses. However, negative resonance about the opponent dialogues was identified. They felt that the SU was handing responsibility to them for criticising colleagues who had not met expectations. They advocated clarification of roles and expectations, as expressed by Principal B and Principal D:

Principal B: It is no pleasure to see that: “Oh, we were good, someone else was not so good”, I think that creates a very bad situation.
Principal D: I’ve said a couple of times that they haven’t been really clear to me and it’s annoyed me a bit that we do this ... For example, the last time we opposed each other’s improvement plans, I felt very strongly that it gave me very little. But for the LEA, I can understand it.

The principals also expressed negative thoughts about use of the concept opposition, as illustrated by Principal H:

We’ve criticized calling it opposition. Because it feels like you have to go there and prove something. No, it should be more of a learning activity, in some way.

The seminars were arranged by the LEA at various times throughout the year and focused on issues addressed in the support material. On some occasions a speaker was invited to deepen understanding of specific challenges highlighted in the material. Before the seminars the SU sent texts and questions to the principals to help them to prepare. LEA official B described the seminars as occasions for the principals to share ideas, review their schools’ current situations, and keep up with the systematic quality work. The principals shared this view of the seminars as good opportunities to get together and share thoughts, but also saw them as good opportunities to influence the SU’s work, which they thought the SU was very open to, as expressed by Principals H and Principal C:
Principal H: When they get questions from us, they actually consider them, and we talk about it the next time, and it’s always … I think they work extremely formatively, like: “Yes, but next time, what do you want to work on then? How can we do it?” I definitely think we have a lot to say.

Principal C: Great humility, I would say. Extremely interested in hearing our thoughts. And always a very careful evaluation of: “What did you find most meaningful, what could be done better?”

Reference groups arranged by the SU was another forum for communication. In these meetings, directions and future challenges were discussed by invited principals, teachers and other co-workers. Some of these meetings were arranged by the SU to make their work transparent and for them to get feedback about new ideas for the quality and improvement work, as explained by LEA official C:

...as soon as we start working on something new, we have a reference group meeting. …

But when you start working with the reference group you identify the importance of balance. As LEA you want to support as well as interfere. It should hurt a bit but you also want them to feel that you support them.

Reference groups were also arranged to address specific school forms or improvement areas. In these groups someone from the SU participated as a facilitator, sent out the agenda and took notes at the meetings, which Principal E said made it much easier for them to focus on the topic:

We have a quality strategist, who helps us to stay focused on the topic. And it makes a difference, a very clear difference actually … Because we can’t do that, as individual principals we only see our own school, but there has to be someone who takes it to the next level. It made a huge difference when we got a quality strategist who could be part of and contribute to the analysis.

In summary, the artefacts providing forums for communication between schools and between principals and LEA-level actors were designed to improve the structure of communication and thus efforts to reach the overarching goal of enhancing quality and improvement processes throughout the school system. The forums were appreciated by the principals. Negative resonance was only identified when the principals thought that the purpose of the forums was unclear.

Discussion

Results of this study indicate that the LEA to strengthen the joint responsibility for quality and improvement launched a broad set of new artefacts, from an overarching vision to specific tools and instructions for the local schools to implement. The frame alignment, the idea of how to expand quality work at local school level and stimulate collaboration, from the LEA level down to the principals and schools was clearly formulated and expressed. In many respects the LEA had similarities with the school district authorities addressed in studies by Leithwood (2010) and Leithwood and Azah (2017). Both this and the cited studies highlight the importance of a shared vision, a learning-oriented organisational improvement process, and opportunities for job-embedded professional learning for leaders for enabling beneficial change.
However, the sometimes challenging process of implementation unsurprisingly aroused some negative resonance in response to the frame alignment. Previous studies have shown that criticism (and other manifestations of negative resonance) particularly occurs when ideas and artefacts are created at the central level and expected to be accepted and implemented at local level (Coburn, 2006; März et al., 2017; Vermeir et al., 2017). Similarly, questioning of some artefacts developed by the SU was identified in this study, especially when principals and teachers felt cornered by them. For instance, when they felt that requirements to track progress in fostering students’ learning identity were being thrust upon them, without understanding the purpose or possible benefits of the demanding additional work.

Nevertheless, the results mainly indicate resonance in tune with intentions of the artefacts produced by the SU. We believe that there are four main reasons for this. First, the principals saw a need for most of the artefacts and regarded them as useful, i.e. they accepted that the municipality needed a new approach to quality work, with appropriate goals, a suitable structure, effective communication and forums, and so on. Deficiencies raised by the Swedish Schools Inspectorate in their regular supervision reports, such as lack of evaluation at LEA level, were also identified by the principals. Their answers in the interviews show that they were aware of the shortcomings and need for improvement.

Second, the clear focus on improvement of teaching and learning, aiming to strengthen all children’s and students’ ability to learn, seems to have contributed to perceived relevance for all employees in the municipality. This signalled willingness of the LEA to take responsibility for student outcomes and promotion of equity throughout its jurisdiction, which has recognised importance for successful, systematic improvement of educational practice (e.g. Hooge et al., 2019; Rorrer et al., 2008). Thus, the positive resonance can be attributed to principals’ perceptions that the SU’s initiatives had improved coherence across the system, from national requirements and policies to expectations for local schools, which is generally challenging according to previous studies of policy implementation (e.g. Hanberger et al., 2016).

Third, the artefacts were introduced with a humble approach, allowing principals to react to and criticise them. Even if they were presented as mandatory, the implementation processes had valves, indicating that if the principals regarded the artefacts as inappropriate, they could be locally adjusted or rejected. The approach also enabled principals to communicate their viewpoints to the SU, thus providing possibilities to contribute to their professional knowledge, which probably also counteracted formation of the potentially antagonistic relationship between principals and LEA level actors identified in other studies (Adolfsson & Alvunger, 2020; Coburn, 2006). Although parts of the “tools for systematic documentation” were questioned, it created discussions indicating elements of reflection and possibilities for learning among both principals and LEA officials. This signalled inclusion in the implementation process, providing a framing plan, of how things could be done. Hence, we argue that transparency between LEA and principals contributed to harmonisation of the implementation process with the intentions. The emphasis on “a learning process for everyone involved” may also have been important as collaboration between different levels was perceived as productive.

Finally, the many artefacts providing forums for communication, such as the result dialogues and seminars, also improved relations between principals and facilitated
understanding of the sometimes complex social system of a municipal school organisation. These forums were well accepted by the principals, as the contents were explicit (often combined with one of the artefacts for systematic documentation) and known to all participants. Further, the forums for communication also functioned as arenas for common sense-making, not only between principals but also between principals and LEA officials. Weick (1995) argues that possibilities for common sense-making are crucial for the ability to implement organisational change and thus preventing tools developed at the central level being decoupled at local level. The mutual appreciation of the forums for communication indicates awareness of the interdependence of principals and LEA level actors. The principals, who shunned responsibility for administration and organisation of the reference meetings, accepted the LEA officials as organisers as they perceived benefits for themselves.

Conclusion

The organisation and activities involved in establishing, maintaining and refining joint responsibility for quality and improvement work in the complex contexts of decentralised school systems have received surprisingly little research attention. In the highly decentralised Swedish system, both LEAs and local schools are responsible for ensuring quality and systematic improvement. However, descriptions of what happens within and between these levels are rare, despite a recognised need for more detailed information and understanding (Prøitz et al., 2019).

Consequently, this study makes a contribution to the field of local school governance as it provides fruitful understanding of relations between LEA-level actors and local school principals and how joint responsibility can be strengthened. The study of course has its limitations. First, despite our strategic selection, the study only consists of a single case. Replication of similar case studies under similar circumstances would of course improve our common knowledge further. Second, the study only relies on cross section interview data. Follow-up interviews or additional observations could have provided added information and brought forth confirmations as well as contradictions. Despite the limitations, the case selection and the methods used (starting with analysing artefacts and following up with interviews) resulted in good insights of the process of mutual sense-making by LEA officials and principals. Further, the theoretical approach to elucidating the process of mobilising a policy (the frame alignment, introduction of artefacts by the LEA, and principals’ responses, i.e. resonance) revealed how appropriately introducing and using new artefacts can improve capacities for quality and improvement work.

In a wider perspective, the study also contributes to the debate on school system governance. As noted initially in the article, Swedish LEAs have varying capacity to fulfil their assignment, often resulting in a call for state-governed interventions (Utbildningsdepartementet, 2017). Results presented here show that considerable mobilisation can be achieved locally, through reciprocal communication of what is needed in the local school context. The analysis reveals some negative resonance concerning relevance for the local principals. However, the LEA’s humble launching of ideas and artefacts, and the well-considered forums for communication, where principals could articulate their criticism, kept the wheels turning. In summary, steps taken locally
stimulated collaboration and created stronger relations, thereby promoting establishment and refinement of a “well working” joint responsibility.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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