School Leaders' Enactment of Policy on Research-based Education – Dilemmas in Negotiating and Facilitating Policy in Practice

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Session Information

01 SES 12 B, Policy Enactment and Crisis Management

Paper Session

Time:	2019-09-05
	15:30-17:00
Room:	VMP 5 - Room 2079
Chair:	Maria Assunção Flores

Contribution

During recent decades, research-based education has become increasingly important, in Sweden as well as in other European countries (Adolfsson & Sundberg 2018; Gough et al 2011; Levin et al 2013; Tripney et al 2014; OECD 2007). In Sweden, the Swedish School Act (SFS 2010:800) explicitly states that "all education should rest on scientific basis and proven experience". This means new demands on school leaders to actively and extensively support and participate in creating organizational conditions to deliver policy demands for research-based education in teachers' classroom practice. However, The Education Act´s authoritative, but vague, requirements have left local schools to translate, interpret and handle the policy reform in practice (Bergmark 2018). The National Agency for Education (2013), though, underlines the importance of school leaders providing direction. Long-term planning, to prioritize collegial learning and to create conditions in the organization, are highlighted as being the responsibility of school leaders.

International studies with a specific interest in research-based education can be found within a broad spectrum of definitions of school development (Hargreaves 1996; Hargreaves & Goodson 2006; Slavin 2002; Biesta 2010). A study exploring how school leaders enact policy with respect to enquiry and practitioner research in schools shows variation in engagement in practice and a clear school improvement agenda (Bryan & Burstow, 2016). There are only a limited number of Swedish studies examining how the policy is enacted at the school level, and even fewer exploring how research-based education is enacted from the perspective of school leaders (Bergmark 2018; Ståhl & Eriksson 2018). It is, therefore, critical to explore how school leaders interpret, prioritize and facilitate the enactment of policy in their school organizations in order to understand the practice of research-based education and how this is performed by teachers (Coburn 2005).

The specific aim of our study, therefore, is to explore the enactment of the policy from the perspective of school leaders and the theoretical ambition is to identify and analyse dilemmas and strategies that arise in the school leaders' practice when developing schools on scientific basis and proven experience, i.e. research-based education. For this purpose, we pose the following questions:

-        how do school leaders interpret, translate and engage with the policy concerning a school built on scientific basis and how do they position themselves?

-        how do they mediate and facilitate the enactment of the policy in their organization and in relation to the development of the teaching profession's practice?

Our study is situated within the extensive field of policy studies on national educational reforms (Ball & Juneman 2012; Lundahl 2005). We follow the critical policy tradition to understand the complexity of school leaders´ engagement in developing schools on scientific basis. In line with Ball, Maguire and Braun, (2012, cf Ozga 2000) we view policy work as an ongoing process of doing that involves interaction between several actors and levels.

Our overall theoretical perspective is *policy enactment*, which involves *the policy actor´*s creative and dual processes of *interpretation,translation* and *negotiation*. Interpretation is an initial reading and sense-making of policy, based on an actor's previous experiences, acceptance or scepticism, followed by translation as a process of re-enactment and reordering (Ball et al, 2011, Braun et al, 2011). Context is central to understanding school leaders´ enactment of policy, therefore policy enactment is combined with an activity theoretical understanding of the dynamics, contradictions and dilemmas that arise when policy meets practice in ongoing activities characterized by change. Meaning as collectively or individually constructed and the concept *shared objects* (Engeström 2009) visualizes meaning-making at different levels and supports an understanding of different subject positions that underpin school leaders´ agency.

Method

The study is recently started and is being conducted in a Swedish municipality, in which a local strategy, with a number of activities, is adopted of accommodate the Swedish School Act (SFS 2010:800). In 2014 the educational administration established a local policy, defining and giving priority to the task, and a scientific leader was assigned to direct the work. Further, a local scientific council consisting of researchers, school leaders and teachers was established to support local initiatives, and a Master´s programme focusing on practical research and school development was launched as a joint venture between the municipality and a university. In 2017, two research and development projects (R&D) were initiated as a collaboration between the municipality and two universities, with the overall intention to explore and support meetings between the policy and teaching practice in the municipality. The present study is part of one of these R&D-projects. Although some school leaders were engaged in these activities, it was in 2017 that a school leader education programme was first introduced, an initiative taken by the school leaders themselves. It is within the context of this programme that the present study is conducted. The programme addresses all (in total 54) school leaders involved during a 3-year period (2018-2020). The aim is: "… to provide an in-depth understanding of a scientific approach in school, and to strengthen the leadership of the school leader by integrating practice-based research in school together with teachers.". To acquire empirical data for the study, a mixed method design is used. The main empirical data derive from fieldwork in the ongoing school leader education programme, where the researchers participate as observers. Field notes from participatory observations, material from school leaders' written assignments and recorded material from their group exercises will represent a rich resource. The study was initiated in September 2018, so the fieldwork is still within its initial phase. The researchers will participate during the three years of the programme and this longitudinal design makes it possible to follow

the school leaders´ progress and any eventual change of practice. The methodological approach builds on strong reflexivity, (Harding 1991) to enrich and deepen the analysis of the empirical material from the perspective of the participants (Kilpatrick et al 2010). This means that preliminary results will be presented to the school leaders and that their reflections will be integrated into the analytical process.

Expected Outcomes

Against this background, the expected outcomes are an understanding of dilemmas and strategies in policy enactment from the stand-point of school leaders as policy actors, who are often described as positioned in a "field of tensions" where different, conflicting pressures are at play (Berg 2003; Persson et al 2003). School leaders are expected to take responsibility for meeting new requirements within slow institutional systems (Leo 2013), in which discrepancies between objectives, resources and organizational frameworks often result in tensions (Berg 2003). In line with previous research, our initial analysis indicates different challenges and strategies employed by the school leaders. Their ambition to facilitate a scientific approach within the school organization´s every day work is, for example, constrained by lack of time and knowledge. Further, they experience constant pressures to introduce new directives and initiatives and this undermines long-term work aimed at a scientific approach embedded in their school's practical work. Despite these challenges, they state that they have to persevere and that their strategy to "hang in and hold out" is necessary to build a solid organization for research-based education. Preliminary results so far indicate that many of the school leaders view themselves as facilitators aiming to adopt dual roles simultaneously, one "supporting" and one "disturbing". The latter involves, for example, raising critical but constructive questions to encourage colleagues to reflect on their practice. What a school leader-led scientific approach can be is under negotiation and several leaders describe their strive for legitimacy as on ongoing process. Continued analysis will illuminate tensions within school leaders' and teachers´ interpretations of meaning and research-based education as a shared object (Engeström, 2009) for actors in schools.

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