A Work Environment Blind Spot – Exploring School Principals' Organisational and Social Work Environments

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Abstract

This article examines principals' social work environment in the context of a series of school reforms inspired by new public management. With the point of departure in Job Demands and Resources, we put forward the following overall research question: which job demands and job resources are related to principals' job satisfaction? The article has a mixed methods approach, combining material from questionnaires (466 participants) and interviews (15 participants). The results of the questionnaire indicate that job resources such as role clarity, influence, meaningfulness, and social community with senior managers were related to job satisfaction, while lacking job resources (influence, social community with senior managers) and experiencing role conflicts were associated with a higher intention to leave the profession. The interviews provide a more in-depth understanding of the shift of institutional logics within the school sector, enforcing boundaries between principals' professional and managerial roles in accordance with New Public Managerial Ideas. The separation between profession and management contributes to principals' organisational and social work environments being in a blind spot. This is not only a problem for the principals, but also a risk factor for the organisations themselves, as stress and ill-health among leaders tend to affect the entire organisation.

Introduction

This study contributes to research on the implications of issues relating to organisational and social work environments within a welfare sector that has been transformed over recent decades as a result of major political reforms. Of particular interest is the Swedish school sector and principals' working conditions, as recent reports have identified significant challenges in relation to their work environment. In contrast to teachers' working conditions, until recently, when trade unions and authorities identified issues related to high stress levels and high rates of turnover, the work environment of principals has received little attention. A union report (Swedish Teachers' Union 2020) indicated that school organisers paid insufficient attention to principals' working conditions, resulting in what is termed a work environment blind spot. Using a mixed methods design, this study comprises two parts, a quantitative survey and qualitative interviews, with the latter designed to contextualise and provide illustrations of responses obtained in the former.

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Principals' work environment – a situation characterised by high turnover

Over the last decade, reports on principals' organisational and social work environments have highlighted the challenging conditions under which principals are working (Swedish Teachers' Union 2014; Skolledaren 2020, 2021; TALIS 2018). Recent studies (Persson et al. 2020, 2021) have found that around 28 per cent of principals are at risk of developing an exhaustion disorder based on their current work situation. Furthermore, a union survey found that 55 per cent of principals were planning to change jobs, 70 per cent were working more than 45 hours per week, and most of that time was spent working on tasks that did not fall under the category of pedagogical leadership (Swedish Teachers' Union 2014; Skolledaren 2020; TALIS 2018).

International studies have found that 40–50 per cent of employees leave within five years of commencing employment in the school sector (Gallant and Riley 2014; TALIS 2018). This trend is also evident in Sweden, where only 37 per cent of principals in compulsory schools remain at the same school for more than three years, and only 22 per cent remain at the same school for more than five years. A similar trend applies to upper secondary school principals (Skolledaren 2020). The challenging working conditions within the school sector were highlighted in a study by Arvidsson et al. (2019), showing that burnout among Swedish teachers was associated with high job demands (i.e. high workloads and a sense of inadequacy) and low levels of self-efficacy.

The TALIS survey of principals in Sweden (2018) found that on average they only stayed at a school for two to three years before moving to a new position. In comparison with other OECD countries, where the average stay is five years, principals in Sweden lack the necessary time to engage in pedagogical leadership, and experience high levels of stress as a result of the need to perform administrative tasks. However, the TALIS survey also found that approximately 90 per cent of both teachers and principals were satisfied with their jobs. Working conditions for principals are consequently challenging, as evidenced by the high turnover rates. However, the Swedish Teachers' Union survey (2020) found that only 43 per cent of school organisers conducted systematic risk assessments in relation to the principal's work environment, even though this is mandatory under the Work Environment Act. In contrast to the role of employees, like other first-line mangers, the principal's role includes both a managerial and a subordinate position in relation to school organisers. As managers, principals are responsible for undertaking tasks in accordance with the provisions of the Swedish Work Environment Authority (e.g. systematic risk assessment) in relation to teachers and other subordinates. Similarly, being an employee, principals are covered by the same legislation, and should therefore be subject to school organisers' actions in relation to the work environmental. However, as the Swedish Teachers' Union survey revealed, school organisers' systematic management of principals' working conditions seems to fall into a work environment blind spot.

Similarly, numerous studies have found the organisational and social work environment of first-line managers within the overall welfare sector to be both challenging and demanding (cf. Berntson, Wallin and Härenstam 2012; Castle and Lin 2010; Corin 2016; Corin, Berntson and Härenstam 2016; Corin and Björk 2016; Cregård, Corin and Skagert 2017; Härenstam, Pousette and

Berntson 2019). Scholars have offered a range of explanations for this situation. Some have highlighted the imbalance between demands and resources (Bejerot et al. 2015; Björk 2013; Dellve, Andersson and Juttengren 2013), while others have pointed to the impact of new public management (NPM) on professional autonomy (Ahlbäck Öberg 2010) and the changes that have followed, including the replacement of traditional professional logic by generic, administration-oriented managerial thinking. One area that has undergone extensive change is the school sector (Jarl 2013; Jarl, Fredriksson and Persson 2012; Johansson 2011; Lundahl et al. 2013; Parding and Berg-Jansson 2016).

A changing institutional landscape – political reform and the principal's role

The professional role of principals has, in line with other professions within the Swedish welfare sector, been transformed, along with the institutional landscape of the education system (Alvehus and Andersson 2018). This changed landscape has emerged as a result of political reforms relating to both content delivered through the Swedish educational system, structural changes to the system, and the creation of new professional and administrative roles within the system (Alvehus and Andersson 2018).

Some of these reforms (in 1969, 1980, 1994, 2001, and 2011) were introduced with the aim of strengthening the quality of education by implementing new national curricula, a need that in recent years has been legitimized by politicians in public debates regarding Sweden's declining PISA rankings (Ringarp and Rothland 2010). Continuing reforms over the years have resulted in increased workloads for teachers, principals, and school organisers as new grading systems and learning outcomes have had to be implemented (cf. Boström et al. 2020). Further, these reforms have challenged the collective autonomy of the teaching profession, contributing to reduced authority in their everyday work (Helgøy and Homme 2007; Wermke and Forsberg 2017).

In parallel with these curriculum-related changes, several structural reforms of the system have been introduced since the early 1990s. In 1991, a major step was taken toward decentralizing the school sector when responsibility for education was transferred from the state to the municipal level. One year later, the "free school choice" reform was introduced, which became a driving force behind the marketization of the school sector, whereby private, public, and cooperative school organisers were forced to compete (Lundahl et al. 2013). The school market, publicly financed because fees are not allowed to be charged, follows a neoliberal ideology whereby accountability and resources are distributed to local organisers, while students and parents are allocated the role of consumers of education services (Alvehus, Eklund and Kastberg 2019). These reforms have not only resulted in differentiation among school organisers offering a variety of pedagogical profiles, which was the main aim of the "free school choice" reform, but have also changed the institutional landscape, and thereby the foundation on which education is built (Alvehus and Andersson 2018).

Thus, in addition to decentralizing resources and accountability, the logic of the market has challenged the hegemony of the teaching profession, and thereby the role of principals. The latter impact is reflected in the mandatory formal

education program for principals that was introduced in 2010 and is now mandated by law (Education Act 2010). This education program for principals, which is governed by The National Agency for Education, covers three main areas, all of which correspond to aspects of the logic of bureaucracy, and thus contribute to defining the principal's role: The Education Act (2010) and the exercise of authority; governance, organisation, and quality; and school leadership.

These reforms have changed the landscape in which principals are working, and thus their role has changed from primarily being a pedagogical leader with teaching experience and skills to being a managerial gatekeeper within an organisational nest containing entangled bureaucratic and professional logics (Alvehus and Andersson 2018). Because the education system in Sweden is built on a foundation of equality, which is regulated by law (Education Act 2010), school organisers and principals need to ensure that resources are distributed regarding both the special needs of students and national learning outcomes. In 2008, in an effort to oversee organisers' compliance with the relevant regulations and laws, the government established the Swedish Schools Inspectorate, which has become an influential actor in relation to principals' everyday work by requesting responses to complaints and conducting routine inspections of schools. Thus, the Inspectorate has contributed to a juridification of the school landscape because it primarily acts on a legal basis (Novak 2018).

As a consequence of this juridification of the education system, the regulative pressure (e.g., Scott 2013) on principals and school organisers to act in accordance with the relevant regulations and laws has contributed to increasing bureaucracy and centralization of power (Alvehus and Andersson 2018). Subsequently, new positions in line with the logic of bureaucracy have been implemented within the formal school organisational structure as a legitimate response to government demands (e.g., Barley and Tolbert 1997; Meyer and Rowan 1977). Controllers, school lawyers, quality developers, quality coordinators, and strategic quality managers are all examples of newly developed roles that often occupy a central position within the school's formal organisational structure. Once these new roles have been implemented, the bureaucratization of the principals' work is further reinforced as their operational attention shifts from pedagogical matters to their obligations as stated by the authorities. This shift in focus is significant, as auditing of both educational quality and the school organisers' quality assessment system (systematic quality work) is now an institutionalized task involving all levels of the school organisation (Ekholm et al. 2000; Power 1997; Ringarp 2011; Stenlås 2009).

Furthermore, as a result of these reforms, the role of the principal has become a hybrid influenced by the dual logics of teaching professionalism and managerialism (cf. Hall 2012). The latter refers to the wide range of ideas relating to NPM (cf. Hood 1995; Pollit and Bouckaert 2004), which on one hand has contributed to strengthening the position of principals, as their responsibility is now formalized by law (Jarl, Fredriksson and Persson 2012; Hult, Lundström and Edström 2016). However, on the other hand, the implementation of NPM thinking has created boundaries between the teaching and management communities. As first-line managers, principals need to undertake "managerial" tasks in their everyday work, which within the NPM framework are often related

to control of performance, budgeting, planning, quality assessment, staffing, and allocation of resources, all of which contribute to reducing teachers' autonomy (Parding and Berg-Jansson 2016; Ringarp 2011; Stenlås 2009). Thus, the school "management bureaucracy" (cf. Hall 2012), which is a consequence of the political reforms of the welfare regime, not only results in a blurring of the principal's role and the boundaries between the management and teaching professions, but also constitutes the everyday working conditions for principals.

Another reason for the deterioration of the principal's role could be related to gender. Historically, there has been a male dominance among principals, but following the municipalization of schools in 1991, the number of female principals rapidly increased (Söderberg Forslund 2009). At the same time, the conditions under which principals are required to work have changed dramatically. The increasing female dominance among principals has been associated with reduced growth of salaries and status, and growing concerns about the consequences of increasing femininization for schools (Söderberg Forslund 2009).

Job Demands-Resources Theory

In line with the Organisational and social work environment provisions (2015), in this study, we use the term organisational and social work environment instead of psychosocial work environment. This implies that instead of focusing on individuals (blaming the victim), organisational aspects are considered crucial for a good work environment. The aim of the abovementioned provisions is to encourage employers to be proactive and prevent risks related to organisational and social conditions in the work environment. Because the provisions focus on a number of job resources and job demands, a relevant theoretical framework for analysing principals' perceptions of their organisational and social work environment is job demands-resources (JD-R) theory (Bakker and Demerouti 2014).

JD-R theory is a further development of the JD-R model (Demerouti et al. 2001; Demerouti and Bakker 2011), and both complements and integrates earlier theories and approaches regarding workplace stress (Schaufeli and Taris 2014) and work motivation (Bakker and Demerouti 2014). Consequently, JD-R theory captures both negative (health-threatening) and positive (motivational) processes that the various demands and resources in the work environment generate. A further strength of the theory is its flexibility, as it can be adapted to different contexts and includes concepts that are relevant to specific organisational contexts (Bakker and Demerouti 2014; Schaufeli and Taris 2014). JD-R theory is an established theoretical approach to stress and occupational safety and health research (Bakker and Demerouti 2014). The JD-R model has been tested empirically in a number of studies examining different occupational groups and outcomes (for an overview of the literature, see Bakker and Demerouti (2014) and Schaufeli and Taris (2014). There is also longitudinal evidence incorporating tests of reverse causation (Hakanen, Schaufeli and Ahola 2008).

A central assumption is that while demands and resources exist in relation to all kinds of work, specific demands and resources may be of particular relevance to various occupational groups (Bakker and Demerouti 2014; Schaufeli and

Taris 2014). JD-R theory differs from earlier more static approaches such as the demand–control–support model (Karasek and Theorell 1990) and the effort–reward model (Siegrist 1996) by taking into consideration the fact that different resources can interact with different demands, and these interactions are specific to a particular type of work situation. This means that each specific work situation has its own patterns in terms of how resources can act as a buffer for different work demands. Beausaert et al. (2016) noted that social support constitutes a resource that can help to reduce stress and burnout among principals.

JD-R theory enables an understanding of the relationships between perceived demands and resources, and the consequent negative or positive outcomes. High levels of demand in relation to perceived resources constitute a risk in terms of high levels of sick leave, stress, and meaninglessness, and a lack of engagement and vitality. In this situation, there is a danger that an employee will apply for a new position and leave the organisation. In contrast, work environments in which employees perceive a high level of resources in relation to job demands will, based on JD-R theory, achieve positive outcomes in terms of high levels of job satisfaction, engagement and vitality, meaningfulness, and a creative approach to challenges. In these kinds of work environments, one can expect low levels of sick leave and low levels of intention to leave the organisation.

Considering the challenges presented by principals' organisational and social work environment, in this study, we explore not only the demands and resources related to their job satisfaction (positive outcome), but also their intention to leave the organisation (negative outcome). In terms of demands, we focused on role conflicts and quantitative, cognitive, and emotional demands, while in terms of resources, we focused on meaningfulness, perceived influence, role clarity, and sense of community with senior managers.

A sense of meaningfulness in one's work contributes to motivation, and thus to one's well-being. In this context, meaningfulness relates to the concept of calling, which refers to an individual's experience of fulfilling a greater purpose. Like other human service occupations (e.g., Edvik et al. 2020; Hasenfeldt 2009), the principal's role includes the characteristic of helping, or devotion to providing students with optimal learning conditions. Success in this regard contributes to a sense of meaningfulness in both their work and their life. This greater purpose also relates to the process of professional identification. Furthermore, calling also refers to occupational/organisational identity and to the work characteristics associated with a specific position (cf. Bakker 2015; Brown 2017; Thompson and Bunderson 2019). When employees' working conditions are not in line with their expectations or restrict their ability to fulfil their personal and/or professional purpose, they risk experiencing disengagement and cynicism (Bailey et al. 2017).

Studies reviewing research on principals' work environment (Alkan Olsson 2013; Johansson 2011) have mainly focused on compulsory schools and addressed pedagogical issues, the challenges of multilevel governance, and stress-related issues. Even though teachers' organisational and social work environment has been the focus of several studies, until recently, there has been

a lack of research on principals' organisational and social work environment (Alkan Olsson 2013; Persson et al. 2020).

Principals play a central role within schools, providing a qualitatively positive learning environment that affects the performance of both teachers and students (Johansson 2011; Alkan Olsson 2013). "When school principals' well-being declines, their ability to significantly impact school functioning, student engagement and whole-school wellbeing also declines" (Maxwell and Riley 2016).

Study Aim and Research Question

The Swedish school sector has undergone several political reforms over recent decades, resulting in both new and transformed occupational positions, and work environment issues have attracted increasing attention from unions, authorities, and scholars. Although most attention has been directed toward teachers' working conditions, recent studies on the principals' work environment have highlighted challenges in terms of high turnover rates, high levels of stress, and high risk of burnout (Persson et al. 2020; 2021). Using JD-R theory as the point of departure, the aim of this study is to examine principals' organisational and social work environment and attempt to answer the following research question: which job demands and job resources are related to principals' job satisfaction and their intention to leave the job, and how do these job demands and job resources relate to changes within the institutional landscape as a result of the major political reforms the Swedish school sector has undergone over the last few decades?

Method

In this study, we used both qualitative and quantitative methods, in contrast to previous studies on school leadership in Sweden, which have mainly used qualitative methods (Johansson 2011). By adopting a mixed methods design, we aim to obtain a greater breadth and depth of understanding, as well as corroboration of our findings, while also overcoming the weaknesses inherent in using either approach alone (Leech and Onwuegbuzie 2007).

The rationale behind the mixed methods approach is that the use of multiple approaches can bring new insights and perspectives (Cowen Forssell 2019). Further, mixed methods research often has a practical, outcome-orientated approach (Greene 2007).

A mixed methods design was chosen because we considered that the quantitative method (part one – a questionnaire-based survey) and the qualitative method (part two – a series of interviews) would complement each other, and thus provide a broader, deeper and more comprehensive social understanding (Greene 2007, p. 101). While the questionnaire was based on items that had been found to be valid and reliable in previous studies (Berthelsen, Hakanen and Westerlund 2018; Westerlund, Søndergård Kristensen and Berthelsen 2014), the follow-up interviews enabled the participants to reflect more freely upon the questions concerning their organisational and social work environment.

Mixed methods approaches can be located on a continuum ranging from a monomethod design (no mixed methods) to a fully mixed methods design, with a partially mixed methods design positioned somewhere between these two extremes (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004; Leech and Onwuegbuzie 2009). Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2009) developed a typology of mixed methods research based on three dimensions: 1) level of mixing of the methods, 2) timing, in terms of either the concurrent or sequential application of the methods, and 3) emphasis on/priority of the different methods, that is, the degree of dominance or otherwise of one method over the other. A fully mixed methods design presumes the mixing of methods within stages and across the entire research process, while a partially mixed methods design implies a lack of mixing either within or across all stages. In terms of Leech and Onwuegbuzie's (2009) typology, the design of our study can be classified as a "partially mixed sequential equal status design." That is, we conducted the quantitative and qualitative studies separately and sequentially, the two data sets have equal status, the questionnaire responses were analysed first, and then the results were mixed (integrated) with the interview data in the concluding discussion (Leech and Onwuegbuzie 2009). In this way, the different methods were used to elaborate, enhance, and broaden our overall analysis.

Part one – questionnaire-based survey

A web-based questionnaire was distributed through a newsletter to principals who were members of the School Leader Section of the Swedish Teachers Union. With more than 6,000 members, the school leader section is the largest union for principals and includes all school levels from preschool to gymnasium.

A total of 466 principals responded to the questionnaire in spring 2016. Union expectations were that 40 per cent of members would open the newsletter and of those, 10 per cent would interact by opening links in the newsletter. Thus, it appears that the principals who opened the newsletter also completed the questionnaire, with a final response ratio of around seven per cent of all school leader union members.

The demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1. A majority (84 per cent) of the participants were female and the mean age was 51 years (SD = 8.21). Most (89 per cent) were working full-time as principals and a majority (59 per cent) was employed in preschools run by municipalities (80 per cent). The participants had been working as principals for an average of 10 years (SD = 6.22) and had been employed in the school sector for approximately 25 years on average (SD = 9.46). The number of staff they supervised varied from 160 to less than 10, with a mean of 34.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the questionnaire respondents (N = 465–452).

Characteristics	N	%	Characteristics	N	%
Age			**Type of school ***		
28-43	103	22	Preschool	275	59
44-54	192	41	Compulsory school	159	34
55-66	170	37	Upper secondary school	27	6
Gender			Adult education	10	2
Female	389	84	Compulsory special needs school	34	7
Male	74	16	Other school	28	6
Position			**Tenure (years)**		
Principal	382	83	≤ 10	292	65
Assistant principal	52	11	11-21	111	25
Other school leader	29	6	22-32	36	8
Organiser			33-43	12	2
Public	372	80			
Private	84	18	**Working hours**		
Other	7	2	Full-time	438	95
			Part-time	25	5

Note: *Participants could choose several alternatives.

The following issues were investigated through the questionnaire:

Job demands. Four different job demands were assessed using scales from the Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire - COPSOQII (Berthelsen, Westerlund and Søndergård Kristensen 2014). *Quantitative demands* were measured by two items, for example, "Is your workload unevenly distributed so it piles up?" The internal reliability coefficient was 0.67. *Cognitive demands* were measured by three items, for example, "Does your work require you to remember a lot of things?" The internal reliability coefficient was 0.70. *Emotional demands* were assessed by two items, for example, "Is your work emotionally demanding?" The internal reliability coefficient was 0.75. The participants responded to the abovementioned items using a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 to 5 where 1 = "Never/almost never" and 5 = "Always/very often." *Role conflicts* were assessed by two items, for example, "Are contradictory demands placed on you at work?" The internal reliability coefficient was 0.72.

Job resources. Four scales from the COPSOQII (Berthelsen, Westerlund and Søndergård Kristensen 2014) were used to assess the various resources available at work. *Sense of communit*y with senior managers was measured by two items, for example, "Is there a good atmosphere between you and your senior manager?" The internal reliability coefficient was 0.79. *Meaning of work* was assessed by three items, for example, "Is your work meaningful?" The internal reliability coefficient was 0.81. *Influence at work* was measured by two items, for example, "Do you have a large degree of influence concerning your work?" The internal reliability coefficient was 0.73. The participants responded to these items using a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 to 5 where 1 = "Never/almost never and 5 = "Always/very often." *Role clarity* was measured by three items, for example, "Do you know exactly which areas are your responsibility?" The internal reliability coefficient was 0.85. The participants responded to these

items using a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 to 5 where 1 = "To a very small extent" and 5 = "To a very large extent."

Outcome variables. *Job satisfaction* was measured by three items from the COPSOQII (Berthelsen, Westerlund and Søndergård Kristensen 2014), for example, "Regarding your work in general, how pleased are you with your work prospects?" The participants responded to these items using a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 to 5 where 1 = "To a very small extent" and 5 = "To a very large extent." The internal reliability coefficient was 0.77. *Intention to leave* was measured by two items adapted from Jaros (1997), for example, "I am considering looking for a new job within a year." The participants responded to these items using a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 to 5 where 1 = "Never/almost never" and 5 = "Always/very often." The internal reliability coefficient was 0.91.

The responses were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics, version 26. First, we conducted descriptive and correlational statistical analyses to provide an overview of the responses. Then, we conducted hierarchical regression analyses in an effort to identify the factors (demands and resources) that could predict job satisfaction and intention to leave the organisation.

Part two – interviews

Everyone who responded to the questionnaire was invited to contact the researchers by email if they were interested in participating in a follow-up interview. A total of 15 principals volunteered and were interviewed during Spring 2017. Their average age was 50 years (SD = 10 years) and they had been employed in their current position for an average of 7 years (SD = 4 years). The majority (10) of the participants were female and were principals in public-owned schools. Nearly half of the participants were preschool principals, while only two were upper secondary school principals. The number of people they supervised varied from 6 to 65, with a mean of around 35 (see Table 2).

Table 2. Descriptive data for the interview participants.

Age	Gender	Position	Tenure (years)	Organizer	Subordinates
48	Male	Principal compulsory school	9	Public	65
60	Female	Principal compulsory school	20	Public	45
62	Female	Principal compulsory school	8	Public	24
61	Female	Principal preschool	10	Public	40
52	Female	Principal preschool	2	Cooperative	6
38	Female	Development manager adult education	7	Public/private	12
53	Female	Principal preschool	10	Public	32
53	Female	Principal preschool	7	Public	33
35	Male	Assistant principal compulsory school	5	Public	34
62	Male	Assistant principal compulsory school	3	Public	42
49	Female	Principal preschool	6	Public	40
59	Male	Principal folk high school	6	Private	50
45	Female	Principal preschool	7	Public	27
48	Female	Assistant principal upper secondary school	4	Public	32
32	Female	Principal preschool	2	Public	42

The majority (14) of the interviews were conducted by phone, while one participant was interviewed at their workplace. The interviews lasted for between 45 and 90 minutes, and we used an interview guide that focused on the same issues as the questionnaire because we wanted to obtain a deeper understanding of the participants' organisational and social work environment.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. In line with the abductive analytical approach (Timmermans and Tavory 2012), the transcribed interviews were interpreted, coded, and theoretically thematized in an iterative process with a starting point based on the central themes of JD-R theory. Because the questionnaire responses suggested that work resources (influence, social community with senior managers), or the lack thereof, were related to job satisfaction and intention to leave the job, particular attention was paid in the analysis to these aspects of the principals' working conditions. This enabled us to elaborate on the questionnaire responses because the interviews provided context and illustrations of the conditions under which the principals were working based on the main themes of JD-R theory (i.e., job resources, job satisfaction, and intention to leave the job). Furthermore, to enable us to understand the significance of the context in relation to the questionnaire responses, we referred to previous research focusing on changes in the institutional landscape within the school sector as a result of the political reforms over the last few decades. This analytical approach enabled us to obtain a deeper understanding of the interplay between institutional changes and job resources, job satisfaction, and intention to leave the job.

Ethics

The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Regional Ethical Review Board, Lund, Southern Sweden (Ref no. 2015/699).

Informed consent was obtained from all participants included in the study.

Findings from the questionnaire-based survey

The data were initially subjected to descriptive statistics and correlation analysis. The descriptive statistics and correlations between all variables are presented in Table 3. As can be seen, participants reported relatively high levels of both demands (especially cognitive demands) and resources (especially meaningfulness). Job satisfaction was rated quite highly, while intention to leave was rated somewhat lower. The correlation analyses showed significant associations in the expected directions between the study variables, for example, a highly significant negative relationship between job satisfaction and intention to leave, indicating that the principals who reported higher job satisfaction had a lower intention to leave their job.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics and correlations.

	Variables	M	SD	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.
1.	Age	50.70	8.21	-												
2.	Gender	1.84	0.37	-.03	-											
3.	Position	1.44	0.50	.11	-.28	-										
4.	Quantitative demands	3.78	0.76	-.05	.02	.09	-									
5.	Cognitive demands	4.67	0.39	-.07	.10	.02	.41	-								
6.	Emotional demands	3.79	0.68	-.02	.08	.04	.31	.43	-							
7.	Role conflicts	3.09	0.86	-.14	-.15	.15	.31	.26	.24	-						
8.	Meaningfulness	4.54	0.53	.02	.10	.03	-.01	.10	.04	-.18	-					
9.	Influence	3.88	0.67	.02	.09	-.03	-.24	-.18	-.10	-.27	.38	-				
10.	Role clarity	3.84	0.77	.20	.10	-.07	-.09	-.06	.01	-.19	.31	.34	-			
11.	Sense of community	4.08	0.84	-.07	.13	-.05	-.05	-.01	-.01	-.20	.29	.31	.33	-		
12.	Job satisfaction	3.62	0.75	.05	.16	-.03	-.22	-.11	-.07	-.25	.40	.46	.48	.44	-	
13.	Intention to leave	2.59	1.23	-.23	-.13	.06	.19	.11	.14	.30	-.22	-.30	-.25	-.30	-.53	-

Notes: N = 451–463; Variables number 4-13 had a response scale from 1 (never/to a very small extent) to 5 (always/to a very large extent); Significant correlations where $p < .05$ are shown in bold text.

We conducted hierarchical regression analyses in order to identify the job demands and job resources that could predict job satisfaction and intention to leave among the principals. The analyses were conducted in three steps, and the results are presented in Table 4. In the first step, age (continuous variable), gender (male = 1; female = 2), and position (preschool leader = 1; other school leader = 2) were used in the analysis as control variables. The results showed

that none of these variables were significant predictors of job satisfaction, while age predicted intention to leave. Older principals reported lower intention to leave, while gender and position were not significantly related to the outcome variables. In the second step of the analysis, perceived job demands, that is, quantitative, cognitive, and emotional demands, together with role conflicts, were identified. The results showed that quantitative demands were related to job satisfaction, while role conflicts were associated with intention to leave. In the third step, perceived job resources, that is, meaningfulness, influence, role clarity, and social community were examined. The results indicated that all four job resources were related to job satisfaction, while a lack of two job resources, namely, influence and social community with senior managers, was associated with intention to leave.

Table 4. Results of hierarchical multiple regression analyses.

	Job satisfaction				Intention to leave			
	β	ΔR^2	F change	Adj. R^2	β	ΔR^2	F change	Adj. R^2
Step 1 Background		.02	3.46*					
Age	-.01				-.21**	.07	9.79	
Gender	.70				-.07			
Position	.05				.02			
Step 2 Job Demands		.08	9.30			.08	9.84	
Quantitative demands	-.13**				.09			
Cognitive demands	-.01				-.03			
Emotional demands	-.02				.07			
Role conflicts	-.02				.13**			
Step 3 Job Resources		.31	55.29			.10	13.13	
Meaningfulness	.17**				-.06			
Influence	.19**				-.14**			
Role clarity	.27**				-.04			
Sense of community	.22**			.40	-.20**			.22

Note: * p = .05, ** p < .01

Therefore, it appears that in general, it is job resources, or rather a lack of them, that are related to both job satisfaction and intention to leave. Of the demands, only high quantitative job demands (i.e., high workload) were associated with lower job satisfaction, while increments in role conflicts were

the one demand related to intention to leave. All of the resources, that is, meaningfulness, influence, role clarity, and social community with senior managers were related to job satisfaction. In contrast, lack of resources, that is, lack of influence and social community with senior managers, was related to intention to leave.

The questionnaire responses indicated that specific factors influenced job satisfaction and intention to leave the job. To deepen our understanding of what these results mean in relation to principals' daily work, we contextualised them using interview responses.

Findings from the interviews

Job demands and job resources from a contextual perspective

The questionnaire responses indicated that job resources such as role clarity, influence, meaningfulness, and social community with senior managers are all related to job satisfaction. JD-R theory states that influence at work contributes to motivation, and thus to job satisfaction (e.g., Bakker and Demerouti 2014; Demerouti and Bakker 2011), while lack of job resources, such as lack of influence at work, can reduce motivation, thereby increasing people's intention to leave the job. Working as a principal is often associated with unforeseen incidents that require immediate responses. A preschool principal described the challenges presented by unforeseen interruptions as follows:

> *It's when the phone is constantly ringing with different problems that need to be solved immediately, and you don't have time to solve one problem before new ones arrive…Yes, you feel a bit inadequate when things don't work out in the preschool because it's them (the children) for whom we are mainly working. (Principal, preschool)*

These unpredictable events that principals are unable to influence interfere with scheduled activities and tend to increase their workload because planned activities need to be postponed. Furthermore, principals' working conditions are characterized by the absence of a stable planning environment. High quantitative job demands can also limit the time available to engage in daily operations, such as meeting with students and teachers, even though pedagogical work and leadership is associated with meaningfulness. Thus, the principals' ability to influence their working conditions, and therefore have a "good day at work," is limited. An elementary school principal described a good day at work as follows:

> *A good day at work is when I have the time to participate in the operational work, when I have the time to speak with teachers and students, and I can check that everything is okay, as I have many students with autism and severe ADHD. To be able to meet and speak with them means a lot to these students, with whom I have a close and good relationship…A good day at work is when I actually have the time to be a pedagogical leader, to participate in the operational work, that's a good day. (Principal, elementary school)*

JD-R theory (Bakker 2015; Bakker and Demerouti 2014; Schaufeli and Taris 2014) states that a sense of meaningfulness and role clarity contribute to motivation, which was confirmed by our finding of their significant relationship with job satisfaction. However, a lack of role clarity and/or a sense of purposelessness at work can reduce motivation and exacerbate negative outcomes such as wanting to leave the job (e.g., Bailey et al. 2017). With the transformation of the principal's role from primarily one of being part of the teaching community with responsibility for pedagogical leadership toward being part of a generic administrative and managerial community in which the principal's responsibilities also include financial and operational results in line with NPM ideology (Hall 2012, 2013, cf. Hood 1995), their occupational identity has become blurred (Alvehus and Andersson 2018; Jarl et al. 2013; Lundahl et al. 2013; Novak 2018; Stenlås 2009).

On one hand, the principal's position is associated with a formal and managerial professional identity underpinned by school regulations, but on the other hand the position is associated with a devotion to helping students (cf. the concept of calling; Brown 2017; Edvik et al. 2020; Thompson and Bunderson 2019). Like other human service occupations (e.g., Hasenfeldt 2019), the principal's position exhibits a dual identity that includes both a managerial identity built on the logic of bureaucracy (through the formal position) and a professional teaching identity based on a "higher" purpose, educating children and leading pedagogical development. This dual identity, together with unpredictable working conditions, lack of time, and contradictory priorities, appears to contribute to the experience of role conflicts and lack of meaning. From a long-term perspective, these characteristics increase the risk of experiencing disengagement and cynicism, thereby contributing to negative outcomes (Bailey et al. 2017). One elementary school principal described a bad day at work as follows:

> *A bad day at work is when I need to report a lot to the administration, which I can't see will lead anywhere. I will answer things one after the other. I will find information for someone who should be able to find the information easily themself. It feels so pointless focusing on reports, asking myself what this will lead to, instead of being able to hold a (pedagogical) workshop at my own school. (Principal, elementary school)*

As the above quote illustrates, it is not only the principal's position that has been transformed, but also the institutional landscape (Alvehus and Andersson 2018; Ekholm et al. 2000; Jarl et al. 2013; Stenlås 2009). The decentralization of both responsibilities and resources, together with increased juridification (Novak 2018), has led to the creation of new administrative positions within school organisations (Alvehus and Andersson 2018). As a result, principals not only need to act in response to teachers' demands, but also have to respond to the needs of the new administrative positions, which both increases the principals' workload and leads them to question the meaning of work (cf. TALIS 2018). One elementary school principal described their relationship with administrative staff as follows:

> *Sometimes I have the feeling that the more administrators that are employed, the more work principals are supposed to generate for them. Of course, their job is important, but sometimes it feels like I have to provide a basis for them to be able to do their job. (Principal, elementary school)*

As the principal's position involves an entanglement of professional and administrative logics, principals risk getting caught between conflicting demands, which relates to role clarity based on JD-R theory (Bakker 2015). On one hand, teachers expect principals to act in accordance with the interests and needs of the teaching profession, while on the other hand, principals need to respond to the expectations of the bureaucracy. This conflict becomes evident in situations where a lack of financial resources hinders the principal's ability to meet the organisation's pedagogical needs, as described by one preschool principal:

> *So, the children's right to have their individual potential developed within the financial resource framework is a demand that can't be met as I understand it. To do so, we would need to employ more staff, which, quite simply there are no finances for. So, that would be the greatest conflict, the economy versus the mission of a preschool. (Principal, preschool)*

As the above quote illustrates, the decentralization of resources and responsibility to local school organisers (cf. Alvehus and Andersson 2018) has resulted in a challenging situation for principals whereby a lack of financial resources hinders the fulfilment of the intentions outlined in the school legislation. Because principals are responsible for distributing the available resources, budget restrictions make it impossible to reconcile the students' need for support with appropriate working conditions for the teaching staff. In an effort to cope with this situation without losing legitimacy (cf. Meyer and Rowan 1977), principals are using decoupling strategies, and some resistance, to handle budget regulations without breaking formal budget routines. One preschool principal described the challenges as follows:

> *…we had children with special needs, and we didn't have the resources to employ extra staff, but sometimes I fight with my employer to get extra resources, which we occasionally get. Not that the school is in deficit, as we normally break even, but I always sense that we will be in deficit if I employ extra staff in relation to what the finances allow. However, I did that anyway to enable the staff to cope with the workload, and to ensure that the children get what they need. (Principal, preschool)*

Another process that follows from the decentralization of responsibility and resources and has led to a significant increase in principals' everyday workload is the juridification of the education system (Novak 2018). In addition to enabling the government to control how resources are used, legislation creates pressure to which principals must respond if they are to be viewed as legitimate

(e.g., Meyer and Rowan 1977; Scott 2013). The effect of juridification is evident via the mandatory formal principal program in which school legislation and the exercise of authority is one of the main subjects (Swedish National Agency for Education).

However, of more importance in relation to principals' everyday workload is the influence of authorities such as the Swedish National Agency for Education and the Swedish Schools Inspectorate, both of which play a significant role in regulating and controlling local school organisers' performance. As a result, the juridification process has reinforced the changes in the institutional landscape and contributed to the distinction between work related to teaching and administrative work, the latter of which is an essential element of bureaucracy. Furthermore, these distinctions contribute hereby to the construct of the principal position as the division of administrative and teaching work creates boundaries between actions, and as such, affect how relations between actors within the education system are formed. One elementary school principal described their relationship with The Swedish Schools Inspectorate as follows:

> *At the Swedish Schools Inspectorate, there are lawyers who look at whether you are legally doing the right thing or not, and they are not educators; they are not. They don't criticize us when they look at us, because legally we are basically doing the right thing…Have we established an action plan? Yes, we have. Have we conducted an investigation, a mapping? Yes, we have. Should a student need more support, they (the Inspectorate) don't take a stand, as they only consider whether we have the right documents. The School Inspectorate's work is a bit pointless. (Principal elementary school)*

As the principals' responsibility is increasingly regulated by legislation as a result of the ongoing juridification of the education system, their cognitive workload is gradually becoming overwhelming. One preschool principal described the situation as follows:

> *The most significant demand is that the work requires me to have so much knowledge. It's the National Agency for Education, it's regulations and legislation, it's social-related tasks; yes, I must have such an incredibly broad range of competence. I read the regulations of course, but sometimes I feel like everything that I should be aware of is not located in the one spot. You always need to look for things, for example, you have to look at the Swedish National Agency for Education to see if there is any news. It sometimes feels a little overwhelming. (Principal, preschool)*

Principals are regarded as representatives of the employer, but their own position as employees seems to be neglected. Instead, principals are viewed as part of the management community, where the work environment is not part of the discourse. Two of the respondents described the situation as follows:

> *Over the years, you could say that the employer hasn't in a systematic way engaged with our psychosocial work environment. They have chosen not to do anything at all when it comes to our work situation.…They see us as managers, not as employees. (Principal elementary school)*

> *Well, it's zero unfortunately. I can't remember any workplace meetings for principals. I have, together with others, addressed this issue in safety committee meetings with the chief safety representative and other representatives, but unfortunately there is no interest in the psychosocial work environment. (Assistant principal, elementary school)*

The above quotes indicate that issues concerning principals' organisational and social work environment are seldom discussed or addressed by their senior managers, something that was confirmed by the Teacher Union survey in 2020. Thus, the principals' have found themselves in a work environment blind spot.

Concluding Discussion

This study addresses a knowledge gap by investigating factors related to both principals' job satisfaction and their intention to leave the job using a mixed methods approach and JD-R theory as the theoretical framework (Demerouti and Bakker 2014). Based on the results of this study, it can be argued that Swedish school principals are at risk of falling into a blind spot in their work environment despite numerous reports revealing the increasing challenges to their working conditions (Alkan Olsson 2013; Arvidsson et al. 2019; 2014; Persson et al. 2020, 2021; Skolledaren 2020, 2021). One issue that has attracted considerable attention (Swedish Teachers' Union [Lärarförbundet] 2014, Swedish National Agency for Education [Skolverket] 2020; Skolledaren 2020; TALIS 2018) is the high turnover rate among Swedish principals. The TALIS (2018) found that high turnover rates are associated with high workloads and excessive administrative tasks in relation to the time available for pedagogical development. However, a majority of Swedish principals found their job satisfying (TALIS 2018).

The questionnaire responses indicated that job resources appeared to be more important than job demands in relation to both job satisfaction and intention to leave. Even though high quantitative job demands were associated with reduced job satisfaction, all of the job resources that were examined, that is, perceived role clarity, influence, meaningfulness, and social community with managers, were significantly related to job satisfaction. These findings are in line with those of Beausaert et al. (2016), who found that social support was associated with reduced levels of perceived stress and burnout in principals. Further, the questionnaire responses indicated that a lack of job resources, that is, influence, and social community with senior managers, was associated with a higher intention to leave the profession. In addition, one of the demands, role conflicts, was associated with a higher intention to leave. In line with previous studies, these results suggest that there is an imbalance in terms of job resources in principals' organisational and social work environment (Bejerot et al. 2015; Björk 2013; Dellve et al. 2013).

According to the questionnaire responses a sense of social community with senior managers contributes to increased job satisfaction, while a lack of it contributes to an increased intention to leave the job (cf. Beausaert et al. 2016). These results reflect the organisational boundaries within which principals are working. Theirs is a position that relates to parallel social communities; a local school community in which the principal is a representative of the employer (school organiser) in relation to their subordinates, and an organisationally central school management community where the principal is an employee in relation to senior managers. Thus, being positioned in a borderland between communities represents a risk factor because the principal has no distinct homestead from which they can receive support. However, it can also be argued that this borderland position provides multiple communities from which they can receive support, which JD-R theory (Demerouti and Bakker 2011, 2014) suggests should contribute to increased job satisfaction.

This position of being both an employee and a representative of the employer has significant implications for how principals' organisational and social work environment is addressed by school employers. Based on the interviews we conducted, in practice, the work environment requires principals to represent school management, while simultaneously treating them as an employee. The Work Environment Act (1977) and the provisions on Systematic work environment management (2001) and on Organisational and social work environment (2015) state that as the employer's representative, principals are responsible for providing an appropriate work environment for their subordinates. The same regulations also state that managers are to be viewed as employees, and therefore to be included in systematic work environment operations (for example workplace safety inspections and safety committees, workplace meetings, and risk assessment).

However, in practice, these two positions (employee and employer's representative) are incompatible, as principals cannot simultaneously hold two distinct and conflicting positions; they cannot participate in safety inspections and safety committees as both the employer's representative and an employee toward whom these actions are aimed. These findings are in line with the results of the Teacher Union survey in 2020, which concluded that only 43 per cent of Swedish school organisers conducted risk assessment in relation to the principals' work environment. Therefore, it can be argued that principals have been left in a work environment blind spot as a result of being required to occupy these two incompatible positions when their employers seldom view principals as "traditional" employees. However, this blind spot does not reflect a lack of awareness regarding principals' challenging working conditions because various studies, as well as union and government reports, over the last decade have frequently addressed these issues (e.g., Arvidsson et al. 2019; Berntson, Wallin and Härenstam 2014; Corin 2016; Corin and Björk 2016; Gallent and Riley 2014; Persson et al. 2020; Skolledaren 2020, 2021; Skolverket 2020; TALIS 2018; Teacher Union 2014). Rather, the blind spot reflects an absence of organisational practice in which principals are viewed as employees. The distinction between these two categories is produced and reproduced by actions that are socially constructed as being either related to managers or related to employees. In this sense, principals are associated with performing managerial

tasks, and thus are primarily considered to belong to the management community. As a consequence, principals are excluded from the institutionalized arenas in which organisational and social work environment operations are conducted.

Among the strengths of this study is the use of the mixed methods approach. By integrating the questionnaire and interview responses, we were able to gain a deeper understanding of the issues (Greene 2007). Previous studies using JD-R theory have generally focused on questionnaire-based surveys. However, the mixed methods approach used in this study enabled us to contextualise the central concepts of JD-R theory. Interview responses supplemented the questionnaire responses to enable a greater understanding of how the principal's position has been transformed as a result of political reforms, and how it has become an impossible task when financial resources are lacking at the same time as legislation is emphasizing the principal's responsibility, when time required for pedagogical development is spent on administrative tasks initiated by new school administrative positions and authorities, and when the work day is characterized by constant interruptions, and thus there is limited time to carry out scheduled tasks. The accounts by interviewees contributed to a deeper understanding of how job demands and resources relate to both job satisfaction and intention to leave the job.

This study also has some limitations that should be taken into consideration. The questionnaire response rate was rather low, and due to the cross-sectional design of study we cannot make causal claims about the directions of the relationships discovered. Furthermore, the interviews were mainly conducted by phone, which limited the opportunity to engage more deeply with the interviewees. Furthermore, the analysis of both questionnaire and interview data has limitations as unique work characteristics for each school level (preschool, compulsory school, upper secondary school) and organiser (public, private) were not considered. If possible, future studies should consider a longitudinal design based on a mixed methods approach, which will enable both a process-based qualitative inquiry and a quantitative survey that can analyse causal relations.

The results of this study revealed an aspect of principals' organisational and social work environment that has not received sufficient coverage in previous research, namely, the problem of simultaneously being considered both an employee and an employer's representative. To further explore how these conflicting positions relate to first-line managers' working conditions, we suggest that more attention should be paid to investigating how principals' organisational and social work environment relates to the construct of the manager's role.

The findings of this study provide a deeper understanding of the shift in institutional logic within the school sector that has created boundaries between the principals' occupational role and their managerial role in accordance with NPM thinking. The separation of their professional and managerial roles has contributed to principals' organisational and social work environment becoming an organisational blind spot. This is not only a problem for the principals, but also a risk factor for the organisations because stress and ill-health among leaders tend to affect the entire organisation.

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