School Superintendents as Translators of Policy From the National to the Municipal Level: Emerging Discourses About an Evidence-Based Practice

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Abstract

Policy discourses focus on (and set limits to) what is considered acceptable to say and to do. Within a discourse, a dominant idea can influence how the discourse unfolds. The present study examines the dominant idea that education should be an evidence-based practice. We explore how this dominant idea at the national level is translated into local practice by school superintendents at municipal education departments in a Swedish context. Sixty-five of Sweden's 290 municipalities were chosen for this study based on their geographical location and size. We found 16 documents from nine authorities that explicitly mentioned evidence-based practice. A discourse analysis of these documents identified six themes that may indicate how school superintendents interpret and translate the dominant idea. The discourses are evidence-based practice in terms of (i) 'mirroring', (ii) 'professional competence', (iii) 'collaboration', (iv) 'literature review', (v) 'method', and (vi) 'quality work'. Thus, there are a number of different ways in which the national policy is translated at the municipal level. What we observe in the discourses, however, expresses provisional attempts at defining *evidence-based practice*, thereby suggesting that, at the local level, education management teams are prepared to accommodate ideas from alternative areas instead of relying on and developing methods and ways of working that (historically) have been used in education. A critical insight for practice is that we should examine the grey areas between research and policy; specifically, where policy materials imitate research in an attempt to influence practice under the disguise of 'evidence'.

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School Superintendents in the Education Governance System

Many organisations face continuous and disruptive external pressure for change, which is also true for the Swedish school system. There are constantly new reforms and requirements from the government that need to be responded to. School operations are measured and weighed, including evaluations at the international level, where countries are pitted against each other. Apparently, 'everybody' knows how schools should be run, and new initiatives for change are constantly being introduced. Furthermore, many lobbying organisations are intent on influencing what takes place at school and how school work should be performed. Governance in the Swedish education system is implemented from the national level all the way down to the teachers' everyday interactions with their pupils. A key player in the education system is the school superintendent, a role

which refers to an official at the municipal level who is responsible for coordinating the interests that exist at different levels in the education system (Nihlfors, 2022; Moos, Nihlfors & Paulsen, 2016; Nihlfors, 2003). The school superintendent is expected to monitor whether national laws and regulations are complied with but simultaneously act as a proactive and responsible leader (Foss & Krantz, 2022). The present study examines how superintendents deal with a specific aspect of national policy, namely the following extract from the Education Act of 2010:

> Utbildningen ska vila på vetenskaplig grund och beprövad erfarenhet [Education must be based on a scientific basis and [be informed by] proven experience.] (Education Act 2010: 800)

Although it has been stated by law for over ten years in Sweden that education must rely on a scientific basis and be informed by proven experience, the enactment of this law is still evolving. Consequently, it is of value that we examine the discursive practices related to this law to reveal the formal and informal norms and assumptions that exist in this area since. The aim of this paper is to examine how school superintendents at the municipal level interpret the dominant idea of 'evidence-based practice' as associated with the concept of 'scientific basis and proven experience' as per the Education Act in their local regulatory documents. Note that these documents constitute the local conditions for the provision of education.

Policy Discourses in Education

Policy is of interest to researchers because it mirrors ideas that emerge in society at specific points in time. It is thus relevant to study policy discourses since they provide frameworks with which we structure how we think and talk about ourselves and how we recognise whether what we are and what we do is 'good' or 'effective' (Ball, 2015). Ball (1998) argues that we need to pay attention to the global level and examine how the challenges that emerge in conjunction with globalisation also give rise to the challenges that exist in the area of education. This approach will give us an increased understanding of how and why changes occur and not just a description of what such changes entail.

In medicine, evidence-based practice has been called a 'global movement', in which quantitative research, randomised controlled trials, meta-analyses, 'hard' numerical data and high-stakes standardised testing are advocated for (McKnight & Morgan, 2020). Despite being subject to critique, pitfalls, and unintended adverse effects, policymakers have come to embrace the evidence-based practice movement in education as well. However, critical voices against the transfer of the evidence-based movement from healthcare into the area of education have been raised (Biesta, 2007, 2010). McKnight and Morgan (2020) argue that if education policymakers are to make informed decisions, then they must connect with and learn from the evidence-based movement in medicine to acquire an understanding of the ambivalences and risks associated with the direct transfer of ideas to education policy. However, commending a model that is sourced from outside a teacher's comfort zone serves to keep them ontologically insecure, Ball (2003) claims. Another critique is based on the insight that education is based on different assumptions than those that lie behind the provision and delivery of healthcare, and thus teaching cannot be seen as an act that is equivalent to an intervention or the provision of treatment (Biesta, 2010). The learning that takes place at school is normative in nature, something which entails that the school system's goals and the means of achieving these goals are intimately connected (Biesta, 2007). Biesta also claims that if an evidence-based practice is used as a frame of reference for how knowledge gained by research activities is to enter into the educational sphere, then this will limit the decision-making process so that it will only address questions about efficiency and will exclude any opportunities for participation (thereby going against democratic principles – which are in themselves normative and not evidence-based).

In the early 21st century, hints of *evidence-based practice* with reference to the school system appeared in the Swedish policy discourse. This is a discourse that, on a general level, may seem to be unproblematic since teaching has historically been built on a range of theoretical and practical evidence. For the implementation of evidence-based practice, systematic literature reviews have identified areas which are central to enabling practitioners to use research results (Hemsley-Brown, 2004, 2005; Hemsley-Brown & Sharp, 2003). These areas include the identification of obstacles; an understanding of the research design and time-planning in

projects; the degree of trust and cooperation between different professions; and the dissemination of knowledge. These areas have been transferred to practice through quality assurance work in schools in England, for example. Sundberg and Adolfsson (2015) found that evidence-based education in schools can inform research, the development of research-related competencies, the connection between practical problems and research results, and development that is based on research processes.

Although there is a significant critique of the assumptions that drive the notion of evidence-based practice, it is mandated by law and thus remains something that school organisations have to comply with. School superintendents have been described as key agents because of their role in the governance framework (Nihlfors & Johansson, 2014; Nihlfors et al., 2013), especially with regard to their work in implementing national policy objectives at local school units. On the municipal level, however, additional political concerns must be made. It is generally accepted that politicians are responsible for what takes place at school, while school superintendents are responsible for how the work is done at school. Nevertheless, in practice, role confusion is common (Skott, 2014). Furthermore, school superintendents are not merely transmitters of national directives. In self-reports from Nordic school superintendents, they view themselves as professional learning facilitators who focus on learning conditions for school leaders, teachers, and students/pupils (Paulsen et al., 2014). Individual school superintendents who perceive themselves to have a clear understanding of the priorities consider the local conditions, and the context in which policy is expected to be implemented is of crucial importance (Ball et al., 2011).

When the Nordic context is examined, it can be characterised in terms of a shift from the democratic sphere towards an administrative sphere (Moos et al., 2016). The shift is often explained as a result of the introduction of New Public Management, a collective term for governance reforms introduced in public administration to make operations more effective through governance, measurement, and reward systems. It should be highlighted that the philosophy and practice of New Public Management are not congruent with the Scandinavian school traditions of commitment to collaboration, democracy, and individual enlightenment (Moos et al., 2018; Moos et al., 2004). Consequently, school superintendents not only have to connect the national and local levels but also mediate between different requirements that are based on contrasting philosophical assumptions. In addition, how individual superintendents interpret and implement educational reform policies varies as each function has to relate to the local context, culture, and politics (Johansson & Nihlfors, 2014; Bredeson et al., 2011). Policy studies have shown that policies are not implemented in a rational sense but, instead, are *enacted*. In this way, policies are translated into practices (Ball et al., 2012). This process of *translation* is key to understanding how policy is discursively formed at the local level.

How Ideas Spread Across Organisations – A Theoretical Framework

Theories about *translation* can inform our understanding of the processes that lead to the formulation of policy documents and how these documents can influence the translator's practice. Here, *translation* does not refer to the performance of a linguistic task where one changes a text from one language to another, but rather, it refers to the idea that language possesses a social dimension (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996). Emphasis is placed on the social function that is performed by language, thereby moving away from the linear model of communication where a message is transferred from point 'A' to point 'B'. Instead, translation is viewed as an interactive process where the interaction between action, meaning, and participant(s) results in maintaining or changing institutions (Zilber, 2002). From this perspective, translation is thus a way of understanding the movement of ideas and concepts from one context to another (Czarniawska, 2005).

The ideas that drive change forward are usually called *dominant ideas*. A dominant idea is a notion that is often shared by many actors within a sector, a time period, or with respect to a particular question. A dominant idea may also obtain a specific meaning in a local context (Zilber, 2006). The process of adapting and translating a dominant idea is of some importance

if it is to provide additional cause for action. Without such, instability and confusion may arise (Czarniawska, 1998). Certain adjustments may be necessary for a particular context, but also for different professions, for example, politicians, engineers, the media, and so on (Czarniawska, 2010). In practice, this entails identifying what is in common or shared in a context and where one needs to provide suitably adapted solutions.

If change is to take place, one criterion that needs to be met is that the dominant idea should be perceived as meaningful (Zilber, 2002, 2006). The institutionalisation of new ideas may involve the individual if the translation (of the dominant idea) takes on a dimension which touches on identity (as constructed by the individual) (Lok, 2010). When a person's identity is concerned, then negotiation of a new identity (position) emerges where the individual, to varying degrees, may accept or reject part of, or the whole of, a new dominant idea. Thus, ideas can be seen as moving through different contexts, and whilst some ideas may remain unchanged (and thereby represent the dominant idea), other ideas *are* subject to change, depending on the context and the individual's reaction to the new idea. Ideas must therefore be formulated in a specific way, at a specific point in time, and in a specific context if they are to achieve a specific aim (Ball, 2016).

The dominant idea under scrutiny in the present paper is the above-mentioned 'evidence-based movement' in education. This idea resonates with the professional identity of educators, as they see themselves as actors in the field of knowledge, and therefore, the idea is readily accepted. The enactment of the idea is, however, not as straightforward. This paper presents an analysis of the translation of a dominant idea from national policy to the municipal level. Specifically, we examine the discourses that emerge in local regulatory documents. To interrogate how ideas travel through organisations (and in some cases are transformed or otherwise modified) is one way to understand the meaning-creating processes which are so tightly bound up with the actions taken by the organisation as it fulfils its legislative obligations and responsibilities.

Context and Method for the Study

The Swedish education system is composed of a number of different types of schools and providers of education and thus contains many levels of management, both at the national level and at the local (municipal) level. At the national level, regulation is primarily conducted via the passing of laws, national regulatory documents, and the control of funding. The municipality is the executor of the will of the legislator and is responsible for ensuring that education is provided in accordance with the provisions made in the Education Act and other decrees. At the municipal level, management and leadership deal with the distribution of resources, the articulation and implementation of local regulatory documents, and the provision of support to school principals by arranging professional development. At the school level, there are school leaders who make decisions concerning the institution's internal organisation and are responsible for the distribution of resources within the institution according to the pupils' various circumstances and needs.

In 2010, the Swedish Education Act stipulated that education must be on a scientific basis and informed by proven experience. Lately, interest in this part of the act has intensified. The choice of the terms, *scientific basis* and *proven experience* (Swedish original: "vetenskaplig grund och beprövad erfarenhet"), can be seen as an attempt to develop and adapt global ideas at a national level, more specifically in the area of education. Several national organisations, including Skolverket (the Swedish National Agency for Education) and Skolforskningsinstitutet (the Swedish Institute for Educational Research), have provided definitions of the terms, *scientific basis* and *proven experience*, and have suggested possible ways of working in light of these definitions. Parallel to this, policy work is conducted by municipal administrations under the leadership of school superintendents. The regulatory documents that were examined for the present study instantiate the local, municipal policy texts. Focus is placed on what each text expresses via different discourses, not on how the regulatory documents and the ideas therein are perceived in practice. We chose to closely examine the school superintendent's work because (i) there is a dearth of academic/scientific knowledge about Swedish school

superintendents in general and because (ii) local policy work is of interest to those who wish to understand the adaptations made between global/national trends and local practices.

Method and data selection

Data was collected from 65 school superintendents in different municipalities. Our selection of municipalities was based on the 2016 classification made by the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions. The purpose of our selection was to collect data from a variety of differently-sized municipalities. The geographic location of the municipality was another variable that we took into consideration, thereby allowing us to include municipalities from all of the major regions in Sweden. In our request for information that was sent out by email, we asked the school superintendents to provide their own definitions of the documents that they thought were relevant to the areas delineated by the terms, *scientific basis* and *proven experience*.

The municipalities that did not answer the first request for information were contacted again by email, and those who failed to respond to our second request were subsequently contacted by telephone. The actual collection of the documents took place in the autumn of 2016. Since some time has passed since the data for this study was collected, including the changes associated with the global pandemic, changes may have taken place with regard to how these professionals work on *a scientific basis* and with *proven experience*. Notwithstanding this, we argue that the results of our study are relevant since the different discourses, in some form or another, remain in existence. Alternatively, one may consider this study as an analysis of a dominant idea that prevailed at a point in time. The Swedish National Agency for Education published a book in 2020 that provides a knowledge overview that is intended to support the teaching profession and inspire educators to perform work that is based on science and proven experience. In this book, the dimension of school governance is also addressed. The authors mention the necessity of organising the school's operations according to the local context, the available roles and resources, the process of systematic quality work, and knowledge access, development, and dissemination.

Among the municipalities that we contacted, and after repeated reminders, 16 school superintendents submitted various documents, which provided us with a total of 53 documents. The documents included mission statements, specifications of goals, strategic documents, operational plans, action plans, and others. (See Table 1 for a complete overview of the various types of documents that were submitted.) The discourses presented in the results section (below) should be understood as taking a step forward in understanding the translation of policy. The low response rate must, however, be taken into consideration when reading the results of this study. We have speculated why we did not receive materials from some municipalities. One reason could be that the people who were sent a request for information had not made any connection to the Education Act in the documents which were asked for, and they thus declined to respond to our email request(s) because of this. Another reason could be that they did not know in which documents the connection to the Education Act was made (or not). This, in turn, may be the case because each administration produces a large number of documents and many people may have been involved in the different parts of the documents that were requested. A third possible explanation is a lack of time or 'survey fatigue'. Our request for specific documentation would have entailed a thorough search through a number of different local documents and this work may have been considered too onerous a task for some municipalities to take on.

Analysis

Fairclough's (1995, 2001) theory of three discourse dimensions was used to explore how dominant national ideas about 'evidence-based practice' are translated to local practice at the municipal level. The first dimension – *discourse as text* – constitutes the written texts found in the documents that were submitted by the various municipalities. This dimension answers the question *What?* in the documents. The second dimension – *discourse practice* – comprises the conditions for the production or consumption of text. This dimension is thus focused on

interpretation and the grounds for interpretations and subsequent translations. This dimension relates to the question *How?* in the documents. Finally, the third dimension – *sociocultural practice* – comprises the extrinsic social and cultural conditions from which interpretations are derived. This dimension refers to the question *Who?* in the documents. In this paper, the first two dimensions are explored in more detail, namely: (i) what sort of actions are described and linked to the terms *scientific basis* and *proven experience*, and (ii) what kind of meaning is ascribed to the terms *scientific basis* and *proven experience* in the local documents. The third dimension refers to the sociocultural setting in which the discourse emerges and to the individuals to whom this discourse is relevant. In the theoretical section, we mention how the dominant idea of 'evidence-based practice' has moved into the field of education, thereby entailing that it affects various social contexts within the area of education. The documents that we studied primarily concern the local context of each (respective) municipality and, more specifically, the management level at the intersection between school managers and school principals.

Our analysis began with a reading of the documents to sort them into three categories: (i) documents that did not refer to or use the terms *scientific basis* and *proven experience*, for example, minutes of meetings and budget reports; (ii) documents which might be interpreted as touching on ideas related to the terms *scientific basis* and *proven experience* but, in fact, did not use these terms explicitly, for example, in descriptions of systematic quality assurance work; and finally in (iii) documents where the terms *scientific basis* and *proven experience* were used explicitly. The first and second category of the documents could be understood as part of the framework ensuring that education should have a scientific basis and be informed by proven experience, but since it was not explicitly mentioned, it is difficult for us to draw such a conclusion with any certainty. These two categories were subject to no further analysis. The final category included 16 documents from nine municipalities, in which we identified six local discourses (A-F) as discussed below. Each document was assigned a unique numerical identifier, and this number and page number are given in parenthesis each time a document is quoted.

Table 1. Document types which were included in the analysis. The documents have been made anonymous with respect to the municipality they originated from.

Doc	Document type	A	B	C	D	E	F
1	Principles for the distribution of resources	X	-	X	-	-	-
2	Background analysis	-	-	X	-	-	-
3	Development plan for Maths	X	-	-	-	-	-
4	Educational goals	X	-	-	-	X	-
5	Plan for research and teaching	-	X	-	X	X	X
6	School strategy	X	X	-	X	X	-
7	Professional development (PowerPoint material)	X	-	-	X	-	-
8	Professional development (PowerPoint material)	-	-	-	X	-	-
9	Evaluation criteria	-	X	-	-	-	-
10	Departmental plan	-	-	X	-	-	-
11	Committee plan	-	-	X	-	-	-
12	Pedagogic leadership	-	-	-	-	-	X
13	Project report	-	X	-	X	X	X
14	Agreement on workplace learning	-	X	-	-	X	-
15	Professional development (PPP)	X	X	-	X	X	-
16	Professional development (PPP)	-	-	-	X	-	X

A coding system was applied to the context in which *scientific basis* and *proven experience* appeared. For example, when the terms were used as a condition for career progression, then the text was coded as 'career'. These codes were then compared with each other, and those texts which had shared coding were gathered together as one group. Certain groups of texts had similar meanings, and so these were also put together *post hoc*. For example, one grouping is

'professional competence', which contains both 'professional development' and 'career structure'. Finally, we discovered that these groupings represented six distinct discourses which, in turn, represent possible interpretations of the terms, *scientific basis* and *proven experience*. The content of these categories is discussed below.

Results

The analysis of 16 regulatory documents from nine municipalities shows that the dominant national idea about 'evidence-based practice' is translated in different ways. Thus, the six local discourses that we identified reveal different ways to approach *scientific basis* and *proven experience*. The discourses present evidence-based practice as 'mirroring', 'professional competence', 'collaboration', 'literature review', 'method', and 'quality work' (see Table 2). The content of each discourse is summarised below, and they are different in character and in terms of what level they address. These differences may indicate that the school superintendents are still in the process of exploring what working on a *scientific basis* and *proven experience* entails. In the descriptions of each discourse, we refer to the relevant document(s) by using a unique numerical identifier (as per Table 1) and the page number.

Table 2. The results of the discourse analysis.

Discourse type	Description (What?)	Text source (How?)
Mirroring	When the terms *scientific basis* and *proven knowledge* are used in certain regulatory documents, this occurs without any further explanation regarding what these terms signify.	"Quality [at the local authority] must be ensured by establishing teaching which has a scientific basis and is informed by proven experience, in accordance with the Education Act." (Doc4: p.5)
Professional competence	Career progression is interpreted as expressing the notion that having a scientific basis and proven experience are issues related to professional competence. Reviewing the opportunities for professional development and career pathways is thus one way to improve organisational conditions in this regard.	"The Education Department's plan should promote a scientific approach in employees and managers at all levels by increased knowledge of the role of research." (Doc5: p.1) With respect to competence development activities, such activities should not just be concerned with improvement and learning in general, but it is also important that they include elements which have a scientific basis and have been proven in one's own practice. (Doc15) Two documents provided information about career posts and evaluation criteria which emphasise the point that school staff must possess knowledge of and participate in scientific research. (Doc9, Doc13)
Collaboration	Cooperation with a university is one approach to ensuring that education has a scientific basis and is informed by proven experience.	In municipalities where there is a university, internship placement education is available where theoretical professional knowledge is closely bound to practical knowledge in the teacher's training courses. However, such cooperation must also give rise to shared research and development projects and the professional development of employees. (Doc14) Municipalities which do not have their 'own' (i.e., local) university state their position somewhat more generally: "Cooperation with colleges and universities" (Doc15) or "[C]ooperation with universities and colleges should increase, so that throughout the educational system a foundation is created for higher education." (Doc4)

Table 2. continued

Discourse type	Description (What?)	Text source (How?)
Literature review	Literature reviews which are written by officials provide a foundation for the analysis of results or for supporting a decision. These officials show links to literature of various kinds, including scientific articles, government reports, and other texts.	The regulatory documents that were collected included an overarching intelligence analysis (Doc11), and analyses of three specific areas: 'equality' (Doc1), 'mathematics' (Doc2), and 'reading' (Doc10).
Method	The use of research-based methods and approaches is one way of ensuring that education has a scientific basis and is informed by proven experience. What is common to the methods that were suggested is that they contribute to the development of new knowledge which is taken from the authors' own context.	One municipality required that collegial learning and practical, action-based research method be the foundation for pre-school and school development (Doc15). This approach will result in a school that has a scientific basis and is informed by proven experience, under the school's own conditions. A particular strategy (Doc6) was followed up on by a detailed action plan for the realisation of methods such as research circles, collegial learning, learning rounds, research and development work, interactive approaches, research conferences, on-going evaluations and research, amongst others. (Doc5, Doc13)
Quality work	It can be difficult to distinguish between systematic quality assurance work from other research and development work with respect to education which has a scientific basis and is informed by proven experience	"The conclusion is that the pedagogic work and systematic quality assurance work are dependent on each other." (Doc12: p.4) "Research and development work should be a continual part of the systematic quality assurance work at the unit level and at the administrative level, and should be conducted in a strategic and long-term fashion." (Doc5: p.1) "A school with a scientific basis should be linked to the systematic quality assurance work and strategies." (Doc16: p.6-7)

In the 'mirroring' discourse, the terms *scientific basis* and *proven experience* are used, but no further explanation about what they mean is provided. Concepts from the national policy documents are inserted in local policy documents without further explanation, as if they are unambiguous. A discourse that mirrors the concepts proposed by the governing body can be a submissive act – it may stem from uncertainty about the concepts – but it may also reflect a strategic choice made to leave the interpretation of these terms up to the school management and teachers at each educational unit.

The 'professional competence' discourse indicates a perspective where a scientific basis and proven experience become questions about the employees' competence. The concepts are integrated into a career system where a scientific degree (at various levels) is a criterion that must be satisfied if a certain job position is to be retained. Hiring a person in a 'scientific' position becomes a signal indicating that evidence-based practice exists.

The discourse labelled 'collaboration' also signals an evidence-based practice through professional practice, but rather than having the competence situated within the municipal organisation or at the schools, this discourse emphasises the establishment of partnership relations with academic institutions as a way to secure the scientific basis in education. We note in our analysis that municipalities that are geographically close to a college or university are the municipalities that most often express intent to establish collaborative regional partnerships.

Instead of establishing an evidence-based practice via institutional collaboration or individual positions, the last three discourses manifest a scientific basis and proven experience through the performance of different practices. In the first of these discourses, 'literature review', the municipal policy documents display the practice of working in a scientific manner

by utilising literature reviews that include an academic referencing style. With respect to literature reviews, they entail that regulatory documents contain analyses of specific areas where a certain amount of academic literature has been taken into consideration so as to either provide an overall picture of an area of interest as background to why a specific decision has been made by the municipality or as the foundation of a particular conclusion. The texts exude an air of being 'scientific', but no clear distinction is made between texts of various types; for example, research articles, official reports, and reports from various interest groups can all be included in the same literature review. The authors of these reviews may use their critical judgement with respect to the sources they use but, to the reader, they are all presented as being sources of equal merit.

In the 'method' discourse, we note that action research (or variations thereof) is encouraged as a desirable way of working. The rationale behind this approach is that engaging in development processes will result in a more robust scientific basis for education. However, maybe more importantly, it might be a way to prove existing experience through systematic testing and reflections.

The final discourse, the 'quality work' discourse, integrates *a scientific basis* and *proven experience* as a part of already-existing practices concerned with quality improvement. In these regulatory documents, systematic quality assurance work acts as a framework within which one can engage in activities to establish education as having a scientific basis and being informed by proven experience.

Discussion

The six different discourses identified thus far reveal how the dominant idea about having a scientific basis and proven experience is translated and ascribed meaning in the different local regulatory documents. The act of translation is not surprising, considering the local conditions, i.e., the context in which the policy is to be used (Ball et al., 2012; Ball et al., 2011; Johansson & Nihlfors, 2014; Bredeson et al., 2011). These ideas are formulated so as to achieve a specific goal, at a specific time, in a specific context (Ball, 2016). The dominant discourse, as an ideology, needs translation into practice if it is to be realised. This necessarily entails a re-formulation at the local level so that the regulatory document's content and purpose can be realised at the local level. The dominant idea about 'evidence-based practice' emerges at different levels of the hierarchy and in different parts of the organisation. In the 'mirroring' discourse, the terms *scientific basis* and *proven experience* were used but with no explanation provided. In such cases, no translation (as defined above) had taken place. Refraining from translation could be an active choice, revealing an intent to leave room for manoeuvring at the individual school units. The problem with this approach is that it may decouple resource allocation on the municipal level and the development of practices of *a scientific basis* and *proven experience* as part of school improvement. Although researchers such as Ball and Biesta are critical of the (non-reflective) transfer of the evidence-based movement from healthcare into the area of education, we understand that they are not against science and proven experience in the development of education. To realise a fruitful development in this area, however, structures and resources must be discussed. This is a central task for school superintendents. One concrete example of a change in structure is how new employment positions that require a scientific education are introduced in municipalities and schools.

Career positions to ensure a scientific basis

The discourse on 'professional competence' indicates that career positions are a means to ensure that education will have a scientific basis. The two documents that address career pathways and evaluation criteria are very specific with respect to what is entailed if a school's operations have a scientific basis and are informed by proven experience. It is stated that the school staff must possess knowledge of, and participate in, scientific research. Concerning careers, there is a direct connection to research, since we observe that it has become more common for teachers to enrol in research programs with the goal of obtaining a licentiate degree or a doctor's degree. This is viewed as meritorious and, in some cases, is stated as a necessary criterion that must be fulfilled

if a person wishes to work as a head teacher or as a lecturer within the compulsory school system. The pursuit of research studies has thus become a career pathway within the school system, and in policy documents this is connected to the idea of evidence-based practice. The introduction of career positions for scientifically educated people could explain two of the other discourses that we identified, namely, the practice of using literature reviews and the introduction of scientific methods in school development. The character of the literature reviews is interesting, however, as it raises questions about source criticism and source ambiguity.

Imitation of research to signal a scientific basis

The style of the 'literature review' discourse in the municipal regulatory documents that provide a basis for municipal decisions regarding school development needs to be discussed. This discourse can be characterised as 'imitative research' in the sense that such research superficially resembles what is usually presented in academic research texts. However, if one looks more closely at the texts, then one notes a lack of a systematic, critical attitude in the authors.

These literature reviews give the impression that they present an overview of the research done in a particular area. Irrespective of whether they are intended to provide an overview or not, they appear to do so since such reviews are presented in a manner that imitates research reviews in that they employ a system of academic-style references. These texts provide information which is often descriptive in character. However, if one examines these texts a little closer, then a number of issues can be readily identified. One issue is the dominance of literature published by public authorities; for example, the Swedish National Agency for Education is frequently referred to in this context. This is perhaps not unexpected since this agency is responsible for operationalising national legislation in the Swedish school system. The issue that rears its head is apparent when this type of agency report is mixed together with academic research articles *as if they were the same type of text*. Let us explain. We note that Biesta (2007) has argued that learning is normative in nature, and public authorities are tasked with a normative assignment that is expected to co-exist with knowledge generated by research. Whilst public authorities (at different levels) have to formulate regulatory documents that are in compliance with the laws of the country and the intents of the involved politicians, it is the task of research to present independent knowledge at a general and theoretical level. With respect to research (in general), this criterion also entails that texts that are produced at different institutions are representative of different sets of assumptions and theories and, thus, are *partial* in character. However, whilst we recognise that normative state regulations and scientific material can and should both be part of school development, it should also clearly state what type of material is involved and why it has been included.

A far more significant problem is the fact that, in the literature reviews that are presented in regulatory documents, public authorities and particular interest groups are mixed together as if they were of equal stature. Lobbying organisations promote their own cause in a manner that resembles academic research but without being bound by the code of ethics and rigour that is expected to be followed by the academic research community. Reference to research can be used to present a skewed argument. The position of strong lobby groups in society and their impact on the public sector should be discussed openly because lobby groups can impact and sidestep legitimate democratic processes.

Notwithstanding this rather dark description, we do not suggest that every public official and educational professional is obliged to examine vast amounts of research material and evaluate it because this would be too time-consuming. The official research summaries published by public authorities (for example, by the Swedish Institute for Educational Research) play an essential role for school superintendents, their administration, and the teaching profession.

An emphasis on the scientific basis – what about proven experience

In the Swedish Education Act, it is stated that education should be built on *a scientific basis* and *proven experience*, but in the discourses which we identified in the municipal regulatory documents, reference is primarily made to *a scientific basis* in various ways. The connection between practical problems and research results, as mentioned by Sundberg and Adolfsson

(2015), could, however, constitute an attempt to include experience. At both the national and the local levels, there seems to be a great deal of uncertainty about what is meant with the term *proven experience*. In the definition provided by the Swedish National Agency for Education, it is unclear how this term is differentiated from *a scientific basis*, because it must be "similar to research results in being universally applicable, generalisable, and thus transferable between different schools" (the Swedish National Agency for Education). Hemsley-Brown (2005) notes that when there is a large amount of uncertainty in the world, then the importance of experience diminishes. Instead, people want to have certainty and turn to science for facts; science is seen as the source of unambiguous answers, rather than a dialogical and fluid collaborative development where results emerge but are also questioned and continuously developed.

Conclusions

The implementation of local policy documents is part of the work that school superintendents are expected to perform in their pursuit of adapting national ambitions to local contexts, including ambitions concerning *a scientific basis* and *proven experience*. In this paper, we have regarded a scientific basis and proven experience as representing the dominant idea of 'evidence-based practice'. Our study has reported on how this dominant idea at the national level is translated into local practices. We identified six discourses which reveal how the dominant idea about evidence-based practice is translated and ascribed meaning by school superintendents in different local regulatory documents. These discourses are evidence-based practice as: (i) 'mirroring', (ii) 'professional competence', (iii) 'collaboration', (iv) 'literature review', (v) 'method', and (vi) 'quality work'. This range of discourses and ascribed meanings are understood as representing an emergent understanding of evidence-based practice in a local context. What we have found are provisional attempts at defining *evidence-based practice* and possible vulnerabilities in education management at the local level. With respect to using research results, one should remember that the school superintendent who is responsible for policy on the municipal level may not necessarily be a trained researcher. However, this person is still expected to understand and apply research results. This opens up the possibility for misunderstanding and influence from lobby organisations that imitate research in their communications (some of which may be directed at school superintendents). The grey zone between research and the work of lobbying organisations is a critical area that should be subject to close scrutiny since they [lobbying organisations] influence practice with their materials under disguise of 'evidence'. Our study has also shown that there is strong emphasis on and expectation of 'science' to find a way forward, but will this come at the expense of education's *social* assignment, which entails that pupils are taught to be competent and democratic citizens?

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