

# Researching research-based professionalisation of music teachers – a Swedish framework to explore policy enactments in three contexts through a (critical) policy sociological lens

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## Abstract

This article proposes and discusses a theoretical framework that combines elements from critical policy sociology and discourse theory to study enactments of policy for research-based music teaching in three Swedish policy contexts. Sweden, being the first country to incorporate legal demands for research-based education into its Education Act in 2010, provides an intriguing case study for the professionalisation and legitimisation of music teachers through academisation processes. The law revision was largely instigated by the policy pressure to address Sweden's decline in international educational quality rankings. Thus, subsequent policy efforts recurrently echo governmental ambitions to restore Sweden's former status as a renowned international knowledge economy. In the suggested framework, policy is defined and analysed in multiple forms, that is, as texts, discourses, practices, and problematisations. The framework also explores a combination of discursive psychology and policy theory to analyse rhetorical negotiations of 'spoken policy texts' among music teacher colleagues. It is hoped that the proposed framework can contribute to future studies on the effects of policy on music teachers and music education.

**Key words:** music education policy sociology; music teacher professionalisation; discursive psychology

## Introduction and background

This article describes and discusses a theoretical framework developed within an ongoing Swedish research project for studying the effects of Swedish state policy for research-based teaching on the Swedish music teacher profession. More specifically, the referred project explores policy enactments (Ball et al., 2012) within three different policy contexts relevant to Swedish music teachers. The influence of Swedish education policy on music teachers has been previously discussed in this journal, when Garvis et al. (2017) analysed and compared compulsory school music curricula in Sweden and Australia, highlighting the need for music education research comparing policy regulation of music teaching in different countries. The research project providing

context for the framework under discussion also contributes to ongoing international research on the effects of policy for evidence-based teaching on music teachers, recently illuminated in the Australian context by Fuller's (2022) discovery of an epistemic gap between the prevailing music curriculum in New South Wales and the governing policy pressure promoting an evidence-based 'what works' approach to teaching. In this area of education policy research, Sweden presents an interesting case, given that the academisation of all categories of Swedish teachers in state-governed schools are prescribed in the school law itself. To guide readers and provide context for the emergence of the current framework, the following sections will present some particular circumstances in the Swedish music education

realm, making Sweden an interesting case for researching the impact of policy for evidence-based teaching on the music teacher profession.

## Professionalisation through academisation in Swedish education policy

Since 2010, the Swedish Education Act has stipulated that all education in Swedish schools shall rest on “[a] scientific foundation and [on] proven experience” (SFS 2010:800 [The Swedish Code of Statutes, author’s transl.]). The policy concept of *scientific foundation*, rather vaguely defined in Swedish education policy, could be considered a *boundary object*, that is, a context-dependent and indefinite object that nonetheless appears robust enough to maintain a coherent identity across contexts, thus concealing its inherent vagueness (Star & Griesemer, 1989). Moreover, as shown above, scientific foundation often appears in tandem with *proven experience*. However, the demarcations of the respective concepts are loosely defined in Swedish education policy texts, making them hard to separate (Persson & Persson, 2017). Since Swedish education policy texts nevertheless clarify that all education must rest both on a scientific foundation and on proven experience (Skolverket, 2012), it becomes compelling to focus on ‘scientific foundation’ as a separate policy instrument from the perspective of music education research. The revision of the Act was part of a series of state policy initiatives aimed at improving the results in Swedish schools and professionalising Swedish teachers. Throughout this article, *professionalisation* refers to efforts to increase the status and autonomy of teachers as a professional occupation while *professionalism* refers to teachers’ knowledge and competence (Englund & Solbrekke, 2015). The idea that research and practice are closely linked is not new in the Swedish school context, and discussions concerning the academisation of Swedish teachers have been going on in various

forms since the 1940s (Carlgren, 2010). However, the escalation of such discussions over the last three decades (Adolfsson & Sundberg, 2018), leading up to the revision of the Education Act in 2010, was largely prompted by Sweden’s decline in international educational quality rankings and the subsequent school crisis discourse that emerged in Swedish politics and the media during the mid-2000s (Lundahl & Serder, 2020; Nordin, 2014; Ringarp, 2016). Related policy initiatives aimed at professionalising Swedish teachers through processes of academisation include the founding of the Swedish Institute for Educational Research [Swedish: Skolforskningsinstitutet], the establishment of the research area of *educational sciences*, and the launching of graduate schools for teachers (SOU 2005:31; SOU 2018:19 [Swedish Government Official Reports]).

## Praxis dilemmas and policy resistance in the Swedish music education context

In addition to Sweden’s legal requirement for a scientific foundation in education, the Swedish music teaching profession presents an interesting case for studying policy processes for teacher academisation, particularly when considering Nordic conceptualisations of school music education and the historical attitudes of Swedish music teachers towards governing education policies. The first of these considerations involves the potential challenges of facilitating research-based professional development processes that take into account the entire range of didactic dimensions between *ars* and *scientia* in Nordic school music education as conceptualised by Nielsen (2010). For example, government evaluations have shown a lack of didactic awareness regarding music creation and polyphonic singing – that is, subject areas specifically related to dimensions of craftsmanship and artistry – among Swedish music teachers (Skolinspektionen, 2019; Skolverket, 2015). The second consideration pertains to the

autonomy music teachers in Sweden historically have shown with respect to governing policy (Skolinspektionen, 2011, 2019; Skolverket, 2004, 2015). For instance, at the start of the new millennium, the Swedish National Agency of Education reported that few music teachers in Sweden used the music curriculum as a starting point for their teaching (Skolverket, 2004). In light of this, the governing impacts of state policy for research-based education on Swedish music teachers emerge as an intriguing area of research.

### **A framework for studying music education policy enactments in multiple contexts**

Building on critical policy sociology (Ozga, 2019), the remaining sections delve into the specifics of the theoretical framework proposed in this article. In summary, the framework draws on the work of established scholars like Stephen J. Ball (and colleagues), Carol Bacchi, and, notably, Patrick Schmidt, contributing to the proposed epistemology from a music education perspective. Additionally, the framework incorporates and applies elements from discursive psychology, less frequently utilised in policy studies, with the aim to bridge the gap between spoken and written texts in policy analysis. For context, before elaborating on the details of these theoretical components, I will begin by outlining a few relevant aspects related to the design of the ongoing Swedish research project from which the framework originates. Specifically, the research project explores three Swedish educational policy contexts in separate sub-studies, of which one is published and two are in progress. The contexts explored include the website of the Swedish National Agency for Education (Larsson & Sjöberg, 2021); publications issued by Swedish teacher unions and a music teacher organisation (currently in progress); and group conversations among music teacher colleagues at upper secondary schools (currently in progress). These three policy contexts could arguably be

interpreted as representing different hierarchical levels of policy-making in the research project. However, from the ontological view put forward in this article, policies are not implemented at a particular time or place; rather, they 'begin' at different points after which they unfold in different trajectories, often colliding or overlapping with other policies producing a mess of incoherencies, contradictions, or confusions. Thus, enactments and recontextualisations of policy are regarded as dynamic, non-linear, collective, and collaborative events that take place through interaction and interconnection between different actors, texts, discourses, and practices across the contexts involved (Ball et al., 2012).

### **Policy as text, discourse, and practice**

Elaborating on the work of Ball and colleagues, this paragraph will clarify a few central concepts deployed in the framework presented. First, *policy* is conceived, following Ball et al. (2012), as:

[...] texts and 'things' (legislation and national strategies) but also as discursive processes that are complexly configured, contextually mediated and institutionally rendered. Policy is done by and done to teachers; they are actors and subjects, subject to and objects of policy. Policy is written onto bodies and produces particular subject positions. (p. 3)

The quote illustrates the acknowledgment of Foucauldian thinking in the work of Ball. Here, *policy as texts* refers to the ways policy materialise as codes of negotiated meanings and compromises or, in Ball's (2017) words, as "cannibalized products of multiple (but circumscribed) influences and agendas" (p. 16). Although such texts seldom dictate concrete music teaching behaviours, they circumscribe and delimit the rational and intelligible opportunities available. In this manner, policies restructure and redistribute power and agency amongst music teachers and other actors. This is also the case when state policy of research-based education is recontextualised or enacted in arenas relevant to the Swedish music teaching profession. Parallel to this structural and linguistic

view, policy can also be considered as *discourses* – that is, regimes of truth that delineate the possibilities for thought and action on the one hand and provide resources for the production of meaning on the other.

Policy discourses organize their own specific rationalities, making particular sets of ideas obvious, common sense and ‘true’. [...] Policies are very specific and practical regimes of truth and values [...]. They construct the problematic, the inevitable and the necessary. (Ball, 2017, p. 8)

Policy discourses, in turn, bring *practices* into play, which Schmidt (2020) expands on from a music education research perspective, acknowledging that “policies and their practices have become a way to encode or demonstrate who has a voice and whose voice matters” (p. 5) and that such aspects of power and governance often contribute to a negative outlook on policy work from the perspective of music teachers. However, Schmidt emphasises that policy discourses can also be used strategically by music educators, provided that they have developed sufficient *policy knowhow*, defined by Schmidt as “a disposition and a capacity to understand, speak, and act with a policy frame of mind that is relevant to teachers, their programs, and their work” (Schmidt, 2020, p. 11). Here, policy knowhow can prove a fruitful resource for music teachers in their schools and communities, helping them “to identify ‘distorted communication’ and how it generates control rather than a shared accountability within school governance” (p. 21). Furthermore, he contends that policy work must encompass ethical perspectives. Here, policy knowhow can help to raise music teachers’ consciousness of the intrinsic tensions concealed in different policy proposals (Schmidt, 2020).

## Policy as the construction of problems

Like Schmidt (2020), Bacchi (2000) emphasises that discourses not only delimit or constrain action but also provide strategic resources for agency and resistance. She further argues that the implied or stated problems addressed by various policy initiatives should not be taken at

face value. Instead, Bacchi proposes that policy problematisations should themselves be subjects of problematisation. Bacchi argues that this shift in focus – from considering policy as problem-solving to instead considering policy as (proposed) problem-construction – can make visible the political interests concealed in policy discourses.

The premise behind a policy-as-discourse approach is that it is inappropriate to see governments as responding to ‘problems’ that exist ‘out there’ in the community. Rather ‘problems’ are ‘created’ or ‘given shape’ in the very policy proposals that are offered as ‘responses’. (Bacchi, 2000, sid 48)

In the framework presented in this paper, Bacchi’s (2009) “*What’s the problem (represented to be)?*” (WPR) approach, which elaborates on the theoretical works of Michelle Foucault, Nicholas Rose, and Mitchell Dean among others, plays a significant role. Bacchi’s WPR approach operationalises the following set of analytical questions:

Question 1: What’s the problem [of “music teachers professional conduct”, “the lack of legitimacy for school music education”, etc] represented to be in the data material?

Question 2: What deep-seated presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the “problem” (problem representation)?

Question 3: How has this representation of the “problem” come about?

Question 4: What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the ‘problem’ be conceptualised differently?

Question 5: What effects (discursive, subjectification, lived) are produced by this representation of the “problem”?

Question 6: How and where has this representation of the “problem” been produced, disseminated and defended? How has it been and/or how can it be disrupted and replaced?

(Bacchi and Goodwin, 2016, p 20; the first question adjusted to illustrate its relevance to music education policy research)

Bacchi recognises that these six questions

involve both overlap and repetition, and clarifies that their presentation as separate steps, as well as the sequencing of the steps, primarily serves a heuristic function and should be treated accordingly. Moreover, she encourages researchers to select from, utilise, and adapt these questions for the specific research at hand (Bacchi, 2009). In alignment with these recommendations, the framework proposed in this paper adopts different modes of the WPR approach, albeit tailored to scrutinise the discursive constructions of 'policy problems' and 'policy solutions' that surface within contexts where the call for research-based education, as prescribed by the Swedish Education Act (SFS 2010:800 [The Swedish Code of Statutes]), intersects with the professionalisation of Swedish music teachers.

### **Discursive psychology – a tool for studying policy as spoken texts and discourses**

In the last section, I will turn to discursive psychology (Potter, 1996), proposing that the integration of this approach to discourse analysis offers a valuable resource when researching local enactments of policy in situated conversations. Discursive psychology takes a micro-perspective on the analysis of discourse, focusing on the verbal negotiations and rhetorical moves that take place in everyday conversation amongst people in particular locations. The approach opposes the view that such conversations would reflect already established attitudes or truth claims of the subjects involved. Rather, social psychological phenomena are constituted in and through the communicative interactions taking place in everyday social life (Potter, 1996; Billig, 2001). Discursive psychology has been previously used in Nordic music education policy studies, for example by Di Lorenzo Tillborg (2021) who combines concepts from this approach with the work of Foucault alongside Ball and colleagues to explore contexts related to the non-compulsory Swedish Art and Music Schools (SAMS). Drawing on Ericsson and Lindgren

(2011), Di Lorenzo Tillborg adeptly operationalises discursive psychology to provide a micro-analytical focus on rhetoric within a Foucauldian framework – treating focus group conversations as discursive practices relating to policies and discourses on institutional levels.

While this approach serves Di Lorenzo Tillborg (2021) well, I propose an alternative strategy to incorporate tools from discursive psychology into a music education policy study: namely, by a direct integration of concepts from discursive psychology and Ball's (1994) conceptualisation of policy as both text and discourse. Starting with the first of these modes, I suggest that analytical tools from discursive psychology can help illuminate how professional subjects rhetorically recontextualise and enact policy into local, unwritten, 'policy texts' materialising in the discussions (Ball et al, 2012). Here, an analysis of rhetorical moves to leverage or undermine credibility – for example by *extremising* or *abnormalising* various aspects of the discussed issues, or changing the *footing* (Potter, 1996) - could shed light on the compromises, positionings and 'patterns of ideology' (Billig, 2001, p. 220) at play when music teachers negotiate local enactments of policy issues at stake. Second, I suggest that this focus could be complemented with a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of the situated policy discourses constituted by such texts (Ball et al., 2012). Here, the concept of interpretive repertoire (Wetherell & Potter, 1992) could prove useful for mapping the language resources that music educators commonly access when enacting policy into local discourses affecting their professional conduct and identities. Finally, I suggest that Ball's (2007) argument - that policy discourses gain credibility through rhetoric, repetition, and simplification, rather than inherent logic - reinforces the epistemic potential of applying discursive psychology to analyse local enactments and constructions of policy in situated interactions among professionals.

## Policy enactments of research-based music teaching in three Swedish policy contexts

To contextualise the theoretical components discussed in this section of the paper, I will conclude by reconnecting the proposed framework to the ongoing study from which it emerges. As mentioned earlier, one of the policy contexts explored (Larsson & Sjöberg, 2021) is the website of the Swedish National Agency of Education – a central governmental policy actor when it comes to the interpretation of the Education Act into governing policy and the implementation of such policy in Swedish schools. The analysis was inspired by Bacchi's (2009) WPR approach as illustrated in the analytical question "Which problems of teacher professionalism are articulated or implicated in the material to legitimise [the Swedish] policy of scientific foundation?" (Author(s), 2021, p. 5). From a policy-as-text perspective (Ball, 1994), the study shows the construction of a policy apparatus that incorporates the policy concepts of *evidence* and a *research-based way of working*. Furthermore, the policy discourses of ideal teacher professionalism that emerge in the texts are centred around accountability, performativity (Ball, 2003) and circumscribed autonomy in the policy texts. In these discourses, teachers' professional critique is equated with adherence to the research-based approaches recommended by governing education policy, and scientifically founded teacher professionalism comes across as generic, de-contextualised and commodified – that is, following neoliberal rationales (cf. Ball, 2007).

The referred project's second sub-study (currently in progress) focuses on publications issued by two Swedish teacher unions and a music teacher association. These publications construct a professional-political policy context in which issues related to the professional interests of Swedish teachers and music teachers are represented, promoted, challenged, or negotiated. The data material of the study comprises a selection of texts that relate school music education or music

teaching to various claims supported by references to research or statements from researchers. As the publishing teacher organisations determine the published content, and how it is framed or presented in the analyzed texts, they are regarded as the main policy actors in this sub-study. Similar to the first sub-study, the analytical process is guided by analytical questions inspired by Bacchi's (2009) WPR approach.

Lastly, the third sub-study (currently in progress) will explore policy enactments among music teacher colleagues at four geographically diverse upper secondary schools in Sweden. Thus, the data material comprises recordings of four group discussions, each approximately one hour long, moderately structured, and revolving around topics pertinent to professional music teaching practice and research-based education. In the forthcoming analysis, I aim to combine concepts from discursive psychology and policy theory, as outlined earlier, to study how Swedish policy for research-based teaching is enacted and recontextualised into local policy texts and discourses, within the transcribed conversations.

## The study of policy in a music education ecosystem – concluding discussion

Some perspectives on policy theory conceptualise policy processes as linear, structured, and rational: 1) a policy proposition is made to address a particular problem; 2) rational discussions lead to a decision on the best possible solution given the current circumstances; and finally, 3) the agreed-upon solution is implemented in a linear and structured manner to address the issue at hand (Mitra, 2018). According to this view, the analytical framework proposed in this paper could be critiqued for not producing knowledge usable for improving policy implementation or expected outcomes. However, the presented framework deviates significantly from such an understanding of the inherent ontology of policy and policy analysis. Rather, education

policy is part of an ecosystem where multiple components coexist and constantly change (Fan & Popkewitz, 2020). Here, music education policy unfolds through messy and entangled processes in constant flow, appearing in various forms and contexts, transcending geographical borders and rational thinking (Regmi, 2019). In such an ecosystem, policy research constitutes a vehicle for textual performances, producing new texts that enter the dynamic interplay of policy and discourse alongside other texts (Petersen, 2015). Thus, education policy researchers must also scrutinise their own problematisations, positionings, and biases (Bacchi, 2009). To conclude: The complex relations of research, policy, practice, and professionalisation unfolding in various music education contexts are vital to explore, also from perspectives recognising “the challenge [...] to relate together analytically the ad hocery of the macro with the ad hocery of the micro without losing sight of the systematic bases and effects of *ad hoc* social situations: to look for the iterations embedded within chaos” (Ball, 1994, p. 15, emphasis in original). From a Swedish music education research perspective, this article has proposed and discussed a critical policy sociological framework that could aid such efforts.

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