

Principals' enactment strategies: enacting education based on scientific foundation and proven experience in Swedish adult education

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim of the study is to examine how principals in Swedish municipal adult education (SMAE) interpret and translate the 2010 Education Act's mandate to lead education based on scientific foundation and proven experience. By analysing enactment as a locally situated process shaped by organisational and marketised conditions, the study offers new insights into policy work within this marginalised sector.

Design/methodology/approach – The study revisits data from a previous study and employs a qualitative approach. Data were collected through ten semi-structured interviews with SMAE principals and qualitatively informed by Ball *et al.*'s (2012) policy enactment framework.

Findings – Principals in SMAE enact the mandate for a scientific foundation and proven experience through four distinct strategies: an information/qualification-based strategy, a symbolic/outsourced strategy, a model-driven strategy and a reflexive and inquiry-oriented enactment strategy.

Research limitations/implications – The study is limited by its small sample and its reliance on interview data collected in 2020, and the findings should therefore be interpreted as exploratory and contextually situated. Consequently, the results are not generalisable but serve as a critical case study with international relevance, given the shared challenges facing adult education systems globally, underscoring the need for further research into principals' enactment strategies across diverse adult education settings and contexts.

Practical implications – Principals can extend their agency within enactment processes by deepening their engagement with policy and embracing their pedagogical leadership role. This enables them to act more deliberately in interpreting, recontextualising and transforming policy into practice.

Social implications – A central contradiction emerges within the policy-governance system: principals are mandated to lead education based on scientific foundation and proven experience while lacking access to research produced within the SMAE context. Closer alignment with the Marrakech Framework for Action, which calls for research processes directly linked to adult education (Rhodes and Tuama, 2025), could help strengthen the sector's research base. Likewise, professional learning programmes enabling principals to lead locally situated improvement work using scientific approaches (Carr and Kemmis, 1986) would support greater leadership agency.

Originality/value – The study contributes to educational leadership research by extending policy enactment theory into the adult education context. It reframes leadership agency in marketised systems and advances understanding of how policy on education based on scientific foundation and proven experience enacted in practice. It highlights how structural and organisational conditions shape principals' agency and indicate the need for stronger sector-specific research, professional learning and governance support to enable sustained, research informed improvement.

Keywords Principals, Adult education, Policy enactment, Scientific foundation, Proven experience

Paper type Research article

Introduction

There is a growing international emphasis on research-based and evidence-informed education as a strategy for professionalising educational practitioners, strengthening institutional capacity



for improvement and ultimately enhancing student outcomes (Biesta, 2015; Brown *et al.*, 2017; Farley-Ripple, 2024; Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012; Moore *et al.*, 2024; Schildkamp, 2019). This emphasis has influenced international organisations to act as key drivers in promoting research-based and evidence-informed educational policy. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), has played a particularly prominent role in this movement (OECD, 2007, 2018, 2024), followed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), through a series of policy frameworks and global reports (UNESCO, 2015, 2024; UNESCO MGIEP, 2021), European Commission (2017), European Union (2024) and World Bank. (2018).

Importantly, UNESCO has increasingly extended this agenda specifically to adult and lifelong learning contexts. UNESCO's *Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education* and the *Global Report on Adult Learning and Education* highlight the importance of strengthening adult education practice through research-based and evidence-informed approaches, including practitioner-led inquiry and action research (UNESCO, 2015; UNESCO MGIEP, 2021). More recently, the *Marrakech Framework for Action – the Global Framework for Adult Education* – recommends that governments establish systematic evaluation and research processes linked to accreditation and certification in adult education (Rhodes and Tuama, 2025). Collectively, these policy initiatives underscore a shared commitment to education policy and practice informed by research, data and evidence.

International research on adult education similarly points to a growing expectation that educational practice should be grounded in research and evidence (Milana, 2019; Rhodes and Tuama, 2025; Roumell *et al.*, 2023; US National Center for Education Evaluation, 2021). In the context of global migration, persistent poverty and socio-economic inequality, strengthening adult education through a research-based foundation is viewed as essential for meeting the needs of increasingly diverse learner populations. As such, adult education is positioned as a key arena for promoting social inclusion and educational equity through informed professional practice.

At the same time, international research and policy documents consistently emphasise that research should function as a resource for professional and institutional judgement rather than as a prescriptive basis for implementation (OECD, 2018, 2024; UNESCO, 2015, UNESCO MGIEP, 2021). Studies by Milana (2019) and the US National Center for Education Evaluation (2021) highlight persistent tensions between policy expectations and local practice, pointing to ambiguity, limited research consensus and contextual constraints. These studies call for closer analysis of how local actors enact research-based policy mandates in practice. Within this context, adult education principals emerge as key policy actors, negotiating competing demands related to research use, accountability and local conditions when enacting policy (Milana, 2019; Roumell *et al.*, 2023). However, despite these insights, there remains a notable lack of research examining how principals in adult education locally enact policies that emphasise research-based education.

This international policy movement has also shaped the Swedish context. In 2010, Sweden introduced a major educational reform mandating that all education be grounded in a scientific foundation and proven experience (Swedish Education Act, SFS 2010:800). Although the reform signalled a strong commitment to research-based education, the concepts of *scientific foundation* and *proven experience* were left undefined, placing responsibility for interpretation and enactment on practitioners and local authorities.

The reform's conceptual ambiguity has prompted Swedish research into how educational actors interpret and enact the mandate, highlighting the central role of principals and the influence of contextual conditions (Bergmark and Hansson, 2020; Forssten Seiser, 2021; Lundqvist and Westerlund, 2022). However, how principals in Swedish municipal adult education (SMAE) enact the 2010 reform remains largely unexplored.

This gap is noteworthy as SMAE differs markedly from other Swedish educational sectors, operating with a distinct mission, governance structure and improvement agenda, within one of the most marketised education systems internationally (Fejes *et al.*, 2016). Moreover, SMAE faces challenges such as high dropout rates and low prior attainment, placing

significant pressure on principals to professionalise staff and improve quality (Mufic and Fejes, 2022). Given these conditions, findings from other sectors are not readily transferable, underscoring the need for context-specific research.

To date, only one study has focused specifically on SMAE in this regard, examining how principals influence the implementation of research-based education (Portfelt, 2025). While it offered valuable insights into how contextual conditions shape leadership practice, it did not analyse principals' interpretations of the 2010 reform's key concepts – *scientific foundation* and *proven experience* – nor did it apply a policy-enactment lens, a significant limitation given the centrality of interpretation, sense-making and context in policy research (Ball et al., 2011, 2012; Braun et al., 2011).

Against this background, the study reexamines an existing dataset through a policy-enactment lens with the aim to investigate how SMAE principals interpret and translate the 2010 mandate to lead education based on a scientific foundation and proven experience. By analysing enactment as a locally situated process shaped by organisational and marketised conditions, it offers new insights into policy work within this marginalised sector.

The study is guided by the following research question: How do principals in SMAE locally enact the 2010 Education Act's mandate to lead education based on scientific foundation and proven experience within their local contexts, that is what enactment strategies do they employ in translating the policy into leadership practice?

By addressing this question, the study contributes to filling the research gap on how adult education leaders locally enact policy emphasising research-based education and offers new insights into the leadership practices of SMAE principals and the complex conditions under which they operate. The findings are of international relevance, as the SMAE context provides a valuable empirical case for understanding policy enactment in marketised adult education systems.

Previous research

Research on principals' roles in advancing research-based education has expanded, yet conceptual and structural constraints still limit principals' capacity to lead research-informed practice. Although the idea of research-based education dates back to eighteenth-century Germany, it gained global prominence in the 1990s and now shapes educational policy internationally (Lundqvist and Westerlund, 2022; OECD, 2018). Related concepts – such as evidence-based education and data-informed decision-making – are often used interchangeably and in Sweden align with the Education Act's requirement that education rest on *scientific foundation* and *proven experience*. Influenced by Hargreaves (1996) and Hargreaves and Fullan (2012), these concepts distinguish between applying established research and generating new knowledge through inquiry, positioning practitioners as co-creators of knowledge. Swedish National Agency for Education's guidance reflects this duality, defining scientific foundation as practice informed by established research and proven experience as systematically tested professional knowledge (SNAE, 2024), though conceptual tensions remain regarding their operationalisation in leadership.

Biesta's (2015) distinction between technical and cultural uses of research further illustrates these tensions. Technical uses emphasise implementing research-derived "best practice", while cultural uses treat research as a resource for interpretation, judgement and inquiry-oriented leadership. The latter is linked to principals' creation of organisational conditions that support collective inquiry (Brown et al., 2017; Schildkamp, 2019; Lundqvist and Westerlund, 2022). Although principals generally express positive attitudes toward research-based education, studies highlight a persistent gap between its perceived importance and what is feasible in practice, largely due to limited time, resources and access to relevant research (Bergmark and Hansson, 2020; Farley Ripple, 2024; Moore et al., 2024, Portfelt, 2025).

These limitations in terms of time, resources and access to relevant research are embedded within broader marketised and neoliberal governance systems that constrain principals'

enactment of the Education Act (Godfrey, 2014; Bergmark and Hansson, 2020; Lundqvist and Westerlund, 2022; Portfelt, 2025). Principals in SMAE face additional challenges arising from diverse organisational arrangements, uneven funding and scarce sector-specific research (Portfelt, 2025, 2026). Consequently, principals are expected to lead research-based education without adequate structural support or specialised preparation, reinforcing the conceptual tensions identified by Biesta (2015).

Research-practice partnerships have been proposed as one way to strengthen research leadership however these too face structural challenges around roles, agency and equitable collaboration (Bergmark and Hansson, 2020; Forssten Seiser and Portfelt, 2022; Portfelt, 2025). An alternative or complementary approach positions principals as leaders of practice-based inquiry, drawing on traditions such as action research (Carr and Kemmis, 1986), though this is ultimately dependent on how principal preparation programmes equip leaders for such scientific work.

Background

The context of Swedish Municipal Adult Education

SMAE operates under a tripartite mission: to compensate for insufficient prior education, to meet labour market demands and to foster democratic citizenship. It is governed by the Swedish Education Act (SFS 2010:800), the Ordinance on Adult Education (SFS, 2011:1108) and a dedicated curriculum (Curriculum for Swedish Adult Education, 2012:101). SMAE provides formal education to adults aged 20 to 64, many of whom have experienced educational setbacks and therefore require tailored pedagogical support.

SMAE is publicly funded and encompasses a broad spectrum of programmes, including Swedish language instruction for newly arrived immigrants, courses equivalent to compulsory and upper-secondary education, special education and vocational training (Portfelt, 2025, 2026). In 2024, approximately 6% of all adult education participants in Sweden were enrolled in SMAE, amounting to around 368,000 individuals (SNAE, 2025). For comparison, 402,000 individuals were enrolled in higher education institutions during the same year (Swedish Higher Education Authority [UKÄ], 2025). Unlike SMAE, higher education primarily attracts students with prior academic success and a demonstrated capacity for independent learning. These two sectors are governed by distinct legislative frameworks, and while research plays a central role in higher education, SMAE remains largely absent from school improvement research (Portfelt, 2025).

This divergence has implications for professional practice, particularly regarding the implementation of research-based approaches. It also highlights the importance of distinguishing between educational contexts in scholarly inquiry.

The leadership roles of principals within SMAE differ significantly not only from those in higher education but also from counterparts in other adult education systems internationally. Following a series of reforms in the 1990s, SMAE evolved into one of the most market-oriented adult education systems globally (Fejes *et al.*, 2016; Mufic and Fejes, 2022). As of 2025, nearly half (48%) of SMAE provision is delivered by private providers (SNAE, 2025). This marketisation has shifted institutional priorities towards maximising student enrolment and progression, often with limited investment in time and resources (Fejes *et al.*, 2016; Mufic and Fejes, 2022).

In this context, the role of SMAE principals has been redefined. Leadership is frequently characterised using terms such as “business leaders,” “executive managers,” “circus directors,” “invisible leaders,” or “dual-role leaders”. The adoption of New Public Management principles within SMAE has further contributed to the erosion of principals’ roles as pedagogical and instructional leaders (Fejes *et al.*, 2016; Portfelt, 2025). This shift has also led to the deprofessionalisation of teaching, as educators are increasingly expected to adhere to standardised instructional models designed primarily for self-directed learners. The consequences of this market-driven approach are concerning, with documented declines in

student achievement and growing evidence of grade inflation within the SMAE system (Fejes *et al.*, 2016). The degree of SMAE principals' turnover is the highest of all school types in Sweden, assumingly based on the difficult context they operate within (Portfelt, 2026).

Taken together, these contextual factors present significant challenges for SMAE principals tasked with enacting the 2010 educational reform, particularly in leading education based on scientific foundation and proven experience. Understanding how these leaders navigate such complexities is essential for advancing both policy and practice in adult education.

Theoretical framework

This study employs a policy enactment framework (Ball *et al.*, 2011, 2012; Braun *et al.*, 2011) to analyse how SMAE principals enact the 2010 Education Act's mandate to lead education based on scientific foundation and proven experience. Rather than presenting a singular or unified model, policy enactment encompasses several overlapping approaches, including interpretive policy analysis, policy-as-practice and perspectives on policy networks and governance (Bartels, 2018; Braun *et al.*, 2011; Ball and Junemann, 2012). This study draws specifically on the conceptualisation developed by Ball *et al.* (2012), in which policy enactment is understood as a process of interpretation, recontextualisation and transformation. In this view, policy is not simply implemented in a top-down manner; rather, it is actively shaped through the interactions of educational actors – such as principals – with policy texts, institutional practices and other stakeholders.

The framework is well suited to this study, as the mandate is conceptually ambiguous and requires local interpretation. Its emphasis on principals' agency in enactment processes – understood as complex, multifaceted and contextually situated (Ball *et al.*, 2012) – makes it particularly relevant given that SMAE operates within a complex, marginalised and marketised sector with distinct organisational conditions. The framework also aligns with the study's aim to examine principals' agency across different enactment strategies.

Principals' agency in policy enactment

According to Ball *et al.* (2011) as well as Spillane *et al.* (2002), principals play a pivotal role in this process due to their capacity to influence how policy is understood and enacted within local school contexts. Within the policy enactment framework, agency refers to the capacity of individuals to act intentionally and make choices within the constraints and affordances of their institutional and policy environments. Principals, as key actors in educational leadership, possess a unique form of agency that enables them to interpret, negotiate and reshape policy in ways that reflect both their professional judgment and the contextual realities of their schools.

Ball *et al.* (2012) conceptualise principals' agency not as autonomous or unrestricted but as situated and relational – emerging through interactions with policy texts, institutional structures and other actors. Principals do not merely implement policy directives; they actively engage in sense-making, drawing on their professional knowledge, values and experiences to determine how policy should be translated into practice. This interpretive work is shaped by the *material, situated, professional* and *external contexts* in which they operate.

Material context includes access to resources such as funding, infrastructure, staffing and technology, which can enable or constrain policy enactment. *Situated context* refers to the local socio-economic and cultural conditions, governance structures and community expectations that influence leadership decisions. *Professional context* encompasses principals' educational background, leadership training and accumulated experience, which inform their capacity to lead pedagogical change, and *external context* involves broader systemic factors, including national policy discourses, historical reforms and political agendas.

Through their agency, principals act as mediators between policy and practice. They make decisions about which aspects of policy to prioritise, how to communicate policy goals to staff and how to align policy with existing school practices. In doing so, they contribute to the

recontextualisation of policy – transforming abstract directives into concrete actions that are meaningful within their specific educational settings.

In the context of SMAE, principals' agency is particularly significant due to the sector's distinct challenges, including marketisation, diverse learner needs and limited access to professional development. These conditions demand a high degree of adaptive leadership, where principals must balance policy expectations with the realities of their institutional environment. Their agency is thus not only exercised in interpreting policy but also in navigating tensions, mobilising resources and cultivating professional cultures that support research-informed practice.

By foregrounding principals' agency, this study examines how SMAE principals enact the mandate to lead education based on a scientific foundation and proven experience, which enactment strategies they employ and how these strategies relate to the complex contexts in which they work.

Method and materials

To examine how principals within SMAE enact the 2010 policy mandate to lead education based on a scientific foundation and proven experience, this study adopts a qualitative research approach. Empirically, the study draws on qualitative interview data from ten principals working in eight local SMAE institutions within a region in mid-Sweden, drawn from a total population of eighteen SMAE principals. All participating principals were members of a regional SMAE principals' network. As a former colleague of theirs in a principal role, I informed the network leader about the study and was subsequently invited to attend a network meeting, where I presented the study to the principals and invited their participation.

Ethical considerations

At the meeting, the principals were informed both orally and in writing about the study's purpose, the voluntary and anonymous nature of participation, the handling of data and their right to withdraw at any time without providing a reason. Principals who chose to participate confirmed their informed consent by signing a written agreement, which also permitted the audio recording and transcription of interviews, as well as the scientific publication of the results. The study therefore adheres to the ethical research principles recommended by the [Swedish Research Council \(2024\)](#).

The study was reviewed by a member of the research ethics committee at Karlstad University and was deemed not to require a full ethical review, as it does not involve the collection of sensitive personal data and has no external funding.

Participating principals

The participating principals had diverse professional backgrounds. Three were relatively new to the role, having worked as principals in SMAE for only three years. Another three were experienced principals but were new to the SMAE context. The remaining four had extensive experience as principals within SMAE. All ten principals had completed the Swedish National Principal Training Programme.

Two of the principals worked in SMAE organisations administered under the municipal education unit. The others were organised under a variety of municipal units, including social welfare, local business, labour, integration, direct municipal management or a combination of units. Only one principal reported that the local administrative unit demonstrated a clear understanding of SMAE's educational mission.

The principals also differed in their leadership contexts regarding how education was offered within the marketised SMAE system. One principal led only procured distance education; six led a combination of procured education and in-house provision; and three led exclusively in-house education. Most local SMAE units were housed in older buildings, often

shared with upper secondary schools or business and labour units. One SMAE unit was located in newly constructed facilities designed specifically for SMAE.

Six of the principals were women and four were men. All principals operated within a shared external context characterised by limited support from the Swedish National Agency for Education, as well as a lack of national statistics and school-based research on SMAE within a marketised education system.

Data collection

The dataset was originally collected for the purpose of this study. However, at the time, it was first analysed in relation to a different research question and theoretical framework, inspired by a new idea. The dataset is therefore re-analysed in the present study in order to fulfil its original purpose.

Individual interviews with each principal were conducted in 2020. While semi-structured, the interview questions allowed principals to define and articulate their interpretation, recontextualisation and transformation of the policy into lived practice, aligning with theory of policy enactment. The interviews were characterised by dialogue, where I, as a researcher, focused to understand individual principals' view and adjusted the order of interview questions to the specific interview situation. The atmosphere in the interviews was characterised by openness and a willingness to express their views.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews were conducted using the digital conference platform Zoom to which all had user experience of. Each individual interview lasted between 40 and 60 min, depending on the principals' responses and the extent to which they elaborated on the interview questions. The interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed. In one instance, technical issues resulted in only partial recording of an interview; in this case, notes were taken, summarised and incorporated into the analysis.

Data processing and analysis

Data processing and analysis were informed by the theory of policy enactment. Analysis was conducted in several iterative stages.

First, all interview transcripts were read repeatedly to gain familiarity with the data and to develop a holistic understanding of each principal's account of the 2010 educational policy. Particular attention was paid to how principals described their sense-making of the policy in relation to their professional experiences and local school contexts. Second, relevant excerpts were identified and organised in relation to each principal's contextual background, including situated, professional and material conditions. Individual mind maps were created for each principal to visualise processes of their policy interpretation, recontextualisation and transformation in relation to the concepts in the 2010 legal act; scientific foundation and proven experience (Ball *et al.*, 2012). These mind-maps functioned as analytical tools to capture how policy were interpreted, recontextualised and translated into practice at the local institutional level. Third, analysis focused on identifying similarities and differences across principals' enactment processes. Individual mind maps were compared and synthesised into an integrated collective mind map. This stage involved iterative movement between individual and collective representations and the original interview transcripts, enabling the refinement of emerging patterns. Attention was paid to discrepancies between what was explicitly articulated and what remained implicit, as well as between described practices, silences and omissions. Through this process, four distinct patterns emerged in how principals enacted education based on a scientific foundation and proven experience. These patterns were further explored to understand principals' agency in terms of enactment strategies, corresponding to the research question: *How do principals in SMAE locally enact the 2010 Education Act's mandate to lead education based on a scientific foundation and proven experience within their local contexts; that is, what enactment strategies do they employ in translating the policy into leadership practice?*

Reflexivity and trustworthiness

The process of sorting, mapping and distinguishing distinct patterns was inherently interpretive and shaped by the researcher's analytical judgement. Transparency and trustworthiness are enhanced through the use of concise, illustrative quotations in the result section. Quotations were selected for their capacity to exemplify each enactment strategy and some overlap with a previous study.

The study draws on interviews with ten SMAE principals conducted in 2020 and reflects their enactment processes at that time. As principals' understandings may have developed since then, the findings are temporally bounded. Although follow-up interviews would have been valuable, it is however not possible. Only one participant remains in an SMAE principal role; the others have retired or moved to other school forms, reflecting the high turnover in Swedish SMAE. The study therefore makes no claims to generalisability, instead offering a rich, contextualised account of policy enactment in SMAE at the time of the study.

Findings

The analysis resulted in four distinct enactment strategies through which principals in SMAE enact the 2010 Education Act's mandate to lead education based on scientific foundation and proven experience. These strategies are labelled as (1) an information- and qualification-based strategy, (2) a symbolic and outsourced strategy, (3) a model-driven strategy and (4) a reflexive and inquiry-led strategy. Together, they illustrate how principals enact the policy mandate in qualitatively different ways.

In this section, each enactment strategy is presented and described in detail through the lens of Ball *et al.*'s (2012) policy enactment framework. To enable transparency between the findings and the data, short selected interview excerpts are provided to illustrate and exemplify how principals interpret, recontextualise and transform the policy in their leadership practices.

Information- and qualification-based enactment strategy

The first strategy involves principals enacting the 2010 Education Act primarily through interpreting and recontextualising policy as text, with limited emphasis on transformation. The concepts of a scientific foundation and proven experience are interpreted as separate and largely unrelated. *Scientific foundation* is associated with formal policy texts, legislation, curricula and formal academic teacher qualifications, whereas *proven experience* is framed as informal knowledge emerging from teachers' everyday interactions. This interpretation shapes principals' agency as an enactment strategy centred on the instrumental mediation of policy texts rather than on collective meaning-making.

Policy is interpreted and recontextualised through its summarisation and communication in written form, which is summarised and communicated through written information, such as weekly letters, as one principal (5) explains: "I read the policy documents and write shortly about it to my teachers, who do not have the energy to read so much text." In enactment terms, principals position themselves as policy interpreters, while the task of transforming abstract policy demands into pedagogical practice is left to individual teachers.

Possession of a Swedish teaching certificate is viewed as sufficient evidence that policy is enacted by the teachers, with little consideration of how policy is transformed into practice. As one principal (6) states: "... a teacher certificate implies that the teacher is skilled when it comes to this; otherwise we do not need this certification system, I think." Accordingly, principals focus on employing certified teachers as a means of recontextualising policy.

Proven experience is enacted as optional and informal, emerging through teachers' own initiatives rather than through leadership-organised transformation. Sharing experience is assumed to occur naturally among teachers, as one principal (5) notes: "I think [teachers] share a lot and have meetings, exchanging tips and ideas."

Notably absent are principals' descriptions of structured opportunities for teachers to systematise and transform proven experience into practice, to enable collective discussions on what a scientific foundation might mean in relation to the local SMAE context, nor do they initiate common dialogue of how policy could inform practice. There are no accounts of principals facilitating structured collegial forums that would enable teachers to jointly interpret, negotiate, recontextualise and transform policy.

From a policy-enactment perspective, this strategy is characterised by textual interpretation and recontextualisation without organising for, or leading, transformation. Policy is enacted through information transmission and reliance on formal qualifications, while responsibility for transforming policy is displaced onto individual teachers. As a result, enactment risks becoming fragmented and dependent on individual interests and capacities, rather than emerging through coordinated leadership and collective organisational work.

Symbolic and outsourced enactment strategy

In contrast to the previous leadership strategy, this second strategy is based on interpreting *scientific foundation* and *proven experience* as conceptually interconnected. Proven experience is positioned as the empirical object of scientific inquiry, and collaboration with higher education institutions and researchers is interpreted and translated by principals as a central means of enacting the 2010 Education Act.

Principals describe such collaborations primarily in terms of granting researchers access to teaching practices, particularly within Swedish for newly arrived immigrants. As one principal (2) explains: "Well, we have research collaboration with this research institute. I let them into our courses in Swedish for newly arrived immigrants, so they can study our teaching." Another principal (8) similarly states: "Yes, we have research collaboration with . . . eh . . . what was the name of the institute again? . . . Anyway, they will research our Swedish for newly arrived immigrants . . . they will observe how it works with students in terms of reading and writing." These accounts suggest that research collaboration is invoked in broad and largely unelaborated terms, with limited articulation of its purpose or relevance for the local transformation of practice.

This enactment strategy appears symbolic and externally oriented, that is outsourced, in which the presence of research activity itself functions as evidence of policy compliance. Research questions are formulated by collaborating researchers prior to engagement with the local SMAE, and it remains unclear whether these questions respond to locally identified needs or priorities for school improvement. At the same time, principals may frame these collaborations as a long-term investment aimed at increasing the overall volume of research conducted in SMAE contexts, which are commonly perceived as under-researched.

The partnerships described are characterised by asymmetrical relations of power and responsibility. Local SMAE is positioned primarily as a research site, while researchers define the agenda, lead the projects and produce knowledge that subsequently becomes constituted as the scientific foundation for SMAE. In some cases, researchers implement interventions in teaching practices and analyse their effects on student learning. Principals' involvement, however, is largely limited to facilitating access to a small selection of teachers and classrooms. Researchers organise meetings with teachers and manage the research process without principals' participation, and there are no accounts of systematic follow-up regarding whether, or how, research outcomes influence teaching practices, student learning or organisational capacity for school improvement.

Principals' interpretation and recontextualisation of policy is largely confined to enabling research to take place and then stepping back. The transformation of policy into practice is outsourced to external actors, with limited leadership involvement in the process.

A similar logic is evident when principals purchase short university courses for their teachers, an approach one principal (2) described as teachers being "showered with science." However, the same principal simultaneously distanced themselves from responsibility for how

this knowledge is transformed into practice, stating: “The teachers do as they please. Whether they are interested in science or not will shape the practice.” This framing suggests a withdrawal of principal agency from the core processes of policy enactment. Principals’ interpretation and recontextualisation of policy leads to the delegation of responsibility for transformation in practice to higher education institutions or to individual teachers with a particular interest in this. Principals’ agency in the enactment process functions as an administrative facilitation of science-based education by proxy, with limited engagement in how policy intentions are translated and embedded in practice.

Altogether, this enactment strategy represents symbolic compliance with policy, achieved through visible organisational arrangements related to higher education. Consequently, the association with higher education institutions and research becomes a marker of legitimacy rather than a driver of organisational learning or pedagogical change.

Model-driven enactment strategy

In contrast to the previous strategies, this third leadership strategy is marked by an internally led attempt to enact the policy. The concepts of *scientific foundation* and *proven experience* are interpreted as related: scientific foundation is understood as research results produced by scholars and proven experience as the application of such research in teachers’ everyday practice. The relationship between the two concepts is largely one-directional: research production is viewed as a prerequisite for proven experience, while the potential contribution of practitioners’ experience to research knowledge is not articulated.

Principals’ interpretation and recontextualisation of policy involves identifying models based on scientific foundation and determining how these can be adapted to the local SMAE context, however without first problematising local challenges. As one principal (1) explains: “To me, it means looking at research, putting research into a local context, from local prerequisites . . . to try to apply research into concrete practice.” Recontextualisation work thus involves adapting research developed in other school forms – often with different student groups, assignments and organisational conditions – to the SMAE context. This challenge is explicitly acknowledged by principals, as one principal (4) notes: “There is no research produced in the Swedish SMAE context.”

In this strategy, principals put effort into actively recontextualising policy through organisational work related to the scientific foundation. For scientific foundation to become proven experience, research results must be used in practice, and the outcomes shared, discussed and stabilised across a wider group of teachers. This place demands on both the organisational infrastructure and the professional culture. Principals therefore focus on building structures – based on science-based models – that enable collective dialogue.

Moreover, principals engage teachers as middle leaders who are tasked with leading cross-disciplinary groups and supporting the development of a shared school culture, in line with the science-based models. In Sweden, the reform introducing first teachers created formal middle-leadership roles for highly skilled teachers. As so-called middle leaders, qualified teachers appointed to a leadership role, first teachers operate between principals and teaching staff, supporting dialogue, collegial learning and contributing to local enactment work within distributed leadership structures. As one principal (1) describes: “It is about working with the culture, the school culture. This is a prerequisite to succeed in school improvement . . . First, the school culture foundation must be created in order to dare open up and have a dialogue about practice.” Another principal (9) similarly explains: “We have four middle leaders leading learning groups . . . building on Scherp’s (Hans-Åke Sherp) model.” These examples illustrate how principals draw on research-based models to organise collective interpretation and recontextualisation processes within the organisation.

In this enactment strategy, principals position themselves as policy actors, facilitating organisational infrastructures and distributed leadership – grounded on science-based models – to enable collective interpretation, recontextualisation and potentially the transformation of

policy into practice. However, they delegate accountability for the everyday leadership of these processes to middle leaders, while distancing themselves from direct involvement in the collective work.

Reflexive and inquiry-led enactment strategy

In the fourth and final enactment strategy, the concepts of *scientific foundation* and *proven experience* are interpreted as qualitatively distinct yet mutually constitutive, actively brought together through leadership-led enactment work. Proven experience is positioned as the empirical object of inquiry, whereby research investigates practice, and research results become proven experience through collective application, testing and systematisation in everyday teaching. As one principal (3) describes this relationship: "It's like a movement between scientific foundation and proven experience." This reflects an interpretation of policy as a dynamic process rather than a linear transfer of knowledge. Another principal (7) similarly emphasises the embedded relationship between theory and practice: "Practice always has a link to theory, for principals as well as teachers, regardless whether we are aware of it or not."

In this strategy, principals' agency involves the interpretation, negotiation, recontextualisation and transformation of policy. They engage in interpreting and recontextualising what scientific approaches mean for local practice and lead structured processes through which these meanings are collectively negotiated with teachers. Principals describe their enactment as a cyclical and inquiry-oriented process that begins with the problematisation of practice in relation to policy, followed by critical engagement with relevant research, the recontextualisation and transformation of research into pedagogical action, and the systematic testing, evaluation and reflection within teaching teams. Principals actively organise and lead the organisational conditions for this work. One principal (7) describes how this is operationalised:

The learning groups get 1.5 hours a week to problematise teaching practice. Then they test something new in practice before the next time and offer feedback regarding how it turned out in practice. It works well in one group, which also reads research literature in between meetings.

Here, principals not only distribute time and space but also shape the direction of professional dialogue. They engage in the transformation process by challenging taken-for-granted assumptions and practices, and by inquiring into practice, thereby influencing how teachers understand both policy expectations and their own professional responsibilities. As one principal (3) explains:

I have said they cannot just have opinions. Write down what you have tested and why, and how it turned out in practice, so you can share . . . so someone else can test the same in another context with other students. You need to have a dialogue about what works and why, resulting in new professional learning . . . striving towards action research or at least based on a research method.

This illustrates how principals actively influence teachers' meaning-making processes, negotiating the criteria for what counts as legitimate scientific foundation and proven experience in professional dialogue. Through such engagement, principals recontextualise and transform policy into local practices together with teachers.

This enactment strategy positions principals' agency as taking the initiative to internally lead enactment processes at the core of their organisation, by leading ongoing, continual and systematic inquiry and reflexive processes that embed scientific approaches into everyday practice.

Discussion

This study set out to examine how principals in SMAE interpret and translate the 2010 Education Act's mandate to lead education based on a scientific foundation and proven experience. The findings reveal substantial variation in principals' enactment agency,

expressed through four distinct strategies shaped by their interpretations of the policy and their understandings of leadership responsibility.

The information- and qualification-based strategy positions principals' agency primarily as that of transmitters of policy texts and recruiters of certified teachers, who delegate responsibility for transformation to individual teachers. In the symbolic and outsourced strategy, principals' agency involves facilitating access to, and association with, research through external actors – particularly higher education institutions, researchers, research projects or university-provided courses – without substantively engaging themselves. This produces symbolic compliance, whereby the mere presence of research activity is treated as evidence of policy fulfilment, and higher education institutions are delegated responsibility for transforming policy into practice.

From a policy enactment perspective, both strategies reveal a narrowing or displacement of principal agency in which principals hand over the accountability to realise policy to either individual teachers or external actors. Here, principals act in ways that suggest an under-recognition of their potential agency in local enactment processes, despite the central role highlighted in previous research (Bergmark and Hansson, 2020; Farley Ripple, 2024; Lundqvist and Westerlund, 2022; Milana, 2019; Moore *et al.*, 2024; Roumell *et al.*, 2023). In a context such as SMAE – marked by weak system support and an absence of sector-specific research (Portfelt, 2025) – these strategies may be understandable. Nonetheless, they risk constraining the development of coherent, practice-based work grounded in a scientific foundation and proven experience, and limiting principals' influence over pedagogical improvement. This aligns with previous research showing that structural constraints – embedded both locally and across the wider education system – are not merely incidental but are reproduced by policy frameworks shaped by marketisation and neo-liberal governance, thereby actively undermining the enactment of research-based education (Bergmark and Hansson, 2020; Godfrey, 2014; Lundqvist and Westerlund, 2022; Portfelt, 2025).

The remaining two strategies demonstrate more active engagement with the policy mandate, albeit in two qualitatively different ways. In both, principals work to create internal infrastructures that support collective interpretation, recontextualisation and transformation. While the model-driven strategy involves principals facilitating these processes by mobilising organisational infrastructures and middle leaders to coordinate collective work – thereby handing over accountability to middle-leadership roles – the reflexive and inquiry-led strategy reflects a deeper form of engagement. In this latter approach, principals themselves lead interpretive, recontextualisation and transformative work through scientific dialogue and inquiry-oriented practices.

The findings further illuminate the tension between technical and cultural uses of research, as articulated by Biesta (2015). While the information and qualification-based strategy fall outside this tension, not meeting the criteria of either a technical or cultural use of research, the symbolic and outsourced strategy relies primarily on technical uses of research – as compliance signals. The model-driven strategy blends technical and cultural orientations through structured, research-based models that aim to foster a professional learning culture that promotes collective meaning-making on scientific foundation and proven experience. In contrast, the reflexive and inquiry-led strategy represents a distinctly cultural approach, using scientific approaches to critically inquire into and improve practice, embedded in everyday work. These latter strategies align with scholarship emphasising principals' roles in establishing organisational conditions for sustained interpretation, recontextualisation and transformation (Schildkamp, 2019; Lundqvist and Westerlund, 2022).

No consistent pattern was identified in relation to principals' professional backgrounds, though accumulated experience appeared influential, echoing Ball *et al.*'s (2012) observations regarding the role of professional context. Instead, principals' enactment strategies should be understood as shaped by the intersection of Ball's material, situated, professional and external contexts. When principals with narrow professional role conceptions navigate material, situated and external constraints, enactment is prone to

displacement or symbolic forms. By contrast, when principals with broader professional role conceptions navigate these contexts by reconfiguring their conditions, more transformative enactments are enabled.

The divergent enactment strategies reveal the underlying structural and cultural conditions, that is contexts, that influence what changes in pedagogical practice are possible within SMAE. This highlights the importance of viewing the implications of the findings for policy, governance systems and professional support structures and how these might be reconfigured to strengthen the sector's capacity for improving education based on a scientific foundation and proven experience.

Viewing findings with previous research, a central contradiction emerges within the policy- and governance system: principals are mandated to lead education based on scientific foundation and proven experience while lacking access to research produced within the SMAE context (Portfelt, 2025). Closer alignment with the Marrakech Framework for Action, which calls for research directly linked to adult education (Rhodes and Tuama, 2025), could help strengthen the sector's research base. Likewise, professional learning programmes enabling principals to lead locally situated improvement work using scientific approaches (Carr and Kemmis, 1986) would support greater leadership agency. This would position principals as key agents of transformation, enabling them to lead enactment processes that fundamentally strengthen institutional improvement capacity rooted in scientific foundation and proven experience, ultimately reshaping pedagogical practice and advancing student outcomes in line with Biesta (2015), Brown *et al.* (2017), Farley-Ripple (2024), Hargreaves and Fullan (2012), Moore *et al.* (2024) and Schildkamp (2019).

The study contributes to the research gap identified by Milana (2019), Roumell *et al.* (2023) and the US National Center for Educational Evaluation (2021), concerning how adult education leaders locally enact research-based policy. It is limited by its small sample and its reliance on interview data collected in 2020, and the findings should therefore be interpreted as exploratory and contextually situated. Consequently, while the findings are not generalisable, they constitute a critical case study with international relevance, reflecting shared challenges across adult education systems worldwide and pointing to the need for further research on principals' enactment strategies in varied adult education contexts. Future research is recommended to examine what enactment patterns appear in larger or more diverse adult education settings and across different governance contexts. It would also be valuable to explore how several policy actors enact research-based education.

Conclusion

Principals in SMAE enact the mandate for a scientific foundation and proven experience through four distinct strategies: an information/qualification-based strategy, a symbolic/outsourced strategy, a model-driven strategy and a reflexive and inquiry-oriented enactment strategy. These patterns highlight how structural and organisational conditions shape principals' agency and indicate the need for stronger sector-specific research, professional learning and governance support to enable sustained, improvement of educational practices based on scientific foundation and proven experience.

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