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A Quest for Legitimacy

On the Professionalization Policies of Sweden's Teachers' Unions

Peter Lilja

Abstract. The aim of this article is to contribute to the ongoing discussion on teacher professionalism by analyzing the professional strategies of Sweden's two teachers' unions from an organizational perspective. Drawing on institutional theory, the article argues that the teachers' unions' focus on strategies of professionalization has as much to do with questions of legitimacy in the eyes of the public, as with any specific effort at transforming the practice of teaching in a professional direction. Against the background of two recent Swedish education reforms, the article shows that the unions are 'trapped' within a normative order emphasizing professionalization as the primary way of organizational development and legitimacy, resulting in a need for the unions to adopt professional attributes. In the case of the Swedish unions, this is accomplished through mimetic processes whereby union policies, aimed at the improvement of teaching, are modeled upon the medical profession, regardless of the differences between the technologies and practices of the occupations. In this way, the professional rhetoric of the unions is decoupled from the practice of teaching in order to maximize the public legitimacy needed for improving the declining societal status of teaching.

Keywords: Institutional theory; Professionalization; Teacher Professionalism; Teacher Unions

Introduction

Today, Swedish teachers – within the language of teacher education, education policies and in everyday discourse – are commonly referred to as professionals; as if attributing the label of profession to teaching is something self-evident or natural. Research from the 1960s and 70s, on the other hand, concluded that teachers were to be considered *semi-professional* or at best

partly professionalized (Etzioni 1969; Lortie 1975) as their dependence on various kinds of administrators and the lack of a common technological culture – characterizing classical professions – disqualified them from being considered full-fledged professionals. Still, in spite of this, it can be argued that a discourse of professionalism has evolved within the policy agenda of Sweden's two teachers' unions (Lundström 2007). The purpose of this article is to analyze why and how the Swedish teachers' unions construct *professional* projects in order to find legitimacy for their political agendas. Why is it that a discourse of professionalism has become dominant in the policy rhetoric of the unions despite the overwhelming results from research on teachers indicating that contemporary government initiated reforms aimed at the professionalization of teachers are in fact often 'hidden' control mechanisms resulting in a deprofessionalization of the teachers it claims to support? The answer, the article argues, has to do with the unions' organizational need for public legitimacy (Meyer & Rowan 1977; DiMaggio & Powell 1991), the double-nature of the concept of professionalism (Fournier 1999; Evetts 2009) and its increased use and attractiveness in public service systems transformed by deregulation, decentralization and marketization.

The decentralization of the Swedish education system may be regarded as part of a process of educational restructuring starting in the 1980s and spreading across the western world with the rising influence of neo-liberalism (Apple 2006; Ball 2003; Stronach et al. 2002). Lindblad and Lindblad (2009 p. 763) argue that 'educational restructuring gives contours to the how's and why's of the professionalizing talk on teaching' and that the discussion of teacher professionalism must be understood against this background. A vital part of this process of change is a renewed interest in the professional development of teachers from a number of instances external to the teaching profession, stressing the importance of effective teachers for educational outcomes (McKinsey & Co. 2007, OECD 2009) and, in the long run, national competitiveness in a global knowledge economy (Ball 2008). As a result, teachers, their work,

education and professional development have become central areas of national education reform initiatives in many countries as political authorities feel compelled to develop strategies aimed at ‘taking control’ over educational outcomes and results. As the workings of even the most reputable welfare states – such as Sweden – have been transformed due to economic crisis and public service reforms and the ideas of the New Public Management (NPM) – with its focus on deregulation and market-style solutions (Tolofari 2005) – introduced into the distribution of public services, the meaning of professionalism have become decidedly harder to define (Evetts 2009; Fournier 1999; Clark & Newman 2009). The political need for increased control over educational outcomes – and the reforms aimed at its realization – has been formulated, to a large extent, as a need for teachers to be professionalized, but in a new and very specific way. Such external pressures towards the professionalization of teachers have met serious criticism from education policy researchers highlighting the resulting infusion into ‘the professionalizing talk on teaching’ of a discourse emphasizing values of effectiveness, competition and individual accountability as ways of enhancing teacher professionalism within the framework of a knowledge economy (Ball 2003, 2008; Goodson & Lindblad 2011; Hargreaves & Shirley 2009; Hargreaves 2000; Ozga & Lingard 2007; Lauder et al. 2006). Effectiveness and accountability are dependent upon external inspection and evaluation and are considered the opposite of the classical way of understanding professional work as comprising values such as autonomy, discretion, collegiality, adherence to ethical principles and being based on a high level of trust (Freidson 2001; Svensson 2010; Evetts 2003). There exist, in other words, at least two versions – or ideal types – of professionalism within the discussion of teachers work; one related to a way of understanding professionalism as a kind of occupational value arising from within certain occupational groups accrediting them a special position in society, the other related to discourses of managerial control introduced from ‘outside’ the occupational group as a tacit

ideology of organizational change aimed at controlling and/or steering professional practitioners in certain directions ‘from a distance’(Fournier 1999; Evetts 2009; Sachs 2001; Whitty 2000).

As education and other welfare services become framed within a context of NPM, professionalism as a concept has been transformed by political forces wishing to use it in order to create educational systems that score well in international performance evaluations (Clark & Newman 2009) but, in the eyes of much educational research, are in fact deprofessionalizing the teachers it is said to support (Ball 2003). However, Fournier (1999 p. 280) highlights the paradoxical fact that ‘as the professions are being threatened by various trends of organizational, economic and political change, the notion of “professionalism” is creeping up in unexpected domains, lending support to Wilensky’s prediction that professionalism would eventually embrace everyone with some claim to specialized knowledge or practice’, making it ‘just another marketing device’, more or less bereft of meaning. On the other hand, the classic sociological version of professionalism has also, in itself, been criticized for being little more than a strategy for creating monopolies and market shelters used by occupational groups wishing, above all, to remain in control of their already prominent social position (Larson [1977] 2013), making the concept somewhat traduced in all but its most common use as a person who is generally serious about or competent at what he/she is doing. This has contributed to the complexity causing Stronach et al. (2002 p. 110) to argue that “‘the professional” is a construct born of methodological reduction, rhetorical inflation and universalist excess’. Even so, the chance of being considered professional continues – or so it seems – to be desirable for occupations not normally considered full-fledged professions (Evetts 2003), regardless of the complexities – and possible threats – surrounding the definition of what, in fact, constitutes ‘professional’ work in the world of today. As is argued by Clark and Newman (2009), this tension between organizational

frameworks geared toward ‘high performance’ and occupational desire for legitimacy in the eyes of the public become problematic as ‘legitimacy now appears more fragile and more contextually contingent, rather than being available “en bloc” to a public service organization or occupation’ (Clark & Newman 2009 p. 46).

In this context, Ozga and Lawn (1981) underline the difficulties created by these kinds of ‘new’ regulatory regimes for the construction of teachers professional projects as one must be attentive of ‘its use as an ideological weapon aimed at controlling teachers’ whilst at the same time not neglecting the fact that it should also ‘be understood as a weapon of self-defense for teachers in their struggle against dilution’ (Ozga & Lawn 1981 p. 2). Furthermore, the development of policies for the professionalization of teachers must also be understood to vary between national contexts since the ‘global’ discourse of education is translated differently as it is incorporated into already existing national narratives of education (Seddon et al. 2013) and used by different actors – e.g. state authorities and teachers’ unions (Mausethagen & Granlund 2012) – within these different national contexts. Consequently, before analyzing the policies of the Swedish teachers’ unions, their role in the Swedish political system and the context of contemporary Swedish education debate must be briefly reviewed.

Swedish Teachers’ Unions and the Context of Swedish Education Reform

Historically, the position of Swedish unions in general has been very strong as they played a key role in the construction of what has come to be known as ‘the Nordic (or Swedish) Model’ (Ofstedal Telhaug et al. 2006). Following the end of the Second World War, a social democratic system evolved within the Nordic countries stressing compromise and cooperation above conflict in the process of constructing the Nordic welfare systems. According to

Ofstedal Telhaug et al. (2006 p. 249) this 'implied that the Nordic model accepted and respected strong organizations, whether these were representatives of labor or employers. These organizations were viewed by the political authorities as partners rather than as antagonists who had to be won over'. Consequently, unions have been, and continue to be, the primary basis of occupational organization in Sweden. As a result, the teachers' unions are, in fact, the only organizations of teachers of any political significance, thereby playing a central role for any understanding of the development of teachers' collective professional projects in Sweden.

Even though the study of teacher professionalism in other parts of the world has a longer history, the use of professional terminology in relation to teachers is a relatively new phenomenon within Swedish education policy. It first emerged in governmental policy documents in preparation of the decision to finalize the deregulation and decentralization of the Swedish education system in the late 1980s – early 1990s (Sjöberg 2010) and was quickly absorbed by the unions hoping, for different reasons, to advance the position of their members. In their study from the early eighties, Ozga and Lawn (1981) highlight a conflict, within English teachers' unions, between what they refer to as professionalism and unionism, placing it as part of a wider class struggle where teachers' unions deliberately tried to position teachers as a middleclass white-collar occupation by mixing strategies connected with professionalism with more classical unionist strategies in order to achieve their political goals. In Sweden, due to the historically strong position of the unions and the tradition of political compromises and negotiations between labor and employer organizations, this conflict has been considerably less obvious. In fact, since the early 1990s the teachers' unions have been less inclined to use classical unionist strategies, like strikes, and have come to position themselves more like professional associations willing to discuss and co-operate with state

authorities on questions of educational development and reforms, while, at the same time, continue to argue for better salaries and working conditions on behalf of Swedish teachers.

In the late 1980s, a reform process began that would transform the very foundations of the Swedish education system. From having been a centralized bureaucratic system it gradually became one of the most deregulated systems in the world organized according to a logic based on a 'quasi-market' (Lindensjö & Lundgren 2000; Lundahl 2002, 2005; Wahlström 2002). Since the national election of 2006, efforts have primarily been made to correct what has been conceived as unfortunate consequences of this process of deregulation and, in the view of the current center-right government, decades of misguided progressive pedagogy focused on the social and democratic development of children at the expense of subject knowledge and skills, manifested in declining results in international performance evaluations, such as PISA. As a result, the school system of Sweden has been criticized for its inefficiency, its lack of discipline and deteriorating results. Simultaneously, and as a result of this, teaching careers are losing their appeal among Swedish students, resulting in a decrease of applicants to teacher education as the social status and pay levels associated with teaching is found to be increasingly inadequate. Research looking into how these developments have affected Swedish teachers shows ambiguities as to how the societal role of teachers is to be understood, resulting in feelings of intensification, uncertainty and confusion (Lundström 2007; Parding 2007; Carlgren & Klette 2008; Fredriksson 2010; Sjöberg 2011).

Today, Swedish teachers are primarily organized in two different unions, the Swedish Teachers' Union (STU, *Lärarförbundet* [in Swedish]) and the National Union of Teachers (NUT, *Lärarnas riksförbund* [in Swedish]), historically descendant from two different teaching traditions. STU is, by far, the largest, and organizes, generally speaking, preschool teachers and schoolteachers up to grade 6 (but also vocational teachers within upper secondary schools, some school leaders and others). NUT, on the other hand primarily

organizes teachers from grade 7 to 9 of the compulsory school and subject teachers working within upper secondary schools (grades 10-12). The historical difference between the organizations is a legacy of the mid-1800s when a compulsory school system for all Swedish children was established. The system was, however, a parallel one with clear distinctions between social classes, a fact that was mirrored by the teachers employed in its different parts. These differences are described by Ringarp (2012) as follows:

In 1842, [the Swedish] Parliament decreed that every parish should have a public elementary school, and that the teachers had to be graduates of a teacher's college. The elementary school teachers were recruited primarily from the rural population and the peasant class and hired as municipal functionaries [...] On the other hand, grammar school teachers taught at the state-run grammar schools. These teachers often came from a bourgeois background and had university educations (Ringarp 2012 p. 330).

The aim of this article is not to go into historical detail of the often tense relationship between these two organizations. However, their divergent backgrounds continue to affect their policy positions in relation to present day reforms even though the parallel education system described above was replaced by a new unified comprehensive school system in the 1960s (Ringarp 2012; Persson 2008). The idea of a unified school system – and thereby a united teaching occupation – continued in the 1970s as all kinds of teacher education were incorporated within the tertiary education system; by the decision, in 1989, to decentralize employer responsibility for all teaching positions to local authorities and in 2001, with the replacement of a system of different teaching degrees with one single general degree for all teachers.

However, as the social democratic government was replaced, in the national election of 2006, by a center-right alliance, a massive education reform program was launched resulting, among other things, in the presentation, in 2008, of two reforms that were later implemented during

2011; the introduction of a system of teacher certification and a reformed system of teacher education. These reforms indicated a new direction in Swedish education policy away from the idea of a united teaching occupation as preschool teachers were not included in the teacher certificate but acquired their own, and by the reinstitution into teacher education of different degrees for different kinds of teachers. The direction of these reforms was greeted very differently by the teachers' unions. Although both supported the introduction of a certificate, STU was strongly opposed to the inherent division of the teaching occupation and even if they agreed that the teacher education system was in need of reform they challenged what they considered the rigidity of the new system. NUT, on the other hand, saw an opportunity of reconnecting with their academic identity of the past by supporting reforms underlining the differences between different kinds of teachers. As is argued by Stenlås (2011) and Ringarp (2012) STU and its members had more to gain from the idea of a united teaching occupation than the former grammar school teachers of NUT whose historical position as relatively high status academics had suffered more from the development of the unified teaching occupation described above. This fundamental historical difference regarding the foundations of teacher professionalism between the unions is – as we shall see in the next section – still present, despite new strategies for finding a unanimous base from which to reinstate the declining status and legitimacy of Swedish teachers.

Union Strategies for the Professionalization of Swedish Teachers

This article's analysis of the professional strategies developed by the teachers' unions is inspired by what Ball (2008) calls 'policy sociology', indicating that 'sociological concepts, ideas and research are used as tools for making sense of policy' (Ball 2008 p. 4). More specifically it is focused on 'how policies are represented and disseminated through "policy

texts”, that is the documents and speeches that “articulate” policy and policy ideas’ (Ball 2008 p. 6). In the case of this article, the material used consists of debate articles (normally signed by the union chairs) and referrals in which the unions comment on governmentally initiated commission reports assigned to suggest how certain reform initiatives may be realized, which in turn (after the referrals have been considered) become official Green papers to be decided by parliament. By using this kind of material, the official ‘voice’ of the unions may be accessed, since these documents are ‘voicing’ the official standpoints – or policies – of the unions on a number of issues. As Ball (2008 p. 5) argues; ‘policies are very specific and practical regimes of truth and value and the ways in which policies are spoken and spoken about, their vocabularies, are part of the creation of their conditions of acceptance and enactment’, making this kind of material very useful for understanding the views and strategies employed by the unions on the question of teacher professionalization (see also Prior 2003). Before applying the sociological concepts of institutional theory as a way of understanding why the vocabularies of the unions take shape the way they do, these policies and strategies will be reviewed in more detail.

On the Importance of Being ‘Professional’

A quick look at the visionary documents of the two Swedish teachers’ unions makes it clear that in an ideal world, teachers are in fact autonomous professionals enjoying the high status and financial rewards they, as such, are entitled to. In NUT’s vision their organization stands for ‘eligibility, professionalism and pride of teaching’ and is the ‘given choice for academically trained teachers’ (NUT 2008 p. 5 *author’s translation*). In the STU vision, the first sentences declare that they ‘are teachers [...] a strong and influential profession’ (STU 2011 p. 11 *author’s translation*), underlining the self-image used by both unions in their positions and attitudes toward a number of reform initiatives as will be exemplified below.

When studying the teachers' unions' referrals to a number of commission reports, the references to professionalism or closely related concepts are numerous. In a referral concerning the establishment of a new National School Inspection in 2008, STU is supportive of the overall intentions of the suggested reform as it 'can create good circumstances within which teachers' and school leaders professional evaluation of their own activities can be combined with the state's control of the education system and its results' (STU 2008/008 p. 1 *author's translation*). However, they are critical of suggestions concerning the reassessment of national tests by the new agency and argue, instead, for a system of collegial co-assessment. Furthermore, they argue critically against the suggested establishment of objective norms for 'good teaching' as it would be 'a token of an excessive political control of the teaching profession' (STU 2008/0008 p. 1 *author's translation*). In the STU referral concerning the introduction of a system of teacher certification, also from 2008, the importance of being associated with professionalism becomes even more obvious. In spite of being very critical to central aspects of the suggested reform they write:

Certification is a guarantee that the pupil/the child will be met respectfully by a profession based on established ethical principles. Furthermore, the professionalization and increase in quality associated with certification often leads to a strengthening of the profession and an increase in its social status (STU 2008/1310 p. 2 *author's translation*).

Likewise, in a referral to a suggested reform of the system of teacher education, STU is strongly critical of several aspects of the new system, not least the replacement of the single teaching degree introduced in 2001 with two new ones. Separating the teaching occupation into two halves is considered contra-productive, as 'two degrees do not promote the development of a common knowledgebase for teaching and isn't desirable from a perspective of professionalization' (STU 2008/2295 p. 5 *author's translation*). As was argued above, and

made clear by these examples, STU is critical of a number of aspects in these reforms. However, they are using arguments connected to professionalism in order to present their criticism as well as for arguing for the need of a system of certification, despite, as they see it, the flaws inherent in the suggestions of the commission report on that reform.

Even if the words ‘professionalism’ and ‘professionalization’ aren’t as frequently used in referrals from NUT, it is, nevertheless, obvious that their viewpoint emanates from concepts clearly associated with, or linked to, ideas of professionalism. In their referral to the commission report on a reformed teacher education, the key concept used is ‘specialization’, underlining the expert role of teachers, a concept normally closely connected to professional work (Abbott 1988). In the initial paragraphs of the referral, NUT states that ‘the future system of teacher education must, in a better way than the present system, provide for the need of society and the school system of more specialized teachers’ (NUT 2008/7973/UH p. 1 *author’s translation*). NUT goes even further by recommending that ‘it is of outmost importance that the education of teachers for different school-levels, ages, and subjects is given clear impressions and profiles. Therefore, the government should seriously consider, in their upcoming bill, replacing the present single teaching degree with more than two new ones’ (NUT 2008/7973/UH p. 2 *author’s translation*). The focus on the need for specialization – based on diversified academic training for different kinds of teachers – in NUT’s argumentation, is underlined even more in the introductory paragraph of the referral to the commission report on the introduction of a system of certification, a system NUT is very positive towards. They write:

The association has underlined the importance of increased specialization, within teacher education, towards specific subjects and school-levels, something which is supported by the commission’s suggestions concerning a clearer division of school levels and connected admission requirements for teachers. The National Union of

Teachers concurs with the commission's opinion that a clearer division of teacher categories, qualified special teachers, and the need for more advanced subject skills as pupils grow older, are required. The association believes that a certification of teachers will strengthen the identity of the occupation in a positive way and become a useful support for the good work performed by Swedish teachers (NUT 2008/3915/S p. 1 *author's translation*).

As is obvious from the short examples above, both teachers' unions are referring to aspects of professionalism in order to find legitimacy for their decidedly different views on the reforms discussed. For STU, the unity of teaching – based on a common knowledgebase – is a prerequisite for professionalization, while for NUT, increased specialization and differentiation is the road back to the professional status once enjoyed by the old grammar school teachers, underlining the obvious tension inherent in their respective constructions of teacher professionalism. Central to our purpose, however, is the fact that despite their differences, the wish to appear professional or to increase the professionalism of the teaching occupation, in whatever way, is important for both unions, as professionalization seems to be considered the best way of acquiring the legitimacy needed to reinstate the social status of teachers.

Imitating 'Professionalism'

Since the introduction of a system of certification for Swedish teachers, there has been a strong emphasis in the rhetoric of the teachers' unions to model teaching upon a standardized version of the ultimate welfare – or public service – professional, the medical doctor. As has already been discussed above, the introduction of a system of certification was supported by the unions as it, in itself, was thought to contribute effectively to the professionalization of

teaching by associating it with other already certified occupations enjoying high professional status. Since then, the parallels to, and comparisons with, the medical profession have become a central feature of the professional rhetoric of the unions.

In a debate article, critical of the handling of the somewhat delayed introduction of the system of certification, NUT chair Metta Fjelkner and chair of the NUT teacher-students' association Fredrik Grip argue forcefully that in order for the intentions of the system of certification to be realized, the state must guarantee positions as *interns* for teachers in need of doing their probationary year, since they are critical towards local school authorities and their financial priorities in this matter. They write:

We can accept that the reform creating a system of certification of teachers is postponed but it is unacceptable if it is not implemented by 1 July next year. In order to accomplish this, the government must introduce state funded probationary positions for teachers, as it does with intern positions for medical doctors awaiting their certification (Fjelkner & Grip 2012 *author's translation*).

As is obvious, the debate article describes teachers doing their probationary year as interns in a way that appears to equate teaching with the medical profession. The demands made are modeled upon the systems of the medical profession as a way of highlighting the gap in resources between two 'equal' professions. STU chair Eva-Lis Sirén and the chair of the STU teacher-students' association Markus Lindgren follow the same logic in a similar debate article as they argue:

The Swedish Teachers' Union has fought for the probationary year – designed to function as the intern service required of medical doctors – to become the good introduction into the profession teachers need and to constitute a guarantee of quality for the new system of certification (Sirén & Lindgren 2012 *author's translation*).

In a similar fashion, STU is introducing another concept normally associated with the medical profession in a debate article focused on the need for teachers to be given increased authority over the resources supporting measures taken to provide children in need of extra support with the support they require. Under the headline ‘Give teachers the right to prescribe support’ they argue:

Teaching, as the medical profession, is now a certified occupation. [...] We want to introduce the possibility for teachers to prescribe extra support in schools. [...] The right of prescription should be an important compliment to the certification. As medical doctors’ professional judgment gives them the right to prescribe medicine and treatment for their patients, the professional pedagogical judgment of teachers must give them the right to prescribe supportive measures for their pupils (Sirén 2012 *author’s translation*).

Once again, by drawing on the fact that teaching is now a certified occupation – like medical doctors – the right of teachers to decide what supportive measures are needed in a certain case is compared with the diagnostic work of medical doctors as a way of underlining the discretionary rights normally given to professional practitioners. By so doing, STU is positioning teaching within the professional framework established by Abbott (1988) who argues that professional work is characterized by diagnosis, treatment and inference based on academic knowledge. The skepticism toward the financial priorities of local school boards is just as prevalent in an article by NUT, arguing for prescription rights along the same line:

The State must take a far greater responsibility for the quality of teaching in Swedish schools. That requires an aimed undertaking by the state without consideration for local priorities or ambitions. [...] Give teachers the right of prescription so that they always have the possibility to assign support and extra resources if a pupil needs it (Fjølknær 2012 *author’s translation*).

A final example on how the teachers' unions are trying to associate teaching with the medical profession is by an increase in the demand for 'clinical' (class-room based) educational research. In a joint debate article from 2006 with the leader of the Conservative party (and later Prime Minister of Sweden) Fredrik Reinfeldt the union chairs argue for the need of decisive investments in class-room based school research in order to increase the quality of education and the competence of Swedish teachers, once again based on a comparison with medicine and its close connection between clinical research and professional practice. They write:

A comparison with medicine may, once again, put the question into perspective. The State invests 370 million kronor in medical research, with local counties investing another 5 billion in clinical research. For research closely connected to teacher education, relevant for the teaching profession, the State invests approximately 120 million kronor for the Committee on Educational Sciences, but far from all of those funds are assigned to that kind of research (Reinfeldt et al. 2006 *author's translation*).

As is obvious, medical terminology is continuously used by both unions in order to find support for a number of political suggestions, despite the major differences between their overall policies for advancing the professionalism of teachers. Because of the fact that teaching is now a certified occupation, probationary teachers are to be thought of as *interns*, teachers are to be given rights of *prescription* and the professional development of teachers is to be accomplished through investments in *clinical* educational research. It seems that the implementation of a system of certification pushes the teachers' unions into a position where the best strategy for finding support for their professional claims is to – in unison – imitate the traditionally most successful professional group within the public services, regardless of the obvious differences between the two occupations in terms of technologies and practice. Being considered professional, it seems, is of vital importance for the unions regardless of the

obvious difficulties associated with transforming the practice of teaching in line with a professional model adopted from the medical profession. Why is it, then, that being considered professional is so central for the way the unions argue politically, and how come it seems so obvious for them to use a modeled version of the medical profession as the goal to strive for? In the next section, a theoretical frame from the field of institutional theory will be applied in order to present answers to these questions.

An Institutional Perspective on the Unions' Professional Projects

Despite the renewed tensions between them, the development of the unions' respective professional projects since 2008 show noteworthy similarities. Regardless of the results of education policy research, arguing that externally initiated efforts at the professionalization of teachers are in fact hidden strategies of control resulting in deprofessionalization, the Swedish unions seem more eager than ever to be considered full-fledged professionals. Why is it, for example, that the Swedish unions are so supportive of a system of certification despite the fact that both unions voice criticism towards large parts of that same system and the way it is being implemented? The argument raised in this article is that it has to do, not so much with any effort at transforming the practice of teaching in a professional direction, but with organizational needs of the unions for legitimacy in the eyes of employers and the public.

By focusing on the teachers' unions of Sweden as formal organizations in order to understand why they invest such high hopes in strategies of professionalization, this article turns to a theoretical tradition referred to as 'the new institutionalism in organizational theory' (Powell & DiMaggio 1991), first introduced in an influential article by Meyer and Rowan (1977). Critical of earlier versions of institutionalism focused on deliberate intentions and the creation

of effective organizational structures, they emphasized the importance of the institutional context and its inherent 'logic of appropriateness' as central forces shaping organizational development. Their claim was that:

[...] organizations are driven to incorporate the practices and procedures defined by prevailing rationalized concepts of organizational work and institutionalized in society. Organizations that do so increase their legitimacy and their survival prospects, independent of the immediate efficacy of the acquired practices and procedures (Meyer & Rowan 1977 p. 340).

The resulting institutional pressure on organizations leads to processes of *isomorphism*, forcing organizations to adhere to the 'rationalized myths', or appropriate behavior of a certain organizational environment because organizations successful in 'becoming isomorphic with these environments gain the legitimacy and resources needed to survive' (Meyer & Rowan, 1977 p. 352). However, as organizations become increasingly similar, due to isomorphic pressure, inconsistencies are created between 'ceremonial requirements' and day-to-day technical activities of organizational practice. As a result, and to avoid uncertainty and accusations of inefficiency and inconsistency, organizations *decouple* their formal structures from the practical aspects of their daily business in order to achieve the isomorphic status required for social legitimacy. Decoupling strategies, in other words, 'enables organizations to maintain standardized, legitimating, formal structures while their activities vary in response to practical considerations' (Meyer & Rowan 1977 p. 357).

Extending the thinking of Meyer and Rowan and others, DiMaggio and Powell (1991) develop a number of predictors for when processes of isomorphism are extra probable to occur. Should the organization in question be characterized by ambiguity or uncertain relations between its means and ends, the likelihood of isomorphic processes to arise is thought to increase. Furthermore, should the organization be dependent, to a large extent, on a

single source for support and legitimacy and its transactions with the state extensive, isomorphic pressure becomes even more probable.

Though heavily deregulated, the education system of Sweden – as well as the entire public sector – is still highly dependent upon public funding and legitimacy and though education is the responsibility of local authorities, state agencies are still exerting a considerable power and influence over the education system and all its actors. At the same time, the Swedish unions are representatives of an occupation under stress as applications to teacher education drop in the wake of national media narratives of the Swedish education system as a system in disorder and decline. Taken together, these factors seem to invite the unions to transform themselves – and the image of the teaching occupation – in line with organizations (or occupations) they perceive as more successful.

In relation to these predictors, DiMaggio & Powell (1991) construct three distinctive *mechanisms* through which this isomorphic pressure operates, called *coercive* isomorphism, *normative* pressure and *mimetic* processes. The focus of this article is on the latter two, but before moving on to describing those in more detail some words are needed on the first one. Coercive isomorphism results basically from ‘formal and informal pressures exerted on organizations by other organizations upon which they are dependent and by cultural expectations in the society in which organizations function’ (DiMaggio & Powell 1991 p. 67). A good example of this is the introduction, by the state, of NPM and market style provision of public services, forcing organizations to adapt to a situation of competition and evaluation, by the state itself or by market mechanisms such as price or consumer demand. This process is well researched when it comes to the ways in which western societies have introduced new steering technologies in schools, fundamentally affecting the work of teachers (e.g. Ball 2003; Helsby 1999).

Normative Pressure: The Value of Professionalism

The close relationship between the isomorphic mechanism called normative pressure and processes of professionalization is underlined by Leicht and Fenell (2008 p. 433) who argue that such pressure results ‘from the socialization of institutional actors into a set of beliefs that define specific organizational arrangements as the “best and customary” way of organizing specific activities’. Professions have been understood as key institutional forces; ‘as definers, interpreters and appliers of institutional elements’ (Scott 2008 p. 233) and as ‘lords of the dance’, they have succeeded old sources of institutional legitimacy – churches, prophets and the like – in the rationalized world of today. As is argued by Dent and Whitehead (2002), professionalism has become one of the ‘leitmotifs’ of our contemporary society, the apparent best way of organizing work in any specific setting, making the urgent wish of the Swedish teachers’ unions to be considered professional very understandable, or even, in a sense, ‘natural’. In other words, professionalization seems to be an attractive strategy for organizations struggling for legitimacy.

As was argued in the introduction of this article, teachers have historically not been included into the professions, but have been regarded as, at best, ‘semi-professionals (Etzioni 1969). Studies from the sociology of professions, however, argue for an increase in the use of professional terminology as widespread ideologies of deregulation transformed the public services in most western nation states (Fournier 1999). Despite evidence from research underlining the transformation of the use of professionalism within this ideology, many occupations not normally considered professional have still been inclined to embrace it since – due to the normative pressure it exerts – being associated with professionalism, however defined, ‘is perceived to be [the best] way of improving the occupation’s status and rewards collectively and individually’ (Evetts 2003 p. 409). This is exemplified by the Swedish teachers’ unions’ support for a system of certification, since the value of being associated with

other certified, high status professions – such as medical doctors – seem to outweigh the quite serious criticisms delivered in the unions’ referrals to the suggested reform. STU find the system dividing and not inclusive enough, and find support from NUT in worrying about resources for its funding and the consequences of its rapid implementation for teachers already working in schools.

Additional evidence for the existence of a normative pressure towards professionalization, in the context of Swedish education, becomes evident in that both unions frame their arguments, whether opposing or supporting different reforms, in a context of the reforms’ effects on the professionalism of teachers, regardless of the problems involved in equating teaching with already established professions. In their critical response to the reformation of Swedish teacher education, STU argues that the suggested division of the general teaching degree is contra-productive ‘from a perspective of professionalization’ (STU 2008/2295 p. 5 *author’s translation*). NUT, on the other hand argues that the increase in specialization is a prerequisite for teacher professionalization as it will enable different teacher categories to become specialists/experts within their chosen part of the education system, thereby improving the quality of Swedish education as well as the professional standing of its teachers.

Together with the decisive focus on the professional development of teachers inherent in Swedish (and ‘global’) political rhetoric on education (Sjöberg 2011) – not least the reforms discussed here – the normative pressure towards professionalization as a key strategy for improving Swedish education seems considerable in the institutional surroundings of the Swedish teachers’ unions.

Mimetic Processes: Adopting Professional Attributes

The third isomorphic mechanism developed by DiMaggio and Powell (1991), *mimetic processes*, is often the result of increasing uncertainty – or ‘identity crisis’ (Sahlin-Andersson 1996) – within or among organizations. They argue:

Uncertainty is [...] a powerful force that encourages imitation. When organizational technologies are poorly understood [...], when goals are ambiguous, or when the environment creates symbolic uncertainty, organizations may model themselves on other organizations. [...] Modeling, as we use the term, is a response to uncertainty. (DiMaggio & Powell 1991 p. 69).

Consequently, mimetic processes are strategies for agency on behalf of organizations within institutional fields, but it is not an unconditional agency since in trying to find symbolic resources to draw from organizations will soon find – due to coercive and normative pressures – that ‘there is relatively little variation to be selected from’ (DiMaggio & Powell 1991 p. 70). Furthermore, organizations are normally prone to select models considered more successful or legitimate from the field within which they are already located, contributing to the narrowness in available choices of imitation.

As mentioned earlier, the current situation of the Swedish teachers’ unions is undoubtedly one of uncertainty. As part of a wider transformation of the provision of social services, the relationships between teachers, school leadership, political authorities and the public in general have been challenged and reworked under relentless pressure of numerous reforms aimed at the improvement of the education system (Clark & Newman 2009). However, during this period the Swedish education system, once celebrated as one of the world’s best, has become a system defined as in crisis and decline. At the same time, the status and pay levels of Swedish teachers have declined relative to other occupations requiring the same level of

education, making the relative number of applicants to teacher educations lower than ever before. Research into how these reforms have affected Swedish teachers in general point towards intensification, uncertainty of purpose and increased ambiguity as teachers feel forced into new roles within an education system designed to improve effectiveness, transparency and accountability (Carlgren & Klette 2008; Lundström 2007).

For the unions – intensely focused on improving the deteriorating public image of teaching – modeling their professional ambitions upon a standardized model of the most ‘successful’ public professional there is – the medical doctor – becomes the obvious choice, not least in the wake of the implementation of the system of certification. Teacher graduates are to be treated as medical interns, teachers’ discretionary authority is to be guaranteed by rights of prescription and the professional development of teachers is to be accomplished through investments in clinical (that is school- or classroom based) research as a way of underlining the equal ‘professionalism’ of teachers and medical doctors. The certification of teaching, then, has led to mimetic processes as the unions model teaching on the medical profession by adopting a terminology associated with high status expertise in their arguments for better working conditions for teachers, regardless of the apparent differences between the practices of teaching and medicine and also, regardless of the historically and still evident differences between their visions of what constitutes the foundation of such professionalism. The professional rhetoric of the unions is, in other words, decoupled from the practice of teaching, as its primary function is to serve as a ceremonious tool for increasing the legitimacy – and thereby the societal status – of teaching in the eyes of local school authorities, the public and prospective future teachers.

Concluding discussion

Within the context of Swedish education policy, the professionalization of teachers remains an important objective for political authorities as well as for the teachers' unions themselves. The argument raised in this article is that normative pressures in the institutional environment surrounding the Swedish teachers' unions create an isomorphic pressure making professionalization the most appealing strategy for organizations wanting to increase their public legitimacy. What Lindblad and Lindblad (2009) call 'the professionalizing talk on teaching' is, today, ever present within the language of teacher education, public debates and in governmental as well as union policies on teachers and teaching despite the fact that teaching – in a strictly sociological sense – never has qualified for full professional status. Throughout twenty years of intensive reforms the Swedish school system and its teachers have been characterized by uncertainty and seriously decreasing social status, as teaching careers are no longer attracting high performing students, mostly due to the relatively modest financial rewards of such a career choice. For the unions – being intensely focused on changing this development – the acquisition of professional attributes have become a central objective, not least apparent in both unions' support for the introduction of a system of certification. The certification of teaching, then, has led to mimetic processes as the unions model teaching on the medical profession by adopting a terminology associated with high status expertise in their arguments for better working conditions for teachers, regardless of the apparent differences between the practices of teaching and medicine and also, regardless of the historically and still strongly present differences between the unions' visions of what constitute the foundation of such professionalism, resulting in a decoupling of their rhetoric from the practice of teaching. Therefore, it could be argued that this process is more 'professionalizing' of the unions themselves as professional associations than of individual teachers working in Swedish classrooms.

In line with the argument by Seddon et al. (2013), this article started with an emphasis on the importance of understanding discussions of teacher professionalism at the nexus of ‘global’ education policy trends and national histories and contexts. As in most western nations today, Swedish education is part of a deregulated and decentralized public service sector comprising fertile grounds for the development of technologies of soft governance within which concepts such as professional work take on multiple and contradictory meanings (Fournier 1999), not least because of the homogenizing processes affecting education systems within a European or OECD context. As is argued by Clark and Newman (2009), these processes have changed the relationships between political authorities, public service professionals and the public as public service systems are increasingly designed with a focus on performance, inviting political pressure toward effectiveness, accountability and transparency in the provision of such services. The Swedish Ministry of Education’s interest in the professionalization of teachers must be understood against a background where increasing results in PISA evaluations are the primary indicators of success, underlining the role of ‘global’ policy talk on education in framing the institutional context within which the Swedish teachers’ unions act.

However, the strategies of the unions described in this article are also dependent, to a large extent, on the specific national context of Sweden’s political system and the role of the unions within it. The Swedish tradition of political compromises and cooperation with labor and employer organizations may explain the need of the unions to appear ‘professional’ in order to find the public legitimacy needed for advancing demands for increased salaries and better working condition on behalf of Swedish teachers in relation to political authorities, the general public and employer organizations. Thereby, this tradition of compromise and cooperation may also explain the fact that the teachers’ unions have come to position themselves more as professional associations seeking dialogue with political authorities,

thereby abstaining, to a large extent, from using classic unionist strategies in order to obtain their goals. However, this union inclination towards cooperation with political authorities may have left the Swedish unions somewhat weak at the level of policy making. Having compared the autonomy of teachers in Sweden and Norway, Helgøy and Homme (2007) claim that the relatively extensive autonomy given to individual teachers in Sweden has rendered the profession as a whole weaker at the policy making level, whereas in Norway the relatively restricted autonomy of individual teachers has resulted in a strong position at the policy level, underlining the importance of taking account of the impact of national contexts in discussions of teacher professionalism. As is argued by Mausesthaugen and Granlund (2012) and Søreide (2007, 2008) the Union of Education Norway presents a clear counter-narrative of teacher professionalism in relation to the accountability focus of the Norwegian government. In this respect, the fact that the Swedish teachers' unions are divided and disagreeing on the foundations of teacher professionalism may explain their weakened position at the policy level, as they are forced to negotiate with political authorities in order to find political support for their own ideas on how to improve the professionalism of Swedish teachers. It may also explain their reluctance to challenge political authorities or employer organizations with unionist strategies like strikes.

The purpose of this article has been to explain why and how Swedish teachers' unions construct professional projects in order to find support for their policies despite results from research warning against the transformation of the meaning attached to professional work in the wake of public service deregulations. The article argues for the need to take into account the unions' organizational and occupational needs for public legitimacy which is severely challenged within the education debate in Sweden. Normative pressures within the institutional field of Swedish public services towards professionalization – created by a mixture of 'global' trends and national traditions – results in an isomorphic pressure forcing

the unions to model their professional claims on the most 'successful' public service professional, the medical doctor, in order to try to find public legitimacy in a complicated context of reformulated relationships and increased uncertainty. Being the only organizations of teachers of any political significance in Sweden, understanding the forces affecting the strategies and policies of the teachers' unions is, therefore, vital for any understanding of the debate on the professionalization of teachers in Sweden. As is emphasized by Hargreaves and Shirley (2009), professional associations are a key feature for the future development of a stronger teaching profession. Understanding the rationality behind their professional projects and their translation and implementation of the elusive concept of professionalism is, therefore, of central importance for future research, if we are to understand what the concept of teacher professionalism may comprise in the future, in Sweden and elsewhere.

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