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# Creating School Leadership: Categorization and identity work in interaction

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## Abstract

*Since the early 1990s, Swedish schools have been managed extensively in and through teams of various kinds, where talk and conversation is highly significant for school leaders' practice. Even though so much of school management is now organized in various group constellations, Swedish research on school leadership has paid little attention to the talk that occurs in the context. In this study an interactional perspective on school leaders' conversation is used. The aim is to show how school organization, school leadership and school leader identities are produced, formulated and transformed in talk-in-interaction and to show methods members use to build their concepts and categories, making them socially acceptable in situ. The empirical material consists of selected sequences of recorded talk in regular school leadership team meetings. I show how categorization work produces, formulates and transforms ascriptions of the school organization. The analyzed meetings can generally be described as problem-oriented. The school leaders depict themselves first and foremost as different from others. This is accomplished by various means; reported speech, use of time, extreme case formulations, laughter, contrasts and use of different pronouns. Individual identities, and more team-oriented identities are created in the school leaders' conversations. School leadership is not produced as a lone heroic effort, but rather as something created by the members in interaction, and constantly negotiated.*

At least since the early 1990s, Swedish schools have been managed extensively in and through teams of various kinds (SOU 2004:116), where talk and conversation is highly significant for school leaders' practice (Sundgren, 2006). Even though so much of school management is now organized in various group constellations, Swedish research on school leadership has paid little attention to talk in this context. The primary research focus on school leadership has been on the school principal and the principal's activities, with the point of departure being the principal as actor, embedded in the field of tension created by conflicts of power and interests. My opinion is that leadership can be understood as socially constructed, provided we do not focus solely on what the principal says or does but also analyze how leadership is produced in interaction in the management team.

With my studies on school leaders' talk I contribute to school leadership research by using an interactional perspective. The aim of my study is to show *how school organization, school leadership and school leader identities are produced, formulated and transformed in talk-in-interaction* and to show *different methods that members use to build their concepts and categories, making them socially acceptable in situ*. Central research questions are: How are the school and school leadership produced in discursive interaction? How are identification/association and difference/dissociation achieved with

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respect to people, things, events and places by conversation, and how are identities asserted?

My theoretical and analytical basis derives from ethnomethodology (EM) (Garfinkel, 1967; Heritage, 1984), social constructionism (Börjesson, 2003; Potter, 1996), and Membership Categorization Analysis (MCA) (Sacks, 1992; Baker, 1997; Edwards, 1991; Hester & Eglin, 1997; Jayyusi, 1984; Lepper, 2000). I consider theory and method to be intimately intertwined. The theoretical perspectives and analytical methods enable me to ask questions about what it is that words create and how versions of the world are constructed and asserted in interaction.

I started with the notion that much of our knowledge about the world is formed through the categories we use in talk and that we categorize in order to perform discursive actions in interaction with others. Categorization is thus regarded as a fundamental principle of organization in human thought and action (Bowker & Star, 1999).

I present my work in four empirical studies oriented towards analyzing how concepts and categories are asserted, negotiated and produced in interaction. Detailed studies of recorded and transcribed sequences are presented in the analysis. The empirical material consists of selected sequences of recorded talk in regular meetings of school management teams: team leaders at a lower secondary school and school leader teams at two upper secondary schools; and also interviews with assistant principals at three secondary schools.

In the studies I demonstrate how categorization work produces, formulates and transforms ascriptions to the school as an organization. A variety of categories are presented that are designated not only by more 'official terms'[1] like principal, assistant principal, work team leader and teacher but also by more 'unofficial terms' like airhead, math and science nerds, new employees, people who do whatever they want, scapegoat, minority, one who was a bit more doubtful, strongly critical, an old, traditional principal, old-fashioned school, old-fogeyish, headmasterish, bitter and new teachers – to name only a few of the categories formed in the conversations. I have argued that Boden's concept of 'organization-in-action' (1994) is relevant here. (See also Gronn, 1983; Chia, 2000). These categorizations illustrate the locally produced organization (Excerpt 2).

In several of the excerpts, the use of various temporal terms is a method or discursive resource frequently used to give meaning to categories and to create meaning. In an interview study, we can see how time is used by both the interviewer and the interviewees to formulate and produce categories relevant in the context. In making categorizations, the narrator (the school leader interviewed) also adopts a position (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998; Benwell, & Stokoe, 2006; Lerner, 1992). This positioning is done in relation to the interviewer and to the interview situation, but also in relation to various contrasting teacher types, managerial concepts, school definitions and the like. Time is used to create historical figures such as "old fogies," "old headmasterish types" and "old, traditional principals." This makes an effective contrast to the innovative and progressive school leaders the interviewees assert themselves to be. (Excerpt 1).

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[1] I use ' for a citation made by me and " for statements made in the excerpts by the school leaders.

Another study also includes examples of how temporal terms are formulated in interaction between participants in the meetings. 'Today' is used in contrast to outmoded teacher behaviour, also denoting how a contemporary teacher *should* act and speak.

Reproducing utterances as they might have been made by non-present speakers or by the speaker her/himself on a previous occasion is another resource used to support categorization work. How utterances are reproduced to achieve something in the context is the main focus in one of my studies, although there are examples of reported speech in the other studies as well. Reported speech is an effective way to produce and ascribe features and attributes to categories. By using reported speech, the speaker does not have to describe or formulate the traits of the quoted person directly but can do so indirectly through the quotation. Reported speech may be described as a discursive resource that produces categories while positioning the speaker in relation to the reported person and the group who are listening. (Excerpt 3).

In my studies, the school leaders depict themselves first and foremost as different from 'the others'. This is accomplished by various means: reported speech (e.g. Baynham & Slembrouck, 1999; Holt, 1996; Myers, 1999; Tannen, 1989), use of time (e.g. Börjesson, 2005; Georgakopoulou, 2003), extreme case formulations (e.g. Pomerantz, 1986), laughter (e.g. Holmes & Marra, 2002), contrasts and use of different pronouns. A variety of discursive resources are used to depict and position the interviewees as 'innovative', 'creative', 'progressive' and 'improving' school leaders. These are attributions that may be regarded as reasonable and practicable for a school leader who is labeled contemporary and credible.

The analyzed meetings can generally be described as problem-oriented. I argue that the problem-oriented conversations construct the school leaders as 'problem-solvers' (e.g. Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998). The school leaders collectively create, produce and reproduce attributions of 'the problematic others', such as teachers and caretakers, while portraying themselves as the group who can solve problems and secure school work (e.g. Atkinson, Cuff & Lee, 1978; Baker, 1997; Middleton, 1996). (Excerpt 4).

Distance and dissociation are created in the problem-oriented conversations in relation to others. Conversation in meetings is a means whereby members can distance themselves from the problematic others and the current organization, and in which they can reflect on and question their own roles. In addition to being a place for discussions about how problems should be solved, who should talk to whom, who should be responsible for making sure problems are taken care of, and where decisions are made and questions coordinated, the meeting becomes a place for identity creation; a place where school leaders critically examine and formulate what it means to be a school leader, where they work out how school leaders should act and where they discuss, negotiate and create their relationships to others.

Beside the individual identity constructions, more team-oriented identities are created in school leaders' conversations (e.g. Kangasharju, 1996; Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998 Housley, William, 2003). Various expressions of *we* are formulated in interaction by the attributes school leaders ascribe to other categories. Utterances about others do

something for the collegiality of the group; they signal membership with the group/team. The conversation in the meetings may be described as a place where solidarity is constructed where a *we* identity different to others is shaped.

Generally speaking, categorization work is highly significant in the interaction, as is the way in which members orient their actions in relation to the categorizations made by previous speakers. Categorizations have been proved to create and produce effects in the context in which they are used.

Categorization and identity work are constructive concepts in the analysis with respect to how team members produce school organization, school actors and identities in interaction. The concept of *identity work* may be seen as a complement to categorization; in many cases it describes the same process, but identity concentrates on something specific in interaction. Identity work focuses on important actions, many of which are occupied and oriented towards the members' positioning in relation to others, each other and utterances expressed in interaction. The team members constantly adopt attitudes to one another and each other's utterances, to other categories inside and outside the school and to conditions depicted as prevailing in the schools. Identity work is an important part of the actions accomplished in the analyzed meetings.

It is not possible to comment on the extent to which leadership work is a collective project in relation to other activities in which school leaders participate, but this study emphasizes the importance of discursive interaction in school leaders' work (e.g. Gronn, 1983). In the analysis, school leadership is not produced as a lone heroic effort but rather as something created by the members in interaction. Based on the studies presented, I argue that school leadership and school leadership identity is constantly negotiated, formed and constructed by teams in conversation.

**Examples of excerpts from my studies**

*Excerpt 1*
*Building up Credibility in School Leaders' Talk*
*"Fogeys", "traditional grammar school" and "old lectureship thinking"*

Opposition and antagonism between 'old' and 'new' are described in Peter's story about daily occurrences in his work as a school leader. Below an interview with a school leader, Anita is the interviewer and Peter the interviewee.

| 1 | Anita | How was the initial period as school leader then? |
|---|---|---|
| 2 | | (0.9) |
| 3 | Peter | t: (0.7) Well, it was |
| 4 | | (1.1) |
| 5 | | You see, this school is just a bi:t old-fashioned or |
| 6 | | you can put it like this, it was standing a bit still |
| 7 | | in any case when I came here, nothing much was |
| 8 | | happening (0.8) there was a bi:t too much of a |
| 9 | | traditional grammar school, you see and those pupils, |
| 10 | | well, we don't have them today |

| | |
|---|---|
| 11 | (1.1) |
| 12 | so that it- it- yes, now, after two years we have |
| 13 | changed attitudes among the teachers (0.7) so |
| 14 | it was quite tough (0.3) to er, er get into |
| 15 | these er, er (0.5) old fogeys and (0.4) their |
| 16 | rather old-fashioned university lecturer style of |
| 17 | thinking and so on (1.4) |
| 18 | So that it- it- it was quite exciting, you see, but then |
| 19 | we- we were (.) a management group, so I |
| 20 | got support from the management group= |

School management "we" is contrasted with the category "school" which is ascribed attributes like "a bit old-fashioned", "was standing a bit still", "a bit too much of a traditional grammar school". "We" is contrasted with the "old" teachers that are given attributes like "old fogeys" and "old-fashioned university lecturer style of thinking". "Old fogeys" evokes an old guard with dated ideas who do not want change, as defined in, for example, Collins English Dictionary (2005). Peter enhances this datedness with grammar school thinking, describing his pupils as being different from those at the time of the traditional grammar school: "those pupils, we don't have them today"; in other words, the types of pupil at that time are not the ones at Peter's upper secondary school, where Peter is a school leader. Peter relates how he has worked for change, "after two years we have changed attitudes", but it hasn't been easy "it was quite tough".

At the beginning of the passage, Peter uses a "a bit" three times: "a bit old-fashioned", "standing a bit still" and "a bit too much of a traditional grammar school". This emphasis and his elongation of the vowel can be interpreted as irony. This means that the "bit" should be interpreted as the opposite: "a bit" does not mean a little but a lot. Potter (1996) interprets irony as an everyday way of undermining the literal meaning of words. This interpretation is supported by assertions in which "a bit" is coupled with "old-fashioned", "too much of a traditions grammar school", "old fogeys" and "old-fashioned university lecturer style of thinking".

The fact that things were "standing a bit still" gives the impression that no change was taking place: "rather old university lecturer style of thinking" casts one's mind back to a school of the old days, even though lecturer posts still exist at upper secondary schools in Sweden. It is the context and the method of expression that convey this meaning to the listener. Ascribing to the school attributes like "old-fashioned", "too much of a traditional grammar school" and to categorize teachers as "old fogeys" and so on is done to underline the arguments and give associations of a negative story, of an old, outdated school. Börjesson (2003, 1997) describe this way of using a story in argumentation as bracing oneself in response to a terrible story. Resistance is built up in response to a defined defect, shortcoming or injustice and something new is formulated. The old school is contrasted, in Peter's interview, with the new school Peter has been working for; and in the story, he describes how he, together with the rest of the school's management, has changed the attitudes among the teachers.

***Excerpt 2***

*Organisation in Action*
*'New staff' and 'characters who do as they please'*
*– categorization in a school management meeting, at a lower secondary school.*

```
 1 Eskil      er, owing to certain circumstances (0.2) I mean
 2            there are some new staff and ah there are caracters
 3            who: (0.1) do as they plea:se (0.4)
 4 Bo         mm
 5 Eskil      and er in this case maybe it's an instance of
 6            both (1.0) so we won't have any parent-student-teacher
 7            meetings in the staff room
 8 ?              [((giggle))
 9 Bo             [it drives me nuts
10 Eskil      during(  ) of course (0.7)
11            the conference room but we won't have those
12            meetings in the staff room (0.3) we used to have time
13            limits but it's my impression that we have in fact said
14            that not even after (1.0)
15 Karin      six o'clock I think (0.5)
16 Eskil      after 18 it's OK (0.6)
17 Bo         mm
18 Eskil      because that's er you can have the parent-teacher
19            meetings here too so
20 Bo         mm
```

Above we see an example of how categories are used and created in the interactions among the members at this meeting. A group of teachers perform the same illegitimate action but are placed in two categories: "new staff" and "characters who do as they please". "New staff" are a category comprising individuals who violate the rules of the school, but as a new staff member you can't know all the rules at the school. "New staff" are not on an equal footing with "characters who do as they please". The latter are understood to comprise individuals who should know the rules, and a negative moral meaning is ascribed to their action. It is more immoral to violate the rules if you are "characters who do as they please", compared with "new staff".

Categorization work is of great importance in interaction between the members, and the members orient their actions (responses or lack of response) in relation to the categorizations made by preceding speakers. Different categories are used to create understandings about the questions being discussed. They used, for example, the categories "new staff" and "characters who do as they please" in a discussion about teachers who have violated the rules of the school.

*Excerpt 3*
*Identity Work*
*Using reported speech for categorizing*

Two excerpts are presented below, showing how reported speech is used to indicate how staff category position themselves in a specific question. Both examples are taken from a

management meeting in an upper secondary school and in the first excerpt we see a discussion about the guidance counsellors' dissatisfaction with the decision that they should be transferred from one place to another. Filip the school leader responsible for this staff group, says that the guidance counsellors' view is that they have been disregarded and treated unfairly.

```
 1  Allan          mm and they are both of the same opinion?
 2  Herman         °you know (   )°
 3  David          [°yes ha ha°
 4  Filip          [yeah I can't say- no I've been talking to them a little bit
 5                 you know- (1.1) once or twice (.) when I've fixed their
 6                 computers and (1.2) and as far as I could gather
 7                 they where very disappointed (0.8) disregarded and
 8                 (0.7) raised stupid points like: "Right but all the others
 9                 jolly well get what they wan't" and so on and-
10                 (1.6)
11  Herman         which ones, for example?
12                 (0.4)
13  David          °er er .hh.hh°
14                 (1.5)
15  Filip      yes but, well, they thought "we're treated unfairly
16             and all that sort of stuff
17                 (1.7)
18  Filip          and we who are working so well and er then
19                 (2.2)
20             and we- we- we really do our bit and so and then
21             we get treated this way"
22                 (1.6)
23  David          °um- um- um° yeah .hhhh
```

***Excerpt 4***
***Creating School Leader Team Identity***
***Standing up for our decision***

The excerpt below is a continuation of Excerpt 3 above. Filip has told the meeting about his talk with the guidance counsellors. The guidance counsellors have, as mentioned in Excerpt 1, expressed discontent with their being transferred from one place to another. The decision about their transfer was made by the school leader team, and below, Vanja shows her disapproval of Filip's advice to the guidance counsellors: "go and talk to Vanja, David and Herman about your discontent". Vanja, Filip, David and Herman are assistant principals. Allan, the principal of this school, is present at the meeting, but is not mentioned and does not say anything in this particular excerpt.

```
1                  (1.0)
2      Vanja       well but when you say it that way "go and talk to Vanja,
3                  David and Herman", then it feels like (0.6) .hh
4                  we think one thing and you think something else
5                  (2.3)
```

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 6 | Filip | but they see it as if you – it's you who have |
| 7 | | decided it |
| 8 | | (0.6) |
| 9 | Vanja | OK, but wha- what do you mean, they see it, the question is |
| 10 | | how you see it (.) if you <u>stand up</u> for |
| 11 | | <u>our</u> decision- |
| 12 | Filip | yeah yeah, of course I do [I say th- |
| 13 | Vanja | [-or not, no but you don't |
| 14 | | when you say "go and talk to Vanja, |
| 15 | | Herman and David", then you don't stand up for it |
| 16 | Filip | but do you think that- should I deal with that discussion |
| 17 | | (0.5) |
| 18 | Vanja | Yes: if they ask you I think you should do that |
| 19 | | (2.3) |
| 20 | Filip | OK OK but I say them like this: "it has been decided that we |
| 21 | | will try to have a guidance counsellors' office downstairs and you will |
| 22 | | have your offices there, but unfortunately they won't be as large |
| 23 | | as you wanted them to be (.) they'll be (.) well like in |
| 24 | | this plan". |

## Transcription Glossary

The transcription symbols in conversation analytic research are developed by Gail Jefferson (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998).

(0.5)          The number in brackets indicates a time gap in tenths of a second

(.)          A dot enclosed in a bracket indicates a pause in the talk of less than two-tenths of a second

=          The 'equals' sign indicates 'latching' between utterances

[ ]          Square brackets between adjacent lines of concurrent speech indicate the onset and end of a spate of overlapping talk

.hh          A dot before an 'h' indicates speaker in-breath. The more h's the longer the breath

hh          An 'h' indicates an out-breath. The more h's the longer the breath.

(( ))          A description enclosed in a double bracket indicates a non-verbal activity. For example ((paper noise))

-          A dash indicates the sharp cut-off of the prior word or sound

:          Colons indicate that the speaker has stretched the preceding sound or letter. The more colons the greater the extent of the stretching

stand up          Underlined words indicate an emphasis on the specific word(s)


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