

Leading and supporting: principals reflect on their task as pedagogical leaders of Swedish school-age educare

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ABSTRACT

Principals in Sweden face leadership challenges as pedagogical leaders of School-age educare Centers (SAECs). This study examines how principals identify both professional development needs as well as challenges they face in supporting the SAEC teachers. The empirical data is based on reflections from 29 principals and vice-principals from four different municipalities in Sweden, which were analyzed using a framework for successful school leadership (Leithwood, K., A. Harris, and D. Hopkins. 2020. "Seven strong claims about successful school leadership revisited." *School Leadership & Management* 40 (1): 5–22) and thematic analysis. Within the key areas for development three main themes were found: personal professional understanding of SAEC, building collaborative cultures within and between SAEC departments, and increasing student participation and engagement. The participants further identified specific challenges in supporting the SAEC teachers: building a culture of collaboration between SAEC and the compulsory school, structuring planning and collaboration, and improving assessment practices in SAEC. The results highlight how by not prioritizing the work in SAECs has impacted their ability to lead the program; they emphasize their need to improve and develop the SAECs and their desire to change their leadership priorities.

KEYWORDS

school leadership; school-age educare; collaboration; development; extended education

Introduction

Research directed towards school principals' work in Sweden has for a long time been an underreached topic (Ludvigsson and Falkner 2019; The Swedish Research Council 2011). The Swedish School Inspectorate (2010) asserts that principals have a key function in the educational system dedicated to realising the national educational goals. Their work is an essential aspect of creating schools where learning is understood as meaningful, stimulating and where

students feel safe. A key aspect of this role is leading and developing the learning environment in school (Hallinger and Heck 1998; Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins 2020).

School leadership is both demanding and complex, encompassing vital responsibilities (Jerdborg 2020; Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins 2020). As Sweden took the decision of keeping schools open during the pandemic (Lindblad et al. 2021), the impact on the school system can in some ways be seen as minimal compared to countries that closed schools or moved them to digital learning. However, like their colleagues in countries that closed the schools, Swedish principals found themselves unprepared for the challenges they faced (see also Harris and Jones 2020). For them, it meant responding to a variety of challenges including staff shortages due to infection and illness. While the impact on Swedish principals can be viewed as different from those countries, there is no denying that it affected both students, teachers and principals.

The responsibilities of the principal additionally continue to evolve as both the tasks and the role itself have changed over time (Lundström, Holm, and Erixon Arreman 2017; Pont, Nusche, and Moorman 2008). For principals in Sweden, as compared to principals in other countries, one such change is also being responsible for the pedagogical leadership of the component of the Swedish school system known as School-age educare centers (SAECs). The focus of this study highlights how principals, responsible for SAEC programs, understand their own professional development needs as well as the challenges they face in supporting the SAEC teachers. The main research question of this study is:

What areas of development or challenges do principals identify as important in developing the instructional program of the SAEC?

School-age educare centres – from childcare to education (and care)

The SAEC program is an extended education program common in the Scandinavian countries, however, Sweden sits apart from its Scandinavian colleagues with a teacher education program specifically aimed at teachers in SAECs.¹ Predecessors to the SAEC were the work cottages from the 1880s. The aim was to provide meaningful after-school activities for the poorest children aged seven to fourteen years. Based on a philanthropic tradition focused on making a moral impact on the children and their families, the work cottages did not merely provide supervised daycare, but the children were taught handicrafts in preparation for future jobs (Johansson 1986). The work cottages were phased out in the 1930s and replaced with after-school centers staffed mostly with pre-school teachers. The after-school centers were initially only supporting families with childcare after school, but during the early 1960s, moved to include before-school hours as well. They were re-named leisure-time centres.

In 1964 diploma courses specifically directed to leisure-time centres were created and the staff working in there were now referred to as leisure-time pedagogues. From initially mainly serving as a complement to the family's upbringing of their children, the leisure time pedagogues work has, since the 1980s, increasingly become a complement to school. As of April 15, 2021, data from The Swedish National Agency for Education indicate that SAECs serves about 480 000 students between the ages of 6–12 years. The English translation of 'leisure-time centre' has also changed to 'school-age educare centre'; an indication that SAEC activities comprise of both education and care (Haglund and Boström 2020) and research directed to SAECs has now been established within the growing area of extended education (Boström and Augustsson 2016; Klerfelt and Ljusberg 2018).

When the collaboration between the obligatory school and SAECs was initiated, it was partly seen as a way to improve school for the youngest children and partly a way to cut budget costs by housing SAECs in school facilities.² SAECs are now a part of the school system, regulated by the Education Act (SFS 2010:800) and the curriculum plan (Swedish National Agency for Education 2017). A new three-year-long teacher education for SAECs was established in 2011. The teachers hold a Degree of Bachelor of Arts in Primary Education – Extended School, and since 2016, the national curriculum includes a chapter directed especially to the SAEC program. The stated aim of the SAEC program is to stimulate students' development and learning as well as offering the students meaningful leisure time (The Swedish National Agency for Education 2011, 23).

Although collaboration with the obligatory school is mandated, the SAECs continue to face the reality of often being relegated to an inferior status in the education system. Early research highlighted the cooperation between schools and SAECs (cf. Calander 1999; Hansen 1999) where SAEC staff were portrayed as subordinated to the schoolteachers. This subordination is also visible in more recent research evident in both the physical location of SAEC and how the collaboration between school and SAEC is enacted (cf. Boström and Augustsson 2016; Haglund and Boström 2020). SAEC staff can be assigned as support to a classroom, resulting in a lack of planning time for SAEC activities and leading to work fragmentation. Creating the schedule for their workday is the responsibility of the principal (Haglund and Boström 2020).

Principals as pedagogical leaders

Extensive research on school improvement shows that principal leadership is key to successful schools where both students and teachers thrive (Fullan 2001). Different terms such as instructional leadership, distributed leadership, democratic or shared leadership and learning-centred leadership are used to describe the principals' governance. While the terms denote a different

emphasis on how leadership is enacted, they all focus on its role within the school organisation. The main aim of the different theories and models of leadership is to find an effective leadership structure that leads to student learning and also provides fertile ground for professional learning for teachers and staff. While there is not a straight correlation between principal leadership and students' achievement, the connection is clear. It is, however, important to remember that leadership impact is mediated by school-level processes and conditions (Hallinger and Heck 1998; Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins 2020; Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe 2008). Principals are also key in being able to interpret, mediate and implement policy and reforms (Leithwood et al. 2004).

Instructional leadership – pedagogical leadership

In Sweden, the term pedagogical leadership has traditionally been used to denote the conditions principals create for teaching and learning and their leadership of teaching and learning (Leo 2015). However, the term instructional leadership is a well-established term in international research and is commonly used to describe the principal's role in leading the instructional and academic programs of schools. Instructional leadership can be defined as encompassing both the improvement of teaching and learning as well as conceptual understanding of curriculum, assessment and teaching (Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe 2008). Thus, pedagogical and instructional leadership can be viewed as similar in both construct and implication as their central aim is improving the learning of the students (Harris and Fink 2008).

Research on instructional leadership usually adheres to the conceptualisation constructed by Hallinger (2003) and later expanded upon by Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2008). In this theory, the pillars for effective leadership embody the aspects of developing a strong vision, setting the direction for the school and promoting positive learning culture by building relationships and developing people, as well as the management and improvement of the instructional program. Instructional leadership emphasises the importance of collaborative learning and the principal's role in encouraging collaboration around student learning (Hallinger and Heck 2010; Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins 2020; Robinson 2010). The teachers' work has a direct connection to student success while the role that the principal plays is more indirect in shaping the culture and setting expectations for the school. This highlights the importance that, as the instructional leader, principals become the builders of the culture that sets the tone for the school (Hallinger 2005). This kind of culture-building, however, must always be viewed as situated and mediated between the principal, the teachers, students and the context where the principals' leadership is grounded in the reciprocal nature of this iterate interaction (Hallinger and Heck 2010; Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins 2020). When teachers perceive the principal as promoting a strong learning climate this is also a strong indicator

of instructional leadership. However, to maintain a culture of learning, it is essential to retain competent teachers. High turnover of staff or schools with inexperienced staff were often unable to maintain this strong focus on learning (O'Donnell and White 2005). This highlights the role that the principal has in staffing the instructional program which is inherently interlinked with their ability to create the right working conditions that motivate staff to improve teaching and learning through ongoing and continuous professional learning (Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins 2020).

Leadership in school-age educare centers

Research on the principals' role as pedagogical leaders in SAECs is scarce compared to research their role as pedagogical leaders of the obligatory school. Most Swedish research focuses on aspects of the education in SAECs, rather than the role of the principal. Research that exists focuses on the SAEC staff and their perception of their principals and emphasises the principals' lack of knowledge and understanding of the SAEC program (Andersson 2013; Ludvigsson and Falkner 2019) and lack of prioritising systematic quality development at the SAEC (Haglund 2018). Andersson (2013) asserts that principals, because of their lack of SAEC knowledge, often hand over the responsibility for the SAEC to the SAEC staff, essentially abandoning their pedagogical leadership, leaving the SAEC staff to develop and evaluate the program.

A recent study on the principals' understanding of teaching in SAEC revealed a divide between both their definition and enactment of the pedagogical program. The principals' responses indicated a distant approach to their pedagogical leadership role (Glaes-Coutts 2021). One of their leadership challenges is the long-term resistance from SAEC staff in using the term teaching, as it is so closely connected to the obligatory school. The expression 'schoolification' is often used to represent the resistance toward using traditional teaching and assessment (Glaes-Coutts 2021). Even as the educational program for principals has been revised, it remains lacking an important aspect of leadership in today's education, including leadership in SAEC (Norberg 2019). Currently, no study exists that explores the professional learning needs of principals in relation to their leadership in SAEC.

Methodology

This study reports findings from the project The Pedagogical task of School Age educare (Fritidshemmets Pedagogiska Uppdrag). It is a three-year research and development project within the framework of Ifous, a nonprofit independent research and development institute in the field of education in collaboration with university researchers. The findings from principals' reflections on their pedagogical leadership in SAECs have been thematized through a qualitative

research approach. The findings were analyzed through Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2008) framework of leadership of how principals obtain and apply their leadership practices in the context of their schools (Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins 2020).

When revisiting their study from 2008, where they discuss seven 'strong claims' about successful school leadership, Leithwood et al. conclude that four of these claims have been significantly reinforced by new evidence. One of these four reinforced claims is: 'Almost all successful leaders draw on the same repertoire of basic leadership practices' (2020). This claim and the basic assumptions that are connected to the claim are the point of direction for the analysis of this study and are connected to four domains of leadership practice; Setting Directions, Building Relationships and Developing People, Redesigning the Organisation to Support Desired Practices, and Improving the Instructional Program.

Data collection

The empirical data in this study is based on reflections from principals and vice-principals from four different municipalities in Sweden. They are participants in a three-year research project with 45 principals and vice-principals, and 29 of them elected to participate in this specific study.³ Participants were informed of the Swedish Research Council's ethical principles (2017) which guide this study. The participants received an email invitation to participate and asked to consent to their participation. Their participation consisted of written reflections concerning their leadership of the SAEC at their schools. Their reflections were submitted through Sunet Survey, a system used by the University of Gävle to manage inquiries and surveys. Four of the principals had difficulties using the Sunet Survey system and were offered the opportunity to send their reflections by email instead. They were informed that this also meant that anonymity was not guaranteed as one of the researchers would know who sent the email but still consented to participate. All participants were asked to actively make observations in the SAECs at their schools. The observations could consist of field studies, participating in the planning of teaching, participating in the execution of the planned work, as well as and being involved in the assessments that staff made of their planned teaching activities⁴ The data used in this study is the written reflections the principals made based on questions emailed to them by the researchers. The two questions used for analysis were:

Based on your experiences at your SAEC program, what areas do you identify as the most challenging or in need of development?

What do you identify as the areas that you as a leader need to change or develop to improve the instructional program of SAEC?

The participants received one reminder during the 15 days they had at their disposal before the inquiry's deadline.

Data analysis

The data material was carefully read through, and thereafter analyzed and sorted into each of the four domains Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2020) describe and the specific practices within these domains. The analysis was carried out in three steps. The first step was a deductive process where the participants' reflections were repeatedly read with the purpose to find out how their reflections fit into the four domains of successful leadership. The coding was determined through discussion between the two researchers to strengthen the reliability and for the data to be coded consistently. The second analytical step was also a deductive one. The participants' reflections were repeatedly read again now to illicit if some of the specific practices were more dominantly represented than others. In the third and final step thematic analysis (Braun et al. 2019) was used to thematize the results of the participants' reflections within the specific practices themselves. The thematic analysis implied a search for repeated patterns of meaning which also included reading and re-reading the data. The participants' written reflections varied concerning the length of the reflections; from short sentences to contributions of more than 500 words.

Findings

The first step of the analysis was done to determine how the principals' reflections adhered to the four domains of successful leadership. The findings are described in the [Table 1](#) below.

The discussed area in response to the question 'What areas of development or challenges do you identify as important at your SAEC' fell within, the leadership practices domain 'Develop the Organisation to Support Desired Practices'. This means that the majority of the participating principals chose to reflect upon developments or challenges within that domain. Although this provides a good indication of what the participants consider to be the most urgent area for development, it is also important to keep in mind that the 'ways in which leaders apply these basic leadership practices – not the practices themselves' that ultimately are the most important aspect of their leadership (Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins 2020, 9). As the first step of the analysis revealed the domain 'Develop the Organisation to Support Desired Practices' to be the

Table 1. Number of statements within the four domains of leadership practices (Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins 2008).

Set directions	0
Build Relationships and Develop People	7
Develop the Organisation to Support Desired Practices	22
Improve the Instructional Program	9
Not answering the questions (or answering in a way that the questions remain unanswered)	3

Table 2. Number of statements within 'Develop the Organisation to Support Desired Practices' domain.

Build collaborative culture and distribute leadership	4
Structure the organisation to facilitate collaboration	13
Build productive relationships with families and communities	0
Connect the school to its wider environment	0
Maintain a safe and healthy school environment	0
Allocate resources in support of the school's vision and goals	5

main focus for most principals, the next step was analyzing the specific practices within this domain. This step in the analysis focused on eliciting which of the specific practices are represented in the participants' answers (Table 2).

Desired practices' domain

Here the results, just as in the analysis of the principals' reflections into different domains of successful leadership, revealed one of the categories as dominant in their responses. Most of the answers from the participants were found within the specific practice 'Structure the organisation to facilitate collaboration'. As can be seen in Table 2, more than half of all quotes within the 'Develop the Organisation to Support Desired Practices' domain could be attributed to the specific practice identified as 'Structure the organisation to facilitate collaboration'.

The following section of the results is presented based on the themes that emerged through the thematic analysis within the specific practice 'Structure the organisation to facilitate collaboration'. The participants identified both areas for development and challenges significant for their leadership in SAEC: Each of these areas was then connected to three main themes. In the section of 'Developments', the following themes were found:

- The professional development needs of principals of SAEC
- Building a collaborative culture within and between SAEC departments
- Increase student participation and engagement

The following themes were identified within the area classified as 'Challenges':

- Build a culture of collaboration between SAEC and the compulsory school
- Structure the organisation to facilitate planning and collaboration
- Develop and improve assessment practices in SAEC

Areas of development

The professional development needs of principals of SAEC

The participants reflected on various practices that they needed to develop and address to effectively lead the SAEC program. The first theme that emerged

highlights the areas for development they have themselves classified as essential in their leadership. One professional development need identified was on increasing their own active involvement in the SAEC program.

[I need to] continuously monitor the development [of SAEC] by attending meetings of the school improvement group and the division meetings, where I further need to emphasize the task of SAEC and the work that the SAEC staff perform in the obligatory school program.

[The most important thing I have learned when it comes to leading and developing the work at SAEC is that] I need to highlight the task of SAEC as an important part of the children's complete school day. I need to show interest and actively participate in the development of SAEC.

Several of the principals echoed this sentiment, as the reality is that often the day-to-day operation is delegated to the vice principal. Thus, the need to actively participate in the SAEC meetings was deemed the base from which both their management and leadership can develop. Their work in clarifying the mission and task of the SAEC further meant that they needed to continue to highlight the importance of the SAEC program for both the students and the school as a whole. Besides highlighting the work of the SAEC and making the impact of the program visible for everyone at school, the participants also identified the significance of the role they play in evaluating and monitoring the development of the SAEC program.

They discussed how the regular monitoring from the different SAECs needs to be based on the established expectations, and the planned work needs to focus on developing student abilities and skills.

How do we summarise and show the development that takes place at SAEC? [It is imperative] to make room for SAEC on the meeting agenda for the obligatory school, and to demonstrate that SAEC works with developing many of the abilities that support students in regular schoolwork; something that the obligatory schoolteachers need to be aware of. The students may demonstrate knowledge and abilities at SAEC that the teachers do not discover during the school day.

Several of the principals identified the importance of regular follow-up of the daily activities, planning, and evaluation in the SAEC, stressing this aspect of their leadership practice as an area of development for their leadership practices. They further acknowledge that in the past, the SAEC program as such had not been highlighted to the whole school. The principals recognise the importance of explicitly emphasising the task of SAEC as a vital part of the children's complete school day. Thus, it is imperative to make room for SAEC on the agenda for the obligatory school. In doing so they can demonstrate how the SAEC program develops many of the abilities that support students in regular schoolwork; something that the obligatory schoolteachers may need to be aware of.

Build a collaborative culture within and between SAEC departments

The second theme is directed towards the principals' work with developing collaboration both within and between SAEC departments. As not only university-educated SAEC teachers staff the SAEC, it means that staff with different educational backgrounds need to meet as a group to plan and discuss the work. These meetings may further function as in-job training:

Continuous professional development is something we work a great deal with during the SAEC team meetings, where we allot a significant amount of time for pedagogical discussions as well as the practical planning for SAEC (which both SAEC teachers and other SAEC staff attend together).

The excerpt highlights the importance for principals to provide time and space for pedagogical discussions as they are seen as essential in improving the program. Here they fill the function of continuous professional learning for both the university-educated SAEC teachers and all staff who work in SAEC. While the discussions in the excerpt above are directed to the collaboration and development within one SAEC team, the principals also highlight the significance of supporting the collaboration between teams of the different SAEC departments.

[I need to] structure a way to enhance collaboration between the different departments for them to expand their knowledge. [To create and encourage] a sharing culture, to schedule time for sharing good examples, visit each others' departments and work preventively. / ... / We, as school managers, need to organise ALL departments to be safe and enjoyable in a better way. Organise to facilitate a sharing culture. Dare to emphasize good examples but also examples where we see challenges.

This excerpt once again describes the importance of sharing and developing staff knowledge. As school leaders, the participants express a need to get better at creating a collaborative organisation among the departments and to make them safe learning places. They describe an important aspect of their role as being able to create a sharing culture throughout all the departments within the SAEC. The participant above had also experienced how some departments stagnate in their development; even finding themselves in a downwards spiral. As school leaders, the principals feel they need to confront these challenges. At the same time, it is valuable for them to lead by identifying and highlighting the good pedagogical practices that are used in their SAEC programs.

Increase student participation and engagement

The last theme describing what the principals identify as important for their leadership development concerns improving student engagement and participation in both the planning and execution of the activities in SAEC. While

student participation is always a goal, the following quote illustrates just how tentative and fragile this aspect of the SAEC work is.

One outcome of the pandemic has meant that most students leave SAEC after the afternoon snack, [rather than stay and participate in the planned activities]. When the pandemic is over, I would like to gather more information by observing longer activity sessions and find out how we can continue to develop and engage the students, so they stay longer at SAEC.

The pandemic has caused changes in the SAEC work as well as in school in different ways. The changes emphasised here involve the fact that most of the students have spent less time at the SAEC during the pandemic. The principals describe the importance of examining what content would enhance the students to want to remain at the SAEC. It reflects a focus on the importance of regularly evaluating the program by asking the students how they experience their learning at SAEC. Another principal mentioned a student survey that they executed at their SAEC, which led to the conclusion that the program needed to find more ways to develop students' language and communication skills further. The principal in the next excerpt highlights the importance of student voice and active participation:

The school leadership team needs to work with organising so that those who are observed as being on their own can actively participate in the planning of the activities. If there are possibilities for them to have a more active role in shaping the contents of an activity, this may increase their willingness to participate in this activity. We need to pay attention to actively working to include these students in SAEC, even if there are only a few of them.

This principal refers to the curriculum expectation, which emphasises that the educational aspect of SAEC needs to be based on the student needs and interests. Although the principal in this example describes how there are only a minor number of students who are observed as being on their own they are still deemed as important, requiring support in the program.

Areas of challenges

Building a culture of collaboration between SAEC and the compulsory school

While the principals spoke about the importance of collaboration within the SAEC, one area of particular challenge was facilitating collaboration between SAECs and the obligatory school. With few exceptions, the principals described this collaboration as a challenge, mainly because of traditional thinking around teaching and learning. One principal despair: 'I have doubts that we will ever reach a sense of equity in the status between the teachers in the two programs'. This uneven situation includes the practice of using SAEC teachers as supply teachers when the classroom teacher was sick or away.

The SAEC tends to act as a substitute service to the school. There might be some pedagogical advantages to this setup since a substitute from the SAEC most often has an established relationship with the students. On the other hand, this destroys the possibility for SAEC to create a systematic approach in their educational program. It lands on the leadership's plate to find a solution that creates a balance for both programs.

The principal sees both pros and cons with the existing collaboration between the SAEC and the school when it comes to SAEC staff stepping in as substitute teachers during regular school time. The advantage of this cooperation is that the students know the substitutes and the principal can make use of the expertise and knowledge of the SAEC staff. One clear disadvantage to this setup is that it both diminishes the work at the SAEC and relegates the status to the SAEC teachers to one of less importance than that of the obligatory schoolteachers. It further interrupts the SAEC program and thus leads to a lack of consistency in the learning that is expected in SAEC. One principal describes it as a 'hot potato' where the SAEC staff view collaboration and the complementary task as one-sided and leads to a lack of reciprocal collaboration from the staff of the obligatory school program. A recurring subject of discussion is how the regular school program and the SAEC should be complementing each other according to the curriculum. The traditional interpretation of the two programs is very deeply rooted as the obligatory schoolteachers and the teachers at the SAEC often have a different point of departure concerning in what way the SAEC should be a complement to school. This debate often leads to discontent and becomes a test for the leadership work of the principal.

Structure the organisation to facilitate planning and collaboration

The principals' leadership in structuring the collaboration involves both providing scheduled opportunities as well as providing feedback for instructional improvement. One challenge frequently mentioned by the participants was the scheduling itself. Planning time is required both for mutual planning time for the SAEC team and planning with the obligatory schoolteachers.

It is difficult to actualize/plan for preparatory work and post-work in relation to teaching. We have to think in new directions concerning this. Perhaps one at a time of the SAEC staff could be responsible for a certain teaching moment. It is much easier to release planning time for the staff one at a time. / ... / It is somewhat difficult to find a common planning time between schoolteachers and teachers at the SAEC.

The challenge comprises both of creating a mutual planning time for the SAEC team, as in the excerpt above, and of creating additional time for collaboration between the SAEC teachers and the obligatory schoolteachers (in which rooms the SAEC teachers often work). This is beyond the planning needed for the SAEC teams themselves. Challenges identified by one participant are that 'the obligatory schoolteachers often failed to see that student achievement improves when SAEC is actively involved'. However, the SAEC

staff may also take a protective stance when it comes to their professional identity. Here the obstacle, expressed by the participant, to overcome is communicating to the SAEC teachers that collaboration does not mean trying to make SAEC into another version of the obligatory school. Instead, as one participant writes, SAECs must keep their own specific program task while at the same time realising that the complementary task is an opportunity that is currently unused.

Develop and improve assessment practices in SAEC

The last theme directed to the principals' areas of challenges is pointing at the difficulties with assessing SAEC work, which in many aspects are different from the work in school.

How do you determine the quality of the SAEC program? How do you monitor student learning at SAEC without 'schoolifying' the assessments? We can perhaps learn from how it is done in pre-school/ ... /.

This emphasises how the SAEC program needs to be viewed as having a different, but equally important, function than the obligatory school. In the SAEC instruction is not subject driven, rather teaching is seen in a holistic sense, including both care and character education. The program quality, as well as teaching and learning at the SAEC, thus needs to be assessed differently than in the obligatory school program. As the pre-school program in Sweden has gone through a similar adjustment to having a curriculum, the principal here suggests that they can learn from their journey when looking at assessment and evaluation practices. The next excerpt also discusses assessments and highlight the assessment-teaching connection as well:

Plus, how we also need to develop the know-how of how we can assess and evaluate the program, revise it based on the analysis and continue to develop student learning.

This principal further describes an observation she did of the SAEC's program. The SAEC staff discussed content that had been implemented on an earlier occasion, but with a questionable outcome. In the excerpt below the principal referred to a conversation that the vice principal has had with the SAEC staff:

So, she asked [the teachers] what they had learned from the previous experience and what they could develop further in their teaching this time, to reach the expected results/effects from the teaching. She didn't get a real answer, and in the end, no revisions were made, which meant that the results were the same as the previous year; the students grew bored since the project was too big.

As no reflection was given by the SAEC staff, the principal, in collaboration with the vice-principal, determined that to improve the assessment in SAEC, they need to provide professional development on using assessment in planning for improved results.

Discussion

The findings from the research have been described through six themes, three grounded in what the principals determined to be areas of development and three described as areas of challenge. While the principals in this study identified both areas for personal professional growth and barriers for the development of the pedagogical program in general, the two can be viewed as two sides of the same coin. They represent how, while leadership leads to learning, the many types of learning that the school leader needs to embark on is a vital factor of overall school success.

In the first of the development themes, The professional development needs of principals of SAEC, the participants identified the need to be more involved in the day-to-day operation of SAEC in general and be more actively involved with both planning and monitoring of the program in particular. Their comments reveal a realisation of the importance of modelling active collaboration in their work to lead the improvement of the program. As both government reports and research claim that principals often lack knowledge and understanding of the SAEC program, the fact that the principals recognise their need to be more involved is seen as encouraging (Leo 2015; Ludvigsson and Falkner 2019). While they are familiar with monitoring the regular school program, the findings highlight how this has been a low priority for them regarding the SAEC program (Andersson 2013). It is important, however, to remember that as leadership is always highly contextualised this is not merely a result of the decisions made by the principals but must be placed in the context of the politics at the municipal level, where both budget and local policy may influence the lack of support in prioritising the SAECs (Hallinger and Heck 2010).

The finding under Build a collaborative culture within and between SAEC departments reflect the stark reality of the lack of educated SAEC teachers in Sweden (Haglund 2018; Haglund and Boström 2020). As a result of this teacher shortage, building a collaborative culture within and between SAEC departments is seen by the participants as a way to support their staff and help them improve their pedagogical knowledge (Hallinger and Heck 2010; Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins 2020). To build the professional capacities of their staff, the principals emphasized the importance of situated and local, 'on-the-job training', taking advantage of the skills and knowledge that the educated teachers have, sharing this with all SAEC staff (Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins 2020). Doing so would provide experienced staff with leadership opportunities and could even be viewed as an aspect of distributed leadership (Harris and Fink 2008; Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins 2020). For this to be effective, however, the principal must first build a culture of mutual respect among all staff and lead by providing clarity on the goals of these learning opportunities.

The last of the themes on development, Increase student participation and engagement, focuses on creating a program that involves and engages the students at the SAEC. As the Swedish 'national school system is based on democratic foundations' (The Swedish National Agency for Education 2011, 5), some participants specifically discussed how to expand the students' opportunities to influence the content in planning activities. The curriculum underlines basing the instructional program on students' needs, interests and initiatives well as the students being given the opportunity to influence and take responsibility for their education. Thus, the principals discussed the challenge of strengthening student voice in the program as an important aspect of their role.

When it comes to identifying the areas of challenges in leading SAECs, the principals emphasized the importance of their role in Building a culture of collaboration between SAEC and the compulsory school. Embedded in this challenge is dealing with the traditional perception of the status of SAEC teachers and schoolteachers where the SAEC teacher status is relegated to an inferior status. Even older research from 20 years ago, reflects established perceptions where SAEC staff assigned subordinated status (Calander 1999). The principals in our study provided few solutions on how to address this challenge. Interpreting and implementing the expectation of how the SAEC and the obligatory school should complement each other emerges as a leadership challenge for the principals (Leithwood et al. 2004). Aware of the situation, the participants admit to a lack of both knowledge and tools to develop this collaboration. This leads to a gap in effective leadership as the principals in this study struggle to communicate a vision, set the direction for, or promote collaboration (Hallinger and Heck 2010; Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins 2020).

The second theme, Structure of the organisation to facilitate planning and collaboration, is in some respects connected to the previous theme. One way to build a culture of collaboration between SAEC and the compulsory school could be to facilitate mutual planning. It should also be difficult for the SAEC to complement the school if there exists few or no encounters for mutual planning. The empirical findings give no clear reasons for why it is difficult to find time for mutual planning, but it is also argued that SAEC staff have few opportunities to realise both preparatory work and post-work concerning their teaching after school. This might be caused by the SAEC staff's many functions during school hours (Haglund and Boström 2020) including function as a substitute service to the school. Because of their assignments during school time (which they appear not to have planned together with the schoolteachers) they may have few opportunities to mutually prepare their work at the SAEC. These findings support the importance of structuring the organisation to facilitate collaboration (Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins 2020) which so far is described as currently undeveloped in the responses from the participants.

The final theme, Develop and improve assessment practices in SAEC, reveal how historical views of the role of SAEC is a significant barrier for the principals

in monitoring the progress of the program itself. Teaching and assessments have not been a part of SAEC traditions and assignments until more recently. To lead the instructional program in SAEC, the principals need to be able to communicate to staff in both the SAEC and obligatory school, the construct and concept of what teaching is in SAEC. The principals need to develop a good grasp of the instructional program to, not only, monitor and support it, but communicate it to staff as well (Glaes-Coutts 2021). To construct an understanding of the learning that takes place in the SAEC program thus becomes a steppingstone for developing assessment practices in SAEC. The principals in this study reveal that they are lacking both a deeper understanding as well as tools to be able to lead this section of the program. Although the study's findings in some respects confirm previous research on principals, this study reveals the effect of principals not prioritising the work in SAECs. This is most clearly seen in the participants' descriptions of difficulties in planning SAEC work and the tensions in the collaboration between SAEC teachers and the compulsory schoolteachers. The principals' account not only emphasises the need to develop the work in SAECs but also their desire to change their leadership to do so. The principals will need support in form of more elaborated steering documents to develop these aspects of the organisation further.

Conclusion

Even older research from 20 years ago, reflects established perceptions where SAEC staff assigned subordinated status (Calander 1999). The principals in our study provided few solutions on how to address this challenge. Interpreting and implementing the expectation of how the SAEC and the obligatory school should complement each other emerges as a leadership challenge for the principals (Leithwood et al. 2004). Aware of the situation, the participants admit to a lack of both knowledge and tools to develop this collaboration. This leads to a gap in effective leadership as the principals in this study struggle to communicate a vision, set the direction for, or promote collaboration (Hallinger and Heck 2010; Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins 2020). It further highlights the importance of giving the principals the education required to perform their job and may need a re-evaluation of the structure of the principal programs in Sweden (Glaes-Coutts 2021).

The findings from this study are not only relevant to the Swedish educational landscape but also in a wider perspective when considering local and comparative conditions for the principals' work. As the educational construct of extended education is a growing field in elementary education, the findings in this study highlights the complexity involved and raises relevant questions around pedagogical leadership in extended education. While this is a specific challenge for principals in Sweden as they balance their dual leadership role in both SAEC and the obligatory school, it also reflects the growing demands facing principals throughout the western world. Harris and Jones (2020) refer

to the principals' role as being 'the pinch point in the system' where they are expected to manage and lead in difficult times such as the pandemic and still focus on student achievement results.

The challenge of dealing with the perceived lower status of teachers in SAEC can also be seen in the perception of teachers in aesthetic subjects such as music and art, where again the role of the principal is to create equity among staff; both as far as work assignments go and in establishing a culture where all staff are seen as valued in supporting student success (Hallinger 2005).

This study included a smaller group of principals and thus the format of written reflections might provide less information in comparison to an interview study. Thus, we suggest that further research directed to SAEC principals' leadership practice is needed to gain a broader view of this unresearched area. Finally, we agree with Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2020) that some of the future research need to explore how school leaders enact these practices and 'their resulting impact' (16).

Notes

1. There are similar institutions in several other countries as well. Platenga and Remery (2013) for example make a thorough description of school-age services from different European countries. The SAEC counterpart in the US are after-school programs (Allen et al. 2019; Howard 2015) and after-school care in Australia (Cartmel and Hayes 2016).
2. SAECs have previously been accommodated in the same buildings as preschools or in separate buildings (Haglund and Boström 2020). Today, most SAECs share rooms, buildings and environments with Swedish compulsory schools.
3. All in all, there exist 290 municipalities in Sweden and about 3 900 principals (and vice-principals) have the responsibility for the education of their 6–15 year old students. However, all of these principals are not leading the work with the youngest students who participate in SAEC activities.
4. To participate with teachers in their professional learning activities is, according to Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2020) an important key finding from a widely cited review of leadership research reported by Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe (2008).

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