

Being a Principal for Extended Educational Services at School: Perspectives on What Matters—Structure, Culture, and Leadership

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Abstract

Extended education includes a variety of activities outside regular school hours for children of all ages, supervised by the school principal. Despite varying experiences, the principal's role has hardly been investigated. As principals play a crucial role in driving school development and educational change, it is important to understand how they view their leadership performance in relation to extended education. This study surveyed principals in Sweden and Switzerland using a problem-based semi-structured questionnaire. Deductive qualitative content analysis showed that principals in both countries faced leadership difficulties related to extended education, including translating policy papers and unclear extended education goals into guidelines for staff. Staff diversity and class sizes were also hindering factors, in a context where the principals' services were seen as setting the tone for the school climate.

Résumé

L'éducation parascolaire comprend diverses activités organisées en dehors des heures de cours pour les enfants de tous âges, sous la supervision d'un directeur d'école. Le rôle de ce dernier a été très peu étudié malgré la diversité de ses expériences. Ce rôle est pourtant essentiel pour assurer le développement de l'école et le progrès en éducation. À ce titre, il est utile de mieux comprendre comment les directeurs d'école perçoivent leur leadership en éducation parascolaire. Cette étude a recouru à un

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questionnaire semi-structuré pour interroger des directeurs d'école en Suède et en Suisse. Une analyse de contenu qualitative et déductive a indiqué que les directeurs d'école des deux pays faisaient face à des difficultés de leadership liées à l'éducation parascolaire, notamment pour traduire les documents d'orientation et les objectifs peu clairs de l'éducation parascolaire en lignes directrices pour le personnel. La diversité du personnel et la taille des classes constituaient également des facteurs contraignants, dans un contexte où l'on considère les services fournis par les directeurs d'école comme déterminants pour le climat scolaire.

Keywords / Mots clés : extended education, educational leadership, international, out-of-school-services, principals, qualitative / éducation parascolaire, leadership éducatif, international, services parascolaires, directeurs d'école, qualitatif

Introduction

Extended education (EE) is an emerging field in both practice and research (Plantega & Remery, 2013). It encompasses a broad range of services that contribute to children's education outside school hours. Extended education includes services such as private tutoring, cram schools, all-day schools, before- and after-school programs, and youth development programs (Bae, 2018). This article examines institutionalized leisure time provided within school buildings at School Age Educare Centres (SAECs) in Sweden and Scholarly Care centres in Switzerland. Such services are similar in Sweden and Switzerland in that they are practised as an optional, institutional care, play, and leisure service that operates on school premises, outside classroom learning. In general, Swedish and Swiss EE services, public educational programs by the local district (Switzerland) and the ministry of education (Sweden), are affiliated with one school building, offering additional non-formal educational activities for all children that depend strongly on the needs of the school building and the local community. The organizational structure, however, is very different: whereas Sweden has a national Curriculum for EE integrated into the school curriculum and an academic training for teachers in EE (Boström, Elvstrand, & Orwehag, 2023), Switzerland only recently had a curriculum and does not offer specific training for staff members (Schuler & Kappler, 2023). This means that principals face various but different challenges. In Sweden and Switzerland, principals are the official leaders of the entire workforce and are responsible for the EE activities on school premises. Children can attend specific activities (e.g., painting, basketball), use the premises freely (e.g., library, playground), and spend time with peers on the school grounds. Parents are requested to contribute financially to a certain extent (Schüpbach, 2018). EE in public schools in Sweden is mostly financed by taxes, and parents are asked to pay a small amount per child per month, whereas in Switzerland, the municipality and the parents cover the costs, so Swiss parents pay a considerable amount per child per month.

Whereas in Sweden, participation in EE services is a child's right and regularly attended by most children (as is the case in other Scandinavian countries), the services in Switzerland vary a lot in content, frequency, costs, and availability; they are also attended by fewer children compared with Swedish SAECs (Schüpbach, 2018).

Extended education in local educational context

Due to Switzerland's political system, the organization of the educational system depends on each canton's regulations. The trend of schools implementing EE services to create a holistic learning experience in which children can attend all day is evident in urban areas due to political pressures. Principals of such public "all-day schools" (ADS) are also requested to supervise EE services in addition to teaching (Landwehr & Bucher, 2015).

SAECs in Sweden are part of the public school system and are regulated by the *School Act* (SFS, 2010:800). The Act states that SAECs supplement education. In SAECs, staff must work toward the goals that govern the SAEC's activities. The principal is responsible for staff planning and carrying out activities in the SAEC in accordance with the assignment set out in the *School Act* and in the curriculum (Skolverket, 2022). Both schools and SAECs have a democratic and social assignment, as well as a knowledge assignment. Principals responsible for SAECs have been criticized by the School Inspectorate (Skolinspektionen, 2010, 2012, 2018) for lack of pedagogical leadership. The first report (2010) found that many employees did not understand the SAEC's learning mission, and the later report (2018) found that students were not challenged enough.

In both countries, public services offer care, supervision, and support before and after academic lessons, provided by staff qualified to teach in EE, offering various guided and non-guided (peer) activities based on play, learning, and leisure (Bae, 2018). Principals in both countries oversee academic lessons as well as EE services. Their tasks therefore include guiding teaching staff and their duties, as well as the EE staff who provide care for the children during EE services. Being the principal of such schools does not only mean pedagogical, operational, and administrative responsibility; it also includes responsibility for the care provided to the children before and after lessons. The principal's knowledge and perceptions of EE services are therefore key in driving organizational educational change for the entire school (Meyer, Hartung-Beck, Gronostaj, Krüger, & Richter, 2023).

Research on school leadership

Principals have a strong impact on school efficacy, and school quality is highly relevant according to international research (Heck & Hallinger, 2005). Principals are pivotal in enacting educational policy, mediating between macro-level directives and school-level practice. Policy enactment theory positions them as active interpreters who adapt and negotiate policies within contextual constraints (Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012). Policy enactment theory shifts the principal's role from one of following orders to that of a creative translator who mediates between government demands and the realities of their classrooms. Principals must navigate the "policy mess" by deciding which mandates to prioritize, which to protect teachers from, and which to integrate into the school's existing culture. For a principal, policy is not finished once it is announced. It is a process that is constantly being negotiated, resisted, and reshaped. The policy enactment theory conceptualizes principals as actively framing and filtering policy, while simultaneously weaving together multiple policy demands. In this perspective, principals are understood to contextualize and materi-

alize policy, engage in professional interactions with staff, and render performance visible. Policy enactment theory thus encompasses processes of translation, monitoring, and critical adaptation to the local context (Maguire, Braun, & Ball, 2015).

Principals are responsible for implementing regulations and policy papers, school improvement, organizing students' and teachers' daily lives, and communicating with various stakeholders; in short, it is a function that encompasses a school's leadership, accountability, and legitimation. As principals primarily influence the system, it is of interest how they can create conditions to empower staff so they can have an impact on students (Huber & Muijs, 2010). Through leadership in vision-setting, resource allocation, and staff support, principals shape how policies materialize and influence outcomes (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Hallinger, 2011). Leithwood and colleagues (2019) showed that successful leadership is meant to develop vision and define future school development, understand and support people, change an organization, and focus on teaching and learning. Successful schools show that principals and staff embrace the same rules, norms, and beliefs over time, leading to mutual cooperation (Lomos, Hofman, Hofman, & Boske, 2011; Scheerens, Luyten, Steen, & Luyten-de Thouars, 2007; Seashore & Murphy, 2017). Successful schools have good leadership (and vice versa) (Gurr, 2017; Rolff, 2016). Hence, principals of schools that implement EE services are challenged "to create a shared strategic vision that can make the difference at the school level" (Louis & Wahlstrom, 2011).

Leadership in EE services seems more complex than in school (Boström & Haglund, 2020). For example, in the educational practice of EE, staff with heterogeneous professional backgrounds work in various learning environments with different types of learning (formal, semi/non-formal, and informal), which requires different kinds of leadership strategies (Boström & Haglund, 2020).

Previous research on educational leadership in Switzerland examined principals, but not specifically principals of all-day schools (Tulowitzki, Pietsch, Cometti, Sposato, & Schweinberger, 2023; Kruse & Huber, 2021). Investigations into the workforce in ADS examined aspects of certain jobs (Windlinger & Züger, 2021) and the multiprofessional collaboration of social workers and teachers (Chiapparini, Selmani, Kappler, & Schuler, et al., 2018; Stampfli, Jutzi, & Windlinger, 2023; Jutzi, 2018; Windlinger & Züger, 2021). To date, there exists no scientific and published study on ADS principals in Switzerland.

Research on principals in Swedish SAECs is sparse (Glaés-Coutts, 2021; Jonsson, 2021). Looking at how principals indirectly support students' social learning, Jonsson (2018) concludes that the principal's commitment and understanding of SAEC activities are valuable, particularly for students' social learning. Staff perceive that principals lack knowledge of SAECs, which has consequences for their leadership (Ludvigsson & Falkner, 2019). Principals themselves highlight the importance of understanding SAEC-specific conditions and that they, as leaders, must enhance collaboration among staff. Further, they must work with structural conditions, such as different tensions between schools and SAECs (Haglund & Glaés-Coutts, 2022). Some studies show differences in how principals define teaching in SAECs and in its manifestation (Andersson, 2020; Glaés-Coutts, 2021; Jonsson, 2018, 2020, 2021).

Further research is needed on the governance of SAECs to enable principals to acquire knowledge and develop their understanding of the work in SAEC (Boström & Elvstrand, 2024).

In conclusion, principals and their leadership have been studied theoretically and empirically in-depth, but neglected in EE services. Sweden has a longer tradition in these services than Switzerland, but it is surprising that in both countries, research on principals in EE services is either absent or limited (Glaés-Coutts, 2021; Jonsson, 2018, 2021). Leadership in EE services is a highly neglected field of research, and few answers have been given so far, even though children spend many hours in EE services. This article aims to fill a knowledge gap about principals' leadership in EE services.

Aim and research questions

The purpose of the study is to analyze principals' perceptions of their mission with a focus on EE services in two countries. The aim is to generate knowledge about this unexplored area and to compare professional practices by reflecting on leadership strategies in relation to the field of EE services.

The research questions to be answered are:

1. What leadership strategies are used by principals in providing EE services?
2. What do principals consider the needs of the school in relation to EE services, and how do the principals act on them?
3. What do principals consider as challenges and possibilities of EE services?

Conceptual framework

EE services in both countries are time- and space-wise connected to the school context, and also to the principal, who is the overall leader of the premises, the staff, the children, and the lesson content. School improvement theories and policy enactment theory were chosen as conceptual frameworks for this study because they refer to organizational theories and overlap in their leadership strategies. They jointly constitute the foundation of the conceptual framework underlying the present study.

Research on school improvement has shown that a collaborative and supportive school culture (Azorin & Fullan, 2022), continuous professional development (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012), and internal and external initiatives and support (Hopkins & Harris, 2023) are attributes that support the implementation of educational reform more sustainably. Culture, structure, and leadership are crucial concepts that influence the success of school improvement initiatives (Höög & Johansson, 2014). Bredeson (2002) defines leadership styles in relation to successful leadership. Understanding successful leadership can be seen as a function of structure and culture, corroborated by strategic thinking and analysis. However, these concepts are interdependent, and little is gained by changing the structure if one is not working with culture change, guided by strategic thinking (Höög & Johansson, 2011).

Culture in schools refers to the shared values, norms, attitudes, and expectations that shape the school's working environment and community life. School culture affects how teachers, students, and school staff collaborate and respond to change. In school improvement research, it is essential to understand the existing school culture

because it can act as a powerful force that either supports or hinders change. Adapting development initiatives to the existing culture can be critical to their success (Bjoerkman, 2008; Lomos et al., 2011).

School structures refer to the organizational arrangements, routines, rules, and hierarchies that govern a school's operation. This includes physical resources, schedules, and the allocation of duties. In school improvement research, analyzing and understanding school structures is necessary because they can affect how efficiently and smoothly changes can be implemented. Structures can either support or hinder school improvement initiatives, and sometimes structural changes may need to be made to facilitate change (Höög & Johansson, 2011).

Leadership in the context of school improvement refers to individuals or groups who have the authority to influence and guide the school's operations. This includes both formal leadership (such as principals and school leaders) and informal leadership (such as teachers and school staff who influence decisions). Leadership is crucial for initiating and driving school improvement processes. Pashiardis and Johansson (2021) emphasize that relationship-building processes are relevant for successful leadership.

In school improvement research, there is often an exploration of how the three factors—culture, structure, and leadership—interact and influence one another. A positive school culture can support and enhance leadership that promotes change. Conversely, structural obstacles or a lack of supportive leadership can make it challenging to alter school culture. To succeed with school improvement initiatives, it is crucial for researchers and educational leaders to understand these three aspects and use this insight to plan and implement effective changes within the school system (Blossing, 2008).

Method

Research design

This research employs a qualitative multiple case study design (Yin, 2017). An international team of four senior researchers was formed to design the study. They also conducted national interviews and trained additional (Swiss) junior researchers to support the data collection and analysis.

The use of a qualitative, deductive approach was useful, as the general aim was to compare principals' reflections during interviews in two different countries and relate them to the theoretical concepts (culture, structure, and leadership). The goal of a deductive (directed) analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) is to validate the conceptual framework. A deductive (directed) approach thus means that the text is interpreted using a predetermined (theoretical) coding scheme (Fife & Gossner, 2024). After a categorization matrix has been developed, all data are reviewed for content and coded for correspondence with or exemplification of the identified categories (Elo, Kääriäinen, Kanste, Pölkki, Utriainen, & Kyngäs, 2014).

Participants and sampling

This article is based on interviews with principals of public schools in Switzerland and Sweden. The Swiss researcher, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education

of a major city in Switzerland, conducted six group interviews at a professional development event, including all of the city's 23 primary ADS principals (three to five interviews per group). All principals, aged 35 to 64 years, qualified and licensed as social workers, were holding a leadership position for more than six years in a public primary school for children aged 4 to 12.

The Swedish researchers carried out 12 individual interviews. The principals had worked in the position for between 1 and 12 years. Their undergraduate education varied; some were trained as primary school teachers, language teachers, or career guidance counsellors. However, none had a background in SAEC.

Due to the accessibility of the field, the Swiss team had to interview the principals during a professional development event, whereas the Swedish team could approach the principals individually.

Data collection

The interviews were conducted using a shared semi-structured interview guide (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014) (in English, translated into Swiss German and Swedish, and back-translated into English for accuracy). The interview questions were aligned with the research questions (RQs) and focused on principals' functions and actions (RQs 1 and 2), visions (RQ2), and perceived challenges (RQ3). Specifically, the interviews addressed the following questions: What is your function in relation to EE services since becoming a principal (RQ1)? Which steering or policy documents do you rely on (RQ 2)? How do you use these policy documents in practice (RQ2)? What is the role of professionals in EE (RQ2)? What goals do you seek to achieve with your team (RQ3)? What challenges do professionals and children face in EE (RQ3)?

The study followed general ethical guidelines about information and consent (Vetenskapsrådet, 2017). All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. The interviews lasted 38–86 minutes.

The interviewers, trained by the senior researchers, were asked to follow the interview guidelines, but were also given some flexibility and could skip or move forward as needed to allow a natural, conversational interview style.

In Sweden, the interviews were sampled through snowball sampling. Three individuals in the target population were identified and thereafter asked to recommend other individuals who met the research criteria. The process continued until saturation was reached. The principals work in three different municipalities and in schools with various structural conditions. In Switzerland, the interviews were conducted face-to-face at the university during working hours. All participants work in different urban schools of the same municipality. All interviews were conducted digitally during the participants' working hours.

Data analysis

A deductive analysis of the open-ended responses was conducted to reveal differences (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The theoretical concepts used were culture, structure, and leadership, according to school improvement theory (Table 1). The analysis involved first reading the responses several times before categorizing sentences and phrases that reflected the core themes (Fife & Gossner, 2024).

Table 1. Example deductive data analysis

Research question	Conceptual framework	Participant response	Key phrase(s)	Category	Theme(s)
What are leadership strategies used by principals in providing EE services?	Structure, culture, and leadership, according to school improvement theory and policy enactment theory	“... at the beginning we still struggled with that where we were presented as an island, but you look at us, it’s opened up a little bit over the years. And these are structures that need to be broken down and redefined, not only within the EE services, but within the whole school site. Certain tools, such as developing a mission statement together, that helps. But it’s also a daily dialogue at different levels. And, again and again clarifying the areas of responsibility, who is responsible for what in this interaction, in this network.” (Jasper)	A need to break down and redefine structures across the school, using tools such as mission statements and daily dialogue to clarify responsibilities and improve integration	Changed structures and needs to fulfill the principal’s mission	Visions and actions for leaders in EE

To establish trustworthiness, critical discussions of interpretative presuppositions and the availability of evidence were conducted throughout the analysis process. To ensure the reliability of this study, the authors initially defined and consistently applied codes and categories, documenting the process transparently. Peer debriefing further enhanced reliability. Reflexivity was crucial throughout, ensuring transparency and rigour (Braun & Clarke, 2019). However, deductive analysis has its limitations, as it may overlook significant data that does not fit within the predefined framework, potentially introducing bias (Fife & Gossner, 2024).

The coding was conducted nationally, using the given family codes (deductively) and inductively, under the guidance of the senior researchers. Within the national teams, the researchers shared their coding and agreed-on doubtful coding. The coding was shared, yielding a coherent set of codes with detailed descriptions and content. The coding analysis was done by compiling the content of the codes. After the national analysis, the results were translated into English to carry out the international study by the senior researchers, who shared the analysis with the national teams again to verify the results.

Ethical considerations

All participants involved in this study were informed about the nature and purpose of the research. They were provided with clear information regarding the study’s objectives, procedures, potential risks, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. When names are used, they refer to anonymized pseudonyms assigned to participants. These pseudonyms were applied consistently across

transcripts, analytical materials, and the presentation of results to ensure confidentiality and protect participants' identities. Researchers ensured that the data collection methods were appropriate and respectful of local norms and values. The study was reviewed and approved by an institutional ethics review board.

Limitations

The research has made valuable contributions by shedding light on a growing profession. The study underscores the importance of recognizing and understanding the dynamics of these players in the field, but it presents several considerations when interpreting its findings. The cohort size in both countries was relatively small. While the data collected was situated within local contexts, it was saturated, providing a comprehensive understanding of the studied environment. Differences in institutional settings, governance structures, and access to policy actors shaped the data collection processes and caused methodological limitations, particularly in data collection approaches, translation effects, and limited triangulation. Group dynamics, social desirability, and sampling bias were mitigated through the study design, data collection procedures, and analytical strategies.

To address sampling bias, clear inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied, and remaining biases were acknowledged transparently. Before each interview started, researchers ensured the interviewer and participants were unknown to each other. To reduce social desirability bias, anonymity or confidentiality was guaranteed; questions were framed neutrally. The interviewers were trained to encourage balanced participation and minimize peer influence. A structured protocol and standardized questions were used. Group discussions during the group interviews were interrupted to assure comparability with the Swedish data collection.

The findings were critically reflected in the research team and with the participants before comparing them internationally to verify if the findings were shared mechanisms, policy effects, or cultural norms. Claims of cross-national similarity were investigated by researchers with expertise in both national contexts and were accompanied by transparent discussion of methodological, political, and cultural asymmetries. Potential translation effects complicated the analysis, as non-English sources required translation into English, risking subtle losses in meaning around central concepts such as "structure and culture," while facing translational issues with the interviews and the coding of the translated interviews. Moreover, the predominant reliance on principal interviews alone, without triangulation via staff surveys or observational data, limits the validation of self-reported leadership impacts on SAEC outcomes.

Findings

The following results are structured along the three research questions. The first research question examines principals' functions and leadership strategies in relation to the surrounding governance and policy system, with particular attention to how they mediate and enact the policy at the school level. The second explores how principals conceptualize the needs of their schools in relation to EE services and how these perceptions inform strategic decision-making and action, with particular attention to the importance of a principal's vision and the policy's implementation.

The third focuses on structural conditions, analyzing how principals identify and navigate institutional challenges and opportunities within the broader education system according to principals' capacity to situate the policy locally.

RQ1: Function and leadership strategies in EE

Principals are the directors of the EE services, translating the existing curriculum (Sweden) or local steering documents (Switzerland) into activities, which are then carried out by school staff. Principals at schools with EE services are very aware of their responsibility for the EE services in both countries, regardless of their professional background.

Despite the availability of a curriculum in Sweden, leaders emphasize the importance of shaping and proactively creating a vision on EE services for their staff development. Principals in both countries claimed the need for a clarified definition of the functions of EE services, which must take into consideration the local circumstances and the neighbourhood community. Relevant structures and activities can be implemented to define the school-specific program of EE activities and the professionals' tasks: what do we offer when? What are the activities' characteristics? The structures implemented would support the definition of the content of EE services (What is offered as a service at *this* school? What kind of profile does this school get due to the offerings? One participant, Freddy, explained that the policy needs to be aligned with local needs.), which then makes it possible to define the school's quality:

Demand is rising. These are the headlines. What is our mission? How do we organise it? What is the quality of the whole? That is not defined ... We have been driven to design ... That is the quality for us ... That's again, I find it very interesting, that there are also differences.

Principals were aware of the tensions created by the unclear and diversely discussed functions of EE services, as well as by the distinct logic compared to the lessons, whereas EE services are non-formal learning opportunities, non-compulsory, and non-qualifying, and they are the child's free time. Freddy stated the need to define "the quality of a whole school." The workforce in EE services is expected to meet the children's and societal needs of those attending the service within the given space, framework, and resources.

Another participant, Cecilia, viewed her role as facilitating effective communication among staff members and actively mediating among them.

So sometimes I'm there just to guide the staff's reasoning, ... the SAEC staff always blames it on the resources. But teachers seldom reason like that ... It does not benefit the SAEC staff in the end, because teachers seldom reason like that. I don't feel that SAEC staff do that in the same way, they just get whiny and think that they don't get anything.

RQ2: Actions and visions for leaders in EE

Principals make the potential of EE as the school's turntable, time- and space-wise, explicit for children and teachers alike. According to principals, EE has the potential to shape the school culture and the school climate. Due to its vague functional de-

scription, it serves as a platform for (multi-)professional negotiation on educational and societal topics, communication, and cooperation. As one participant said:

That the school, the teaching part, has not been used to working in an interdisciplinary way for a long time, and that's like a paradigm shift in the whole construction of a school, that everybody has to open now, right? It's happening now, isn't it? And, at the beginning, we still struggled with where we were presented as an island, but you look at us; it's opened a little bit over the years. And these are structures that need to be broken down and redefined, not only within the EE services, but within the whole school site. Certain tools, such as developing a mission statement together, that helps. But it's also daily dialogue at different levels. And again, clarifying the areas of responsibility, who is responsible for what in this interaction, in this network. (Jasper)

Principals clearly defined the services that would impact the school climate, given their opportunities to build relationships and “setting the tone of interaction between children and adults” (Jeremy). The activities offered in EE are seen as an opportunity to reflect professionally on the existing school, its values and norms, and to create multiprofessional negotiations on a shared vision, on “how we want this school to be” (Anna).

In conclusion, the services are considered to shape the school climate crucially, due to the space given to children and the materialization of policy, defining and regulating relationships among children and adults.

RQ3: Challenges and possibilities leading EE

Principals see EE service as a main carrier of informal and non-formal learning, creating diverse learning opportunities for children, strengthening children's social interaction and life skills by being together, negotiating the content of the activity, and including friends and others in the activity: “We live together here, we define who we want to live together here—it's not about math or science, it's about living together” (Seraina).

Principals acknowledge that the staff in EE services must fulfill a variety of tasks such as designing spaces and structures, planning activities, balancing children's freedom with the need for intervention, and managing underlying conditions such as the staff-child ratio, available space at school, and the shortage of qualified staff: “an ocean of children” (Delilah).

The principals acknowledge the complexity and the high demands in the workforce's everyday life and remind themselves that staff in EE therefore must be highly competent, educated, and trained: they must be able to apply methods of handling large groups of age mixed and diverse children, be highly competent in creating space for social relations, and conduct a genuine child-centred inquiry to enhance learning, not by instruction but by child-led activities. They must have a high degree of flexibility to shape any upcoming content into a non-formal learning opportunity for the individual child as well as for the group of children, including all children. Berta described this in the following way:

There is a similarity with school, that you have to have incredibly well thought out routines and rituals. There must be a very strict structure and very clear what there is to do, and when, where, and how... When do I get to choose, when is it controlled, etc.? And that's what I think is still missing. (Berta)

Principals face very different challenges when it comes to situating the policy into the local context: In Switzerland, principals situate EE services as a service for parents, as parents are expected to pay for the services on an hourly basis. EE services are considered the second-best option, helping parents reconcile work and life. EE services are perceived as encroaching on the family's domain, primarily serving societal needs rather than providing the comfort and warmth of a home environment.

Swedish leaders struggle to implement the existing curriculum in evident educational practice. And in the Swiss interviews, the question of "what a pedagogy of a school with EE services can be" was raised. In both countries, the principals share the opinion that EE services are "something different than school," following an entirely different logic and a place with a lot of possibilities, as Karin described:

The possibilities are quite great, even if there is a curriculum, I think there is a lot of freedom. And that you try to encourage those who work in EE that you have a lot of freedom. You're supposed to develop learning. It's like it's big. You can follow the pupils' wishes, but you have to listen to them first.

Karin highlighted the freedom in EE services as a possibility to both work with different issues and to listen to children's voices.

Leaders see their leadership capacity and steering opportunities as difficult to carry out. The ongoing negotiations over the function of EE services, which can be seen in both countries, lead to professional uncertainties and disillusionment. Principals feel they are unable to provide the workforce with satisfactory answers.

Multiple case comparison

Comparing the two cases, Sweden and Switzerland, we conclude that the principals share many concerns despite their different histories and policies (Table 2).

Table 2: Comparative compilation

Analysis	Differences between the two countries	Similarities between the two countries
Strategies on leadership (RQ1)	No differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared awareness of the leadership position and function • Overall pedagogical leader • Serving various stakeholders/ mediating between the professionals within the whole school • Superiors to two workforces that differ in status

Analysis	Differences between the two countries	Similarities between the two countries
Needs and actions (RQ2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Urgent need for professional development in Switzerland: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ strong need for specialized educational training ◦ request society, school, and the workforce to embrace extended educational services into traditional school settings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need to create a shared vision of an inclusive school • Develop an inclusive vision that shapes the school's profile • Must find a suitable workforce that supports their vision • Request professional and educational material to instruct the workforce
Challenges (RQ3)	<p><i>Different histories of EE services in the two countries</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sweden: relies on a long tradition within Swedish society • Switzerland: recent educational reform <p><i>Availability of EE services</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sweden: nationwide availability and acceptance of EE services • Switzerland: services in EE are mainly available in urban areas <p><i>Availability of policy documents</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sweden: refer to the existing curriculum for SAEC • Switzerland: refer to a few mandatory steering documents, request a pedagogy for EE services <p><i>Funding</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sweden: funded mainly by the government • Switzerland: funded by parents and municipalities 	<p><i>Structure and location</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oversee institutionalized EE services that are located at the school • Professional beliefs based on contrasting school pedagogy • Struggle with the two contrasting educational logics • Support the EE service workforces' belief in socio-pedagogical concepts <p><i>A vaguely and broadly defined task of EE services</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share the same questions and sorrows: what is the function of EE services? • How can EE services best serve the children?
Possibilities (RQ3)	No differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared acknowledgment of the complementary and compensatory function of EE services • Active creation of a whole school pedagogy and an situate EE for local and international school improvement

EE services are seen as beneficial for children and families, as a major driver of cultural change in schools, and as educational enrichment. However, when it comes to structural aspects, the challenges become dominant: the complexity of the workspace, including the premises, as well as the increasing number of children attending, does not allow easy instruction and translation into practice. The numerous daily di-

lemmas, the local context and the diversity of staff and children lead to abstract concepts that must be reflected (multi-)professionally from various perspectives to then define professional practices that might change due to time, space, and context, within the given conditions. Leadership, therefore, is a difficult act of balance, initiating different strategies addressed to each specific workforce, developing an overarching mission, and defining a local vision supported by families and the educational government.

Discussion

It is interesting to see the shared similarities despite the structural, cultural, and historical differences in EE services across the two countries. There seems to be a shared concern on leadership strategies that both countries share: how to instruct the workforce on the daily professional work, when the tasks to be carried out are complex and heavily dependent on the local contexts (Ball et al., 2012). Since perspectives on what EE serves vary across stakeholders, principals recognize that the workforce faces ongoing societal dilemmas in their daily work. This also makes it challenging for the principals to develop a shared vision. The local context, structural difficulties such as the facility itself, the increased number of children attending the services, a diverse workforce, and the need for transdisciplinary work are seen as challenges in their function as school leaders. Principals agree cross-culturally on the principals' strategies, the vision setting to impact the school culture and the inner communication between the professionals, allowing transdisciplinary work as they create the school together. A key competence in leading schools with EE services seems to be transdisciplinary collaboration, as structural issues can be tracked and discussed to impact school culture. Leadership in EE services within schools, therefore, needs to create a professional space for developing new "cultural" knowledge on how EE can be empowered in educational settings in general, while remaining attentive to the school's local context.

The linkage among leadership, culture, and structure becomes obvious as these aspects are intertwined and influence one another. However, it is the leader who impacts cultural aspects, enabling them to have an impact on structural issues.

Conclusion: Being a leader in EE services

In conclusion, the leaders are aware of their professional task of creating a strong vision for the school, but realize that the lack of explicit goals and a definition of EE services' function makes it difficult to influence and support the workforce. Due to vague and unspecific educational and policy documents, leaders are struggling to develop a clear vision based on shared norms. The diverse workforce is related to different disciplines and professional orientations, which in exchange can be beneficial and could be transferred into other fields. However, educational practice remains broad and unclear due to the various stakeholders' agendas, the work on boundaries, and numerous societal dilemmas. The following questions remain unanswered: what kind of learning is required in EE services? What kind of learning activities are specific to each field? How can professional orientations be translated into educational practice? What is good educational practice in EE services in general, and how can leaders support their staff in implementing the curriculum?

Despite the large number of (Swedish) children attending many hours at SAECs, they do not achieve the same level of importance and value as schools. A similar lack of recognition of EE services can be seen in Switzerland: parents are strongly involved in the choice of activities in EE services and therefore influence children's attendance and the perceived value of the services. The leaders' shared concern is the undefined purpose of EE services. Is it educational, functional, or custodial? Linked to this concern is the role of the profession working in EE, the workforce's qualifications, and the tasks to be fulfilled. Principals formulated the urge and need for an active creation of a pedagogy in EE to define its relational requests with the children, the parents, and their relational demands. The staff's heterogeneity or their lack of qualifications is seen as a severe disadvantage that cannot be compensated for by educational leadership. The need for qualified personnel to face and address these complex claims within an area of conflicting interests is regarded as a major concern amongst all principals, despite EE services' potential and the underestimated impact on the school climate as a great possibility to shape the school's culture.

Implications for practice and future research

This research shows that the leaders have rich insights into their workplace and know their heterogeneous workforce and their needs. This is not consistent with research on staff perceptions (Ludvigsson & Falkner, 2019). However, principals seem unable to translate their knowledge of EE services successfully to their staff. Leaders in schools with EE services agree on the richness of learning opportunities in these services, but they see their task to raise the heterogeneous workforce's awareness to create such opportunities for a large number of children in mixed-aged groups. The finding strongly supports the importance of leaders in SAEC adopting relationship-oriented leadership (Pashiardis & Johansson, 2021) with a diverse workforce to create a collaborative and supportive school culture (Azorín & Fullan, 2022). The challenges seem to be mainly structural: dealing with the facility and the increasing numbers of children; however, to balance the two heterogeneous workforces and their specific professional roles in EE can be achieved by actively framing and contextualizing the policy in interaction with the staff.

This seems to us a crucial and sustainable strategy for principals in EE services: the intra- and interprofessional interaction and reflection within the entire school to explore the variety of professional actions in EE. This finding is in line with Hargreaves and Fullan (2012), who support continuous professional development as a main task for principals. In EE, this task should be based on interprofessional negotiating processes as they have the power to reinvent or change existing structural challenges and to then create new knowledge on "how this school works." Principals in EE can then be supported in interpreting and enacting educational policy, particularly in such a complex governance environment.

The study's findings show the principals' commitment to developing a new organization. Specific training for the leaders (and the workforce) in EE services and evidence-based research could provide more opportunities to learn and verbalize content, as well as the function of EE services, to then become more visible.

Policy implications

The Swiss case study showed that enhancing policy coherence across levels reduces fragmentation and supports consistent implementation in EE services. A greater alignment and overarching standards across national, regional, and local education policies would be supportive for principals and the workforce alike (as seen in Sweden), and would also allow flexible, context-sensitive policy implementation to adapt policy goals to local needs.

In addition, the comparative study indicates a need for policy frameworks that foster stronger collaboration between the community, schools, and EE to better address children's and families' needs. Policy measures should address structural constraints, such as staffing, time, and resources, that limit the capacity of EE services to implement policy effectively.

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Conflict of interest

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Ethical consent

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Ethical Board, Zurich University of Applied Sciences in Social Work nr EA-ZHAW_W2023-005-S.

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