Visiting the Controversial Space of Swedish Preschool Principals

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The focus in this article is on controversial issues through the eyes of Swedish preschool principals. Controversial issues for principals are often difficult to handle, and there is a lack of both national and international research in this area. The starting point for the study is a broad and general definition of the concept of controversial issues as issues that arouse strong emotions and create tension both within an organisation and in society at large. The aim of this study is to make visible some of the controversial issues that principals deal with in their everyday lives, with an ambition to increase knowledge about principals’ leadership in preschools. A specific focus is on what preschool principals think are controversial issues for them and what characterizes these issues.

This study has an exploratory approach, and the theoretical starting point is based on the concept of dilemmatic space, which in the article has been further developed into controversial space. We have a broad view of the concept controversial issues and believe it is something principals face in their everyday practice, meaning that they need to navigate a borderland between different requirements and expectations, which is done within various controversial spaces. This space is constructed in a specific social context and are both relational and dialectical, affecting how principals position themselves. We see the boundaries of the controversial space as dynamic and changing because, for example, laws and regulations change, new decisions are made, and new roles are introduced. By analysing the controversial issues, they raise and what characterizes them, it is possible to visualise how the controversial spaces are constituted.

The results are based on seven semi-structured interviews with Swedish preschool principals. The results demonstrate how the principals need to navigate in three different
controversial spaces in relation to loyalty, management and values. Each space is ensconced in two or three different areas of controversial issues, which form the basis of the descriptions of the space. The largest space is about loyalty and consists of controversial issues addressing participation and influence, loyalty between different actors and issues where the principal's professional standards are challenged. Space in relation to leadership consists of the issues of management, responsibility and goal conflicts. The smallest space is about values and consists of questions related to values and opinions as well as difficult conversations.

We can see the principals' controversial spaces as an expression of a challenging position that requires one to take many interests into account. Doing so in a preschool characterized by a strong egalitarian culture makes leadership a challenge. In this context, many leadership actions risk being perceived as controversial, even if they are a natural part of being a principal.

**Keywords:** controversial issues; dilemmas; leadership; positioning