Enacting a Preschool Curriculum: A Case Study of Agentic Leadership in Sweden

Johanna Sundström
Umeå University, Sweden

Contact corresponding author: Johanna Sundström, e-mail: johanna.sundstrom@umu.se

Abstract
This article explores preschool principals’ leadership agency when enacting a new curriculum, looking at how they perform their role, how they organise their work and what challenges they face in the process. Drawing on the concept of agency, this case study focuses on the principals’ positions, practices, opportunities and limitations as well as their construction of agentic leadership. The data collection consists of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 16 preschool principals working in a large Swedish municipality. The analysis of the material has taken place through thematic coding and interpreted through the lens of agency; the results show how the cultural, structural and material aspects of each preschool influence the enactment of the curriculum and shape the principals’ agentic capacity. Both time and context provide a framework for these principals’ enactments of a new curriculum within the specificities of their particular preschools and their own ambitions for the future. The principals’ discursive positionings are both filtered through these aspects and constructed on the basis of values and ideas about their own role and the role of staff. In addition, they underpin how the principals describe themselves as leaders and how they view their opportunities to act in an agentic manner.

Keywords: agency; agentic leadership; curriculum; ECEC

Introduction
As part of a larger comprehensive set of modernisation reforms of the educational system, the Swedish government introduced a new preschool curriculum in 2019 (Curriculum for Preschool, Lpfö 18), that brought about changes, including a more distinct division of responsibilities between principals and staff; the inclusion of new concepts for preschool
settings, such as: “education”, “teaching”, the use of “digital tools”; and higher expectations for preschool educators to work towards the stated goals. Further, the principals’ responsibility as leaders included an obligation to ensure “that the education as a whole is targeted towards the national goals” (Swedish National Agency of Education, 2019, p. 21). This increased emphasis on individual responsibility and pursuing goals could be seen as a challenge to the Swedish preschool tradition and culture, which had up to that point prioritised learning and a democratic model of shared responsibilities. Simultaneously with introducing a new curriculum, schools’ budgets have been reduced, putting additional pressure on the preschool principals, who must now enact major changes with fewer available resources.

In this context, the new legal responsibilities for preschool principals include the requirement to interpret the curriculum itself because, even though Lpfö 18 (SNAE, 2019) sets more goals than its predecessor, it does not provide detailed descriptions of or guidance for completing educational tasks. This responsibility has now been delegated to principals, and a recent survey focusing on the new curriculum’s enactment in Swedish preschools has revealed variations in principals’ interpretations of both this policy’s direction and their own progress towards enacting it (SNAE, 2023). In order to explain this variation, the article focuses on the principals’ leadership positions and agency when enacting the new national ECEC curriculum, specifically addressing the following questions:

- How do preschool principals describe the work of leading the new curriculum, and what factors are significant during this process?
- What leadership discourses do they use to describe their enactment of the curriculum, and what kind of agency do they assume in doing so?
- What do these leaders’ discourses suggest about their perceptions of the role of preschool staff and the preschool as an organisation?

The article draws on a wider project focusing on how the preschool curriculum, Lpfö 18, is enacted by preschool professionals at different levels of preschool education in a Swedish municipality, such as municipal officials and principals.

The study adopts the term enactment to capture an understanding of the mediation and translation processes when new policies are introduced in educational contexts, as used by Ball et. al. (2012).

**Background context**

The idea of an ECEC curriculum is not novel in Sweden. In 2010, ECEC provisions were fully integrated into the Education Act (SFS 2010:800, 2010); this change brought preschools under the same legislative regulation as schools. Additionally, preschool principals were assigned overall responsibility for preschool education and its development. In the same year, a curriculum revision, intended to strengthen the vision for preschool
education, clarified the responsibilities of principals and preschool teachers alike (Ministry of Education and Research, 2011). However, although the term teaching was explicitly mentioned in the Act, it did not feature in the revised curriculum. A decade later, a preschool quality audit revealed significant variations in the understanding of teaching and quality as well as of associated practices and delegated responsibilities in preschools nationwide (Swedish School Inspectorate, 2018).

This culminated in the latest revised curriculum of 2018 (Lpfö 18), which was intended to “raise the quality of teaching in preschool” and comply with the legislation’s goals. Consequently, principals’ responsibilities have been expanded from being solely focused on “ensuring that the preschool is run in accordance with the goals of the curriculum” (SNAE, 2011, p. 16) to focusing on having education as a whole “targeted towards the national goals” (SNAE, 2019, p. 21). The last section in the curriculum concerns the preschool principals’ responsibilities; for example, the bullet list of these responsibilities now includes these principals’ obligation to ensure that their preschools provide suitable conditions for their staff to teach (SNAE, 2019). So, while the old established idea of care as a core element of the ECEC mission still features, it does so mainly as a component of children’s learning and development (SNAE, 2018). The introduction of teaching has been one of the most contested aspects of the new curriculum (Sheridan & Williams, 2018).

Swedish preschool principals
Preschool principals have multiple roles as being leaders of pedagogical work and having overall responsibility for managing staff and budgets (SNAE, 2018); and quite often, they are responsible for running more than one preschool. In a highly decentralised system of governance, national policy describes pedagogical leadership according to specified goals. However, decisions regarding financial allocations and budgets are taken at the municipal level (Eriksson et al., 2015). The financial state of any preschool changes from year to year, as does the composition of children, thereby affecting the organisation and enactment of policies from the principals’ perspectives (Lunneblad & Garvis, 2017). Recent research suggests that preschool principals highly value the possibilities to define their own pedagogical leadership and organisational development (Nihlfors et al., 2023). So, when adherence to steering policy documents clashes with aspects of preschool practice, principals report tensions in their leadership tasks since their expressed priority is to create a good working environment driven by loyalty to their staff (Franzén & Hjalmarssson, 2021).

The new responsibilities for principals seem to be driving leadership in preschools closer to the formal roles of compulsory school leadership (Styf, 2012) in order to meet the national curricular goals, set by the Education Act; this sometimes takes place at the expense of the perceived needs of the local preschool (Nihlfors et al., 2023). In the recent past, until the 2010 curriculum was introduced, organisational issues, division of labour
and professional responsibilities within preschools were shaped by consensus and the
active participation of all staff in each preschool; accordingly, the preschool principal was
viewed as being an active member of the work team (Munkhammar, 2022). In principle,
this tradition conflicts with the new curricular emphasis on individualised responsibility
(Hildén et al., 2019).

Principals’ roles in the enactment of policies
Studies have found that principals have striven to put the preschool curriculum into prac-
tice (Brodin & Renblad, 2014; Hildén et al., 2019). There are also studies on municipali-
ties that offer support for implementation in the form of guidelines, lectures and collegial
discussions (Sundström et al., 2021; Eriksson et al., 2015). However, Hildén et al. (2019)
found that many principals have approached the new curriculum rather uncritically and
sought to include teaching in existing preschool practices in a supplementary rather than
transformative manner. Others have reported that principals may reproduce expressions
from policy documents regarding preschool teachers’ responsibility for teaching in general,
but in more specific situations, thereby recontextualising policy to the practice (Eriksson,
2014) and acting as maintainers of ECEC traditions and discourses (Varpanen, 2021).

Beyond these studies, the literature reports agentic approaches whereby principals
actively apply values, past experiences and aspirations for the future to inform their plans
for enacting a curriculum, thus resulting in different and varied practices (Ståhlkrantz,
2022). Further studies discuss the significance of the local context for the interpretation
and enactment of policy (Ståhlkrantz, 2023) in addition to the importance of dialogue,
appropriate division of responsibilities, well-qualified staff and reducing high rates of
staff turnover (Ahtiainen et al., 2021). Leaders are known to use different strategies when
enacting ECEC policy. One is to delegate the translation of policy to competent staff, while
another is to be actively involved in discussions with staff about the translation of policy
into practice (Ljunggren & Hoås Moen, 2019).

This body of work highlights the importance of active and agentic leadership for pre-
school principals to promote the enactment of a new curriculum effectively. They need
to balance new roles for themselves and their staff with the expectation of adapting exist-
ing practices to new ideas. This often necessitates questioning older professional values,
the construction of new leadership positions and reflection on their practice (Ståhlkrantz,
2022).

Theoretical considerations
Theoretically, this study draws on the concept of agency as conceptualised by Biesta &
Tedder (2007) and Priestley et al. (2015a) with an explicit adaptation to explore leader-
ship agency of preschool principals who enact a new curriculum. Agency is grounded in
possibilities for action and understood as practical achievements of actors with the capacity and autonomy to shape their own work (Biesta & Tedder, 2007). It constitutes an "active dimension of professional practice" resulting from actors interacting with and by means of their environments (Alexiadou et al., 2023, p. 2). These definitions of agency facilitate analysis of preschool leaders’ discourses around their work and leadership positions, their capacity for changing their own and staff’s practices and the values that shape them. Agency is relational and embedded within structures, contexts and temporal specificities (Priestley et al., 2015a). Hence, it is not an inherent property of individual actors but something that can be achieved and mobilised within the parameters of goals, intentions and possibilities that can be selected from possible ranges of action and enactments (ibid.). In the Swedish preschool setting, these parameters are set partly by the policy environment of the new curriculum and its enactment requirements. However, they are also partially formed by the local resources available at the municipal level and the specific preschools that provide the human, social and material resources and contexts where leadership is exercised.

Agency is always enacted in the present but informed by both the past and aspirations for the future. In professional education environments such as preschools, this understanding of agency suggests that principals, preschool teachers and other staff draw on earlier experiences of practice and interactions to act within the present and plan for the future (Biesta & Priestley, 2013; Ståhlkrantz, 2022). To assist analysis of these aspects of agency in educational environments, Priestley et al. (2015b) apply three temporal dimensions of agency as conceptualised by Emirbayer & Mische (1998). The first, an iterational dimension, provides a repertoire of past professional and personal experiences that actors can select, adapt and use as appropriate in response to emerging situations in the present (Biesta & Priestley, 2013). The second, a projective dimension of agency, refers to how people imagine the future, or their “hopes, fears and desires” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 971). Finally, a practical-evaluative time dimension of agency suggests that even though actors draw on past experiences and plan for the future, they always act within the present, respond to difficulties and balance competing requirements. In line with this temporal focus, I have in this study explored several principals’ past professional experiences as preschool teachers and preschool leaders – noting the different levels and years of such experiences. The future in this study is oriented towards leadership practices to enact a new curriculum that requires changing practices and defining new relationships between different categories of staff while adjusting new requirements to the local needs of preschools.

In the here-and-now contexts of practice, preschools’ cultural, structural and material realities are both resources and constraints for preschool principals. The wider discourses about preschool education purposes and values (derived from both the steering documents and their localized interpretations) constitute a cultural backdrop against which preschool principals and staff talk about their work and define what is feasible (materially and structurally) and appropriate (in terms of personal and professional values and experiences).
Structurally, preschool leadership is influenced by and shapes the nature of the organisation, work practices and staff relationships in preschools. Finally, the materiality of each specific preschool provides the conditions that enable and constrain the available resources (including municipal support, budgets and time available for professional development) and their use.

In these respects, the study focuses on principals’ leadership agency when enacting curricular changes in preschool environments with diverse cultural, structural and material properties. The principals’ possibilities for taking action in the present are reflected in their discourses about leadership. They depend on their understanding of the roles and relations with preschool staff as well as their views of the curricular reform.

Methodology

This research follows an exploratory, qualitative research design in the form of a case study (Patton, 2002, Yin, 2018) of preschool principals’ leadership agency while enacting a major curriculum reform. In particular, the study explores the positions and discourses of preschool principals, focusing on their understanding of their roles in curriculum enactment and their agentic positions in relation to the preschool staff and environments. As in all case studies, this is an empirical enquiry (of principals’ leadership agency) within a real-life context (Yin 2018), based on the view that “reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds” (Merriam, 1998, p. 6). Having reviewed the literature on preschool leadership, the proposition is that principals past experiences and expertise along with the material, social and cultural contexts of their preschools in their municipality shape their positions on leadership and how they mediate reforms. This has informed the study’s design as well as the sampling criteria for the selection of the principals who participated in the study.

In directing attention to a particular group of principals in one focal Swedish municipality, the study explores these principals’ understandings and discursive positionings. As the curricular documents provide minimal pedagogical guidance, the principals’ efforts to cope with their complexity in addition to interpreting the curricular demands found within them comprise the study’s key focal points.

The sampling process of the municipality’s principals aimed to get a group of principals: (a) from all five school districts in the municipality that capture the diversity of preschools and their local contexts; (b) with diverse experience in their role as preschool leaders. I asked district managers to identify principals in their districts who met these two criteria, thus following a purposeful sampling approach (Patton, 2002). I acknowledge that this process of having participants volunteer to take part in the study entails the risk of potential bias, so I took this factor into account when conducting the interviews and analysing the material.
This study is part of a more extensive research project investigating how preschool professionals in a Swedish municipality enacted the new preschool curriculum, Lpfö18. The municipal principals were expected to attend a series of sessions, organised as modules, each addressing a different curricular area or issue: “teaching”, “preschool teacher responsibility”, “the curriculum”, “digitalisation”, “care, development and learning”, “gender equality” and “play”. These sessions included presentations, group activities and material for the principals to help with their planning in practice. The principals referred to this process in various responses, including some quoted in the findings.

Data collection
The principals were first contacted individually, where they were given detailed information about the study and asked to participate in in-depth interview. The principals were informed before the interview of the study’s ethical parameters; they were also informed that they could stop, their participation at any time without having to provide any reason for doing so (The Swedish Research Council, 2017). In total, 16 preschool principals accepted the invitation to participate in the research project; they then decided the time and place for their interview. I asked each principal for permission to record their interview. Most interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom because of the Covid-19 pandemic, and each one lasted 44–90 minutes. The semi-structured interviews were structured around themes and questions to make the interaction both flexible and in line with the research aims (Edwards & Holland, 2013; Patton, 2002) to explore the enactment process and the principals’ positionings in depth.

The interviews explored the preschool principals’ understandings of, and practices related to the enacting of the new curriculum. The interview guide used in this study was intended to probe the following three aspects of the process: first, the principals’ practices associated with organizing its enactment (to explore temporal dimensions and various structural and material aspects); second, how they faced challenges and difficulties during the process (considering the project’s dimension in addition to its cultural and material aspects); third, the leadership roles they adopted during the process (their experiences and habits as leaders as well as the present cultural and structural aspects).

Analysis
In the first steps of a data analysis process inspired by Alexiadou (2001) and Braun and Clarke (2006), the interviews were transcribed, after which, the transcripts were read several times to obtain familiarity with the data and acknowledge nuances. The principals were given pseudonyms by replacing their names with a code (R1-R16). The text was then reduced into codes intended to capture the essence of the principals’ statements (Alexiadou, 2001). This analytical step generated many small-scale codes. In the next step, several codes
were merged into larger, more abstract categories (such as “responsibility”, “professional experiences”, “curriculum enactment”, and “professional relationships”). During the analysis, I returned to the transcripts to re-read the texts. The categories were further analysed and interpreted in the subsequent step using the theoretical temporal dimensions of agentic action (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). For example, consideration of the *iterational* dimension directed the reader’s attention to descriptions of professional and leadership experiences and how they underpinned ongoing practices and judgements. Consideration of the *projective* dimension focused on how the principals described the future and alternative enactments of the new curriculum. Consideration of the *practical-evaluative* dimension concentrated on the “acting out” of the enactment process in the present. This included their perceptions and descriptions of dealing with current issues contextualised within the material and social reality of their preschool and filtered through their experience and future aspirations (Priestley et al. 2015b).

Across the temporal dimensions of interpretation, I explored the data regarding 1) the principals’ beliefs about the preschool curriculum, 2) their professional roles and positions in the preschool structure and 3) their staff’s role. The results clearly showed that the principals expressed different beliefs, particularly regarding the structural aspects, including their position in relation to their staff. This process of interpretation led to the construction of three distinct leadership discourses that emerged and captured the principals’ views and positions when enacting the new curriculum. The discourses were named using metaphors that some of the participating principals used in describing their role as a principal: “spider”, “adaptor”, and “conductor”. These metaphors captured the essence of the three leadership discourses; thus, they are used as overview concepts that define the different positions.

**Findings**

This section summarises the principals’ leadership narratives and, more importantly, insights obtained regarding how they were constructed by drawing on their past experiences, assessing the present’s structural, cultural, and material dimensions and looking to the future.

All 16 participating principals agreed that developing sound preschool practices and staff competency is important in a general sense; this development is and particularly important when a new curriculum is being introduced as it provides them with a focus and direction for their work. Overall, they each expressed favourable views of the new curriculum and the changes it introduced to the preschool’s ideas, values, organisation and structure. All principals viewed the enactment of the new curriculum as a long-term

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1  Preschool teachers and childminders, who respectively have a university degree and vocational training.
process. They were thus concerned about cuts in economic resources since these funds were regarded as being essential for them to implement the new curriculum successfully.

**The spider in the web**

**Professional experiences and future aspirations**

Seven preschool principals described their leadership position as one close to their preschool's daily practice because they had detailed knowledge of and active involvement in its operations. A key characteristic of this first group is a strong identification with their preschool's practice, staff and own position at the preschool's core. Although some had a great deal of experience as a preschool leader (20–40 years) and others had less experience (2–4 years), they had all spent considerable time in a preschool setting working as teachers and principals; in other words, they had all been closely involved with the practice. Principals with extensive experience described the changes to their role as principals over time. From having a high level of engagement with the practice that in the past had included having responsibilities for activities with children, working in the kitchen, and having more time for talking with the staff, they now described having a more distant managerial position (R15, R16, R5).

The aspirations for future curriculum work were mainly described as actively engaging with curriculum development and constructing new knowledge about teaching and preschool practice (R9, R10). The higher level of demands and responsibilities for principals expressed in the new curriculum will increase the need for them to prioritise time for pedagogical leadership and meeting teachers’ requirements (R1). One of the biggest challenges for the present and future is the municipality's smaller budgets.

More and more centres, and more and more employees, it's becoming a bit large-scale, which may be good to some extent, (...) I think there will be a greater distance between the principal and staff in the future, and whether it's good or bad, only the future will tell. (R16)

This quote is an example of how one of these principals envisions the future; there will be a steady shift away from their present ideas and practices.

**Leadership positions in preschool organisations**

The principals taking part in the discourse ("spider in the web") expressed deep confidence that they wanted to be closely aligned with practice. This desire was shown through daily visits (even if brief) to each of the preschools during the enactment of the curriculum to establish good relationships with the staff and children. This approach was seen as positively affecting the preschools’ development and increasing the principal's personal
awareness of any minor and major issues taking place in them (R12, R10). One of the most experienced principals had tried various organisational tactics, including how often they visited the preschools, and found that making daily visits to them were the most beneficial for the practice (R15). They drew on their past experience of being closely involved with the pedagogical practices of preschools during their enactment of the new curriculum in them. The principals are thus at the coordinative core in their role as:

... a spider in the web; we get a mission that must be implemented; so, I have to establish the organisational requirements to implement it, and that's what I've done. (R1)

This leadership discourse brings together principals’ responsibilities set on national and local government levels with their responsibilities for preschool staff and children.

**Relating to preschool staff**

In the process of enacting a new curriculum, the staff play an essential role in how principals act because they are both resources and challenges. The “spiders” themselves used several positive adjectives to describe the preschool staff as resources, including ambitious, (R10), self-sufficient and hard-working (R16). They were also described as “strongly willing to work with the new curriculum” and develop their practice accordingly (R1, R5). Some of the staff thus challenged their principal’s authority in enacting the new curriculum by refusing to work according to the modules organised by the municipality, thereby slowing the process down for everyone involved (R1). For instance, principals reported several cases where staff refused to engage with subject areas such as digitalisation (R5); or they showed passive resistance by arguing that they lacked the resources or energy needed to engage in the enactment process (R9).

These principals also identified two groups of staff: one with little experience and one with a great deal of professional experience. The more senior and experienced employees were described as highly competent, having as they did the practical knowledge required to enact a new curriculum (R12). However, some senior staff members were also described as resistant to new ideas and practices introduced in the new curriculum (R9); as a result, they were finding it difficult to change their longstanding practices (R5, R1). The new curriculum’s enactment thus disrupted the established workload balance among the preschool staff and raised serious questions about its future distribution. Additionally, while the less experienced staff members had the required theoretical knowledge (due to having recently graduated from university) and eagerness to take on new responsibilities and teaching duties (R9, R5), they had less practical knowledge than the more senior staff (R12).

The “spiders” said they dealt with stressed and tired staff by putting the enactment process on pause or slowing it down (R16). Some of the strategies they reported included encouraging stressed staff to acknowledge their progress and achievements rather than
what they had not done (R10); the principals also increased their communication frequency and clarification regarding the curriculum, especially with staff seen as resistant (R5) in order to support every staff member’s processing of the new curriculum:

> Since then, I've become a conversation leader, (...) to make sure that the conversations continue and that everyone gets to say what they think (R9)

During the process of enacting the national curriculum, other local policies were also introduced and expected to be translated into practice. For a certain number of the principals and staff, the support offered by the municipality (modules) seemed to be causing additional stress. The available support material was “so comprehensive” that they needed to reduce it so that every staff member would be able to manage it (R5). However, they did not report any adaptions that considered each local preschool or staff context as had been outlined in the adaptor discourse. Allocating enough time for the staff seemed to pose a serious challenge to enacting the new curriculum. Indeed, the principals reported having insufficient time to process the curriculum themselves, a situation they found stressful and frustrating (R15).

### The adaptors

**Professional experiences and aspirations for the future**

The second leadership discourse was narrated by six of the participating principals. Key characteristics here included principals maintaining a flexible, adaptable approach with the intention to adjust leadership approaches depending on the issues addressed, the competencies and experiences of the preschool staff and the conditions of specific preschools and work teams. In these respects, the “adaptors’ discourse” indicates a high degree of agentic leadership; although similar to the “spiders’ discourse”, it is constructed in a more selective, targeted and differentiated manner. As in the previous group, while four of the “adaptors” had considerable leadership experience (7–15 years), two had substantially less experience (2–4 years) – and all of them had previous preschool practice. The principals talked about their professional experiences of working in preschools and other schools, including at the primary level, in other municipalities or private preschools. They emphasise the variety of cultures in preschools in terms of both attitudes to change and levels of staff competence (R3, R14).

The future challenges the principals identified included translation and mediation of the new curriculum concepts and values introduced by the reform, especially when these are open to diverse interpretations (R4). They welcomed the openness of interpretation but regarded the creation of consensus amongst different work teams and across different preschools as highly demanding (R3, R6, R14). Also, noted challenges were posed by changes
to the balance of responsibilities among the professional groups within the preschools. They also expressed the expectation that there would be a further shift of responsibilities from the principal to teachers (R14).

**Leadership positions in preschool organisations**

The “adaptors’ discourse” acknowledges more than any of the other discourses the diverse needs of different staff teams, preschools and their specific circumstances as well as needs for corresponding responses that include making changes to their approaches. In doing so, these principals recognise the significance of the staff’s past experiences, practices (culture), group dynamics (structure) and varying levels of expertise. Their leadership role can be hands-on or hands-off depending on the need for enacting the curriculum, as expressed in the following quotation by a principal responsible for two contrasting preschools:

> I need to provide significantly more directives in one preschool than the other. In the one, they are, if I may say so, quite self-sufficient. At times, I either really need to put my foot down and say, “This is what you should do,” or they come up with their own ideas for working something out. (R14)

In another example of pragmatic leadership, principal R7 followed another principal’s plan for enacting the new curriculum in one of her preschools. This allowed her to focus more attention on her other preschool, where there was a need for much more support. In this case, the principal simplified the curricular material for the working teams that had been deemed less competent and therefore needed more time to plan activities. This flexible approach allows effective adaptation to the contingencies that follow from a major reform like the new curriculum, pressures for its enactment and implications related to the diversity of preschools and work teams. Thus, in progressing with the reforms’ enactment, the adaptive principals take an interventionist approach when making an effort to ensure that the preschool staff do not lose focus.

**Relating to preschool staff**

The main concerns expressed by this group of principals were related to the staff’s competence, attitudes towards the new curriculum and levels of knowledge required for this curriculum work. In particular, when compared to the other discourses, the adaptors expressed worry about the diversity of competence, skills and knowledge within their organisations and the variations in practice likely to accompany this diversity.

> But the opening of (preschool) S was rushed, and the staff were hastily recruited, so competence is lacking at this preschool, and it shows in many ways (…) you must go back even further there and start with rudimentary questions like, “Why are we here?” (R11)
They regarded competence, both practical knowledge gained from extensive experience in preschool practice and more subject-related competence, as an important factor in the process of enacting a new curriculum. These principals thus recognised the need for less competent work teams to work with the curriculum, receiving basic support material and more support from the principal than work teams with higher levels of competence when working with the new curriculum (R14, R11). This adaption to different levels of knowledge is not apparent in the other leadership discourses. In addition to lower levels of competence associated with brief work experience, or lack of pedagogical education, they identified problematic attitudes and ideas among many of their staff. This discovery showed reserved (or even negative) attitudes towards the support modules provided by the municipality:

There was also a bit of reluctance from a lot of people, “Why should we do this now that we’re going to be with the kids?” It’s some well-known phrase. I don’t know what to call it, but when you can’t cope when (...) a lot comes down on you from up above, and we don’t have time and it’s so much, (...) then this module becomes one of the things that they (resistant staff) think is a bit unnecessary or difficult. (R11)

Resistant attitudes or motivation were understood to be responses to a stressful working environment, or desires held by staff members (particularly in a new preschool) to prioritise other work areas. On the other hand, staff who expressed interest in working with the new curriculum and developing their practice and competence (R3) were used as important assets in the organisation, especially for facilitating the process of curriculum enactment and enabling the principals to develop the organisation and their own leadership skills. These principals mentioned preschool staff members’ deficiencies, at least in relation to the new curriculum practice. Thus, in progressing with the reforms’ enactment, the adaptive principals could use a hands-on approach to ensure that the preschool staff did not forget about the curriculum or become complacent and set in their routines.

In this leadership discourse, two principals provided examples of approaches that did not work; consequently, they recognised the need to work on changing the preschools’ environment. One of these leaders had recently been appointed principal following the preschool’s move to a new building where the staff seemed burned out and poorly motivated for making large-scale changes. In response to this situation, the principal lowered their expectations for their preschool staff during the enactment process (R7). Another principal talked about how she did not understand what kind of support one of the preschools needed, and how this contributed to her own professional development.

[In the future] I really have to plan a session where I say, "Now we’re doing this, and some other time, you can do that [other tasks]" (...). But I didn’t do this with the implementation modules. I just took it up during our regular meeting; it was too little, and I should have thought and acted differently. But I only learned this lesson in retrospect. (R11)
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Principals who express discourses that acknowledge their own mistakes can help steer future leadership actions effectively.

The conductors

Professional experiences and future aspirations

The “conductors’ discourse” was expressed by the smallest group of principals (three), who each had 5–10 years of experience in leadership positions and had worked as preschool teachers. These principals talked mostly about their experiences of starting new preschools and taking over established ones. They emphasised the importance of structure, organisation, staff composition and clearly delegated responsibilities for establishing a successful preschool. In the start-up of a new preschool, the conductors recognised the value of having a planned organisational structure in place, so staff could “settle” into their work from the beginning (R8); they also noted that it is highly challenging and time-consuming to start from scratch without any structure in place (R13). When taking over an existing organisation, they saw the (old) organisational structures as potentially challenging for making changes (R8). Like some of the principals who articulated the other discourses, the “conductors” sought to establish the same organisational structure in all their preschools since they saw this as most sustainable for freeing up time for practicing pedagogical leadership (R2).

The “conductors” recognised that the new curriculum placed higher demands on themselves and their staff at a time when budgets were being reduced; hence, a future challenge was to balance the expectations of national and local governments with constraints set by local government. The future challenges acknowledged included recruitment of appropriately educated preschool teachers (R2) and making changes to preschool culture and structure (R13). They also identified the need for themselves and their staff to be continuously updated about research related to the curriculum and developmental areas in practice.

Leadership positions in the preschool organisations

The leadership position portrayed in this discourse is significantly more directive and hierarchical than those portrayed in the other two discourses, with principals describing their role as a captain of a football team or train conductor.

I describe myself as a train and I "drive." I am the locomotive that runs, but at the same time I'm the conductor who checks if everyone is on board, and you can choose to step off the train if you don't want to go in the direction I say we're going. (R13)

Further examples of the directive leadership approach are introducing new staff to their “concept” of preschool organisation and associated responsibilities (R8). They also sought
to maintain a more hierarchical structure in their preschools than the other principals, particularly those described in the spider discourse. These principals seemed to be more distant from the preschool staff than the “spiders”; a clear indication of this was that they visited their preschools less frequently (only once a week, or when there were meetings).

In addition, two of the three “conductor” principals were the only ones in the whole sample who decided to enact the new curriculum their way, without using any support material or structures offered by the municipality. This approach was due to their ideas about their role as a principal and how they were to lead the enactment of the new curriculum. They advocated a more systematic approach grounded in the preschool’s needs than what was offered by the municipality support. One example of their future-oriented direction was that they started to talk about teachers’ responsibilities with the staff at an early stage in order to give them time to get used to these new ideas (R8).

**Relating to preschool staff**

Principals in this discourse referred to preschool staff in terms of “organisations” and not work teams; for instance, they identified two types of preschool organisations: older and newer. Compared with the other principals who discussed individuals and work teams more than the whole organisation, these “conductor” principals emphasised the importance of having an organisational staff with subject-related and practical knowledge as well as procedures for planning and enacting the new curriculum found in “old” organisations. They regarded the allocation of the time and resources required to enact the new curriculum as much more challenging in newer organisations without good systems (R13).

In contrast to the “adaptors,” this group of principals seemed to adopt the same directive leadership style that they regarded as essential for curriculum enactment regardless of the preschool’s experience and competence levels. According to the “conductors,” older organisations had progressed further in developing their teaching than the newer (R8) organisations had done, the latter showing a high level of staff turnover (R13). Unlike other participating principals, the two principals who chose to not use the “module process” did not talk about meeting any resistant attitudes from their staff during this process.

**Discussion**

Preschool principals play a crucial role in the establishment and maintenance of high-quality preschools that are responsive to the needs of children, daily providing an appropriate level of support for their staff. When a major reform is introduced, such as the reform of the Swedish preschool curriculum, the positions of principals and their views on their leadership, staff and available resources become particularly significant. This study explores how principals have enacted the curriculum in a framework based on leadership positions and
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the discourses they use to construct their agency. Three key observations are discussed in the following paragraphs:

The first concerns the temporal dimensions as expressed in the three leadership discourses and embedded in the participating principals’ narratives. As Emirbayer and Mische (1998) suggest, time plays a fundamental role here, as principals draw on past professional experiences, evaluate their present actions and plan for the future. While these processes influence all agentic actions, they do so with different strengths – and not necessarily synergistically. Accordingly, major differences between the discourses are related to the principals’ emphasis on temporal dimensions. The “spiders” draw primarily on their past experiences close to the practice, whereas the “conductors” are very much future-oriented and adopt a firm leadership style. Finally, the more flexible “adaptors’” actions are driven by what seems to be appropriate for specific circumstances and issues in the present.

The second observation is related to principals’ beliefs about their staff, who are described as having substantial variations in competence, knowledge, age, experience, ambition and willingness to change. Competent, knowledgeable staff who are willing to change and have experience are described as being desirable. Those who are unwilling to change their habits or express resistant attitudes are viewed as lacking in key traits (cf. Priestley et al., 2015b). The failure to address resistance and undesirable traits has been called “abdication of some professional responsibility” (Priestley et al., 2015a, p. 47). Leaders adopting the three identified positions try to avoid such abdication in different ways. “Conductors” decide organisational and pedagogical structures, leaving the delegation of professional responsibilities to their staff, who are expected to accept this responsibility. “Adaptors” adjust support according to perceived needs and may seek to protect staff with low competence or knowledge, while “spiders” seek to protect their staff from unnecessary stress. The staff’s relationships within their work teams are also discussed; a stable group of staff has a positive effect on the reform’s enactment, while a high staff turnover and instability are in general seen to adversely affect an organisation’s ability to enact a new curriculum, a finding in line with the study performed by Ahtiainen et al. (2021).

The third observation concerns how the principals position themselves in relation to their staff in the enactment process itself, hence structural aspects of principal agency. The leadership discourses presented in this study reveal significant differences in the balance of these professional relationships, ranging from principals being almost “equal” to their staff (Munkhammar, 2022) to being at the top of a hierarchy (Malmberg & Arqvist, 2019). A strategy often applied by the “spiders” and occasionally by the “adaptors” entails close involvement of the principal and all the staff, maintaining the prevailing discourse of a close leadership position (Ljunggren & Hoås Moen, 2019). The “adaptors” personalise their position according to the perceived needs of their staff (cf. Priestley et al., 2015b), aiming to give them the same opportunity to work with the new curriculum. The “conductors” adopt
a more directive and instrumental (Priestley et al., 2015a) approach, to a certain extent delegating policy translation responsibilities to staff (Ljunggren & Hoås Moen, 2019).

The positions associated with the three discourses also impact the enactment of the curriculum. In this study, the position adopted by “spiders” potentially fosters the maintenance of ECEC traditions (cf. Varpanen, 2021), as they prioritise relieving staff members of stress with respect to meeting the schedules and goals of the municipality (and central government), all of which may compromise attempts to introduce deep changes in preschool values and habits (Eriksson, 2014; Hildén et al., 2019). The pragmatic approach of “adapters” may offer staff the support they need in the enactment process; however, the approach builds on normative assumptions about their competence. It may also lead to variations in enactment due to differences in the material support the staff are given (cf. Ståhlkrantz, 2022). However, acknowledgement of staff diversity and curriculum interpretations could be an important source of agency. The more hierarchical approach of the “conductors” is in line with the demands presented by the new preschool curriculum, as they seem to question older professional values and construct new leadership positions (Ståhlkrantz, 2022). Thus, although the findings illuminate key discourses, further analysis of both discourses and their implications are required.

**Author biography**

**Johanna Sundström** is a doctoral student at the Department of Applied Educational Science at Umeå University, with an interest in preschool policy enactment in municipal contexts.

**References**


