

Article

Principals in Preschool Management and Leadership: A Necessary Combination to Ensure That Preschool Teachers Are Given Conditions to Be Responsible for Teaching in Preschool

Anna Öqvist *  and Sara Cervantes 

Department of Health, Education and Technology, Luleå University of Technology, 971 87 Luleå, Sweden; sara.cervantes@ltu.se

* Correspondence: anna.oqvist@ltu.se

Abstract: Following the educational reforms of 2010 and the revision of the curriculum in 2018, Swedish preschool principals have a special responsibility for ensuring that preschool teachers have the necessary conditions to assume their responsibility for the teaching and to lead the work team. This indicates that integrating leadership with management is essential for a sustainable and successful preschool education. This study explores this assumption. Building on the concepts of management and leadership, with a qualitative research design, this study analyses data from seven interviews with preschool principals. The results showed a lack of a combination of management and leadership among the principals in relation to their special responsibility of ensuring that preschool teachers are given conditions necessary to be responsible for teaching in the preschool. The principals either lacked both management and leadership or focused on management only with a lack of leadership. Our findings suggest the necessity for principals to combine management and leadership and move from a previous flat organisational structure towards a focus on increasing preschool teachers' responsibilities and leadership within the work team. Support for principals is needed to be able to perform a combination of management and leadership when their mission is complex and time-consuming.

Keywords: leadership; management; education; principal; preschool



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1. Introduction

In Sweden, changes in policies in 2010 and 2018 have strengthened preschool principals (henceforth principals) and preschool teachers' mission and responsibilities in preschool practice [1–3]. The mission now includes a division of labour between the preschool teacher and the work team, with the preschool teacher leading teaching and being responsible for the pedagogical content of the teaching. The principal's main responsibility is to ensure the conditions necessary for the preschool teacher and work teams to follow the guidelines specified in the curriculum. Moreover, the principal ensures that staff follow policy and that the activities are carried out in accordance with the goals of the curriculum and the mission as a whole. Prior research has shown that to strengthen children's learning and development, the principal has a large responsibility for initiating and creating change in line with the clarified responsibility of the preschool teacher [4,5]. The Swedish National Agency for Inspection [6] has identified that principals do not make full use of the preschool teachers' competence and do not lead the teaching mission in such a way that the preschool teachers' roles and responsibilities are made clear. This is in line with prior research that pinpoints principals' lack of governance of preschool teaching throughout the systematic quality work [5], a lack of division of labour in the work team, and a lack of preschool teachers taking responsibility for and leading the teaching [7–11].

In relation to principals' huge responsibility for initiating and creating change in line with the clarified responsibility of the preschool teacher, management and leadership

become central. Combining management and leadership has been identified as essential for sustainable and successful organisations [12–15], as principals become the link between policies and practice and influence the quality of school practice [14]. One way to strengthen principals' leadership in Sweden is through a mandatory principal education which the principals attend when they start working as a principal [1]. Previous studies highlighted the importance of principal and preschool teachers' leadership in early childhood education for preschool quality, e.g., [5,11,16–21]. Other studies have also demonstrated the importance of management [5,14]. Nevertheless, there is a scarcity of research studying the combination of principals' management and leadership in preschools. To narrow this gap, this study aims to analyse principals' management and leadership in relation to their special responsibility for ensuring that preschool teachers have the conditions necessary to be responsible for teaching in preschool.

2. Background

2.1. *Preschool Education in a Swedish Context*

Preschool is the first stage of the Swedish education system, and over four out of five children aged one to five go to preschool. Preschool is governed by its own national curriculum, which states societal and educational intentions for preschool children and development [18], as well as the Education Act [1]. The organisational structure of preschools consists of a principal, who, according to the Education Act, must lead and coordinate the pedagogical work [1], and a work team that comprises preschool teachers and caregivers who work together in preschool practice with the children.

In 2010, the Swedish government clarified the role, mission, and responsibilities of principals and preschool teachers. The policy reforms in the Education Act [1] and the national curriculum for preschool [2,3] can be viewed as a consequence of the increased focus on learning outcomes and educational institutions, with the aim of strengthening national competition in a global market [22]. This policy reform and a further revised curriculum for preschool in 2018 [3] stipulate that the principal is responsible for the quality of the preschool and leads preschool teachers and other staff in accordance with the Education Act [1] and the preschool curriculum [3]. These changes also include the added responsibility of ensuring that preschool teachers are given conditions to assume their responsibility for teaching in the preschool. The principal has gone from being the director of the preschool, with a responsibility for one preschool with several departments, where the director also usually works as a preschool teacher, to being a professional identity protected by the Education Act with responsibility for more than one preschool with several departments. This has also resulted in the principals becoming more distanced from preschool practice [23].

For preschool teachers, the policy reforms [1–3] gave them clearer and enhanced responsibilities over the quality of educational practices and the work carried out in line with the curriculum in recognition of their academic backgrounds and competence. Preschool teachers also received increased responsibility for teaching. The organisational structure of the preschool work team changed from a flat organisational structure, in which both professional bodies within the work team were jointly responsible for educational practices, to a more hierarchical structure that positioned preschool teachers as superiors within the team [2,4,7,11]

2.2. *Literature Review*

In the field of education, especially preschool education, the main focus has been on leadership, with little research on management in relation to principals. Prior research points out that principals, in their day-to-day work in practice, are rarely aware of whether they are leading or managing and the distinction between those two [24]. It also emphasises a need for support for principals to be able to perform both management and leadership when their mission is complex and time-consuming [16].

Leadership is globally considered an important aspect for preschool quality, with reforms largely focusing on improving principals' and preschool teachers' leadership as key factors [16,25–30]. Studies have shown that principals' leadership has both an indirect and direct influence on preschool teachers' leadership [31,32]. Preschool is considered important to improve children's learning, supporting and preparing them for success in their further education [33,34]. How to distribute work between preschool teachers and caregivers is controversial among principals [35]. Here, they need to take different perspectives and interests into account, which can lead to discussion about working hours, the distribution of work tasks between preschool teachers and caregivers, and who should make decisions—the staff or the principal [35].

The principal thus has a great responsibility and plays an important role in working towards changes in preschool practices in line with changes in the Education Act and preschool curriculum. This occurs in a context where fair distribution of working tasks and responsibility in the work team still prevails, with the consequence that preschool teachers and caregivers still do the same work [8–11,25], with the challenge of understanding as well as accepting their different roles [36–39]. Prior research shows that preschool teachers and caregivers view themselves as having equal responsibility, with both preschool teachers and caregivers upgrading the competence and position of caregivers while downgrading preschool teachers' professional competence and position [11], and that preschool teachers do not consider themselves team leaders [20]. The limitation of division of labour within the work team can be explained by the tradition of working in teams, which has its focus on the practical structure and limitations of preschool teachers' professional competence [5,10,11]. This also depends on a fear among preschool teachers of creating conflicts within the work team [11]. Similarly, a report by the Swedish National Agency for Inspection [6] pinpoints principals' experience of sensitivity in discussing preschool teachers' strengthened responsibility for teaching. This indicates that principals manage the practice through a structure that is strongly influenced by a care-, democracy-, and equivalence-oriented organisation [5,40]. However, preschool teachers need a support system to carry out their leadership in the work team, with the principals communicating the preschool teachers' mission to lead the work team [10].

It is a demanding process for principals to implement policy changes and reforms to the curriculum, which is identified as scarcely shown in practical work [41]. This may be because culture and traditions are stronger than political decisions [11,42–44] and the beliefs that principals have influence, frame, define, and act as a filter concerning how leadership is performed [45]. A strong culture can challenge principals' leadership, and their actions can be considered controversial, highlighting an important and natural aspect of being a principal [35].

2.3. Management and Leadership in Educational Settings

In this section, we present our theoretical point of departure concerning the concepts of management and leadership. The principal is the chief of the preschool and its staff, which means that management and leadership are important interrelated concepts [14]. Research on management and leadership is fragmented [46–48], with different configurations and categories [15,48]. However, salient aspects include influencing others, working with people, and effective goal accomplishment units' management and leadership [15]. A central part of management is to encourage positive attitudes towards changes and support the staff to embrace changes [14]. By contrast, leadership requires action and relates to changes, values, visions, and influences on the staff and their actions [12,46,47].

Kotter [13] argued that there are several distinctions between management and leadership that involve different processes. The processes of management consist of (1) planning and budgeting, (2) organising and staffing, and (3) controlling and problem-solving. Thus, in the principals' management, planning and budgeting involve creating an agenda, communicating, setting goals, allocating resources, and creating different steps to reach the goal through, for example, guidelines and timetables. To achieve this agenda, management

focuses on staffing and organising. Here, principals develop a human network to reach the agenda by focusing on the establishment of structures to reach plans, delegate responsibility to qualified preschool teachers to work towards the plan, and provide policies, procedures, and implementation. Lastly, management focuses on control and problem-solving to overcome problems and achieve results. According to Kotter [13], principals follow-up and monitor results in relation to the plan, identify deviations from the plan, and organise for problem-solving.

The process of leadership, by contrast, deals with (1) establishing directions, (2) aligning people, and (3) motivating and inspiring [13]. In establishing directions, principals create visions and strategies to make changes to reach the visions. By aligning the staff, principals communicate directions, influencing and empowering the work team so they understand and accept the vision and strategies and work towards it. Lastly, leadership focuses on motivation and inspiration to energise staff to make change. Here, principals focus on motivating and inspiring the staff to work towards the vision despite barriers such as lack of resources, politics, and bureaucracy.

Kotter [13] emphasised that the different approaches of management and leadership lead to different outcomes, with the outcome for management related to predictability and order, and the outcome for leadership focusing on useful changes, such as new approaches to labour relations, to become more competitive. Kotter argued that the complexity of the organisation, as well as the number of changes needed, influence the need for leadership and management. The more complex the organisation and changes are, the more leadership is needed to deal with the changes. However, too-strong leadership with a lack of management and too-strong management with a lack of leadership might negatively influence outcomes. Too-strong leadership combined with weak management can produce changes for its own sake and can become cult-like, while too-strong management without leadership becomes bureaucratic, with a focus on orders for its own sake. Therefore, it is important that both management and leadership are strong.

In this study, our standpoint is that leadership produces change and movement, while management produces order and consistency [13,45,47]. Management focuses on planning, budgeting, organising, staffing, control, and problem-solving, while leadership focuses on establishing direction, setting strategies and creating visions, communicating goals, building teams, motivating, inspiring, and empowering staff, e.g., [13,15]. Our standpoint aligns with Kotter [13] and Northouse [15]: combining strong management with strong leadership is necessary to create a successful organisation.

3. Method

3.1. Participants, Data Collection, and Ethical Considerations

This study adopted a qualitative research design, and the method for data collection was qualitative interviews, as they enabled the principals to share their experiences and allowed for the researchers to delve deeper into the shared insights [49]. We interviewed seven principals, each of whom was responsible for 2–4 preschools that were divided into units. Each unit consist of different departments where preschool teacher and caregivers work together. The principals work in a region in Sweden that consists of several municipalities, and they have worked different lengths of time as principals, between 5 and 20 years.

An interview guide was developed to capture the principals' experiences. These interviews were conducted on a one-on-one basis, partly physically in private rooms and partly as digital. On average, each interview lasted about one hour. All interviews were recorded using a digital recorder and later transcribed. The recorded data contributed to identifying patterns in the principals' experiences, shedding light on their management and leadership as principals [49].

This study followed the Swedish Research Council's [50] ethical considerations for research. First, we informed the principals of the preschools about the nature of the study. Second, we emphasised that their participation was voluntary and that they could

withdraw at any time without giving a reason. Third, the principals were given assurances that their identities and the names of the preschools they were responsible for would be safeguarded and remain confidential. They all provided oral formal consent to participate in this study.

3.2. Analysis

The analysis was performed through a content analysis [51,52], which focused on language as communication, with attention to the content and contextual meaning of the transcribed text [53,54]. Content analysis is used to study and identify patterns in communication. It includes a systematic reading of the transcribed text, which clarifies meaningful patterns [55]. In this study, the analysis aimed to identify management and leadership in principals' experiences in relation to their special responsibility to ensure that preschool teachers have the conditions necessary to assume their responsibility for teaching in preschool. Thus, a qualitative content analysis was used to identify how the transcribed text describes certain phenomena, e.g., [56], that is, how management and leadership appeared in the principals' narratives.

The coding process followed an interpretive approach in close relation to our theoretical concepts and empirical patterns. The analysis was based on the fact that social groups construct their own reality as expressed through their experiences [57]. This approach assumes that socially constructed institutions are brought to life through the experiences of principals. We used a four-step coding procedure. The first step involved manual coding of the transcribed data, which were manually transcribed into a Microsoft Word document. In the second step, we read through the material several times and marked the sections where the principals described accounts and phrases in relation to Kotter's [13] and Northouse's [15] concepts of management and leadership with its different processes. Management concepts examined included (1) planning and budgeting, (2) organising and staffing, (3) controlling and problem-solving, and (4) producing a degree of predictability and order. The concepts of leadership highlighted were (1) establishing a direction by developing a vision, (2) aligning people, (3) motivating and inspiring, and (4) producing change. In the third step, we sorted the marked sections according to each concept and organised phrases. Words and units related to each concept were used to identify the different processes [58]. In the fourth and last step, using repeated feedback from the theoretical concepts and empirical patterns [59], the patterns were grouped into more abstract themes in accordance with Stemler [52] and analysed using the theoretical concepts [59,60].

Three overarching themes were identified: (1) a focus on management with organisation as central, (2) lack of management, and (3) the lack of leadership. According to Gibbert et al. [61], quotes from the principals' experiences were used to construct the validity of the themes.

4. Results

The aim of this study was to analyse principals' management and leadership in relation to their special responsibility for ensuring that preschool teachers have the conditions necessary to be responsible for teaching in preschool. The results show three overarching themes, which are presented below: a focus on management with organisation as central, lack of management, and the lack of leadership.

4.1. A Focus on Management with Organisation as Central

Principals who focused on management with organisation as central gave clear communication to the staff about the strengthened responsibilities for preschool teachers regarding teaching stated in the curriculum and Education Act. They emphasised the importance of preschool teachers' responsibility and expressed the value of clear organisation and communication to staff to achieve the teaching mission. It was visible that their management focused on organising to create conditions for preschool teachers to take responsibility for leading the work with teaching. One aspect involved creating more

planning time and schedules for preschool teachers, both individually and together with other preschool teachers in the same preschool. This organisation of more planning time for preschool teachers also indicated a division of labour between preschool teachers and caregivers. The purpose of gathering preschool teachers together at the same preschool to work with teaching was to have a common thread, a common way of working throughout the preschool with common content, and to create a progression and support each other. The principals neglected the fact that the different segments worked as different islands. One principal expressed the following:

What I have said is that preschool teachers have the overall responsibility for the teaching, and since the preschool teachers [work in] different departments, they will meet together over these three departments so that they get progression in the teaching and keep the work with teaching common and also have an insight into what is happening and an overall responsibility.

Another aspect of organising for preschool teachers to take responsibility for leading the teaching was to establish a structure by formalising network meetings for preschool teachers from all preschools in the unit for which the principals were responsible. The purpose was to create opportunities for preschool teachers in their profession to meet, discuss, and have dialogue about aspects of teaching and learning, its challenges, and possibilities. It was also a way to follow-up on the teaching mission at the different preschools in the unit. This means a focus on organising meeting areas for preschool teachers. However, a clear instruction was not given on what these meetings should deal with. Rather, the preschool teachers set the agenda. An example of an area that the preschool teachers found important was to develop a structure for a formalised development dialogue between preschool teachers and guardians about children's development and learning. One principal expressed the following:

It is important that questions we talk about come from the preschool teachers and that I, as a principal, don't decide the agenda; it is the preschool teachers that are involved who set the agenda based on their needs. Now we have worked on clarifying the development dialogue with guardians by developing documents with guidelines for content and routines. I haven't been involved in this work. I don't have to be involved in everything. This is what they have the skills to do: produce documents and routines that they feel are good.

In the network meeting, the responsibility of tasks was delegated to preschool teachers. This means that there were no clear plans or goals connected with the content of those meetings set by the principal. For example, during a network meeting, some preschool teachers identified a need to develop the development dialogue with guardians, to ensure quality. The principal then delegated the responsibility for developing a policy to guide the work in development dialogue with guardians without the principal being involved. The policy consisted of content and routines for how the development dialogue should be carried out and stipulated that if a caregiver was in charge of it, they had to talk to the preschool teachers both before and after to ensure quality.

This way of organising for more planning time and possibilities for preschool teachers to meet in the network started reflections among principals regarding the division of labour between preschool teachers and caregivers. They emphasised the importance of progression in teaching. For example, a caregiver could proceed teaching without a preschool teacher's presence, but it was necessary that a preschool teacher was responsible for planning and reflecting on the outcomes from the teaching and how to go forward. The reflections dealt with who was responsible for what was in the teaching to ensure progression. When preschool teachers spent more time on planning, other tasks had to be removed from them and assigned to the caregivers. There was a clear need of a division of labour of who did what, but this also engendered a fear of conflicts.

4.2. Lack of Management

For principals who lacked management, there was a lack of organisational structure that created conditions for preschool teachers to take responsibility for teaching. Although they informed the work team about the revision of the policy documents that stipulate preschool teachers' responsibility for teaching, these principals did not organise or create conditions in practice for preschool teachers to take the leading responsibility for teaching. Instead, they still organised equal planning time for both preschool teachers and caregivers, motivated by the fact that the work team together should decide how to work and who was doing what. One principal expressed the following:

I haven't actually worked on it that much; they know what's in the curriculum. It is difficult to say that the preschool teacher should do this, and the caregivers should do that. They work in work teams, although they are aware that the preschool teacher has a responsibility for teaching.

A few principals mentioned that they were far too cowardly to organise a leading role for preschool teachers due to the potential for conflicts. This suggests that these principals did not organise teaching in preschool based on qualified preschool teachers with education; rather, they organised from a perspective of equality, with preschool teachers and caregivers assumed to be equal and doing the same work. Further, they identified a problem—the preschool teachers were not taking their responsibility in practice—and they questioned how they, as principals, could solve such a conundrum. They were aware and could see that preschool teachers had problems taking their responsibility and leading the work team, but they attributed the issue to the traditions of the work team sharing equal responsibilities. One reason for the uncertainty among preschool teachers could be that principals of preschools did not have and communicate clear goals and steps that included how to move from the past, create necessary conditions, or organise for preschool teachers to take responsibility for the preschool teaching. Although the principals were aware of the preschool teachers' teaching mission, the organisation remained flat because these principals found it challenging to communicate the division of labour based on the work team. One principal expressed the following:

If I only focus on the preschool teachers and their competence, there will be a questioning from the caregivers, as they consider that their competence is then worth nothing. It is important that the work team carry out teaching together so that everyone participates, including the caregivers. It is important that the work team together decide what works best rather than give them a certain direction.

In management, problem-solving is central. When the principals identified the problem of the preschool teachers not taking responsibility for the teaching, they should have planned and organised to solve the issue. However, the results showed that the principals avoided problem-solving. A reason for this seemed to be that the principals themselves were stuck in a tradition of a flat organisation with equal responsibility between preschool teachers and caregivers. Their way of handling the problem was to dodge the problem and allow the work team to solve its own division of labour, even though the principals identified that they did not manage it. This neglect was based on the fear of conflict. One principal expressed the following:

This is why no conflicts appear because I don't point with my whole hand and say preschool teachers should do this and caregivers should do that. They manage their division of labour based on what suits them. I used to tell my staff that they were so good. I say that they always have the best solutions. If I came up with a solution, it might not work. So, I used to say that you are so good that you don't need a chief.

Thus, fear of conflict was expressed as a reason for avoiding problem-solving and the lack of organising. Rather than dealing with their own fear of creating conflicts that may arise if they organised the division of labour, the principals placed the responsibility of

problem-solving on the work team, believing it had the best solutions of everything and did not need a principal.

4.3. *The Lack of Leadership*

A central part of principals' leadership is to establish a vision and direction to create conditions for preschool teachers to take responsibility for teaching and to lead the work team. This means that they must create strategies to create changes and reach the vision. In this work, it is important that principals communicate and have a dialogue with preschool teachers and caregivers regarding how to reach the vision. Thus, principals must influence the work team and motivate and inspire it to overcome the barriers. This requires moving away from equal responsibility between preschool teachers and caregivers to a strategy of division of labour in which the preschool teachers take the leading position with a strengthened responsibility in the work team.

The results showed that the principals lacked leadership, with a clear vision and strategies missing. A consequence of the absence of a clear vision and strategies was that they had difficulties communicating and aligning people in a direction, failing to motivate the preschool teachers and caregivers to make changes in their way of working. One reason for this was the lack of time and the complex and fragmented mission of principals. They concluded that all their working time was taken up by budgeting, staff recruitment, meeting with other principals and principal chiefs, and being responsible for staff. Securing a competent supply of staff is strategic work, and the recruitment of staff takes a lot of time. Altogether, this means that the principals did not have time for leadership. One principal expressed the following:

I have only time to dab here and there. I don't have time to go into the depth of leadership. I have a lot of recruitments; there are a lot of things that take time, a lot of meetings. I have started to reflect on the fact that there are so many meetings. There is so much that I don't have time to think strategically.

The absence of strategies and visions can be a consequence of the expressed lack of conditions for their mission as principals. They further expressed that an important part of creating strategies was time to be in the preschool practice and be a part of what was happening. They expressed concern about a lack of time to visit preschools, and when they were able to visit the preschool, it was often for a very short time. One principal stated the following:

But sometimes I might just go in and drop something off, and then I might have to leave again. But I feel that I have no control over the preschool practice if I am not there and can see it. I can hear them describe, but it is not the same as if I am there and can hear and see with my own eyes what happens. I think the principal of preschool is a very important part of the curriculum for the work carried out in preschool. But it feels like I am not involved if I am not there.

They express the importance of their role as principals stated in the curriculum in order to carry out the work in preschool. Meetings with preschool practice were considered important, which included meetings with staff in their practice. However, the lack of time affected the possibility of having a dialogue and communicating and motivating the staff to work towards division of labour and create conditions for preschool teachers to take their strengthened responsibility for teaching and to lead the work team. Further, it affected the possibility of having dialogue with the work team about the necessary changes that need to be made to achieve these changes.

Another aspect that showed a lack of leadership, similar to the lack of management, was the principals' avoidance of dealing with changes based on their fear of creating conflicts in the work team. In relation to management, the principals lacked in organising and setting goals due to the fear of conflicts. Regarding leadership, they did not hold a dialogue with the whole work team about preschool teachers' strengthened responsibility and how it should be interpreted and implemented in practice. Rather, they communicated

with preschool teachers in individual meetings about their responsibility for teaching with reference to the curriculum. One principal expressed the following:

I usually say in my dialogues with preschool teachers that it is you, as a preschool teacher, who is responsible for the teaching. But it's always difficult because they say that they and the caregivers do the same things, even though they are aware that the preschool teachers are responsible for teaching. But I have to say that we have good caregivers, too. But maybe I'm too cowardly to make a division of labour.

The avoiding of dialogue with caregivers and with the common work team was due to the fear of conflict. Although the preschool teachers made the principals aware of their experienced difficulties with the division of labour and that they still did the same things as the caregivers, the principals could not resolve this issue. Rather, the principals emphasised the competence of the caregivers and acknowledged that they were too cowardly to implement division of labour in practice in order to create change.

5. Discussion

The aim of this study was to analyse principals' management and leadership in relation to their special responsibility for ensuring that preschool teachers have the conditions necessary to be responsible for teaching in preschool. According to Bush [12], Kotter [13], Moloney and Pettersen [14], and Northouse [15], it is necessary that principals use a combination of leadership and management to create a successful and sustainable organisation where preschool teachers are responsible for teaching. The results of this study show a lack of a combination of management and leadership. First, we find that principals focus on management only where organisation is central. In accordance with Kotter's [13] perspective, such principals develop human networks (by creating network meetings and more planning time for preschool teachers) and delegate responsibility to preschool teachers (develop a policy for development dialogue with the guardians). Second, our findings highlight principals with a lack of management in relation to ensuring that preschool teachers assume a superior responsibility for teaching in the preschool. These principals identify a problem when preschool teachers do not take responsibility for teaching, but they do not, according to Kotter [13], solve the problem, organise, or set up a structure to create for preschool teachers to take responsibility. Third, we reveal a lack of leadership among principals in preschool. Regardless of whether they have a focus on management or a lack of management in relation to ensuring that preschool teachers are given conditions to be responsible for teaching in preschool, these principals lack leadership. According to Kotter, they lack in creating strategies for changes needed to create a vision, communicate direction, influence and empower the staff, and motivate and inspire them to work towards the change.

For principals who focus on management only, the lack of leadership is attributed to the principals' complex and time-consuming mission, which influences their possibilities to combine management and leadership [16]. In relation to Cuban [41], implementing policy changes and curriculum reforms is a demanding process. These principals recruit staff, secure competent staff supply, implement the budget, hold different meetings outside the preschool practice, and are responsible for staff, all of which take a lot of time and limit the time to visit their preschools. Altogether, these tasks affect their ability to take leadership and implement policy change. According to Styf [23], this may stem from principals becoming more distanced from preschool practice because of their increased responsibility for several preschools.

For principals who lack both management and leadership, this could be attributed to the sensitivity and controversy surrounding the distribution of work between preschool teachers and caregivers [6,35]. These outcomes are motivated by fear of conflicts, which, in line with prior research, can be explained by the fact that culture and traditions are stronger than political decisions [11,42–44], thereby sustaining conditions of fair distribution of working tasks and responsibility [8–10,25].

6. Conclusions

The findings of this study support the conclusion that there is a lack of a combination of management and leadership among principals in relation to their special responsibility to ensure that preschool teachers have the conditions necessary to assume their responsibility for teaching in preschools. The principals interviewed either lacked both management and leadership or focused on management only with a clear lack of leadership.

Preschool is considered important for improving children's learning and supporting and preparing them for success in their further education. This means that the role of principals becomes crucial when they are the link between policies and practices and influence the quality of preschool practice. In the Swedish context, changes in policy reforms have made the principal mainly responsible for creating conditions that allow for preschool teachers to take responsibility for teaching and to ensure that preschool teachers and caregivers follow policy. Implementing these changes is a demanding process, necessitating that principals work on beliefs that influence, frame, define, and act as a filter of how the preschool moves forward. For principals whose beliefs are still caught in a strong culture that forms the preschool as a flat organisation with equal responsibility in a work team, fear of conflict becomes an obstacle. To implement changes, principals must create a successful and proper organisation that supports preschool teachers by influencing and empowering the work team to understand and accept the vision and strategies and to work towards it. First, it is necessary that principals perform a combination of both management and leadership and move from a flat organisational structure towards a focus on increasing preschool teachers' responsibilities and enhancing their superior leadership position within the work team. Principals must also be clearer about which goals and visions they want preschool teachers and caregivers to work towards and create plans and strategies that are clearly communicated, motivating preschool teachers and caregivers to work in the direction, even if the process is painful and involves sacrifices that might create conflicts. Second, we emphasise a need to support principals' ability to perform a combination of management and leadership when their mission is complex and time-consuming.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

A limitation of this study is that it involved only seven principals. However, it provides insight into principals' management and leadership from their own experiences in relation to their special responsibility for ensuring that preschool teacher have the conditions necessary to be responsible for teaching in preschool. Based on the results of this study, we encourage future studies to focus on principals' conditions, formal professional learning, education, and preparations on how to be a leader and a manager in preschools.

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