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Teacher leadership in a high-quality practice

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This study scrutinizes teacher leadership in high-quality practices identified as both relationship-building and successful from a leisure pedagogical perspective. These situations are characterized by interactions where activities can be initiated by either children or teachers. Previous research on teacher leadership in school-age educare settings indicates a dynamic interplay between the initiatives of teachers and children. Leadership in this specific context is examined through a dynamic lens, considering how time, space, and relationships are co-constructed within social contexts and institutional frameworks, building on ethnographical fieldwork. The scenarios analyzed are drawn from a study investigating spatial features in children's leisure time at school-age educare settings. The findings highlight three key aspects of teacher leadership in high-quality practice: (1) teachers' commitment to the program, children, and colleagues; (2) structured framing of the program; and (3) continuous evaluation.

KEYWORDS

school-age educare, leadership, high-quality, teaching, fritidshem

1 Introduction

This study analyzes the teacher leadership in contexts deemed both relationship-building and successful from an extended education perspective, focusing on leadership dynamics. Leadership is a vital competence for teachers, necessitating the ability to interact with children in diverse ways and employ a repertoire of strategies to enhance student learning, development, and meaningfulness ([Swedish Institute for Educational Research, 2021](#)). Specifically, this research examines leadership within Swedish school-age educare (SAEC) settings, a form of extended education characterized by child-initiated activities aimed at not only academic success but also the enhancement of social abilities, personal growth, and self-confidence. The leadership in SAEC is marked by an interplay where activities can be initiated by either children or teachers.

In the Swedish context, the concept of teaching within SAEC, as defined by the Education Act ([SFS, 2010](#)), differs from that of compulsory schooling. This difference lies in an extended teaching approach that emphasizes the interconnectedness between child and teacher, blending care, learning, and development. Research indicates varied interpretations and implementations of this blended approach in practice, with a social pedagogical discourse being predominant ([Lager, 2019](#)). [Lager \(2020\)](#) identified three distinct spaces within SAEC practices, highlighting the *Community space* as the most successful. These Community spaces, characterized by a blend of teacher-led and child-initiated activities, were found to possess several quality factors, including the presence of licensed teachers, staff relationships with each other and the children, staff educational levels, continuity within the staff, materials, physical spaces, and time allocated for planning and preparation. These settings were designated as Community spaces due to their provision of a community with strong relationships, where relational work was continuously emphasized as both content and goal, with staff serving as role models.

This article aims to investigate the specific actions of licensed teachers within these Community spaces and to analyze the nature of the interplay between teachers and children. The research question driving this investigation is: *What aspects of licensed teachers' leadership contribute to their success?* To gain a deeper understanding of leadership in extended education, this study conducts a detailed analysis of three high-quality SAEC settings.

The interplay between teachers and children in situations identified as both relationship-building and successful from an extended education perspective is in this study analyzed from a leadership perspective.

2 Leadership in school-age educare

In Sweden, SAEC is part of the educational system and is governed together with compulsory schools by a principal. There are a limited number of studies examining leadership within school-age educare settings. From a principal's perspective, for instance, [Glaés-Coutts \(2021\)](#) and [Haglund and Glaés-Coutts \(2022\)](#) identified a significant lack of knowledge among principals regarding the school-age educare program and its leadership requirements. Similarly, [Boström and Elvstrand \(2024\)](#) highlighted substantial challenges associated with managing a volatile and heterogeneous workforce. They noted that, due to these challenges, on the one hand principals must participate extensively in planning and other meetings, more so than their counterparts in other educational contexts. On the other hand, interviewed principals perceive numerous opportunities arising from the comparatively flexible objectives of the school-age educare program. They also consider distributed leadership as a promising approach for the future. Furthermore, [Andersson \(2013\)](#) observed that principals often delegate leadership responsibilities to teachers, expecting them to manage these duties autonomously. Therefore, it is imperative to explore leadership within school-age educare not only from the principal's perspective but also at the teacher level.

2.1 Teacher leadership

The definition of teacher leadership seems to be weak ([York-Barr and Duke, 2004](#); [Wenner and Campbell, 2017](#)), and [Schott et al. \(2020\)](#) conclude that there is still more to be done in conceptualizing it. According to the overview of Schott et al., a significant portion of the literature conceptualizes teacher leadership as a process whereby teachers influence others, both within educational practice and in the broader context of school development. In addition, teachers today appear to have significant opportunities to take responsibility for their own teaching, grounded in their close relationships with students. This shift is linked by [Terry \(2017\)](#) to a paradigm change in teaching, where the traditional hierarchical structure has transformed into an empowered teacher role. [Harris and Muijs \(2004\)](#) identify two fundamental principles of successful leadership: the first pertains to teachers' interactions with students, and the second to their collaborative efforts with colleagues, emphasizing teamwork, collaboration, and collegiality. [Wills \(2015\)](#) adds a third principle: participation in school decision-making. [Kamaruzaman et al. \(2020\)](#) identify eleven aspects of teacher leadership, encompassing roles beyond the classroom, instructional expertise, autonomy, the ability to influence

peers, collaboration, professional development, engagement in leadership activities, community contribution, recognition of work and performance, working environments, and improved student outcomes. These aspects reflect a distributed leadership approach, wherein teachers closest to the students are empowered to make decisions.

In the Swedish context, a flat hierarchy with distributed leadership and extended teacher leadership is well-established ([Liljenberg, 2016](#)). The aim of this model is school improvement, with a focus on enhancing practice through teachers' work with students. Despite its long-standing use in Sweden, this model's potential seems underutilized. Various leadership models coexist, and school leadership is characterized by informal social interactions ([Liljenberg, 2016](#)).

2.2 Teacher leadership in Swedish SAEC

Previous research on teaching in school-age educare settings indicates a dynamic interplay between the initiatives of teachers and children. [Ackesjö and Haglund \(2021\)](#) have investigated the preconditions for teaching, concluding that interaction is a crucial component of teaching in SAEC. [Gardesten \(2021\)](#), focusing exclusively on interaction, emphasizes the importance of the encounter between teacher and child as it relates to the quality of teaching. Furthermore, [Ackesjö and Dahl \(2022\)](#) and [Perselli and Haglund \(2022\)](#) highlight the actions of teachers in connection to their approaches and perspectives. In [Ackesjö and Dahl \(2022\)](#), the relational aspect is emphasized, noting that teachers must be attentive to children's signals—a form of sensitivity. [Perselli and Haglund \(2022\)](#) corroborate this finding, adding that children's ability to influence their environment serves as an expression of this sensitivity.

3 Method and material

Primary data for this study were gathered through a twelve-week multi-sited and rapid ethnographic fieldwork ([Jeffrey and Troman, 2004](#); [Pierides, 2010](#)), focusing on the leadership of teachers and their interactions with children in high-quality practices. Additionally, interviews with both staff and children were conducted during this fieldwork. The methods employed are rooted in an understanding of how time, space, and relations are constructed within social contexts ([Massey, 1994](#)). Leadership, in this context, is analyzed through a dynamic lens, considering the co-construction of time, space, and relationships within social environments and institutional frameworks. The ethnographic scenarios analyzed are drawn from a recent study exploring the spatial features of children's leisure time in school-age educare settings ([Lager, 2020](#)). From the twelve settings included in the ethnographic fieldwork, three were selected for this study. These three settings were identified as *Community spaces* where licensed teachers played a central role in their interactions with children.

3.1 Observations

The settings were observed over 1 week each, with detailed field notes collected during a rapid ethnographic fieldwork. The researcher

participated as an observer throughout the entire operational hours of the setting, from early morning to late afternoon, closely following the children during their activities, routines, and play, both indoors and outdoors. During the fieldwork, notes were meticulously recorded on various aspects, including the spatial configuration of rooms, the use of time, materials, routines, and interactions between teachers and children, within the staff team, and among the children themselves. Additionally, schedules and documents were observed, along with the teachers' allocated time for planning.

3.2 The three cases

Associated with the Community space are three specific settings, The Fish Centre, The Impala Centre and the Swan Centre¹.

3.2.1 The Fish Centre

At the Fish Centre, effective communication within the work-team is paramount. This communication manifests through discussions among staff, dialogues with children, conflict resolution, and large meetings to discuss the common program. The close communication within the staff team ensures clarity and coordination, with each member fully aware of their roles and responsibilities. Activities at the Fish Centre are often voluntary, with a significant emphasis on children's leadership and initiatives. The staff exhibit flexibility in scheduling and maintain continuous dialogue, often responding with, "Let us discuss that." Regular circle gatherings for program evaluation enable children to actively contribute to decision-making processes. Teachers frequently participate in games and play, acting both as peers and as supportive instructors, maintaining close interactions with the children.

3.2.2 The Impala Centre

At the Impala Centre, a licensed teacher leads the staff team, engaging in continuous discussions about their approaches to one another and the children. The program at Impala incorporates long-term planning, with teachers actively participating in play and assigning responsibilities to children. The staff demonstrate trust in the children by assigning them responsibilities, which are evaluated during circle time. Circle time is utilized for continuous program evaluation and as an opportunity for children to practice active listening. The lead teacher clearly articulates expectations without imposing restrictions, fostering curiosity and participation from the children. In daily practice, the teacher poses thought-provoking questions to the children, provides materials for child-initiated activities, and offers support and guidance. The teacher's sensitivity in connecting current conversations to previous ones enhances relational dynamics.

3.2.3 The Swan Centre

The Swan Centre is characterized by a coordinated distribution of responsibilities among staff members, facilitated by a schedule that outlines individual and collective tasks. Information is conveyed

clearly through verbal communication and visual displays. During daily activities, children and staff disperse across different rooms, with adjustments made as necessary to accommodate children's choices. Visual displays on walls and doors support self-help and independence. Continuous evaluation of the common program is facilitated through tablets, where children can express their thoughts and opinions on activities. The staff use this feedback for planning and evaluation purposes. Participation in children's play and games allow staff to offer support, manage turn-taking, and express genuine interest in the children's activities. The staff's approach of giving responsibilities to children reinforces their belief in the children's capabilities.

3.3 Ethics

Both staff and children who participated in the study provided informed consent to be observed and interviewed. The children's parents provided written consent for their participation, while the children gave their oral consent. All participants engaged voluntarily. Prior to the observations, information about the study was sent to teachers and parents. Upon my arrival at the setting on the first day, I informed the children about the study's aim and focus, explaining how they could choose to participate or opt-out. Many children expressed enthusiasm, showed me around, and shared details about their daily lives in the setting.

Throughout my stay, children were free to ask me to leave if they wished. Occasionally, I sought their permission to sit and observe quietly. I explained the purpose of my note-taking, reassuring them that no names would be recorded. The staff had agreed to participate in the study early on, providing written consent for both observation and interviews. The research was conducted in accordance with Swedish ethical guidelines ([The Swedish Research Council, 2024](#)) which align with European standards ([ALLEA, 2023](#)).

3.4 Analyze

During the analysis, observations from the three selected settings (Fish, Impala, and Swan) were reviewed multiple times. They were coded individually, focusing on teacher leadership. In the initial step, aspects of leadership within the Community spaces were identified. In the subsequent step, these aspects were clustered into themes. Each theme was associated with time, space, and relationships ([Massey, 1994](#)). Examples of coding included attention, attendance, framing, dialogue with children, evaluation, placement in the room, and expectations. Time-related codes encompassed preparation, coordination, expectations, voluntariness, and framing. Spatial codes involved divisions into different rooms, distribution within spaces, and both indoor and outdoor activities. Relational codes focused on teacher participation, mutuality, and interactions. The themes that emerged are presented and interpreted in the following section.

4 Findings

Based on the above analysis, three common themes have emerged: *Commitment*, *Framing*, and *Evaluation*. These themes will now

¹ In Sweden where the study is conducted, different animal or plant names are used to name the settings. Fictive animal names are used in this study.

be elucidated in relation to the research question: *What aspects of licensed teachers' leadership contribute to their success?*

By focusing on these themes, the study aims to delineate the specific leadership of licensed teachers in high-quality practices, providing deeper insights into the mechanisms that foster successful teaching outcomes.

4.1 Commitment

A common theme across the three centres was the staff's unwavering commitment to their work, colleagues, children, and the program. This commitment was evident in their involvement with the children, participation in play and games, support and facilitation provided to the children, and their ability to determine the appropriate engagement required for each situation and child. Below are examples illustrating this theme:

At 2:00 PM, one teacher is in a room with children playing with dough, discussing what they would do if they won half a million Swedish crowns. In another room, some children listen to music, dance, and engage with creative materials. Two teachers in the larger room support children and address conflicts through conversation. Additionally, they engage in dialogue about an upcoming talent show they are planning. Last week, a significant meeting was held to discuss the talent show, and negotiations continue on how to use time and space for practice without eliminating any participants. Observation at the Fish centre

In this example from the Fish Centre, teachers and children collaboratively engage in the program. The teacher playing with dough is involved in both the activity and the discussion about money, demonstrating engagement. Staff participation in discussions about the talent show further highlights this involvement.

At 2:55 PM, a teacher and three children discuss frog eggs, using a computer to verify whether they are frog or toad eggs. They document the date on a displayed picture showing the lifecycle of a frog next to an aquarium, which helps them track the process. They continue discussing the water from the lake, the comfort of the frog eggs in it, and refrain from touching the eggs, counting them instead. More children join the discussion, and the teacher keeps asking questions to stimulate their thinking. Observation at the Impala Centre

Here, the teacher and children explore the frog eggs together. The teacher's involvement includes asking questions, participating in exploration, and providing support when needed, enhancing the interactive experience.

At 4:30 PM, with three staff members remaining, children are being picked up by their parents. The staff engage in playing games and conversing with the children in a relaxed and pleasant atmosphere, also interacting with the arriving parents. Observation at the Swan Centre

At the Swan Centre, staff frequently participate in play and games, providing materials to enhance these activities. Time is

strategically allocated for spending with the children, with well-planned schedules and organized staff teams. Space is utilized to allow staff to spread out and engage with children effectively. Relationships with both staff teams and children, as well as parents, were central to involvement. Staff focused on their work with children, ensuring that their attention was fully dedicated to this endeavour.

These examples illustrate how the teachers' commitment is carefully structured around the use of time, space, and relationships. Time is meticulously planned to maximize interaction and engagement with the children. Space is strategically organized to facilitate involvement and participation. The relationships with both children and colleagues foster to create a supportive and collaborative environment. These elements collectively underscore the commitment of the staff's leadership in fostering a thriving educational environment. Leadership is characterized by a passion for working collaboratively with colleagues and with children to ensure high-quality practice.

4.2 Framing

In all three settings, a clear and easily comprehensible structure is communicated to the children through various means. This structure is conveyed by the staff during meetings, such as circle-time and daily dialogues, and is also displayed on walls as schedules that the children are familiar with. Here are examples illustrating how framing is executed in each setting, first an example of framing a risky activity with knives at the Fish Centre:

The children who wish to participate can follow a teacher to the edge of the forest to carve. A backpack containing knives is provided for the children to use. The teacher communicates clear rules for using the knives, ensuring the children know not to walk around with them and instructing them on how to sit safely while carving. Approximately ten children participate, engaging in carving with the teacher, who continuously reminds them of the safety rules, thereby creating a secure and enjoyable environment. Observation at the Fish Centre

The teacher at the Fish Centre demonstrates awareness of the risks associated with knives and children. By selecting a specific location for the activity and maintaining a calm, involved presence, the teacher sets clear expectations and guidelines, ensuring the children's safety while allowing them the autonomy to carve.

During circle time, the teacher at Impala frames the process of a shared activity:

At 1:00 PM, the teacher gathers the children on a round carpet. They begin by discussing the frog eggs, reconnecting to a previous small group discussion, and allowing the children to lead the conversation about the water temperature and other related topics. Observation at the Impala Centre

In this instance, the teacher connects a previous activity to the larger group, reinforcing the shared experience and encouraging children to recount their exploration and research to their peers.

Displays are used to frame activities at the Swan Centre:

At 2:45 PM, six children and one teacher are in the larger room. The teacher engages with the children by asking questions, involving themselves in the children's activities, and assisting with turn-taking in games. Calm music plays in the background, and a large sign made by the children displays the setting's name. When children request materials from a closed room, the teacher inquires about their intended use and grants access. A sign on the door instructs children to ask a teacher before accessing materials. Observation at the Swan Centre.

The structure at the Swan Centre is communicated and planned collaboratively during circle time or other group meetings. This framing helps children understand expectations and their roles in activities, fostering a sense of involvement and responsibility. The framing of the program is not only communicated by staff but also co-constructed with the children, ensuring they are active participants in shaping it.

Decisively, activities at the three observed settings are framed to allow voluntary participation, with clear guidelines on how children can engage and influence the activities. Time is used judiciously, respecting children's interests and preparing them for upcoming routines and activities. For example, providing time for children to prepare for the next step. Space is framed to promote community, togetherness, and mutual understanding. Staff and children share responsibilities, with clear delineation of roles. Relationships are framed within a mutual understanding, with clear communication of staff responsibilities and children's roles, supporting meaningful engagement in the setting's activities. Framing in these settings involves various strategies such as textual instructions, visual displays, and participatory meetings, all aimed at supporting children in making their time in the setting meaningful and collaborative. Leadership is characterized by the staff collaboratively taking responsibility for assisting children in various ways to succeed in SAEC practice.

4.3 Evaluation

In all three settings, continuous evaluation of the work with the children was a central practice. Evaluations were conducted through various techniques, demonstrating the teachers' competence in selecting the appropriate tools for different contexts. Understanding the group dynamics and individual expression preferences was a significant resource. Older children might write their evaluations, while others might use signs, oral communication, or digital platforms. A key element in these settings was the establishment of a community where relationships were emphasized, and forums were created for all children to participate. Teachers listened actively, ensuring that every child who wished to could make their voice heard. These forums allowed group evaluations where children could express their opinions about activities and their work, fostering a sense of community and influence.

After an activity, the children gather in a circle on the floor. The teacher praises their efforts and invites them to evaluate the activity using thumbs up, down, or horizontal. Most children are pleased, while a few are not. Observation at the Fish Centre

This method at the Fish Centre demonstrates the simplicity and effectiveness of a quick, visual evaluation technique that allows children to express their satisfaction or dissatisfaction immediately.

At 1:30 PM, the children gather on a round carpet in the setting of the room. The teacher begins circle time by checking attendance, then moves on to evaluating the previous week's responsibilities. New responsibilities are assigned, encouraging children to make each other happy through kind words and actions. Circle time is a shared responsibility between children and staff, facilitating an interactive evaluation process. Observation at the Impala Centre

In this example from the Impala Centre, circle time is used effectively for group evaluation and planning, reinforcing a sense of joint responsibility and active participation.

On a tablet on the table, an ongoing survey allows children to answer questions about clubs, a recurring joint activity. This digital form of evaluation provides children with a voice, practicing participation and democratic engagement over several weeks. Observation at the Swan Centre

At the Swan Centre, the use of digital platforms for evaluation highlights the integration of technology in fostering children's participation and feedback.

Integral to the three high-quality programs, is the ensure of that children have regular opportunities to reflect on and discuss their experiences. Evaluations are seamlessly integrated into daily practice in both time and space, with teachers creating an environment where children's thoughts and opinions are valued. The relational aspect is evident in how time, space, and resources are utilized to create a meaningful and inclusive program. Teachers engage in ongoing dialogue with the children, obtaining their opinions on various aspects of the program, such as the effectiveness of routines and any desired changes. This continuous feedback loop ensures that the program remains responsive to the children's needs and preferences. By employing these evaluation strategies, the settings exemplify a commitment to reflective practice and continuous improvement, ensuring that children's voices are heard and valued in shaping their educational experiences. Leadership is characterized by teachers leading through actively listening to children in daily practice and collectively enhancing practice in a broader sense to promote school improvement.

5 Discussion

This article aims to investigate the specific actions of licensed teachers to gain insights into leadership in high-quality practices. The research question driving this investigation is: What aspects of licensed teachers' leadership contribute to their success? Observations were analyzed with a lens of time, space and relations (Massey, 1994), and the findings are discussed in beneath.

Exemplary teachers exhibit deep involvement with the children, demonstrating a *commitment* to being present and engaged. This commitment includes inspiring, challenging, and supporting the children while sometimes maintaining a respectful distance to allow for independent exploration. It is crucial for the entire staff team to have defined roles and a collaborative approach, ensuring that resources are utilized efficiently and that everyone understands their responsibilities.

Framing involves creating a clear structure for routines and rules, communicated through signs, displays, and lived experiences. Teachers facilitate this understanding by actively engaging with children and

modeling expected behaviors. Framing also includes making participation and influence opportunities transparent, clearly defining what can be negotiated and in which forums children can express their voices. This continuous dialogue between staff and children ensures that all participants are aware of their roles and responsibilities.

Successful teachers continuously *evaluate* their work to ensure it meets the children's needs. This evaluation is not merely paperwork but involves ongoing dialogue and feedback. Teachers assess the effectiveness of their methods and make adjustments based on children's responses. Evaluation practices vary, utilizing different tools and techniques to accommodate children's diverse expression methods. This evaluation process is essential for fostering a responsive and supportive educational environment.

To summarize the aspects of successful teacher leadership in school-age educare, as identified in the reanalysis of the high-quality settings previously designated as Community Spaces, these settings encompass commitment to the program, children, and colleagues; structured framing of the program; and continuous evaluation. These findings are consistent with prior research on teacher practices in school-age educare settings, which emphasize the close interaction between teachers and children (Gardesten, 2021; Ackesjö and Dahl, 2022) and the importance of incorporating the child perspective in program organization (Perselli and Haglund, 2022).

These insights provide valuable knowledge for high-quality practice, highlighting that teacher leadership include to inspire, challenge, and support children while allowing room for independent exploration. Additionally, teacher leadership include having clear roles within the staff team and implementing planned, prepared strategies enhances overall quality in practice. Continuous dialogue and interaction between teachers and children. foster mutual understanding and respect, enabling teachers and children to collaboratively shape the program, ensuring its relevance and engagement.

Moreover, teachers in high-quality practices exhibit leadership by serving as role models and guiding children through structured routines and open participation opportunities. This approach promotes shared responsibility, empowering children to take an active role in their learning. According to Liljenberg (2016), the Swedish system of distributed leadership is both common and expected, as part of a broader concept of teacher-driven school development. Boström and Elvstrand (2024) found significant potential in the distributed leadership style and its impact on school development, as evidenced by interviews with principals of school-age educare settings. The teacher leadership found in this study is connected both to leadership in the educational practice with children and to school improvement as discussed by Schott et al. (2020), as influencing not only children's outcomes, but influencing also collegial work and school improvement in a systematic quality work.

This study demonstrates that teachers in high-quality practices embody many of the leadership characteristics identified by Harris and Muijs (2004) and Kamaruzaman et al. (2020) as essential for successful teaching. However, it is also evident that few settings possess the same structural attributes necessary for high quality in practice (Lager, 2020), underscoring the importance of further developing these findings. To conclude, teacher leadership in high-quality practice is characterized by three key elements: first, a passion for working collaboratively with colleagues and children; second, staff collectively taking responsibility for assisting children in various ways; and third, teachers leading through actively listening to children in daily practice and collectively enhancing practices to promote school improvement in a broader sense. In addition, the findings highlight the need for

licensed teachers in SAEC settings to maintain high quality in practice and support the development of SAEC as a meaningful, learning, and developmental societal institution for children.

Consequently, these insights from successful teaching practices can inform future policy and develop practice in school-age educare settings. Emphasizing teacher leadership with commitment, framing, and evaluation can improve educational outcomes. In addition, teacher training programs would benefit from incorporating these practices, preparing future teachers to lead, interact, and evaluate effectively.

This study is a reanalysis of three high-quality practices to gain valuable knowledge about teacher leadership. In this sense, these settings are not representative of all school-age educare settings. Instead, it is valuable to learn from best practices, as the data are derived from ethnographical fieldwork with the strength of being on-site, observing how teachers lead. By understanding and implementing these practices, teachers can create a more meaningful, engaging, and supportive learning environment for children in school-age educare settings.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

Ethical review and approval was not required for the study on human participants in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Both staff and children who participated in the study provided consent to be observed and interviewed. The children's parents provided written consent for their participation, while the children gave their oral consent. All participants engaged voluntarily.

Author contributions

KL: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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