Collaborative or distributed? Exploring the context-dependent variations in leadership after-school programs

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Introduction: Switzerland is complex and heterogenous. Since ASP have developed over the past decades without neither national guidelines nor a clear purpose, the services and programs differ considerably. Furthermore, the delineation of leadership styles, the roles and responsibilities of leaders in ASP remain ambiguous.

Methods: This empirical study describes the relationship between the organizational context of ASPs and different leadership styles. A newly developed framework of context-dependent leadership in ASP serves as a tool to interpret the commonalities between the experiences of five different ASP leaders.

Results: The findings show that the broader municipal context shapes the way ASP leaders navigate their inter- and intra-organizational leadership role. The results indicate that ASP leaders must be flexible in their leadership styles according to the context and responsibilities.

Discussion: The results point to important nuances of collaborative and distributed leadership styles which characterize leadership in ASP and call for ASP specific leadership development strategies that account for context-dependent variations.

1 Introduction

Research shows that the quality of after-school programs (ASP) plays a vital role in the holistic development of children, providing learning opportunities beyond the traditional classroom setting (Fischer et al., 2022; Fukkink and Boogaard, 2020). As societal demands evolve and the increasing need for ASP due to changes in family structures and work patterns, the importance of effective leadership in this organization becomes more pronounced (Muijs, 2007). Understanding the leadership styles and associated roles and responsibilities of leaders in ASPs is crucial for several reasons: Effective leadership can significantly contribute to the quality and impact of programs, thereby enhancing overall educational outcomes for students. ASPs provide essential support for working families and contribute to community well-being. Strong leadership ensures these programs are responsive to community needs, of high quality and sustainable over time (Durlak et al., 2010; Mahoney et al., 2007).

The concept of leadership in After-School Programs (ASP) is under-researched in many countries. Current knowledge largely stems from the Swedish (Glaés-Coutts, 2023; Haglund and Glaés-Coutts, 2023) or from the US context (Fuller et al., 2013; Jackson-Roberts, 2020; Rudd Safran, 2019) and is often based on theoretical papers, evaluations, case studies or dissertation projects. Moreover, there is generally little research on leadership outside of regular school hours, while

school and instruction have been topics of research and policy for at least the last century (Muijs, 2007). Compared to the established field of the school, ASP are an emerging research field that needs further theorization and empirical foundation especially in the context of leadership (Leemann et al., 2016). It can be assumed that leadership styles of ASP leaders are comparable to those of school principals, since the systemic context as well as the roles and responsibilities are comparable between schools and ASP (Huber and Ahlgrimm, 2012; Maag Merki, 2009). Some preliminary research shows that leaders in ASP fulfil classic leadership roles such as supporting student learning, focusing on a pedagogical mission statement and being responsible for team management (Jutzi et al., 2016; Jutzi, 2020; Jutzi and Woodland, 2019). Boström and Elvstrand (2024) highlight that leaders in ASP have to deal with heterogenous staff which can be a challenge but also a benefit in building the common principles and mission of the ASP service. Moreover, the need for collaboration within their service and team as well as with the school and other stakeholders seems to be a demanding task for ASP leaders (Haglund and Glaés-Coutts, 2023). Yet, there is no research which focuses explicitly on leadership styles and the resources, roles and responsibilities which might be associated with it.

In what follows, we begin with a broader approach to school leadership theory to explore the roots of different leadership styles. According to Fullan (2001), leadership styles "must be learned and used in different situations" (p. 58) and are affected by the roles and responsibilities of the leaders. This paper aims to explore the leadership styles prevalent in the field of ASPs and at the same time consider different contexts of those ASPs. Therefore, we analyse the following research questions:

- How do resources, key roles and responsibilities shape the leadership styles of ASPs leaders?
- Do leadership styles differ in relation to different tasks of ASP leaders and their roles within the local context?

2 Background of this study

Especially in German-speaking countries, ASP only developed in the last 30 years, often as a response to changing societal demands and family structures[1] (Allemann-Ghionda, 2005; Schüpbach and Lilla, 2019). In Switzerland, ASP are often largely independent from the public school and consist of a team of people with different professional backgrounds (pedagogical vs. non-pedagogical training) as well as an appointed ASP leader (Jutzi et al., 2013; Schüpbach, 2010). However, there are often overlaps of common tasks or responsibilities with the local school in terms of the pedagogical concept, staff and management as well as the use of space (Chiapparini et al., 2018). In addition, the school and ASP have the same target group of pupils and their parents, which in many systems calls for more collaboration between those two organizations (Jutzi et al., 2016). Complementary to the school, ASP offer a new place of learning that focuses on objectives that are partly in line with those of the

school (Coelen and Otto, 2008). ASP staff take responsibility for organizing attractive leisure activities and can benefit from the familial atmosphere and greater flexibility in choosing different group settings (Huang et al., 2014; Huang and Deitel, 2011).

Yet, as in other countries, the contexts of ASP differ considerably and their services and programs depend on the local context (Chiapparini et al., 2019a,b; Schüpbach and Herzog, 2009). In this study we focus on one state in Switzerland – the canton of Bern. The guidelines for ASP in the Canton of Bern explicitly state that the tasks of the leader are basically the same as those of the school principals (Erziehungsdirektion des Kantons Bern, 2009). Central areas of work are "quality management, the development of an operational concept, the pedagogical organization of the offer, responsibility for the staff and for the location as well as the coordination of collaboration with the school management and the teaching staff" (translated by the author, ERZ BE 2009).

2.1 Theoretical approaches to leadership styles in schools

To explore the leadership styles (as well as the perceived roles and responsibilities that come with it) in ASP, it is essential to understand the most prominent school leadership styles. In what follows, we argue that leadership in ASP involves a combination of traditional leadership styles such as those of a school principal, while other roles and tasks are unique to the field of ASP. One, for example, is the extension of the leadership role to the collaboration with other organizations in the municipality, which can be called the "inter-agency or multi-agency work" (Muijs, 2007). Based on extensive research on school leadership, the following section explains which forms of leadership are crucial for ASP leaders.

Over the last few decades, leadership in schools has shifted from the traditional notion of having one single, charismatic leader, to a more distributed form, spread across various actors and organizations within the school setting (Abrahamsen and Aas, 2016; Gronn, 2008; Louis et al., 2013). The idea of concentrating leadership on one single individual is increasingly viewed as both impractical and undesirable (Shava and Tlou, 2018). As school systems become more complex and interconnected, different forms of leadership and influence are needed to navigate rapidly changing learning environments (Shava and Tlou, 2018). In this new understanding of leadership in school systems, different concepts such as collaborative leadership, shared leadership or participatory leadership have emerged over time, demonstrating different approaches to implementing a less hierarchical and more integrated approaches to leadership (Shava and Tlou, 2018). In particular, collaborative leadership and distributed leadership (sometimes treated separately, sometimes interchangeably) have attracted considerable research interest in school settings, as highlighted by the systematic review of educational leadership studies from 1980 to 2014 by Gumus et al. (2018).

The following definition highlights the key characteristics of distributed leadership: "Leadership is an emergent property of a group or network of interacting individuals, there is openness to the boundaries of leadership, varieties of expertise are distributed across the many, not the few" (Bolden, 2011, p. 257). The term distributed leadership was interpreted in two ways: on the one hand, as a normative approach that seeks to expand administrative tasks in schools and give teachers more authority. On the other

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hand, it is understood as an analytical framework for understanding how leadership tasks are distributed among leaders, those who are led, and the surrounding context. This second approach is intended to be neutral, avoiding any endorsement or opposition to teacher leadership or specific leadership distribution patterns, and instead focuses on describing different leadership dynamics (Leithwood et al., 2008). In contrast to the first interpretation, the second interpretation suggests that distributed leadership is not dependent on the leadership being democratic or shared in every situation and that distribution in itself does not relate to a more effective leadership (Bolden, 2011). A further distinction is made between atomistic and holistic approaches to distributed leadership. In the atomistic approach, leadership is distributed among different leaders within an organization who are coordinated but do not necessarily collaborate. In contrast, the holistic approach distributes leadership among leaders who work closely together as a collective unit, fostering strong relationships and true collaboration rather than mere coordination (Morrison and Arthur, 2013).

In line with the concept of distributed leadership, Hallinger and Heck (2010) broadly define collaborative leadership as a strategic, school-wide approach to leadership that involves the principal, teachers, administrators, and others in shared decision-making and accountability for student learning. This leadership style focuses on empowering staff and students through governance structures and processes, encouraging broad participation in decision-making, and fostering shared accountability for student learning outcomes. By incorporating these elements, Hallinger and Heck's (2010) concept of collaborative leadership aligns with the broader literature that emphasizes the importance of empowering teams, minimizing hierarchies, and fostering shared leadership to drive improvement. This approach builds collective responsibility for educational outcomes while at the same time leveraging the diverse strengths of all school stakeholders. However, this leadership style often implies that there is one single appointed leader. In addition, scholars have identified specific conditions and characteristics that enable collaborative leadership. Leaders create the foundation for collaboration by framing problems in particular ways and acting as curators of talent, motivating group members to act rather than simply issuing directives. They engage in dialog with team members, minimizing power differences to promote a more equitable environment (Kramer and Crespy, 2011). Effective collaboration also requires that leaders empower teams with decision-making authority, allowing team values and structures to develop through interaction rather than control. Leadership styles become co-constructed within the team as functions are shared among members, which enhances overall group effectiveness (Kramer and Crespy, 2011).

To sum up, collaborative and distributed leadership styles share several characteristics, such as the notion that leadership is integrated in a collective and social process (Bolden, 2011). Yet, on the one hand, according to Hallinger and Heck (2010), leadership in schools is often distributed rather than focused on a single leader, which would be implied by the collaborative leadership perspective. On the other hand, while emphasizing collective and social processes, distributed leadership does not imply that everyone can take on leadership responsibilities or diminish the role of the school principal (Bolden, 2011). What differentiates distributed leadership is a focus, on a systemic perspective, as Bolden (2011, p. 257) puts it: "[an] attempt to

offer a *systemic perspective* on leadership rather than positioning itself as distinct theory."

2.2 Leadership approaches in ASP

Compared to the extensive school leadership research, there is only little and often exemplary research on the leadership styles, role and responsibilities of ASP leaders. Yet, as shown by Muijs (2007) the extension of the schools' responsibilities may go along with a change in leadership styles because the collaboration with other organizations outside the organizational field of the school becomes more important. Furthermore, ASP services are embedded in a particular local context and often in close contact or even dependent of other organizations, such as the public school (Jutzi et al., 2016; Jutzi, 2020). Therefore, it is often difficult for ASP to define their organizational boundaries and at the same time be in close collaboration with other organizations in the community. Although there has been little research on leadership in ASP to date, these studies reflect the complexity of the leadership task.

Research on leadership in ASP started with projects in the US context which identified leadership to be one key aspect of high quality or successful ASP (Durlak et al., 2010; Mahoney et al., 2007). Furthermore, two dissertations highlight the role of leaders in ASP and challenges. Jackson-Roberts (2020) points out that ASP leaders suffer from poor leadership skills and have themselves a high need for professional development. Moreover, the "interagency collaboration" between the ASP and the community partners (p. 191ff.) seems to be another challenge. Since they are part of the local social system, there are other actors in the community (principals, social workers, etc.) who need to be convinced of the value of the ASP. Lastly, Rudd Safran (2019) points out that ASP leaders having a strong servant leadership style report higher job satisfaction as well as lower staff turnover. Servant leadership is characterized by creating a sense of community, high conceptual skills and staff empowerment (Rudd Safran, 2019, p. 25).

In the Swedish context, the school principal is often also responsible for the Extended Education service and its staff (Glaés-Coutts, 2023; Haglund and Glaés-Coutts, 2023). The researchers highlight based on qualitative data that communication and collaboration with the ASP staff is a key role of the participating leaders. Furthermore, it is discussed that the leaders should be part of the team meetings to "stimulate growth in the professional capacities of staff" (Glaés-Coutts, 2023, p. 884). The leaders also have the responsibility for setting a common goal and the implementation of national guidelines within the program (Glaés-Coutts, 2023). It seems that in the Swedish context, school principals, who also lead the ASP, play a key role in both pedagogical or instructional leadership and in advocating for the value of Extended Education to the school's teaching staff (Boström and Elvstrand, 2024; Haglund and Glaés-Coutts, 2023). Boström and Elvstrand (2024) highlight that the biggest challenge for leaders in ASP seems to be the "volatile and heterogenous workforce" (p. 12), which also entails that staff have different competences and the development of a common mission seems to be challenging.

Moreover, there are different approaches to defining collaboration and alignment between school and ASP, which also emphasize that ASP leaders have a dual role in their organization (intra) and also to

take responsibility for the collaboration with other agencies, institutions or organizations outside their specific organizational context. Bennett (2013) proposed a framework based on Noam et al. (2003) and Noam et al. (2004) which differentiates between self-contained, associated, coordinated, integrated, and unified programs (as in an alignment of school and ASP). While in self-contained programs there is no effort of collaboration between school and ASP, on the opposite side of the continuum a unified program would be seamlessly integrated with the school and for all intents and purposes indistinguishable. Bennett (2013) extends the framework by adding academic resources, communication, and a sense of partnership as measurable alignment practices to measure the alignment. A different approach but with similarities can be seen by the typology developed by Boon et al. (2004) for healthcare settings, validated by Gaboury et al. (2010) for care settings and applied by Fukkink and Ploeger (2021) on education and care in four European cities. The framework distinguishes between six models of interprofessional collaboration which refers to the collaboration between the professionals working in the Extended Education program: In the parallel model, professionals work independently with minimal collaboration, despite sharing a common workspace. The consultative model involves professionals advising each other, either in person or in writing, while still maintaining a degree of independence. In the collaborative model, employees share information about specific cases on an informal, *ad hoc* basis. The coordinated model introduces a team structure, with a coordinator overseeing the process as individuals retain autonomy in decision-making. The multidisciplinary model builds on this by emphasizing coordinated collaboration under a team leader, though individual team members continue to make independent decisions and recommendations. In contrast, the interdisciplinary model integrates collaboration more fully through face-to-face group consultations, where joint decisions are made about both individual cases and broader programs. The integrative model represents the highest level of collaboration, within a multidisciplinary, non-hierarchical team that offers a comprehensive care system. In this model, mutual communication is emphasized, and professionals perceive clear benefits from their interactions. As the model progress, there is a shift from hierarchical control—typical of multidisciplinary and coordinated models—toward greater autonomy and synergy in interdisciplinary and integrative models. These more integrative approaches are associated with complex networks and increased collaboration among professionals (Fukkink and Ploeger, 2021).

While both the model from Bennett (2013) and the model from Fukkink and Ploeger (2021) view integration as the highest stage of collaboration, they also acknowledge the significant costs and investments required to implement this approach. Both models emphasize a non-hierarchical structure as key to successful collaboration. However, in practice, the collaboration between schools and ASPs often remain hierarchical, creating tension between the theoretical ideal and practical realities of implementation (Bennett, 2013; Fukkink and Ploeger, 2021).

In summary, this chapter has highlighted the complexity of ASP leadership, which involves a dual role of leading internal teams and collaborating with external organizations. Intra-organizational leadership focuses on the internal dynamics within organizations and includes the management of employees, the organization of daily tasks and internal processes. This perspective captures how leaders manage resources, set priorities and foster cohesion among their teams. The scope of employment of the ASP leaders and thus the time available to them is referred to as a time resource of leadership. Furthermore, challenges such as staff turnover, poor leadership skills, and inadequate professional development can hinder efforts to achieve higher stages of collaboration, such as integration, and to move toward less hierarchical structures.

In contrast, inter-organizational leadership examines the relationships and collaborations that extend beyond the organization (ASP). This includes links with schools and their staff, the municipality and other education and care-related organizations in the context of the ASP, such as school social workers, youth workers and similar roles.

Given the different dynamics of intra- and inter-organizational contexts, leadership styles in ASP may differ between these two settings. An analysis of leadership in ASP should therefore consider both perspectives, as leadership styles —whether distributed, collaborative, or otherwise — may vary depending on the context. Following the different theoretical approaches, we propose an analytical framework (Figure 1).

3 Method

This study is part of the ongoing research project VisionB2 (funded by the University of Teacher Education in Bern), in which six municipalities in the canton of Bern in Switzerland were selected in a two-step process. Firstly, we used a cluster analysis to find maximally different municipalities based on demographics (number of inhabitants, size of the municipality), finances (per capita federal income tax) and regionality (urban, intermediate, rural). Secondly, the cases were randomly drawn from the six clusters. Five of the six communities offer access to an ASP as part of their Extended Education provision. In these five municipalities, the leaders of the ASP were interviewed using the method of semi-structured interviews about how they perceive their "role and responsibility as leaders" for the inter-organizational leadership (with the subcodes: current status, perception pos/neg) and how they perceive collaboration with and within their municipality as part of the intra-organizational leadership (with the subcodes: current status, perception pos/neg). Example questions include: "Can you say something about your job and your role and tasks in this position?," "With which actors / organizations do you collaborate? When and how?"

The interview material was transcribed and coded collaboratively by five researchers through an interactive process. High inter-coder reliability (ICR) was ensured via coding interviews together to gain a similar understanding of the codes within the research group (parallel coding). This approach eliminates the need for a formal ICR calculation, as suggested by Kuckartz and Rädiker (2024). The method of analysis is a qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz and Rädiker, 2024) focusing on the three main and respecitve subcodes described above. The analysis therefore distinguishes between inter-organizational and intra-organizational leadership, reflecting the multi-layered nature of leadership processes in the context studied. This distinction guided both the coding and thematic structuring stages of the content analysis.

3.1 Cases

The cases for this study have been chosen based on a stratified sample to account for the natural variation of ASPs and their sizes and
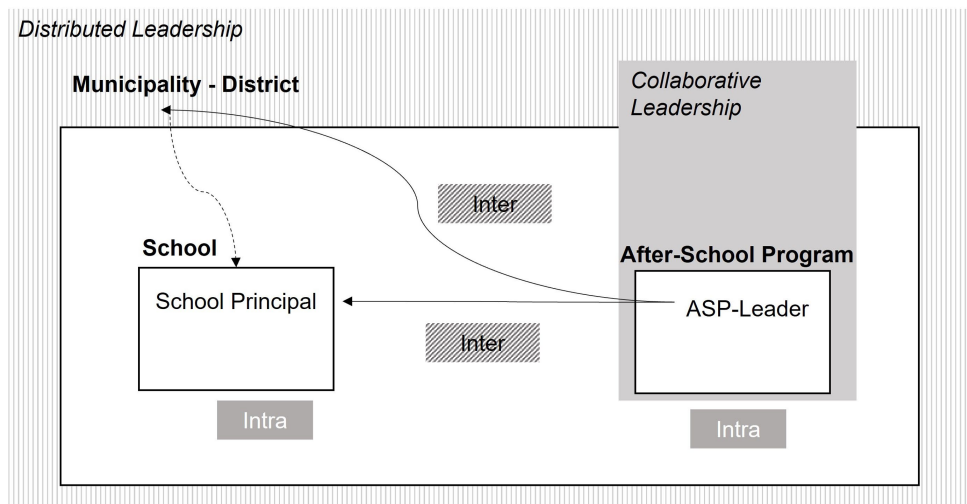
FIGURE 1
Dual framework of leadership in ASP.

locations. The cases were selected from a total of 338 municipalities in the canton of Bern, Switzerland. The following five municipalities with their ASP have been chosen randomly from the sample: Municipality 1 is urban, with a large population size and a politically centrist orientation. It has moderate financial resources. The primary language is German, and it occupies a small area with high population density and a medium proportion of foreign nationals. Municipality 2 is also rural with a small population size and a right-leaning political orientation. It has limited financial resources. German is the primary language, and it covers a large area with low population density and a moderate proportion of foreign nationals. Municipality 3 is rural with a small population size, centrist in political orientation, and financially limited. French is the primary language. The area is medium-sized, with a medium population density and a high proportion of foreign nationals. Municipality 4 is urban with a large population, leaning politically to the left. It has moderate financial resources. German is the primary language, and it covers a large area with high population density and a high proportion of foreign nationals. Municipality 5 is an intermediate area with a medium population size, a right-leaning political orientation, and limited financial capacity. German is the primary language, and it has a medium-sized area with low population density and a low proportion of foreign nationals. As shown above, the municipalities which are used for this study are very diverse.

In Table 1 the ASPs are described in more detail. It is obvious that different local demands shape the sizes of the ASP. Moreover, we can see that not only the resources for leadership vary between the municipalities.

4 Results

The following section presents the findings of the study, structured according to the distinction between intra-organizational and inter-organizational leadership. This dual perspective highlights the complexity of leadership in ASPs, reflecting both internal organizational dynamics and external collaborations. Also, it is

assumed that ASP leaders may use different leadership styles according to these two contexts.

4.1 Intra-organizational leadership

The organizational context of all five ASP is characterized by a continuous growth of their service. The leaders report that over the last couple of years, their needs for leadership time (time resources) within their organization have changed because they have to cater for more and more students. This directly influences the number of staff and therefore also the scope of their leadership tasks. Furthermore, all leaders report that they have a rather large group of employees who are only present in the service for a couple of hours – for example for lunch care (ASP1). These frequent changes in the personnel and the composition of the team are a challenge for the development of the team: *"When the change is prevalent it is hard to bring harmony to the team. We need to have an understanding for each other. That takes a lot more time. It's not always easy" (ASP1).*

Many of the ASP leaders report that they developed their leadership roles "on the job" and only had little knowledge of how to lead in this context (ASP 1,2,5). Some ASP leaders (ASP 1,5) have been appointed to this position: *"I dare say I am the one who has been in this ASP business the longest" (ASP 5).* In the five ASPs, there is only one single person in the leadership position who is appointed to core leadership tasks, which also opts for a more collaborative, rather than a distributed approach. The growing responsibility in the area of leadership due to the increasing number of students, the frequent changes in the team and the heterogeneous composition of the team, as well as the resources available to the leaders, can therefore have an influence on the leadership style of ASP leaders.

The leadership role within the ASP is described as very diverse and challenging. They for example need to fulfil tasks such as personnel management (HRM), broader management tasks, such as organizing team meetings, as well as financial and administrative tasks. Moreover, some report (ASP 1,2,3) that they must balance the role of the leader with

TABLE 1 Characteristics of the ASP in the five municipalities.

	ASP1	ASP2	ASP3	ASP4	ASP5
Resources of EE leaders	50% leadership & management 20% care	10% management 35% ed. leadership	Co-leadership Balance between «office» and «care»	80% leadership & management	Co-leadership and teacher
Size	12–13 staff 120 children	4–5 staff 25 children	9 staff 100 children	30 staff 250 children	12 staff 60 children
Regional context	Suburban	Rural, tourism	Rural/suburban	Urban	Rural/suburban

working directly in care with the children and being a part of the team. Yet, many statements reveal a more collaborative approach to intra-organizational leadership. The leader of ASP 1 for example describes that there is often little time in the team meetings to discuss important aspects such as the common goals or pedagogical approaches, yet it is important for him/her to develop the vision together with the team:

"Feedback: I was actually a bit scared of the team meeting. But now I'm glad that it came out quite well. Realizing that those who are involved already know and that if you are afraid of being told off, you can act in a different way. It just needs more time." (ASP 1, pos. 26). This quote highlights the collaborative approach of this ASP leader and how he/she tries to empower the employees to shape the culture and vision for their ASP. Some ASP leaders argue that it is important to have written guidelines for the whole organization of the ASP. According to the ASP leaders, this must be developed together with the team, but it must also be discussed with the municipality as a superordinate management. As a result, some ASP leaders are torn between the expectations of their team and those of the municipality (ASP1).

It is also apparent from several of the discussions with the ASP leaders that there is some insecurity concerning the leadership style and how to approach important leadership tasks, such as involving the employees in these important discussions. On the one hand, there are often not enough resources available that all employees can participate in team meetings and on the other hand, administrative questions are often more important than the pedagogical. Another leader reports: *"We also had a team meeting where we were all together and we went over the whole organization and discussed it and the following week, everyone could bring up what they thought. […] And then we discussed what they could add and then we'd mix it all together and then we'd always decide together. And then every year, usually at the start of the new school year in August, we'd go over it again and discuss it. Is it still valid? Is it no longer valid? Do you want to focus on something else? (ASP 3, pos. 61).* In this quote, there is also a clear focus on participation of all team members in the decision-making and planning processes. There is little reference to hierarchy between professionals, but rather a focus on the collective process of defining and reevaluating common goals for the team. In conclusion, the intra-organizational approach to leadership of the ASP leaders is more focused on collaborative, rather than distributed leadership styles. This means that the power and responsibility are concentrated on one person, although the staff is consulted for important decisions and planning of the services (Muijs, 2007).

4.2 Inter-organizational leadership

Concerning the inter-organizational leadership. The five ASPs demonstrate a range of approaches to managing relationships with

external stakeholders such as municipalities, social services, and other educational institutions and organizations. While the leadership structures within each program may vary, the key focus is on how decisions are made in collaboration with external organizations and how these decisions align with both internal and external goals.

In ASP 1, the leadership emphasizes the importance of collective decision-making not just within the program, but across external partnerships. The leader works closely with the municipality to ensure alignment between the ASP's goals and those of the local education authorities. The emphasis here is on creating a shared vision with external stakeholders: *"We have to pull together on the same direction. I was able to see with the municipality that we could organize additional team meeting times. To look at very specific points. How do we work together? What is our attitude? What is our educational mission? What do we want to achieve together?"* (ASP 1, pos. 2). This shows how the leader's role is not only about internal collaboration but also about ensuring that the municipality's educational priorities are integrated into the program's decision-making.

However, the collaboration is not without its issues. School social worker showed a tendency to "drop" children with problems on the ASP which caused problems for the ASP: *"We realized early on that this wasn't sustainable because we had all the "difficult" children. The school social worker sent them all here, which created a compounding effect that was really challenging to handle."* (ASP 1, pos. 6).

In contrast to ASP 1, which focuses on collaboration within a collective decision-making framework, ASP 2 strengthens external ties through more direct involvement of municipal authorities as decision-makers, particularly through the role of the mayor, who serves both as a teacher and a municipal president. This dual role creates a direct link between ASP leader and the municipality, allowing for faster decision-making and better alignment with broader community goals. The ASP leader highlights the value of ongoing, close collaboration with external partners: *"We benefit a lot from it. That's something we are very aware of, and so is he, regarding the ASP and the whole process."* (ASP 2, pos. 22). Here, decisions are made within a framework where external partners, especially the municipality, have a direct influence on the direction of the ASP, fostering a unified approach to educational leadership. This closer integration contrasts with the more collaborative leadership style seen in ASP 1, where decision-making is more spread out among stakeholders. While ASP 2 highlights the advantages of close integration with municipal authorities, ASP 3 illustrates how changes in leadership structures and decision-making formats can reshape inter-organizational collaboration. Previously, the ASP leader and other school leaders were regularly integrated into the school board's monthly meetings, fostering a close partnership. However, structural changes 1.5 years ago reduced this integration to semi-annual roundtables. The ASP leader reflects on this transition: *"So the school board, they have their meeting once a month I think… And since then, we are no longer included in the meetings every time. Twice a year, they propose a round table… But otherwise, when we have something,*

we can phone, we can send an email… there's collaboration with that too, so there's no problem." (ASP 3, pos. 75). This shift demonstrates a move from continuous integration to a model of selective engagement, where collaboration occurs through periodic formal discussions and ad-hoc communication channels. While this allows for flexibility and targeted exchanges, it also highlights how leadership must adapt to new structural realities to maintain effective collaboration. The ASP leader perceives the current model as functional but notes the reduced opportunities for regular involvement in decision-making, which may limit the depth of partnership compared to more integrated approaches.

Contrary to the leaders in ASP 1, 2, and 3, which emphasize strong external collaboration in varying contexts, ASP 4 and ASP 5 demonstrate a different dynamic, where leaders have more autonomy in their decision-making, exert a more distributed leadership style, but still must balance this with their responsibilities toward external stakeholders. In ASP 4, the leader's ability to make decisions independently is crucial, but they must continuously align with municipal expectations, especially in terms of resource allocation and program effectiveness. The leader reflects on the need for ongoing negotiation with the municipality: "We have more freedom to make decisions, but this also requires us to constantly manage our relationships with the municipality. We cannot afford to have misunderstandings, as the municipality expects our program to operate efficiently and within budget." (ASP 4, pos. 12). While the leader in ASP 4 enjoys more autonomy than in ASP 1, ASP 2, and ASP 3, the necessity of aligning decisions with the municipality's broader educational objectives underscores the continued importance of external collaboration. Similarly, in ASP 5, the leader emphasizes autonomy but also underscores the necessity of close engagement with municipal authorities. The leader reflects on how important it is to manage external relationships effectively, ensuring that the ASP's goals are in synchronicity with the municipality's educational priorities. The dual role of the leader in participating in faculty meetings and maintaining communication with external partners helps to bridge internal and external decision-making: "I'm involved in the staff conferences, where I have a dual role—on the one hand as a teacher and, on the other hand, as an ASP leader." (ASP 5, pos. 1). Like ASP 4, ASP 5 demonstrates how leader autonomy is balanced with the need to engage with external stakeholders, particularly municipal authorities. In this case, the leader's ability to navigate both internal school dynamics and external stakeholder expectations ensures that decisions are balanced and aligned with broader educational and municipal goals. This dual responsibility highlights the complexity of decision-making within these programs and shows how leaders navigate both internal dynamics and external expectations.

Common to all the ASPs is the notion that, while the collaborative effort is made, and leaders exert a more distributed leadership style with varying degrees of autonomy, the municipality plays a central role in the decision-making process and maintains such a central role in the leadership of the ASPs. In some cases this also causes friction when the needs of the ASP and the provisions of the municipality do not match. "It's hard to explain to the municipality why larger contracts are essential. I need 12–13 people for lunch shifts and finding candidates willing to work fragmented schedules is a major challenge. Even professionalizing these roles remains a struggle." (ASP 1, pos. 24). Both the results for intra- as well as inter-organizational leadership show

that the leadership style of ASP leaders depends on the context of the ASP, but also on their roles and responsibilities within the ASP.

5 Discussion

The qualitative data from interviews with five ASP leaders shows that they have a key role to play– both in leading the team of employees within their organization and in collaboration with other organizations in their context, such as the school as well as the municipality. Therefore, we conclude that leaders in ASP fulfill intra- as well as inter-organizational leadership tasks. This differentiation acknowledges the complex field of leadership in ASP, which has already been described for the case of Sweden (Boström and Elvstrand, 2024; Haglund and Glaés-Coutts, 2023) and the USA (Jackson-Roberts, 2020; Rudd Safran, 2019). However, contrary to the Swedish context, where ASP leaders often also serve as school principals, Swiss ASP leaders typically head a separate organization. This dual role of leading their own team and simultaneously focusing on the leadership tasks they take on in collaboration with the school and the municipality requires a flexible understanding of leadership styles.

We have shown that the municipalities provide an organizational context which is characterized by atomistic distributed leadership styles (Morrison and Arthur, 2013). This means that the municipality representatives distribute leadership roles and responsibilities to appointed leaders in the social system, such as the school principal, as well as the ASP leader. As a result, different leaders share leadership tasks within the same context. Within their organizations, ASP leaders adopt a collaborative approach with their teams, as highlighted in both the literature (Haglund and Glaés-Coutts, 2023) and our findings. This approach may stem from the relatively flat organizational structure of ASP, where other leadership positions such as middle leadership are not present yet (Harris et al., 2019). Harris et al. (2019) defines those middle leaders as "subject leaders, heads of year, pastoral heads and heads of department (p. 256). How this relates to the ASP field remains unclear. Yet, functions such as "head of supervision," "head of group" or "head of administration" are possible roles in the ASP sector. Furthermore, the data shows that the work in ASP is also a more team-focused task. ASP leaders allocate their time in varying degrees of prioritization across administrative duties, direct care, and educational leadership, reflecting the multifaceted nature of their roles. Larger organizations tend to have more complex structures and responsibilities, with tasks such as hiring, budgeting, and facility management varying in scope depending on organizational size. While some organizations operate with a high degree of autonomy, others are more closely integrated into the local education system, which affects their decision-making processes and flexibility in exerting different leadership styles.

The ASP leader's connection to the regular school system remains evident, even if the ASP is an autonomous organization. The variety of leadership tasks and roles reflects the adaptability of leadership styles to the specific needs and contexts of each organization.

The qualitative content analysis in this study reveals, that while the core roles and responsibilities of ASP leaders may appear consistent across different settings, the variation in organizational size and the definition of their area of responsibility significantly influence the scope and nature of their leadership styles. Moreover,

the study highlights the disparate positions that ASP leaders occupy within their respective municipalities, which in turn, impacts their capacity for organizational development and professional autonomy. The research also underscores the importance of collaborative leadership styles for the development of ASPs in response to societal demands. By examining the contextual factors that shape the leadership dynamics in Extended Education, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of daily work of leaders in ASP. Our findings suggest that a more detailed approach to defining and supporting leadership styles is necessary to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of Extended Education programs in Switzerland. This research not only provides valuable insights for policymakers and educational administrators but also offers a foundation for further exploration into the leadership styles and contexts both within Switzerland and beyond.

The comparability between the contexts and generalizability must be examined with care. The selection of cases was characterized by a high degree of diversity, since the aim was to reflect the full range of situations. However, this approach makes a direct comparison difficult in the qualitative analysis, since the observed differences could be due to the context.

In conclusion, ASP leaders take a strong role in inter- and intra-organizational leadership, although they use different leadership styles in these two contexts. Distributed leadership styles rather apply to the municipality as a whole, than to the internal team structure of the ASP. Middle leadership is not yet a common concept in the ASPs in this study. Although staff participation is high, the responsibility and power are still concentrated with the ASP leader. Therefore, the introduction of middle leadership and distributed leadership styles might be a further step to lighten the workload of ASP leaders and boost professionalization of this specific field (Cummings et al., 2007; Muijs, 2007; Muijs and Harris, 2007).

6 Conclusion

ASP leaders must be adept at leading in different contexts, flexibility in leadership styles and fostering collaboration within their organizations as well as within the broader educational context. By understanding the theoretical underpinnings of school leadership styles and its application to ASP, we gain a deeper appreciation for the connection between roles, leadership styles and the local context faced by leaders in this emerging field. ASP leaders serve multiple roles and responsibilities, which differ between the organizational context and may lead to different leadership styles. These multifaceted tasks, combined with the expectation that the ASP is an active part of the municipal educational context, raise important questions about how those leaders can be supported through further education and training.

Data availability statement

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

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declare that no Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript.

Publisher's note

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