

Extended education - leadership in practice

Edited by

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Extended education - leadership in practice

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Editorial: Extended education - leadership in practice

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KEYWORDS

extended education, out-of-school-hours care, school-age educare, international, all-day school

Editorial on the Research Topic

Extended education - leadership in practice

In many parts of the world, various forms of extended education are emerging to respond to parents' care needs before and after the school day as well as to enhance learning and provide children with meaningful leisure time. Extended education encompasses after-school programs, school-age educare, all-day schools, and outside-of-school-hours care. The extended education sector is under increasing pressure to deliver quality services for children youth and families. It is essential to ensure that the leadership is in place to ensure effectiveness of services working in tune with all stakeholders in a synergistic way.

Despite this growing field, research is still limited. The previous discourse on Extended Education (Bae, 2018; Schuepbach, 2018a,b) discusses the diversity within these educational offers and activities while highlighting the existence of shared values and structural similarities that help establish a common understanding of what Extended Education entails. This implies that while these programs may vary significantly across different contexts and countries, there are fundamental principles or characteristics that are widely recognized and agreed upon.

Leadership plays a crucial role in shaping the nature and relevance of extended educational activities as it is depicted as operating at the nexus of various stakeholders, including families, schools, and the broader community. It emphasizes that effective leadership in this context involves understanding and responding to the diverse needs of children, parents, and other members of the community. Essentially, leaders in Extended Education must navigate the complexities of multiple stakeholders and their varying needs to ensure that educational activities are well-designed and successfully implemented. There is limited research-based knowledge regarding how leadership is enacted within extended education. Nevertheless, considering the specific nature of its mandate, it may be assumed that leadership is exercised in ways that differ from those found in traditional classroom instruction. It is therefore essential to develop a broader research base in this area, illuminated through diverse contexts and perspectives.

In this Research Topic we were fortunate to be able to accept 10 articles for this Research Topic on expanding the knowledge base on leadership in extended education which provide a comprehensive examination of leadership, quality, and practice in extended education settings across several European countries and Australia. A recurring concern across the studies is the lack of standardized definitions and frameworks for quality in extended education to support leaders.

Key themes and findings

The research reveals significant challenges in leadership within extended education contexts. Swedish principals managing school-age educate demonstrate what researchers describe as “nebulous leadership”—a reactive, adaptable style that seeks collective support rather than taking full responsibility (see [Holmberg and Kane; Manni et al.](#)). This leadership approach emerges from complex power relations and institutional constraints that limit principals’ ability to lead proactively.

In contrast, German research on all-day schooling emphasizes the importance of collaborative development over shared leadership responsibility as the primary driver of organizational quality (see [Kielblock](#)). Swiss studies further highlight how after-school program leaders must flexibly adapt their leadership styles based on municipal contexts and organizational demands, requiring both collaborative and distributed approaches depending on circumstances (see [Jutzi et al.](#)).

Several studies emphasize the critical importance of including children as leaders in extended education programs (see [Milton et al.](#); [Näpfl and Schweinberger](#)). Swiss research demonstrates that children can articulate clear preferences about participation opportunities, self-determination, and feedback mechanisms. When children experience meaningful participation, they develop greater agency and engagement.

Australian research on co-production approaches shows that structured yet flexible processes can effectively amplify children’s leadership roles and decision-making participation (see [Milton et al.](#)).

Staff working in extended education settings navigate complex professional tensions. Pedagogues face competing demands between serving individual needs vs. large groups, and between providing experiential spaces while building close relationships (see [Scholian et al.](#); [Lager](#)). Their work often lacks visibility and coherent professional frameworks, leading to varied approaches based on individual backgrounds and qualifications.

Despite national differences in policies and structures, the research identifies common intentions and processes across European extended education systems (see [Ferrari et al.](#); [Krepper et al.](#); [Kielblock](#)). Five main categories emerge: factors influencing extended education, institutional structures, pedagogical requirements, content areas, and outcomes. This suggests potential for shared learning and development of transnational frameworks on extended education and its learning for children.

Educational implications and future directions

The research collectively points to several critical needs in extended education: Firstly, Context-specific leadership training that addresses the unique challenges of extended education environments, moving beyond traditional school leadership models is needed.

Secondly, according to the research published in this Research Topic, quality frameworks and policy coordination seem to

be a shared concern. The development of comprehensive quality definitions that balance educational, social, and economic considerations while maintaining focus on children’s developmental needs to help guide the responsibilities of leaders in extended education. This alignment extends to the policies underpinning the practices.

Thirdly, participatory practices for children must be enhanced in the field of extended education. This means the systematic integration of children’s voices in program design and evaluation, valuing their knowledge as leaders. Consequently, staff working within extended education need to apply a form of leadership that makes children’s voices visible and ensures they are acknowledged and valued.

This Research Topic emphasizes diverse research perspectives and collects submissions in a highly relevant field to improve educational outcomes for students, staff and communities, and promote equitable and inclusive policies and practices grounded in educational research and theory, using quantitative, qualitative and/or mixed methodologies.

This multidisciplinary section is at the forefront of disseminating and communicating cutting-edge scientific knowledge and impactful discoveries in the field of educational leadership to researchers, industry, policymakers, and the public worldwide.

Author contributions

JC: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. PB: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. HE: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Amplifying children's leadership roles and voice in decision-making through co-production in outside of school hours care: qualitative findings from the connect promote and protect program

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Background: There is scant research examining evidence-based processes and practices that delineate how to include the voices of children in service design and delivery in school age care environments such as Outside of School Hours Care (OSHC). A possible structure to support children to share leadership in design of their OSHC program and have a meaningful voice in decision-making is co-production, whereby children and their OSHC communities have the opportunity to co-plan, co-design, co-deliver, and co-evaluate OSHC program activities. The Connect Promote and Protect Program (CP3), a social connection and wellbeing program that provides a structured method of co-producing with children, educators, and their OSHC communities, is examined.

Objectives: This study aimed to explore the response to a co-production approach in OSHC settings as part of participation in the CP3.

Methods: Qualitative interviews and focus groups were conducted with 12 OSHC staff (educators, coordinators, managers, and volunteers) and 12 children attending OSHC as part of a wider mixed-methods implementation-effectiveness stepped-wedge trial of CP3 in 12 OSHC services located in urban and regional areas of New South Wales, Australia. Participants undertook semi-structured interviews/focus groups via multiple communication platforms (face-to-face, phone, and video-conferencing platforms). A representative research team (including researchers, OSHC educators/coordinators, OSHC administrators, clinicians, and parents of children in OSHC) used an inductive thematic analysis process. Two researchers undertook iterative coding using NVivo12 software, with themes developed and refined in ongoing team discussion.

Results: The analysis identified nine sub-themes that related to child co-production and voice in CP3, which were organised into two super-ordinate themes: (1) processes that enable child agency and voice and (2) the impact of child agency and voice. Process related sub-themes included the following: co-

production (ko-production) as a key driver; high-quality programming practice in a demanding environment; structure balanced with flexibility; the importance of being agile and having a willingness to adjust; and implementation factors supporting child voice. The impact related sub-themes included the following: *empowerment of children through meaningful engagement; we all have a role in the team (a space for growing leadership skills); a spark through engagement and enjoyment; and being and belonging (the impact on children's social and emotional wellbeing).*

Conclusion: This is the first known qualitative study to examine the use and impact of co-production processes in OSHC—where children not only co-design but also co-plan, co-deliver, and co-evaluate the activity programming alongside OSHC educators and their communities. The findings indicate that the co-production process provides a structured, yet flexible, way of supporting children's voice and leadership even when delivered in diverse types of OSHC settings.

KEYWORDS

participatory design, co-design, co-production, children, after school care, program development, child leadership, decision-making

Background

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989) advocates for the fundamental rights of children to be consulted and to express their views on matters that affect them. This emphasis on child-centred practice, which enables children's voice and agency (Australian Government Department of Education, 2022), is echoed in Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority's (ACECQA) National Quality Framework and National Quality Standard (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2018), which regulates Australia's School Aged Care (SAC) system. Despite this, there is scant research looking at formal evidence-based processes and practices that include the voices of children in service delivery in school age care, such as Outside of School Hours Care (OSHC).

OSHC can often be referred to as out of school hours (OOSH) services, after school care, or before and after school care. SAC such as OSHC services offer a secure and supervised environment for primary school aged children, who are typically aged 4–12 years. Care is provided before and after school typically for 2–3 h a day during the school term, and some services offer vacation care in school holidays (Milton et al., 2023). In 2020, Australia's Productivity Commission reported 5,000 OSHCs supporting 460,000 Australian children, and it is now the fastest growing childhood education and care sector in Australia (Cartmel and Hurst, 2021). Despite this, staff turnover is high (Cartmel and Hayes, 2016) which may be attributed to low pay, insecure working conditions, and limited career/training advancements (Simoncini and Lasen, 2012). Further, educators are not required to hold qualifications or formal training in child development, wellbeing, or mental health in Australia (Murray et al., 2024).

Although the field is growing, there is limited qualitative literature from SAC and OSHC settings, and still fewer examples of studies providing children's voices (Cartmel and Hayes, 2016; Simoncini et al., 2015). Research suggests listening to children's needs and perspectives delivers responsive policies and practices and improved child experiences (Flückiger et al., 2018; Moir and Brunner, 2021). The

global literature suggests that when asked children in SAC settings say they value play, freedom, choice in activities, being with friends, having private spaces and the availability of supportive non-intrusive adults (Simoncini et al., 2015; Horgan et al., 2018; Lehto and Eskelinen, 2020; Elvstrand and Närvänen, 2016) and want to be treated appropriately for their age (Horgan et al., 2018; Hurst, 2017). Furthermore, over-structuring and too many rules decided on by adults is often viewed negatively by children (Horgan et al., 2018; Elvstrand and Närvänen, 2016). This feedback from children highlights a clear need for meaningful participation in SAC and that the voices of children need to be listened to and incorporated into programming decisions.

There remains scant information in the academic literature outlining how to listen and respond to children's voices in SAC settings such as OSHC for program planning, program design, program delivery, and program evaluation purposes. Indeed, understanding how to apply the voices of children in programming once they have been articulated and understanding the impact of this process on children and their SAC services would be a clear benefit to the field. A significant Australian Report on OSHC, “*More than convenient care*,” emphasised the need for cross-collaborative initiatives in partnership with children in design of OSHC programs. At the same time, research is increasingly seeking to adopt a participatory methodology, typically known as co-design, to enable children to actively contribute to intervention development and decisions that relate to them (Milton et al., 2023; Milton et al., 2021).

Co-design and co-production

Co-design, also known as participatory design, places stakeholders at the centre of the design process (Sjöberg and Timpka, 1998; Ospina-Pinillos et al., 2018) and involves a process of collective creativity applied across the entire design process (Sanders and Stappers, 2008). Co-design represents a paradigm shift in practice from top-down design towards collaborative bottom-up engagement, whereby stakeholders jointly explore and create solutions to program design

and service delivery (Milton et al., 2021). Co-design involves more than participants simply voicing what they want from interventions or services or are engaged in jointly exploring and articulating needs and collaboratively exploring and creating solutions (Sanders, 2002). Emerging research in other settings such as mental health also extends participatory processes to co-production (Milton et al., 2024; Kealy et al., 2024). Co-production includes end-users having a role in co-planning, co-design, co-delivery, and co-evaluation of interventions. In OSHC settings, this means that children themselves, not just the service administrators and educators, are key contributors and drivers of these participatory processes. Noting through our program, the Connect Promote and Protect Program (CP3), this has been coined 'ko-production' for kids in co-production.

The connect promote and protect program

In Australia, CP3 is the first and only known co-designed evidence-based social connection and wellbeing-focussed program delivered in OSHC (Milton et al., 2021). CP3 provides a structured method of co-producing with children, educators, and their OSHC communities utilising unique activities through co-planning, co-design, co-delivery, and co-evaluation processes. CP3 activities are unique and tailored to each participating OSHC but have the same overarching aim of providing opportunities for social connection, child leadership, and engagement, through the delivery of activities that broaden children's experiences, opportunities, and wellbeing. As shown in the CP3 Model (Figure 1) and discussed in past formative co-design (Milton et al., 2021) and evaluative research (Milton et al., 2023), CP3 has four guiding programming

principles (CP3 Principles): (1) Build Wellbeing and Resilience; (2) Broaden Horizons; (3) Inspire and Engage; and (4) Connect Communities. As defined in a study by Milton et al. (2023), there are multiple CP3 personnel who are trained and support the implementation of CP3 in OSHC settings (Table 1); importantly, one of these roles—'CP3 peer champions'—includes children at OSHC having an opportunity to engage in leadership roles as part of the program delivery.

In line with documented co-design practices with children (Thabrew et al., 2018), in CP3, there are creative techniques to engage children. The manualised program follows a structured engagement process (Stage 1: consult and create; Stage 2: test and refine; Stage 3: implement and evaluate; see Milton et al., 2023). This includes initial co-design workshops that use visual materials, storytelling, fun and playful activities, and the physical creation of ideas with the use of whiteboards, butchers paper, storyboards, inspiration cards, stickering activities, and modelling tools such as Play-Doh and Lego. Children prototype various activities and co-plan their delivery. After this, the children try these activities through a "taste test," so they can co-evaluate to improve or extend the activities before they are rolled out into the full CP3 activity delivered at their OSHC. As highlighted above, children are able to co-deliver these activities through their CP3 peer champion roles.

Outside of utilising a co-production model (Milton et al., 2024; Kealy et al., 2024), CP3 draws on Hart's 'ladder of participation' (Hart, 2013), with a focus on ensuring genuine participation of children which ranges from 'adult-initiated, shared decisions with children' to 'child-initiated, shared decisions with adults' as the CP3 delivery progresses over time. In line with Ludy's seminal study (Lundy, 2007), meaningful child participation in CP3 ensures that there is sufficient 'Space' provided to children so they can express their views in a child-friendly way; their

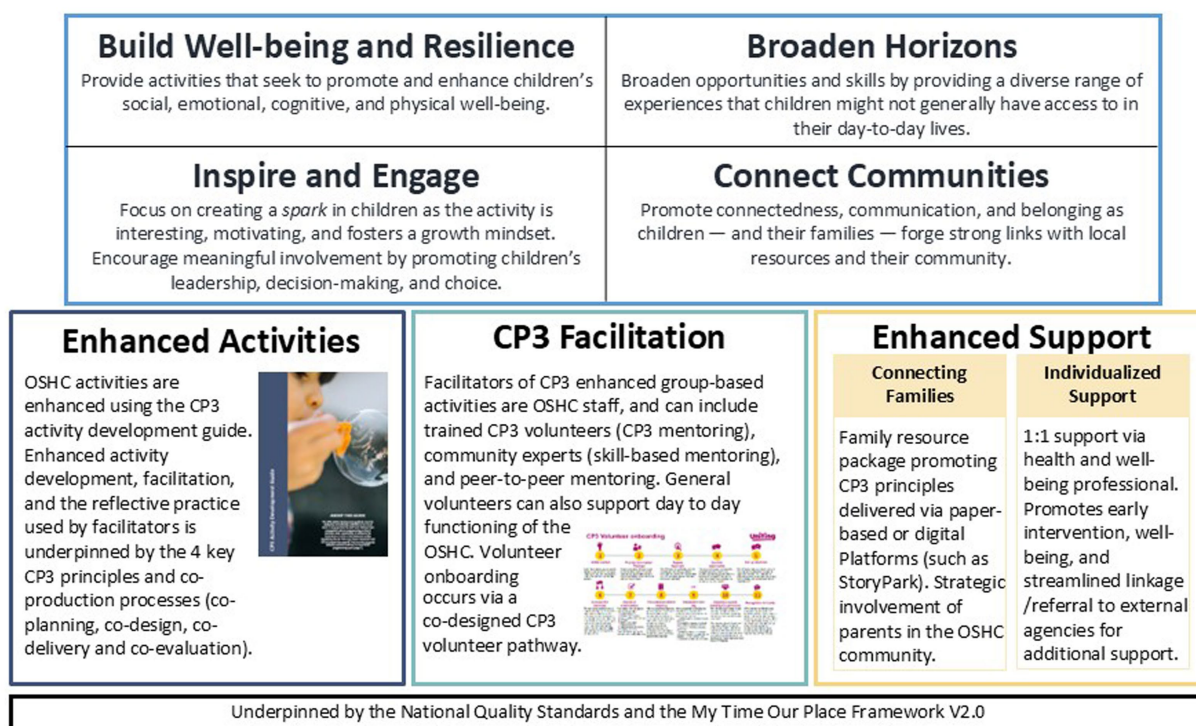


FIGURE 1
CP3 model.

TABLE 1 Roles in CP3.

CP3 Coordinator	The overarching coordinator of CP3, who supports sites implementing CP3 through resourcing, educator and volunteer training, and co-production of the activities (co-design, activity co-planning, co-delivery, and co-evaluation).
CP3 Site Champion	The nominated educator or staff member who is trained in CP3 principles (alongside the other OSHC educators) and CP3 deliver and is responsible at a site level to support CP3 delivery.
CP3 Skilled Mentors	Skilled mentoring complements the range of activities that can be provided as part of CP3. These champions are mentors with specialised skills that can facilitate activities in their area of expertise—whether it be movie making, martial arts, or community advocacy. Depending on their availability, skilled mentors can help facilitate one off sessional activities, a full CP3 activity program, or they may simply offer OSHC the use of specialised resources.
CP3 Principle Mentors	These mentors (who can be OSHC educators, staff, or volunteers) are trained in and have an in-depth understanding of the “CP3 principles” (i.e., Build Wellbeing and Resilience, Broaden Horizons, Inspire and Engage, Connect Communities). Their role is to support the CP3 activities each week to ensure that that CP3 Principles are being delivered within each session.
CP3 Peer Champions (Child leaders)	These are children attending OSHC who are particularly interested in CP3. These peer champions can have a variety of roles, depending on the OSHC. For example, they might lead CP3 announcements in the OSHC community meetings, or they might buddy-up with other children who might need additional support during CP3 workshops or CP3 activities.

‘Voice’ is facilitated in various forms, and children are provided multiple opportunities to participate in decision-making, and children’s ideas are taken seriously (i.e., have ‘Influence’) as those that have the power (i.e., the ‘Audience’) such as the SAC service coordinators and educators listen and act upon the ideas generated by children accordingly.

The current study

As part of a large, mixed-methods, randomised stepped-wedge trial of CP3 in 12 Australian OSHC sites, qualitative implementation-effectiveness data from adults engaged in program delivery and children who participated in CP3 were collected. This was a sub-study from this larger trial in which main objectives were to explore how co-production facilitated and impacted children’s leadership, voice, and decision-making as part of the Connect, Promote and Protect Program (CP3) in Outside of School Hours Care Services (OSHC).

Methods

Ethical approval

This research was approved by the University of Sydney’s Human Research Ethics Committee (Protocol Number: 2022/254).

Study design

This qualitative sub-study is part of a larger stepped-wedge cluster randomised controlled trial evaluating CP3’s implementation and effectiveness. The CP3 model was developed with local stakeholders in 2017 using participatory co-design (Milton et al., 2021) and has been refined further in a formative and process evaluation (Milton et al., 2023). The overarching CP3 research is based on the Medical Research Council’s guidelines for developing complex interventions (Skivington et al., 2021) which uses an iterative research design cycle of ongoing development, feasibility, evaluation, and implementation. A critical realist orientation was applied to the research (Archer et al., 2013). We made use of the consolidated criteria for reporting

qualitative research (COREQ checklist, Tong et al., 2007; Supplementary File 1).

Participants and setting

Participants comprised two stakeholder groups: (1) children attending OSHC aged between 4 and 12 years and (2) OSHC educators, coordinators, managers, or volunteers. Inclusion criteria were as follows: (i) identified as one of the stakeholder groups; (ii) able to participate in English; and (iii) provide written informed consent to participate. For a child to participate in the research, both parental/guardian and child written consent were obtained. Participants were recruited from 12 OSHC services in urban and regional areas of New South Wales, Australia. A *priori* sample size estimate was guided by research (Hagaman and Wutich, 2017; Hennink and Kaiser, 2022; Milton et al., 2022), suggesting 20–40 participants would be required for data saturation as the research involved recruiting a non-homogenous participants (i.e., both children and OSHC personnel). Data were collected after the CP3 had been delivered at these sites.

Recruitment and procedures

Electronic and paper-based advertising materials were used to notify potential participants (and children’s parents or guardians) of the study. Recruitment was passive so that participants (or their parents/guardians) initially volunteered by signing up on a contact form or contacting researchers directly to participate. Upon receipt of parental consent, children went through a consent and a subsequent assent process immediately before the activity. All participants were reassured of the voluntary nature of participation and that they could stop at any time. Participants did not receive any compensation or reward for taking part.

Data collection and analysis

A qualitative semi-structured interview/focus group guides was developed by the evaluation research team who had diverse

stakeholder backgrounds, including academic researchers, OSHC personnel, parents of children in OSHC, and child health and mental health clinicians. This diversity in background of qualitative research team is now encouraged as best-practice in qualitative research (Milton et al., 2024; Milton et al., 2022; Klinner et al., 2023; Powell et al., 2024). Input from children was gathered on the child-focussed questions to ensure clarity before they were used. The semi-structured interview and focus group guides can be found in [Supplementary File 2](#). After informed consent, audio-recorded interviews and focus groups were conducted face to face at the OSHC, or via telephone or a digital communications platform between October 2023 and May 2024. Interviews were conducted by either a research psychologist with extensive experience in OSHC services and child mental health (AM) or a paediatric nurse (YH and HN). The OSHC provided photo prompts of activities to support the discussion with children. The average interview duration was 38 min for adults and 25 min for children’s focus groups. A one page lay summary of the findings was returned to participants.

Data analysis

Interviews were transcribed, anonymised, and checked for accuracy. Qualitative data were analysed using a six-step qualitative thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2021): (1) data familiarisation; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes and sub-themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) refining, defining, and naming themes; and (6) report writing. This step-wise process provides a flexible and accessible way of analysing qualitative data and enables iterative exploration of patterns and relationships between different themes whilst ensuring research rigour. Qualitative data from the focus groups and interviews were reviewed by three members of the researcher team (AM, HN, and KB) noting relevant points and key concepts across all participants to develop an initial coding framework and checked by a fourth (a manager of OSHC services) to triangulate interpretation. Notes were then coded in NVivo (version 12) software (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2016) by one researchers per transcript (AM or HN) and reviewed by the wider qualitative team. The coding followed an iterative process of reading, coding, and discussing the pattern and content of coded data.

Results

Participation

In total, 12 adults participated in qualitative interviews comprising 3 OSHC educators, 8 OSHC coordinators, and 1 volunteer. Four focus groups with 12 children in total were conducted.

Main findings

As presented in [Table 2](#), nine key sub-themes were identified in the data that related to child leadership and voice in CP3, which we organised into two key super-ordinate themes: (1) process considerations that enable child agency and voice and (2) the impact of child agency and voice being enabled in OSHC.

Structured processes enabling child agency and voice

Co-production (ko-production) as a key driver

The process of co-production, and specifically kids in co-production (ko-production), was identified by participants as an important driver of child agency and voice. Personnel in OSHC services identified that they often lacked the confidence and processes to capture the voices and interest of children in creative and meaningful ways—they reflected that the inclusion of formal co-design workshops as part of CP3 delivery was a key avenue for addressing this need and building their skill set. Specifically, as child-centred co-design workshop and ongoing co-planning and co-evaluation processes were embedded from the outset of the program through a structured engagement process (Stage 1: consult and create; Stage 2: test and refine; Stage 3: implement and evaluate), the sites were better equipped to allow a welcoming space for children’s voices to be encouraged and heard, that is, the program provided them with this clear pathway for children to contribute ideas. From the program outset, children were empowered to design and choose the activities that promoted the CP3 key principles through co-design. They were engaged in co-planning how they would run the activities at their service. Children in different focus groups noted that this process of co-design was easier and better way of choosing activities:

“It’s like a bit more easier rather than just asking all children to put their hands up.” (Children’s Focus Group, OSHC 3)

Further to this, there was a child-led co-delivery component of the program that was also evident throughout the interviews. Multiple participants reflected that older children were given leadership roles in delivering the program, helping younger ones, and taking on responsibilities. This was seen as important as the opportunity to mix age groups is not typical in schooling environments. Finally, being a part of the co-evaluation of the activities, including identifying what worked and what should change, meant that the program was run on the children’s terms.

TABLE 2 Child agency and voice themes.

Super-ordinate themes	Sub-theme
Enabling processes	Co-production (ko-production) as a key driver
	High-quality programming in a demanding environment
	Structure balanced with flexibility
	The importance of being agile and a willingness to adjust
	Implementation factors supporting child voice
Impact	Empowerment of children through meaningful engagement
	We all have a role in the team: building collaboration and leadership skills
	A spark through engagement and enjoyment
	Being and belonging: the impact on children’s social and emotional wellbeing

"Yeah, well, I think it kind of showed the kids that they are in control, you know, this our service does not work without having kids. And their voices are everything to us, we are very child driven at this service. So what they say goes with reason, essentially. So I think for them to be a part of that initial planning process same for the staff. It just made them care about it more, it invested them. They were so much more invested into the whole experience." (Coordinator, OSHC2)

High-quality programming in a demanding environment

Participants relayed that multiple micro, meso, and macro factors exist that influence their ability to implement high-quality programming in OSHC. These factors can promote or be a barrier to children's voice and agency being a part of programming. This included individual factors at a micro level including insufficient confidence, knowledge, skills, and time for OSHC personnel to engage with children and in reflective practice. At a meso level, there were issues such as stretched organisational resources, administrative burden, staff churn, and being in small or pack-up pack down service. At a macro level, there were factors such as regionality and government funding. It was noted that having the additional training, funds, data insights, and personnel provided through CP3 helped alleviate some of this burden to facilitate more meaningful engagement of children in programming.

"And plus we are a very small service, so we only have three educators. Um, like now we have four on the floor, but two are casual and then it's like two permanent staff. So it does limit some things what we can do (...) I think it [CP3] brings an opportunity that it's hard to replicate by ourselves, in after school care, especially since we are a small service ... it does give it's an instant opportunity for the children to learn something more and have that more personalised attention." (Educator, OSHC1)

This was a positive cycle that promoted a sense of achievement for children and also the educators. This sense of achievement enhanced positive staff morale and, in turn, boosted the team's focus on providing holistic engagement and development of the children in the service.

"I think it's really I think it's kind of changed the way we look at programming as well. Like I said, we used to program small things and ever since the CP3 that was kind of a long project. And I think that's what we are getting more involved now because we have noticed the children are more interested in longer projects to get that like end result." (Coordinator, OSHC7)

Structure balanced with flexibility

CP3 was seen as balancing the need for structure with a need for flexibility based on the individual service's situation. This was seen as critical to service and program delivery as OSHC sites were not homogenous, noting the above-mentioned micro, meso, and macro factors that influenced service delivery and the fact that educators and children from different services (and within services) have different needs, wants, ideas, skills, and motivations. Despite this wide service variation, the structured bottom-up approach to CP3 (enabled through activity co-production with children and

personnel at each site) was sufficiently flexible to enable child-centred engagement, voice in decision-making, and equal contributions on a joint collaborative activity that they were interested in.

"It can be tricky to find activities that all kids collaborate in, which is obviously our goal because we do not want to have, you know, five different activities on an afternoon for the different kids to have. I want them all to know that they are all equal and can collaborate as one." (Coordinator, OSHC2)

"There was those couple of kids who were not super interested in it. Some activities had more kids interested than others. Yeah, it's really dependent on the interests of the children." (Coordinator, OSHC5)

In one service, some children did not initially wish to participate in CP3 preferring other activities, and an educator explained how they continued to enable choice which fostered a sense of ownership, which in turn increased participation.

"Okay, this program is for you guys. You can come and join. Just have a look if you are interested... Yeah, like if they do not want to participate, we cannot force them. 'Okay. You can go and do other activities'. So yeah, but we find out they like it now so at the end [of CP3 activities] all children were over there. No one was outside." (Educator, OSHC 3)

This was surprising for the educator as such high participation was unusual in general OSHC settings:

"I'm in this industry [SAC service provider] – I can say I think more than five years. But not a single program, like hundred percent children over there. At least you have 1 or 2 children they do not want to do that. But yeah, 98, 95%. Yes. But two or three, definitely they do not want to. But we were surprised at the end, all children over there, we want to join this one." (Educator, OSHC 3)

The program structure enabled multiple flexible pathways for engagement through avenues of participation that accommodate these differences in preferences and the different ways in which children engage with the world.

"If a child wasn't interested in planning the calm down area, they were interested once it was done. So it was like I think there was something for everyone. And that's the same with the chickens [project] as well. There was something in the whole project for everyone. There was kids that absolutely were not interested in the incubation side as soon as they hatched that they hold the chickens every single day. So I just think it's like it's just really helped our children as a as a whole." (Coordinator, OSHC 7)

This flexibility in engagement was seen as very important as children do not all engage in the same way.

"It's great because you can get a number of different children's perspectives at a similar time. It's tricky because half the kids do not want to be sat down for a group discussion. They do not want to have that chat. They want to go and play." (Coordinator, OSHC 5)

The importance of being agile and the willingness to adjust

Participants reflected the need to be open to the unexpected nature of meaningfully engaging children in decision-making, with a willingness to adapt to children's interests being paramount. Being responsive to children's needs when programming meant that the OSHC personnel had to be open to change and diversify their activities. Participants reflected that they genuinely valued this feedback and input from children and reflected that enabling the children's autonomy to choose and also change direction when required created a supportive and inclusive environment.

"When you see how happy the kids are. And like I said, you know, it's extended on to something that, we keep doing here. So and that's how I, well I can speak for the other educators as well, you know, it's just seeing how much it's opened up for them to do different things." (Coordinator, OSHC 10)

Many services commented that extended on their CP3 activities after the program had ended in responsiveness to the high level of engagement from children.

Implementation factors supporting child voice

Participants highlighted key implementation considerations that are essential for OSHC services to effectively engage children in the co-production process of building their own local wellbeing programs using CP3 Principles, as well as delivering the program. These implementation factors centred around the need for ongoing staff training, sufficient time and resources, and clear communication.

Regarding training, service co-coordinators consistently emphasised that finding time for staff training is a challenge in OSHC, but when time was allocated for CP3, it proved to be highly beneficial.

"It's difficult to sit them (educators) down and do a whole training course with them. So, it was really good that, [Name, CP3 Coordinator] can sit with them for two hours and they actually leave understanding CP3." (Coordinator, OSHC 5)

Due to time constraints, coordinators and staff preferred shorter, face-to-face training sessions followed by ongoing support through regular updates, meetings, and catch-up calls. Face-to-face sessions with a facilitator enabling staff to ask questions tailor CP3 to their specific service needs and helped them to feel more prepared and connected to the program's goals. In the future, staff recommended that short refresher top-up training modules on CP3 components, including theoretical insights, processes, principles, and interactive content such as videos, would be beneficial, which could be delivered digitally. This may also be useful for staff who needed "a refresher on how to do it" and for new staff who lacked knowledge of CP3, considering the high turnover typical in OSHC settings.

"But I think we have been through it [CP3] a few times. I think we know the process and how it's going to happen. Yeah. So I think maybe for the new educators, some sort of training online will be good. So they have an insight into it." (Coordinator, OSHC 10)

However, this would need human involvement, navigation, and support:

"I think having an online module would be great as long as there's someone somewhere that you can ask questions to and have a person answer." (Coordinator, OSHC 5)

One site identified that continuous communication and engagement with the broader OSHC team, including casual staff, was seen as vital and would generate greater program impact.

"If we are not really, involved, involved, it's kind of easy to kind of forget and not really understand the program as well as we could". (Educator, OSHC 1)

The additional support of a CP3 coordinator onsite and a budget provided through the program was highly valued, but without this resourcing CP3 may not have been easily implemented and child engagement may have been lower.

"It was [Name, CP3 coordinator] physically coming here, meeting the kids, the kids getting to meet with her and interact with her. ... CP3 pretty much just came here, which was really good, and I think that was a huge part of it." (Coordinator, OSHC 7)

Impact of agency and voice on children

At each OSHC site, there were several impacts relayed by participants that stemmed from enabling children's agency and voice through the embedded CP3 activity co-production process. This included greater sense of empowerment, leadership skills, engagement and enjoyment in the activities, and enhanced social and emotional skills and wellbeing.

Empowerment of children through meaningful engagement

Enabling children's voice in decision-making and autonomy over program design was viewed as enhancing their sense of empowerment. As one participant noted:

"It made them feel empowered. It was empowering that they get to choose what to do. They get to choose what they want to do at the [OSHC] centre... participate in those activities. Make them feel empowered and giving them the right or the power for them to be able to choose their own activities and path or programs that they wanted to do." (Coordinator, OSHC 2)

Children reflected that this process was straight forward and was highly rewarding to see their ideas actioned via the activities.

"It's easier for us to, like, pick and choose which one we want to do. And get to do what we wanted to do." (Child Focus Group, OSHC 6)

These feelings of ownership generated within children fostered a more positive experience for them at OSHC.

"I think the program itself, um, encourages the children to kind of be in charge of their own experience. I think offering them, having the collaboration with them of building the program is great. I think it gives them a sense of ownership over the experience that they have

and in turn will turn into a more positive experience for them.” (Coordinator, OSHC 5)

We all have a role in the team: a space for growing leadership skills

CP3 was seen as providing a supportive structure and space for all children to take responsibility for planning, designing, and delivering a program and building skills to do this through the co-production approach. OSHC personnel also reported that the co-delivery element developed children's leadership skills and sense of responsibility. This was particularly the case for the older children that supported and guided younger children to engage in the activities through buddy systems and other leadership roles.

“It definitely promoted leadership roles for older kids as well... it was definitely promoted more leadership responsibility roles for our older kids to help with the younger kids and everything like that. So that was really nice to see.” (Coordinator, OSHC 2).

This was seen to benefit both age groups, especially as this multi-age connection and mentoring is not always enabled in school environments, and mixing of age groups is a unique and important part of how OSHCs are structured.

“I absolutely think it is so beneficial for things to engage with each other in different age groups because they just learn so much. You know, they are developing their language skills and developing their social skills indirectly that help them with their emotional regulate.” (Coordinator, OSHC 2)

It was also noted that certain children taking up leadership roles at OSHC could inspire other children to want to do take on responsibility.

“And I’m sure as a big child if you notice that ‘oh today my friend was leader, why I cannot be?’ So definitely, maybe next time, or maybe next week they say, ‘Oh, I’m doing well so I can be a leader now’. So it’s helps children in their development.” (Educator, OSHC 2)

This leadership opportunity provided through CP3 could also build children's confidence and help them consider other ways they could lead and engage in OSHC.

“But the more quiet kids that you would not expect to want a leadership role in and they have done that. And then now six weeks later, a completely different child because they have had that sense of achievement and leadership (...) I think those some kids have definitely found their niche and just that little bit more stability at OSHC because, yeah, they have had that confidence of that leadership role before. It’s obviously encouraged them to kind of spread their wings and expand out to do other opportunities at OSHC.” (Coordinator, OSHC 2)

A spark through engagement and enjoyment

It was reported that through children having a voice, they became highly engaged and reported high levels of enjoyment of the activities with terms such as “fun,” “super-duper fun,” “good,” “exciting,” and “very happy” often being relayed. One focus group

also highlighted that the activities challenged them in an engaging way, stating it was: “*It was fun but equally as hard.*” Educators reflected this high level of enthusiasm for the program was evident because CP3 offered something different to regular program delivery and personnel.

“You could tell how happy and excited they were coming in to the experience because it’s something new (...) I feel like when it’s not us running the activity, the kids will engage more. They want to listen and they want to learn about it.” (Coordinator, OSHC 9)

“It’s way different to the activities here because they are not everyday arts and crafts, they are might be a bit of drawing or a bit of paper mâché, but these ones were different.” (Child Focus Group, OSHC 6)

Children also expressed enjoying the activity and wanting to it again both at OSHC and outside of OSHC.

“We tried it, It’s a great opportunity. And next time you are bored, you could just do this activity with a bunch of family and friends. Let us say you are bored in the school holidays or the weekend, and you can do what OSHC taught. Yeah, you can do that.” (Child Focus Group, OSHC 2)

One coordinator reflected that this process of enabling children to have a voice in decision-making positively influenced the way children thought and felt.

“It was them who come up with the idea and they were independent, and they had the choice and they had the say. So it changes the way that they view things as well and how they feel.” (Coordinator, OSHC 7)

A child highlighted that a key to children's engagement was that the program is not static and can change positively as the activity unfolds and iterates. This meant that the activity design and development could cater to a diverse range of children's expectations and preferences.

“You might feel excited. Some people will be like, this activity is going to be boring. I know for sure they could be bored. But when the presentations is on and we do like other stuff the person decides to join in because everything is starting to become fun.” (Child Focus Group, OSHC 1)

Although children's engagement could fluctuate overtime, with novelty compared to usual programming being a key part to fostering excitement.

“And it’s interesting as well because you could have someone be really, really excited about it one day and then the next week they are like nope I do not want to do that. But for the most part, like I said, they were so excited. It’s something new and different from the norm, which is always going to kind of excite them, I think.” (Coordinator, OSHC 5)

Interestingly, because the program co-production process was supported by external personnel and the usual OSHC staff, there was an element of excitement and increased engagement that was felt by the children.

"Because what I've learnt being a coordinator is I can say something 100 times and they get sick of hearing my voice and they just kind tune out. Whereas when someone external comes in, and it's a fresh face and has a completely different perspective on it. They're more likely to engage." (Coordinator, OSHC 2)

This was also a factor to increase staff motivation.

"I think as well, having [name, CP3 coordinator] here in person, her being a new face as well, got all the kids very, very excited that something new and exciting was happening. And the educators also got into it as well, just because they I think everyone always responds better to face to face stuff." (Coordinator, OSHC 4)

OSHC personnel also reflected that having the time and space to build a program alongside children at their service resulted in feeling enthused and inspired themselves.

"But I do think it is a nice and inspiring part of being able to do those programs and have the ability to have those experiences with the kids and allow that for the kids is inspiring. And I think people do get excited about it. Yeah. But again, it all comes back to having the time to then successfully program for it, successfully make it happen." (Coordinator, OSHC 5)

Being and belonging: the impact on children's social and emotional wellbeing

OSHC personnel noted that collaboration amongst children flourished during the program, because of the children being so engaged via the co-production process. Interactions during the program were described as enhancing children's social and emotional skills, where prosocial behaviours, kindness, and teamwork fostered.

"They helped each other, so it was really good to see them communicate in that way. And all the teamwork, you know, involved because of the program." (Educator, OSHC 1)

"It just brings people together. You might be enemies with somebody else like just not friendships with them. And then you do something together and you are suddenly good friends." (Child focus group, OSHC 3)

Importantly, this made children feel included and a part of the OSHC community:

"Like included. Yeah, not left out, not like the odd one out. We did not have to do the activities that we did not want to do." (Child focus group, OSHC 3)

Feeling included made children feel positive. For example, one child in a focus group commented that being included made them feel: *"Really good. Yeah, it made us feel happy. Not like, sad because you are like the odd one out and no one wants to play with you."* (Child focus group, OSHC 3). Children feeling included and valued through the program's engagement processes positively impacted their social and emotional wellbeing. This sense of inclusion and belonging

made them feel more comfortable and happy in the OSHC environment.

'You'll feel a bit more confident and happy and safe'. (Child Focus Group, OSHC 1)

"I think it just gave them a different sense of like being and belonging and another way to make OSHC home." (Coordinator, OSHC 7)

It was observed how the program provided alternative ways to be involved in decision-making which also fostered a sense of inclusion, *"We have a lot of kids that are here five days a week, and it was just another activity that made them feel more comfortable and gave them a say"* (Coordinator, OSHC 7).

Discussion

Principal findings

Research concerning the delivery and impact of co-design programs with children is still in its infancy. Indeed, this is the first known qualitative study where children not only co-design but also co-plan, co-deliver, and co-evaluate the program alongside educators and their OSHC communities. The qualitative accounts of children and staff presented here explore how the co-production process impacts child engagement in OSHC programming. The findings suggest that the co-production process embedded within CP3 provides a structured, yet flexible, way of supporting children's voice, agency, and opportunity for leadership even when delivered in diverse types of OSHC settings.

Co-design as a flexible solution to supporting children's voice

Research highlights the importance of listening to children's voices as part of best-practice service delivery in OSHCs (Cartmel and Hayes, 2016; Simoncini et al., 2015). Echoing calls for child agency, Australian qualitative research has found that children emphasise the importance of choice of the activities they do at OSHC (Moir and Brunker, 2021). Indeed, the governing National Quality Standards (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2018) and the My Time Our Place Framework (Australian Government Department of Education, 2022) in Australia emphasise the need for embedding play-base approaches that routinely offer consultation with children. This is prerequisite, however, for developing policies and practices that directly respond to children's needs and perspectives (Flückiger et al., 2018; Moir and Brunker, 2021). Yet, to date, an evidence-based strategy to support engagement of children across the diversity of OSHC settings has been lacking. The data we provide in this study suggest that the use of co-design may be a powerful method of enabling meaningful child engagement in OSHC program design. Indeed, co-design, as part of a wider co-production process, was seen by participants as providing each OSHC with a supportive and structured approach to engaging children in decision-making, program design, and delivery. In line with other co-design programs with children documented in the

academic literature (Wake, 2015), child participation was enabled by centring design and participation and that encouraged active citizenship. This process may enable ‘democratic practices’ which has been seen as valuable to children in the academic literature in SAC settings (Lehto and Eskelinen, 2020).

Importantly, the qualitative findings in this study highlight that there is a positive flow on effect to children when they are enabled to make active decisions about the service where they play, learn, and grow. This impact particularly centred around children sense of empowerment, inclusion, enjoyment and engagement, and leadership in decision-making. Interestingly, these outcomes described by participants that stem from CP3 participation are frequently used to define ‘meaningful participation’: with core elements including children being empowered (Henderson-Dekort et al., 2023), included and listened to, enabled to make decisions about how they can participate, and what is meaningful for them (Willis et al., 2017), whilst having access to participation opportunities (Sinclair, 2004).

Co-production as a pathway to agency, engagement, and leadership

Hart’s ‘ladder of participation’ is a well-established model describing children’s participation in decision-making (Hart, 2013). The bottom three rungs of the ladder (1. manipulation, 2. decoration, 3. tokenism) are viewed as ‘non-participation’, and the top five rungs are all varying degrees of ‘genuine participation’ (4. assigned but informed, 5. consulted and informed, 6. adult-initiated, shared decisions with children, 7. child-initiated and directed, 8. child-initiated, shared decisions with adults). The current program moves back and forth from rungs 6–8 of this model. Although the CP3 is initiated by adults with shared decisions with children (i.e., rung 6), its iterative design process moves towards the child-initiated, shared decisions with adults (i.e., rung 8) as the program progresses. The co-production process extends beyond co-design, as children in the program co-planned activities, co-evaluated their experiences to inform future activities, and importantly co-delivered the program through leadership roles—coined ‘ko-production’ (kids in co-production).

Interestingly, these leadership roles were often filled by older children. This is in line with post-doctoral research with older children in Australian SAC settings, which has found that they want programming strategies that recognise them as older and provide separate roles from younger children (Hurst, 2017). In our study, older children that were asked did value leadership roles, although it is acknowledged that these types of roles may not always be desired by all older children, with literature suggesting some may simply want to play in ways that are separate to their younger peers (Hurst, 2024). Furthermore, some research has reported that children have specific ideas about the roles of staff in SAC and reports not wanting them to be constantly involved in the children’s activities (Ackesjö, 2011) cited in Pálsdóttir, (2019); this process of involvement through co-production that promotes and enables children’s decision-making is a key feature that ensures children’s acceptability of the program (CP3); that is, as the program does not place too much power in the staff hands, but rather places decision in the children’s control, there is a greater sense of satisfaction when participating.

Staff skills and morale

As part of this research, it was emphasised that the wider OSHC community benefited from enabling children’s voice in decision-making through co-production processes. Research highlights that for educators, they themselves having a voice in service delivery is critical in addressing workforce issues that have arisen over recent years (Thorpe et al., 2020; Thorpe et al., in press). Furthermore, the compounding effect of seeing children take on leadership roles, and in turn have positive experiences and develop social and emotional skills through the process, was viewed as boosting staff morale. It is possible that enabling meaningful participation of children through providing time, resources, and reflective practice to OSHC personnel through CP3 may be a key ingredient to boosting staff morale. Such a possibility should be explored further in ongoing research.

Training educators in co-design and co-production approaches to support activity programming, such as those that are used in CP3, may provide an opportunity for professional development. This may be particularly beneficial given that OSHC staff have the highest rate of under-qualification in the Australian care and education sector (Cartmel and Brannelly, 2016). It is acknowledged, however, that services dedicating the time and resources are paramount in supporting such skill development in educators is required. For example, Cartmel and Brannelly have found that services can be reluctant to invest in educator professional development—which is a particularly pronounced reluctance for investing in developing short-term workers’ skills (Cartmel et al., 2020). This is despite initiatives such as the Core Knowledge and Competency Framework, which is designed to build the skills and knowledge of the OSHC workforce in Australia having clear benefits—such as a reduction in staff turnover, an increased capacity, and competence of educators (Cartmel and Brannelly, 2016).

Strengths and limitations of the research

The overall sample size of participants was 24 (50% being children), and this is typically viewed in the research literature as sufficient to gain saturation and meaningful insights with non-homogeneous groups (such as children and adults) (Hagaman and Wutich, 2017; Hennink and Kaiser, 2022; Milton et al., 2022). The inclusion of children views is paramount, not only proving triangulation of viewpoints with other stakeholders but also directly aligned with the CP3 co-production approach. Two staff involved in the program delivery resigned from their jobs before being interviewed which may lead to some participation bias, especially noting there were very few negative comments provided by those that were interviewed. We note that this is an 18% attrition rate of staff who were involved in the delivery of CP3, which is lower than expected given the general workforce turnover in Australia amongst early childhood education and care employees each year is estimated to be more than 30% (McDonald et al., 2018). Like most qualitative studies, the interviews relied on participant recollection, where challenges with recall may impact findings. To enhance recall, we used photo prompts of activities to support the discussion with children. We note that we only spoke to children who had parental consent and were available and willing to participate in the qualitative interviews (12/21; 57%). It would be important in the future to consider the voices of children who did not participate in the program directly, so as to understand how they might be included as part of decision-making at OSHC in general.

Criticisms of CP3 were relatively rare, with every participant reflecting that the experience of CP3 was highly positive, and the co-production structure provided a comprehensive way of enabling children voice in programming. This positivity, however, was caveated by implementation factors. Importantly, coordinators felt time poor in their highly demanding day-to-day roles. High demands in SAC are noted elsewhere in the literature, with this being attributed to increased administrative and regulatory burden (Cartmel and Hayes, 2016). Therefore, the additional resources that CP3 provided (including dedicated staffing, time allowances for training, and a supplementary budget) were viewed as vital to ensure program feasibility—which is echoed in past research (Milton et al., 2023). Furthermore, in line with recommendations from a recent systematic review of mental health and wellbeing programs in OSHC, our next steps for CP3 research will be to consider educators' knowledge of, capability, and confidence to support not only children's mental health and wellbeing (Murray et al., 2024) but also the processes that enable children's voice to be heard in programming. This will enable us to further develop the top-up and ongoing training that OSHC educators and services coordinators strongly desired.

Where to next

This type of meaningful engagement through co-production with children and their communities is not well established. Despite increasing acknowledgement that including the active input of children is crucial to conducting insightful and impactful research and interventions, there is currently no best-practice guidance on how to do this. Not only is it recommended that such guidance should be established through participatory consensus processes, programs such as CP3 may help directly inform how these interventions can be co-produced in other areas working with children such as educational and healthcare settings in the future.

Conclusion

This is the first known qualitative study to examine the use and impact of co-production processes in OSHC—where children not only co-design but also co-plan, co-deliver, and co-evaluate the activity programming alongside OSHC educators and their communities. The findings indicate that the co-production process provides a structured, yet flexible, way of supporting children's voice and agency even when delivered in diverse types of OSHCs settings. OSHC services may wish to draw on these evidence-based process to support them to effectively listen and respond to children's voices and provide children with opportunities to be leaders in their OSHC. These structured, yet flexible, processes may be critical as providing high-quality OSHC programming is an investment in children's future given OSHC is the fastest growing childhood education and care sector in Australia (Cartmel and Hurst, 2021).

Data availability statement

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

data will be anonymised and provided per ethical requirements and only in written form.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by the University of Sydney's Human Research Ethics Committee. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent for participation in this study was provided by the participants' legal guardians/next of kin if under 18, and by all participants.

Author contributions

AM: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. KB: Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. HH: Data curation, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. YH: Data curation, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. NG: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. TM: Conceptualization, Project administration, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. HL: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. KT: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. IH: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

IBH is the Co-Director, Health and Policy at the Brain and Mind Centre (BMC) University of Sydney. The BMC operates an early-intervention youth services at Camperdown under contract to headspace. He is the Chief Scientific Advisor to, and a 3.2% equity shareholder in, InnoWell Pty Ltd. which aims to transform mental health services through the use of innovative technologies. CP3 has an executed IP Agreement between the University of Sydney (AM and IH) and Uniting.

The remaining 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.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2024.1457286/full#supplementary-material>

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Rethinking leadership in extended education: how collaborative development drives organizational quality

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Effective school leadership significantly impacts student learning outcomes and equitable educational opportunities. However, the increasing complexity of educational environments—marked by expanded learning spaces and diverse institutional involvement—presents new challenges. This study investigates leadership approaches within Germany's extended education system, using all-day schooling as a case study. Data were collected from 1,355 school leaders across primary and secondary schools via a standardized online questionnaire. Structural equation modeling was employed to explore the effects of shared leadership responsibility and collaborative school development on key organizational quality indicators: designated collaboration time, breadth of extracurricular aims, and curricular-extracurricular synergy. The findings highlight that collaborative school development, rather than shared leadership responsibility, is the primary driver of organizational quality across all measured indicators. Shared leadership responsibility, while less impactful overall, contributes to the allocation of staff collaboration time, a crucial factor for teamwork and integration. These results underscore the importance of fostering collaborative practices within leadership frameworks to enhance educational quality in extended education contexts. This study provides insights into broader leadership strategies that prioritize collaboration as a cornerstone of innovation and progress in extended education.

KEYWORDS

extended education, leadership, school development, shared leadership responsibility, collaborative school development, all-day schools, organizational quality, collaboration

1 Introduction

1.1 Problem of the study

Effective school leadership exerts a significant and well-documented influence on students' learning outcomes and overall educational experiences (Hattie, 2024). By shaping school culture and promoting high-quality, equitable educational opportunities, leaders play a critical role in ensuring student success. However, the increasing diversity of educational programs, the expansion of learning environments beyond traditional classrooms, and the growing involvement of varied institutions and staff in supporting students collectively intensify the complexity of leadership. This evolving landscape raises important questions about how leadership responsibilities and organizational development strategies can effectively address and navigate such multifaceted challenges.

This study contributes to this area of inquiry by examining leadership approaches within the context of the German education system. Initiatives such as the introduction of

all-day schooling and inclusive education have significantly increased the complexity of school operations in Germany (Kielblock et al., 2017), making it an ideal setting to investigate forms of leadership.

While this study focuses on Germany, its findings hold relevance for other education systems that have expanded learning opportunities beyond traditional school hours. Any model of extended education similarly requires school leaders to coordinate diverse stakeholders, align extracurricular activities with curricular goals, and foster collaboration among staff. By analysing leadership in Germany's all-day schooling context, this study provides insights that may inform leadership strategies in other nations facing similar organizational challenges in extended education.

1.2 Context of the study

This study explores Germany as a context for investigating shared leadership responsibilities and collaborative approaches to organizational development. The German education system provides an exemplary setting for such inquiries due to its structural and policy transformations. Over the past two decades, Germany has undergone substantial school reforms. Among these is the shift from a traditional half-day school model—centred primarily on curricular instruction—to all-day schools that integrate classes, extracurricular activities, and meal provisions (Stecher and Maschke, 2013).

According to the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs—KMK (2023a), all-day schools are educational institutions in primary and lower secondary education in Germany that provide extended care and learning opportunities. These include full-day supervision for at least seven hours daily on a minimum of three days per week. Additionally, on days with an extended program, participating students are provided with a lunch. The organization and implementation of all-day offerings fall under the responsibility or co-responsibility of the school principal. These offerings are conceptually aligned with regular classroom instruction, ensuring an integrated educational approach. Currently, over 70% of schools in Germany are classified as all-day schools (KMK, 2023a).

The increased complexity of all-day schools demands deliberate school development strategies to ensure the seamless integration of varied learning environments and to foster effective collaboration among diverse teaching staff. These efforts are crucial for establishing high-quality educational settings and achieving positive outcomes for students. The multifaceted nature of all-day schools highlights the importance of cohesive school development practices that promote synergy across the curricular and extracurricular domains. In this way, research underscores the critical role of collaborative leadership and shared responsibility in enhancing staff cooperation and cultivating positive learning environments (Huber, 2020; Kielblock, 2023a). In the German context, the recent legal mandate for access to all-day education for primary school students (GaFöG, 2021) further accentuates the challenges of leadership and school development, especially in primary education.

This study focuses on the German context, with the all-day school as a setting where collaborative leadership is essential. It serves as a context in which complex leadership settings are highly visible and thus can be effectively analyzed. The findings of this study, however, also provide valuable insights that extend beyond Germany and are

applicable to other contexts where various actors and institutions are involved in providing extended education.

1.3 Collaborative forms of leadership

Before the 2000s, it was common in school leadership research to focus primarily on the individual agency of leaders such as principals and their downward influence on staff. Spillane et al. (2001) challenged this understanding of school leadership. They argue that this perspective is insufficient, as leadership cannot be reduced to what leaders know and do in isolation. Instead, they propose a distributed framework, which views leadership as an activity shaped by the interactions between different leaders, followers, and their shared school environment. According to Spillane et al. (2001), this distributed perspective reframes leadership as a practice that is socially and situationally distributed, offering a more nuanced understanding of how instructional change is enacted in schools.

1.3.1 Definition(s) of the concept

The concept of distributed leadership has garnered significant interest subsequent to Spillane et al. (2001). Yet, it remained subject to diverse and occasionally conflicting interpretations. Harris (2008) describes distributed leadership as a lateral form of leadership, wherein influence and decision-making emerge from interactions among organizational members rather than relying solely on individual direction. However, this does not negate the importance of formal leadership structures; rather, distributed leadership involves an interplay between vertical and lateral processes.

Harris (2008) noted that definitions of distributed leadership span from normative to theoretical perspectives, with literature overlapping substantially with concepts of shared, collaborative, democratic, and participative leadership. This was underlined by Mayrowetz (2008), too, who examined the diverse usages of distributed leadership in the literature. Four primary interpretations were found: as a theoretical lens for understanding leadership activities, as a means of fostering democracy, as a strategy for enhancing efficiency and effectiveness, and as a tool for building human capacity. Mayrowetz (2008) concludes that striving for a universal definition of distributed leadership may be unwise, advocating instead for research that clearly defines the concept in relation to school improvement and leadership development, ensuring both theoretical grounding and practical relevance.

In later reviews, the diversity of definitions is still present. Tian et al. (2015) review research on distributed leadership from 2002 to 2013, noting its growing independence and scope, but highlighting the lack of a universally accepted definition as a key limitation. Harris et al. (2022) review two decades of research on distributed leadership. According to their literature analysis, early evidence (2001–2011) highlighted the positive relationship between distributed leadership, organizational improvement, and student achievement, though critiques emerged regarding its conceptual clarity. Contemporary research (2011–2021) spans broader contexts and disciplines, introduces advanced measurement tools, and continues to explore distributed leadership's impact across variables such as trust and optimism.

Further attempts are made to systematize the field and clarify the different terms. According to De Jong et al. (2023), distributed

leadership should be conceptualized as a sociocultural and contextually embedded process of social interaction. It involves multiple individuals collectively exerting influence within a given context. D'Innocenzo et al. (2014) highlight the fragmented nature of shared leadership definitions and propose an integrative definition: „Shared leadership is an emergent and dynamic team phenomenon whereby leadership roles and influence are distributed among team members” (D'Innocenzo et al., 2014, p. 1968).

These attempts illustrate the difficulty of adequately accounting for the social dynamics in the definition of distributed leadership, while also preventing the 'lead' component from dissolving entirely into the conception of social interactions. In this way, it gets clear that leadership responsibilities are as important as the relation of leadership practices to school development processes.

In the following sections, shared leadership responsibility and collaborative school development are treated as distinct concepts. *Shared leadership responsibility* refers to the extent to which the management responsibility of the extended school program is distributed among multiple individuals or groups rather than being concentrated in a single leader or role. It is characterized by the involvement of steering groups, committees, or other collaborative structures within or beyond the school, whereas non-shared leadership is defined by individual management responsibility. *Collaborative school development*, in contrast, captures the extent to which various stakeholder groups actively participate in school development processes. This concept reflects the number of stakeholder groups—including school leadership, teachers, school staff, external staff, parents, students, etc.—engaged in shaping the school's development.

1.3.2 Impact of leadership on instruction and school performance

Research has put much emphasis on effects on instruction and school performance. The meta-analysis conducted by D'Innocenzo et al. (2014) revealed two key insights. First, a significant positive relationship between shared leadership and team performance was found, supporting the notion that shared leadership enhances team outcomes. However, the magnitude of this effect varied across studies. Second, the study demonstrated that the way shared leadership is theoretically conceptualized and measured plays a critical role regarding the effect sizes. For example, network-based conceptions, which focus on dyadic leadership exchanges within teams, yielded higher correlations with team performance compared to more holistic, aggregated measures of shared leadership. These findings might remind us that “distributed leadership is not a panacea; it depends on how it is shared, received and enacted” (Harris and DeFlaminis, 2016).

De Jong et al. (2023) explore how distributed leadership is embedded in sociocultural contexts across individual, team, and school levels. Their study of 14 collaborative innovation-oriented teacher teams found that stronger distributed leadership practices foster a collaborative spirit, characterized by teachers seeking advice on schoolwide improvements, engaging beyond formal roles, and principals promoting innovation as a joint endeavor. Teams with such practices demonstrated a shared commitment to improving education, highlighting the link between distributed leadership and collective educational development.

Wahlstrom and Louis (2008) investigated how leadership is experienced and enacted by teachers, focusing on the interactions

between principals and teachers, as well as between teachers themselves, to understand their impact on classroom instructional practices. Using data from a survey of 4,165 teachers across K-12 schools in the United States, the study identified three distinct instructional teaching behaviors: (1) Standard Contemporary Practice, (2) Focused Instruction, and (3) Flexible Grouping Practices. The findings revealed that the presence of shared leadership and a professional community significantly influenced the strength of these teaching styles.

Hallinger and Heck (2010) investigated the effects of collaborative leadership on school improvement and student reading achievement through a longitudinal study of 192 elementary schools in the United States. Using latent change analysis, they examined how changes in leadership influenced academic capacity and reading outcomes over four years. The study revealed that collaborative leadership had significant direct effects on enhancing schools' academic capacity and indirect effects on students' reading achievement. Additionally, it identified varying growth trajectories among schools, reflecting diverse improvement processes. These findings underscore the role of collaborative leadership in fostering organizational improvement and student success.

1.3.3 Distributed leadership in the context of all-day schools

Today, there are increasing demands on schools to respond to social, economic, ecological, and cultural changes. Pearce (2004) argues that shared leadership is particularly effective in contexts that require a high level of creativity, as it fosters collaborative development of innovative solutions. This is particularly relevant to the current paper, which explores leadership in the context of extended education, where both creativity and the management of complex, dynamic educational environments are crucial. In this way, Huber (2020) highlights that German all-day schools (Ganztagsschulen) might represent a pivotal response to these challenges. He underscores that leadership in all-day schools should be grounded in cooperation, with the primary aim of fostering students' educational biographies and enhancing educational quality. Cooperative leadership is characterized by shared decision-making, empowerment of staff, delegation of responsibilities, and the collective determination of goals, aligning leadership practices with the broader mission of schools as holistic, life-encompassing learning environments.

1.4 Toward effective learning environments

International research on extended education has emphasized that extracurricular, afterschool and out-of-school time activities have positive effects on students (Durlak et al., 2010; Feldman and Matjasko, 2005; Metsäpelto and Pulkkinen, 2014; Abraczinskas et al., 2016; Murray et al., 2024) and is able to reduce social inequalities (O'Donnell et al., 2022; Heath et al., 2022; Bouchard et al., 2023). A similar state of research seems to be present for Germany (Kielblock and Maaz, 2024).

1.4.1 Effectiveness research in Germany—an overview

Empirical research from Germany provides limited evidence for direct benefits of all-day schooling compared to half-day schooling.

Positive effects, where identified, predominantly related to social behavior (Kanevski and Salisch, 2011; Salisch and Kanevski, 2011; Reinders et al., 2013). Some studies suggest differential benefits for specific groups (Strietholt et al., 2015). Similarly, reduced associations between socioeconomic background and mathematics performance are observed in all-day schools where attendance is compulsory for all students (Züchner and Fischer, 2014).

A longer duration of participation in all-day programs is linked to academic and behavioral improvements. Evidence indicates gains in goal orientation, grades (Fischer et al., 2009), transitions to higher education tracks (Seidlitz and Zierow, 2022), prosocial behavior, and mathematics achievement (Arnoldt, 2021). Long-term participation correlates with positive social behavior (Kuhn and Fischer, 2011b; Fischer et al., 2011b), reduced grade repetition risk (Steiner, 2011), and greater educational attainment (Arnoldt et al., 2016). It also positively affects well-being, such as school enjoyment (Fischer and Brümmer, 2012). A higher intensity of program attendance is associated with more positive grades (Kuhn and Fischer, 2011a).

Voluntary engagement in programs appears crucial; students opting into reading-focused activities exhibit improvements in reading comprehension and motivation (Fischer et al., 2016; Sauerwein and Heer, 2020). Voluntary participation also supports social behavior, psychological health, and personality traits like openness and emotional stability (Schmitz, 2022b; Schmitz, 2022a).

Program-specific participation profiles are tied to educational outcomes (Arnoldt et al., 2016; Sauerwein et al., 2016), including reading achievement (Bellin and Wegner, 2010). Structured extracurricular programs in reading and science show positive effects on subject-specific competencies, self-regulation, and motivation (Holtappels et al., 2018; Lossen et al., 2016; Schröder, 2021). Even alternative programs, such as organized 'learning time' instead of traditional homework support, enhance student well-being and self-perceived competence (Brisson and Theis, 2020).

The concept of "process quality" represents the views of the students, if activities are engaging, motivating and if they allow for active participation. High process quality leads to improved grades (Kuhn and Fischer, 2011a), goal orientation (Fischer et al., 2011a; Fischer et al., 2009; Fischer et al., 2016), social behavior (Fischer et al., 2011b; Sauerwein et al., 2018; Kuhn et al., 2016), self-esteem and self-efficacy (Sauerwein, 2017; Sauerwein, 2019) and well-being (Fischer et al., 2011a; Fischer and Theis, 2014). For science programs, process quality influences the domain-specific self-concept (Lossen et al., 2016).

Strong relationships between program leaders and students contribute to academic and behavioral benefits, including better grades, goal orientation, and well-being (Kuhn and Fischer, 2011a; Fischer et al., 2011b; Fischer et al., 2011a; Fischer and Theis, 2014). Mentorship programs further demonstrate positive effects on academic performance, such as English achievement (Dohrmann et al., 2021).

1.4.2 Relevant organizational factors leading to effective learning environments

The previous section demonstrated that participation in extended education programs, program/process quality, and the nature of relationships within these programs are critical for achieving positive outcomes. To ensure these elements, effective collaboration among educational staff is paramount. All-day schools bring together

professionals from diverse pedagogical backgrounds, such as teachers and those with expertise in social pedagogy, special education, or even non-pedagogical fields. This diversity necessitates coherent collaboration within multi-professional and inter-institutional teams (Kielblock, 2023b; Qualitätsdialog Zum Ganzttag, 2021). To achieve this, designated time for collaboration must be systematically allocated. Empirical studies underline that structured collaboration time is an indispensable prerequisite for effective teamwork (Fussangel, 2013; Meyer, 2020; Beher et al., 2007; Steiner, 2010; Tillmann and Rollett, 2014).

Establishing favorable conditions for collaboration (such as allocated collaboration time) requires robust school management with a clear emphasis on cooperative processes. All-day schools are inherently complex institutions, given their diverse organizational and governance demands. Relying on individual efforts to manage this complexity is neither sustainable nor effective. Instead, a collaborative leadership model is essential, ideally realized through a steering group (Kielblock, 2023a; Qualitätsdialog Zum Ganzttag, 2021). Such a steering group should include representatives from all key stakeholder groups, whose composition may vary depending on the specific organizational configuration.

The steering group serves several critical functions. First, it facilitates the establishment of structured collaboration time for educational staff. Second, it enables the articulation and implementation of a coherent vision for the all-day programme, aligning extracurricular and curricular aims. Third, it fosters meaningful curricular-extracurricular synergy, ensuring that academic instruction and extended education programs are cohesively integrated. This approach underscores the importance of well-designed collaborative frameworks, strategic leadership, and intentional alignment of instructional and extracurricular efforts as prerequisites for maximizing the impact of extended education (see also Section 1.3).

1.5 Conceptual framework and research questions

1.5.1 Conceptual model

The present study utilises the all-day school effectiveness model, which was developed by Holtappels (2009). The model assumes that contextual aspects (such as policies, infrastructure) have an impact on the quality of the school processes. These comprise the school organization, the concepts, but also the staff. School processes lead to the quality of learning processes of the students, and these result into certain outcomes. The student outcomes are also dependent on the socioeconomic background of the students. The present study is concerned with the quality of the school processes, and the model allows to understand, how this facet is embedded in other factors of schooling.

Research highlights parts of the model (as the literature review pointed out; summarized in Kielblock and Maaz, 2024). Namely: (1) High quality learning processes and positive social relationships lead to positive student outcomes. (2) High quality learning processes depend on positive and collaboration-friendly working conditions of staff and a clear and cohesive overarching concept with a focus on extended education. (3) Shared responsibilities and collaborative school development processes are necessary to providing sufficient

working conditions and concepts. (4) Context and external support services are enabler for (3). This leads to the model proposed by Kielblock (2023a), which is depicted in Figure 1.

The grey part of the model represents the focus of the present study, which is how shared responsibilities and collaborative school development processes might help in providing sufficient working conditions and concepts.

1.5.2 Research gap and research questions

While prior research has examined the effects of shared leadership responsibility and collaborative school development on various outcomes, relatively little attention has been given to their comparative impact on organizational quality. Existing studies highlight the benefits of shared leadership responsibility in fostering team effectiveness and strengthening collaborative school cultures, while research on collaborative school development underscores its role in enhancing instructional practices and academic outcomes. However, the extent to which these two constructs contribute differentially to school improvement remains largely unexplored. This gap in the literature limits our understanding of whether they function as complementary or distinct mechanisms in shaping organizational effectiveness. Addressing this question is crucial for refining leadership models and optimizing strategies for school development in complex educational environments.

Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions: Can (A) shared responsibility, and/or (B) collaborative school development predict the (C) working conditions of staff (facilitated by designated time for cooperation), as well as (D) enhanced conceptual integration of the learning environments (in the form of a clear school vision, and the breadth of overarching pedagogical concepts).

1.5.3 Hypotheses

As argued earlier in this study (see Section 1.4), shared leadership structures in all-day schools create the foundation for collaborative school development by engaging representatives from all key stakeholder groups in developmental processes. This collaborative approach fosters an environment in which practical challenges, such as establishing designated collaboration time for staff, can be systematically addressed. Furthermore, it enables the development of broader and more coherent extracurricular aims while promoting stronger curricular-extracurricular synergy. These improvements not only enhance working conditions for staff but also ensure that extended education programs are aligned with the school's overall

pedagogical vision, ultimately maximizing their impact on student outcomes.

As previously highlighted in the research gap, existing literature only partially addresses the specific research problem of this study. While the reviewed studies provide valuable insights into the effects of shared leadership responsibility and collaborative school development, the direct empirical foundation for their impact on working conditions and the conceptual integration of learning environments remains limited. Nevertheless, the existing body of research suggests plausible relationships that serve as a basis for formulating hypotheses.

H1: Schools with higher levels of shared leadership responsibility and collaborative school development are expected to allocate more designated time for cooperation among staff, as both foster collaborative work structures and joint decision-making (De Jong et al., 2023; Wahlstrom and Louis, 2008; Hallinger and Heck, 2010).

H2: Shared leadership responsibility and collaborative school development are expected to positively predict a clear school vision and the breadth of pedagogical concepts, as both foster collective decision-making, stakeholder engagement, and a shared sense of direction (D'Innocenzo et al., 2014; Pearce, 2004; Wahlstrom and Louis, 2008; De Jong et al., 2023).

H3: Collaborative school development is expected to be a stronger predictor of staff working conditions and pedagogical concepts than shared leadership responsibility, as it is more immediate in shaping these outcomes. Moreover, collaborative school development may moderate the relationship between shared leadership responsibility and these outcomes.

2 Methods

2.1 Sample

This study presents an analysis of data from the Study on the Development of All-Day Schools (StEG; Data doi:10.5159/IQB_StEG_Systemmonitoring_V2). The sample included three types of schools: primary/elementary schools (PRM), typically encompassing grades 1 to 4 (students aged 6–10 years). In two of Germany's sixteen Federal

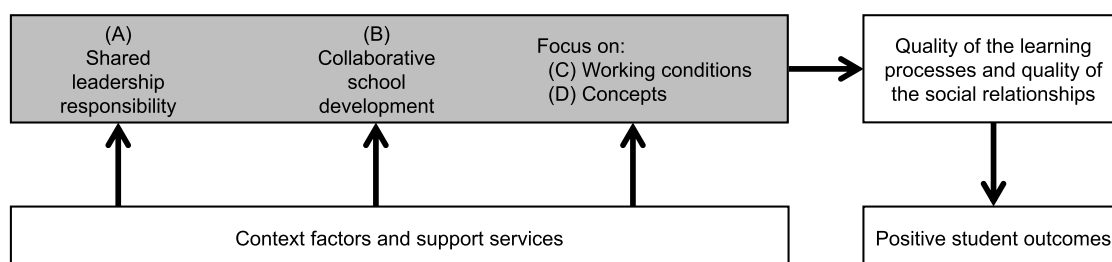


FIGURE 1
Model of collaborative leadership in extended education. This model was originally published in Kielblock (2023a) and is presented here in a modified version.

States, primary schools extend to grade 6 (students aged 6–12 years). Secondary schools were classified into two categories: the Gymnasium (GYM), a selective track with explicit academic orientation, and non-gymnasium secondary schools (SEK), which comprise all other secondary school forms. Representative samples were drawn for each school type. Analyses either treated these school types as distinct samples or, in more complex models, as distinct groups (see Section 2.3 for details).

The sampling process followed an elaborate and rigorous design to ensure representativeness [see [Furthmüller \(2019\)](#) for further details]. The sampling frame consisted of lists of all all-day schools in each Federal State, provided by respective state governments. Schools were randomly selected from these lists.

Prior to data collection, the study instruments and procedures underwent a comprehensive review process required by all sixteen Federal States. Beginning in August 2017, school authorities and data protection offices evaluated all materials. Approval from all States was granted in February 2018, after which sampling and data collection commenced.

A three-stage recruitment process was implemented to maximize participation. Initially, schools were contacted via postal mail with access credentials for an online questionnaire. Approximately two weeks later, non-responding schools received a follow-up email. After three weeks, a second postal reminder was sent to schools that had not yet participated. If no response was received within four weeks, a backup school with similar organizational characteristics was contacted. Throughout the data collection phase, schools were supported via multiple communication channels, including a telephone hotline and email.

The target sample consisted of 1,991 schools (PRM: 735; SEK: 827; GYM: 429). The final sample included 509 primary schools (response rate: 69.3%), 574 non-gymnasium secondary schools (response rate: 69.4%), and 272 Gymnasium schools (response rate: 63.4%). These relatively high response rates were achieved through persistent follow-ups and the use of a multiple-sample design, which included backup schools to replace non-responding institutions, as described above. Consequently, the dataset provides a robust representation of all-day schools in Germany during the 2017/18 school year.

School size varied considerably within the sample, ranging from fewer than 100 to over 1,000 students. On average, primary schools had 224 students, non-gymnasium secondary schools 455 students, and Gymnasium schools 587 students. Further details regarding the sample can be found in [Furthmüller \(2019\)](#).

The survey also explored when the school became an ‘all-day’ school. Some schools reported transitioning to the all-day format as early as the 1960s. The adoption of all-day schooling in Germany surged following the political decision to promote this model in 2002 and the implementation of the Investment Programme for the Future of Education and Childcare (IZBB) policy. Between 2003 and 2009, the IZBB policy facilitated substantial investments in all-day school infrastructure and program development. Researchers (e.g., [Klemm, 2014](#)) argue that this period witnessed the largest expansion of all-day schools in Germany, with the rate of new adoptions slowing thereafter. This trend is corroborated by the data: between 2003 and 2009, 193 primary schools, 203 non-gymnasium secondary schools, and 125 Gymnasium schools transitioned to the all-day model. In contrast, between 2010 and 2016, the numbers dropped to 158, 191, and 96 new all-day schools, respectively.

To collect relevant institutional information, the study surveyed school leaders. Eligible respondents varied by school, hence, participants were asked to identify their roles. In most cases, the principal completed the survey (PRM: 434, 85.3%; SEK: 384, 66.9%; GYM: 152, 55.9%). Other respondents included deputy principals (PRM: 36, 7.1%; SEK: 74, 12.9%; GYM: 36, 13.2%) and designated coordinators for all-day school activities (PRM: 27, 5.3%; SEK: 84, 14.6%; GYM: 75, 27.6%). In a few cases, the respondent indicated an alternative role.

2.2 Instruments

2.2.1 Data collection method

The data were collected through a standardized questionnaire accessible via a password-protected online portal. Comprising 68 questions, the interactive design of the questionnaire facilitated a user-friendly data collection by tailoring the survey dynamically to participants’ prior responses. This adaptive approach excluded irrelevant items, enhancing both efficiency and relevance. The questionnaire addressed general school characteristics and specific aspects of all-day school operations, including institutional resources, school development practices, the roles of teachers, educational staff, and external cooperation partners, as well as the structure and provision of all-day programs. Additional questions explored diversity within schools, with a particular focus on inclusion and exclusion.

2.2.2 Measures

Shared leadership responsibility and collaborative school development are the explaining variables of interest. Collaborative working conditions are measured by the designated time for collaboration. Breadth of extracurricular aims and curricular-extracurricular synergy are both used to measure concepts. These three measures are the explained variables. [Table 1](#) contains all descriptive information regarding the important variables. How these variables were measured is explained in the following paragraphs, and then, the structure of the explained (latent) variables is examined and confirmed.

2.2.2.1 Explaining variable: shared leadership responsibility

School leaders were asked, “Who mainly manages the extended school program at your school?” with eight response options. Four options indicated individual responsibility for managing the program: (1) the school principal and/or deputy principal, (2) the didactic/pedagogical manager or department head, (3) a designated teacher as coordinator, or (4) a member of the school’s pedagogical staff as coordinator. These responses were coded as [0] to indicate the absence of shared leadership responsibility. The other four options reflected shared leadership models: (5) an existing steering group at the school, (6) a specialized committee comprising teachers and pedagogical staff, (7) a coordination committee between the school and external partners, or (8) a committee involving the school and an external sponsor or organization. These responses were coded as [1], signifying shared leadership responsibility.

The data indicate that in most schools, the (deputy) principal has the primary responsibility for managing the extended school program, consistent with German policy emphasizing the principal’s role in this domain ([KMK, 2023b](#)). This pattern is especially pronounced in primary schools (50.8%), compared to non-gymnasium secondary

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics of the relevant variables.

	PRM		SEK		GYM	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Shared leadership responsibility	107	23.0	98	17.9	52	20.4
Collaborative school development						
1 group involved	25	5.7	36	7.1	20	8.5
2 groups involved	68	15.6	111	22.0	60	25.5
3 groups involved	129	29.7	118	23.4	37	15.7
4 groups involved	108	24.8	109	21.6	65	27.7
5 groups involved	79	18.2	95	18.8	46	19.6
6 groups involved	26	6.0	35	6.9	7	3.0
Designated time for collaboration						
Time for collaboration between teachers	253	61.9	259	55.9	65	15.9
Time for collaboration between other staff	261	63.8	194	41.9	68	16.6
Time for collaboration between teachers and staff	214	52.5	187	40.3	64	15.6
Breadth of extracurricular aims						
Enhancing the learning culture	286	65.6	340	67.5	142	59.4
Fostering competencies and talent development	197	45.2	282	55.8	150	62.8
Community, social learning, and personal development	396	90.6	445	87.9	199	83.3
Curricular-extracurricular synergy						
Focus areas link teaching and extracurricular activities	138	32.9	191	39.5	72	31.0
Learning difficulties addressed through programs	285	67.7	417	86.3	199	85.8
Extracurricular learning deepens topics from lessons	135	32.3	190	39.6	80	34.6
Teaching and other activities are poorly integrated	237	56.8	241	50.0	144	62.6

Dataset StEG 2017/18. For the presentation of the items related to “Breadth of Extracurricular Aims,” the categories “Largely” and “Fully” were combined. For the presentation of the items related to “Curricular-Extracurricular Synergy,” the categories “Somewhat Agree” and “Fully Agree” were merged.

schools (41.2%) and Gymnasium schools (27.8%). In secondary schools, individual teachers often coordinate the extended program (SEK: 20.9%; GYM: 31.0%). Shared leadership models, such as steering groups or committees, are reported in approximately 20% of schools (PRM: 23.0%; SEK: 17.9%; GYM: 20.4%; see Table 1).

2.2.2.2 Explaining variable: collaborative school development

School leaders were also asked to what extent various groups were actively involved in their school’s development processes. Respondents rated six stakeholder groups—(1) school principal (team), (2) teachers, (3) other school staff, (4) external staff (from collaborating institutions), (5) parents, and (6) students—on a 4-point scale: “not at all,” “somewhat,” “largely,” and “fully.” Responses of “largely” or “fully” were considered indicators of group involvement. These ratings were aggregated into an index ranging from 1 (non-collaborative) to 6 (fully collaborative), representing the number of groups actively participating in school development.

Descriptive statistics for this index are shown in Table 1. Primary and non-gymnasium secondary schools exhibit similar distributions, with three groups actively involved in school development processes most frequently reported (PRM: 29.7%; SEK: 23.4%). Few schools involve only one group or all six groups. By contrast, Gymnasium schools display a different distribution, with two (25.5%) and four (27.7%) groups being the most common constellations. Full collaboration

involving all six groups is rare across all school types, especially in Gymnasium schools, where it occurs in only 3.0% of the cases.

2.2.2.3 Explained latent variable: designated time for collaboration

One latent variable examined is the designated time allocated for collaboration among school staff. School leaders were asked whether specific time was allocated for collaboration (1) among teachers, (2) among other staff, and (3) between teachers and other staff. Responses were binary (yes/no). Descriptive statistics (Table 1) reveal that designated collaboration time is most common in primary schools (52.5–63.8%), less frequent in non-gymnasium secondary schools (40.3–55.9%), and rare in Gymnasium schools (15.9–16.6%). A latent variable was specified to capture the shared variance across these three measures (see further details on confirmatory factor analysis below).

2.2.2.4 Explained latent variable: breadth of extracurricular aims

The breadth of extracurricular aims was conceptualized as another latent variable. School leaders were asked to what extent their school’s extended concept incorporated three objectives: (1) enhancing the learning culture, (2) fostering competencies and talent development, and (3) promoting community, social learning, and personal development. These items were rated on a 4-point scale: “not at all” to “completely.” For descriptive purposes (Table 1), responses of “largely”

and “completely” were combined. The latent variable reflects the combined extent to which schools aim to achieve these objectives, with higher values indicating a broader set of extracurricular goals.

2.2.2.5 Explained latent variable: curricular-extracurricular synergy

Curricular-extracurricular integration was assessed through the question: “All-day schools enable the conceptual integration of subject teaching and extracurricular learning opportunities. How is this implemented at your school?” Responses were rated on a 4-point Likert scale (“not agree at all” to “fully agree”) for the following items: (1) Development of content-based curricular profiles and priorities that integrate teaching with all-day offerings. (2) Addressing classroom-identified learning problems and deficits through learning support programs or structured study periods. (3) Methodological and substantive links between extracurricular learning and subject teaching that deepen themes and knowledge areas. (4) Poor integration of teaching and extracurricular offerings (negatively worded). Descriptive statistics (Table 1) indicate moderate integration overall. Approximately one-third of schools agree or partially agree that extracurricular activities enhance curricular focus areas or deepen classroom topics. Conversely, 50.0–62.6% of schools report poor integration. The highest agreement concerns addressing classroom learning deficits through extracurricular activities, particularly in secondary schools (SEK: 86.3%; GYM: 85.8%) compared to primary schools (PRM: 67.7%).

2.2.2.6 Examination of the structure of the latent variables: parallel analysis

To evaluate the structure of the three explained latent variables—designated time for collaboration, breadth of extracurricular aims, and curricular-extracurricular synergy—Parallel Analysis (Horn, 1965) was conducted. This method compares Eigenvalues from the observed data's correlation matrix with those from randomly generated datasets to determine the number of factors to retain. Retention criteria involve selecting factors whose Eigenvalues exceed those derived from random data.

As shown in Figure 2, the Eigenvalues for the observed data exceeded those of the random data for three dimensions (Empirical data: 3.30, 1.76, 1.12). This result suggests that the ten manifest variables are best represented by three dimensions, supporting the hypothesized structure of the constructs.

2.2.2.7 Examination of the structure of the latent variables: multi-group confirmatory factor analysis

Building on the Parallel Analysis findings, a three-factor model was specified to correspond to the latent variables described earlier. Multi-group Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was performed using the R lavaan package (Rosseel, 2012). Table 2 presents the results. Most standardized loadings exceeded 0.5, indicating that the latent factors strongly explain the manifest variables. Although a few loadings fell below 0.5, all remained above 0.3 and were statistically significant. Notably, the negative loadings of Factor 3 on the item “Teaching and other activities are poorly integrated” align with the item's negative phrasing.

The model demonstrated good fit based on established cut-off criteria (Weiber and Mühlfeld, 2010; Kielblock, 2024). High goodness-of-fit indices (CFI = 0.951; TLI = 0.931) and low badness-of-fit indices [RMSEA = 0.060 (0.050, 0.069); SRMR = 0.052] indicate that the hypothesized structure fits the data well. These results confirm that the ten manifest variables are adequately captured by three latent constructs: (1) designated time for collaboration, (2) breadth of extracurricular aims, and (3) curricular-extracurricular synergy.

2.3 Analytic strategy

The analytic strategy comprises three steps to explore the relationships between shared leadership responsibility, collaborative school development, and their effects on working conditions and conceptual frameworks.

2.3.1 Step 1: Individual predictive analyses

In the first step, the relevance of the two explanatory variables—shared leadership responsibility and collaborative school

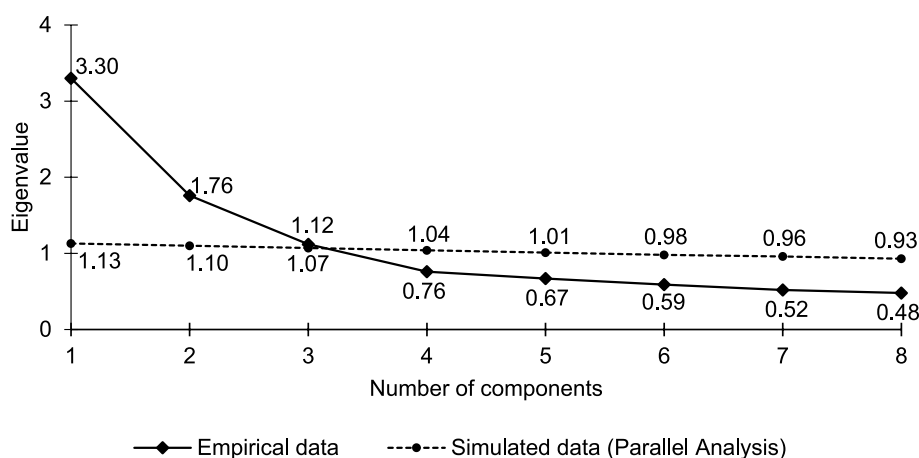


FIGURE 2
Parallel analysis of the indicators of the explained constructs.

development—as predictors of the three latent variables is examined. Specifically, shared leadership responsibility and collaborative school development are individually tested as predictors for designated time for collaboration, breadth of extracurricular aims and curricular-extracurricular synergy. Analyses are conducted separately for each explanatory-explained variable pairing, resulting in six models. The results identify which of the explanatory variables serves as a particularly strong predictor for each latent outcome.

2.3.2 Step 2: Moderation models

Building on the results from Step 1, Step 2 investigates whether the relationship between shared leadership responsibility and the working conditions and concepts (designated time for collaboration, breadth of extracurricular aims, and curricular-extracurricular synergy) is mediated by collaborative school development. This involves testing mediation models for each of the three explained variables. The paths are specified according to the model in Figure 3. In this step, particular attention is given to the indirect effect (ab), representing the potential mediated pathway from shared leadership responsibility through collaborative school development to the working conditions and concepts. The total effect (abc) is also calculated to determine the combined direct and indirect effects.

2.3.3 Step 3: Combined model

The third step integrates the findings into a unified structural equation model (SEM) to simultaneously estimate all relationships among the five variables. This comprehensive model assesses whether the relationships observed in the individual analyses persist when all paths are estimated together. The estimated model is depicted in Figure 4.

2.3.4 Analytical approach

All analyses were conducted using the lavaan package in R version 0.6–19 (Rosseel, 2012). As the explained variables are latent constructs, the SEM methodology was applied. Given the stratified sampling strategy across the three school forms, multi-group SEM was employed using the “group=” function in lavaan to account for school-type differences. Although the hierarchical structure of the data could suggest potential clustering effects, tests using Cluster Robust Standard Errors showed no deviations in significance patterns. Consequently, only the multi-group results are reported, as they address the primary clustering concerns inherent in the stratified design. Missing values were addressed using Full Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML) estimation to ensure robust parameter estimates. All coefficients are reported in standardized form (std.all).

3 Results

3.1 Relevant predictors of working conditions and concepts

In the initial phase of the analysis, it was examined whether shared leadership responsibility and collaborative school development significantly predict key aspects of working conditions and concepts. Six regression models were estimated, employing either shared leadership responsibility or collaborative school development as the independent variable. The dependent variables included designated

time for collaboration, the breadth of extracurricular aims, and the integration of curricular and extracurricular activities.

As presented in Table 3, shared leadership responsibility emerged as a significant predictor for designated time for collaboration [$\beta_{(PRM)} = 0.138^*$; $\beta_{(SEK)} = 0.115^*$; $\beta_{(GYM)} = 0.263^*$]. Notably, the standardized coefficient was particularly pronounced for Gymnasium schools compared to the other two school types. This finding indicates that the relationship between shared leadership responsibility and the allocation of designated collaboration time is strongest in Gymnasium schools, although it remains significant across all school forms. Additionally, shared leadership responsibility was significantly associated with a greater breadth of extracurricular aims in secondary schools. However, no other significant associations were identified with respect to shared leadership responsibility.

Table 3 also demonstrates that collaborative school development is significantly associated with all three variables representing working conditions and concepts. Regression analyses reveal that schools characterized by more collaborative development approaches tend to allocate greater time for collaboration, exhibit a broader range of extracurricular aims, and achieve stronger integration between curricular and extracurricular activities. Most regression coefficients were approximately 0.3. An exception was the relationship between collaborative school development and designated time for collaboration in Gymnasium schools, where the coefficient was lower than in other contexts but remained statistically significant at the 5% level.

3.2 Relative position of responsibility and development

To examine the relative influence of shared leadership responsibility and collaborative school development, the potential mediating role of collaborative school development was analyzed in the second stage of the study. The results of three (multi-group) mediation models are summarized in Table 4.

In all three models, path b is significant, confirming that collaborative school development is a strong predictor of the three outcome variables: designated time for collaboration, the breadth of extracurricular aims, and curricular-extracurricular synergy. These findings are consistent with the results reported in Section 3.1.

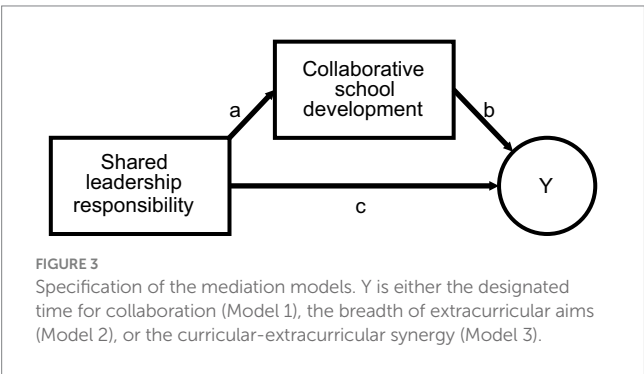
Path c , representing the direct effect of shared leadership responsibility on the outcome variables, is significant only for designated time for collaboration. Across all school types, schools implementing shared leadership responsibility are more likely to allocate designated time for collaboration. This result reinforces the conclusions from Section 3.1, which indicated a similar pattern. However, in non-Gymnasium secondary schools, the breadth of extracurricular aims is not significantly predicted by shared leadership responsibility, diverging from the trends observed in Section 3.1. Specifically, in Model 2, path c is not significant for non-Gymnasium secondary schools (see Table 4). None of the other direct effects were found to be significant.

The core focus of the mediation analysis is the indirect effect (ab), which would indicate whether collaborative school development mediates the relationship between shared leadership responsibility and the outcome variables. If a mediation effect were present, this would imply that shared leadership responsibility influences collaborative school development, which in turn affects the outcome

TABLE 2 Confirmatory factor analysis.

	PRM	SEK	GYM
f1 Designated time for collaboration			
Time for collaboration between teacher	0.571	0.502	0.455
Time for collaboration between other staff	0.710	0.581	0.764
Time for collaboration between teachers and staff	0.705	0.758	0.584
f2 Breadth of extracurricular aims			
Enhancing the learning culture	0.867	0.789	0.814
Fostering competencies and talent development	0.742	0.689	0.696
Community, social learning, and personal development	0.552	0.606	0.521
f3 Curricular-extracurricular synergy			
Curricular profiles link teaching and extracurricular activities	0.726	0.626	0.760
Learning difficulties are addressed through support programs	0.554	0.429	0.332
Extracurricular learning deepens topics from lessons	0.800	0.785	0.844
Teaching and other activities are poorly integrated	−0.660	−0.529	−0.647
Covariances			
f1 with f2	0.190	0.212	0.171
f1 with f3	0.345	0.281	−0.033
f2 with f3	0.710	0.582	0.696

$n_{(PRM)} = 452$; $n_{(SEK)} = 523$; $n_{(GYM)} = 244$; CFI = 0.951; TLI = 0.931; RMSEA = 0.060 [0.050, 0.069]; SRMR = 0.052.



variables. However, no significant mediation effect was identified across the three models (see *ab* in Table 4). Although a significant total effect was observed in Model 1, this does not alter the conclusion that collaborative school development does not mediate the relationship between shared leadership responsibility and the outcome variables.

Obviously, shared leadership responsibility serves not as a foundation for collaborative school development. Accordingly, based on the results of the mediation analyses, the overall model in the next section treats shared leadership responsibility and collaborative school development as correlated constructs. This approach assumes their impacts on the outcome variables to be of equal importance, rather than one construct mediating the other.

3.3 Overall model

The overall model was specified in accordance with the framework described in Section 2.3 (see Figure 4). Model fit was assessed as the first step in the analysis. The goodness-of-fit indices (CFI = 0.946;

TLI = 0.922) indicate a good fit, while the low badness-of-fit indices (RMSEA = 0.053 [0.045, 0.061]; SRMR = 0.048) further underline the adequacy of the model. Table 5 presents the results of the multi-group structural equation model, including standardized estimates for regression paths, correlations, and *p*-values for each group.

A consistent pattern emerges regarding collaborative school development, which serves as a significant predictor for all three outcome variables. The standardized regression coefficients are significant at the 0.1% level across all groups, with one exception: the regression of collaborative school development on designated time for collaboration is significant at the 5% level. This aligns with findings reported in earlier sections. In this analysis, the effect persisted to be significant even in a more complex model incorporating more variables.

In contrast, the effect of shared leadership responsibility on designated time for collaboration, which was prominent in earlier results, is slightly less robust in this model. Significant effects are observed only for primary and Gymnasium schools, where the coefficients reach significance at the 5% level. For non-Gymnasium secondary schools, the coefficient misses significance ($p = 0.054$). Under a 10% significance threshold, this effect would be considered significant. Nevertheless, the interpretation that shared leadership responsibility predicts designated collaboration time across all school types should be approached cautiously, given that significance is limited to primary and Gymnasium schools.

The overall structural equation model also facilitates analysis of covariances among the variables. Notably, no significant correlation was identified between shared leadership responsibility and collaborative school development. Similarly, the correlation between designated time for collaboration and the breadth of extracurricular aims was non-significant across all school groups.

However, significant correlations were observed in specific contexts. In primary and non-Gymnasium secondary schools, a

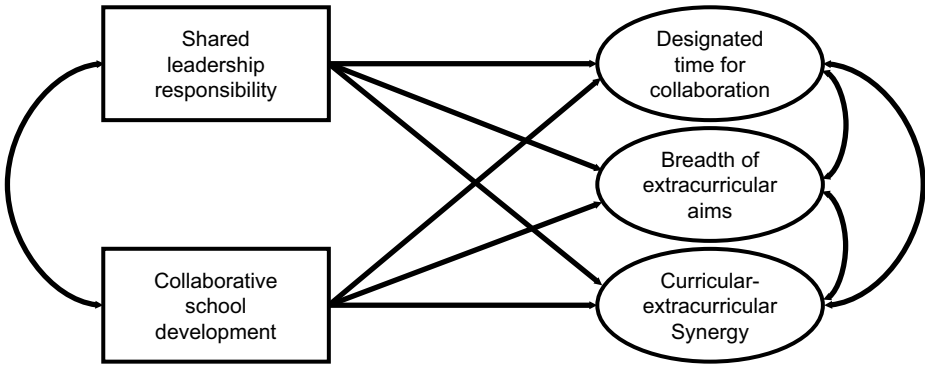


FIGURE 4
Specification of the overall structural equation model. The three latent variables are specified as described in Section 2.2.2. The full model is calculated as a multi-group structural equation model, where the group-variable is the school form. Hence, fit statistics apply to the full model, while estimates are given for each school group separately.

TABLE 3 Relevant predictors of the working conditions and concepts.

Model	Primary	Secondary	Gymnasium
Shared leadership responsibility →			
(1) Designated time for collaboration	0.138*	0.115*	0.263**
(2) Breadth of extracurricular aims	−0.045	0.109*	0.045
(3) Curricular-extracurricular synergy	0.014	0.024	0.013
Collaborative school development →			
(4) Designated time for collaboration	0.296***	0.272***	0.220*
(5) Breadth of extracurricular aims	0.329***	0.296***	0.379***
(6) Curricular-extracurricular synergy	0.397***	0.275***	0.342***

Each of the six models is one independent manifest variable as predictor of one dependent latent variable (see Methods for more details). * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

significant association exists between designated time for collaboration and curricular-extracurricular synergy. Across all school types, a strong correlation was found between the breadth of extracurricular aims and curricular-extracurricular synergy. This is theoretically consistent, as both constructs reflect the concepts which are implemented.

4 Discussion

4.1 Interpretation

In Section 3.1, two primary findings were identified. First, collaborative school development emerged as a significant predictor for all relevant outcome variables across all three school types. Second, shared leadership responsibility was shown to be a significant predictor of designated time for collaboration across all school forms.

In Section 3.2, the analyses examined the mediating role of collaborative school development but found no evidence of a mediation effect. However, the mediation models reinforced two critical direct effects: collaborative school development significantly predicted all outcome variables, and shared leadership responsibility directly influenced designated time for collaboration. These findings corroborate the results from Section 3.1. Furthermore, the mediation models demonstrated that shared leadership responsibility does not account for collaborative school development. This indicates that the

type of leadership responsibility operates independently from the extent to which school development processes engage broader stakeholder involvement.

In Section 3.3, a comprehensive model incorporating all variables examined in the study was estimated. This full model confirmed the consistent and significant impact of collaborative school development on all outcome variables—a robust finding throughout all stages of analysis. However, the effect of shared leadership responsibility on designated time for collaboration was significant only in primary and Gymnasium schools within the context of this larger model. The earlier result showing the independence of shared leadership responsibility and collaborative school development was also underlined by this analysis.

An additional noteworthy finding emerged from the full model: in primary and non-Gymnasium secondary schools, designated time for collaboration was significantly correlated with the conceptual integration of curricular and extracurricular activities. This highlights the nuanced ways in which collaboration time may support broader conceptual alignment in these school types.

These findings provide partial support for the proposed hypotheses. H1 was confirmed, as both shared leadership responsibility and collaborative school development consistently predicted designated time for collaboration. H2 received only partial support, as breadth of extracurricular aims and curricular-extracurricular synergy were predicted solely by collaborative school development. H3 was also only partially supported: while collaborative

TABLE 4 Mediation models.

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
Y	Designated time for collaboration			Breadth of extracurricular aims			Curricular-extracurricular synergy		
	PRM	SEK	GYM	PRM	SEK	GYM	PRM	SEK	GYM
a	0.052	0.044	0.047	0.054	0.046	0.049	0.054	0.046	0.049
b	0.237***	0.263***	0.300***	0.291***	0.363***	0.320***	0.316***	0.367***	0.295***
c	0.141***	0.133***	0.162***	0.019	0.020	0.019	0.005	0.004	0.004
ab	0.012			0.016			0.017		
Total	0.153***			0.035			0.022		

$n_{(PRM)} = 465$; $n_{(SEK)} = 549$; $n_{(GYM)} = 255$; (a) shared leadership responsibility → collaborative school development; (b) collaborative school development → Y; (c) shared leadership responsibility → Y (see Methods for more details). * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

school development demonstrated a substantially stronger predictive power than shared leadership responsibility, moderation analyses did not indicate a significant moderating effect.

4.1.1 The importance of collaborative school development

Taken together, the results suggest that leadership is not just about shared responsibility but especially about collaborative school development. This resonates with [Spillane et al. \(2001\)](#) that leadership is framed as a practice shaped by interactions among leaders, followers, and the school environment, highlighting that leadership practices directly influence school improvement through dynamic exchanges. Similarly, it was emphasized by [Harris \(2008\)](#) that leadership is the interplay between vertical and lateral processes, and [Mayrowetz \(2008\)](#) argued that leadership needs to be understood in relation to school improvement. This is foundational for fostering collective school development rather than merely delegating and negotiating responsibilities. In this way, other studies also linked stronger distributed leadership practices to better schooling, which is showcasing how leadership drives collective development goals ([De Jong et al., 2023](#); [Hallinger and Heck, 2010](#); [Wahlstrom and Louis, 2008](#)). The current study underlines that leadership extends beyond the mere shared responsibility and instead actively facilitates collaborative processes that shape organizational development.

While the stronger predictive power of collaborative school development compared to shared leadership responsibility is a key finding, this does not necessarily imply that shared leadership is ineffective. Rather, it highlights an important conceptual distinction: Shared leadership responsibility refers to the distribution of management roles, whereas collaborative school development captures the extent of active stakeholder participation in shaping all-day school processes. The mere delegation of leadership responsibilities does not automatically foster meaningful collaboration. In contrast, collaborative school development reflects an embedded culture of joint decision-making and engagement, making it more directly relevant to school improvement efforts.

4.1.2 Shared responsibility and collaborative school development are independent

It would have been reasonable to assume that clarifying responsibilities would serve as the foundation for collaborative school development. However, the findings indicate that these two aspects are unrelated. The assumption that clarifying responsibilities is

sufficient (as, for example, the policy of the [KMK, 2023b](#) states) proves to be an oversimplification. The present results suggest that it is essential for the all-day school team to drive collaborative school development forward. Therefore, it can be argued that “development outweighs responsibility” in fostering high quality organization in extended education.

4.1.3 Shared leadership responsibility as a factor for allocated collaboration time

Shared responsibility for leadership is not as important as collaborative school development, yet it seems to be central at least for providing a distinct time frame, which is reserved for staff collaboration. Research on multi-professional collaboration underscores the importance of opportunities for collaboration, with interview studies highlighting that participants consider allocated time for cooperation as a critical condition for success ([Fussangel, 2013](#); [Meyer, 2020](#)), and this time is especially given, when team members have longer weekly working hours, which are often associated with more intensive and frequent collaboration ([Beher et al., 2007](#); [Steiner, 2010](#); [Tillmann and Rollett, 2014](#)). Thus, it is plausible to argue that the allocation of time for collaboration becomes less meaningful when significant portions of the staff are employed on an hourly basis, as they may not be able to fully utilize the allocated time. This issue, however, may be particularly addressed through leadership practices, especially when shared responsibility is implemented. In such cases, the relationship between shared leadership and the allocation of collaboration time can be explained, as the collaborative nature of leadership responsibility can facilitate both, adequate contracts, including enhanced amount of working time, and also specific time for collective engagement among staff.

4.1.4 Collaboration time is correlated with curricular-extracurricular synergy

At least for primary schools and non-gymnasium secondary schools, it has been shown that allocated collaboration time correlates with curricular-extracurricular synergy. More specifically, this means that at all-day school locations where time for collaboration is explicitly provided, there is a stronger integration of classroom teaching and extracurricular activities. This finding can be interpreted in various ways, as causal conclusions cannot be drawn from the cross-sectional research design. On the one hand, the curricular-extracurricular synergy could necessitate the need for collaboration, thereby prompting the introduction of collaboration time. On the

TABLE 5 Overall structural equation model.

	PRM		SEK		GYM	
	Est.	<i>p</i>	Est.	<i>p</i>	Est.	<i>p</i>
Regressions						
Shared leadership responsibility →						
Designated time for collaboration	0.116	0.040	0.104	0.054	0.249	0.006
Breadth of extracurricular aims	−0.062	0.226	0.086	0.080	0.025	0.733
Curricular-extracurricular synergy	0.002	0.969	0.007	0.895	0.007	0.923
Collaborative school development →						
Designated time for collaboration	0.306	0.000	0.264	0.000	0.242	0.011
Breadth of extracurricular aims	0.336	0.000	0.287	0.000	0.384	0.000
Curricular-extracurricular synergy	0.405	0.000	0.288	0.000	0.337	0.000
Covariances						
Shared leadership responsibility --						
Collaborative school development	0.046	0.340	0.062	0.159	0.022	0.742
Curricular-extracurricular synergy --						
Designated time for collaboration	0.263	0.001	0.220	0.004	−0.133	0.201
Breadth of extracurricular aims	0.670	0.000	0.553	0.000	0.649	0.000
Designated time for collaboration --						
Breadth of extracurricular aims	0.112	0.119	0.126	0.078	0.079	0.476

Estimates (Est.) are standardized coefficients. See Section 2.3 for more information regarding details of the multi-group structural equation model.

other hand, the allocated collaboration time itself may be utilized in ways that further enable and enhance curricular-extracurricular synergy. In fact, if both factors are present, it could indicate the overall developmental stage of the all-day school (Holtappels and Rollett, 2009). Regardless of the direction of the effect, it can be concluded that the findings support the idea that staff collaboration time and curricular-extracurricular integration must go hand in hand—without such coordination, the integration of curricula and extracurricular activities (Haenisch, 2009) is difficult to imagine.

4.2 Limitations

Despite the robust analysis presented in this study, several limitations in the research design should be considered when interpreting the findings. Firstly, the data represent the state of all-day schools in Germany during the 2017/2018 school year. While this means they do not reflect the current situation in Germany, they nonetheless offer substantial analytical potential. The findings can help identify relationships and patterns that are likely still relevant today—and extend beyond the German context.

One key limitation is the cross-sectional nature of the data, which prevents the establishment of causal relationships between shared leadership responsibility, collaborative school development, and the outcomes of interest. Although mediation and moderation models were used to examine the pathways between variables, these statistical techniques can only suggest associations, not causality. Future longitudinal studies or experimental designs would be beneficial to establish more definitive causal links.

The data were collected using self-reported responses from school leaders. While the use of a structured questionnaire can

provide valuable insights into participants' perceptions, self-reporting can introduce biases, such as social desirability bias or response bias, which may affect the accuracy of the data. Future studies could include additional data sources to triangulate findings and increase the reliability of the results.

While the analysis accounts of school type differences, there may be other confounding factors that influence the relationships between the variables of interest. Further factors might be introduced in future research to control for potential further influences (such as institutional culture, individual leadership styles, or local policy constraints). Qualitative studies (interviews or case studies with school leaders) might offer a more nuanced understanding of how leadership structures translate into meaningful collaboration and school improvement.

4.3 Implications

Overall, the present analysis provides important insights into collaborative forms of responsibility and school development, and how they relate to relevant aspects of all-day schooling. The study and its findings are not only relevant to the German context but use the German context to study the broader phenomenon of effective leadership for quality in extended education.

The findings highlight that collaborative organizational development should be prioritized over clarifying leadership responsibilities. While shared leadership responsibility is important for allocating time for collaboration, impact comes from fostering a collaborative development-oriented spirit. Providers of extended education should create opportunities for participation in leadership tasks for all staff. Encouraging collaborative organizational

developments will likely enhance both the quality and the effectiveness of extended education programs. Similarly, from a policy perspective, the study suggests that educational policies should emphasize the importance of supporting organizations in developing collaborative developmental practices rather than just focusing on the allocation of formal responsibilities.

To conclude, this study underscores a vital insight: true organizational improvement in extended education settings is driven not by the mere allocation of shared leadership responsibility, but by the dynamic force of collaborative organizational development. The findings illuminate the profound impact of fostering a culture of collaboration and ensuring the participation of all stakeholders in shaping collective progress. While the data stem from the context of German all-day schools, the insights extend to diverse settings in extended education, emphasizing that enhancing staff working conditions and developing meaningful educational concepts are universal drivers of quality. This research calls for a reimagining of leadership in extended education—one that places collaboration at the heart of progress and transformation. The path forward is clear: to build stronger, more innovative leadership practices in extended education, we must invest in the power of collaboration of all at every level.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this study can be found in online repositories. The names of the repository/repositories and accession number(s) can be found at: doi: https://doi.org/10.5159/IQB_StEG_Systemmonitoring_V2.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by the school authorities and data protection offices in all sixteen Federal States. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

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Conflict of interest

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

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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

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Learning from the diversity of national structures, processes and intentions with regard to extended education

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Introduction: In European countries, the emphasis placed on Extended Education (EE) differs not only in practice but also in policies and literature. In fact, there are still no standardized concepts or definitions of this specific educational area.

Methods: The aim of this study is to contribute to a transnational understanding of EE by inductive content analysis of essential documents from five different countries. The results of this study will facilitate a better understanding of shared factors which can be used to improve student access, success and retention in education, generate valuable guidelines for effective leadership and highlight the potentials of public governance for social innovation. As part of the Erasmus+ project “EKCO” (Extended Education Facilitating Key Competences through Cooperative Learning), a research team consisting of local experts in the field of EE from Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Switzerland and Austria was asked to provide a selection of local literature on EE that they considered particularly relevant. A total of 19 documents were submitted from the five countries. In the present study, the expert sampling was subjected to an inductive content analysis using MAXQDA software to identify the salient points that emerged from the sampling.

Results: The results indicate that five main categories can be identified in the EE literature offered, namely: (1). Factors influencing EE, (2). Institutions and structure, (3). Pedagogical requirements, (4). Content of EE and (5). Factors influenced by EE.

Discussion: The analysis of the data shows that, despite national differences, there are common intentions, processes and structures that are productive for the development of key competences and future skills. Moreover, the interplay of these factors should be considered when discussing EE. The article discusses how national EE policies can learn from the diversity of their structures, processes and intentions.

KEYWORDS

extended education, leadership, governance, content analysis, international comparison

1 Introduction

“Extended education flourishes all over the world” (Bae, 2019, p. 153). In most countries around the world, schools - in various forms - are given the task of supporting pupils beyond the traditional lessons - be it in terms of professionalization (see Holmberg, 2021), health and resilience (Murray et al., 2024), learning (Enrich, 2020; Noam and Triggs, 2018), inequality (Bae et al., 2019) or their leisure behavior, to name just a few examples. Internationally, such offers are often discussed under the heading of EE (Schüpbach, 2019).

In this context, very different expectations, structures and processes emerge. These are subsumed under EE, which can be understood to mean the following, for example:

“[...] we can tentatively define programs and activities in the field of extended education as activities and programs that are based on a pedagogical intention and organized to facilitate learning and educational processes for children and adolescents that are not (completely) covered by school-curriculum-based learning and that aim at fostering academic achievement or success in school, or in general at accumulating cultural capital in a broader sense” (Stecher et al., 2018, p. 77).

While in economics it is almost an existential threat not to learn from and analyze the national experiences and circumstances of other countries in the world (Steffen and Oliveira, 2018), countries remain rather isolated in their educational systems or focused on their national circumstances (see Ecarius et al., 2013). The EU is taking first steps to make national education systems more transparent and accessible. For example, comparative reports and overviews of national education systems are published on the Eurydice information network (European Commission, n.d.). It can be seen that many areas of education are approached and structured in different ways and many aspects still seem to be specific to individual countries. For innovation in the education sector, we consider it fruitful to compare different systems in terms of their intentions, structures and processes. In section 2, a transdisciplinary analysis will draw on insights from sociological, socioeconomic, organizational and educational disciplines to better understand the role of governance in EE. Section 3 presents a two-step analysis of EE in five different countries (Denmark, Switzerland, Austria, Norway, Sweden). The selection of the countries was based on their participation in the EKCO (Extended Education Facilitating Key Competences through Cooperative Learning) project. Firstly, the participating experts in EE were asked about key documents (from science, policy and practice) in order to obtain country-specific information on intentions, structures and processes. Subsequently, central foci of these documents were condensed using a qualitative content analysis in order to obtain inputs for the further development of EE in a contrastive comparison. Finally, section 4 will discuss the results of the study and highlight the potentials of governance in EE.

2 Conceptual framework

2.1 Extended education

Extended education is a broad term that encompasses organized leisure time, recreational time, learning support and tutoring (Bae, 2019) as well as health, nature and creative learning settings that are typically not embedded in regular school curricula and thus not graded (Stecher, 2018). In contrast to formal education or schooling, EE can be seen as institutionalized informal education. While still following curricula and concepts, it can focus on social and emotional skills, play and student well-being that complement other school related skills and knowledge (Holmberg, 2021). Schüpbach defines EE as follows:

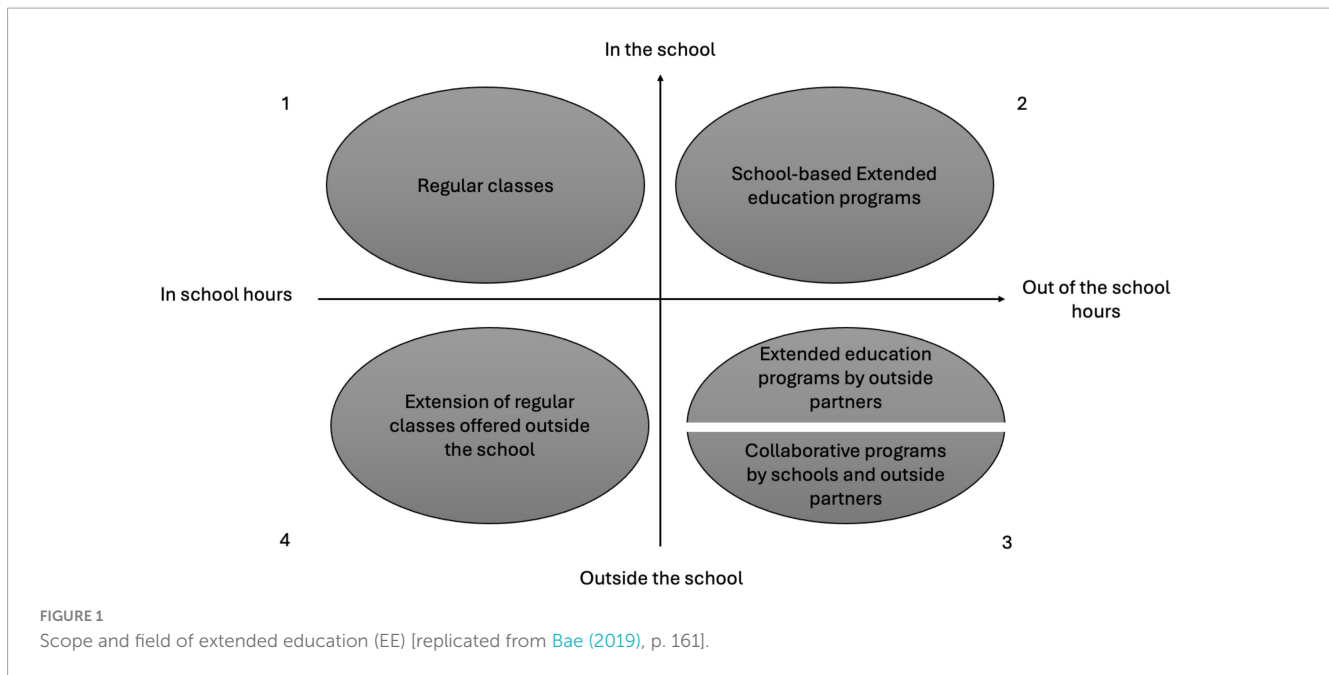
“Extended education represents a multitude of programs/activities/offers, among other things, that provide children and adolescents with a range of supervised activities designed to encourage learning and development, for children to be supervised and safe, and extending the regular school day. Some of them pursue general goals, such as psychological well-being and social competence, others focus on specific educational outcomes and goals. They are extracurricular, meaning that they are non-credential and voluntary. They can be offered in school-, faith-, and community-based settings, for any age range, and can be held before school (in the morning), between school hours (lunchtime), after school (afternoon), on weekends, or during school vacation” (Schüpbach, 2019, p. 135).

Extended education teachers¹ engage with students during and outside of class hours, however, in contrast to regular teachers they are not in charge of teaching school curricula, student achievement and grading. Instead, they focus on aspects such as planning and facilitating meaningful leisure time and recreation, and thereby the development of personal and social skills, offering supervised free play situations and providing learning opportunities outside of graded school subjects (Ecarius et al., 2013; Holmberg, 2021; Noam and Triggs, 2018). In some countries EE teachers have completed a different type of pedagogical training than schoolteachers, with an emphasis on pedagogy, communication, social skills and recreation amongst others rather than subject matter and methodology (see Fischer and Loparics, 2020).

Depending on the respective country policy and institutional setting, EE teachers can work with public or private schools, either as part of the school staff or in separate institutions that often collaborate with schools. Figure 1 presents an overview of the various professional settings EE teachers work in.

Extended education moves on a spectrum of no relation to school's regular curricula activities and leisure programs that take place outside of school hours and a strong relation, when EE supports innovations in education, such as student-centered

1 In this paper, we use the terms “classroom teacher” to refer to traditional teachers who deliver ordinary lessons, and “EE teacher” to refer to people who focus on providing activities other than teaching in schools - knowing full well that in some linguistic contexts the term “teacher” would be inappropriate here and terms such as “leisure time educator,” social pedagogue or “educator” would be used instead. These terms often reflect a national tradition or educational policy. This is intended to improve the readability of the article, but not to express a preferred focus.



teaching or all-day schooling (Bae, 2019). Educational policy provides the conditions for EE collaboration with other educational institutions, making it a stakeholder of varying importance. Depending on the organization of formal and informal learning in education systems additional terms are used to describe extended education, such as all-day schools in German speaking countries, afterschool or out-of-school in the United States, leisure-time-oriented programs in Scandinavian countries or cram schools in Japan, Taiwan and Korea (Noam and Triggs, 2018, p. 171). Particularly in school models that include EE in school hours, as is the case in all-day schools, EE teachers collaborate closely with school leaders and thereby become facilitators of the all-day school design. The term shadow education is used in extended education that primarily encompasses academic training that is aimed at increasing student achievement and children's opportunities in education (Cipollone and Stich, 2017).

2.2 Leadership: the potentials of governance in extended education

The rapidly growing field of EE is mirrored by growing attention in an emerging field of research on the processes, outcomes and specific issues of EE. The role of learning that takes place outside of formal education in school has been analyzed through a pedagogical and organizational lens on education (Bae, 2019; Stecher, 2018), a sociological perspective on inequality in education (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Ecarius et al., 2013; Holmberg, 2021; Noam and Triggs, 2018), anthropologically (Campbell, 2009) as well as economically, focusing on the role of private stakeholders and market dynamics in education (Bray, 2007; Cipollone and Stich, 2017; Wilkins and Olmedo, 2019). The role of leadership, particularly governance, can support the understanding of the interplay of institutions and stakeholders in education and shed light on how EE is embedded in the education system.

Governance is defined as the cooperation between different public, private and non-governmental stakeholders (Wilkins and Olmedo, 2019, p. 5) that, in contrast to more hierarchical leadership styles of educational institutions and education policy, include stakeholders of varying power and leverage (e.g., Tikly, 2017). Governance allows collaboration between involved actors that play different roles in educational processes, that can present a more diverse and specialized understanding than hierarchical leadership processes in education. From a global perspective, governance has the potential of fostering participation and partnerships across public and private sectors for the greater good (Unterhalter, 2024). Governance can be seen as a collaborative response to state led or market-based failures, such as ineffective top-down steering, or the protection of self-interest in competitive markets (Wilkins and Olmedo, 2019, p. 5).

Schools work collaboratively with various stakeholders within the education policy frameworks to provide quality education, leisure time and care. Stakeholders can entail EE, social work, psychologists and medical staff, learning aid, legal and political representatives, sport, music, nature, art, parent clubs, cultural clubs, as well as teacher training and professionalization, amongst others. They characterize the institutional structure in which education takes place and can vary both nationally and regionally, depending on the legal frameworks of the education system and regional interactions between stakeholders.

Hierarchical leadership structures in educational institutions run the risk of overlooking possible avenues for developments of collaborations with involved actors and stakeholders, due to insufficient insight and information in centralized leadership models. Educational governance includes economic, institutional, governmental, legal, regional and international actors, amongst which EE represents one, that collaborate in a variety of constellations of educational networks on (inter-)national and regional scales (Maag Merki and Altrichter, 2015). Governance perspectives emphasize that a variety of social processes, stakeholders and actors are involved in education, honoring (1)

their respective resources and expertise as well as (2) the complexity of the education system, while acknowledging the challenge of coordinating involved parties effectively (Ittner et al., 2021, p. 7; Wilkins and Olmedo, 2019, p. 6). Other drawbacks of governance processes are the difficulty to ensure participation and distribution of power between stakeholders and that “participatory policy processes are not captured by local power elites” (Torfing and Triantafyllou, 2013, p. 17). Rather than a normative proposal for governance practices in EE, an analysis EE through a governance lens can help identify the circumstances, actors involved, existing resources, and needs in education to promote knowledge transfer between education systems and institutions and thereby maximize the potential of current EE models.

Maag Merki and Altrichter (2015) identify the following criteria as central in the analysis of educational governance:

- Theoretical pluralism
- Pluralism of data on education systems, educational practices social norms, values and beliefs
- Pluralism of research methods
- An analysis of interdependencies between actors and the education system, e.g., through the study of curricula and legal frameworks
- A broad scope that includes historical, political and social dimensions in their specific socio-cultural context
- An analysis of the education system

Studying educational governance requires theoretic pluralism, such as systems theory, policy-network theory, institutional theories, rational choice theory, or organizational theories (Ittner et al., 2021, p. 7).

This includes the emergence of new public governance, which is characterized by the gradual incorporation of market-based management techniques into the education sector (Mezza, 2021, p. 30). New public governance holds potential for social innovation (Sørensen and Torfing, 2015). When leadership in new public governance follows principles of collaboration and networking, knowledge can be transferred between involved stakeholders and regional and school specific needs can be met more precisely. Another emerging discourse that employs a similar lens is called democratic professionalism (Noordegraaf, 2020; Sachs, 2016). It stresses the importance of an ecosystem approach in education that understands the interdependency of collaborations between educational institutions, teachers and school-stakeholders (Mezza, 2021, p. 31). Both perspectives highlight the potentials of governance in education.

From a sociological perspective, the role of EE as a provider of childcare and informal education plays an important role for parents; specifically mothers; opportunities in social and economic contexts. “[E]xtended education, as a social institution, is part of the ecology of the entire society” (Bae, 2019, p. 158). As EE stretches between offering supervised leisure time including cultural and health related activities, to learning support, such as tutoring or assistance with homework, language, reading tasks, etc., it can be seen as a commodification of household resources. The provision of informal education and childcare is unevenly distributed across genders, socio-economic and socio-cultural backgrounds. The access to informal education contributes positively to students’

educational attainment and consequently their educational and professional (Cipollone and Stich, 2017; Entrich, 2020). Access to EE for all students, not only widens the scope of children’s educational, social and cultural experiences but it may raise the equality of opportunity in education for children of disadvantaged family backgrounds.

2.3 Aim

The aim of this study is to identify differences, similarities and challenges in EE across countries. The insights can be used to improve student access, success, and retention in education, generate valuable guidelines for effective leadership, and highlight potentials for social innovation in the public sector.

3 Materials and methods

The data collection was carried out as follows: experts from the countries participating in EKCO (see section “1 Introduction”) were asked to submit documents from the fields of policy, practice and research that were as meaningful as possible and that illustrate what extended education is in their countries and which challenges exist. These documents were translated using DeepL. After the analysis, the results were presented to the experts to rule out any linguistic misunderstandings.

This was followed by using the qualitative data analysis method called “inductive qualitative content analysis” (Mayring, 2022) to find out which factors emerged as central in relation to EE in the sample obtained. Since inductive content analysis allows a systematic investigation that reduces complexity but generates a broad understanding of the phenomena referred to Mayring (2010), p. 65 it was the appropriate methodological approach for this research. For the content analysis, the MAXQDA 24 software was used, which allows thematic data analysis (Kuckartz and Rädiker, 2023).

For the inductive content analysis, the approach of expert sampling (purposive sampling) was used. Expert sampling is applied when people with specific expertise in a particular area are required in the sample (Teddlie and Yu, 2007). Therefore, expert sampling relies on the expertise of the people chosen. Teddlie and Yu (2007) describe the scope as follows: “For example, a purposive sample is typically designed to pick a small number of cases that will yield the most information about a particular phenomenon [...]” (p. 83). However, the selection of experts is often a challenge (Marquardt et al., 2019). In this research project, the participating expert teams were asked to provide a selection of local literature on EE that they considered relevant (see Table 1). The experts were asked to provide documents from practice, research and policy documents (see Table 2). They were also asked to submit as comprehensive a view as possible of the strengths and areas of development of extended education. It can be argued that they are suitable because they have already had ample evidence of their suitability for participation in the ERASMUS+ project. An advantage of expert sampling is that these individuals typically possess a more profound comprehension of the subject matter (Marquardt et al., 2019), coupled with an expansive view of their

TABLE 1 National documents.

Country	Original language	Author	Year	Translated title
Norway	Norwegian	National department of education	2021	National framework for extended education
Norway	English	Knut Løndal and Anne Greve	2015	Didactic approaches to child-managed play: analyses of teacher's interaction styles in kindergartens and after-school programs in Norway
Denmark	Danish	Kirsten Elisa Petersen et al.	2023	Educators' work with children and young people in leisure education – The importance of leisure pedagogy for children and young people well-being, development and life opportunities
Denmark	English	All SIPP researchers (David Thore Gravesen, Lea Ringskou, Anja Aagaard Christensen, Caroline Bach, Helene Elvstrand, Lina Söderman Lago, Patricia Schuler, Christa Kappler, Paolo Nardi, Mari-Liss Lind, Egle Hollman)	2023	HANDBOOK: social inclusion through pupil's participation
Denmark	Danish	Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet (National department of children and education)	2020	Executive order on requirements for the content of goal and content descriptions for public school after-school programs
Denmark	English	Lea Ringskou and David Thore Gravesen	2022	Keen on qualification? A comparative review of Danish and Swedish research literature on leisure-time pedagogy
Switzerland	German	Department for Education (VSA), Canton Zurich	2021	Day structures. General information and specific requirements
Switzerland	German	SCHOOL	2024	Day school operating concept
Switzerland	German	SCHOOL	2024	Childcare concept at SCHOOL
Switzerland	English	Emanuela Chiapparini, Andrea Scholian, Patricia Schuler, Christa Kappler (International Journal for Research on Extended Education, Volume 7, 1/2019, pp 60)	2018	All-day schools and social work: a swiss case study
Sweden	English	National board of education	2022	Curriculum for compulsory school, preschool class and school-age educare
Sweden	Swedish	National board of education	2022	Leisure center a commentary on the fourth part of the curriculum
Sweden	English	National board of education	2022	The Swedish education system
Sweden	English	Lago and Elvstrand	2023	This is a Swedish school-age educare center: care, education, and leisure
Sweden	English	Jonsson	2021	Principals' vision of social learning in school-age educare
Austria	German	Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research	2018	Care plans for all-day school types. Guide
Austria	German	Josef Scheipl, Johannes Leeb, Konstanze Wetzel, Wolfram Rollett and Stephan Kielblock	2018	Pedagogical design and favorable conditions for successful all-day school forms
Austria	German	SCHOOL	n.d.	ABC of our SCHOOL
Austria	German	SCHOOL	n.d.	Your tasks in SCHOOL

TABLE 2 Categorization of the submitted documents.

Country of the participating research team	Research work	Pedagogical framework	Policy document	Submitted documents in total
Norway	1	1	–	2
Sweden	2	–	3	5
Denmark	2	1	1	4
Switzerland	1	2	1	4
Austria	1	2	1	4
Sum	7	6	6	19

respective national research domain, due to their expertise and involvement in the field. Moreover, this expert sampling provides valuable insights into the diverse national education systems across countries, highlighting their unique characteristics. Nevertheless, it is important to be aware that expert sampling may be susceptible to research bias, which could affect the reliability of the results (Berndt, 2020).

A total of 19 documents were submitted by the experts. Seven of these documents were research work (e.g., literature review, reports, qualitative analysis). Six of the documents submitted could be identified as pedagogical-didactic frameworks of individual schools or projects for school practice and a further six were policy documents, including legal texts, curricula or commentary on national curricula (Table 2).

The research is based on the core criteria for qualitative research proposed by Steinke (2012): Intersubjective traceability is ensured by disclosing all decisions in all phases of the research process. The presentation of the indication of the research process has already been described in the key points here. The findings were linked to the empirical material and any limitations were disclosed. Coherence and relevance are always discussed. The researcher from Austria who selected the data was not involved in the categorization of the data in order not to violate objectivity.

In qualitative research, “validity” and “reliability” are defined and evaluated differently than in quantitative research. In this context, “validity” refers to whether a research finding actually captures the phenomenon it purports to measure. It ensures that the chosen methods, such as interviews or observations, provide the relevant data needed to answer the research question. In the case of the present research, which is internationally comparative, documents selected by local experts on policy and practice appear to be an ideal approach to identifying and defining similarities and differences in policies across countries. Reflection on the researcher’s point of view was achieved through member checking, in which the results were presented to and discussed by the international experts in order to minimize bias and achieve as accurate a representation of social reality as possible. No misunderstandings were found. “Reliability” in qualitative research is not understood as the reproducibility of results as in quantitative research, but rather as the consistency and transparency of research methods and decisions. This means that the research process is documented in such a way that it can be understood by others and, if necessary, replicated. This includes a detailed description of data collection and analysis, as well as a clear reflection on one’s own position and possible factors influencing the research.

In the present research, this was achieved by having the study design and contact with the international experts carried out by a different person than the one who carried out the evaluation. The evaluator was not involved in the selection of experts and documents and is new to the field. The presentation of the results described above ensured that there were no misunderstandings during the evaluation.

Regarding ethical considerations, all persons involved were informed about the purpose of the research and the documents were provided voluntarily, unless they are publicly accessible. Internal school documents are not cited to ensure anonymity.

3.1 Data analysis

First, the documents which were predominantly written in the local language were translated into English using the “DeepL” translation software and an overview of the translated documents was created. After the organization and the translation of the documents, the analysis process started with the examination of the content. Categories were formed inductively in a close reading of the documents’ content (Mayring, 2021). Recurring terms, main topics, paragraphs, or headings were recorded as categories. For example, if a paper dealt with the topics of well-being and life opportunities in connection with EE, the two categories of well-being and life opportunities were formed. The documents were read individually, and more codes developed gradually. Categories were added and adapted over the course of the reading process and after several readings relations and contradictions between categories were identified. When content saturation was reached, the categories were divided into logical main and sub-categories. In the end, five main categories emerged from the 19 documents (Figure 2).

4 Results

The content analysis resulted in five main categories with a total of 1,632 allocations of all categories:

As illustrated in Figures 1, 3 categories were identified by paying attention to their respective levels and the interplay between the categories. The following sections provide a detailed examination of the five primary categories: (1) *Factors influencing EE*, (2) *Institutions and structure*, (3) *Pedagogical requirements*, (4) *Content of EE* and (5) *Factors influenced by EE*. In general, the focus in

Codesystem
1. Factors influencing EE
Age
Organisation and politician framework
Principal, EE teachers and school conditions
Parents, socio-economic background and stereotypes
2. Institutions and structure
Guidelines, organisation and systems
Leadership, management and teams
Infrastructure and rooms
Financing and costs
Time and time structure
Communication and exchange
Values, rights and mission
Design of the offer
Learning time
Leisure time and extracurricular activities
Supervision
3. Pedagogical requirements
Cooperation (internal and external)
Teacher's qualification
Professional development and support
Flexibility
Didactic methods, tasks and tools
Diversity and inclusion
Pedagogical concept and planning
Ensuring a good environment
Balance between activity, recreation and rest
Introduction to local communities, environments and values
Knowledge transfer and learning support
Value transfer
Child-centered education
Different learning environments and offers
Promotion of independent learning
Group-oriented teaching
Individualization and situational teaching
Experiential learning
Care and supervision
Teacher-student relationship
Teacher's involvement
4. Content of EE
Space and care
Activities and playing
Time outdoors
Active participation, responsibility and independence
Community and socializing
Talking, listening and understanding
Development and learning
Meaningful leisure time
Creativity and curiosity
Food, health and lifestyle
Awareness of values, norms and rules
Facing challenges and new skills
Personal development
Projects
Digitization and technology
Ecology and environment
Mathematics and construction
Reading and relaxing
Communication and language
5. Factors influenced by EE
School climate, attitude and behavior
Well-being
Development
Academic performance
Belonging, social learning and inclusion
Life opportunities

FIGURE 2
Representation of the relationship of the factors found.

the submitted documents was on organizational topics, different requirements as well as on content and design concepts. Table 3 summarizes the categories and their corresponding subcategories. This section presents each category individually, and discusses its respective subcategories and examples from the analyzed literature.

4.1 Factors influencing EE

Factors influencing EE includes factors that have an influence on the organizational, didactic or content design of EE. The following subcategories were identified:

- a) Political framework and legal organization
- b) Principal, schoolteachers and school conditions
- c) Parents and socio-economic status
- d) Age

The factor “Age,” for instance, will affect not only the duration of time children spend in the institution, but also the specific content designed to meet their expectations and needs. Furthermore, it can also determine the degree of teacher involvement and the role that educators are expected to assume in the early education of these children.

The national conditions in the countries seem to have a particularly strong influence on the design of EE, as they specify EE conditions at the state level. Document 1, for instance, addresses the issue of insufficient resources for EE: “One particular factor is based on the fact that for several years, leisure education has been severely under-prioritized on both the social and educational policy agenda. Major cutbacks in the leisure education area, as well as an increased focus on longer school days and school performance, have dominated and had an impact on the everyday life of the leisure education institutions, the time spent with the children and young people as well as a lack of financial and staff resources.”

It is also important to consider the impact of the parents and their socio-economic status, as outlined in Document 8: “As women to a greater extent are employed and work outside the home, there is a need for expanded childcare in many countries. To meet modern families’ way of life requires good quality childcare – an important part of this is various forms of EE.”

The socio-economic status is often mentioned in the documents in connection with financial issues of EE. While in some countries, there are basic fees or supplementary services, which results in some families being unable to afford these options due to their socio-economic status, in other countries, initiatives are being implemented with the objective of reducing these inequalities through the allocation of state funding to EE. Furthermore, the inequalities that have been caused can be found in the documents: “Children’s right to a placement in [EE-Institution] is legally governed by the parents’ need for care, which means that children who have parents who are unemployed or on parental leave do not have a legal right to a place in [EE-Institution]” (Document 8). Document 8 additionally emphasizes in this respect: “The national report highlights that the inequality of to what extent children attend [EE] is related to family’s different socioeconomic background. Children who live in vulnerable areas more often do not have access to [EE].”

These explanations show that EE is often used by national education systems to respond to educational policy needs. The focus on improving performance or addressing social inequalities point to the compensatory role EE could assume. The following explanations show in which ways internal school factors could partially thwart this mission.

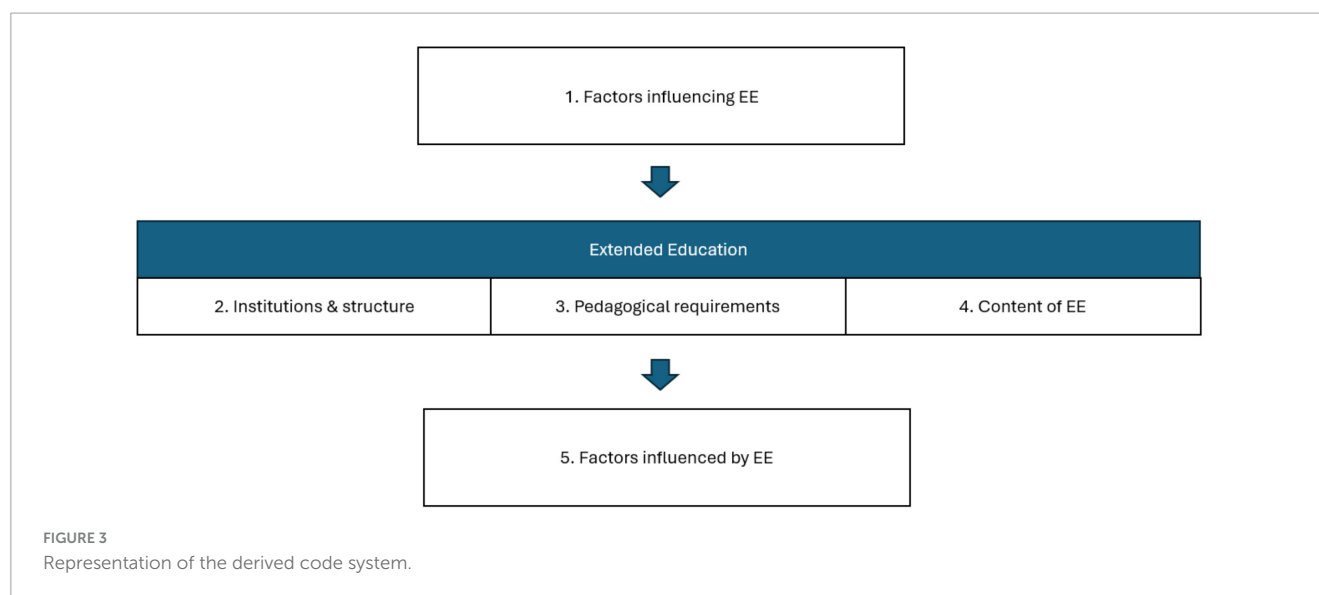


TABLE 3 Mapping of the categories and the numbers of allocations.

Derived main categories and subcategories	Number of total allocations
1. Factors influencing EE	108
a) Political framework and legal organization	–
b) Principal, schoolteachers and school conditions	–
c) Parents and socio-economic status	–
d) Age	–
2. Institutions and structure	289
a) Guidelines, organization and systems	–
b) Values, rights and mission	–
c) Design of the offer	–
3. Pedagogical requirements	506
a) Cooperation (internal and external)	–
b) Teacher's qualification	–
c) Didactic methods, tasks and tools	–
d) Teacher-student relationship	–
e) Teacher's involvement	–
4. Content of EE	555
a) Space and care	–
b) Activities and playing	–
c) Active participation, responsibility and independence	–
d) Community and socializing	–
e) Development and learning	–
5. Factors influenced by EE	174
School climate, attitude and behavior	–
Well-being	–
Development	–
Academic performance	–
Belonging, social learning and inclusion	–
Life opportunities	–
Sum	1.632

Finally, the school leaders, schoolteachers and school conditions were identified as influencing factors. At the EE

teacher level, for example, the different qualifications of EE teachers are mentioned as having an impact on EE. Document 15 reports on the effects of the use of social workers on EE: “They found that while most social workers offered free-play programs and ensured that homework was completed without well-targeted assistance, they seldom offered extracurricular programs.”

At the school management level, it is the respective visions and leadership. Document 9 describes the influential role of school leadership in establishing shared goals and conditions for collaborations: “leaders influence pupils’ learning for example, by promoting a vision and goals and by enabling teachers to have the resources to teach well. Further, shared goals and effort are emphasized concerning professional learning communities, and a supportive leadership is highlighted as being especially important for this.”

Furthermore, it is stated that: “professional development as a long-term process, emphasizing the need to provide [EE] staff with ongoing support in the professional development process for instance, by the principal.” With regard to school conditions, it is mentioned that organizational problems in particular, such as a lack of time resources or coordination difficulties of EE teachers with schoolteachers, have an impact on EE: “A lack of time resources is apparently quite often a limiting factor for cooperation at all-day schools” (Document 17), highlighting communication issues in hierarchical structures within educational institutions.

The findings clearly show that the goals and policies of EE are quite similar between the different countries, but the structures are significantly different, which leads to different challenges. In this sense, transnational learning could have a supportive effect.

4.2 Institutions and structure

“It would be short-sighted to conclude that all-day schools cannot be effective. Rather, it is highly likely that such results can be linked to the currently inadequate forms of their design (personnel, organizational, pedagogical, financial)” (Document 17).

Due to the document types, it is not particularly surprising that a lot could be found on organizational framework conditions. Descriptions of various types of offerings were found not only in the general curricula, but also in the individual school descriptions. Therefore, the three subcategories “Guidelines, organization and systems,” “Values, rights and mission,” and “Design of the offer” were derived. The Curricula or framework concepts of all-day schools often started with the description of the values, rights and tasks associated with school and specifically with EE. A more detailed description of the subcategories “Guidelines, organization and systems” and “Design of the offer” can be found below.

4.2.1 Guidelines, organization and systems

The documents showed that “scaffolding” of EE was an important issue, which includes historical forms of EE as well as reports on different forms of EE in different countries. The current national structures were recorded in particular. Some of the uploaded documents report on the system, the organizations or the structure of the national responsible institutions in great detail. The national structures for EE differ in many respects within the five countries, with different terms being used for EE itself. A clear distinction from the school system can be found in the literature, for example in Document 8: [EE] should be “something other than the school” or “It is often stressed that education in [EE] is something else than education in, for example, school.” This shows that the learning opportunities provided within EE are regarded to be different from formal education fostered in school.

It was not uncommon for documents to deal with issues such as funding, infrastructure design, responsibilities or timing, leading to the following subcategories being identified:

- a) Infrastructure and rooms
- b) Financing and costs
- c) Time and time structure
- d) Leadership, management and teams
- e) Communication and exchange

Particularly often, predefined timetables or explanations of the tasks within the individual time blocks could be found. The design of individual EE organizations depend largely on political regulations, school conditions (see section “4.5 Factors influenced by EE”) and funding. In terms of funding, considerable differences were found between countries. While in some countries, childcare is fully financed by the state, some regulations entail various surcharges for specific services or for the entire EE program.

The organization’s staff on both, the school staff and leadership level, appears to be particularly relevant here. The documents frequently report on the tasks and responsibilities of the principal or various teams (e.g., pedagogical teams, support teams, steering groups, working groups). Internal school communication and exchange is also frequently addressed at an organizational level, with regular meetings, team meetings, WhatsApp groups or feedback loops, for example, being an integral part of the organization of EE in the system descriptions for exchange. The exchange with all parties involved is considered a key factor in many documents, whereby the task of fruitful cooperation is also mentioned at the pedagogical level (see section “4.3 Pedagogical requirements”).

“To ensure good interaction between the numerous actors of all-day school forms, meaningful and appropriate communication (regarding learning progress and tasks to be completed) between the teachers of the teaching part and the care part and the parents/guardians is necessary” (Document 16). Here too, it can be seen that different systems produce different communication structures which can lead to coordination issues between and within organizations.

4.2.2 Design of the offer

In the documents, a distinction was often made within the (curricular) design of EE between learning time and leisure time or supervision. This included, for example, the descriptions of “afternoon or morning care,” and their corresponding responsibilities and conditions. Document 12 offers an example: “Morning supervision is generally limited to supervising children who come to school before the start of block times. As morning supervision is not subject to any specific requirements, a specially qualified supervisor does not necessarily have to be employed.”

The divergent understandings of EE are reflected in the different structures offered. While some documents focus on learning and school support, others also talk about *pure* supervision tasks or child-managed play. As explained in Document 11: “The term “child-managed play” refers to play that is organized by children themselves. EE teachers might initiate play by making time, locations, and equipment available, but the choice and management of activities are entrusted to the children.”

However, in some documents a mixture of both areas, in which different content blocks of learning time and free time alternate was also mentioned. An illustrative example can be found in Documents 8: “In the [EE] care and education should be combined” and Document 6: “The supervision part is divided into two parts, learning time and free time. These two parts can be organized separately from lessons or combined with them.”

4.3 Pedagogical requirements

In general, this main category includes issues that relate specifically to EE teachers’ requirements, such as qualification processes in EE, organizing and planning their EE lessons, or interacting with different parties. In general, the documents focus on didactic approaches to EE, the qualification of EE teachers, different forms of cooperation (both, on an intra-institutional level and with external parties, parents or institutions) and the extent of involvement in EE teaching. In the documents attention was paid to the pedagogical and didactic arrangements and their circumstances. In this context, the following subcategories were derived:

- a) Didactic methods, tasks and tools
- b) Teacher’s qualification
- c) Cooperation (internal and external)
- d) Teacher-student relationship
- e) Teacher’s involvement

The subcategories are explained in more detail in the following sections.

4.3.1 Didactic methods, tasks and tools

Commonly addressed topics could be found in connection with the “didactic methods, tasks and tools.” This subcategory has a pretty high number of second-order subcategories which reflects the different didactic approaches and claims in the countries. Thirteen different second-order subcategories were identified, which in addition to different teaching approaches also include, for example, the teacher-student relationship. The second-order subcategories are presented in the following list:

- a) Ensuring a good environment
- b) Pedagogical concept and planning
- c) Different learning environments and activities
- d) Knowledge transfer and learning support
- e) Care and supervision
- f) Diversity and inclusion
- g) Child-centered education
- h) Promotion of independent learning
- i) Balance between activity, recreation and rest
- j) Introduction to local communities, environments and values
- k) Value transfer
- l) Group-oriented teaching
- m) Experiential learning

In some documents, particular emphasis is placed on the fact that the pedagogical requirements within EE should arise from children’s needs. These text passages were collected as “Child-centered education.” Document 5 shows: “Teaching in school-age educare shall stimulate pupils’ development and learning and offer pupils a meaningful way to spend their free time. This shall be done through teaching based on pupils’ needs, interests and experiences, as well as by continuously challenging pupils by inspiring them to make new discoveries, or “Teaching shall be adapted to the circumstances and needs of each pupil.” In other documents, the importance of group-oriented teaching is highlighted, as evidenced in Document 8: “Group-oriented teaching refers to joint learning and learning by and together with others is emphasized rather than individual learning. Teachers are involved in learning activities together with children they investigate, explain, and develop knowledge.”

These are not the only demands placed on EE teachers. The texts further mention that EE teachers are also expected to find a balance between activity, recreation and rest and to introduce the children to the local community, culture and values. In addition, a task of EE teachers seems to be to ensure a good environment for children, as described in Document 1: “The pedagogical professionalism seems to fundamentally rest on a pedagogy that creates good communities where all children and young people can participate and get involved.”

Furthermore, the promotion of independent learning, which means that the teacher does not explicitly explain the content to the children, is also mentioned in several documents: “Teachers in the supervision part should support pupils to such an extent that the children’s independent performance is guaranteed” (Document 16). The role of the teacher extends beyond mere knowledge or value transfer, as evidenced by the fact that “care and supervision” appear to be an additional responsibility in EE. This task is defined

in Document 8 as follows: “an important aspect of [EE] teachers’ work is relationships. In the [EE] care and education should be combined.” Document 10 for instance describes that: “[EE] shall maintain and meet children’s needs for care, safety, well-being, sense of belonging and validation.”

4.3.2 Teacher’s qualification

“This concept refers, among other things, to the fact that it is important that the staff is trained and committed to leisure education” (Document 1).

In addition to the existence of a range of didactic approaches, the literature also reveals significant discrepancies in the expectations placed on the training and qualification of EE teachers. While documents 1 and 11, for example, attach great importance to teacher competences and qualifications, document 15 also mentions forms of EE that include social workers without specific pedagogical training. Document 15 describes this as follows: “Social workers working at all-day schools in [country] are mostly involved in the care setting before and after lessons and at lunchtime. They have different educational backgrounds, e.g., a bachelor’s degree, a completed childcare apprenticeship, or no specialized education.”

Due to the consistent mention, two separate subcategories were created for the topics of “Professional development and support” and “Flexibility.” The former is often recorded in the literature within concept descriptions of EE institutions or statutory curricula. In particular, internal exchange and ongoing training are mentioned as a way of organizing ongoing development and internal support. Document 18 states this as follows: “Teachers: 15 h of further training must be completed.”

The necessity for EE teachers to demonstrate considerable flexibility in EE is emphasized by the requirement for a broad and readily accessible repertoire within their EE teaching. Changes can occur spontaneously, particularly when working with children and young people and EE teachers should be able to respond flexibly to them. The following three passages in the documents could provide evidence for the subcategory “flexibility”:

- “The educator should be able to adapt the teaching in that way and let the pupils decide” (Document 2).

“Pedagogical tact implies awareness of the child’s experiences and involvement in the subjectivity of the other: To exercise tact means to see a situation calling for sensitivity, to understand the meaning of what is seen, to sense the significance of this situation, to know how and what to do, and to actually do something right” (Document 11).

- “Since pedagogical tact and understanding are connected to a particular practical situation, it is impossible to establish an exact set of rules or skills for the teacher. To act tactfully, the teacher must have integrated a form of practical and professional pedagogical wisdom” (Document 11).

In terms of guaranteeing the quality of teaching staff, leadership responsibility is frequently highlighted (see section “4.1 Factors influencing EE”), whereby the principal is held responsible for initiating and ensuring quality assurance measures,

discussions with colleagues or support measures, for example. Moreover, the competences and skills of EE teachers should also be made possible through internal support from colleagues and the school management. The following can be found in Document 9: "... professional development as a long-term process, emphasizing the need to provide [EE] staff with ongoing support in the professional development process for instance, by the principal."

Despite the diversity of documents and national differences, it is clear that a great deal of responsibility is delegated to EE teachers and which points to the role of their training, skills and actions for EE quality. This is in line with the frequently cited work on the role of teachers by Hattie (2023). While there are different attitudes toward existing institutional structures and the problems associated with them, the different education systems seem to describe this in a standardized way.

4.3.3 Cooperation (internal and external)

Cooperation is closely related to the previous topic of internal support and emphasized in the literature as a crucial factor in early education. The documents highlight not only the importance of teamwork within EE institutions but also the collaboration with parents and external organizations. The literature recognizes both internal cooperation within the school and partnerships with external entities, including communication with parents.

The notion of collaboration between EE teachers and schoolteachers from the school system appears to be a recurrent theme throughout the documents:

- "Collaboration between staff members is a key factor in attaining professionalism in [EE]" (Document 9).
- "Teachers in schools and [EE], though must cooperate to create the best possible conditions for pupils' development and learning" (Document 8).
- "(...) Ensuring that pedagogues and teachers collaborate in the most fruitful and effective way during students' hours in school" (Document 4).
- "It is important that the tasks are carried out in regular consultation between the teachers of the teaching part and the supervision part (learning time)" (Document 16).

4.3.4 Teacher's involvement and teacher-student relationship

The relationship between EE teachers and the children is frequently mentioned in the documents. The extent to which EE teachers are involved in EE is referred to particularly in the context of the children's freedom to make decisions and organize their own time. The teacher generally plays an important role in the documents and is ascribed various functions in EE. From a non-involved supervisor, who should only intervene in individual situations to a confidant and playmate, or an authority figure that transfers knowledge to learners, various forms of teacher involvement can be found. The teacher should adjust the degree of leeway granted depending on the needs and age of the children. The ability to find the appropriate level of involvement or degree of freedom is often mentioned in connection to teacher's

qualifications and their flexibility (see section "4.3.2 Teacher's qualification").

4.4 Content of EE

The documents provided extensive information on EE content. For instance, within the curricula received, the content was clearly defined at the state level, outlining the requirements that should be included in EE in the participating countries. "Content of EE" exhibited the greatest variety in descriptions, and it seems there is still no consensus on the core content of EE. Consequently, five subcategories were created to represent the variety of thematic focuses:

- a) Activities and playing
- b) Community and socializing
- c) Active participation, responsibility and independence
- d) Space and care
- e) Development and learning

The following sections provide a detailed description of these subcategories.

4.4.1 Activities and playing and community and socializing

The two subcategories, "Activities and playing" and "Community and socializing," are presented together in this analysis due to considerable overlap in the documents. Both appear to play an important role in which EE content was mentioned in the documents. What they have in common is that both sub-categories include all content that is not aimed at learning at school, and although learning is not the main focus here, it does not mean that nothing is learnt.

The documents indicate that the activities conducted in EE provide an opportunity for learning, the development of social skills and the testing of one's own identity: "In all-day schools, collaboration, tolerance and socially appropriate forms of interaction are developed, and communication skills are promoted" (Document 16).

This category emphasizes the promotion of community and social learning. Consequently, helping each other, listening to each other, making friends and overcoming conflicts are often cited as EE content in documents that emphasize social learning. "Opportunities to develop new friendships seem crucial across the board. For both children and young people, leisure education seems to provide access to and opportunities to be with friends" (Document 1).

Within "Activities and playing," a separate (second order) subcategory called "Time outdoors" was created to highlight the significant role time spent outdoors plays in the documents. Scientific studies pointed out: "Play and activities seem to be of great importance regardless of age, partly as something you do together and partly as something that creates experiences of joy and satisfaction for yourself" (Document 1).

A total of 14 out of 19 documents dealt with each of these two content categories ("Activities and playing" and "Time outdoors") and they appear in all countries participating in this study.

4.4.2 Active participation, responsibility and independence

The content of “Active participation, responsibility and independence” is also featured in almost all documents. Document 2, for example, provides the following information: “Participation is part of democracy, and it incorporates concepts such as inclusion and influence. It is related to pupils’ possibility to have a say, make themselves be heard and to influence activities, actions and decisions in the school.” (Document 2).

Involving children in decision-making processes is focused on as follows: “When involving children more in making different decisions and carrying out various activities, children take more initiative. Educators say they have a greater focus on children’s resources, as the didactic approach is oriented toward enlarging what actually was a success for the children. So, with the children’s participation we also see a renewal of educational practice” (Document 2).

This passage illustrates the relationship between participation, responsibility and independence. In addition to the content, the impact of participation on children (see section “4.5 Influenced factors by EE”) is also outlined, as are the didactic requirements to facilitate active participation (see section “4.3 Pedagogical requirements”). Hence, if the objective is to guarantee child-centered education that is responsive to children’s needs, it seems imperative for the children to be actively engaged in decision-making processes.

The assumption of responsibility is an inherent aspect of self-determination and freedom. Documents 13 and 18, for instance, indicate that a distinct children’s parliament is established for this objective, with the intention of simultaneously imparting democratic values. “The children’s parliament meets once a month and discusses topics relevant to the children. They can express their needs/wishes/complaints here” (Document 13).

This shows that democracy and the active participation of children are seen as important contents in EE.

4.4.3 Space and care

The subcategory “Space and care” consists of EE content that focuses on the provision of space. EE should create spaces in which children can experience safety and care, and where they can be themselves. In Document 1, for example, EE is described as a place “[...] where there is space and time.” “Having a good time is placed in the context of leisure education as the physical place where there is space and experiences of freedom and leisure, as well as experiences of co-determination and influence” (Document 1).

4.4.4 Development and learning

In contrast to the aforementioned subcategories, “development and learning” focuses on teacher’s professional development and learning. Again, there is considerable variation in the focus of the content included in the documents. Some national curricula, for instance, designated content and competences for EE are listed that are similar to those typically encountered in school settings, such as “Mathematics and Construction,” or “Digitization and Technology.” Other documents include a diverse range of learning content, that includes personal development, values, social norms and a healthy lifestyle. The topics collected in this sub-category are as follows:

- a) Creativity and curiosity
- b) Food, health and lifestyle
- c) Awareness of values, norms and rules
- d) Facing challenges and new skills
- e) Personal development
- f) Projects
- g) Digitization and Technology
- h) Ecology and environment
- i) Mathematics and Construction
- j) Reading and relaxing
- k) Communication and language

As previously noted in “section 4.2 Institutions and structure,” EE concepts are frequently distinguished from school concepts. This perspective is also reflected to some extent in the learning content. In addition to school-related learning content, EE content revolves around the promotion of curiosity, creativity, new skills and hobbies. Document 16 includes references to personal development and self-confidence: “In this context, the main aim is to strengthen self-confidence and self-esteem. Children learn to assess themselves and recognize their own strengths and weaknesses. They develop concepts and strategies to overcome their weaknesses and build on their strengths. The pupils’ self-confidence and ability to empathize are promoted in equal measure.”

4.5 Factors influenced by EE

The final main category “Factors influenced by EE” encompasses factors that are influenced by EE. The following subcategories were derived from the documents:

- a) Well-being
- b) Development
- c) Academic performance
- d) Life opportunities
- e) School climate, attitude and behavior
- f) Belonging, social learning and inclusion

The documents described expected effects of EE on children’s and young adults’ academic performance, their school-related behavior and attitudes as well as the school climate. Documents 2, 11 and 15, for example, indicated that school-related behavior, attitudes and academic performance are influenced by pupils’ “active participation.”

The subcategory “Development” is distinct from “Academic performance” as it contains those effects of EE that are not only centered around academic performance, but go beyond by including social, emotional and cognitive aspects. When considering EE’s influence on children’s development and on their “Life opportunities,” documents mention short-term and long-term effects: “Childcare that complements family and school life offers children stability and security and promotes equal opportunities for children of different social and cultural backgrounds, languages, religions and genders” (Document 12).

The documents pay special attention to the categories “Well-being” and “Belonging, social learning and inclusion.” EE can have an impact on the sense of belonging and the development

and maintenance of friendships, which in turn promote inclusion. These potentials also point to the key challenges that emerged in all participating countries, namely that the children who would benefit most from EE are not always the ones who participate - especially children from families with low incomes and little formal education, with languages other than the national language often experience limited access to EE. Document 1 reports that: “[...] research has emphasized the importance of this community element for young people who attend a leisure or youth club. A community where experiences of belonging and being included, hanging out with friends, and being with pedagogues who are good to talk to and who respect you, have been highlighted in several Nordic studies.”

Some factors within this sub-category are related to one another. For instance, well-being is mentioned in relation to belonging, social learning and inclusion. “[...] relationships and socializing are emphasized as important conditions in leisure education that both promote well-being and prevent unhappiness” (Document 1).

Finally, the documents name some content-related dimensions, such as active participation and collaborative decision making are expected to have an influence on pupils’ well-being. “Well-being thus also seems to be linked to the children’s experiences of freedom to choose what they want to do in their free time. Being able to decide for themselves, to choose how the afternoon and evening should take place outside the school setting, is found several times in the research interviews across ages and different leisure education institutions” (Document 1).

5 Discussion

The aim of this study was to gain an understanding of what is particularly important in transnational research on EE, to learn from different national structures, processes and intentions of EE and to derive recommendations for leadership, policy and educational institutions.

5.1 Limitations

First, limitations of this research should be mentioned. In particular, the literature on EE is limited to the participating countries in the Erasmus+ “EKCO project,” Austria, Switzerland, Denmark, Sweden and Norway. Future studies should analyze further countries by building on the five EE categories identified in this study: (1). Factors influencing EE, (2). Institutions and Structure, (3). Pedagogical requirements, (4). Content of EE, (5). Factors influenced by EE. Another limitation is that the project’s research team was deliberately selected for research on EE and was therefore responsible for the selection of the documents (expert sample), which could have led to a subjective selection that is guided by interests. However, the clear advantage of this approach is that linguistic differences have provided access to literature that is not English. The documents from the partner countries were provided in the original language, which made it necessary to rely on the computer-generated translations done by “DeepL” prior to the analysis. The translations are, however, considered adequate for the purpose, as the experts affirm the results for their own countries.

5.2 Policy and leadership recommendations

The five categories identified in this research offer five key recommendations for educational policy on a national and at the EU level:

1. Factors influencing EE: Extended education has been established in all countries for many years, even if it has had a longer tradition in some countries and has been rolled out more recently in others as part of political innovation programs. Legal and organizational difficulties such as different employers or unclear regulations should therefore be reviewed and revised as far as possible. Cooperation between different countries and institutions could facilitate knowledge transfer and successful concepts can be adopted. This would help to establish a supportive structure in the schools. Support for schools regarding school development and accompanying research also appears to be necessary, as some countries have set up broad accompanying research and some hardly have any studies to show for it. Similar to teaching, specific responses are needed for specific student characteristics such as language skills and socio-economic status.
2. Institutions and structure: The importance of EE has been highlighted in the previous sections. The document analysis shows major intranational differences in all countries regarding spatial and staffing resources and costs. It seems necessary to establish minimum standards to reduce these differences as far as possible. The importance of organization within schools was also emphasized in all countries – educational governance should offer exchange formats, further training and organizational development based on good practices.
3. The results highlight the need of a further development of institutional autonomy to adapt to current local contexts and needs and increased cooperation between school, EE and other involved stakeholders, such as parents or social workers. This would allow for a more effective use of resources (time, infrastructure, staff) and support innovative and equitable practices in EE (Sørensen and Torfing, 2015). This quest is supported by governance perspectives that stress the importance of enabling self-governance of institutions (Wilkins and Olmedo, 2019). Educational policy should provide goals that serve the common good and that allow autonomy of individual schools as well as the creation of networks on the local, national and supranational level. Institutional structures that support “regulated self-regulation” (Torfing and Triantafyllou, 2013, p. 15), can help reduce complexity, coordination issues and quality assurance in leadership processes that are characterized by collaborative networks of institutions and other stakeholders (Wilkins and Olmedo, 2019). Finally, from an equity perspective, leadership should pay attention to the access to and distribution of participatory power and leverage of influential stakeholders in educational institutions to mitigate marked-based power dynamics that

run risk of excluding people of disadvantaged backgrounds (Torfing and Triantafyllou, 2013, p. 17).

4. Pedagogical requirements: At the pedagogical level, the qualification of staff should be specified. While some of the analyzed countries require a qualification at the academic level as a standard, others employ unqualified staff. An EU-wide minimum standard would be necessary to improve the quality of children's education. Likewise, organizational development within educational institutions must be promoted at this level to improve the cooperation of educators. This points to the role of school leadership and teacher appraisal, as well as the provision of quality initial and in-service teacher training, in the continuous development of staffs' pedagogical competences and organizational cultures that are responsive to their contextual needs.
5. Content of EE: The core content of EE is discussed very differently in the various countries, but there also seem to be debates within the countries. While in some countries the goal is "learning," others promote the self-determination of children. It is recommended to use these differences as inspiration for a lived diversity of content, since in contrast to teaching, EE is based on voluntary offers, personal and community-based interests as well as access of individuals to EE.
6. Factors influenced by EE: Numerous student characteristics are said to be influenced by EE – such as well-being, personal development, academic performance, life opportunities, school climate and social belonging including inclusion in the documents. This content, as outlined above, is shared by all countries, even if there is variance. It is recommended that the governments consider pedagogical requirements and offer clear and beneficial framework conditions, resources and training, as well as programs to promote organizational development. In addition to that, the comparative analysis has shown difficulties in access to EE in all participating countries – the ones who could benefit the most do not always have the opportunity to participate in EE.

This study points to an increasing institutionalization and decentralization of informal education (care, leisure time, learning support, cultural, social, personal and health related activities) through the collaborative provision of education by different stakeholders. Consequently, educational leadership on the school, local, national and international level needs to ask new questions, such as: (1) What is the role of EE institutionalized informal education? (2) What are the goals of EE? (3) What are the characteristics of the student and staff body? (4) Which aspects need to be further developed? (5) Which resources and practices do already exist in the network of professionals in EE? (5) In which ways can collaborative efforts and training support the provision of quality EE? And (6), at which governmental level can these developments be best be governed?

5.3 Future research directions

These results provide clear indications of where further research and governance efforts could be directed at both

the transnational and national level. On the academic level, transdisciplinary sociological and organizational analyses could shed more light on the emerging field of EE (see Maag Merki and Altrichter, 2015) and on possible avenues to support education quality and equality of opportunity in education (Bae et al., 2019; Entrich, 2020; Holmberg, 2021; Cipollone and Stich, 2017). From a gender perspective, the role of EE in institutionalized childcare could be examined further to offer insight on the relationship between social, economic and educational opportunities of children's primary caregivers, who are predominantly women (Berghammer et al., 2019; Felderer et al., 2006; Schierbaum and Ecarius, 2022; Zartler et al., 2011). On a social level, the facilitation of access to health (Murray et al., 2024), cultural and social learning opportunities in EE (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Noam and Triggs, 2018) could be studied more closely. On a leadership level, a governance perspective could support the effective allocation of expertise to the demands of EE and allow the implementation of solutions that are tailored to specific institutional or regional contexts. This can provide insights for policy development and raise new questions for quality assurance and professional training. Recommended policy and organizational guidelines that promote social innovation and collaboration through governance practices are the (1) adaptivity to current contexts and needs, (2) pragmatic and realistic use of available resources, (3) a distribution of power to allow autonomy and support self-management of educational institutions and involved stakeholders, (4) horizontal integration of all stakeholders to share needs and ideas, (5) collaboration to pool resources, and (6) the integration of diverse groups (Sørensen and Torfing, 2015).

5.4 Key findings

This paper identified five central categories of EE: The first category contains factors that shape EE, such as national frameworks or educational policy structures. Three categories were identified that describe structures and processes: the institutional structures, pedagogical requirements and EE content. The fifth category describes effects of EE, such as the well-being of children and young people, or the promotion of educational opportunities and positive effects on student performance. These categories should not be considered as isolated but understood in relation to one another by paying attention their interaction. The potential outcomes of EE depend on policy structures in the same ways that EE content and design is based on EE teacher competence, leadership support and the quality of collaboration with internal and external stakeholders. A governance perspective shows that EE is influenced by a multitude of conditions and that the overall design of EE in the countries is influenced by their respective political circumstances. Consequently, a standardized solution or a cross-national approach will not necessarily yield the same results in every country. However, there is potential for mutual learning and knowledge transfer through the study of individual approaches of the countries. Another important contribution of this paper is to provide an understanding of possible blind spots in the current overall discourse on EE. In effect, it can be surmised that there are areas that are not sufficiently addressed in the existing research on EE.

These include the promotion of equal opportunities for children of disadvantaged family backgrounds, the fostering of critical and creative thinking and the role of educational governance and leadership in providing quality EE.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in this study are included in this article/[Supplementary material](#), further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

BK: Data curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review and editing. AE: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review and editing. JL: Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review and editing.

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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.

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The author(s) verify and take full responsibility for the use of generative AI in the preparation of this manuscript. DeepL was used to translate the documents.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2025.1537034/full#supplementary-material>

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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.

KEYWORDS

leadership, qualitative research, all-day schools, governance, collaborative leadership, distributed leadership

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 heterogeneous 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 structures¹ (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

¹ Yet, in some countries, such as Sweden, Italy and France a stronger connection between education and care and early development of institutionalized care offerings for school-age students can be observed.

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 respective 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

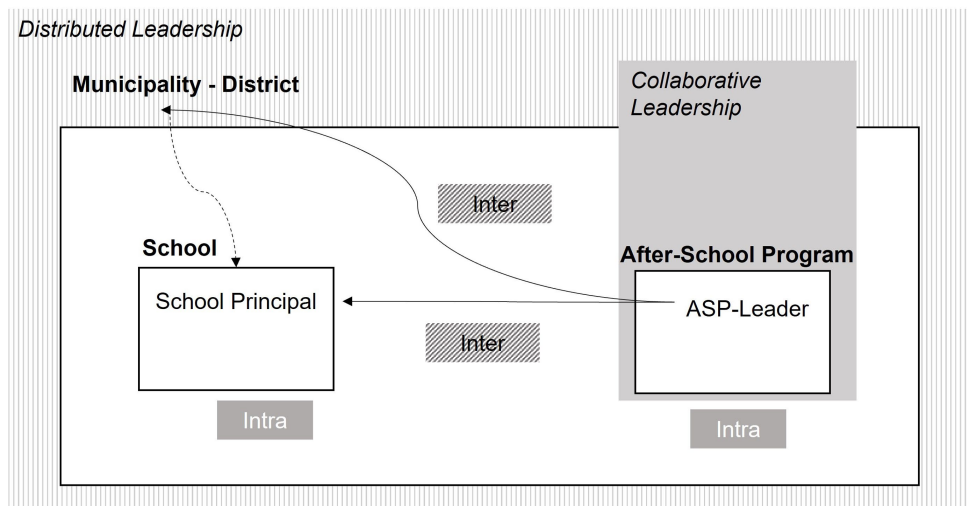


FIGURE 1
Dual framework of leadership in ASP.

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 (Cummins 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.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Ethikkommission, pädagogische Hochschule Bern. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The ethics committee/institutional review board waived the requirement of written informed consent for participation because all participants had been informed about the data handling and protection at the start of the interview. They all gave informed oral consent. A script lead all interviewers in this procedure. Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

Author contributions

MJ: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Resources. LA: Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. BS: Data curation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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"Why do I do what I do?" The meaning of work from the perspective of social pedagogues as informal leaders in all-day schools

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The number of all-day schools in Switzerland is growing fast. However, the development of new guidelines and regulations in this field is lagging. In their unique position, the professionals not only execute but also define and lead educational practices in all-day schools. In the present study, problem-based group interviews were conducted with extended educational staff in schools in urban Switzerland to review their educational practices and to uncover the meaning they ascribe to their work. The interviews provided insights into professional beliefs and attitudes and were analyzed using thematic analysis. The data revealed two areas of tension in which social pedagogues operate: on the one hand between "fulfilling individual needs and serving a large number of children" and on the other hand between "providing spaces for experience and building trusting and close relationships with children." Different ways of shaping the work can be determined, depending on the professional background and qualification of the staff. In the future, it is essential to make the work of staff in all-day schools visible and to highlight the challenges in dealing with different demands in the hope that a coherent attitude toward their work will emerge.

KEYWORDS

all-day school, educational practice, educational policy, non-formal learning, informal learning, informal leadership, school-based extended education

1 Introduction and research question

Extended education provides a range of services outside the regular school hours that vary in form, purpose, and ownership. It includes private tutoring, cram schools, all-day schools, before and after-school programs, and youth development programs (Bae, 2020). Compared to more traditional educational settings like schools and early childhood education, research knowledge about this diverse field is scarce.

In Switzerland, institutionalized, non-compulsory extended educational services at public schools are known as "Tagesstrukturen" (daytime structures), and schools providing these services are called "Tagesschulen" (all-day schools) (EDK, 2022). Public schools, mostly in urban areas, offer such services before and after lessons and during lunchtime. The staff has a diverse professional background, ranging from unqualified childminders to university-trained social pedagogues. The number of all-day schools has risen sharply in the last 15 years, particularly in urban areas (Federal Statistical Office, 2020). In the city of Zurich, for example,

in 2008, 28% of pupils were integrated into this structure, and by 2023, this figure had risen to 65% (Department of School and Sport City of Zurich, Switzerland, 2012a,b).

The first institutionalized, non-compulsory extended educational services for schoolchildren (“Kinderhort”) opened in Switzerland at the end of the 19th century as a junction between family and school. It was their task to complement both family and school. At the beginning of the 20th century, this focus shifted toward a primarily caring character and complementary family tasks (Staub, 2021). The expansion of all-day schools was intensified and became politically acceptable to the majority at the end of the 20th century. The reasons for advocating an expansion were manifold, such as the decline in births (Crotti, 2015; Schüpbach and Herzog, 2009), increased shortages in the labor market (Criblez and Manz, 2011), with gender equality anchored in law since 1981 and the Gender Equality Act, which came into force in 1996 (Criblez and Manz, 2011; Crotti, 2015). In short, the introduction of all-day schools is warranted by the equality of men and women, economic and socio-political reasons, and preventive goals.

In addition, due to Swiss federalism, there are no defined mandates or binding guidelines at a national level (e.g., a curriculum). Switzerland also does not have a specific training program for the staff in all-day schools. The municipalities are responsible for the organization and structure of these services, resulting in a great variety of framework conditions and performance (Department of Education, Canton of Zurich, 2021, p. 12). Thus, individual schools mainly develop a service that suits their local needs.

Unsurprisingly, professionals in all-day schools deal with various complex tasks, divergent goals, and different expectations. These include designing spaces and structures for playing, planning activities and excursions, balancing children’s freedom with the need for intervention, and managing educational policies such as the staff-child ratio, the division of shared spaces at school, and the shortage of qualified staff (Department of Education, Canton of Zurich, 2021).

In their unique position, the professionals do not only execute but also define and lead educational practices in all-day schools. They shape educational offerings and create content, space, and interaction for and with the children based on their professional or individual understanding. Meanwhile, their practice also defines the purpose of these programs in all-day schools, which take place before and after school lessons. This underscores their significant influence and power in shaping the educational landscape. Since staff in German-speaking Switzerland shape and organize their work without a basis of binding guidelines, the following research question is of great interest: What meaning do staff members ascribe to their work in all-day schools?

2 State of research

With the continuing expansion of all-day schools in Switzerland, research efforts on this topic have intensified in recent years. There is a particular focus on the cooperation between the two professions, the teachers and the social pedagogues in all-day schools. The collaboration of the professionals seems to be inhibited by structural issues, but mainly cultural ones, as the professionals do not collaborate but rather organize their work alongside each other on parallel tracks (Chiapparini et al., 2018; Chiapparini and Scholian, 2023; Schuler Braunschweig and Kappler, 2023). A recent study also revealed that

cooperation is shaped differently depending on the orientation of the social pedagogues in an all-day school. Some try to support teachers or take on tasks assigned to them by the teachers. However, they consider the cooperation with the parents as a challenge and thus sometimes feel powerless. Other social pedagogues give more weight to their professional content or individual preferences and only respond to the expectations and demands of teachers and parents if they think they are legitimate (Scholian, 2025).

There are also many studies on the quality of all-day schools in terms of effectiveness (e.g., Von Allmen et al., 2018) which revealed that attendance at all-day schools did not have a positive impact on the students’ academic output. Further studies on children in all-day schools indicated the presence of well-being spaces for children (e.g., Schuler Braunschweig, 2023; Wetzel and Näpfl, 2022). An evaluation of the work environment in all-day schools concluded that employees are motivated and perceive their work as meaningful (Windlinger, 2020). However, they also experience frustration in some cases, particularly when they cannot meet the needs of all children due to the large group size or a lack of resources. The noise level, and insufficient staff space and children’s retreat areas were also criticized. Concerning quality requirements, Windlinger (2020) states that staff without training have lower expectations in terms of training compared to trained staff. At the same time, the study also showed that many employees have precarious working conditions. They often are employed on hourly wages, at low workloads, and without training (ibid.).

Research outside Switzerland reveals further insights into work in all-day schools or extended education. German professionals see their role as complementary to the families, by compensating for educational deficits, equalizing for deficits with educational programs, and a motivating learning environment. Others see their role in offering a “caring, supportive counter-world that is—apparently or actually—denied to them [the children] in the family” (Idel et al., 2013, p. 256). In another study on cooperation, Silkenbeumer et al. (2017) concluded that, compared to teachers, it is difficult to find “unique selling points” for social pedagogues who work in schools. In Denmark, Moloney and Pope (2020) identified an additional field of tension concerning work in all-day schools—named Skolefritidsordning [SFO] in Denmark: enabling leisure and recreation while encouraging leadership and responsibility. They claim that the focus has shifted from leisure and recreation to promoting academic achievement and accountability. Sweden has a curriculum for employees in extended education—called School-age Educare in Sweden. The institutions serve to compensate for “children’s different backgrounds, where children can follow their interests and needs “and, meanwhile, “complement [...] the family “(Lager and Gustafsson-Nyckel, 2021, p. 7).

3 Theoretical framework

The present contribution assumes that the organization of everyday life in all-day schools is the product of a process of sensemaking (Weick et al., 2005) among staff, guided by different goals of their work, different needs, and expectations of children, parents, and society. The diversity of staff members regarding their disciplines and qualifications adds to the vast array of pedagogical practices. The sensemaking theory is a suitable framework for

understanding how individuals and organizations interpret and act upon information in complex and ambiguous situations. The concept is about a “retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing” (Weick et al., 2005, p. 409). The term sensemaking is used “when a flow of organizational circumstances is turned into words and salient categories,” the organization is embodied in “organizing itself [...] in written and spoken texts” and when talking about it shapes behavior (Weick et al., 2005).

The sensemaking concept comprises various characteristics and follows a process. The starting point of sensemaking is “chaos” (Weick et al., 2005, p. 411). It is about noticing this and then labeling and categorizing [the chaos] to stabilize the streaming of experience (Weick et al., 2005). To create meaning, the abstract relates to the concrete. Various social factors influence this process. Sensemaking takes place in communication and is “an ongoing process of making sense of the circumstances in which people collectively find [themselves] [...] and of the events that affect them” (Taylor and Van Every, 2000, p. 58). Consequently, sensemaking is used to deal with uncertainties. It is not about whether something is right or wrong but about explaining activities to understand them. The “description is important mostly because it sustains motivation” (Weick et al., 2005, p. 415). The focus is on plausibility and the interpretation of actions (ibid., p. 409). Sensemaking is about constructing frameworks that make actions comprehensible and manageable. When staff members of an organization are confronted with ambiguity and different approaches, they search for meanings and settle on a point of view. Weick et al. (2005) assume that these convictions are reflected in actions and routines in the organizations. Sensemaking theory is also described as a means by which action can change institutions and the environment (p. 419).

This study aims to unfold the sensemaking process of the staff in all-day schools. Due to the absence of steering documents and explicit goals, it is assumed that the staff must act and perform, define routines, and ascertain their sense of work while facing uncertainties.

4 Materials and methods

The data originates from an international three-year research collaboration: The project “To Make the Invisible Visible” (TIV) aims to provide an understanding of educational practice in extended educational services at schools in three countries—Australia, Sweden, and Switzerland. In the Swiss study, a case study was chosen as the research design. Therefore, group interviews ($N = 4$, including 15 persons) were conducted with staff members (qualified and non-qualified) in two all-day schools in urban Switzerland to determine what sense they ascribe to their work. The research team asked the staff members to participate in the study via the school principal. All interviewees volunteered to participate in the interview and signed a declaration of consent. The interviews were conducted on school premises, audio-recorded and transcribed, and lasted approximately 1 h. The professional background of the participants is the following: Three persons are social pedagogues with a tertiary education degree; one person is in education at the tertiary level; four persons hold a vocational qualification in childcare; three persons are assistants and do not have a pedagogical education; four persons perform their civilian service (one option within the mandatory military service for young men in Switzerland).

The guidelines for the group interviews were based on the problem-centered interview (Witzel, 2000). They included a request at the beginning to briefly characterize the all-day school and its various features, such as area, location, age group, or daily routines. The questions were about what the staff members find crucial when looking after the children, and about how they perceive the spatial environment and the time phases within a day. Other questions were about whether they plan the daily offers or spontaneously react to the situation and whether there are principles or concepts on which they base their work. Finally, the staff members were asked whether and how all-day school settings have changed in the time they have been working in the field, how they define a “super professional in all-day school,” and what challenges they see in their everyday work—always with the request to describe specific situations.

The interviews provided insights into professional beliefs and attitudes and were analyzed using systematic thematic analysis. Following Braun and Clarke (2022) we proceeded in six steps for this structured, sequential approach to interpreting research data: (1) data familiarization; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; (6) producing the report. To ensure an intersubjective validation, the first and sixth steps were carried out in groups of four researchers, while one researcher conducted steps two to five.

5 Results

In the following, the relevant topics that emerged in the analysis process are presented and classified with the help of the concept of sensemaking. Considering this concept, the rising numbers of all-day schools with more children without binding policy guidelines are viewed analytically as the moment of “chaos.” The framework conditions in all-day schools in cities were often different in the past: There were smaller, mixed-age, and consistent groups of children who were looked after by people trained in social pedagogy. The expansion of all-day schools resulted in adjustments to the pedagogical concepts at various levels and, therefore, also affected the work of the staff referring to this development process in the interviews. As a result of these developments, staff seem to be forced to rethink their work and their associated role. They must review their opportunities and justify their work. At the same time, they are confronted with different requirements, must deal with uncertainties, and settle for a point of view.

5.1 Making sure that the children feel comfortable is an overarching professional task

Despite the changes in the job field in all-day schools and the different senses they see in their work, all staff interviewed want to ensure that the children feel comfortable and perceive this as their overriding task. This means accompanying and supporting the children and responding to their needs. Children should be encouraged to organize their time independently and according to their needs.

Most of the staff feel that they operate in a field of tension. In the interviews, we found different patterns of how staff members deal with two specific areas of tension:

- Fulfilling individual needs and serving many children.
- Providing spaces for experience and building trusting and close relationships with children

5.2 Fulfilling individual needs and serving many children

The staff is torn between the necessity to concentrate on group dynamics, to offer a suitable place for everyone, and to focus on the individual. How employees deal with this area of tension differs from one another.

One pattern that emerges from the data on the field of tension is that various staff members see the development as contradictory to their function given the large group they must supervise.

It is important to me that I have time to respond to the children's needs, which is no longer possible now, I would like to have time for various things [...]. If they [the children] start a project, I would like to support them, which is impossible due to a lack of resources. (A, q. P3).

Three professionals repeatedly refer to the change that has taken place resulting from the increased attendance of children in all-day schools by differentiating between now and the past. The discrepancy between the situation “in the past,” and how one would like it to be now often leads to complaints about the current situation and results in professional dissatisfaction.

The rapid growth of the team, and high fluctuation rates, we used to be one team, but now we are separated from each other, with many children, with a complete separation of the large groups of children. (A, q. P1).

This person (P1) repeatedly uses the situation from a few years ago as a point of reference, when all-day schools were more family-based, with smaller and mixed-age groups of children who ate lunch together at one table, and one staff member was responsible for the same children for several years. Due to the expansion of all-day schooling and the resulting rise in the number of children, the children are increasingly looked after in age-homogeneous groups (per level) and eat in an “open restaurant.” A staff member does not always supervise the same child over several years.

This has led to a change in the purpose of their work, which person P1 describes as follows.

I would like to accompany them and enable them to have a nice day, to come to rest, to have a place to be, to play, to find out what they would actually like to do, to find out who they are, what they would like to delve into. I would like to give them opportunities to participate as much as possible. The small concerns get lost, and a lot of children just tag along. And then our attention is drawn to the children who act up. (A, q., P1).

Some staff members reject new developments since they are incompatible with the meaning they assign to their work, as mentioned above. For other staff members, the developments are consistent with their meaning of work. One professional emphasizes

the negative aspects of the previous family-based form of work and describes the job today as more professional, as can be seen in the following quote:

We started small. There were far fewer children and adults. It was much more informal, but now, we work much more professionally. Now, we also get a lot of input from other professionals and can give them observation assignments for individual children. It is also enriching for the children; they now interact much more with each other outside of the group. (E, q. P4).

Professionalism is also reflected in weekly meetings and regular multiprofessional dialogue, which leads to adjustments and further developments. The constant documentation of everyday life in all-day school and staff members assigned to a child is a means of professionalization. The staff members are organized into sub-groups and schedule regular exchange meetings.

At the same time, another person points out a benefit of the new development: Children can shape their relationships with staff in a self-determined way in everyday life.

These relationships have changed. I think this is also positive because now the child can see which person suits them and with whom they can build a relationship[...]. (A, q. P1).

5.3 Providing space for experience and building trusting and close relationships with children

Data on the purpose of the work showed two central issues, namely the need to provide children with spaces for experience and to build trusting and close relationships with children.

Staff members see their job as providing children with spaces to experience various activities and play together. One or more staff members are responsible for one room during several hours or the whole day. Based on the children's needs, the staff organize activities and design the rooms accordingly.

The library is kept open to serve as a retreat for children who need quiet. We also set up activity zones so that the children can pursue their needs, e.g., creativity, free play, construction, exercise, and rest/relaxation; different spaces are important for the children, and we provide different activities. Concept: free roaming in the activity zones according to the children's needs. (E, q. P3).

Although the staff organize various activities for the children during the day, they remain flexible. This means, for example, that planned activities are rearranged or not carried out if the children express other needs.

For example, if we plan an activity and go outside with the children, I do not insist that the children do precisely what we had planned. If they have other ideas or needs, that's ok, and I take up the children's input on what they want to do. (E, q., P2).

Some staff mention that, depending on which area they are responsible for, they do not see all the children during their work.

They consider themselves replaceable and interchangeable because the quality of their relationship quality does not depend on them but on their (shared) understanding of their profession. Instead, they see themselves in the role of being present and accessible at various locations. Children decide which area they choose, with whom they play, and which staff they interact with. However, staff will intervene if they think the child's choice of a game or playmate is not appropriate.

In contrast, staff members who reclaim the traditional model characterize socio-educational work as building trusting and close relationships with each child. Educational work is carried out through relationship-oriented work, which is highly individual; therefore, people are not interchangeable. Staff members become the children's confidants and act proactively when conflicts arise. Because they know the children, they are aware of conflicts that can arise between children. Two professionals criticize a lack of clarity regarding their professional role and proclaim a lack of pedagogical orientation. Their mission is unclear, and they are not (or cannot be) guided by any socio-pedagogical concept.

In addition to relationship-oriented work, six staff members define their work as being determined by seasons, topics, or projects: for example, making seasonal window decorations, celebrating Halloween, building huts in the playground, rehearsing for a play, or organizing handicrafts. These activities are partly initiated by the children and implemented in collaboration with the staff. They consider it their task to turn children's initiatives into project work.

Building a hut on the school grounds was a socio-educational project that was very open - the children took it up from holiday care and then we continued to support it, and we added a second season. (A, q. P3).

5.4 The meaning of work depending on professional background, qualifications, and position

The interviews showed that the function that staff ascribe to themselves in all-day schools depends significantly on their background, qualifications, and professional position in the school setting. The socio-pedagogically qualified professionals refer to socio-pedagogical goals, which represent their meaning of work (e.g., participation, children's needs, accompanying conflicts), and five of them describe the promotion of self and social skills as their goal. However, all the trained professionals are not very specific about how they implement these goals and principles. They describe a wide range of tasks and see the complexity of their actions in numerous dilemmas or strongly context-dependent interventions, which characterize their work.

In addition, two professionals emphasize that their task changes depending on the day or time of day. If there are fewer children present, or if children are supervised for a longer period of time, they can spend more time with one child or a group of children. This can be seen, for example, in the following statement:

There are three days that I find strenuous, that's when the children are very demanding. There are two days when I can catch my breath, when I have time to work on projects. (A, q., P1).

Staff members without socio-pedagogical training or qualifications do not justify the meaning of their work with socio-pedagogical principles, unlike qualified staff members. Three staff members without socio-pedagogical training, being primarily responsible for preparing and serving meals, describe their role as taking on educational work with precise tasks. They have a clearly defined function, such as making sure that children eat a healthy and balanced diet, "communicate respectfully" at the table, use "forms of politeness" (saying please and thank you), have "table manners" or appropriate "table culture."

There was also a situation where a boy said he would only eat vegetables if his dad cooked them. I was then able to motivate him to taste the vegetables, and he was so proud of having tried. He did not quite like them, but I told him it was great that he had tasted them anyway. (A, n. q., P3).

These educational tasks can be implemented at work, and the success is easy to measure. Unlike people with pedagogical qualifications, these staff members consider their work as clearly definable; they react primarily within their professional remit and develop their strategies.

All female staff members who are not pedagogically trained are guided by their experiences or ideas as mothers, as shown in the following quote: "We are all mothers, and we have our ideas and experiences to contribute."

In contrast, the unqualified young men in civilian service, who only work in all-day schools for a limited time, highlight a clear distinction between their work and school teaching. This means that there is no lesson plan like at school. Instead, they must always act based on the situation. Two community service workers emphasize that childcare work should not focus on behavioral norms but should give the children more freedom. This attitude coincides with the clear distinction they make between extended education services and school lessons in all-day schools. The purpose of school is learning and working. Childcare is leisure time, and for them as staff, it is a work of trust.

Two pedagogically unqualified community workers see their function more as teaching the children everyday things, such as "life," "making friends," and "not just moving within classic normative boundaries." One describes the work so that every day is different and depends on the group dynamics. To be able to deal with these group dynamics and the situations experienced, it is essential to work on a trusting relationship.

In contrast to the unqualified female staff members who refer to their role as mothers, the community workers put more emphasis on "self-evident" values, which can also be individual, as a point of reference for their actions.

6 Discussion

The number of all-day schools in Switzerland is growing fast. However, the development of new guidelines and regulations in this field is lagging. The increasing number of children calls for a redesign of educational activities and space in some all-day schools and, therefore, partly also changes in the meaning of work. In addition, there are various goals associated with the expansion that the

employees should fulfill. These goals are often contradictory, such as enabling parents (still often mothers) to work while at the same time doing preventative work (Criblez and Manz, 2011). Consequently, some staff see different purposes in their practice work. With their peers, they create routines on which they can rely, eventually shaping the culture in all-day schools and defining a sense of their work. This is reflected in the different areas of tension we found in this study.

Previous research confirms most of our findings. Available studies also revealed various fields of tension, such as the frustration of being unable to meet the needs of all the children (e.g., Windlinger, 2020; Moloney and Pope, 2020). In the areas of tension in our study, the staff in all-day schools attributed new and various meanings to their constantly changing work to reach a consensus between their conception of work and the practice. Further, the results confirm the findings of a Swiss study, which shows that the orientation of social pedagogues is individually defined and focused on different things, depending on the team (Scholian, 2025). This leads to diversity in how the work is organized by the individual employees and what meaning they see in their work.

However, there are also differences to previous study results. In contrast to research results from other countries with a higher degree of professionalization in the field, such as Sweden or Denmark, the data material shows hardly any attribution of a function to performance or the compensation of deficits in the family (Lager and Gustafsson-Nyckel, 2021; Moloney and Pope, 2020). It remains to be seen whether these aspects will become more vital with the further development of all-day schools. In the present study, only unqualified staff members spoke about compensation for deficits in the family by referring to their role as “mothers” and adding the teaching of table manners to their job tasks. This task is easier to perform, whereas other tasks are more complex and more difficult to describe in concrete terms. Such actions are often situation-related and depend on the staff (qualifications) and the group dynamics.

The results also show how work in the all-day school has changed. It shifted from a place that was supposed to replace families to an environment where children are agents of their leisure time. They can, for example, decide when they want to eat and with whom they wish to interact. However, there might be fewer opportunities for social pedagogues to interact closely with children and to meet their individual needs, which is an aspect that is regretted by some professionals and is seen as a loss of quality.

Lunch is often also mentioned in the interviews as a sensitive topic in all-day schools in Switzerland, because school lunches are still not the norm, especially in rural areas (Crotti, 2015; Federal Statistical Office, 2020). In no other country—except the Netherlands –, do women work as much part-time as in Switzerland (Crotti, 2015). Thus, they are responsible for providing lunch at home between morning and afternoon lessons. This is another indication that all-day schools, in the sense of institutionalized, non-compulsory extended educational services at public schools, are still young in their development in Switzerland.

Nevertheless, the social pedagogues keep the new business running, and some state that they no longer meet their professional expectations. They do their job within the framework conditions and resources defined by the municipality so that parents can combine family and career. However, they can only partially perform preventive tasks or fulfill the needs of the children. Only on certain days or at specific times of day when there are fewer children on site do they

have the opportunity to interact closely with individual children, as mentioned in the interviews. Under these conditions, it is essential to constantly check how comfortable the children feel in the all-day school.

The interviews also revealed different patterns depending on the educational level and qualifications of the staff members. This means that the mix of trained and untrained staff contributes to the diversity of meaning ascribed to the work. Qualified staff refer to socio-pedagogical principles but rarely make explicit links to examples where they are established.

This leads to a higher need for professional intervention and negotiation and a broader societal understanding of the potential of all-day schools and, associated with it, the work of social pedagogues. Today, there are limits to the professionalization of staff, especially in all-day schools, due to the precarious working conditions. Nevertheless, most staff are motivated and see their work as meaningful, as an earlier study shows (Windlinger, 2020). However, there exist no binding pedagogical standards or educational policies that preserve a clear professional identity for those working in these institutions (EDK, 2022; Windlinger, 2020). In addition, it is difficult to clearly define unique selling points for social pedagogues in schools to show what added value the employees provide (Silkenbeumer et al., 2017). Therefore, the definition of the aim and purpose of all-day schools is left to the various stakeholders and their perspectives. In this ambiguous or undefined area, the pedagogical mission and its implementation become highly variable.

At present, it can be assumed that the care for and work with children in all-day schools depends on how the individual staff members define their work. If a function of their work is supported by other staff members, the school management, the authorities, and the parents, it seems suitable. So, it is vital to establish nationwide principles for social pedagogues working in the school sector – such as those that exist in Switzerland for youth work (Swiss Umbrella Association for Socio-Cultural Animation in Child and Youth Work - Fundamentals for Decision-Makers and Experts, 2018) or school social work (Avenir Social and School social Workers Association, 2025) or a curriculum like in Sweden (Lager and Gustafsson-Nyckel, 2021). This creates a quality standard for social pedagogues in all-day schools and the children who attend them. The care of the children would, therefore, be—at least less—dependent on the staff members. It would also provide a basis for standardized further training. Standardized further training is necessary so that social pedagogues become aware of the areas of tension, can deal with them, and can legitimize the quality they can provide.

Finally, it is crucial to make the work of staff in all-day schools visible and to highlight the challenges in dealing with different demands, hoping that a coherent attitude toward their work will emerge in the future. The study revealed important insights into the pedagogical work in all-day schools from the employees' perspective. Since this is a qualitative study of two selected schools in German-speaking Switzerland, the results cannot be generalized. However, this article aims to contribute to making the work visible and show challenges in the field. Further studies need to continue investigating the expansion of all-day schools and the impact on the work of social pedagogues. More schools need to be examined, including those in rural areas. The children's perspective must also be taken into account with the aim of gaining a more differentiated insight into the work,

investigate possible ways of dealing with the areas of tension, and demonstrate the quality achieved in day schools. At the same time, a basis for further training of social pedagogues can be created.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because the data are not publicly available due to the ethical guidelines of the project. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to Andrea Scholian, scod@zhaw.ch.

Ethics statement

Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

Author contributions

AS: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. CK: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. RS: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. PS: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Identifying an educational-economic code of quality in definitions of extended education: an example from school leaders in Sweden

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Knowledge about how quality in extended education is defined, formulated, and communicated regarding quality-related problems in educational practices, and school leaders' roles in these processes is limited. This article presents findings from research focusing on educational quality in extended education in Sweden (commonly known as School-age educare) is defined by school leaders in one Swedish municipality. The data examined written documents associated with governance and organizations of School-age educare created by school leaders at different levels of one Swedish municipality. The analysis of data was based on the concepts of Bernstein's pedagogical codes (2003), and from Scherp and Scherp's School organization model (2007). The results revealed that the educational-pedagogical code dominated, and the leisure-pedagogical and social-pedagogical codes only appeared sporadically in the analyzed documents. A new 'educational-economic' pedagogical code emerged during analysis. It included formulations indicating that quality can be addressed by economic actions. The analyzed documents revealed power structures between different levels of school leaders, and also a lack of shared understanding and definition of quality in extended education. School leaders should discuss, and agree on, what quality in extended education includes and not only rely on quantitative and measurable aspects of this educational practice.

KEYWORDS

extended education, educational quality, school leaders, school-age educare, case study

1 Introduction

Quality in education is a 'hot', multi-faceted contemporary issue in many ways. A critical element of problematization is that the notion of high educational quality is often defined, measured, and quantitatively compared through assessments of individual pupils' knowledge (Biesta, 2009), rather than contributions to the common good in society (UNESCO, 2021). This issue is particularly problematic if quality criteria that are applied to schools are also applied in extended educational practices such as School-age educare, which are traditionally mandated to provide care and social inclusion, as far as possible, in addition to education (Andersson, 2020). Extended education in Sweden is called School-age educare (SAEC) and is hereafter referred to that name and abbreviation. SAEC is supposed to provide complementary care before and after the school day, including meaningful care, play and restorative activities in a socially inclusive setting, in addition to formal classroom teaching (Klerfelt et al., 2020; Klerfelt and Ljusberg, 2018). Understanding the quality has been limited.

A Swedish study has shown that SAEC centers have often acted more as extended forms of compulsory schools, with associated focus largely on individual educational attainment, rather than the traditional complementary activities (Memišević, 2024). Thus, important elements of educare in Swedish SAEC seem to have been lost, or at least substantially diminished. Local school leaders play prominent roles not only in the formation and maintenance of educational practices, but also the communication and application of pedagogical ideas and values of their staff, pupils, and caretakers (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2023b). This article presents a study of how educational quality in SAEC from one Swedish municipality as defined by school leaders from various levels of the school organization originating in official documents. The aim is to contribute knowledge of how quality in SAEC is defined, formulated, and communicated regarding quality-related problems in Swedish SAEC practices, and school leaders' roles in these processes. The study was guided by the following research questions:

- How is quality in SAEC defined and formulated by school leaders in municipal documents?
- What pedagogical codes are present in the written definitions of SAEC quality?
- What are the implications of school leaders' definitions of quality for SAEC practices?

2 Educational quality in extended education

Measurable elements of educational quality include not only pupils' educational performance (nationally assessed) but also practice guidelines such as numbers of pupils per class, and areas available for indoor and outdoor activities (Swedish School Inspectorate, 2010). The latter are intended to ensure that educational conditions are equal and fair, or at least meet acceptable minimum standards, but this approach to defining the quality concept and associated practices has been questioned and problematized by educational philosophers and researchers (Biesta, 2009; Dahlberg et al., 2007). Briefly, this is because educational quality defined solely in measurable terms is rooted in a too narrow view of the purpose of education, which should not offer individuals possibilities of meaning-making solely through pre-defined educational goals (Biesta, 2014). Critics note the complementary importance of social elements that promote the development of wellbeing and justice for all (UNESCO, 2021). The associated problems may be particularly complex in contexts such as preschool (cf. Moss, 2017) and extended education, with broader aims than merely teaching and acquiring individual knowledge (such as school practice in general). In research focusing on educational quality in extended education in German speaking parts of Europe emphasis are on what effects extracurricular activities may have on academic achievements for pupils (i.e., Schuepbach, 2015). In a meta-analysis from the United States the results show an optimistic development of intellectual skills as well as social, physical and academic performance when attending after-school programs (Durlak et al., 2010). In a research study, the guidelines and children's perspectives of Swedish SAEC centers and German all day schools are compared (Fischer et al., 2022). The result of this comparison reveals that the educational policy in the two countries is similar regarding

development of for example, social skills, health, life-long learning, and well-being. However, the German quality framework, unlike the Swedish curriculum, also emphasize the academic skills (Fischer et al., 2022). When extended education mainly focuses on academic learning there is a risk of "schoolification" (Klerfelt and Stecher, 2018, p. 56) of the practice. Research in Swedish extended education has shown that educational practices of care are also framed and measured in a similar manner to those aiming to increase knowledge, such as in school (Memišević, 2024). This framing also has important performative implications, as assumed expectations and measurements of educational practices guide and affect those practices, including the definition and assessment of quality, as well as efforts to provide it (Löfdahl and Pérez Prieto, 2009; Löfgren, 2016).

2.1 School leadership and educational quality

The term "School leaders" is here used as a general term for all types of educational leaders where some have responsibility for whole school organizations, and some are principals with responsibility for one school unit. Especially principals play prominent roles in the formation and maintenance of educational practices, and both the communication and application of pedagogical ideas and values by their staff, pupils, and caretakers. Besides this, research point to that school leaders of today also are obliged to handle economic issues, in which it is argued that entrepreneurial leadership can be beneficial in this matter (Brauckmann-Sajkiewicz and Pashiardis, 2022). In the same vein, Hallinger (2003) finds that principals' leadership can be seen a process of development that is affected by the local school context for example financial resources, and the structure of the organization. In addition to providing opportunities to govern and develop extended education, school leaders must also maintain continuous dialog and collaboration with the staff, i.e., shared leadership (Kielblock, 2025) about the daily work and how to develop extended education practices. A further task for school leaders in Sweden is to organize SAEC in a manner that favors cooperation between SAEC staff, preschool classes and the schools. This also provides important overviews of the pupils' development, learning and education. Principals must also consider pupils' ages, staff competence, design of premises and the outdoor environment, and adapt the staff density and both sizes and composition of groups to enable delivery of the SAEC mission (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2023a). The Swedish National Agency for Education's latest assessment of the state of the education system (2023a), highlights challenges faced in SAEC. This regards quality related to its mission, including impacts of a shortage of trained teachers and low teacher-to-pupil ratios, and deterioration of conditions in SAEC in favor of schools in terms of resources and the utilization of premises. It also notes a shift in responsibility for SAEC operations from the governing body to the principal, who in turn delegates responsibility to teachers and other staff. A consequence of this is a gap between the overall responsibility for the SAEC conditions in terms of premises and resources and teachers' responsibility for teaching. Inadequate conditions inevitably impair SAEC quality and their ability to fulfill their mission (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2023a). The Swedish Schools Inspectorate's review of SAEC quality (2018) also reveals that principals are not sufficiently striving to clearly steer, set

goals, and follow up on teaching in SAEC. The review also shows that the teaching in SAEC tends to be marginalized in schools' systematic quality work. Accordingly, a recent assessment by the [Swedish National Agency for Education \(2023a\)](#) recognizes needs to increase the quality of teaching in SAEC and its inclusion in the schools' systematic quality work.

2.2 The context of Swedish school-age educare, SAEC

SAEC has been included in the national educational organization since the mid-1990s, and it has had its own part in the national curriculum for compulsory school since 2016 ([Swedish National Agency for Education, 2016](#)). SAEC is offered to all Swedish children between 6 and 12 years old. It is not compulsory, but about 57 percent of the cohort (about 500,000) are currently enrolled ([Swedish National Agency for Education, 2024](#)). SAEC has two main purposes: to provide care and meaningful activities before and after compulsory school days, and to offer teaching and learning in line with the curricular aims ([Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022](#)). Recent increases in societal divisions have also raised the importance of this educational practice for mitigating social exclusion and inequalities. However, despite the urgently required and emphasized societal function, several reports have found that the quality of SAEC practices is frequently low ([Swedish School Inspectorate, 2010, 2018](#); [Swedish National Agency for Education, 2023a](#)). Noted quality shortcomings in these reports include deficiencies in offering stimulating and meaningful leisure as well as good care. SAEC facilities may be regarded as lacking quality if they do not provide satisfactory conditions, and/or set goals or definitions of quality and anticipated results. Moreover, reports have consistently found increases in numbers of pupils, leading to increasingly large pupil groups and reductions in staff density. Further noted obstacles to good quality SAEC include deficiencies in premises' design and school leaders' developmental competence. According to the [Swedish School Inspectorate \(2010\)](#), leaders in more than half of the reviewed schools need more knowledge of the SAEC mission to enhance development of the practice. Similarly, the Swedish National Agency for Education's latest assessment of the Swedish school system (2023a) found that school leaders of several reviewed SAEC providers put little effort into setting goals, and both managing and following-up results. It highlights that the teaching in SAEC has low prioritization in the schools' systematic quality work. The finding that SAEC practices lack the quality needed to provide good care and meaningful activities for children and youths, in accordance with the stated mission, is clearly problematic. Moreover, this is exacerbated by lack of clarity regarding the definition of quality in informal settings, who should define, why it requires definition, and how current educational discourses on quality affect educational practices like SAEC.

2.3 Research perspectives on quality in Swedish SAEC

The inclusion of SAEC in the Swedish national curriculum (see part four) introduced in 2016, contributed to an increase in its legitimacy. However, the chances for staff to realize the curriculum in SAEC

practice are strongly influenced by frame factors, such as organizational elements, the time allocated for shared planning, access to dedicated premises, and involvement of staff with a university degree in education ([Norqvist, 2022](#)). For example, some SAEC staff have reported that the curricular text contributed to discussion about quality in terms of the content and pedagogical approach of the practice ([Norqvist, 2022](#)), but the mentioned frame factors inevitably affect the social relations and opportunities that can be provided in everyday practice within SAEC ([Lager, 2020](#)). Quality audits have focused on opportunities in SAEC to promote pupils' learning and development, in accordance with key elements as described in part four of the curriculum. According to [Andersson \(2020\)](#), this is a manifestation of an educational discourse on quality in SAEC that raises questions about whether teachers involved in SAEC should assess children individually, in stark contrast to previous group- or setting-based quality assessments ([Andersson, 2010, 2013](#)). It has also been found that tensions arise when more structured and individualized approaches to quality are introduced into traditional SAEC ([Lager et al., 2015](#)). Variations in, and effects of, settings and the times of activities add further complexities ([Lager, 2015](#)). [Lager \(2015\)](#) also found that although compulsory schools' quality work may provide a template for the conduct of quality work in SAEC, the social pedagogical discourse of SAEC was still prominent. Further, the staff engaged in SAEC may adapt their work to an implemented template for systematic quality work, which can lead to complications when a quality system is introduced into practice grounded in a social pedagogical tradition ([Andersson, 2013, 2020](#); [Lager, 2015](#)). Two contrasting ways of handling such changes have been identified. Some SAEC providers seem to have carried on as before, at least temporarily, despite the introduction of new curricular demands ([Boström and Berg, 2018](#)), while others seem to have abandoned the traditional features of SAEC in favor of more school-like practices ([Memišević, 2024](#)). Moreover, researchers have noted a shift in the prevailing discourse, from warnings about changes in the mission and conditions of SEAC (particularly threats to the social, restorative and recreational functions) toward fulfillment of the schools' curricular goals ([Memišević, 2024](#)). This has been reportedly accompanied by clashes between the traditional group-orientation in SAEC and school discourse (e.g., [Andersson, 2013, 2020](#); [Lager, 2015](#); [Memišević, 2024](#)). A Swedish practice-based study has also found that quality in SAEC is connected to several knowledge interests, and introduced the concepts technical, practical and liberating quality ([Kane, 2023](#)). Technical quality refers to doing the 'right thing' in relation to the curricular assignment and difficulties linked to voluntariness and individual assessment of pupils' goal fulfillment since it presupposes control of participation and assessment. Practical quality includes collegial sense-making in attempts to transform curricular text into everyday practice in SAEC. Liberating quality is largely about collegial reflections focused on problematizing norms and limitations with the aim to improve activities for both pupils and staff. It involves planning and designing practice with responsiveness and curiosity in line with the interests, needs and experiences of the children, as expressed by the children themselves ([Kane, 2023](#)).

2.4 Principals' responsibility for quality in Swedish SAEC

Quality in SAEC is a complex concept (see [Andersson, 2013](#); [Lager, 2015](#)), which is rarely applied in a manner that is fully

congruent with a practice rooted in social pedagogical traditions. Principals are the instructional leaders in SAEC facilities, and responsible for the educational quality within them. General advice of the [Swedish National Agency for Education \(2023b\)](#) highlights the importance of the principal's knowledge of the SAEC assignment. The principal can also provide support and guidance for development of the practice through follow-up and evaluation of the goals linked to its purpose ([Swedish National Agency for Education, 2023b](#)). However, studies indicate that principals often lead SAECs with a more distanced leadership rather than as educational leaders ([Glaés-Coutts, 2021](#)), which may be related to what was mentioned earlier about many leaders needing more knowledge about the SAEC's mission ([Swedish School Inspectorate, 2010](#)). This limits the development of educational quality in SAECs as they only relate quality to the educational level of the staff rather than the development of practice, and there is a need to apply structural quality criteria to the pedagogical work in SAECs ([Andersson, 2020](#)). This makes it complex as SAEC practice mainly involves learning in informal situations that are intended to promote social inclusion and wellbeing, which are difficult to document, monitor and evaluate ([Andersson, 2013](#)). There is a need to examine this issue with more empirical research. In summary, the issue of educational quality in extended education in general, and in SAEC in particular, is highly complex and difficult to interpret, as quality in SAEC is multifaceted and influenced by diverse factors, encompassing (for example) the suitability of premises, teachers' training, and available time for planning (e.g., [Lager, 2020](#); [Norqvist, 2022](#)). Moreover, schools' measurement of quality and the applied definition of quality inevitably influence SAEC norms and practices (e.g., [Andersson, 2013, 2020](#); [Lager, 2015](#)). National and international education trends toward more formal and measurable definitions of quality rooted in a knowledge-oriented paradigm pose threats to socially oriented SAEC (e.g., [Biesta, 2014](#); [Lager, 2015](#); [Löfdahl and Pérez Prieto, 2009](#); [Löfgren, 2016](#)). Aspects of quality within extended education seems thus to be an area open for varied definitions and implementations, why a study like this could contribute with more knowledge on school leaders' perspectives on the issue.

3 Theoretical perspectives

Theoretically, this study is based on two theoretical positions—[Bernstein \(2000, 2003\)](#) theory of pedagogical code as adapted by [Norqvist \(2022\)](#) and a model of school improvement by [Scherp and Scherp \(2007\)](#). The classification, framing and pedagogical code concepts and associated theory of [Bernstein \(2000, 2003\)](#) was used to facilitate analysis of the principles and norms that inform the organization, content, communication, and relations in pedagogic practice ([Bernstein, 2000](#)). This theory is valuable for illuminating power relations and control mechanisms between various 'categories', for example, relations or boundaries between categories such as agencies, agents, discourses, and practices ([Bernstein, 2000](#)). *Classification* refers to the strength of separation between curricular categories, content, or subject matter. *Framing* refers to the control that teachers and students have over the selection, organization, pacing and timing of knowledge transmission. *Pedagogic code* refers to the way that knowledge is classified and framed ([Bernstein, 2000, 2003](#)). In the present study, pedagogical codes identified by [Norqvist](#)

(2022), i.e., educational-pedagogical code, social-pedagogical code, and leisure-pedagogical code, will be utilized in the analysis (see also section 4.2). The organizational theories of schools, particularly the model of school improvement presented by [Scherp and Scherp \(2007\)](#) has four inter-related dimensions that influence the success or failure of developmental work. The four dimensions are holistic idea, routines and structures, professional knowledge creation, and pedagogical practice. A holistic idea (that is ideas about the practice and its purpose) as a common understanding within a school organization has proven to be the most important factor for successful school development ([Mogren, 2019](#)). Routines and structures that support the common goal is also vital for a successful educational practice, as well as the possibilities of teachers' professional knowledge creation. What then turns out as a reality in the pedagogical practice could be understood in relation to the other dimensions ([Scherp and Scherp, 2007](#)). This model has proven value for analyzing educational practices to identify aspects that are strong and explicitly addressed or weak and implicitly rather than explicitly addressed, which hinders improvement ([Manni and Knekta, 2022](#); [Manni et al., 2024](#)). Combining these two perspectives contributes to understanding our case on educational quality in a more comprehensive way including norms as well as structures.

4 Methods

This study is based on documentary sources. Three significant educational documents from a single municipality in Sweden, were analyzed according to methods described by [Scott \(1990\)](#). In accordance with the aim of the study, the focus was on parts of these documents that provided indications of municipality-level actors' interpretation, definition and communication of quality in SAEC. As described in the background section, quality in extended education is complex and has not been in focus of many municipalities school developmental work in the past. Therefore, documentation of this kind is sparsely found, why this study is somewhat unique.

4.1 Data selection and sampling

The documents were sourced through a collaborative partnership between the municipality and the researchers' host university and are the only three documents specifically focusing on quality in SAEC in this municipality. This opportunity facilitated practically oriented and critical examination of SAEC quality. The selected documents (see [Table 1](#)) were deemed to meet the four criteria (authenticity, credibility, representativeness, and meaning) for appropriate sources of data in documentary research suggested by [Scott \(1990, p. 19\)](#). Confirming the authenticity of many documents, particularly old ones, can be difficult or even impossible. However, the documents selected for this study were deemed to have high authenticity because they were recent, and the researchers had collaborated with the authors of the documents. Regarding credibility, "all accounts of social events are of course 'distorted', as there is always an element of selective accentuation in the attempt to describe social reality" ([Scott, 1990, p. 22](#)). Credibility is a matter of sincerity, that is, the degree that authors of documents believed what they recorded. In this research it is considered that all the authors to believe what they recorded in each document, so

TABLE 1 Selected documentary data.

Type of document	Author/type of school leader	Pages (N)
1. General mapping of SAEC quality	Head officer in the municipal educational office	20
2. A self-assessment tool for practice	Two assigned principals	15
3. Compilation of (38) quality reports	Principals	3

despite their inevitable selectivity the researchers regard them as providing highly credible foundations for the analysis of quality in SAEC and its definitions. Representativeness refers to the degree that the chosen documents represent “the totality of relevant documents” (Scott, 1990, p. 24), and thus the possibility of basing valid generalizations on them. Other aspects of this criterion are whether the documents will survive and be available for future scrutiny. The documents used in this study will remain available because they are official documents that will be preserved in municipal archives. Assessment of the degree that they represent all relevant documents is more difficult. There is a strong possibility that similar types of documents are present in archives of other Swedish municipalities, based on the researchers’ knowledge of educational structures. There are no claims of that the findings of this study are generalizable; however, these forms of document are potentially found in other municipalities. The researchers regard them as trustworthy indications of views meaning refers to the legibility, clarity and ease of interpreting documents. All three documents used are easy to read, written in clear and modern language, and easy to understand, at least for anyone such as researchers with knowledge of the SAEC context. In summary, all the analyzed documents stem from one municipality, concerned aspects of quality in its SAEC practice. They were produced by school leaders such as head officers and principals with positions at three levels in the hierarchical organization of municipal education. One document was 20-page mapping of the physical framings of the practice to be used by the municipality’s head of education. Another document was a self-assessment tool for teachers to evaluate quality-related aspects of SAEC, produced by two assigned principals. The other document was a compilation of quality reports written by principals of all schools in the municipality.

4.2 Analytical process

Analysis of the three text documents started with repeated readings before an inductive step, in which each text was coded based upon its content and wording. After the initial coding procedure, the documents were analyzed deductively to identify pedagogical codes (Bernstein, 2000, 2003). These included three codes—designated the educational-pedagogical, social-pedagogical, and leisure-pedagogical codes identified in a previous study on extended education (Norqvist, 2022). The educational-pedagogical code referred to concepts with a stronger classification and stronger framing (for example, teaching or focus on the knowledge goals of school). Hence, the educational-pedagogical code was assigned to text indicating that school-age educare is goal-oriented and focused on the pupils’ goal achievement in compulsory school. The two other codes, social-pedagogical, and

leisure-pedagogical code are characterized by a weaker classification and weaker framing. The social-pedagogical code represents concepts that indicate work with social relations and care in SAEC. The leisure-pedagogical code regards concepts of the SAEC teaching, which involves situation-based and group-oriented play and teaching centered on pupils’ needs, interests and experience (Norqvist, 2022). The text in each of the three documents was color-coded according to these descriptions. Memos were scribbled in the margin when a wording expressed something that could not be assigned to one of these predefined pedagogic codes.

4.3 Validity and reliability

Following the documentary analysis process described by Scott (1990) the researchers aimed to maximize the study’s trustworthiness in terms of internal validity (through all authors and municipal participants discussing the results) and reliability (by providing accurate contextual descriptions and quotations from the documents).

4.4 Ethical considerations

None of the documentary sources are ethically sensitive as they are formal educational policy documents produced in a single municipality. The school leaders who authored them were participants in a co-operative project and were informed about the research study and participated voluntarily (Swedish Research Council, 2024). Open and respectful occurred in all stages of the research, giving the participants opportunities to discuss the findings throughout the process and in a final meeting (i.e., Manni and Löfgren, 2022). This rigor supported the validity of the findings.

5 Results—definitions and codes regarding quality in SAEC in the three municipal documents

The results section consecutively provides a contextual description of each of the selected documents to establish its authenticity (Scott, 1990) and increase the qualitative depth, as commonly done in document-based case studies (Flyvbjerg, 2011), see 5.1.1, 5.2.1, and 5.3.1. The definitions of quality and pedagogical codes identified in each document are also presented, see 5.1.2, 5.2.2, and 5.3.2. Finally, in section 5.4, we present results of a comparative analysis of the documents in terms of the similarities and differences in definitions and pedagogical codes related to quality, and their relations to school leaders at different municipal levels.

5.1 The general mapping of SAEC quality

5.1.1 Contextual description of the document

This document (Municipality, 2021a) partly originated from a desire of the municipal board of educational politicians to obtain an overview of the uses of economic resources in all the municipality’s SAEC centers, and how the practice was organized in relation to the national curriculum. The mapping was also partly inspired by signals

of problems within SAEC identified in previous joint assessments of schools and SAEC centers, which raised awareness of needs for higher-resolution knowledge of the practices. The author of this document was a school leader with in the municipal educational office. The author was a Head Officer and one of his tasks was to monitor developmental work within all schools, and to implement policies expressed by the Lead Officer of Education and the Educational Board. The main quality-related content of this document concerns economic and formal aspects of quality, as well as deficiencies and needs of the municipality's SAEC centers identified by the mapping. The main proposals for enhancing quality include establishment of a developmental manager for SAEC centers and following up of the distribution of personnel costs between school and SAEC. It also proposes three further measures:

- o Development of competence regarding the curricular aim of the SAEC among principals and key personnel of all the municipality's SAEC-centers.
- o Creation of guidance for principals regarding group sizes, appropriate premises and collaboration to clarify appropriate positions, roles and responsibilities in the SAEC centers in the future.
- o Development of the skills needed to ensure that the municipality has competent staff in the SAEC practice (Municipality, 2021a, p. 19–20).

5.1.2 Definitions of quality and pedagogical codes

The general mapping document is permeated by consistently strong classification and strong overall framing. This is manifested in formulations such as “[the SAEC] is more curriculum-oriented and structured than before, as manifested by clearer work with the pupils’ goal achievement” (Municipality, 2021a, p. 7). Quality on this general municipality level focuses largely on frame factors related to formal quality and economic aspects that we interpret as elements of a new (educational-economic) type of pedagogical code. Examples include changes in the way that SAEC is organized, the occupational categories that should be engaged in SAEC, and the service and budgetary allocations to support the principals’ distribution of personnel and funds. This definition of quality could also be understood as what Scherp and Scherp (2007) frame as a dimension of routines and structures within the school organization. In the general mapping, the SAEC practice is to a large extent linked to the compulsory school and the text is consistently informed by an educational-pedagogical code which emerged by wording such as that the school-age educate practice now “is more curriculum oriented and structured than before” (Municipality, 2021a, p. 7), and this manifests by “a clearer work with the pupils goal achievement in the school-age educate” (Municipality, 2021a, p. 7). These expressions assigned to the educational-pedagogical code are mixed with short passages assigned to the leisure-pedagogical code, stating for example that school-age educate practice should “seize the learning opportunities” (Municipality, 2021a, p. 7). Occasionally the social-pedagogical code emerges in references to relationships that are considered key elements of “all teaching and the mission of school-age educate, which includes care, learning and development” (Municipality, 2021a, p. 11). The document includes

suggestions for targeted changes focusing on frame factors, such as directions for group size, purposive premises, and development of relevant competence of principals and key personnel in all the municipality's SAEC centers. It also recommends clarification of the optimal positions, roles and responsibilities of staff engaged in SAEC and a review of the needs for development of their competence in the whole municipality.

5.2 A self-assessment tool for practice

5.2.1 Contextual description of the document

This document (Municipality, 2021b) was commissioned following the general mapping of the SAEC centers and its call for development of competence about the curricular aim of the SAEC for principals and key personnel of all SAEC centers in the municipality. The authors were two principals who were assigned the task of supporting such competence development. The main content of this document is of a practical nature, consisting of questions designed to elicit the views of teachers and other staff on what, how and why they teach and work as they do in their respective SAEC centers. In accordance with the curriculum, it focuses particularly on the complementary task of SAEC and thus has an educational emphasis. A similar self-assessment tool is used in compulsory school; however, the content of this tool is based on the SAEC part of the curriculum.

5.2.2 Definition of quality and pedagogical codes

The self-assessment tool is based on formulations in the SAEC part of the curriculum. It focuses on teaching in SAEC practice, particularly the staff's pedagogical approach, both individually and within the team of colleagues. This document thus focuses what Scherp and Scherp (2007) calls a dimension of professional knowledge creation, and the pedagogical practice, while it clearly does not include any dimensions of routines or structures. It generally has weak classification as it does not set clear boundaries between any categories, however the framing is slightly stronger as some of the text indicates that pupils can influence the practice to some extent in high quality SAEC. The self-assessment tool was developed to facilitate analyses of teaching quality in SAEC. Accordingly, large parts of the document are characterized by leisure-pedagogical, social-pedagogical, and educational-pedagogical codes, with emphasis on the part of SAEC's mission to complement compulsory schooling. These codes emerged under the headings learning environment, adaptation, and structure, since the formulations derive from the SAEC part of the curriculum (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022). Examples of the leisure-pedagogical code include self-assessment items, such as “in our practice there is room for situation-driven and experience-based activities” (Municipality, 2021b, p. 7). Examples of the social-pedagogical code include formulations that chime with the social relations and care elements of SAEC, such as “we build relationships with the pupils and make pupils feel part of the group community” (Municipality, 2021b, p. 5). The self-assessment tool has the same structure as the tool for compulsory schools mentioned above. A consequence of this is that some of the self-assessment items have the character of an educational-pedagogical code, e.g., “we have high expectations on all pupils” (Municipality,

2021b, p. 5). This formulation is complex as it implies that placing high demands on pupils is desirable, but the expectations may be unattainable for some pupils.

5.3 The compilation of quality reports

5.3.1 Contextual description of the document

This document (Municipality, 2022) presents a compilation and analysis of 38 of the municipality's 45 quality reports for compulsory schools (including SAEC practice). Quality reports are prepared annually as part of the focal municipality's routines. The authors of the compilation document were the two principals assigned to work with quality development in SAEC. The compilation is based on individual principals' quality reports for their respective schools. The main content of this document concerns the schools' goals for the previous year, the current year's results, identified successes and aspects requiring development as well as future goals. Of the 38 schools that submitted a quality report, only 23 reported specific results for the SAEC activities. A pupil questionnaire had provided foundations for 22 of the schools' quality reports of, but only two had used the self-assessment tool in parallel with the pupil questionnaire. The analysis shows that most of the results reported by the municipality's SAEC centers were based on the goals set by the schools and overall goals linked to the curriculum. However, 14 of the reports address goals specifically linked to SAEC practice, eight of these mainly report efforts related to furnishings and production of play boxes, and six of the SAEC center's reportedly goals had related to safety and values. Furthermore, five had goals related to adaptations in the physical environment intended to support groups or individuals.

5.3.2 Definitions of quality and pedagogical codes

In the compilation of quality reports there are signs of a weaker classification since few of the municipality's school's quality reports explicitly concern the quality in SAEC, and weak framing since pupils' influence in the practice is highlighted as a sign of success. The document strongly focuses on frame factors, such as funding, and the content of the SAEC practice, indicating acknowledgement of the importance of both formal and informal quality aspects. However, a low proportion of the results explicitly concern the practice in SAEC. Some formulations highlight a need for consensus between different groups of professionals within the organization and the importance of both collaboration and a common understanding of the SAEC mission. The focus on frame factors is manifested in formulations that stress the importance, for example, of "joint time for planning the practice for the staff in school-age educare, good organizational structures in both organization and practice" (Municipality, 2022, p. 1). The leisure-pedagogical code also emerges, in formulations such as "Making pupils involved in the practice, and pedagogues' relational competence are also factors for success" (Municipality, 2022, p. 1). In addition, the compilation of quality reports includes some results of a survey of the views of the municipality's pupils and proposed measures based on their views for SAEC staff to adjust the content of the practice and their approach. However, the problems highlighted in the pupils' survey are largely

related to the frame factors and hence difficult to change through such adjustments. Analyzing the definition of quality in this document through the school organization lens of Scherp and Scherp (2007), we again notice a focus on the dimension of routines and structures, but also on the professional knowledge creation in terms of collegial dialogs. A few comments reveal a need for a common understanding of the SAEC mission, i.e., a holistic idea (Scherp and Scherp, 2007).

5.4 Comparison of the documents and their pedagogical codes defining quality in SAEC

5.4.1 Initial reflections

Comparison of the three documents and their codes defining quality in SAEC led to the following reflections:

First, the three documents from a single municipality present different dimensions and definitions of quality in SAEC, which do not seem to have been explicitly discussed. Second, quality is defined and largely related to economic and frame factors such as routines and structures in both the general mapping document and compilation of quality reports, but these aspects are not mentioned in the self-assessment tool for teachers. Third, there are indications in both the general mapping and compilation of quality reports of expectations that identified economic and organizational shortcomings will be addressed by changes in practice and approaches of the staff within the SAEC centers. Fourth, use of the self-assessment tool was not mandatory, and results obtained with it were not compiled to provide clearer foundations for the pedagogical developmental efforts within the municipality. Similarly, the compilation of quality reports shows that some schools did not include SAEC in their annual educational assessments and quality reports. Finally, the pedagogical codes we identified were not solely leisure-pedagogical and social-pedagogical. Instead, as further addressed below, both an educational-pedagogical code and the new educational-economic code influenced the definition of quality in SAEC in the focal municipality.

5.4.2 Pedagogical codes and power structures between different levels of school leaders

Deeper analysis of the three documents revealed that the educational-pedagogical code dominated, and both the leisure-pedagogical and social-pedagogical codes only appear sporadically. In addition, a new 'educational-economic' pedagogical code emerged during analysis of the general mapping document, as it includes formulations indicating that quality can be addressed by economic actions. The analyzed documents, which were created by school leaders at different levels of the municipality organization, revealed power structures between different levels of school leaders. This is normal for hierarchical school organizations, but it can complicate collaboration, for example, a Head of education must both respond to demands from the educational politicians and help principals to develop the quality of SAEC practice in their centers. Dilemmas associated with power structures are further illustrated by the self-assessment tool (developed by two assigned principals) solely focusing on the staffs' pedagogical approaches and neglecting the higher-level

frame and economic factors, which also strongly affects the quality in SAEC practice.

6 Discussion

This research reveals how quality in SAEC was defined and formulated by school leaders from several levels in a Swedish municipality, and the pedagogical codes embedded in documents concerning quality, and implications of their definitions, assessments and recommendations for SAEC practices were exposed. Although, by analyzing these national findings with general theories on policy, power and school organizations we argue that the results could be of common value. An overall reflection is that despite shared ambitions to increase the quality in SAEC there are clear variations in the assumptions regarding definitions of quality, and clear challenges to overcome. Different definitions of quality are embedded in the three studied municipal documents. In terms of the school improvement model, with the four interrelating dimensions (Scherp and Scherp, 2007) this clearly indicates a lack of a joint understanding or a shared holistic idea of quality in extended educational practices (Mogren, 2019). In accordance with Manni and Knekt (2022) such ambiguities should be explicitly discussed in practice. Also noted was a correlation between the authors' hierarchical positions in the school organization and definitions of educational quality, with high positions being linked to formal, structural, and economic definitions of quality, and closeness to practice linked to more social-pedagogical approaches. In terms of the cited school improvement model, two documents focus on routines and structures, while the other focuses on pedagogical knowledge. This may not be surprising, given the differences in school leaders' responsibilities (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2023b), however the apparent lack of awareness of the variation among the relevant actors involved could clearly hinder efforts to improve SAEC quality.

Regarding the results revealing pedagogical codes (Bernstein, 2000, 2003; Bernstein, 2000), we think the most interesting is the identification of a previously unrecognized code, which we call the educational-economic code. This helped the researchers to deepen the analysis of principles and norms that inform the municipality organization and relations in the pedagogical practice of SAEC. When this code was identified it illuminated findings with clarity. Together with the three codes (educational-pedagogical, leisure-pedagogical, and social-pedagogical) identified in a previous study (Norqvist, 2022) analysis of aspects of quality work emphasized in textual documents and the complexity of quality in SAEC, which has been problematized in previous research (e.g., Andersson, 2013, 2020; Lager, 2015) was evident. For example, it illuminates more clearly how schools' approaches to quality have often served as templates for practices rooted in a social pedagogical tradition such as preschool and SAEC (Lager, 2015). A consequence is that informal aspects of quality are frequently overshadowed by more formal quality aspects or performative aspects that are easier to measure (e.g., Biesta, 2014; Löfdahl and Pérez Prieto, 2009; Löfgren, 2016; Moss, 2017). This also increases the risk of extended educational practices becoming more like those of schools rather than continuing the social and leisure pedagogical traditions (Memišević, 2024). The result also raises questions about the responsibilities of school leaders, particularly

principals, in matters of complex and integrated educational practices, such as extended education (Glaés-Coutts, 2021). The main problems identified regarding good and equal quality were connected to staff shortages, large groups of pupils, and adequate classrooms, none of which can be addressed without good financial support (Lager, 2020; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2023a). Similar results and conclusions regarding the financial aspect of educational quality and school leadership were also found in previous international research (Fischer et al., 2022; Hallinger, 2003; Kielblock, 2025). The identification of an educational-economic code can also be related to the fact that current educational leadership are to handle economic efficiency alongside pedagogical issues, and some argue that entrepreneurial leadership can be beneficial for developing the educational practice (Brauckmann-Sajkiewicz and Pashiardis, 2022). We thus argue that interventions by relevant politicians, together with school leaders or teachers are needed to solve the economic challenges. Furthermore, leaders of specific schools can pay attention to the four dimensions of school improvement presented by Scherp and Scherp (2007) and strive (for example) to ensure that the whole staff in their schools discuss quality and establish shared understandings and definitions of quality to maintain a coherent approach. Similarly, leaders on higher levels in the school organization should strive to develop a shared understanding among the school leaders. This can avoid some problems, however good will and pedagogical efforts are not sufficient to overcome problems associated with inadequate funding or deficiencies in other resources. Results of this study also highlight surprisingly weak attention to children's well-being and care in the definitions of good quality in SAEC. We also found a surprising, and problematic, apparent optionality in implementation of some of the municipality's structural recommendations for quality control in our study, which we relate to a general and problematic issue of extended education practices nation-wide (Biesta, 2009; Moss, 2017).

7 Final conclusions

Through this study, questions are raised about relying on the more quantitative and measurable aspects in definitions of quality in extended educational practices. Practical and economic aspects, such as available facilities and numbers of pupils are clearly essential for comparing educational conditions and efforts to ensure equality in care-oriented, as well as education-oriented practices. However, it is still important to consider qualitative aspects of quality in extended education, such as SAEC, since they include educational values, teaching approaches, as well as individuals' experiences and meaning making of practice. Since this was a rather small-scale and national study, we recommend for further, and international, research that involves a collaborative understanding of quality in line with Kane's (2023) concept of liberating quality including collegial reflections. Further inclusion of attention to children's and pupils' voices, when considering quality in extended education, and holistic efforts of school leaders (cf. Manni et al., 2024; Scherp and Scherp, 2007) to address the full multi-dimensionality of this educational practice should be required. Quality in extended education is a complex concept; however, it demands attention to ensure that extended education provides children with valuable opportunities that are not only based on structural or economical aspects.

Data availability statement

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

Author contributions

AM: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. MN: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Software, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. SY: Conceptualization, Investigation, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Generative AI statement

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

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Ask the children: reframing extended education offerings quality and policy through children's perspectives

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Although the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child mandates that children's voices must be heard in matters affecting them, their perspectives on the quality of Extended Education Offerings (EEOs) are rarely considered. This study explores how children perceive their participation opportunities in EEOs. Conducted in a Swiss canton where EEOs are well-established within a quality framework, the study involved 46 photo tours followed by group discussions with 194 children aged 5–12 across nine EEOs. These data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis focused on aspects of participation. The results reveal differences in participation practices, ranging from formalized meetings with guidelines to settings with limited or informal opportunities. Many children expressed a sense of self-determination, particularly in free play, and emphasized the importance of receiving feedback in participation processes. The analysis identified recurring patterns across participation dimensions, showing that self-determination and meaningful feedback foster children's sense of agency, while lack of transparency leads to frustration and perceived tokenism. These findings emphasize the need for intentional, context-sensitive strategies to embed participation more consistently within EEO practices. Given the significant role that EEOs play in children's lives, it is crucial to translate these insights into practice. In a short brief example, we illustrate how the findings informed the revision of the cantonal quality framework. While children are not consistently able to participate directly in policymaking, this example underscores the critical role of researchers as knowledge brokers who can represent children's perspectives. By fostering an "interactive space" between research, practice, and policy, researchers can ensure that children's voices inform quality development in EEOs. Even when children are not directly involved, their perspectives — conveyed through research — can shape institutional frameworks and strengthen participatory principles in educational contexts.

KEYWORDS

participation, extended education, quality, children's perspective, interactive space

1 Introduction

Extended Education is flourishing all over the world (Bae, 2018) and takes many forms and names, reflecting a broad spectrum of learning and care arrangements both in and out of school. Following the suggestion of Schüpbach et al. (2017, p. 58), we consistently use the term Extended Education Offerings (EEOs) to refer to all care and out-of-school educational services for school-aged children as it serves as an umbrella term. The expansion of EEOs is associated with high expectations, ranging from social and intercultural learning to fostering

inclusion, improving individual skills, and enabling care for dual-income families (Bae, 2018; Klerfelt and Stecher, 2018). Their effectiveness depends on various factors with quality — alongside structure and usage — playing a particularly critical role (Sauerwein et al., 2019; Zuechner and Fischer, 2014). Consequently, the discourse on quality in EEOs has intensified, prompting increased research and policy initiatives to establish quality frameworks. All of these frameworks (Höke et al., 2016; Landwehr, 2015; Sauerwein, 2016) address participation alongside other process quality dimensions such as relationships, climate, and pedagogical orientation, as well as structural quality aspects like infrastructure, organization, leadership, and staff.

This focus on participation gains significance as EEOs increasingly embed childhood within institutions (Seitz and Hamacher, 2024), making them vital socializing spaces (Schüpbach and Lilla, 2019) where school-aged children spend time, interact, and gather impactful experiences (Bock, 2010). Participation gives children the role they deserve in EEOs, allowing them to actively shape and influence their environment. It is also an important pedagogical and societal value (Reisenauer, 2020) gaining importance in EEOs: In Germany, for example, the Ministry of Education (KMK, 2023) states that the pedagogical design of EEOs should prioritize the interests and needs of children, creating democratically structured learning and living environments that require high participation from all stakeholders. However, to date, children's voices are not often heard (Deinet et al., 2018; Staudner, 2018; Walther and Nentwig-Gesemann, 2022).

This underrepresentation is problematic, as understandings of quality can vary significantly depending on specific contexts and the stakeholders defining them (Harvey and Green, 2000). Children, as key stakeholders in EEOs, hold perspectives that can diverge from those of adults (Hauke, 2019), yet their views are rarely taken into account.

When it comes to participation in EEOs, it seems even more important to capture the children's perspective. It is therefore vital not only that children's voices are heard, but also that deliberate efforts are made to ensure their meaningful inclusion for two important reasons. First, their unique insights are essential for evaluating and improving EEOs, especially since they experience the process dimensions of quality firsthand. Second, children's rights emphasize the importance of including their voices: Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989) stipulates the right to participation, mandating that children must be consulted in matters that affect them, recognizing them as individuals with integrity and agency (Lundy, 2007). However, existing research highlights that while participation is emphasized in policy and theory, children often experience limited real influence — especially in institutional settings such as schools and EEOs (Gerbeshi and Ertl, 2023; Elvstrand and Söderman Lago, 2019). This mismatch underscores the need for more in-depth insights into how participation is perceived and experienced by children themselves.

This focus on participation aligns with the theoretical perspective of childhood studies (Thomas, 2021), particularly the sociology of childhood, which views childhood as a social construction and children as competent social actors (Corsaro, 2015; James and Prout, 1997). These two perspectives are often bridged in research (Thomas, 2021), as they are in the present study.

Australia provides one of few examples where children's voices were incorporated in updating the national EEO framework. In this process, children's responses provided meaningful insights into their perceptions, illustrating how their feedback led to the inclusion of passive leisure in the new curriculum for EEOs (Barblett et al., 2023; Cartmel et al., 2024).

Although children view the quality of EEOs positively, existing studies mainly use quantitative surveys to capture their perspective (Coelen and Wagener, 2010; Sauerwein, 2016, 2019). Hence, their evaluations were limited to predetermined quality aspects established by adults.

To address this gap, the present study employs qualitative methods to explore children's experiences and perceptions of participation in EEOs. We combine the perspective of childhood studies — which conceptualizes children as competent social actors—with a rights-based understanding of participation, as outlined in the UNCRC and Lundy's model. This integrated lens allows us to explore participation both as a lived, relational practice and as a fundamental right within institutional contexts. It investigates children's perspectives on participation as a key quality dimension within EEOs, using childhood studies as our theoretical lens. Specifically, it examines how children perceive their ability to participate and what forms of participation they encounter in everyday EEO settings.

2 Theoretical framework

There are several justifications for children's participation in schools. One is a *legal* argument rooted in the UNCRC, which grants children the right to express their views on matters affecting them and requires that their opinions be given due consideration. A *societal* argument holds that schools should educate children and adolescents to become responsible citizens by imparting democratic values and skills essential for fulfilling their societal roles (Derecik et al., 2013; Reisenauer, 2020). Another is an *educational* argument, which states that participation must be an integral part of children's and adolescents' daily lives, as it helps develop essential skills like self-confidence, responsibility, and autonomy, skills that are vital for identity formation (Moser, 2010).

The term “participation” is often used interchangeably with concepts such as involvement, engagement, membership, co-determination, consultation, collaboration, and co-creation, each highlighting distinct aspects. Therefore, participation should be understood as an umbrella term encompassing various forms and intensities of involvement (Derecik et al., 2013). In this broad sense, children's participation is seen as a complex social process in which issues of social belonging and formal decision-making play a significant role (Elvstrand and Söderman Lago, 2019).

One of the most well-known models is Hart's Ladder of Participation (1992), which outlines eight rungs, representing increasing levels of involvement. However, the model has some limitations. Notably, it implies a hierarchical progression, suggesting that the highest rung is the ultimate goal, which is not the intended approach (Hart and Reid, 2008; Wagener, 2013).

In the Swiss school context, the model by Biedermann and Oser (2006) is used (see Figure 1). It describes six degrees of participation, ranging from externally determined involvement to self-determined decision-making, and emphasizes a continuum from passive to active

Decision-making scope and responsibility of children. Outcome still open.						
Decision-making scope and responsibility of staff. Outcome already determined.						
	External Determination		Forms of Participation			Self-Determination
	Externally Determined	Informed	Consulted	Deciding Together	Collaborating	
staff	Staff makes decisions.	Staff plans, organizes, and prepares the event.	Final decisions still rest with staff, but...	Staff includes children in decision-making processes, so...	Staff shares the responsibility, so ...	Support from staff, but...
children	Children carry them out.	Children are fully informed and updated about the purpose, goals, and plans but do not provide input.	...children can share their opinions and suggest ideas on school matters, but final decisions rest with teachers or school teams.	...children are actively involved in the decision-making process. They may be included in decisions that lead to specific outcomes and participate in voting processes.	...children actively help plan, design, and evaluate projects, taking responsibility for decisions on topics like school atmosphere, space use, or homework policies.	... children initiate and carry out projects independently.

FIGURE 1

Model of participation in school (Own and adapted figure, based on Biedermann and Oser, 2006).

roles. Because this model is already well established in school practice, we adapt it to the context of EEOs.

For a long time, participation discourse focused narrowly on one aspect of participation, meaning that children were allowed to speak, but without any real influence. Early models — such as Hart's (1992) ladder — have been criticized for framing participation as a process in which adults remain in control, determining if and how children's input is considered (Elvstrand and Söderman Lago, 2019; Thomas, 2021). This understanding reduces participation to a symbolic gesture and fails to enable meaningful involvement. Furthermore, from a children's rights perspective, participation has often been treated too individualistically, neglecting its relational and institutional dimensions (Horgan et al., 2017).

In contrast, Lundy's model conceptualizes participation as a multi-dimensional process — not only encompassing voice, but also space, audience, and influence — which not only recognizes the child as a competent actor but also highlights the institutional and social context in which participation occurs. Thus, not only should the form or degree of participation be considered — as in the previous models — but also its impact, as Lundy (2007) argues, proposing a new model for understanding participation, as outlined in Article 12 of the UNCRC, which includes four key elements:

- **Space** means providing opportunities for children to express their views and encouraging their participation, ensuring they are asked about matters affecting them and have the right to choose participation.
- **Voice** refers to the right to express opinions, based on a child's ability to form them, not their maturity.
- **Audience** highlights the importance of adults listening to children's views, not just hearing them. Adults should be trained in active listening and aware of non-verbal communication.
- **Influence** involves giving children's views "due weight," ensuring decisions reflect their opinions in line with their age and capacity. This requires adults to take children seriously and avoid

tokenism. Feedback should show how their views were considered, fostering transparency ensuring participation leads to real outcomes.

In this regard, the difference between being heard and being listened to is central: hearing a child's voice is not enough—their voice must also have the potential to influence decisions.

The four components outlined by Lundy (2007) are useful for critically reflecting on the quality of participatory processes. They help to identify and address potential barriers and obstacles, ensuring that participation is genuine and not reduced to mere tokenism or superficial involvement (Reisenauer, 2020). At the same time, children's participation must remain within certain boundaries. This includes their right to opt out, as well as respect for social and cultural norms (Lundy et al., 2024). A balance between participation and protection is crucial, as children both have the right to be heard and to be safe. The idea that "children are experts in their own lives" can be problematic in certain contexts as in education and health decisions. Balancing children's views with adult expertise ensures both their right to participate and access to quality education (Lundy et al., 2024).

As mentioned earlier, the discussion on child participation arose simultaneously with the emergence of childhood studies, which often led to a combination of the two approaches in research (Horgan et al., 2017; Thomas, 2021). Childhood studies are based on two main assumptions: children are seen as active social actors who actively construct their surroundings, they are seen as subjects who can shape their environment and are not only objects of socialization (Corsaro, 2015; James and Prout, 1997). The second main assumption is, that childhood is a social construction (James and Prout, 1997; Qvortrup, 1994). Thus, researchers are encouraged to see children as co-constructors of knowledge, implying that participation research should be conducted with children rather than about them (Mey, 2013).

For our analysis, we will combine the adapted model of participation forms in school (Biedermann and Oser, 2006) with the categories from Lundy (2007), so that we can identify on the

one side the (structural) intensity of participation forms from externally determined to self-determination and on the other side the (process) quality of participation focusing on space, voice, audience, and influence. This integration allows for a more nuanced analysis of participation in EEOs—not only how much participation children have, but also how meaningful the process is.

3 Research findings on participation in educational settings

Existing research highlights that while children increasingly express a desire for participation, genuine opportunities for involvement remain limited, particularly in institutional contexts such as schools and EEOs (Gerbeshi and Ertl, 2023). While children feel informed and consulted, opportunities for collaboration or decision-making remain limited. They more often perceive participation in organizational aspects, such as classroom design and duties, rather than in areas like curriculum content or academic performance (Gerbeshi et al., 2024). Furthermore, children feel least able to participate in schools compared to home or community settings. While educators believe there are sufficient opportunities for involvement, children perceive schools as hierarchical, with limited meaningful participation. This highlights the need for cultural and institutional changes to empower student voices (Forde et al., 2018).

In EEOs, participation opportunities are primarily found in non-academic activities such as breaks and sports (Coelen and Wagener, 2010) suggesting that leisure-oriented environments may offer greater potential for meaningful participation than academically focused settings. However, empirical research from Swedish EEOs shows that this potential is shaped and often limited by institutional conditions. Elvstrand and Söderman Lago (2019) emphasize that participation in Swedish EEOs should be understood as a relational and ongoing practice, negotiated in everyday interactions between children and adults. They identify three key forms of “doing participation”: negotiating, initiating, and choosing. Participation, in this view, is a process that must be practiced, learned, and socially supported. Elvstrand and Söderman Lago (2019) highlight the tension between participation as a pedagogical value and the pressure to make participation visible and measurable. While choice is considered central, it is often formalized and restricted, serving policy demands rather than enabling genuine influence. As a result, participation becomes a controlled and individualized practice rather than a democratic or collective experience.

Further findings (Ackesjö et al., 2024) emphasize the importance of agency as a central concept in the sociology of childhood. Their study illustrates that free choice can both expand and limit agency, depending on how it is structured and supported by adults. Meaningful participation requires active listening, not just hearing, and that children’s perspectives must be integrated into the design of everyday activities. Agency, in this view, is not about total independence but about shared responsibility, relational sensitivity, and respectful collaboration between children and adults.

This aligns with the broader critique by Horgan et al. (2017), who argue that research and practice often focus too narrowly on formal, adult-structured participation, neglecting informal, everyday, and horizontal forms of involvement. They emphasize the importance of

relational contexts, where children’s perspectives are genuinely acknowledged, and warn against overburdening children with responsibility through overly formalized participation frameworks.

The increased focus on children’s perspectives also mirrors broader calls for structural reforms in education systems to better integrate children’s voices into decisions that directly affect their daily lives (Sauerwein and Grasshoff, 2022).

Across all studies, there is a consensus that participation must be understood beyond formal structures. It is not a static right, but a contextual, socially negotiated, and relational practice. Despite the apparent potential of EEOs as more flexible environments, children’s participation remains highly dependent on adult attitudes, institutional frameworks, and the ability to translate participatory values into everyday interactions. This reveals a persistent gap between participation as a pedagogical ideal and its practical realization—a gap that this study aims to explore further.

4 Context of the study and the situation in Switzerland

The Swiss School System is federally governed, with the 26 cantons developing their educational frameworks autonomously, while schools are managed by local communities. Regarding EEOs, there is only a national obligation for municipalities to provide needs-based programs, with no nationwide quality framework or binding quality standards in place. Approximately 36.2% of school-aged children in Switzerland attend EEOs (BFS, 2024).

Our data comes from one pioneering canton in Switzerland (Schüpbach and Von Allmen, 2013), where EEOs are above-average used, already strongly anchored. The EEOs we examined cater to children aged 4 to 12 years and are offered as a complement to regular classes. Their primary focus is leisure-oriented, not focused on academic outcomes. Children are often allowed to choose their activities, which fosters an environment conducive to non-formal and informal learning, often referred to as play-based or child-centered pedagogy (Hedges and Cooper, 2018). In addition, EEOs provide meals, supervised free play, as well as guided activities and homework supervision.

All decisions regarding extended education in this canton are determined by the Ministry of Education. Notably, this canton has an established quality framework (Landwehr, 2015), in which participation is one quality dimension. This institutional anchoring of participation makes the canton a particularly relevant setting for examining how participation is experienced by children in practice. Over the past decade, EEOs in the canton have rapidly developed, prompting the Ministry of Education to initiate a revision of the quality framework, a process in which the authors were actively involved.

5 Methods

The aim of the study was to explore how children perceive and experience participation within their respective EEOs. Following the methodological principles of childhood studies, we recognize children as social actors and consider it essential to explicitly ask for their perspectives (Mey, 2013, p. 53). Children are seen as experts in their own lives, and qualitative methods are particularly well suited for

capturing their subjective views on their living environment (Heinzel, 2000, p. 22). This methodological approach was chosen to address a gap in existing research, which often neglects the everyday, informal, and relational dimensions of participation as experienced by children. Childhood studies emphasize the importance of children's own experiences and their active involvement in research. Accordingly, participatory methods are often used to engage children in sharing their views, positioning them as active agents in their lives and aligning with the theoretical shift that recognizes childhood as a distinct and valuable phase of human development, rather than merely preparatory (Barblett et al., 2023; Deinet et al., 2018; Klerfelt and Haglund, 2014; Walther and Nentwig-Gesemann, 2022).

In line with this, we chose a qualitative approach to gather the children's perspectives. As an initial, ice-breaking activity and to gather the most uninfluenced views from the children while recognizing them as experts in their EEOs, we first asked them to show us their EEO. The children guided us through their EEO and showed us the places which they liked or disliked. At each chosen location, we took photos (without children present, for ethical reasons) and discussed with the children why they like or dislike the place. These photo tours served as a neutral stimulus and allowed for child-led exploration, which formed the basis for the following group discussions (Nentwig-Gesemann et al., 2017, p. 20). By using group discussions and child-centered inputs, we strive to reduce the traditional power imbalance between adults and children in educational research, enabling a more nuanced understanding of children's lived experiences (Schultheis, 2019; Sedding, 2019). To align with the methodological orientation of childhood studies and to reduce adult-child power imbalances during data collection, we tried to adopt a "least adult role" (Corsaro and Molinari, 2017; Mandell, 1988). This role positions the researcher not as an authority figure, but as a co-participant who engages with children on their terms. Throughout the photo tours and group discussions, we consciously avoided evaluative or directive behavior and instead allowed the children to take the lead, using their own language and deciding what they wanted to show and discuss. We responded with open-ended, non-directive questions and used child-appropriate vocabulary to encourage spontaneous expression. This combination of child-led photo tours and group discussions is well aligned with the principles of childhood studies, which emphasize co-construction, autonomy, and the situated nature of knowledge. This approach fostered a safe and inclusive atmosphere in which children were more likely to share their genuine thoughts and experiences.

A semi-structured discussion guide was developed, based on thematic blocks derived from the cantonal quality framework for EEOs, including a specific section on participation. Photo tours and group interviews were conducted in immediate succession, within the same groups, each lasting approximately 45 min. All sessions were audio-recorded, transcribed, and anonymized for analysis.

The study was conducted across nine EEOs in a Swiss canton, involving 46 groups of 194 children aged five to twelve, with group sizes ranging from three to seven children. Parents were provided with written information regarding the study's purpose, methods, and data handling, and were asked to give written consent for their child's participation. However, even with parental consent, children retained the right to decline participation. Recruitment and group allocation were managed by the EEO leaders, who ensured that both the children's and parents' consent was obtained. We are aware that this

might have influenced the group composition, e.g., by including children considered particularly communicative. The groups were composed to maximize diversity in terms of age and gender. If children were not actively participating in discussions, they were gently encouraged to share their thoughts to capture a broad range of perspectives. However, we fully respected any child's decision to refrain from expressing their views, in line with their right to opt out (Dockett et al., 2009). Despite this, we argue that data saturation was achieved across the different locations, as no new themes or insights emerged after conducting the 46 photo tours and group interviews. The group interviews as well as the photo tours were transcribed and anonymized so that names of children are not visible. For this paper we analyzed all transcript sections which focused on participation.

These data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz, 2018) using MAXQDA. This method was chosen because it allows for a combination of theory-driven and data-driven coding: The analysis began with a deductive category system, based on the model of participation by Biedermann and Oser (2006) and the categories of Lundy (2007). This led to the creation of the main theoretical categories: space, voice, audience, influence, and boundaries, each with associated subcategories. In Table 1 the full categories stem with examples from the data are presented.

A sample of the same material was coded independently by the two authors to ensure intersubjective comprehensibility. After comparing and discussing the coding, additional inductive categories were developed — mainly in relation to specific spaces mentioned by the children. This expanded category (Table 1) system was then applied to a second data sample and again checked for coding agreement.

In the first step of analysis, we described the categories based on summarized data and used illustrative quotes to highlight key findings and ensure transparency regarding data grounding. In the second step, we examined the material for recurring patterns across categories, which we present in relation to the different dimensions of participation.

6 Results

The results section is divided into three parts: First, we examine the categories Space and Voice, highlighting their interconnection — opportunities for participation are closely tied to how children express themselves and engage with these opportunities. Second, we present findings related to Audience, Influence, and the boundaries that shape or limit participation. The categories presented below correspond to the analytical framework outlined in Table 1, illustrating how different dimensions of participation — such as space, voice, audience, and influence — are experienced by children in their everyday lives within EEOs. Finally, we identify patterns that emerged across all categories, offering a broader understanding of how participation is practiced and perceived by children within the institutional context of EEOs.

6.1 Space and voice

The children named various spaces for participation, which can be categorized into (a) topics where they perceive participation

TABLE 1 Category system.

Deductive category	Subcodes	Examples
Space	Activities for the group	I: Yes. (.) And, um, do you get to have a say in things like, for example, whether you go on a trip to the fountain, or to the theater, or to the movies? P: (several) Yes.
	Activities for themselves / Freeplay	I: Okay, what about freedom, um, you choose the rooms you go to, right? P: (several) Yes.
	Material	We wanted new games.
	Sports hall	Well, in gym class very often. In gym class, we are allowed to suggest what game we want to play next time.
	Food	I: Can you also suggest what you want to eat? P: Yes, we could do that once. Hot dogs, sushi.
Audience	Heard	I: One last question. What if you go to a caregiver and say, “I would like this,” that you want to do something. Does that happen? P: Sometimes, sometimes. P: But then the teacher or someone says, “No, tomorrow or the day after.” P: And then they do not do it tomorrow or the day after.
	Listen to	P: Hmm, well, I’m usually allowed to have a say in things.
Influence	Feedback /	I also have something on the topic. We actually wanted to ask in the EEO if we could put up walls here, but then they said “No,” we are not allowed to do that
	Influence	I: Cannot you choose what food there is? P: Yes, sometimes we can choose. P: Pizza day.
	No-influence	S: She says no to almost everything.
Forms of Participation /voice	Informed	Activity zone plan
	Consulted	Exactly, the day after tomorrow, so on that day we then/could write down everything we can do, and then, yeah, maybe we’ll do it sometime.
	Deciding together	Hmm, no. Someone makes a suggestion, then an adult says ‘yes, that’s okay,’ and then someone else comes up with a suggestion, and then they are combined, and then we get what we want.
	Collaborating	Um, they just ask us, ‘What do you want to do?’ and once we said we wanted to buy chips and drinks, and we were allowed to do that. I do not know if the others are allowed to do that too. But = we were allowed to.
	Self-Determination	And what I generally like is that you can decide when you want to eat, whether you want to go to the gym.
	Externally	I: Who decides here? P1: The adults. I: And can you have a say? P2: Nope.
Boundaries of participation	Room, Norms	No! Not everything we want! Not watching TV.

opportunities and (b) institutionalized formats. The key spaces identified in the data were free play, group activities, food-related practices, and the sports hall. Across these spaces, children reported different forms of participation (*voices*). In fact, they referred to all categories of voice described in Table 1.

Free play was consistently associated with self-determination. In all EEOs, children were able to choose their own activities. This autonomy included selecting rooms or engaging in preferred activities, such as playing games or painting:

I: You can choose in which room you go?

Several Ps: Yes!

P1: Yes, we can decide where we will go [in the EEO], that's / that I mean by freedom. (A3, p.138)

Some EEOs use an activity zone system, which children highlighted during the photo tours. In this system, staff inform children about open rooms, enabling them to choose where to go and what to do. In other EEOs, children are assigned to fixed group rooms but still have the freedom to select activities within them.

Group activities were present in all EEOs. Here, we found various examples of externally determined formats in which staff selected the activities for the group:

So, you can say, yes, when they ask: "Do you want to come along?" But you can't decide whether it's going to be a skating week or something like that. You can't choose the topic yourself. (B2, p.223)

This highlights that while children may choose whether to participate in a group activity or opt out, they are rarely involved in determining what that activity for the whole group will be.

Mechanisms such as wish boxes, wish lists, and, in one case, formalized children's participation meetings provide avenues for *consultation* and *decision-making*. When it comes to *deciding together*, small groups of friends often collaborate on what they want to do. For whole-group activities, children provide examples such as choosing games or activities to engage in collectively. Various methods exist for making these decisions, including finding an agreement where everyone can choose once (for example music) or using a majority vote as well as drawing a raffle ticket:

Our group always does this after brushing our teeth: we have a basket where we can write down 'F' for football, or 'B' for building, or something like that. (F6, p.404)

Still, children expressed a wish to suggest more collective activities such as baking or visiting a museum. In the **sports hall**, consultation was the most common format. Children reported that they could suggest games to play:

So, in sport quite often. In sport, we are allowed to wish for which game we want to play next time. (C5, p.91)

In some cases, joint decision-making was also used in this space, for example through majority voting.

Food was another recurring topic. Children could request specific menus and, in some EEOs, evaluate the meals by giving ratings. However, due to health-related constraints, participation in this domain often remained limited to consultation. In a few EEOs, children helped prepare snacks for the group — indicating a more collaborative form of participation. One EEO had a highly structured participation format that included children's meetings

P1: So, always after the holidays, there is a week where it [box for wishes] is available. There are slips of paper inside, and then you can write your wishes on them.

P2: No, there are slips of paper where you can write what you would like to eat.

P3: Or also what you want to do in the EEO. Then the leaders look at which wishes are possible and which are not, and then there is a participation meeting, that's what we call it, where a few children select which of the possible wishes will be implemented and when. (E3, p.93)

Children also reported that some of their material wishes — such as for new sofas or board games — had been fulfilled, which they interpreted as outcomes of joint decision-making.

Participation opportunities were not distributed equally. Children reported that participation opportunities varied by age and group size.

P1: Yes, but the other groups NEVER get to decide, the others usually don't get to participate in the decisions at all.

P2: Yes, but we are just a small group, so we can also decide faster, and we are older. (D5, p.347)

Overall, the data show that participation opportunities were more common in individual contexts such as free play, while group-based activities tended to be more predefined and staff-led. Formal, institutionalized participation mechanisms, such as wish boxes or lists, exist in several EEOs, whereas participation meetings are present in only one.

6.2 Audience, influence and boundaries

This section explores how children perceive the responsiveness of adults to their expressed views (*audience*) and whether these views have a tangible impact on decision-making processes (*influence*). The analysis is based on the subcategories *heard* and *listened to* (audience), as well as *influence*, *no influence*, and *feedback* (influence), as outlined in Table 1.

Participation becomes meaningful only when children's input is not merely acknowledged but also taken seriously and reflected in actions. The children's accounts paint a nuanced picture: while some describe experiences of genuine influence, others report tokenistic practices or a lack of clarity about how and why decisions are made. This suggests that the quality of participation is not only a matter of offering space and voice, but also of ensuring responsive and transparent adult engagement.

Children noted that staff members differ in how attentively they listen to them. Some staff members ask for their input but do not genuinely listen:

And I actually think it's pretty good now that you can accept yourself like that, because in the past, it annoyed me a bit that this cook sometimes added something to my food that I didn't want, even though I said I didn't want it. Even when I said 'I don't want that', she still added it to my food. (C3, p.208)

In contrast, other staff members listen to children's voices and take them seriously by allowing them to experience genuine influence over decisions made within the EEOs. When staff actively listen to children, they feel heard, fostering a sense of self-efficacy; however, if staff members do not engage meaningfully with children's voices, this can lead to tokenism — where children's participation feels superficial rather than impactful.

Children often express confusion about why some of their wishes are granted while others are not, they frequently mention a lack of feedback regarding these decisions. In some EEOs, children may not even be aware of where wish boxes are located or that they exist at all:

P1: But sometimes [Name of EEO staff member] also asks us what we want to do.

P2: Very often.

P3: And then, yeah, I know.

P2: But then it almost never happens. (D6, p.246)

The children identified various boundaries affecting their participation rights. Notably, age plays a significant role. Another boundary is the needs of other children:

Look, but when you serve yourself, then/ then/then sometimes you take too much and there is nothing left for the others. (A4, p.82)

Additionally, structural boundaries limit opportunities for participation; for example, room size can restrict freedom when choosing where to eat or what activities to engage in, while unhealthy wishes — such as eating sweets or watching TV — are often dismissed.

For some children, the space for participation seems overwhelming:

P: We are allowed to decide, but it also takes quite a long time until everyone has been somewhat covered. For example, child X, she always starts to say something like (.) something to child Y like he's stupid or something, and then it always takes a long time. And we can't really explain what we want to do. (B1, p.107)

Not everyone uses the right to opt out of participation; others do not use the right to participate:

I: And are they always the same ones who speak, or/?

P1: No, not really. But a few are QUIET, say NOTHING at all. (B1, p.188)

Further, we found examples illustrating that children often misunderstand the process of participation, frequently confusing decision-making with the idea that their opinion should always prevail. However, participation also means accepting that the majority's decision may override individual preferences.

P: But I never get to decide. BECAUSE there are always other children who get to decide. And I just never get to decide.

I: And YOU don't, why not?

P: Because other children are always chosen.

I: Yes. Do you also have this impression, or do you find it still fairly distributed?

P: Hm-mh, I always get to decide. (C6, p.117)

This quote demonstrates the previously described pattern: both children have the same opportunity to participate, but they experience it differently. These findings suggest that *audience* and *influence* are deeply interconnected: Without transparent and respectful engagement from adults, children may feel that their voices have little value, even when invited to speak. True participation in EEOs requires not only asking for children's input but also providing feedback, negotiating boundaries, and ensuring that participation is perceived as fair, inclusive, and effective.

6.3 Patterns

As part of the second part of our analysis, this section presents recurring patterns across the different dimensions of participation as

experienced by children in EEOs. By synthesizing findings from the previously discussed categories — space, voice, audience, and influence — we identified patterns that offer a deeper understanding of how participation is practiced and perceived from the perspective of children in everyday EEO contexts.

The following Table 2 provides a condensed overview of participation forms as experienced across four key domains of EEO life: Free Play, Food, Group Activities, and the Sports Hall. Each row corresponds to a specific setting, and the columns represent the main forms of participation, the type of adult responsiveness (audience), the degree of influence children experienced, the perceived effect of this influence, and the boundaries or structural limits encountered. The table must be read from left to right, as each row illustrates how participation unfolds in context.

During free play, children often experience self-determination, a common feature across EEOs, fostering a sense of self-efficacy. However, their choices are often constrained by room availability, structure (limited spaces for some activities) and norms (e.g., “Do not disturb others.”).

Food-related decisions reveal varying degrees of participation. In settings with “open restaurant” systems, children can choose when, where, and what to eat – which fosters self-efficacy. We also observed collaborative forms of participation, such as children evaluating meals or preparing snacks. When children's voices are listened to and taken seriously, this results in influence and self-efficacy. However, when their input is merely heard without resulting in action or feedback, this leads to tokenism, generating frustration.

Children described a range of consultation practices regarding food. While they are often asked about their preferences, the response to their input is inconsistent. Some children reported being listened to, with their preferences respected. Others described situations where food they explicitly rejected was still served—without explanation. This lack of transparency results in perceived tokenism. For example, when wishes for certain foods (e.g., pizza) are fulfilled sometimes but ignored at other times without feedback, participation becomes symbolic rather than meaningful. Even when decisions not to fulfill wishes are justifiable (e.g., for health reasons), the absence of explanations fosters mistrust and disappointment. This underscores the importance of feedback and transparent communication by adults, as emphasized in Lundy's concept of “audience” (2007). In some EEOs without open restaurant systems, even decisions about when and where to eat are externally determined, further limiting participation.

Regarding group activities, we found similar patterns to food. While collaboration was not mentioned, children described various forms of “deciding together,” such as everyone taking turns or drawing raffle tickets. When these processes are respected by adults, they lead to influence and self-efficacy.

The sports hall follows similar patterns. A key difference here is the use of majority voting, which sometimes led to frustration—especially when children felt their individual vote did not matter. In one EEO, this issue was addressed by protecting minority interests; when football was the majority's constant preference, staff members ensured that other suggestions were also implemented at times. This approach promoted fairness and inclusivity. Here, too, transparent communication about boundaries and shared rules is crucial to avoid the perception of unfairness and increase the legitimacy of participation.

TABLE 2 Patterns of participation in EEOs.

Space	Main form	Audience	Influence	Effect	Boundaries
Freeplay	Self-determination	–	Influence	Self-efficacy	Room availability, structure and norms
Food	Self-determination		Influence	Self-efficacy	Structure, Health, room availability
	Collaborating: Feedback, evaluation, preparing snacks	Listened to	Influence	Participation- > Self-efficacy	Health
		Heard	No influence	Tokenism- > frustration	Health
	Consulted: what in the plate / wish	Heard	No influence	Tokenism- > frustration	Health
		Listened to	Influence	Participation- > Self-efficacy	Health
	Externally determined		No influence		Health
Group activities/ excursions/	Self-determination (opt out option)	–	Influence	Self-determination	Others and their wellbeing, safety
	Consulted	Listened to	Influence	Participation- > Self-efficacy	Age, size, feasibility
		Heard	No influence and feedback		
	Deciding-together: every one once/ to draw a raffle ticket	Listened to	Influence	Participation- > Self-efficacy	
	Informed	–	No influence		
	Externally determined		No influence		
Sports Hall	Self-determination (opt out option)	–	Influence	Self-determination	Others and their wellbeing, safety
	Consulted	Listened to	Influence	Participation- > Self-efficacy	Age, size, feasibility
		Heard	No influence and feedback		
	Deciding-together: majority vote	Listened to	Influence	Participation- > Self-efficacy	Minority protection
			No influence	Participation- > Accepting the effect	
				Not understanding the process participation -> frustration	
	Externally determined		No influence		

Overall, [Table 2](#) and corresponding examples demonstrate that the experience of participation is shaped not only by whether opportunities exist, but also by how they are framed, mediated, and responded to by adults. Boundaries such as age, space, health considerations, and institutional structure significantly impact whether children perceive their participation as meaningful or symbolic.

7 Discussion

This study examines children’s views on participation in EEOs in a Swiss canton. The findings reveal that children feel they have more influence over personal choices, such as whether to participate in an activity, compared to determining the content of group activities, a result that aligns with previous research ([Gerbeshi et al., 2024](#)). Participation is notably high in sports hall activities, confirming earlier findings ([Coelen and Wagener, 2010](#)).

The study found varying structures across the nine EEOs, with some using formal meetings for participation, while others rely on informal methods like wish boxes. Across all EEOs, children

experience space for participation ([Lundy, 2007](#)), and all forms of participation were found ([Biedermann and Oser, 2006](#)). However, externally determined formats still dominate group-based activities, indicating that opportunities for deeper involvement are often limited to individual spaces such as free play.

These findings underscore the importance of participation as a dimension of process quality in EEOs (e.g., [Landwehr, 2015](#)). While space and self-determination were often realized, the inconsistent presence of influence and audience suggests that quality remains uneven across institutional settings.

8 Conclusion

Our research explored how children perceive their participation rights, the extent to which they feel heard by staff, and how their perspectives can influence their experience in the EEOs. The results indicate both opportunities and challenges in integrating children’s voices into the decision-making processes within EEOs.

Institutions that empower children to explore autonomy and engage in decision-making are vital for fostering democratic skills and promoting well-being (Sauerwein and Grasshoff, 2022). Our study shows that EEOs can fulfill this role effectively by offering diverse forms of participation across topics and activities (Biedermann and Oser, 2006), thereby supporting children's development as active citizens. However, meaningful participation depends on transparent and responsive feedback: staff must not only ask for children's views, but explain how these views are considered and why certain suggestions are implemented while others are not. This helps prevent participation from becoming symbolic and instead fosters a sense of recognition and trust among children.

To achieve this, staff need ongoing training to integrate children's voices effectively and prioritize participation in daily practices (Macha et al., 2024). As Lundy (2007) and our results point out, children's views are essential but must be balanced with professional responsibilities regarding safety, health, and pedagogical objectives. This requires transparent communication of boundaries and appropriate adjustments for different age groups and their capacities. Additionally, EEOs should recognize age-related differences in children's ability to express their opinions and adapt their approaches accordingly.

In the canton where this study was conducted, the Ministry of Education initiated a revision of the existing quality framework for EEOs, involving both practitioners and our research team. Children's voices should not only be heard at the practice level but also inform policy decisions. As researchers, we contributed to the revision process by bringing children's voices from our study into these policy discussions.

A key example was the debate about removing "meal" as a quality dimension. The practice group argued that the open restaurant system had reduced its relevance. However, our findings (Näpfli and Schweinberger, 2025) showed that meals remain central to children's daily well-being. We advocated for retaining the dimension based on the children's views—and it remained. This case also illustrates how researchers can act as "knowledge brokers" (Ward et al., 2009), bridging the gap between children's lived experiences and institutional decision-making. While children rarely participate directly in policymaking, such mediated approaches enable their perspectives to influence systems that shape their everyday lives. It also aligns with participatory principles enshrined in the UNCRC and childhood sociology expanding these research-informed processes could embed participatory principles more deeply into educational governance at both local and national levels.

The concept of an "interactive space" (Coburn and Stein, 2010) was crucial during the framework revision process, allowing children's voices—conveyed through research—to influence decisions collaboratively with practitioners and policymakers. Strengthening such spaces and fostering more exchange among EEOs on participatory practices would further enhance the quality and consistency of participation across institutions.

In summary, our research underscores the importance of actively listening to children's voices in EEOs and integrating their perspectives into policy frameworks. While there are significant

opportunities for enhancing children's participation rights, challenges remain that must be addressed through targeted training for staff, structural changes within EEOs, and clearer communication about participation processes. By fostering an environment where all children feel heard and valued, the EEOs can promote the well-being of children and enhance their democratic skills.

Data availability statement

The data analyzed in this study are not publicly available due to the inclusion of sensitive personal information. Requests to access the data can be directed to the corresponding author, Jasmin Näpfli (jasmin.naepfli@fhnw.ch).

Author contributions

JN: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. KS: Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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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.

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The authors declare that Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript. Generative AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT and deepL) were used to support language editing and phrasing during the manuscript preparation. All intellectual content, analysis, and interpretation were created and reviewed by the authors. The authors remain fully responsible for the content.

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Sports activities in extended education—their leading role for educational development

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Introduction: Physical inactivity represents a global challenge that calls for early intervention, particularly during childhood. Schools are uniquely positioned to influence children's current and future physical activity behaviors. The introduction of all-day schools creates an opportunity to integrate diverse sports-oriented activities throughout the school day. In Zurich, the implementation of all-day schools in primary schools led to the development and evaluation of extended educational programmes, with a particular emphasis on physical activities, with the aim of contributing to holistic and sustainable health promotion. These activities included optional programmes during lunch breaks and before, between, and after lessons, aimed at fostering both subject-specific and interdisciplinary competencies.

Methods: To evaluate the activities, both qualitative and quantitative methods were used, comprising semi-structured interviews with school principals and extended educational services principals and student questionnaires.

Results: The evaluation revealed high levels of participation, particularly in physical activities including the Open Gym and mobile facilities.

Discussion: The findings demonstrate the leading role of physical activities including teacher-led and child-driven options in extended educational programs.

KEYWORDS

physical activities, extended education, all-day school, movement promotion, comprehensive school program

1 Introduction

During childhood, physical activity, exercise and play are essential for the healthy development of children (Stodden et al., 2008; Hulteen et al., 2018). Physical activity in both informal settings and organized sports is important for lifecourse health, and the World Health Organization (WHO) recommends at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity per day for children and adolescents (Chaput et al., 2020; Chalkley and Landais, 2022). School is an important context for promoting extended educational activities, including physical activity (Sallis et al., 2012; Bailey et al., 2023), where theoretically, all children can be reached, including those who are less active and have lower motor competencies.

However, the daily lives of children and adolescents are increasingly shaped by additional activities which reduce the time available to them to freely organize their activities outside of school (Chiapparini et al., 2018). Extended educational services are seen as part of extended education, which includes school-based extended educational activities, extended educational activities by outside partners and collaborative activities by school and outside partners (Bae, 2018). As children spend most of the day at school, extended educational services schools should also take responsibility for promoting physical activity through extended educational activities (Neuber, 2020; Naul and Neuber, 2021). This is a key concern as the daily lives of many pupils are characterized by a lack of physical activity (Finger et al., 2018; Bailey et al., 2023). According to Neuber (2020), sports activities comprise the largest proportion of extended educational activities in schools.

The physical activities belong to the category of school-based extended educational activities conducted within the school context. They are organized by the school, even when some activities take place off-site, either directly offered by the school's teachers or by other school staff or professionals from the field of extended education (Bae, 2018).

Extended educational services have the potential to develop and implement appropriate and varied extended physical activity and sports programmes for children and young people (Neuber, 2008; Züchner, 2014; Webster, 2023). The extended educational services at schools referred to here offer opportunities to stimulate interest and enjoyment in physical activity at an early age. As they take place in the school grounds but after the lessons, they are designed to reach children who may not have access to an active lifestyle at home (Noetzel et al., 2024). The activities intentioned as a new type of intervention at the intersection of sport and social pedagogy as they do not request formal participation and subscription, are non-selective and open to every student. In particular, the rhythmization of the school day through movement is emphasized, as well as the informal social interaction among children. There is potential for individual support, especially for children with a lack of experience of movement or for young people showing aptitude for sport, as access to sports clubs is often limited, especially for non-athletic students (Pate et al., 2006).

As the provision of institutionalized extended education at school becomes increasingly important in Switzerland (Chiapparini et al., 2016), extended educational services at schools are assuming responsibility for developing appropriate and diverse activities for children and young people in the hours outside of the formal academic day.

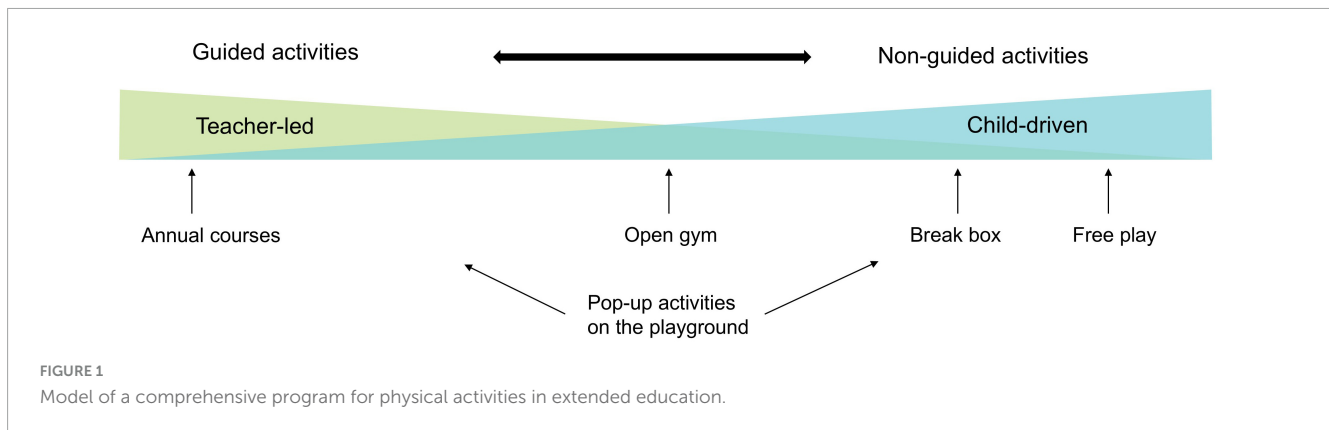
It is recommended that extended educational services provide non-formal and informal contexts, such as organized or guided extended physical activities, as well as informal free play in the playground during breaks (Reimers et al., 2018) or in institutionalized extended educational service times at school. Physical activities during extended education service times play a crucial role in promoting physical activity among children, not only because they provide additional opportunities for exercise, but also because they contribute to the social and emotional development of children (Rüser et al., 2019; Webster, 2023). Theoretically, activities in extended educational services are based on the self-determination theory (SDT), serving an individual's basic needs for intrinsic motivation and overall wellbeing (Ryan and Deci, 2000). These needs include autonomy, competence and relatedness (i.e., forging positive inter-personal relationships). A supportive

learning environment, characterized by student autonomy, choices, recognition, and clear explanations regarding the importance of physical exercise significantly contributes to the satisfaction of individual basic needs (Paap et al., 2025). The experience of autonomy, competence and relatedness in sports activities as part of an extended educational programme thus contributes to the promotion of a sustainably health-conscious lifestyle.

In extended educational contexts different temporal and spatial contexts are encouraged, in which children have the opportunity to meet and move according to their needs and abilities. Promoting autonomy and participation to promote relatedness. Therefore, activities should not generally be competition-oriented but offer low-threshold opportunities for physical activity and social encounters (see Figure 1). They represent an innovative field of learning and interaction that differs from both compulsory physical education and recreational or club sports. They serve as a form of social infrastructure for students, enabling them to connect their school experiences with their personal lives through the activities offered (Ferrari et al., 2023). Consequently, educators in these activities should adopt an individualized approach, considering students' abilities and preferences, offering them choice as well as a self-determined degree of participation and peer-relatedness.

All these activities are to be understood as components of a comprehensive school programme for physical activities, such as the American framework "Comprehensive School Physical Activity Program" (CSPAP) (Society of Health and Physical Educators, 2024), the Swiss model "Bewegte Schule" (Schulgruppe BASPO, 2010) or the programme "Schule Bewegt" (Swiss Olympic et al., 2018). CSPAP is the most-globally recognized model. It is a comprehensive framework for promoting physical activity in schools, developed in the United States by the Society of Health and Physical Educators (SHAPE America). In addition to the recommendation of 60 min of physical activity per day (World Health Organization, 2010), the model also emphasizes the development of knowledge, skills, and confidence necessary to support lifelong physical activity. The framework highlights the importance of strong coordination of and synergy between all of its components: physical education, physical activity before and after school (extended educational programs), physical activity during school, staff involvement, and family and community engagement (Carson et al., 2014). The Swiss model "Bewegte Schule" aims to support schools in planning, implementing and evaluating physical activity interventions according to temporal (before/after school) and structural (in school-in class) criteria (Schulgruppe BASPO, 2010). The national programme "Schule Bewegt" has also provided a comprehensive synthesis of proposals for physical activity breaks in the classroom to encourage teachers to integrate at least 20 min of physical activity into their lessons every day (Swiss Olympic et al., 2018).

Compared to the wider field physical education, research on extended educational activities at schools is in its infancy (Demetriou et al., 2017; Webster, 2023; Bailey et al., 2024). Further (child -oriented) research is required to gain insight into the processes involved in the successful implementation of comprehensive school physical activities in different school contexts. The current literature is still in its early stages, and more evidence is needed to support the development of effective practices (Webster, 2023) and to understand the role of the physical activities during the school day.



In contrast to the parameters of club activities, participation in these activities should not be limited to a specific class or group to increase the child's autonomous choice in terms of in what and with whom they participate. It is recommended that children and young people from diverse backgrounds be included in extended educational activities as it is acknowledged that optional school sports courses have the potential to engage children who are less active than their peers in club activities, and to attract a slightly higher proportion of girls than other organized sports (Lamprecht et al., 2021). The aim of this article is to analyze the role of physical activities during school days. With the implementation of extended educational services in primary schools and the establishment of all-day schools in the city of Zurich, extended educational services developed a variety of activities that provided non-formal and informal learning opportunities. Alongside other cultural and aesthetic educational programs, physical activities became central elements in the design of extended educational programs at school. Physical activities during lunch breaks and before, between, and after lessons were developed and evaluated to combine subject-specific and interdisciplinary competencies, complementing both family and school activities. The evaluation of the extended educational physical activities, guided by the following research questions, provided the basis for the data analysis presented in this article:

- How is the role of physical activity (PA) offerings perceived in the context of all-day schools?
- What are the patterns of use and the reasons for participating in PA?
- What are the facilitators and barriers for the effective implementation of physical activity offerings in the context of all-day schools?

These research questions provide a structured framework for an in-depth exploration of the topic and a nuanced analysis of the data collected.

2 Materials and methods

The research questions were examined within the framework of two studies *Sport in school environment —a School Development Study* and the *in-depth Open Gym Study*. The context of the city

of Zurich is introduced first, followed by a concise presentation of both studies. Subsequently, the methods of data collection for analysis for each study are described.

In the city of Zurich, the implementation of all-day schools is being continually expanded. As extended educational activities are increasingly becoming part of the school day, new activities need to be developed and evaluated. In this context, our studies focused on physical extended educational activities.

2.1 Study 1: school development study

Various physical extended educational activities to support all-day schools were implemented between 2019 and 2021. The sports department of the city of Zurich invited all-day schools to participate in the project, and the aim and the content of the projects were presented online. A total of 14 schools registered as pilot schools to participate in the school development study. The goal of the project was to develop, implement and evaluate extended educational physical activities that were offered across the 14 public all-day schools in Zurich. The aim was to offer physical and sports activities during the lunch break as well as before, between and after the compulsory lessons. The activities, which were free of charge and open to all children were designed as a leading example of the interlinking of subject-specific and interdisciplinary competencies and supplementary to children's lives. Different types of activities selected by the school were available. Activities took place weekly throughout the school year. Schools could choose from a range of activities, such as multi-sport activities ("games, fun and sport") or sport-specific options, like dancing, football or tennis, which were led by professional sports coaches. The Open Gym during lunchtime offered a mix of free-play and structured sports opportunities on demand. Mobile facilities such as a pump track, a skate park, street soccer and parkour were set up in the school's outdoor playgrounds and remained in place for between 4 weeks to 3 months, depending on the school's needs.

2.2 Study 2: in-depth study open gym

The evaluation of the Open Gym focused on the usage and how the programme was used. An in-depth qualitative study was conducted on the extended educational programme Open Gym

TABLE 1 Characteristics of the school development project and the in depth-study *Open Gym* and the methodological approaches.

Characteristics	Qualitative study	Quantitative study
School development project <i>Sport in School Environments</i>	Semi-structured interviews with school principals and principals of extended educational services	Questionnaires for pupils in second and fifth grade about the use of physical extended educational activities in the all-day school
In-depth sub-study <i>Open Gym</i>	Semi-structured interviews with principals of extended educational services	Questionnaires for the pupils in first and second grade as well as third to sixth grade.

in 2022. The Open Gym provided added value to the extended educational program not only inclement weather but also through the specific play and exercise options. The aim was to provide pupils with an offer that met their individual basic needs and interests and that they could also shape. The Open Gym offered a variety of opportunities characterized by different degrees of management; the influence of the adult leader(s) present ranged from ensuring safety by supervising completely self-initiated activities to actively supporting the organization, structuring the movement space and (partly) selecting and specifying activities.

In this article the empirical data is driven by the longitudinal *School Development Study* (2019-2021) and the evaluation of the in-depth study *Open Gym* (2022). In both studies, a mixed-method approach (qualitative and quantitative data collection) was used, which is outlined in [Table 1](#).

2.3 Data collection

2.3.1 Qualitative data collection

After 2 years of experience in the *School Development Study*, the interviews were used to evaluate the impact of the implementation of the range of physical extended educational activities in all-day schools. In particular, the interviews focused on the activities themselves, their impact, the quality of the provision and the future development of the physical extended educational activities in all-day schools. Moreover, this study was concerned with the impact of the school context, the aims and impact of the activities, the school culture regarding the cooperation between professionals, the children's wellbeing but also tensions between the stakeholders, and the pace of the children's day regarding the transitions between school and extended educational activities. The interviews were conducted face-to-face following a semi-structured interview guide ([Ferrari et al., 2022](#)). The average duration of the interviews was 56 min (range = 39-76 min).

In the in-depth study *Open Gym*, the qualitative interviews took part in five schools with the principals of extended educational services and lasted approximately 60 min. The aim of the interviews was to consider the specific circumstances and unique characteristics of the Open Gym in each school and to capture the experiences of the principals of extended educational services. A semi-structured

interview guide was used, which contained questions about the organization, aims and perceived impact of the Open Gym during lunchtime.

In both projects, the participants were informed about both the aims of the interviews and the wider study, as well as the data security of the audiotaped interviews.

2.3.2 Quantitative data collection

In the *School Development Study*, the questionnaire for the second grade pupils was administered in an analog format using pen and paper ([Ferrari et al., 2022](#)). Project staff visited the classes of the participating schools to distribute questionnaires, explain the survey's purpose, and guide the students through the questionnaire. The questionnaire for the fifth grade pupils was administered in an online format. The link to the questionnaire was sent to the head of the participating schools with a request to forward it to all fifth grade teachers. Teachers were asked to allocate 20-30 min of a regular school lesson for their students to complete the questionnaire. As the questionnaire was not mandatory, there were missing data for school-level reasons (e.g., the principal did not forward the questionnaire to the teachers), for class-level reasons (e.g., the teacher did not have the pupils complete the questionnaire) or for individual-level reasons (e.g., the pupils did not complete the questionnaire).

The quantitative questionnaire in the in-depth study *Open Gym* was conducted for all children attending the school, using different questionnaires for younger (grades 1-2) and older (grades 3-6) children according to developmental appropriateness. As the children from first and second grade had lower reading levels, the questionnaire took part in the form of a standardized interview. The survey was conducted by a staff member from the Zurich University of Teacher Education who interviewed the children in small groups (approximately three children per group) during the lunchtime activity of the Open Gym. The children were asked six questions about the Open Gym, which they answered using three visual "smiley" categories. They could choose whether they agreed, partially agreed, or disagreed with the statement ([Ferrari et al., 2024](#)). For each question, the children placed a piece of paper with the chosen "smiley" in an envelope corresponding to the question being read out. Each group of children could not see the responses of the previous group. The questions covered significant aspects of the self-determination theory related to the activity and included their overall appreciation for the activity, the student's participation and the student's relatedness (example: "I like being in the Open Gym," "We do cool things" or "I move a lot and can try new things"). In third and sixth grade, the questionnaire was completed by the pupils during regular class time shortly before the summer break. Schools either received the questionnaires in paper form or were provided with a QR code, allowing students to complete the questionnaire online ([Sportamt Stadt Zürich, 2023](#)). This flexibility of format enabled schools to integrate the survey into their existing daily schedule. The questionnaire contained questions about participation in the Open Gym as well as participation in other extended educational activities to explore the aspect of the individual basic needs, relatedness, autonomy and competence ([Ryan and Deci, 2000](#)).

TABLE 2 Example deductive data analysis.

Research question	Theoretical framework	Interview Guide	Meaning unit	Condensed unit	Category	Theme/themes
How is the role of physical activity (PA) offerings perceived in the context of all-day schools?	PA based on SDT	What is the value of this PA during lunchtime?	“Very important and a child’s favorite. To be active is positive for us and for the children, they can let off steam and come back a bit overstimulated, but it still works really nicely in the lessons afterward.	Highly important for and well- received by the children. Active moments after sitting still, impacts the lessons afterward.	Impact	Impact on individual and structural level

2.3.3 Participants

In the *School Development Study*, 14 elementary schools participated. School principals participated in the qualitative data collection in the form of interviews. The quantitative questionnaire was filled out by all children of the second grade present on the day of the data collection ($n = 402$, $M = 8.1$ years, $SD = 0.42$, 43.5% girls, 56.3% boys, 0.2% diverse) out of 12 schools and children of the fifth grade, whose teachers asked them to complete the questionnaire ($n = 299$, $M = 11.8$ years, $SD = 1.1$; 51.8% girls, 47.2% boys, 1.0% diverse) out of 12 schools.

In the *in-depth study Open Gym*, qualitative interviews took place with the principal of extended educational services in the five participating schools and lasted on average for approximately 60 min. In total, first and second grade children ($n = 101$, $M = 7.83$ years, $SD = 0.84$, 45.5% girls, 54.5% boys, 0% diverse) from four different schools participated in the quantitative survey. From third to sixth grade, the questionnaire was filled out by children ($n = 379$, $M = 10.49$ years, $SD = 1.21$, 51.3% girls, 47.9% boys, 0.8% diverse) from three different schools.

2.4 Data analysis

2.4.1 Qualitative data analysis

The interviews in both projects were recorded and transcribed. For data coding and the analysis, the software MAXQDA 22 (Verbi Software GmbH, 1989–2024) was used. In both projects, qualitative content analyses were conducted according to the methodological approach of Mayring and Fenzl (2019). After transcription, the themes and patterns in the interviews were identified. The categories were identified deductively based on the research questions, the theoretical framework and interview guide and inductively supplemented based on the data (see Table 2). The data were counter-coded until discrepancies among the ratters could no longer be detected.

2.4.2 Quantitative data analysis

The quantitative data analysis was performed using SPSS (IBM Corp., 2023), with descriptive statistics being calculated. In the sports programme, children had the option to participate in specific physical extended educational activities based at school. To classify the activities by sport type, broader categories were established to form, “dance,” “multi-sportive courses,” “gymnastics,” and “ball sports.”

3 Results

3.1 Physical extended educational activities as an important element of school development

“We see it as a way of offering sports in an open and inclusive manner. There are programmes designed for specific target groups, but there are also opportunities where, for instance, the gymnasium is simply made available for everyone to join in. In the playground, we also provide pop-up facilities such as a skate park or a pump track. For us, these are all pieces of the puzzle that contribute to creating an active school.” (School Principal, S11_t2_Pos. 57)

Regarding the physical extended educational activities, our analysis revealed four main categories: aims, quality, impact and conditions for success. In summary, the interviews revealed that the physical extended educational activities were well-selected and generally well-received. Activities, like the Open Gym and the mobile facilities were especially popular and actively used, even during the compulsory Physical Education lessons. The pupils developed creative solutions to manage equal participation, such as developing a button registration system for mobile facilities.

3.1.1 Activities and quality

In the following sections, the quality dimensions of the physical extended educational activity of the *School Development Study* are presented, based on guided interviews at the end of the project.

In second grade 41,8% children ($n = 170$) participated in the year-round courses. Out of the boys ($n = 226$), half participated in year-round courses ($n = 114$), resulting in a participation rate of 50%. For girls ($n = 175$), 55 took part, reflecting a participation rate of 31%. In the child-driven activities, 70% of the boys ($n = 158$) and 57% of the girls ($n = 100$) participated (Table 3).

Table 4 shows the usage of physical extended educational activities by the children of the fifth grade ($n = 299$) who participated in the quantitative data collection. The year-round courses were attended by nearly one fifth of children ($n = 56$, 18.7%) of the total sample, which means that a smaller percentage of fifth-grade children attended the annual courses, in comparison to the second-grade children.

In total, the physical extended educational activities were more popular among second-grade pupils than in fifth-grade pupils.

TABLE 3 Usage of the physical extended educational activities in second grade (data based on the questionnaire, $n = 402$).

	Teacher led courses	Child-driven activities		
	Annual courses	Total	Open gym	Mobile facilities
	n (% of total sample)	n (% of total sample)	n (% of total sample)	n (% of total sample)
Total ($N = 402$)	169 (42.0)	259 (64.4)	150 (37.3)	89 (22.1)
Male ($n = 226$)	114 (28.4)	158 (39.3)	100 (24.9)	58 (14.4)
Female ($n = 175$)	55 (13.6)	100 (24.9)	49 (12.2)	31 (7.7)
Diverse ($n = 1$)	0 (0)	1 (0.2)	1 (0.2)	0 (0)

TABLE 4 Usage of the physical extended educational activities in fifth grade (data based on the questionnaire, $n = 299$).

	Teacher led courses	Child-driven activities		
	Annual courses	Total	Open gym	Mobile facilities
	n (% of total sample)	n (% of total sample)	n (%)	n (%)
Total ($n = 299$)	56 (18.7)	57 (19.3)	48 (16.1)	11 (3.7)
Male ($n = 141$)	30 (10.1)	29 (9.8)	24 (8.2)	6 (2.0)
Female ($n = 155$)	26 (8.8)	27 (9.2)	24 (8.2)	4 (1.3)
Diverse ($n = 5$)	0 (0.0)	1 (0.3)	0 (0.0)	1 (0.3)

While 42% of the second-grade children attended the year-round courses, only 18.7% of the fifth grade pupils attended the year-round courses. This could also be observed within the child-driven activities. These were engaged with by 64.4% of the second-grade pupils, but only by 19.3% of the fifth-grade pupils. The various activities were discussed in the qualitative interviews, as described in the following section.

3.1.2 Year-round courses

“I think it contributes to equal opportunities or equity that there are not only programmes that cost money but are also free of charge. I think that is very important, otherwise there is a two-tier society within a school and that goes against our desire to be one unit.” (Extended Educational Principal, S5_t1_Pos. 12)

This excerpt highlights that school principals prioritize the annual sport courses, because they were free of charge as opposed to organized sports clubs. The interview participants assumed that the number of enrollments was partially influenced by children's social background and the sports infrastructure in their communities. Schools where many children were already involved in private extracurricular activities (e.g., sports, music, or arts) saw lower attendance in year-round courses than schools where children were not involved in private provision due to infrastructure or socioeconomic reasons.

“We need different year-round courses for different ages – the younger ones should have diverse experiences.” (School Principal, S3_t3_Pos 15)

Year-round courses in lower grades were generally broad and often focused on multisport activities, with a strong appreciation

for them as they provided a contrast to compulsory Physical Education lessons due to the multi-age characteristics of the groups of children, instructors leading sessions instead of teachers, and the content of the activity. In upper elementary school, more specific courses became popular, and course offerings were influenced by current trends and local sports infrastructure.

“I need experts in these courses, real basketball players, dancers, professionals that know the sports well, who become part of the school and showcase their performances at the end of year party.” (School Principal, S1_t3_Pos 6)

Several factors contributed to the success of the year-round teacher-led courses. Key among them was the well-trained and highly professional leadership. Cooperation between course leaders and school staff was also important to ensure smooth transitions between lessons and extended educational activities, with good collaboration leading to consistent participation. Establishing continuity in year-round courses and maintaining the same leadership helped to build a sports culture and relationships with instructors. Courses of varying skill levels allowed students to progress over multiple years, improving their skills (e.g., in dancing). Effective communication with parents and pupils, such as presenting the year-round courses in class or offering trial days, also played a role in promoting enrollment. In some schools, parents were supported with online registration or translation of key documents, which led to higher attendance.

Specific organizational factors however, hindered the success of year-round courses. Neighborhood characteristics needed to be considered during course selection, as an oversaturation of a particular activity could result in low attendance. For younger children, getting to the course location was sometimes problematic, though this was addressed at some schools by asking the course leaders to escort the children. At other schools, schedule

coordination was difficult, particularly when transitions between classes and courses were too tight or courses were scheduled in the afternoons during regular lessons.

3.1.3 Open gym

“They have the opportunity to go to the Open Gym during the lunch break. That is an offer that is used very well.” (Extended Educational Principal, S9_t2_Pos. 50)

The Open Gym was generally seen as a positive offering. It was noted that children played there differently compared to outdoor activities or compulsory Physical Education classes, making it a distinct experience. The programme allowed for varied participatory activities. Different organizational forms were observed depending on the Open Gym’s setup, and by creating movement landscapes, children could engage in free play. The mixing of classes and age groups led to a different dynamic than was observed during regular class time or breaks. Involving pupils in decision-making was seen to enhance their social and personal competencies.

“But then, because it’s a child’s favorite, everybody showed up at the Open Gym and we had to find a way to avoid pure chaos and make it possible that children could play a game.” (Extended Educational Principal, S2_t3_Pos.34)

Initially, some schools had no limit on the number of participants, leading to overcrowding (up to 150 children in some cases) and difficulty managing the programme. To address this, creative solutions were introduced, such as a “button system” for children to sign up for midday activities. Each child was given a button in the morning to place on the board with the different activities in order to register for the activity they wanted to attend during lunchtime (e.g., Open Gym, library, etc.).

The success of the Open Gym relied heavily on well-trained staff capable of managing large groups, support from the sports department (i.e., expert advice), and a balance between more organized activities and free play. Challenges arose when participation was unrestricted, leading to a mix of age and competence levels, which could result in either cooperation with or domination by older children. Managing these heterogeneous groups required skilled staff and was often resolved by splitting children into different days or time slots. Additionally, access for preschool children was limited due to the decentralized location of preschool on school grounds.

3.1.4 Mobile facilities

“The designs painted on the playground also play an important role in some school buildings. Additionally, we are fortunate to have created an exceptionally attractive playground, thanks to the pump track and other initiatives we have implemented.” (School Principal, S6_t2_Pos. 56)

Generally, the mobile facilities were very popular among students and were used frequently. Children developed their own rules (e.g., using the skatepark twice before stopping at a designated point) to ensure everyone could have an opportunity

to take part. They regulated their learning process individually, initially observing before trying out the facilities themselves. Even children who were usually less active increased their activity levels and developed a desire to compete with their peers. Notable motor competence improvements were observed in all children.

A key advantage of the mobile facilities was their support for self-regulation and peer interaction, with an inclusive character. A positive link was found between the training of teachers and extended educational staff and the use of the facilities. When teachers and extended educational staff participated in the introduction, the facilities were more likely to be used in extended educational activities and Physical Education classes. Proper introduction to the equipment also helped pupils become “multipliers,” teaching other children how to use the facilities effectively. Additionally, the facilities were popular with the public outside school hours and at weekends, acting as a “neighborhood magnet” due to their location on school grounds, which allowed free and local access.

Due to limited school areas or available space, the mobile facilities could not be deployed across all schools. In some cases, they were placed on existing sports areas, like a basketball court, rendering these areas unusable for their normal purpose. The optimal usage period was identified as between 4 and 6 weeks.

3.1.5 Recess area

“The recess box is something we use daily. We are not even noticing it, it became so natural to use it. The only problem is the gathering when the break is over, we have to remind the children to store the stuff in the box again and not just run back to the classroom.” (Extended Educational Principal, S6_t2_Pos 41)

The school’s outdoor areas were used in a variety of ways. Each school had a bicycle course that could be used by bicycles or other wheeled play vehicles. Some schools also had playgrounds, basketball or football fields, chess boards, or other demarcated areas.

Typically, a “recess box” was available in the playground or a classroom, allowing children to freely take materials to play with. These boxes were used both outdoors and indoors, with different organizational approaches observed. At some schools, a teacher or supervisor distributed the materials, while at others a class took turns managing the box each week. In addition to small play equipment, ride-on vehicles like go-karts were especially popular. Available throughout primary school, these provide continuous engagement, offering an appealing way to improve motor skills without stigmatization. The recess box was child-oriented and needs-based, with no explicit learning goals, but it was used to guide children in overcoming poorer motor skills (e.g., those skills required for biking, balancing, and ball games) and to interact with each other.

The active involvement of Physical Education teachers, school principals and principals of extended educational services was crucial in designing an attractive playground, especially when it

TABLE 5 Wellbeing after and reasons why second-grade children participated in the physical extended educational activities, analyzed separately according to teacher-led and child-centered activities.

	Child-driven (Open Gym, mobile facilities, recess area) (<i>n</i> = 259)	Teacher-led (annual courses) (<i>n</i> = 169)
<i>How do you feel after the courses?</i>	% (yes)	% (yes)
I feel well.	81.2	69.9
I do not feel good.	4.0	9.8
I am tired at evening.	18.4	30.1
I feel strong and fit during the day.	56.2	57.7
Why do you attend the courses?		
Because it is fun.	63.3	48.4
Because I learn something new.	37.1	49.4
Because I can be together with friends.	50.4	47.2
Because I feel well afterwards.	46.0	47.2

TABLE 6 Reasons why the fifth-grade children participated in the physical extended educational activities (in percent).

	Child-driven (<i>n</i> = 57)		Teacher-led (<i>n</i> = 56)				
			Total	Offer-specific			
	Open gym (<i>n</i> = 48)	Mobile facilities (<i>n</i> = 11)	Annual courses (<i>n</i> = 56)	Dancing (<i>n</i> = 19)	Ball sports (<i>n</i> = 14)	Individual sports (<i>n</i> = 15)	Multi—sportive course (<i>n</i> = 17)
Why do you attend the offer?% (yes)							
Because I can be together with friends.	58.3	45.5	47.6	59.1	35.0	22.7	36.8
Because it is fun.	66.7	90.9	46.0	40.9	35.0	35.3	47.4
Because I learn something new.	20.8	72.7	50.8	40.9	55.0	50.0	15.8
Because I can let off steam.	52.1	45.5	36.5	36.4	20.0	22.7	42.1
Because my parents want me to.	2.1	0	12.7	3.5	10.0	13.6	10.5

came to managing sports equipment or applying for funding to make infrastructure improvements.

3.1.6 Perceived impact of the physical extended educational activities

The children who participated in the teacher-led and child-driven activities were asked for the reasons as to why they participated in the activities. The questionnaires for the second- and fifth grade children differed in complexity due to developmental appropriateness. While the children in second grade class were asked how they feel and why they participate in the teacher-led and child-centered physical extended educational activities in general, the children in fifth grade answered the question why they participate in the activities separately for the different activities (Ferrari et al., 2022).

For those in the second grade, there were initial filter questions in the questionnaire. First, they could tick which year-round courses they attended, for which the name of the year-round course was school-specific. After that, they answered both questions about the wellbeing after the course and the reasons why they participated in the course by ticking the boxes.

Table 5 shows the result of the second-grade children regarding their wellbeing after the year-round courses and the reasons for

their participation. Overall, they “felt well” after the courses. Differences were observed between the teacher-led and child-centered courses regarding the reasons for their participation. The reason “because it’s fun” was given more often by children in child-led activities (63.3%) than in teacher-led activities (48.4%), while children in teacher-led settings (49.4%) wanted to learn something new more often than children in child-led settings (37.1%).

For the fifth-grade participants, the questionnaire also contained filter questions. The children could select the reasons for choosing each individual activity, which is shown in Table 6. As for child-centered activities, they could choose the Open Gym and mobile facilities, whereby the teacher-led activities contained the school-specific year-round activities. The year-round activities were then categorized as “dancing,” “ball sports,” “individual sports,” and “multi-sportive courses.”

Among fifth-grade pupils, the reasons for the attendance in child-driven activities were different for the Open Gym and the mobile facilities. In both activities, children wanted to be together with their friends and “let off steam.” Children used the mobile facilities because it was fun (90.9%) or they learned something new (72.7%). In the year-round courses, the reason “because it is fun” and “I can let off steam” has been less often cited. Within the year-round courses differences regarding the reasons for the attendance

were also found. While 59.1% of the children attended the dancing courses because they wanted to be with their friends, the percentage of the children in individual sports was lower (22.7%). In the multi-sport course, only 15.8% went because they “learned something new,” while the reason “to learn something new” was higher in ball sports (55.0%).

Alongside the questionnaires for the children, the perceived impact of the physical extended educational activities was also discussed in the qualitative interviews with the school principals. The impact was observed on both individual and school levels. On an individual level, there was an observed increase in pupils’ self-esteem and autonomy. Through surveys and votes in class councils, pupils were able to express their preferences for new activities, enhancing their participation. At some schools, the effects were visible in pupils’ behavior. Pupils tended to be calmer and more balanced, especially when they engaged in physical activities during lunch breaks.

“We are convinced that the children are calmer if they can move around outside during the lunch break. They come to the afternoon lessons much more relaxed. As soon as the weather is bad or cold and they can’t go outside, things get restless. That is an interesting observation.” (School Principal, S1_t2_Pos. 100)

This effect was particularly pronounced on wet days, as restlessness grew in the afternoons when outdoor activities were limited. Group dynamics in schools also shifted, as activities were offered to multiple classes and grade levels, mixing students in settings such as the year-round courses, the open sports hall, and mobile facilities. As a result, students took part in cross-grade and cross-class socializing.

The qualitative interviews highlighted both subject-specific and personal/social competence development as goals, and in addition, “that children have a place where they can be physically active, let off steam, and also engage in something meaningful” (S9_t3_Pos. 84). These goals included integrating physical activity into daily life, improving motor and sport-specific competencies, fostering students’ autonomy through a choice of extended educational activities, and strengthening self-regulation and conflict resolution skills in the context of group play. During the project, additional physical extended educational activities were developed to meet the specific needs of both students and school staff. One example was the year-round course “calm down—multi-sportive course,” which balanced activities that pushed students to their limits with opportunities for relaxation and retreat. Another key goal was promoting equal opportunities. Free and easily accessible year-round courses aimed at reaching children who, due to financial barriers, lacked access to organized sports. In some schools, teachers and extended educational services supported the enrollment process by offering recommendations to parents.

3.2 In-depth study open gym

As the principals valued the physical activities during lunch as a child-led physical activity that had an impact on children’s behavior in the afternoon, this activity was evaluated in depth using both qualitative interviews with the principals of extended educational

services and quantitative analyses of questionnaires for the pupils (Sportamt Stadt Zürich, 2023).

3.2.1 Programme and organization

“The Open Gym is an activity we would not be without any more, it’s a highlight and offer that constantly takes place and an opportunity for much more than just playing a game together. It’s not an easy offer though.” (Extended Educational Principal, S7_t3_Pos 62)

At some schools, the Open Gym was open during lunchtime every school day, and in other schools only 2 days per week. The children could also participate in extended educational activities other than the Open Gym such as the library, open classrooms with handicrafts or play-based activities. The registration for the Open Gym was also organized in different ways. At some schools, children had to register during the morning or directly before the lunch break, with the help of a button system, whereas at other schools no registration was necessary. At some schools, the children could come and go during the different activities and in other schools the children were expected to stay during the entire lunchtime once they signed up. The Open Gym was available to all children regardless of age or class level.

Whereas some schools opened the Open Gym for free play, other schools offered teacher-supervised activities, like soccer, or offered mixed formats by separation the gym hall into different areas. The content of the activities in the Open Gym was also dependent on the leader who was in the Open Gym. These were usually professionals from the sport office and staff from the extended educational services.

3.2.2 Quality and importance of the open gym

The interview partners from all schools rated the Open Gym as an important activity, which was appreciated by the parents and very popular among the pupils and almost always fully booked to capacity. The quality of the Open Gym was rated in different ways. The Open Gym should be structured, with a start and an end point, e.g., warm up, practicing, play and a cool-down. Moreover, the professionals leading the Open Gym were appreciated.

3.2.3 Aims

One of the over-arching aim of all the activities during lunchtime was to offer the children meaningful engagement during lunchtime with informal learning situations and to serve their individual basic needs by giving them the opportunity to choose the activity they wanted to take part in during lunchtime. Regarding the organization of the activities in the school, the Open Gym helped to disperse the children within the school and offer physical activities next to the playground, which could be visited during periods of inclement weather. One of the central aims of the Open Gym was to increase the duration and quality of children’s physical activity. Within the Open Gym, different activities with different materials were made available to introduce new play formats, and the opportunity to try different activities and types of movement. The children also liked the Open Gym and had fun during their physical activities.

TABLE 7 Questions about the Open Gym for the first and second grade children ($n = 101$) and the distribution of the answers.

	Agree	Partly agree	Disagree
I like to be in the Open Gym.	84.0%	13.8%	2.1%
We have the right to participate in decision-making.	70.9%	19.8%	9.3%
We make cool things.	87.1%	9.7%	3.2%
I get to know new children/I meet friends.	77.2%	16.3%	6.5%
The day care staff are kind.	59.8%	27.2%	13.0%
I move a lot. I can try out new things.	86.0%	9.7%	4.3%

3.2.4 Perceived impact

The perceived impact was assessed by feedback from extended educational services staff and pupils. For some children the Open Gym was very beneficial, but some younger children were overwhelmed due to the variety and the open nature of the programme.

The Open Gym was visited frequently and especially during adverse weather conditions when it was an attractive alternative to the playground. At the beginning of the project, the Open Gym was mainly used for football, which was particularly popular with the boys: “The Open Gym, just setting up goals and a ball, only attracted the boys” (Extended Educational staff, OG_S7_Pos. 32). “We mainly have boys who just want football, football, football, and more football (. . .). If something other than football was offered, like a scooter park or a skate park, they weren’t interested.” (Extended Educational Staff, OG_S6_Pos. 83). The school team began to direct the use of the hall by organizing specific physical activities, such as a movement landscape or separating the Open Gym to offer child-driven and teacher-led activities. As a result, more girls began to participate and sports activities other than football were conducted in the Open Gym.

The emergence of conflicts between children, but also between children and staff, was frequently mentioned. However, it was also explained that this type of collaboration could positively influence relationships between the children as well as with the staff members. Some children were agitated after the Open Gym, but the lessons afterward generally proceeded positively.

3.2.5 Quantitative results

First and second grade children ($n = 101$) who participated in the Open Gym during lunch time took part in the standardized questionnaire. The children could answer six questions by using a child-centred approach. The questions as well as the distribution of the answers are displayed in Table 7.

The children in the first and second grades were satisfied with the Open Gym. The children enjoyed being in the Open Gym, doing “cool things” and moving around a lot, which allowed them to try new things. Seventy percent of the children said they were involved in decision-making and 77% of the children got to know new children or met (new) friends. Most of the children agreed that the staff in the Open Gym were kind, whereas one fourth partly agreed and 13% of the children disagreed.

Children from third to sixth grade ($n = 350$) filled out an online questionnaire during 20 min of a regular lesson. Two hundred and fifty-seven children (73.4%) participated in the Open Gym, of which 13.6% went to the Open Gym “always,” 44.7% frequently’ and 41.6% “seldom.” Building on this, these children were then asked for the reason why they participated in the Open Gym (Table 8). The reasons were scaled dichotomously. The distribution of reasons as to why they participated in the Open Gym can be found in Table 8. Children went to the Open Gym because they had fun (79.0%), they liked to move (64.6%), they did “cool” things there (60.7%) and their friends were there (57.2%). Only 5.4% of the children said they would attend the Open Gym because there were no other available options.

Children who did not attend the Open Gym ($n = 97$) were asked for the reasons. Children preferring to go to other activities was the most commonly given reason (40.2%).

4 Discussion

The aim of this article was to analyze physical activity during the school day, at lunchtime and before, between and after lessons. The focus was on the role and importance of such activities for school principals and the extended educational services principals, as well as children’s patterns of use and motivations for participation.

The results of both studies highlight that school principals and the extended educational services principals regard the various sports activities in all-day schools, particularly the Open Gym, as central components of school-based extended educational programme (Bae, 2018).

“We need these activities. We cannot be without them anymore.” (Principal S7_t3_Pos 5)

The sports activities offered were selected and utilized by students in different ways. This underscores the necessity for all-day schools to develop and implement diverse movement-based activities (Bailey et al., 2023; Webster, 2023), to ensure they are autonomously chosen and utilized by the children attending these schools (see Figure 1). This diversity of activities is what enables physical activities to play a leading role in extended educational activities: children choose what and with whom they are actively engaged. They perceive this engagement as part of their leisure where they can steer activity, involvement and partners.

Nevertheless, there is a need for guided activities with fixed schedules, as well as supervised options such as the Open Gym during lunch breaks offering various opportunities, and low-threshold sports activities, such as mobile facilities or equipment kits, which can be used autonomously throughout the day or outside school hours (Neuber, 2020; Naul and Neuber, 2021). The combination of these offerings is crucial and should be tailored to the specific characteristics of the schools, the needs of the students, and the local community.

“We must make sure that we offer activities that differ from the teaching but also from those activities provided by the community and the neighborhood, that these are attractive

TABLE 8 Reasons why third to sixth grade children participated in the Open Gym and why they do not (in total n and %).

Children who participated in the Open Gym (n = 257)			Children who did not participate in the Open Gym (n = 97)		
I participate in the Open Gym, because. . .	n (%)	(%)	I do not participate in the Open Gym, because. . .	n (%)	(%)
. . . I have fun.	203	(79.0%)	. . . there are too many people.	19	(19.6%)
. . . My friends are there.	147	(57.2%)	. . . it is boring.	19	(19.6%)
. . . There are no more opportunities.	14	(5.4%)	. . . it is too loud.	15	(15.5%)
. . . I like to move.	166	(64.6%)	. . . I do not like to move.	8	(8.2%)
. . . we do “cool” things there.	156	(60.7%)	. . . I do not like what they do there.	11	(11.3%)
. . . I like the supervisor of the Open Gym.	32	(12.5%)	. . . I do not like the supervisor.	7	(7.2%)
. . . I feel better afterwards.	47	(18.3%)	. . . I do not like the other children.	6	(6.2%)
. . . I can do, what is fun.	177	(68.9%)	. . . I would rather calm down.	16	(16.5%)
. . . We do things there, we do not to in Physical Education.	131	(51.0%)	. . . I would rather go to different places.	39	(40.2%)

activities, easily accessible to the children because they enjoy engaging in the activity but that also mean that they can chat with their friends and peers.” School Principal S3_t3_Pos74

Sustainable engagement with these activities is achieved through the flexible and daily selection and participation of children, fostering an inclusive environment where belonging is as important as performance (Webster, 2023). Year-round courses revealed a preference for multi-sport programmes among younger children (preschool to third grade), while sport-specific courses gained popularity in higher grades, especially when children attended extended educational services on a daily basis. It was noted however, that children’s engagement in year-round courses declined with age, indicating a reluctance to commit to year-long programs. From fifth grade onward, open courses or those with quarterly adjustments in content became particularly popular. Although non-compulsory courses were requested, the courses could not always be implemented in this way, especially if the content were to be expanded. It also made it more difficult to plan with certainty.

The Open Gym was generally well received by children, who described it as a space for fun, physical activity, and social interaction with peers. Voluntary and spontaneous participation was crucial for them. One criticism was the limited opportunities for them to influence the choice of activities, with older children expressing a desire for more varied and age-appropriate content. The results of the children’s questionnaires and interviews highlight the need for a wide range of activities within extended educational offerings, not limited to sports. Some children in the two studies preferred quieter or alternative activities. Children require a variety of options, including not only movement-based activities but also cultural and aesthetic educational offerings that allow for relaxation and calmness, as well as opportunities to withdraw from social interactions with peers.

“To really grow together as a school with a diverse staff, we must have reliable structures and professionals we all can rely on, for the children’ and the parents’ sake. That children have the security to move around freely, that they feel safe, they know the professionals, they feel cared for by them. So the

professionals must also trust and rely on each other 100%.” School Principal, S8_t3_Pos 75

To successfully implement extended educational activities, certain prerequisites must be in place to effectively offer a diverse range of programmes. Collaboration between stakeholders is essential, requiring clear communication. Responsibilities need to be well-defined, as there were uncertainties regarding issues such as child supervision when activities were cancelled. Physical proximity between school staff was necessary for quick and informal communication. Additionally, children were more likely to participate in activities when they were held at or near the site of the school. In the case of year-round courses, the selection of activity should take into account the programmes available in the immediate neighborhood of the school. Furthermore, course content and structure should vary depending on the grade level.

The high level of participation in movement-based activities underscores their significance and their “leading role” within the extended educational offerings. This confirms the results of a participatory survey on desired extracurricular activities (Tietze et al., 2005), in which children ranked sports and movement as their top priority across all primary school grades, and these activities were subsequently used extensively (Ferrari et al., 2023).

4.1 Limitations

The School Development Study and the in-depth Open Gym Study, while shedding light on the importance of physical extended educational activities, present several limitations which must be acknowledged.

4.2 Participants’ bias

One key limitation is the potential bias in the responses from participating principals, as they come from innovative schools that already have experience of seeking and securing additional funding and resources. Moreover, the schools joined the project voluntarily, which suggests that they are interested in having sport activities in day-schools and have also shown a willingness to implement it. This selection bias could lead to an overly optimistic view of their

schools' achievements and the capabilities of their staff. Another limitation lies in the powerful role of principals and extended education principal as key decision-makers in school development, whose perspectives could be influenced by personal interests and which might be contested by other school staff in the long term.

Furthermore, the studies were limited by their 3-year timeframe, which may not capture the long-term effects of extended educational services, particularly for students who engage in such programmes for over 6 years.

4.3 Methodological limitations

Self-report data present several critical limitations that must be acknowledged: participants might overestimate their achievements or the effectiveness of their programmes due to social desirability or a vested interest in portraying their work positively. Additionally, children may have difficulty remembering past events or experiences accurately, leading to inaccuracies in the data. Additionally, they may interpret survey questions or interview prompts in different ways, leading to inconsistent or incomparable responses. Complementary methods such as observational data or triangulation with other informants could not be deployed due to time constraints.

Additionally, the studies focused exclusively on physical activities, omitting other extracurricular courses such as cultural or musical activities, which may have shown comparable relevance (Tietze et al., 2005). Consequently, direct comparisons between different types of extended educational activities were not possible. While this study focused primarily on physical activities, future research should include comparative analyses of different types of extended education programs, such as cultural, artistic, or academic offerings. Such studies could help identify intersections and ways of complementary working across various extracurricular areas.

4.4 Limitation of the sample

The participating schools have already benefited from financial and material support provided by the sports department of the city of Zurich, such as specific training for the extended education services staff and equipment for school playgrounds. The free year-round courses offered in schools are accessible to all schools and students across Switzerland, as they are funded by the Association for Youth and Sport (Jugend und Sport, 2025). However, additional investments in materials and programme design are required to offer extended educational activities, such as mobile playground facilities, like Pop-Up-Systems or sport-specific training for the staff.

The studies highlighted that physical extended education activities play a central role in all-day schools, but they do not operate autonomously or automatically. Effective management and professional delivery are essential to facilitate effective communication between the different stakeholders and the coordination of the different activities. This was especially evident in the in-depth Open Gym Study, where the management of the activities significantly influenced the project's success and girls' attendance rates in the Open Gym, and where activities were

thematically planned, and movement landscapes which facilitated floorball were offered.

5 Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore that physical activities within the context of all-day schools assume a leading role in extended education. The high participation rates in programmes such as the Open Gym or mobile facilities demonstrate that physical activity is not merely supplementary to instruction, but possesses its own pedagogical quality and developmental value. Schools also have the potential to contribute to the reduction of social inequalities in access to sports and exercise. The evaluation shows that low-threshold, free and open-access exercise programmes are particularly effective in reaching children regardless of gender, ability or socio-economic background. Physical activity serves a dual purpose: it not only promotes physical health but also supports emotional, social, and personal development. When physical activity programmes are designed with the principles of Self-Determination Theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000) in mind, fostering autonomy, competence, and relatedness, children are more likely to experience a sense of ownership and motivation. They can decide how, with whom, and in what form they want to be active. These findings highlight the educational value of physical activity and its role in providing a learning environment conducive to social and personal development.

Schools should regard physical activity as an integral component of educational development, not merely as an occasional add-on. The high level of student engagement demonstrates that physical activity is both meaningful and relevant to their daily school experience. To embed it consistently and flexibly into the school day in a student-centered way, school leadership must provide the necessary resources, such as space, time, and qualified staff to support its effective implementation. The successful implementation of physical activity programmes depends on well-trained staff, clear communication, and strong collaboration among all stakeholders, including school leadership, teaching staff, and extended education professionals. To ensure and enhance programme quality, schools must provide appropriate structural conditions and offer targeted continuing professional development. Educators should be equipped not only to promote physical activity, but also to understand and support its broader developmental potential (Neuber and Kehne, 2024).

This study contributes to addresses a significant research gap and provides empirically grounded insights into perceptions, usage, and impacts—based on the perspectives of school leaders, educational staff, and pupils. The findings offer a strong empirical foundation for the further development of concepts such as “Active Schools” (Schulgruppe BASPO, 2010; Swiss Olympic et al., 2018) or the CSPAP framework (Society of Health and Physical Educators, 2024) in European contexts.

The valuable insights provided by the present study point to the need for further research to broaden and deepen our understanding of physical activity within extended educational settings (Naylor et al., 2015). Future research should adopt a multidimensional approach that considers various perspectives and levels of impact. First, longitudinal impact studies are needed to

investigate the sustained effects of physical activity programmes across different stages of a child's educational trajectory. Such research could provide valuable insights into long-term influences on motor development, social-emotional competencies, academic achievement, and health-related behaviors. Second, child-centered and participatory research methods should be employed to gain a deeper understanding of how children perceive, engage with, and co-construct physical activity opportunities. These approaches offer the potential to capture children's voices in a more nuanced and context-sensitive way. Third, given the critical role of qualified staff in the success of physical activity programmes, future studies should examine the effectiveness of continuing professional development initiatives.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because of the lack of anonymity of the interview data. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

IF: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. KB: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. JK: Writing – review & editing. LN: Writing – review & editing. PS: Writing – review & editing.

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Leading school-age educare in Sweden: Regimes of practices and principals' subjectivities

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How do primary school principals responsible for Swedish school-age educare (SAEC) describe their work? By understanding the principals' practise as a site of power relations within regimes of practises and, through this, exploring principal subjectivities, it becomes possible to reveal which types of educational leadership for school-age educare are normalised and made possible. In an analysis based on answers from primary school principals in a qualitative survey, a discursive production of a nebulous leadership subject emerges; a bland and nebulous leader is enabled and, at the same time, constrained by the power relations within the regime of practises. This leadership terrain is not easy to navigate and appears to be guided by the notion that good enough is enough. This leadership style is changeable as well as varied, and at the same time, apparently marked by an unwillingness to shoulder all the responsibility for SAEC, and consequently, seeks support in different ways from different directions, transforming responsibility into a collective project driven by joint forces. It is also leadership that constantly needs to adapt its commitments to the needs of others, which in turn leads to a reactive rather than a proactive leadership style. Finally, it is leadership that appears legitimate, even though adequate knowledge about SAEC sometimes appears to be lacking, to some extent, pointing towards an abdicated leadership. For a different type of educational leader for school-age educare to emerge, a changed regime of practises is required, allowing the primary school principals to perform their leadership in ways that today do not appear possible.

KEYWORDS

primary school principals, educational leadership, school-age educare, extended education, subjectivation, nebulous leader

1 Introduction

This article aims to explore what kind of educational leadership is possible in Swedish school-age educare (SAEC) as a critical diagnosis of the present. A discourse analysis approach inspired by Michel Foucault enables a look into the societal factory; by examining discursive practise, we can gain insight into how people create and re-create society through their use of language.

The leader of SAEC is normally the primary school principal or vice principal who manages staff, premises (usually the school premises), budgets, and is the pedagogical leader of the staff team. A public inquiry into the quality of SAEC reported that services had a "weak governance" (SOU 2020:34, 2020, p. 20). In response, the national agency for education (SNAE, 2023) recently published general guidelines for governing and leading SAEC specifically to support accountable authorities and principals responsible for the service. The purpose of the guidelines is to support the principal in creating the conditions necessary for SAEC to achieve its aims. Hence, how do principals leading SAEC discursively construct their leadership specifically in relation to these new guidelines?

The influence of new public management (NPM) and looking for “best practise” in educational leadership has been discussed by many (Niesche, 2018; Wilkinson, 2017). This influence has resulted in a change in the focus of school leaders from pedagogy to efficiency (Niesche, 2010), from “holistic formation of the child” to “measurements of individual learning outcomes” (Grice et al., 2023, p. 104). Similar to other countries, Sweden has seen recent neoliberal reform, meaning that educational leaders “are increasingly influenced by business-management approaches” (Møller and Rönnerberg, 2021, p. 114). These approaches demand “effective and efficient educational leadership, both of which require measurement [...] of inputs and outputs” (Courtney et al., 2021, p. 3). Leaders of SAEC are deeply embedded in this results-driven agenda that now operates in Swedish schools.

The impact of NPM has even given rise to the term “bastard leadership” (Niesche, 2010; Smyth, 2008), as its main concern is only to implement policy. Wilkinson (2017) suggests that it has become common to privilege “...dominant notions of leadership in terms of white, heteronormative, masculinist meanings and know-how, rooted in the global north.” In contrast, she argues, using Foucault helps to show how market forces’ discourses legitimise certain types of leaders, because

[...] leadership practises can only ever be understood in the specific sites in which they occur—through the words, ideas, and discourses that construct knowledge/power relations; and through their performance in social spaces and in relationship with others and the material world. (Wilkinson, 2017, p. 658)

Simultaneously, formal and informal educational leadership exists, which is part of what Wilkinson (2021) calls ecologies of practises that “orchestrate distinctive educational projects.” SAEC is such a social site, made up of an ecology of practises or, in Foucauldian terms, a regime of practises (Foucault, 1991, p. 75), where the primary school principal is responsible for organising and leading the service. By analysing primary school principals’ accounts of their work, we can learn more about what type of educational leadership is possible today in SAEC, a service providing care, development, and learning during children’s “free” time. SAEC’s educational programme must be driven by the participating children’s needs and interests (SNAE, 2024a; Ljusberg, 2022), yet the curriculum also specifies what should be central to the programme’s content. The mission of SAEC is to “stimulate development and learning as well as offer pupils’ meaningful leisure time” (SNAE, 2024a, p. 25). Ultimately, the accountable authority has to ensure that children have access to the service and that the educational programme follows the regulations for SAEC. The primary school principal manages the SAEC and leads the pedagogical work to ensure that the outcomes set for the service are achieved. The principal should also enable the development of the service.

SAEC in Sweden is part of a coherent educational system. A service integral to primary schools that is considered a form of extended education, which is voluntary for the children. It is governed by the Education Act (SFS 2010:800, 2010) and the national curriculum (SNAE, 2024a) and can be provided by both public and private schools. SAEC’s educational mission has been strengthened over the last 15 years. Previously, it was mainly a childcare service, yet, since the move to the Department of Education in the mid-1990s, it has been transformed into an educational service, complementing

regular school. This change has seen a shift in focus from play, development, and social relationships to a much more explicit focus on learning (Elvstrand et al., 2024), a shift which is not exclusive to Sweden (Ljusberg and Holmberg, n.d.). In the results-driven NPM environment, this has led to an emphasis on measuring learning rather than promoting meaningful leisure through social pedagogy. Nationally, 84% of children aged 6–9 years and 21.6% aged 10–12 years attend SAEC (SNAE, 2024b). To teach in SAEC, you need a 3-year university degree; 35% of staff hold a degree, 20% have a childcare or youth work qualification, and the rest have other or no qualifications (SNAE, 2024b). Teaching in SAEC usually means being responsible for the day-to-day planning and running of the service in collaboration with the rest of the staff.

Primary school principals responsible for SAEC operate in a context, a regime of practises, that enables and constrains their leadership practises. Within this regime of practises, only certain educational leadership will be possible. Even though the label “leader” automatically provides more power and authority (Courtney et al., 2021, p. 5), the label “SAEC” appears to do the opposite (Boström and Elvstrand, 2024; Haglund and Glaés-Coutts, 2022), and this tension is part of a regime of practises within which the leaders act. There is, for example, no mention of SAEC in the required [by the National Agency for Education (SNAE)] training for school principals. It was not until 2023 that a specific training module for principals of SAEC was available (Gothenburg University, 2025), as suggested earlier in the public inquiry (SOU 2020:34, 2020). SAEC’s programme, needs, and budgetary demands often end up in the shadow of the schools, whose mission and quality are usually prioritised both in terms of attention and budget (SOU 2020:34, 2020). It is also clear that it may not be possible to measure results and outcomes of SAEC in the same way as the rest of the school (SOU 2020:34, 2020). Nevertheless, leaders of SAEC are expected to show results. This may reinforce the control element of the regime rather than ensure leadership that focuses on developing educational opportunities so that “care, development and learning are integrated to form a whole” (SNAE, 2024a, p. 27) as part of children’s meaningful leisure. In SAEC, such a results-driven agenda challenges an ethos of care as well as learning (Møller and Rönnerberg, 2021, p. 115). In these times of competing demands on the leaders of SAEC, we recognise that the marketisation of schools has had an effect on how these principals understand themselves and their role.

There is a lack of international research on extended education’s management and pedagogical leadership. Some studies discuss staff leadership (see, for example, Augustsson, 2018; Cartmel and Brannely, 2016), yet this is not the focus of this article; instead, the focus here is on the overall management and pedagogical leadership of the service. In SAEC, this is the role of the principal or vice principal. In Sweden, there are few, yet a growing number of, research studies about the principal’s role in and understanding of SAEC. Haglund and Glaés-Coutts (2022) argue that not much appears to have changed regarding the subordinate status of SAEC and its staff in the school since the first studies 25 years ago. A subordinate status does not appear unique to Sweden, since the same situation appears to exist in, for example, Australia (Hurst et al., 2023) and Switzerland (Jutzi et al., 2024). Haglund and Glaés-Coutts (2022) also conclude that the 29 principals in their study lack effective leadership of the SAEC since they “struggle to communicate a vision, set the direction for, or promote collaboration” (Haglund and Glaés-Coutts, 2022, p. 23). Some studies

focus on the introduction of the term educational programme of 2016 and the teaching that this implies. The conclusion is that principals do not have a well-developed understanding of what teaching in SAEC might be or how to explain it, and that the way they talk about it is different from how it manifests in everyday practise (Boström et al., 2023; Jonsson, 2020, 2021). This will impact a principal's role as a pedagogical leader who is responsible for developing the service. Glaés-Coutts (2021, p. 13) argues that principals "often take an arm's-length approach and view their role as more of a manager than an instructional leader." Without an understanding of the SAEC programme, it may be difficult to see how the service can contribute to achieving its aims of complementing school and compensating for children's varying backgrounds. Similarly, Boström et al. (2023) argue that principals responsible for SAEC have limited knowledge about both content and teaching at SAEC. The lack of answers in their survey about the care aspect of SAEC's mission is of specific concern since this is an important difference between classroom teaching and teaching in SAEC. They suggest that the principals' background and identity more often stem from classroom experience and therefore school, rather than SAEC culture, which may influence their understanding (Boström et al., 2023, p. 159). The task of leading SAEC with the numerous "and sometimes counterproductive reforms" over the last 50 years is complex (Boström and Elvstrand, 2024, p. 2). Several studies use terms like tension and crossfire to discuss the different forces that influence SAEC (Andersson, 2013; Boström and Berg, 2018; Elvstrand and Lago, 2019; Lager, 2015; Saar et al., 2012). In recent years, the principals' mandate and responsibility for quality in SAEC have been clarified (SNAE, 2021, 2023; Boström and Elvstrand, 2024). There is also evidence that some principals say that they are interested, as well as actively engaged, in leading SAEC (Haglund and Glaés-Coutts, 2022), as well as being aware of their leadership role, its opportunities, and its challenges (Boström and Elvstrand, 2024).

Research concerning the work of the principal in leading SAEC in the Swedish context is still sparse. For this reason, and against the above backdrop, we intend to illustrate how primary school principals stage their leadership in relation to SAEC. The aim, more specifically, is to explore *how* they discursively construct themselves as principals for school-age educate whilst manoeuvring a web of demands in the regime of practises in which they find themselves. Through their discursive practise, knowledge about SAEC is organised, which gives us an insight into the conditions of opportunity through which the principals subjectivise themselves in the direction of a specific educational leadership.

2 Theoretical starting points

A discourse analytical approach has been applied in the analysis, inspired by Michel Foucault. This type of approach is common in educational research generally, yet not within the field of educational leadership. Based on their literature review, Norqvist and Poromaa Isling (2020, p. 181) argue that such an approach could "develop contemporary understandings of what Swedish school leadership is and can be." Foucault's theorisation offers possibilities to understand the role and work of the primary school principal in ways other than those that dominate, for example, effective or best practise, and instead focuses on the complexity and tensions that surround principals' work (Niesche, 2020):

By examining the principal as a site of power relations and exploring principal subjectivities, it becomes possible to find the cracks and spaces in which principals are able to operate within normalising discursive regimes such as leadership frameworks and self-management (Niesche, 2011, p. 3).

The analytic procedure is based on a socio-constructionist approach and a view of discourses as meaning-making processes. Discourses constitute the preconditions and limitations of how people in specific moments can talk and think about a specific phenomenon, in this case, principals of SAEC. Through discursive practises, knowledge about SAEC and its principals is organised, and, in this way, people order their understanding and view of this service and the role of its principals (Foucault, 1971, 2008). This course of action opens up the possibility of distinguishing subtle discursive patterns that can be valuable in attempting to understand the times we live in. Through which preconditions do SAEC principals construct themselves? A decisive foundation for this kind of analytical work is the view of language as constitutive and performative (Eilard, 2021; Eilard and Dahl, 2021; Wiklund, 2021).

Foucault emphasised many times that his analytical toolbox of concepts was freely accessible to use in such a way that suits the specific project. Here we use the analytical concept of regimes of practises, "practises being understood as places where what is said and what is done, rules imposed and reasons given, the planned and the taken for granted meet and interconnect" (Foucault, 1991, p. 75). In this way, primary school principals' work is incorporated in a range of discursive regimes evident across numerous contexts. The practises are both disciplining and self-forming, whereupon the principals construct themselves as particular subjects within these discursive regimes: "The notions of agency and structure are always present when looking at educational leaders, as they are expected to formulate visions and enable change but at the same time are constrained and normalised by bureaucratic processes and mechanisms" (Niesche, 2011, p. 22). The term subject here is understood in the sense of "subject to someone else by control and dependence and tied to his [sic!] own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge" (Foucault, 1982, p. 212).

Put another way, regimes of practises can be seen as maps of the terrain where the principals find themselves (Dean, 1999; Niesche, 2011). Further, this terrain is constituted by webs of power relations, shaping subjectivities. Normalisation also constantly takes place during the process of subjectivation. Normalisation, as an integral part of disciplining mechanisms, "compares, differentiates, hierarchises, homogenises, and excludes" (Foucault, 1977, p. 183) the principals. The normalisation often occurs through the eyes of others, for example, through the supervising gaze of the staff and caregivers, alongside bureaucratic regimes such as systematic quality work and authorities such as the school inspectorate (Niesche, 2010).

3 Materials and methods

3.1 Empirical material

The survey that provided the empirical material in this study was developed a year after the guidelines developed by the SNAE (2023) were published. The guidelines aim to support the authority

(local government or private) and the principal in creating conditions for the staff in SAEC to run a quality programme. Amongst other things, the guidelines stipulate that the principal shall provide resources and organise the service in such a way that it fulfils the mission and aim as stated by the governing documents, that indoor as well as outdoor facilities are fit for purpose, and that staff are provided with appropriate continuous professional development opportunities. There are two guidelines directed to the principal together with the authority (questions 1 and 2 below), and five guidelines specifically about the pedagogical leadership of SAEC by the principal (questions 3–8 below). The introductory note in the survey explained that the questions mirrored the areas covered in the guidelines (SNAE, 2023).

The questions answered by the principals were: (1) How do you work to ensure that SAEC has facilities that are fit for purpose? (2) How do you provide continuous professional development for staff in SAEC? (3) What is the focus of the dialogue with the authority about SAEC, and who/m can influence the content? (4) How do you organise the SAEC service? (5) What are your thoughts on collaborating and exchanging experiences? (6) What is the focus of the dialogue with SAEC staff about daily work? (7) How do you work to ensure that carers will get information about and be able to influence SAEC? (8) How do you distribute resources to ensure that SAEC can achieve its mission? (9) Have you had any training (SNAE principals' courses or similar) on SAEC? (10) What is your position in the school (principal or vice principal)?

The subsequent analysis is based on the anonymous survey designed in the Survey & Report tool provided by Stockholm University, where qualitative survey answers—unlimited free text—from primary school principals have been collected. This was after the university department's ethical review board had approved the research methodology and protocol. The invitation was sent by email and included information about the study and the ethical approach that is respected throughout all phases of the study (The Swedish Research Council, 2024), for example, that the answers are dealt with in accordance with GDPR (European Union law for General Data Protection Regulation) and that taking part is voluntary.

In a first mail-out, primary school principals were chosen because they work in schools that are placement providers for university students in teacher training for school-age educare, and as such are actively working towards excellence. In a second mail-out, due to a poor response despite reminders, we approached all principals in schools with pupils aged 6 to 12 years old in the county. Of the 143 principals contacted, 23 responded. We did not expect a high number of responses from the target group, yet other research methods, such as interviews, would probably not have generated any more answers since principals are usually fully occupied with responsibilities that take their time and attention.

Five of the respondents are vice principals, meaning they have been delegated the responsibility for SAEC by a principal who is normally responsible for one or more schools and often shares the workload in this way. This article only uses the term “principal” because this position is assigned the responsibility to govern and lead SAEC. In the case that a vice principal assumes the role of leader for SAEC, they have the same, or partly the same, tasks even if the principal is formally ascribed the responsibility. The answers provided by the principals total approximately 5,000 words, originally in Swedish but in the finished analysis translated into English.

3.2 Methodological procedure

The analysis aims to study the logic—the patterns—in the principals' use of language, not to identify good or bad answers, or attempt to discuss how they work. The object of study is only how the principals display their accounts (Potter, 1996). The analysis produced by the research is not the only possible representation, but one of many.

The analytical work is based on discourse analytical procedures suggested by Svensson (2019), which are characterised by the following (overlapping) steps: approaching the empirical material, organising the material, close reading, thematisation, and, finally, contextualisation. During the entire analysis process, the primary focus is on how the principals, through their use of language, construct themselves as principals precisely for SAEC. During the initial approach, both regularities and deviations have been noted. Repeated content threads were noted in the organisation phase, and based on these, the answers were then sorted. The analytical thematisation grew from a close reading of the answers in reciprocal action with these readings, and theoretical concepts were picked up and applied. The thematisation has been given the heading *The nebulous leader*, with the following subheadings: *The nebulous leader who tries*, *The nebulous leader who seeks support*, *The nebulous leader who follows the needs*, and *The nebulous leader who is blindfolded*. Throughout the analysis, there are quotes—pseudonymised when necessary—from the principals to exemplify how they construct themselves as principals for SAEC based on the questions provided.

This article's qualitative approach, based on the methodological premises described above and the theoretical perspective, implies knowledge claims that cannot be generalised. Instead, it aims to highlight and show how principals approach their leadership for SAEC in the way they answer the given questions. The knowledge interest lies in exploring their perspectives and views, and the analytical material can be seen as examples of how principals express their leadership of SAEC. Due to the voluntary nature of the survey, coupled with the pressures on principals, especially including time to deal with issues beyond their school, the number of respondents is low. Those who have chosen to answer could have a similar view to SAEC leadership, and those with a different view may not be represented. The limitation of the number of respondents may also be assumed to be commensurate with the importance or the insignificance the principals place on SAEC.

The analysis intends to provide an examination of the regime of practises that normalises and subjectivates the principals daily (Niesche, 2011). In the following section, a regime of practises is initially identified and categorised, based on the principals' answers. Furthermore, the subject created through this regime is made visible and discussed.

4 Results

In the responses from the SAEC principals, it is possible to distinguish a multifaceted regime of practices in which they discipline and normalise themselves as well as create themselves as specific subjects. In their descriptions of the responsibilities they are tasked with and the work involved in being responsible for, running, and leading SAEC, the principals reveal that numerous power-related practises consistently both enable and limit their ways of being and doing.

Amongst the practices that appear to affect them most – based on how, as well as the frequency with which the principals discussed them – are the following:

- The local authority.
- The budget.
- The needs (of the authorities, the staff, the schools, and the children attending SAEC).

Amongst the practises that appear to affect them a little less, we find:

- SAEC staff.
- Aspects of time (as in regular, ongoing, all the time).
- Available premises (both indoor and outdoor).
- Quality development work (such as documentation, follow-up, evaluation, and development).

Amongst those practises that affect them least, we find:

- SAEC's aim and mission (voluntary educational service for the children, but staff are tasked with teaching in line with the curriculum and the Education Act).
- The National Education Agencies' general comments and guidelines (several documents relevant to SAEC).
- The children who are enrolled and take part in SAEC.

There is an implicit NPM grid overshadowing this regime of practises. The principals do not directly express this, yet this logic of governance becomes visible when they write about the demands and expectations of budgets, reviews, and inspections in their approach to their task of being responsible for running and leading SAEC, as well as in their way of writing about—dealing with—children and their carers. Thus, what kind of primary school principal is normalised through this practise regime, and how is it possible to be an educational leader for SAEC when these premises constitute the prerequisites?

4.1 The nebulous leader

Given the conditions that the regime of practises identified above provides, a specific leadership is staged. That is, the principals subjectivise themselves into nebulous leaders. The concept of nebulous is regarded in the context as a subject position that lacks clear boundaries and is therefore difficult to delimit and define. Nebulous leadership is consequently vague, indistinct, ill-defined, and possibly confused. The term appears appropriate to describe the elusive and difficult-to-manage leadership that appears to be associated with the management of SAEC.

Such a subject—the nebulous leader—is characterised as someone who does what needs to be done without knowing what needs to be done all the time, since what needs to be managed and organised is complex and ambiguous. Principals responsible for SAEC need to work top down (oblige the authority and the budget) but simultaneously work bottom up (with considerations to staff, children, and carers). They also need to manage a service that is voluntary for the children, yet at the same time compulsory for staff (with the mission to educate and teach), as well as respond to the authority's demand for quality development work with visible results.

Consequently, the nebulous leader could be said to be trapped in an unpredictable crossfire (Boström and Berg, 2018). In a more Foucauldian fashion, this can be expressed in a way that underlines the principals' agency; a nebulous leader manoeuvring a web of demands that make up the regime of practices, simultaneously shaped by and shaping practices. What follows is a closer reasoning of this subject, based on the themes that were crafted in the analysis.

4.1.1 The nebulous leader who tries

When analysing the practises and discourses that create principals as subjects, a consistent theme emerges about trying. This signifies leadership that is not easy to navigate and instead is concerned with playing it by ear, doing one's best, and sometimes also being creative to solve different tasks and challenges. Sometimes the trying is adequate, other times not; and sometimes it is unclear what the trying results in, if the outcome was what the principal imagined or not, for example, when principals state that they “are trying to create space for best practise in SAEC.” These attempts can also be about protecting SAEC, which in the Swedish context is often dealt with in a Cinderella-like manner when it comes to budget, as well as attention and understanding compared to school. The nebulous leader is happy to try rather than clearly put their foot down to defend or ensure the provision of SAEC services: “Trying to support and create a positive view of the importance of SAEC.” Sometimes the trying is despondent, as if the attempts do not reach very far and end up being just attempts: “Still, I have tried to stop it when one says that one wishes to get access to (SAECs') facilities in the afternoon, for example, for home language classes or meetings.” The trying can also be more persistent: “We try to make it possible to schedule this (planning time) by grade, but we have not succeeded yet.” The regime of practises that govern and mould the principals appears to lead to uncertainty about how to present the leadership without encountering too much critique, an uncertainty that leads to a vague type of leadership, more searching than authoritarian. It is not about saying that things are being done but rather that attempts are being made: “I try to listen to those who get in touch.” These attempts at listening to others lead us to the next theme, searching for support and the construction of an “us.”

4.1.2 The nebulous leader who seeks support

The vague leadership is also visible through what appears to be an unwillingness to shoulder all the responsibility for SAEC. Instead, it seeks support in different ways: “The content is affected by us all.” Yet again, no distinct leader is produced. Despite the responsibility carried by the role of principal to organise and lead SAEC, the educational leadership is frequently constructed as an “us” rather than an “I.” This “us” appears to be made up of different constellations and can refer, for example, to “us” meaning the whole school including SAEC, or “us” as the school leadership team, or “us” as in the principal and the SAEC staff. The nebulous leader seeks dialogue with various groups and individuals, partly due to the demands of the mission but possibly even as a way to ensure safe footing in the complex and unpredictable web of demands: “Encourage conversations about SAEC so we get improvements.” In one way, the construction of an “us” could be seen as a leader willing to abdicate, or at least one who is prepared to share responsibility with others: “The facilities are not fit for purpose, but we do the best we can under the circumstances.” The identification of who does what appears blurred and fluid: “We work based on the aims for the whole school but break them down and

make them applicable to SAEC.” Therefore, organising and leading SAEC appears to be a collective project driven by joint forces. The web of demands of this regime of practises becomes visible through a kind of bottom-up approach to governance, which appears to come from all sides, rather than just bottom-up, since the “us” includes a number of different constellations: “We influence and decide ourselves what and how to develop our competences.” Sometimes the “us” is defined explicitly and uncovers delegation and supportive dialogue: “A SAEC manager responsible for content, development, and follow-up. Issues concerning labour law are my responsibility, but all decisions are taken in dialogue with the principal/manager.” The overshadowing NPM grid is also occasionally made visible when terminology from market discourse is used by the principals: “We share **success factors** for increased cooperation and experience exchange” (bold not in original). The search for dialogue, in all different directions, to a large extent circles around different types of needs, leading us to the next theme which focuses on needs as a starting point in the process of subjectification: “In dialogue with SAEC, school, the (local) authority and with a holistic approach to the needs of all services.”

4.1.3 The nebulous leader who follows the needs

A part of the regime of practices within which the principals subjectivate themselves, normalises a certain type of educational leadership, centered on responding to need. This practice appears to produce a principal subject who vacillates, constantly responding to emerging needs. Needs govern, rather than the principal, resulting in a reactive rather than proactive leadership. Needs arise, the principal acts. Needs change, the principal acts. Or rather, the collective subject – a nebulous ‘us’ – (re)acts: “We look at the needs of pupils and staff, and work based on that.” Delegation of responsibility and tasks also makes itself known in this theme through the nebulous leader who seeks support when following needs: “SAEC has a development group that analyses results and identifies development needs for the service.” SAEC staff in this case are acting as a kind of co-principal (not the same as vice-principal, which is an existing role/position), because they are dragged into the principals’ work in different ways: “Work in partnership with staff in SAEC and plan based on needs.” However, in the unpredictable web of demands, the needs come from various quarters, from the service and from the authority: “SAEC’s development is based on the curriculum and based on needs at the authority level.” Needs in this context can mean many different things, just as the construction of an “us” includes several different constellations; it can, as previously stated, be about the needs of the SAEC service and the authority’s needs, yet also refer to the needs of the staff, the children, special needs, competence development requirements, and more. The starting point for the principals is often precisely some kind of need that exists, arises, or is identified: “Everything depends on the needs of the children.” The economic or budgetary aspect of the regime of practises also presents itself as part of the aspect of need: “We allocate resources based on need.” Nebulous leaders who follow needs both start and end in the needs, and in between are on their toes just in case the needs might change:

Firstly, it is important to rigorously analyse the needs of SAEC. [...] Based on the analysed needs and priorities, create a realistic budget that allocates resources for staff, material, training, maintenance of facilities, and possible development projects. [...] Be prepared to

be flexible and adjust the resource allocation based on changing needs or new challenges that can arise during the year.

However, the nebulous leader who follows needs and seeks support might sometimes be blindfolded, which is the focus of our next theme.

4.1.4 The nebulous leader who is blindfolded

Working in the unpredictable web of demands that comprise the regime of practises sometimes appears to occur without (updated) knowledge about or understanding of SAEC’s service, aim, or mission. A blindfolded nebulous leader becomes noticeable when the principals use obsolete terms such as “childcare,” which was phased out by the National Agency for Education many years ago. Or when they assume that conditions that apply in school also apply to SAEC. “The Work Environment Act also applies to SAEC.” This law applies in schools, but not in SAEC. The answers from the principals also uncover a pervasive lack of knowledge about the new general guidelines (SNAE, 2023), despite them having been written specifically for them and about what is expected of them. The answers largely lack insight into what is written in the document. This could, of course, be due to the document being relatively new and perhaps not having been fully implemented, yet it is central for principals responsible for SAEC, which makes their ignorance remarkable. Influenced by the premise of the regime of practises, the leadership sometimes becomes insufficient, for example, when focus on SAEC is allowed to take a backstage role compared to the school: “SAEC tends not to be in focus, in favour of the part of the school day which is compulsory.” For a principal to say that there is no time for SAEC, again, becomes a way of constructing an abdicating educational leader who does not take the responsibility inherent in the job: “As a leader, I think it is hard to find the time when one is juggling so many balls.” The nebulous leader who is blindfolded appears to give less priority to SAEC in favour of other tasks, despite the lack of any hierarchical grading of areas of responsibility or tasks. Sometimes a direct resignation emerges when the principals declare that things that should be done or exist simply do not get done or do not exist: “There is no such dialogue”; then it appears as if the nebulous leader, sometimes of their own accord, puts on the blindfold to avoid dealing with certain aspects of the responsibility of governing and leading SAEC.

5 Discussion

Subjectivation to the nebulous leader who tries, seeks support, follows needs, and is blindfolded whilst working in a practise regime that earlier research described as an unpredictable and complex crossfire (Boström and Elvstrand, 2024; Elvstrand and Lago, 2019), enables and normalises an educational leader who operates within a governing logic marked by NPM. But instead of embracing a bastardised leadership—largely concerned with managerialism, performativity, efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability (Niesche, 2010; Smyth, 2008)—a distant and virtually absent educational leadership in relation to SAEC is seemingly embraced. As already pointed out, this is not about portraying primary school principals as bad leaders. The analytical point is instead to draw attention to the regime of practises, the web of demands, within which the principals find themselves, which works through, as well as on, them, and which thereby enables exactly the type of educational leadership made visible here, which in many respects is a non-leadership.

The identified regime of practises surrounding principals' responsibility for running and leading SAEC is complex and characterised by different tensions. The multifaceted regime—the map of the terrain in which the principals work—includes influential aspects (although others may not be mentioned here). Aspects include:

- Local authority.
- Budget.
- Other areas of responsibility, such as the compulsory school.
- Different needs of others.
- SAEC staff.
- Aspects of time.
- Available premises.
- Quality development work.
- SAEC's aim and mission (found in the Education Act and the curriculum).
- Dual mission: to offer voluntary education, including meaningful leisure time for children, but in which staff are simultaneously forced to conduct goal-directed teaching.
- Several general guidelines.
- The children enrolled in SAEC.

All of these components—the practises within the regime—together form a force field of relational power, a web of demands, that the principals constantly need to relate to and through which they discipline and normalise themselves, as well as create themselves as a specific—yet not fixed but fuzzy and in a flux—subject, which is a leader who leads without really leading. They have the role and responsibility to govern and lead, but via the regime of practises, they appear to be governed and influenced in ways that cause them to govern themselves (self-regulate) in ways that make them somewhat bland leaders. The bland and nebulous leader, enabled and at the same time constrained by the power relations within the regime of practises, is seemingly characterised as follows:

- A leadership terrain that is not easy to navigate, which appears to form an attitude that revolves around the idea that good enough is enough.
- A leadership marked by an unwillingness and/or inadequacy to shoulder all the responsibility for SAEC and consequently seek support in different ways from different directions, transforming one's own responsibility into a collective project driven by joint forces.
- A leadership that constantly needs to adapt commitments to the needs of others, which in turn forms a reactive rather than a proactive leader.
- A leadership that appears legitimate, even though adequate and sufficient knowledge of SAEC sometimes appears to be lacking, in some way and to some extent, pointing towards an abdicated leadership.

Overall, this indicates a type of educational leader who wobbles within a web of demands, striving to do what needs to be done without always clearly knowing what that is, as the tasks to be managed and organised are inherently complex and ambiguous; hence, the concept of nebulosity appears appropriate in this context. The normalisation processes taking place within the regime of practises might mean that few question or react to the type of leadership that the principals

seemingly establish in relation to SAEC. This quite invisible and absent leadership, which is addressed when time allows alongside other assignments (leading the school, for example), is normalised into common sense; SAEC has an acting principal with responsibility, but at the same time, does not. That's the way it is, the established normal.

This detached leadership shows that the “weak governance” of SAEC reported 5 years ago (SOU 2020:34, 2020), as well as the lack of effective leadership (Haglund and Glaés-Coutts, 2022), is still prominent. The recently published guidelines for governing and leading SAEC (SNAE, 2023), which emphasise and clarify the principals' mandate and responsibilities (SNAE, 2021; Boström and Elvstrand, 2024), have, up to now, not amounted to any significant differences with regard to principals taking responsibility for SAEC. The nebulous leadership includes “an arm's-length approach” (Glaés-Coutts, 2021, p. 13), maybe even a greater distance. Limited knowledge about SAEC, as noted by Boström et al. (2023), still applies today, since the nebulous leader appears to be blindfolded in some respects.

As Niesche (2020) puts it, the purpose of this article is not to develop

a model of leadership to be applied or a new theory of leadership. Rather, it is to provoke different lines of inquiry into a field that remains narrow, self-referential, and prone to fads, hero worship, and uncritical adoptions of discourses of best practise. (Niesche, 2020, p. 142)

Given this perspectivising inquiry, is this the type of leadership that SEAC needs—a nebulous non-leader? Or do the children, the staff, and society at large deserve another type of educational leadership? For a different SAEC leader to emerge, a changed regime of practises is required, one that allows the primary school principals to perform their leadership in ways that today do not appear possible. To enable change in the practise regime in which these principals find themselves, an expanded political understanding of SAEC's indisputable value and relevance for children's lives, as a vital cog in community building, needs to be developed.

Leadership in relation to SAEC is, to date, a relatively under-researched area that warrants further attention. For example, through interview and observation studies, with a critical approach, and preferably with a focus on what the conditions are like and what knowledge of SAEC exists amongst those responsible for leading and managing.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because we follow Swedish ethical procedures including GDPR. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to linnea.holmberg@buv.su.se.

Ethics statement

Ethical review and approval was required for the study on human participants in accordance with national guidelines and institutional requirements. Written informed consent was required and given by

the participants in this study in accordance with national guidelines and institutional requirements.

Author contributions

LH: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. EK: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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