



OPEN ACCESS

EDITED BY

Jennifer Cartmel,
Griffith University, Australia

REVIEWED BY

Nanine Lilla,
Free University of Berlin, Germany
Bruce Hurst,
The University of Melbourne, Australia
Penny Anderson,
University of Glasgow, United Kingdom

*CORRESPONDENCE

Eva Kane
✉ eva.kane@buv.su.se

[†]These authors have contributed equally to this work and share first authorship

RECEIVED 28 January 2025

ACCEPTED 14 May 2025

PUBLISHED 15 July 2025

CITATION

Holmberg L and Kane E (2025) Leading school-age educare in Sweden: Regimes of practices and principals' subjectivities. *Front. Educ.* 10:1567857. doi: 10.3389/educ.2025.1567857

COPYRIGHT

© 2025 Holmberg and Kane. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License \(CC BY\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.

Leading school-age educare in Sweden: Regimes of practices and principals' subjectivities

Linnéa Holmberg[†] and Eva Kane^{*†}

Department of Child and Youth Studies, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden

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 Brannelly, 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 educare 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.

Funding

The author(s) declare that no financial support was received for the research and/or publication of this article.

Acknowledgments

The authors are grateful to all the educational leaders/principals of SAEC who answered the survey.

References

- Andersson, B. (2013). Nya fritidspedagoger—i spänningsfältet mellan tradition och nya styrformer. Doktorsavhandling, Umeå: Umeå universitet. Available online at: <http://umu.divaportal.org/smash/get/diva2:603114/FULLTEXT02>
- Augustsson, G. (2018). The complexities of leisure-time center staff's leadership in the leisure-time center learning environment. *Cogent Educ.* 5, 1–19. doi: 10.1080/2331186X.2018.1451670
- Boström, L., and Berg, G. (2018). Läroplansimplementering och korstryck i fritidshemmets arbete. *Educare* 2, 107–131. doi: 10.24834/educare.2018.2.6
- Boström, L., and Elvstrand, H. (2024). Being a principal at a school age educare center in Sweden: perspectives on structure, culture, and leadership. *Leadersh. Policy Sch.*, 1–17. doi: 10.1080/15700763.2024.2431705 (epub ahead of print).
- Boström, L., Elvstrand, H., and Orwehag, M. (2023). Didaktik i fritidshem ur svenska rektors perspektiv: särskiljande föreställningar möter en pedagogisk praktik. *Ped. Forsk.* 28, 142–171. doi: 10.15626/pfs28.04.06
- Cartmel, J., and Brannelly, K. (2016). A framework for developing the knowledge and competencies of the outside school hours services workforce. *Int. J. Res. Ext. Educ.* 4, 17–33. doi: 10.3224/ijree.v4i2.25779
- Courtney, S. J., Gunter, H. M., Niesche, R., and Trujillo, T. (2021). "Introduction: taking critical perspectives and using critical approaches in educational leadership" in *Understanding educational leadership: critical perspectives and approaches* (London: Bloomsbury), 1–11.
- Dean, M. (1999). *Governmentality: power and rule in modern society*. Thousand Oaks CA: SAGE.
- Eilard, A. (2021). "Rasifiera(n)de strukturer och positioneringar: Diskursanalys med exempel från läromedel och SVT" in *Diskursanalys med utbildningsvetenskapliga perspektiv*. eds. I. A. Eilard and C. Dahl (Lund: Studentlitteratur), 167–196.
- Eilard, A., and Dahl, C. (2021). "Inledning: Diskursanalyser för utbildningsvetenskapliga studier och sammanhang" in *Diskursanalys med utbildningsvetenskapliga perspektiv*. eds. A. Eilard and C. Dahl (Lund: Studentlitteratur), 11–40.
- Elvstrand, H., Boström, L., and Orwehag, M. (2024). Möte mellan tradition och förändring: en forskningsöversikt om undervisning i fritidshem. *Nord. tidskr. utdanning praksis* 18, 173–198. doi: 10.23865/up.v18.5677
- Elvstrand, H., and Lago, L. (2019). Do they have a choice? Pupils' choices at LTCs in the intersection between tradition, values and new demands. *Educ. Inq.* 11, 54–68. doi: 10.1080/20004508.2019.1656505
- Foucault, M. (1971). *Diskursens ordning*. Höör: Symposion.
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish*. London: Penguin.
- Foucault, M. (1982). The subject and power. *Crit. Inq.* 8, 777–795. doi: 10.1086/448181
- Foucault, M. (1991). "Questions of method" in *The Foucault effect: studies in governmentality*. eds. G. Burchell, C. Gordon and P. Miller (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf), 73–86.
- Foucault, M. (2008). *Diskursernas kamp*. Höör: Symposion.

Conflict of interest

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

Generative AI statement

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

Publisher's note

All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers. Any product that may be evaluated in this article, or claim that may be made by its manufacturer, is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.

Glaés-Coutts, L. (2021). The principal as the instructional leader in school-age educare. *Leadersh. Policy Sch.* 22, 873–889. doi: 10.1080/15700763.2021.2019792

Gothenburg University. (2025). Fortbildning för rektorer: Leda och organisera fritidshem. Available online at: <https://www.gu.se/studera/hitta-utbildning/fortbildning-for-rektorer-leda-och-organisera-fritidshem> (Accessed January 24, 2025)

Grice, C., Seiser, A. F., and Wilkinson, J. (2023). Decentring pedagogical leadership: educational leading as a pedagogical practice. *J. Educ. Adm. Hist.* 55, 89–107. doi: 10.1080/00220620.2022.2163381

Haglund, B., and Glaés-Coutts, L. (2022). Leading and supporting: principals reflect on their task as pedagogical leaders of Swedish school-age educare. *Sch. Leadersh. Manag.* 43, 8–27. doi: 10.1080/13632434.2022.2137725

Hurst, B., Brannelly, K., and Cartmel, J. (2023). The production and performance of workplace hierarchies in Australian outside school hours care. *Int. J. Res. Ext. Educ.* 12, 8–21. doi: 10.3224/ijree.v11i1.03

Jonsson, K. (2020). Principals' perspectives on pupils' social learning in Swedish school-age educare. *Int. J. Res. Ext. Educ.* 8, 5–21. doi: 10.3224/ijree.v8i1.02

Jonsson, K. (2021). Principals' vision of social learning in school-age educare. *Early Years* 43, 683–696. doi: 10.1080/09575146.2021.1997934

Jutzi, M., Wicki, T., and Stampfli, B. (2024). Towards a holistic model of extended education in the public school system: three schools on the way to integrated all-day schools. *Int. J. Res. Ext. Educ.* 12, 23–41. doi: 10.3224/ijree.v12i1.03

Lager, K. (2015). I spänningsfältet mellan kontroll och utveckling: en policystudie av systematiskt kvalitetsarbete i kommunen, förskolan och fritidshemmet Doktorsavhandling, Gothenburg Göteborgs universitet. Available online at: <https://gupea.ub.gu.se/handle/2077/40661>

Ljusberg, A. L. (2022). The concept of pupils' interests in the context of school-age educare in Sweden. *Early Child Dev. Care* 193, 223–234. doi: 10.1080/03004430.2022.2075356

Ljusberg, A.-L., and Holmberg, L. (n.d.). Utbildningspolitiska iscensättningar av lek i institutionaliserad fritidsverksamhet. *Barn—Forskning om barn och barndom i Norden*.

Møller, J., and Rönnerberg, L. (2021). "Critical perspectives in and approaches to educational leadership in two Nordic countries" in *Understanding educational leadership: critical perspectives and approaches*. eds. S. J. Courtney, H. M. Gunter, R. Niesche and T. Trujillo (London: Bloomsbury), 105–119.

Niesche, R. (2010). Discipline through documentation: a form of governmentality for school principals. *Int. J. Leadersh. Educ.* 13, 249–263. doi: 10.1080/13603121003692967

Niesche, R. (2011). *Foucault and educational leadership: disciplining the principal*. New York: Routledge.

Niesche, R. (2018). Critical perspectives in educational leadership: a new 'theory turn'? *J. Educ. Adm. Hist.* 50, 145–158. doi: 10.1080/00220620.2017.1395600

Niesche, R. (2020). "Subjectivity and the school principal" in *Theorising identity and subjectivity in educational leadership research*. eds. R. Niesche and A. Heffernan (New York: Routledge), 141–154.

- Norqvist, L., and Poromaa Isling, P. (2020). Skolledarskap i Sverige: en forskningsöversikt 2014–2018. *Nordic Stud. Educ.* 40, 167–187. doi: 10.23865/nse.v40.2230
- Potter, J. (1996). *Representing reality: discourse, rhetoric and social construction*. London: SAGE.
- Saar, T., Löfdahl, A., and Hjalmarsson, M. (2012). Kunskapsmöjligheter i svenska fritidshem. *Nord. barnehageforsk* 5, 1–13. doi: 10.7577/nbf.315
- SFS 2010:800 (2010). Skollag. Stockholm: Utbildningsdepartementet.
- Smyth, J. (2008). Australia's great disengagement with public education and social justice in educational leadership. *J. Educ. Adm. Hist.* 40, 221–233. doi: 10.1080/00220620802507219
- SNAE (2021). Rektors ansvar. Available online at: <https://www.skolverket.se/regler-och-ansvar/ansvar-i-skolfragor/rektorns-ansvar> (Accessed May 26, 2025).
- SNAE (2023). Styrning och ledning av fritidshemmet. Kommentarer till Skolverkets allmänna råd om styrning och ledning av fritidshemmet. Available online at: <https://www.skolverket.se/publikationsserier/allmanna-rad/2023/styrning-och-ledning-av-fritidshemmet> (Accessed May 26, 2025).
- SNAE (2024a). Curriculum for compulsory school, preschool class and school-age educare. Lgr 22. Available online at: <https://www.skolverket.se/publikationsserier/styrdokument/2024/curriculum-for-compulsory-school-preschool-class-and-school-age-educare---lgr22>
- SNAE (2024b). Elever och personal i fritidshem Läsåret 2023/24. Available online at: https://siris.skolverket.se/siris/sitevision_doc.getFile?p_id=553125
- SOU 2020:34 (2020). Stärkt kvalitet och likvärdighet i fritidshem och pedagogisk omsorg. Available online at: <https://www.regeringen.se/rattsliga-dokument/statens-offentliga-utredningar/2020/06/sou-202034/>
- Svensson, P. (2019). *Diskursanalys*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- The Swedish Research Council (2024). God forskningsled. Available online at: <https://www.vr.se/analys/rapporter/vara-rapporter/2024-10-02-god-forskningsled-2024.html>
- Wiklund, M. (2021). "Digital teknik i undervisning: En foucauldiansk diskursanalys" in *Diskursanalys med utbildningsvetenskapliga perspektiv*. eds. A. Eilard and C. Dahl (Lund: Studentlitteratur), 221–238.
- Wilkinson, J. (2017). "Educational leadership as critical practice" in *Encyclopedia of educational philosophy and theory*. ed. M. A. Peters (Singapore: Springer), 654–659.
- Wilkinson, J. (2021). "Educational leadership through a practice lens" in *Educational leadership theory* (Singapore: Springer).