



## Making Sense of Assignment: On the Complexity of Being a School Leader

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### Abstract

The primary aim of this paper is to narrow down the description of how school leaders interpret the assignment (the task) and identify the markers for how they look upon the conditions of doing a good job in Sweden. The aim is in the context of practice-based and process-oriented research. We use complexity and complexity theories to frame the emerging practice of leading and organizing. This is in contrast to technocratic homogenization—that is, law texts, steering documents, documentation, standardized methods, planning, and ceremonies. A questionnaire was conducted with three open questions (n=363 out of a possible 548 participants) and four focus groups (n=21). Complexity, dilemmas, and inconsistency emerge in the respondents' answers the closer they are to everyday action. The results show that complexity theories put focus on a conflict between the image of schools as complicated and complex. Complicated is accompanied by generalizing and weak contextualizing of control systems, standardized methods, planning, law texts, and evidence-based education—that is, the concept of technocratic homogenization. Complexity theories emphasize the life in organizations, everyday practice as leaders, and a conflict between weak and robust contextualizing from the perspective as practice-based and process-oriented research.

**Keywords:** Assignment; complexity theory; practice-based and process research; technocratic homogenization

### Introduction

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conditions of doing a good job in the context of practice-based (Nicolini, 2013) and process-oriented research (Garud, Simpson, Langley, & Tsoukas, 2016). Practice- and process-oriented research reflects an “understanding of the world as in flux, in perpetual motion, as continually in the process of becoming” (Langley & Tsoukas, 2012, p. 1). Making sense of assignment and so on, gets some insight of the making of organizing, living in organizing, and leading in context (Thomas & Linstead, 2002; Tsouas & Chia, 2002). Hernes and Maitles (2012) argue that in the leadership literature, in general, practice-based and process-oriented research play a seemingly modest role (Holmberg & Tyrstrup, 2010). For the most part, the topic focuses on how to do the work as a leader (Hernes, 2009). Mats Alvesson, a management researcher, in many books and articles, says that the dominant view of leadership and organizations has focused on belief in leadership models, control and predictability, or what we call technocratic homogenization, instead of what managers really do and think (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013). This is the case even in research about school leadership and different models of leadership in schools (Drysdale, Bennett, Murakami, Johansson, & Gurr, 2014; Scherp & Scherp, 2007; Slater, 2011). However, the field is large, divergent and difficult to obtain a uniform view of.

In recent years, especially, research has been conducted about what school leaders do or how they look upon and describe their practice (Carraway & Young, 2015; Coburn, 2005; Jäppinen, 2014; Morison, 2010; Nilsson, 2015; Rigby, 2015). Our article forms one contribution to understanding how leaders interpret the assignment and the chances and conditions of doing a good job, within process and practice-based research. Our first contribution thus involves descriptions of how school leaders interpret their assignments, while our second mission is the use of complexity theories. Complexity theories entail different concepts and therefore more sophisticated thinking about leading and organizing than what is usual in the mainstream organization theory of schools. We agree with Jäppinen’s (2014, p. 66) statement: “In education, the utilization of complexity research is still quite uncommon” (see also Morrison, 2008; 2010; Osberg & Biesta, 2010).

### **Some aspects of complexity theories**

In order to gain new insights into understanding leadership and organizing it is essential to make a comparison between complex, complicated and simple systems. A simple problem is, for example, how to bake a cake by following a recipe. Sending a rocket to the moon is complicated. Being a parent or a teacher, however, is complex.

In short, complexity requires that the actual outcome depends on the relationships between a large number of factors. Relationships and communication are part of complex dynamic systems and processes and involve genuine uncertainty. To be more precise, the result of the communication between people lies in the details, and its extension over time is fundamentally uncertain (Augustinsson & Petersson 2015).

This distinction is fundamental in all complexity theories. Fields associated with relationships and communication include emerging and self-organizing. The focus is on the

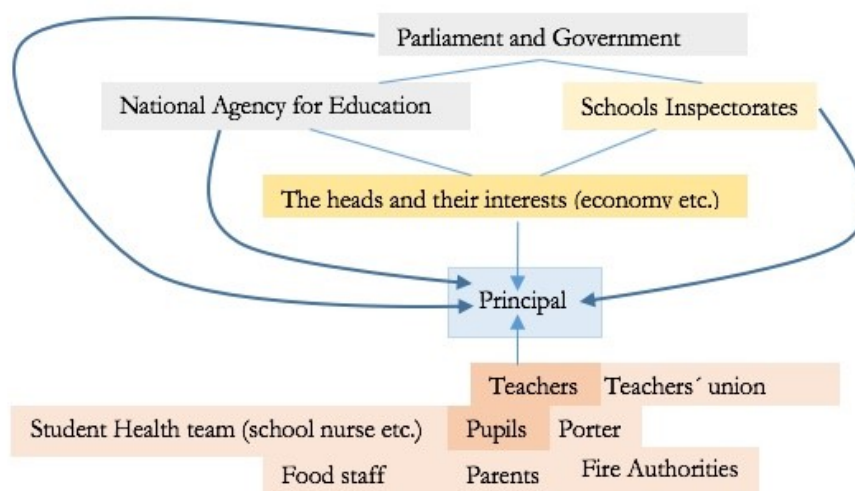
local level. The outcomes of a particular situation will never be repeated exactly. Complexity involves dynamic processes like flux, heterogeneity and the becoming as well as the ordered. Neither order nor chaos is in focus. It is what lies between order and chaos that characterizes complexity. Complexity means the handling of paradoxes (Czarniawska, 2005), uncertainty and surprise, which are vital everyday elements in complex organizations (Augustinsson, 2006; Morrison, 2010). A typical feature of complex things is that known and unknown factors are simultaneously present (Norretranders, 2002; Stacey, 2009) and that control and lack of control exist side by side. Hence, part of a complex system always involves genuine uncertainty. Therefore, the results of communicative diversity between people are to some extent always unpredictable. Consequently, leading also involves processes of self-organization that make the particular unique.

Thus, to predict the future, the chance of planning rationally and authoritatively as well as keeping an eye on activities has become more and more questioned. Parallel to this runs a control system of schools entailing an increasing effort towards technocratic homogenization—that is, law texts, steering documents, documentation, standardized methods, planning and ceremonies, evidence-based education, instrumentality, rationality and administration with elements of New Public Management (NPM) as well as goal- and result-oriented management. Nevertheless, “[t]he current goal-instrumental control system makes it difficult ... to optimally contribute to student, professional and educational development” (Scherp & Scherp, 2007, p. 14), because governing applies more to complicated or simplistic situations (following a recipe), while real practice in schools consists of complexity and therefore also of communicative diversity. Consequently, there is a conflict between a complex organization, as schools actually are, and the image of schools as complicated, accompanied by control systems, standardized methods, planning, law texts, and evidence-based education, that is, the concept of technocratic homogenization.

### **Relational contextualization of action**

As a matter of fact, within schools and preschools, managers have a considerable number of other relationships to consider, including various actors within and outside the organization (Moos, 2010) that entail communicative diversity and thrownness (Heidegger, 2009). These actors often have conflicting requirements, expectations, and comments on the business (Sims, 2003). Although the examples in the text below only derive from principals, the same applies to preschool managers (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Principals' connections, being trapped between different demands



Source: Authors

Figure 1 above shows principals' different relationships and stakeholders. As first-line managers, they find themselves in a crossfire of a range of demands and expectations from various actors (Ericsson & Augustinsson, 2015). These relationships include the following. *Parliament and Government*, which make decisions on laws to control and regulate school activities. The *National Agency for Education*, a civil service department which has the force of law. The *Schools Inspectorate*, which performs a variety of types of inspections of schools, whose heads receive a rebuff if they do not have the forms and documents in order or in other ways fail to comply with the legislation and the official order from the National Agency for Education.

*The heads* are the municipalities and private companies where schools or preschool managers are employed. The heads have the overall responsibility, while principals have the daily responsibility based on state law and regulations. The *teachers union* exercises pressure based on its principles and guidelines for teachers' working conditions. The *teachers* act by their profession, their implementation of the mission and their performance.

*Parents* exert influence through the parents' association. By law they have the right to appeal against principals' different decisions and to pursue issues about their children's schooling. The *student health team* includes a school counselor and a school nurse along with a psychologist and a special needs teacher. However, this is not all. It is more than mentioned in Figure 1. There are *also* functions like *cleaning and caretaker* staff, who sometimes intrude without even talking to the principal. When negotiations about bus times for students take place, the *bus company* and the principal do not always have similar views on what is important. *Fire authorities* have views about furnishing and a number of other aspects of fire security.

At the core of the whole operation are students with their different backgrounds, skill levels and (non-)commitment, representing a great many conflicting wills and interests.

It is this system of roles, actors, relationships, and events, that constitutes principals' background for their interpretation of their assignment and the way they look upon the chances and conditions of doing a good job.

## Method

This study is primarily based on two empirical materials. The first comprises the questionnaire (n=363). The questions were as follows:

- Describe briefly what you consider to be your assignment. In other words, what are you expected to do?
- Do you consider yourself as having good conditions for doing a good job? Describe and explain.
- What or who enables and/or prevents you in your assignment?
  - People? Physical conditions? Legislation? Documents? Superiors? Colleagues? Premises? Students? And so forth.

The second empirical material includes four focus group (n=21), one- to two-hour interviews with school leaders containing the same issues as the questionnaire but involving broader and deeper talks between the respondents. The ambition in the focus groups has been to encourage the participants' narratives. Through lively and open discussions between leaders, stories emerged from their experiences.

The aim was to obtain stories that were more extensive than what is usually found in surveys.

## The participants

The respondents are participants in the three-year compulsory education for principals and preschool leaders in Sweden. All the participants have already worked in their position for more than two years as first-line managers within preschool, compulsory school, upper secondary school or adult education. By the time of the study, the respondents had been managers for at least two years. About 20% work in private organizations. The following analysis does not, however, include any statistical comparisons between private and public organizations.

The questionnaire was distributed in connection with, or immediately after, a course session near the end of the programme. The number of responses amounted to n=363 out of possible n=548 (with a 66% response frequency). The positions were distributed as follows: preschool leaders (23% out of 363), principals (47%), assistant principals (15%), upper secondary school leaders (13%), and adult education leaders (6.3%). In the focus groups, one of the researchers asked questions about the intensity of assignments differing between different assignments and organizations. There was some difference. Preschool managers had a slightly less complex everyday life. However, the differences were that the number of employees had a more significant impact on the intensity than the type of

assignment. When reading the questionnaires, we could not find any difference between the types of assignments in the respondents' answers.

### **Overview methodological approach**

Qualitative material has no singularly given meaning. Meaning emerges in the interaction between researcher and text (Alvesson, 2003, 2011). However, a rational and logical processing of the empirical material through coding and examination of the core content of the codes is essential (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). This constituted the general result, which is usually what is presented in qualitative research articles.

The formulation of the questions in the questionnaire, focus groups and the analysis of the answers are based on a constructionist approach and human social research focusing on interpreting and understanding phenomena (Agar, 2013; Czarniawska 2008). Consequently, it is interpretation and understanding with the help of complexity theories that are of interest to this paper. What managers really do in complex organizations (see the previous background about interpretive leadership research) we use to compare with the results of the survey and the focus groups research, in which this research can be sorted. After writing our first draft, we also tested the results at a conference with 45 school leaders. The participants' discussion of a compilation of the results in smaller groups strengthened the results of the survey and focus group interviews. In this way, opportunities were given to both deepen and problematize the answers in the questionnaire (Cuba & Lincoln, 1994).

### **How**

The empirical material, from both the questionnaire and of the transcribed focus group interviews, is based on content analysis. We started with careful reading. First in a naive sense (Czarniawska, 2008) of the respondents' texts and transcription. Thereafter first coding of the material individually using Atlas ti. This followed by a comparison between the authors' first coding. Through this first coding, different patterns appeared in each issue. We discussed and problematized the initial coding by asking critical questions about, for example, responses based on different types of organizations. A way of dealing with the complex and multifaceted answers was: What or who enables and/or prevents you in your assignment? followed a comparison between the authors first coding (Cuba & Lincoln, 1994). When sometimes ambiguous answers appeared to one and the same question we related the particular answer to this particular respondent's answers to other questions in the questionnaire. An additional way to test reliability is to get an audience to share and discuss results with a critical eye (the conference with 45 school leaders after formal coding). Then we started the formal coding. First units of meaning (perspectives from the questions), such as a word, a statement, or a paragraph—fragments from the survey and focus groups. An abstraction process followed detecting subthemes and after

that themes that expose the data—an abstraction process. This process that considers context is a way to problematizing results (see figure 1). On the basis of themes and sub-themes, we went back to the empirical material. We then again analyzed the respondents' answers question by question, which guides the presentation of the results below. We do not claim, however, that the results can be generalized. Instead, we establish certain complexity theories as a way to contextualize the outcome.

## Introduction findings

In the next few sections, we report in detail the respondents' answers to each question. However, some word before we go to the themes. The dominating keywords in the questionnaire that we found recurrently in the answers referred, followed by law/legislation and steering documents. Other frequent keywords were pedagogical leadership and goals. One of the themes identified as an assignment label is *developing human resources*. This label was the outcome of sorting questions containing systematic quality work and the development of colleagues' competence and knowledge, but it was also extended to include labor legislation and employment issues. We also saw that what obstructs and what promotes the condition for doing a good job appeared even more complex in the focus groups, where more shades and communicative diversity emerged. Therefore, we also use later in the text more quotes from the focus groups that reflect the complexity in the answers.

## Assignment labels

Four core aspects of principals' and preschool leaders' assignment descriptions have been identified by the researchers: 1) economy, 2) law and steering documents, 3) human resources development and pedagogical leadership, 4) goal fulfillment and a fifth aspect, of less expected appearance, is marketing and customers.<sup>2</sup>

## Economy and budget

Economy and budget constitute an important assignment. The economy creates the framework and the limitations which have to be met. This is thus where the respondents express the formal framework of the organization. There is also the decree from above to consider. The respondents are given a budget with the related financial resources. In some cases, it has been established after negotiation with senior managers and politicians. The responsibility for the budget and economy is clear, involving keeping to the budget and organizing activities within the given budget framework: "It is still the budget we have to consider in many ways" (focus group). Even if a number of respondents represent private schools, there is no mention of yields or profits. Other words referring to the economy

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<sup>2</sup> Marketing and customers were not as frequently mentioned as the labels.

part of the assignment include “economic balance”, “not to exceed the budget” and “an instrument for the allocation of resources” (questionnaire). It also seems clear that to the principal and preschool leaders the economy (budget) is mainly regarded as a decree from above. However, what is clear is that the budget does not encroach on other aspects that should be given priority, such as law and steering documents. The position of the budget and the economy does not occupy a dominating role in the leaders’ task, but appears more like one responsibility (or duty) along with a variety of other things.

The role of the budget as a preventer will be discussed further. The economy, including the budget, is seen more as a preventer than an enabler. Principals would like that more resources were given to the students. Hence, although financing and budgeting are limited, they are very explicitly included in their assignment (focus group).

### **Law and steering documents**

Laws and steering documents are frequently referred to in the questionnaire answers. The expression of the assignment contents not only includes the specific regulatory framework for schools and preschools, but also the general rule for the labor market, such as the Work Environment Act. Other assignment contents are also related to documents, like those stating that teachers are to strive for high efficiency. When the assignment concerns business development, this should also be pursued on the basis of the documents. It is stated that the heads of schools and preschools (at municipality or enterprise level) determine principals’ and preschool leaders’ mandate on the basis of documents. The steering documents ensure quality. The rule of law by legislation and steering documents is expressed in words like “keeping track of laws”, “ensuring that schools follow the laws, regulations and curriculum and the principals’ requirements” and “the rule of law and rules and regulations [steering documents] ensure quality” (questionnaire).

The exercise of authority is highlighted with clear references to what is legally expected of principals and preschool leaders in their capacity as the foremost representatives of the school in question. The essential points are the law (government legislation) and rules and regulations from the National Agency of Education.

### **Human resources development and pedagogical leadership**

Educational leadership, developmental leadership, and pedagogical leadership are frequently used synonymously within schools as well as in preschools, which have today, additionally, a legislated learning task. The words *pedagogical* or *developmental* leadership area, are thus prevalent in the interpretation of the assignment. Educational leadership involves creating frameworks and conditions for dialogue, having ideas of how to improve the organization and trying to create a holistic approach to the economy ranging from top decisions to employees’ decisions. It also concerns systematic quality work and a systematic work environment (questionnaire). However, the connections to the educational processes and to staff are often diffuse and unrestricted.



My job ... is to create the best possible preconditions for our children to be able to learn as much as possible, together with my staff. Getting students into an adult role, as members of society. Leading the school from the conditions, making all continually learn and develop. Creating a school where everybody grows. (questionnaire)

Sometimes, responses occur like “being an educational leader in charge of the employees, for example using systematic quality work and curriculum work” (focus group). These descriptions contain a soft and a hard view. An example of a soft description of the assignment with links to the development of human resources is developmental leadership. As examples of the hard view, systematic quality work or systematic work with environment activities are primarily highlighted. The goal is

To deliver the best possible education to the students within the framework of my economic conditions. To optimize the utilization of resources and promote more resources. To lead the work forward with the help of the employees. Financial responsibility, leading kitchen and cleaning staff, support, seeing the whole picture, including work environment and property (questionnaire).

### **Objectives (Goal fulfillment)**

Goal fulfillment is a concept recurrently commented on, either referring to *student* or to *organization* goal fulfillment. For those respondents who equate the primary assignment of the organization with goals concerning students, the goals probably converge. Still, both are abstract concepts, as exemplified by statements like the following: “Leading the actions to goal compliance” and “Overall responsibility for activities directed towards the national targets and the board’s own priorities” (questionnaire). These statements in the questionnaire are on an abstract level, making abstract references to the public law or, for example, to national targets for controlling the content and objectives at staff and student levels.

### **What then is the assignment?**

A summary of the different components is that the interpretation of the assignment is abstract, relatively vague and unclear about what exactly they relate to. The interpretation of the assignment is, very generally held, referring to laws, budgets, steering documents and official objectives for schools and preschools. Few words are taken directly from practice. The legitimate, the official and the politically correct lie at the center of the respondents’ interpretation of the assignment.

### **Prerequisites for doing a good job**

The survey question read: Do you believe you have good opportunities to do a good job? Describe and explain. If the answer is *yes* or *no*, the respondents always develop their underlying arguments. Further, if there is a convincing yes, there are also arguments for a no, and if there is a no it also involves a yes in some respects, as well as arguments for this. Thus, there is for the most part, no definite yes or no in the replies to whether the

principals and preschool leaders believe that their conditions are good or bad. Therefore, these answers are too complex to classify under different themes. There is a recurrent ambivalence in the respondents' views on conditions. The most appropriate summarizing answer in the questionnaire was "partly" or "both and", and "the task is too complex, and mostly there is no educational leadership". Still, answers in this direction in focus groups are even more complex, therefore, we provide excerpts from the focus groups:

The administrative tasks are too far-reaching to be able to find the time to perform any educational development. It is not made any easier since you have both the State and the municipality as heads. One emphasizes the goal and the other the economy. It's hard to conduct a long-term educational developmental process when quick and quantifiable results are prioritized.

No, much of my time I do administration to get everyday life at the school to function. The school I have responsibility for has no functioning schoolyard. We lack a dining room as well as a library. The time for educational leadership is minimal.

From two respondents in two focus groups, a representative description of the ambivalent "partly or both and" has been chosen. One respondent in a focus group is both a principal and a preschool leader, and the other is the principal of an elementary school, both schools being public:

Yes and no. My working place is in the school and close to activities. The preschool is located elsewhere, which means that I am there too seldom. I have plenty of chances to discuss problems with colleagues. Too much of my time/job has to do with sitting in the office in front of the computer.

It depends on what you mean by good conditions. Not ideal if you consider that I have 35 staff, budget responsibility, local response, too many categories of staff to lead, and so on. But if you compare with other principals or preschool heads you may certainly have even fewer opportunities, because I still have an assistant principal who can relieve me.

This ambivalence of principals and preschool leaders regarding the opportunities to do a good job was manifested in different ways in the various parts of the assignment. The same phenomenon also manifested itself in different ways within the same organization. For example, colleagues were declared competent and collegial cooperation was said to work well, but the economy was felt to be tight and to cause great limitations for cooperation and collegial learning in the organization. This ambivalence could also apply to the same phenomenon, for instance when there were, on the one hand, competent teachers doing a good job and, on the other, teachers without professional competence, which naturally created a problem for the principal.

I have a lot of freedom within a fixed framework. Unfortunately, the state and the municipal assignments do not always go hand in hand and many times the economy throws spanners in the works to prevent us from carrying out missions the way we would like.

Unfortunately, no good conditions. Hindered by mail (questionnaires!), meetings and information on fire protection, playground materials, food, kitchen staff, financial reports, and sorting post. Other people are better suited for these tasks than I am.

Still, some of the respondents say:

Well, good conditions, I definitely have such. Small private activities with short decision paths enable rapid action if necessary. Staff with a high level of competence and excellent students ... act as fuel for their own part. The economic conditions are tough in a small business, but with developed cooperation with the municipality and good contacts with the public schools, I believe that we continue to fulfill the demands and achieve our goals.

The participation of my employees with common objectives and a vision of how we want it to be, where we want to go, provides the ideal conditions for a good business.

There seem to be dilemmas or paradoxes where a lot of different matters encroach on each other. Meaningless meetings are another problem:

When there is a problem at my school, which often happens, I will be called to all kinds of stupid meetings. They sit discussing the follow-up of the economy or something else above my school ..., although it is not my focus right now. My focus is to stand up this time and say no, I will not be at that silly meeting because I need to be at my school. I think that we need to be better to say no to many meetings as principals.

Still, there are paradoxes both the in the interpretation and the execution of the mission. In some contexts, the laws and regulations are followed, while in others they are not. The expression of the assignment both follows and contrasts the laws and rules that govern activities in schools and preschools. This indicates a tension between the dynamic complexity and laws and rules from above.

### **So, what are good conditions?**

The ambivalence between different factors is relatively large in the questionnaires and focus groups. Classifying the answers by clear different and distinct themes is problematic, both in the questionnaire and focus groups. One character, or theme, is “partly” or “both and”, and “the task is too complex, and mostly no educational leadership will take place” (focus group). The space in between assignment and conditions constitutes the practice for handling complexities and communicative diversity.

### **Preventers and enablers**

In the analysis of the third part of the questionnaire and focus groups, three distinct themes emerged: paradoxes, thrownness/complexity, and physical conditions and premises. There are some problems between the assignment and that which prevents or enables. The consequence of this is that the assignment, its interpretation, and the everyday complexity will be in conflict with each other. To present these results we use focus groups because they reveal more aspects of what prevents or enables the participants in their assignments.

## Paradoxes

Principals and preschool leaders describe the enablers and preventers of their everyday work in terms similar to those identified under the heading of assignment labels. The economy, legislation, and teachers are three highlighted core aspects. On the aggregate level, a world filled with paradoxes appears. Obvious enablers become at the same time obvious preventers. Against the background of how principals and preschool leaders interpret their assignment, teachers, not surprisingly, serve as an important resource for achieving the goals set up within the organization. Teachers are, in other words, a given background. The teachers' role in this respect also emerges quite clearly in the descriptions of good conditions. However, this group's ability to form an enabling factor for principals and preschool leaders is not presented unequivocally. As a matter of fact, the descriptions were actually equivocal in that teachers appeared both as enablers and preventers.

Similarly, a number of different factors were highlighted. The prevalent (administrative) support function did not always act as support, but instead could complicate the work for principals and preschool leaders. Legislation was primarily described as an enabler, which is needed as an authoritative ally for convincing teachers or parents on a specific point. Still, in other contexts, legislation turned out to be a preventer. Concrete examples were supplied by the respondents of situations or cases that did not fit into the "norm template" of various laws and therefore became problems instead such as, "*the legislation is not suited for students with autism*". Consequently, there emerge some paradoxes

I have the support of my colleagues and can consult them. There are procedures and guidelines developed that everyone knows which you can lean on. Time, or the lack of time is, however, a major obstacle for me to keep up with everything that forms part of the assignment. I also have a fragmented area of responsibility, which includes many different programs and responsibilities. I'm the manager of 43 people, which also affects my workload.

Some paradoxes lie close to what we call tangled works and mess and much less of technocratic homogenization.

## Complexity/throwness

Principals and preschool leaders described the aspects of their daily work that prevented them from fulfilling their assignment in terms of throwness. This is an example: "I have discovered that my working hours are eaten up by too many meetings. Meetings that are sometimes not so close to operations that I would rather have been visiting classrooms instead" (focus group). Although the respondents had a picture of what they were supposed to do, every now and then other tasks took over. This was not related to how they interpreted their (actual) work but was something that took time and resources from fulfilling the imagined assignment.

I feel that the constant interruptions have a negative effect. Student affairs, which constantly seem to increase, also reduce the prerequisites to act more educationally. Parents' *rights* also take effect. Parents do not always understand that the school does not look the same anymore. Resources (both financial and human) also limit the scope for action.

Everyday conflicts, misconceptions, and other unpredictable and momentarily emerging problems could take over a whole working day. "I only put out fires" is a representative quote (questionnaire) illustrating how principals and preschool leaders described parts of their everyday work. However, sometimes they seem to put the blame on themselves. Something is wrong with them as leaders.

I do not think I have the potential to be the educational leader whom I consider my mission is all about. My time is eaten up by things that include everything from real estate and ventilation to issues of sand (against slipping) and various schemes to do.

Insufficiency is an experience described in situations when everyday hassles take over from what is part of their formal assignment, that is, complexity and communicative diversity gains the upper hand over technocratic homogenization.

### **Physical conditions and other premises**

Restrictions caused by localities are seldom mentioned as such but are highlighted in connection with the attitude towards the organization of the authority in charge, or with economic restrictions that are impossible to fulfill. Some voices claim: "Too much staff are responsible for the premises and the work associated with the premises, but I cannot change it because the premises are a technical administration." Further, principals and preschool leaders who work in different schools that are located far from one another, refer to the distance as a preventer. To keep moving continually between two working places or always having a bad conscience for not spending enough time in either of them was emphasized by the respondents, who highlighted premises, locations, and distances as some of the preventers of doing what they call pedagogical leadership. However, there is often a lack of premises. Improperly designed rooms, observation from fire authorities on the equipment and furnishing, comments on cleaning, ventilation not working, and radiators that leak are only a few of the facilities and physical things falling on the school leaders' responsibility to fix and make sure that the work of the staff can go on. These are findings from both the questionnaire and focus groups.

### **So, what are enablers and preventers?**

There is a strong tendency of a conflict between weak contextualization and a high degree of contextualization affecting the opportunities to do a good job. Insufficiency is an experience described in situations when everyday hassles take over from what is part of the assignment for the principals and preschool leaders.

Principals and preschool leaders pinpoint problems and premises as contributory factors in preventing them from fulfilling certain assignment-related ambitions satisfactorily.

The main criticism is that the premises are too small for the activities the respondents wish to develop.

The following quote from one of the focus groups and a principal in primary school may serve as a summary of the above that shows the conflicts and tensions between, on the one hand, everyday life (strong contextualization) and, on the other hand, the legitimate documents and romantic ideas on organization, management and control (weak contextualization) (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998):

As being responsible for the business, there are many challenges. The importance of organization and delegation is large. My business was part of a major reorganization carried out last year. Many uncertainties still remain. This entails a strong feeling of inadequacy. Still, the uncertainty is great, takes a long time before I get comfortable with the new organization, new formal procedures and new goals. A form of familiarizing oneself with the new organization. And at the same time meeting sick leave staff and a fall in numbers of students.

The basic conditions are not the best, because the responsibility is affected by uncontrollable external factors such as the number of students, which affects the economy, decisions around the budget, property issues within the municipality, giving notice to redundant staff, and the employees' time lists. There is an obvious conflict between the different parts regarding which interpretation of the task is loyal to steering documents as well as legislation and everyday work. A clear picture emerges between everyday work and formal documents. The idealized image of what we should be like as managers and leaders also conflicts with daily life. Leading and directing are obvious matters, but the practice is more ambiguous.

## Discussion

Everyday hassles take over from what is part of their formal assignment, that is, complexity and communicative diversity gets the upper hand over technocratic homogenization. What the respondents consider to be their assignment contains few contradictions, for example, a form of technocratic homogenization and generalization with a small degree of contextualization. On the other hand, the conditions for doing a good job, in everyday work, are more connected to communicative diversity in practice and coping with emerging uncertainties or surprises with a high degree of contextualization. Complexity emerges more clearly from the respondents' answers the closer they are to everyday action. In the responses to what does and what does not facilitate doing a good job, inconsistency and dilemmas become apparent. Ambivalence, dilemmas, or what we call paradoxes, show up here frequently. Not infrequently, even obvious enablers may simultaneously be that which prevents school leaders from completing their assignment. This is in line with research about what managers actually do in other types of organizations (Morrison, 2010; 2011) and in line with practice-based and process-oriented research.

In sum, technocratic homogenization such as steering documents, economy, dynamic complexity, communicative diversity, and physical premises are all part of doing a good

job as principals and preschool leaders. Various tensions constitute paradoxes and complexities that principals have to handle skillfully. The assignment, the interpretation, and experiences of conditions for doing a good job are cues for the day-to-day leadership, including the mundane and strategic and the development of schools. On the basis of weak and/or strong contextualizing (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), they try to imagine the future development of their schools and preschools.

Complexity theories help us to conceptualize a conflict. On one hand, the image of schools as complicated accompanied by generalization and weak contextualizing of control systems, standardized methods, planning, law texts, and evidence-based education. On the other hand, everyday hassles.

Complexity theories, practice-based and process-oriented research can help to understand and handle the conflict between weak and strong contextualizing, between technocratic homogenization and everyday leadership.

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