



# VALUES AND ETHICS IN EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION

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## “It was like kaboom! and the children stayed at home.” Leadership in a Preschool During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore how the COVID-19 pandemic affected leadership through the case of a Swedish preschool. The analytical framework draws from turbulence theory and multiple ethical paradigms. Findings indicate that established routines, principals' flexibility, explicit communication, and ethical sensitivity contributed to a moderate level of turbulence within the organization. Moreover, the findings reveal the importance of paying attention to children at risk when ordinary routines change. The paper concludes with an argument for the importance of principals' competence to lead with flexibility without losing shared vision and direction in times of anxiety and uncertainty.

### Key Words:

COVID-19, preschool, leadership, turbulence, ethics

### Introduction

In early 2020, the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic reached Sweden. In March, the Swedish government took measures to slow the virus's spread via recommendations based on the Public Health Agency of Sweden's expert knowledge. The recommendations included avoiding unnecessary travel, practicing social distancing and hand washing, staying at home if one had any symptoms and working from home as often as possible (Government Offices of Sweden, 2020). These recommendations affected all public sectors, including education. Universities switched from on-site to distance teaching, and upper-secondary schools conducted a variety of school-based and distance teaching methods. In contrast to some countries, the national strategy was to keep large sectors of society open to ensure that the general public could continue to function. Consequently, compulsory schools and preschools remained open.

The pandemic prompted several unpredicted changes and a period of uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity for employees in preschools and schools. The regulations led to many absent children, pupils and staff members and an increased workload for principals and other educators.

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New issues and decisions had to be handled quickly and flexibly in an unprecedented situation to maintain an organization supporting children and pupils' learning in a new normality (Ahlström et al., 2020).

This exploratory study took place in a Swedish preschool with the purpose of discovering if and how the COVID-19 pandemic affected leadership. How did the principals manage to adjust their organization and activities to fulfil their responsibilities for the preschool while following the national recommendations during a pandemic?

### Theoretical Frameworks

*Turbulence Theory.* Because the pandemic caused concerns and challenges for several organizations, turbulence theory was the initial theoretical framework for analyzing the data. The theory organizes dynamic forces acting on organizations into four levels: light (ongoing issue, little disruption), moderate (widespread awareness of the issue), severe (fear for the entire enterprise) and extreme (structural damage to the institution's normal operation) (Gross, 2014, 2020; Shapiro & Gross, 2013).

The theory also includes three driving forces that, acting separately and together, increase or decrease turbulence. The first of these forces is *positionality*, or where one stands relative to the turbulence. To determine positionality, one considers organizational groups and how the heightened turbulence is viewed from various positions according to the following criteria: light (most people seem to view this issue the same way), moderate (two or three factions seem to be forming), severe (multiple factions are moving toward action) or extreme (critical differences among factions are redefining the school and community; new alliance patterns seem likely) (Gross, 2020).

The second driver of turbulence is *cascading*, or turbulent conditions' tendency to build on each other, thereby escalating their impact. Gross describes the following cascading statuses: light (calmness, with little sign of new conditions complicating the situation), moderate (two or three conditions are interacting to accelerate the situation), severe (multiple forces propel the situation as it gains momentum) and extreme (a torrent of forces sweeps away almost all other issues, as the current order seems destined to transform).

According to Gross, the third driver of turbulence is *stability*, or how solid or fragile the organization's foundations are. The criteria for analysis include the same levels as those above: light (concrete evidence supports a solid reputation for effectiveness), moderate (cracks in the organization's image are starting to show; key groups are voicing doubts), severe (trust from multiple directions has eroded; key structures supporting the current organizational structure are weakened), and extreme (most stakeholders are expecting continued volatility, personnel shifts are taking place, challenges to the organization's foundations are constant, and dynamic

change is within sight). Stability should not be confused with rigidity. On the contrary, in cases of dynamic tension, stability might best be found in organizations that respond flexibly and assertively to turbulence or even use it to re-culture the school so that it better fits a new set of conditions.

Critical to turbulence theory is the idea that some level of turbulence is always occurring in organizational life and that it may be a desirable condition; therefore, learning how to work with turbulence is a desired characteristic for leaders.

*Multiple Ethical Paradigms.* Many decisions leaders face present ethical dilemmas, and leaders' values influence almost all decisions one way or another (Cranston et al., 2014; Leithwood, 2021). As Begley (1999) argues, "leadership and administration involve considerable amounts of decision-making and problem-solving. Such decision-making inevitably involves values to the extent that preferred alternatives are selected and others are rejected" (p. 4).

In short, following Shapiro and Stefkovich (2021), the ethics of justice relate to the question of whether a law, rule or principle can be used in a particular case. If so, should it be enforced? The concepts emphasized in this paradigm include fairness, equality, and individual freedom.

The ethics of critique challenge the analytical and rational approach to the ethics of justice. Difficult questions regarding such factors as class, race, gender, and social justice should be asked. Who benefits from these laws, rules, and principles? Who has the power, and whose voices are silenced?

An ethics of care is focused on such concepts as loyalty, trust and empowerment, encouraging people to consider the consequences of decisions and actions. This type of ethics is based on the importance of including multiple voices and a leadership style that emphasizes relationships and connection. It also asks whom an action will benefit or hurt and what are a decision's long-term effects.

Finally, a profession's ethics concern its unique moral aspects, encouraging people to be aware of their personal values and the standards set forth by the profession – in this case, acting in the students' best interest. The question of what one is expected to do in their profession should be raised in this ethical paradigm.

### Methods

As the pandemic put pressure on principals' work, only one preschool was selected based on knowledge of the context, i.e., a preschool with several sections and diverse staff, thus potentially increasing the variety of data concerning reactions to the pandemic. The preschool is situated in a multicultural and socioeconomically disadvantaged district. It consists of 12 sections, with 181 children between 1 and 5 years old, 98% of whom have

migrant backgrounds—only four children have Swedish as their mother tongue. The majority of the parents are first- or second-generation immigrants or are newly arrived to Sweden. There are 47 staff members – 20 preschool teachers (with university degrees) and 27 preschool aides. Of the aides, 13 are uncertified; 64% of the staff members have migrant backgrounds, and some speak poor Swedish.

Moreover, the preschool uses functionally shared leadership. In this context, this means that a hierarchical equality exists, but the managers have separate professional areas and daily tasks (Döös et al., 2019). Pamela, the principal, and Susan, the administrative director, were preschool teachers for almost 20 years at this preschool before they entered their leadership positions five years ago. Pamela has the responsibility of ensuring that the educational program is targeted toward the national goals for preschool quality (Skolverket, 2018 [The National Agency for Education]). Susan's responsibilities include budget issues, working environment, sick-leave issues, staffing and child placement.

This study focuses on one preschool and how these two leaders responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. Studying a preschool as a qualitative case study opens the possibility of analyzing its unique and complex situation to understand leadership in turbulent times, its possibilities, and its constraints (Merriam, 1988; Stake, 1995; Vennebo, 2017).

The interview with the two principals, Pamela and Susan, was conducted digitally using TEAMS. It was semi-structured with open and explorative thematic issue areas in the interview guide. The themes focused on the context and processes the principal and the administrative director used during the pandemic. They were asked to describe whether and how the pandemic has affected their leadership and the preschool's inner workings, what challenges they have encountered, what was easy or difficult to handle and what lessons they have learned. The interview took one hour, and was recorded, transcribed, and sent back for member checking.

The analytical work and coding approach can be described in terms of a constant comparative technique or a constant comparison of patterns in the raw data in light of theoretical perspectives (Hjerm & Lindgren, 2010). The case was reviewed to determine the impact of the three drivers of turbulence (positionality, cascading and stability). This review involved an evaluation of each driver's impact. Positionality was determined by Pamela and Susan as they viewed the ways that different groups responded to heightened turbulence. Events that affected the second driver, cascading, were identified by examples given during the interview, e.g., the children's attendance increased from 20% to 70%. When the principals considered the third driver, stability, they considered all participants' reactions to the forces they encountered.

After establishing each driver's turbulent impact, the general level of turbulence from among the four possible levels (light, moderate, severe, or extreme) was evaluated.

While reading the transcript, the ethical dimension of decision making emerged – examples of the ethical paradigms of justice, critique, care, and profession were evident (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2021). Therefore, the analysis also included the multiple ethical paradigms as analytical probes in the coding process, i.e., by asking the critical questions about Pamela's and Susan's story.

The excerpts in the data became fixed when they were typed and categorized. The real individuals disappeared and came forward as symbols infused with meanings. As Gudmundsdóttir (2001) suggested,

the selected episodes (already infused with meaning) become the artifacts with which the narrator (or researcher) creates a narrative or story that will capture what the narrator experienced in such a way that the reader will gain a new insight and a new understanding of the larger issue behind the particular series of incidents. (p. 231)

### **Findings**

*Spring 2020, Uncertainty and Worries.* In March 2020, it became clear that the COVID-19 virus had entered Sweden, and the requirements for the preschool's work changed. In line with social distancing restrictions, meetings between staff across sections and preschools were prohibited. Sick leaves increased among the staff, and parents were not allowed to enter the preschool. At the same time, most of the children (around 80%) stayed home. As Pamela said, "It was really from one day to the next, the low number of present children didn't fade out; it was like Kaboom! And the children stayed at home."

This new situation created a high level of concern. According to Susan, "the whole society changed. The message from the authorities was 'Stay at home, don't go out,' and at the same time, the preschool was open. That double message created concern among the staff." The central office's recommendation to principals was to work from home as often as possible, something with which Pamela and Susan were uncomfortable:

We decided to work at the preschool every day. We are not more important than the staff; it was kind of a principle of loyalty. We couldn't say to our pedagogues, 'You have to be here no matter how much the children sneeze at you, but we work and guide you from home.' It didn't feel right.

Pamela and Susan noticed a high level of concern among their employees for themselves, their families, and their relatives. Several staff members stayed at home with flu symptoms, but because testing was not common at that time, concern for their colleagues increased. Were they sick with COVID-19? What if they returned to the preschool too early?

The principals recognized that staff members' concerns varied. Preschool teachers were generally more up to date with reliable and relevant information. The bilingual nursing aides were generally less critical of sources and listened to news from their countries of origin, some of which contradicted the Swedish information and recommendations. Consequently, a sense of confusion arose. Were facemasks necessary or not? That issue quickly disappeared, as everyone soon realized the difficulty and inconvenience of working with young children wearing facemasks. However, the concerns were not always related to language or education. They were also linked to whether and how seriously the virus affected them or their families.

Children also expressed their awareness of the virus. Coronavirus-based discussions were frequent. "We cannot play wedding. It is corona!", was heard in their play, and they reminded each other to wash their hands.

Pamela and Susan were neither moving around the preschool nor visiting the sections as often as they used to, but they found their onsite presence important. During the first month of the pandemic, they noticed that the staff members' concern caused anger and annoyance and that staff members often reacted differently. Some were unconcerned whereas others were very strict about maintaining their distance. Forums for supportive dialogue with the working teams or individually were created to answer questions and handle the emotions concerning work during a pandemic. This practice was helpful in decreasing collective anxiety and establishing a sense of caring for each other in a situation that impacted everyone. According to Pamela and Susan, a significant event that diminished common worries occurred in April 2020, when they both confirmed the pedagogues' concerns and were explicit about their own. Susan explains,

It changed when we revealed our worries and vulnerabilities. Something happened among the employees. I was also worried for my mother and about being at work every day. We met over our joint worry with empathy. I have learned the importance of showing my vulnerability but not at the expense of my leadership.

During the first month of the pandemic, amidst all the worries and the unpredictable changes in requirements, moments of joy also occurred when a relative could be taken off a ventilator or a son returned from abroad. Such events were celebrated with a cake.

Before the pandemic, there was a staff meeting each morning for briefings concerning the day's situation, such as sick leaves among staff, children's absences, or other significant information. This morning routine became even more important.

Besides the uncertainty about how the workday could turn out and ensuring enough staff in every section, there were

other practical issues to handle. The central office asked for action plans for various scenarios due to the pandemic, Susan remembered: "Plan A, B, C... the whole alphabet and [we] advised ordering protective equipment, equipment that didn't exist."

A ban was imposed on employing substitutes, but because this preschool had permanent substitutes, the work could continue regardless of sick leaves. Another issue was creating routines to guarantee all personnel access to the breakroom consistent with restrictions. Susan was responsible for those new items on her agenda.

As the principal, Pamela was responsible for ensuring that education was targeted toward national goals. During the pandemic, that responsibility meant helping the staff remain focused on their tasks and continuing planned projects and activities. Collegial learning across the working teams was difficult because the members were isolated from each other. And, despite their different areas of responsibility, Pamela and Susan cooperated and supported each other in this new situation, which often required rapid decision making and flexibility.

*Fall 2020 and Spring 2021 – The "New Normal".* In August 2020, children returned to the preschool, increasing their attendance to 70%. The "new normal", still with restrictions and attention to COVID-19 symptoms, enabled the return of more conscious and planned activities rather than simply surviving each day.

The staff quickly modified their work with small groups of children, but it was not as easy to adjust to 70% attendance. Despite having fewer children in each group than in pre-pandemic times, the staff reacted with increased concern. For instance, how should a small group of children be handled if a colleague is on sick leave? Susan and Pamela had to reassure the staff that they still had the capacity to handle a small group of children despite absent colleagues and the ongoing pandemic. Because Pamela and Susan were present at the preschool, they could, if necessary, step in and help during meals but also explicitly clarify the joint responsibility:

We had to be very clear and explain our joint responsibility to handle the situation without diminishing their feelings; you cannot ask for a substitute for a group of eight children! That explicit approach wasn't appreciated in the beginning, but the staff's attitude changed. 'Fifteen children and two personnel, no problem!' was their attitude after a while.

Because there were only a few cases of COVID-19 among the personnel during fall 2020 and spring 2021, work at the preschool continued within the frame of restrictions. There were still no meetings between sections or with other preschools if it was not possible to perform them virtually. Because the staff's digital competence varied and there were not enough computers while the social distance restriction required more rooms than were

available, digital meetings were not an option. According to Pamela's follow-up meetings, the staff missed in-service training and pedagogical discussions with colleagues outside their work teams. However, as the annual evaluation of their work illustrates, this new situation had no negative impacts on goal achievement. As Pamela explained, "We haven't had as high goal achievement concerning our development areas in accordance with the goals of the curriculum this year since there has been a massive focus on the here and now and working close to the children."

The fact that a pandemic was going on was no longer at the top of the agenda in late spring 2021. Pamela continues,

We don't talk about COVID-19 other than continuing to keep distance, the parents are not allowed to enter the preschool and so on. Okay, we have this virus, we have adjusted our routines, but we don't have to talk about it all the time.

Another change in the "new normal" was the increased number of virtual meetings at the leadership level. Pamela and Susan, who normally have meetings with the administration and the superintendent at City Hall, have become used to attending those meetings virtually. They both think this practice will continue after the pandemic, as it is less time consuming.

### **Challenges and Lessons**

When Pamela and Susan were asked to describe their main challenges, it was obvious that they supported each other in this new situation. However, due to their different positions, some issues were more apparent to Pamela and others to Susan. Pamela highlighted her responsibility for ensuring education according to the curriculum:

It was a challenge to simultaneously ensure that education was going on as planned, to handle the staffs' concerns and to handle my own worry. I had to ask myself, 'Where is my focus? Who am I trying to protect?' /.../ The task of the preschool must go on. We are not babysitters for children whose parents have important jobs but for all children. It is a matter of democracy and inclusion.

From Susan's perspective, the uncertainty of how each day would turn out was directly connected to absent staff members or children showing flu-like symptoms by noon. But, it was also related to keeping a balance between extinguishing fires, being proactive and being prepared for various scenarios. Their flexibility was tested, and their shared leadership and work onsite was crucial for the well-being of all involved and a prerequisite for continuing activities:

People handle stressful situations differently. For some, this uncertainty is really stressful. But when we asked if there were ever situations we couldn't solve, the response was 'no'. We have been there and

promised them that if they need us, we will be there; we promise. We have tried to create a sense of stability.

Some of the children were absent for long periods for various reasons, so an additional challenge became obvious after a couple of months: the difficulty to notice children who were at risk. For children with siblings in school, social services contacted the preschool due to concerns about those children's well-being. Never had they had this many requests from social services concerning at-risk children. According to Pamela, "There have been children absent for a long period of time; their parents have followed the restrictions by the book. But when the social services contacted us, we asked ourselves, 'Have we been missing something?'"

A challenge for the staff who work closely with children has been deciding whether they were healthy enough to enter the preschool, which could mean tricky discussions with some parents who were not allowed to leave their children in the morning. Pamela or Susan could, if necessary, support their staff onsite and empathize with the parents' stress about not being able to go to work. However, they had to follow the national restrictions despite the inconvenience they caused.

When asked about what they would highlight regarding their learning as leaders during the pandemic, they returned to the importance of having the competence to handle a situation they could not control and being able to deal with uncertainty. Susan also stressed the importance of explicit communication to avoid insecurity within the organization:

We became aware of the need for us to be even more explicit. Communication, communication, communication. What we said yesterday in a crisis situation was soon forgotten, so we had to say it again. /.../ We were their sounding board and helped them to focus on their task.

The humanistic also became apparent. Pamela continues, "and again, showing our [own] vulnerability. We are also humans." Susan filled in:

Celebrating success and highlighting good news but also talking about the joint responsibility we all have at the preschool has become more obvious; we are in this together. We are pretty tired now, but we have also had a lot of fun during this period.

### **Conclusion**

How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect Pamela's and Susan's leadership, and how did they manage to adjust their organization and activities to fulfill their responsibilities for the preschool? To answer those questions, the three turbulence drivers - positionality, cascading, and stability, aligned with ethical perspectives on leadership actions are explored, followed by a

discussion of how Pamela's and Susan's leadership was affected.

Pamela and Susan described a turbulent period and how it changed over time depending on external and internal circumstances as well as how the staff responded to them. The definition of moderate turbulent impact for the first driver, positionality, is the most accurate for this case. Pamela's and Susan's positions as leaders gave them an overview of the situation, and they were able to maintain the recommended distance at work and focus on their assignments as leaders. However, as Gross (2020) suggests, it is important to understand the situation of individuals in the organization in a multidimensional fashion. In this case, the staff members' varied educational backgrounds and linguistic competencies impacted their diverse understanding of how to interpret the virus's consequences and recommended restrictions. Pamela's and Susan's actions reveal an ethical sensitivity, as they considered others' perspectives, worked with interpersonal and group differences, and identified the consequences of actions and options (Tuana, 2014).

The turbulent effect of the second driver, cascading, can also be interpreted as moderate. The pandemic influenced the organization and all employees. Further, conflicting recommendations from TV channels broadcasted from abroad contributed to a cascade of enhanced worries among some of those who got information from foreign news. The next cascading impact was the return of children in the fall of 2020 and the issue of handling the increased number of annoyed parents who, due to COVID-19 symptoms, were not allowed to leave their children at the preschool. Pamela and Susan considered those forces and took actions to diminish their consequences and, following Gross (2020, p. 32), prevented "undue cascading by reflecting on the world as it is lived by those they led." Parents' stress over not being allowed to leave their children was confirmed and met with empathy yet with maintenance of the restrictions.

The third driver, stability, had a light impact but with an ongoing risk of increasing to moderate. The leaders' presence at the preschool and the established morning meetings functioned as significant stabilizing factors to reassure staff and parents that the situation was under control or, at least, could be handled during the day. The staffs' worries decreased when Pamela and Susan took their concerns seriously, opened supportive dialogues and repeatedly communicated support and expectations for how the work could be accomplished.

However, stability is not an absolute condition; it requires flexibility and change to be maintained and a culture emphasizing dialogue (Gross, 2020). The leaders flexibly and assertively demonstrated a systems-thinking approach. They switched between perspectives, balanced their actions, and bridged internal needs and external demands with a holistic view. That practice might have been helpful, for Shaked and Schechter (2014) argue,

... the holistic view may enable school leaders to tolerate ambiguity and be able to work under circumstances of uncertainty, so that lack of knowledge about all the details of a particular situation does not hinder their efforts to solve a system's problem (p. 800).

The analysis of the three drivers sets the general level of turbulence for this case as moderate. There is not an ongoing issue or disruption nor a fear for the entire enterprise or structural damage to the institution's normal operation.

Pamela's and Susan's actions described above illustrate how personal values influence decision-making processes (see, for instance, Begley, 1999; Branson, 2014). The statement, "It didn't feel right" shows how their individual values impacted their decision to be at the preschool each day. It is also an example of "one size does not fit all" due to different contexts, or, to quote Shields (2014), "...there may be times when following the letter of the law...is absolutely not the right course of action" (p. 25). Therefore, the recommended policy to work from home was, according to the ethics of justice, questioned (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2021).

The ethics of critique arose when Pamela and Susan consciously asked questions such as "Who benefits from this guideline?" and "What are the long-term consequences?" (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2021). They took an ethical stand (ethics of care) that reveals a concern for others as they dealt with values such as loyalty and trust. Pamela and Susan handled the variety of situations they struggled with in light of ethical issues of justice, critique, care, and children's best interests.

Moreover, their decision to work from their office and their disclosures of their own fear and concern illustrate authenticity – they were not afraid of revealing their feelings (Starratt, 2005). It also exposes the link between authenticity and presence. Their presence onsite was significant at a preschool in a socioeconomically disadvantaged area with uncertified staff members, some of whom had difficulties interpreting the situation due to language barriers and conflicting information. They exhibited physical presence but also a confirming, critical presence, as they took the staff's concern seriously and provided them opportunities to express problems through dialogue.

When Pamela and Susan describe how their leadership was affected, they refer to their established routines and the importance of their teamwork. Their story reveals that their collaboration was intensified because this new situation had no obvious answers. It also stresses the importance of flexibility, explicit communication, and specific expectations for the collective responsibility of managing the inner work of the preschool. Ärlestig (2020) emphasizes the need for educational leaders to tolerate uncertainty and make visible multidimensional aspects of the organization, which, in turn, might create a starting

point for discovering different solutions to the same problem. The case illustrates how, following Ärlestig, communication within an organization concerns structure, trust, attitudes, and an understandable professional language, as Pamela and Susan met the staff's doubts about their competence and worries with empathy, trust, honesty and openness (see Tschannen-Moran, 2014)

Finally, an unexpected finding in the data was that restrictions had consequences for children at risk when they stayed home according to recommendations or due to parents' fear of infection. The pandemic generated other issues in terms of supporting this group of children in a situation that emphasized broad collective good, i.e., stopping the virus's spread. Yet, the increased requests from social services for some children at the preschool indicate the importance of paying attention to children with limited resources and special needs as well as seriously thinking about possible alternatives (see also Angelle, Ärlestig & Norberg, 2015), which implies the importance of an established relationship between preschool and parents in discussions of risks vs benefits of entering the preschool, or as Bouakaz (2008) argues, a qualitative contextualized collaboration based on mutual respect.

No one was prepared for the new situation that affected the world in 2020. Traditions, routines, and attitudes were challenged, and the collective good sometimes conflicted with the private good. In retrospect, several lessons have been learned, and some have challenged traditional perceptions. Because new turbulent situations might arise, it is necessary to strengthen principals' ability to lead with flexibility without losing their shared vision and direction in a time of anxiety and uncertainty. In times of unpredictability and insecurity, when leaders cannot control what is affecting their organization, they can, as Branson (2014, p. 452) suggests, "...fill the need for stability by having moral integrity and building a workplace culture based upon fairness and ethical behavior."

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