The First Teacher as the Elephant in the Room – Forgotten and Hidden Teacher Leadership Perspectives in Swedish Schools

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Abstract	Article Info
International research has highlighted teacher leadership as a means to improve teaching and learning by distributing instructional (learning-centered) leadership to teacher leaders. Simultaneously, there has been an increase and alteration of teacher leaders in schools. One example is the 'first teacher' position in Sweden implemented in 2013. The article builds on an inductive, empirical study made in four Swedish schools. I conducted 34 semi-structured interviews with teachers, first teachers, assistant principals, and principals to explore how different school actors understand first teacher leadership and how this enables and constrains the construction of teacher leadership for teaching and learning. In the analysis, I concluded that the participants understand first-teacher leadership as horizontal and facilitative. Their understanding, built on egalitarian and autonomous norms, collides with the intensions of a changed role to improve teaching and learning. The result implies a hidden first-teacher function. In the article, I argue teacher leadership, as a concept, has been forgotten in Swedish research literature and schools, even though Sweden has had teacher leaders for decades. Increased exploration of first-teacher leadership in Swedish schools can contribute to a more visualised and nuanced understanding of teacher leadership and its impact on teaching and learning.	

Introduction

During the last few decades, research about educational leadership has moved away from studying a strong single leader towards a view on leadership as a process constructed by several actors (Yukl, 2012; Northouse, 2016). A distributed leadership perspective has gained ground and is today a common perspective within leadership research, as well as the instructional perspective. As a result, research about how leadership can be distributed to teachers, as instructional leaders for their teacher peers outside the classroom, has attracted more attention (Gumus et al., 2018; Wenner & Campbell, 2017). The opportunity for principals to distribute instructional leadership to competent teachers has been argued in international research as desirable because the principals' impact on the teachers' knowledge and abilities, and thereby the students' results, has been shown to be limited (Leithwood & Seashore Louis, 2012). However, in Swedish research literature in the last few decades, *teacher leaders* outside the classroom seem to have fallen out of mind.

The conceptualisation of 'teacher leadership' is complex and elusive (Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Teacher leadership can be understood as leading students inside the classroom and as leading teacher peers outside the classroom. In this paper I focus on the latter conceptualisation, which buils on theories about instructional leadership, professional development, and distributed leadership.

This conceptualisation has emerged as an important aspect of conceptualising school leadership in the past few decades (Mangin, 2005). Focusing on teacher leadership outside the classroom highlights teacher leaders as potential leaders for professional learning and teaching improvement (Wenner & Campbell, 2017). International research about teacher leadership has highlighted teacher leaders as valuable assets to school improvement because of their direct access to the classroom, their close relations to teacher peers and their attention to teaching and teaching development (Wenner & Campbell, 2017; Grootenboer, Edwards-Groves & Rönnerman, 2015). It has been argued that teacher leaders, in this way, can lead to improved teaching.

Teacher leaders are sometimes called teacher *middle* leaders because of their position between the school leader and the teachers. With one foot still in the classroom they have a unique position to lead for teaching improvement. As middle leaders, it is argued, they can bridge the educational work in classrooms and the management practices of school leaders (Lillejord & Børte, 2018; Rönnerman, Edwards-Groves & Grootenboer, 2018; Harris & Jones, 2017; Wenner & Campbell, 2017), such as leading professional learning groups and coaching teacher peers.

Despite these potential gains for teaching improvement, teacher leaders, as a resource, seem globally ambiguous (Lillejord & Børte, 2018). International research has shown instructional (learning-centred) teacher leadership can be hard to construct because of the existing cultural aspects in schools (Lillejord & Børte, 2018; Supovitz, 2018). The learning and teaching norms within the teaching profession have proven to be predicated on autonomy and egalitarianism, which can make teachers resistant to teacher

leadership (e.g., Berg, 2015; Mangin, 2005). There seems to be a disconnection between the predicted opportunities and ideal with implementing teacher leaders and their possibility to construct teacher leadership that contributes to teaching and learning. This disconnection is relevant to consider when implementing new teacher leaders in schools.

In the last few decades, there has been an increase and alternation of teacher leaders in many Western countries, such as New Zealand, the United States, Australia, England, Poland, and Norway (Alvehus et al., 2019; Swedish Ministry of Education, 2012). By policy initiatives, career paths for teachers have been created to enhance the attraction to the teaching profession and to improve teaching (Fisk Natale, Bassett, Gaddis & McKnight, 2013). These initiatives are argued in terms of handling educational challenges and unburdening overloaded principals (Hairon, 2017). Many career reforms have been aimed at the teacher profession to improve teaching and learning in schools. The idea of career pathways reached Sweden in 2013, with the implementation of 'first teachers' (Swedish Ministry of Education, 2012).

The teacher leader is not a new phenomenon in Sweden. For example, there have been teacher team leaders, process leaders, and subject coordinators for decades. However, when reviewing research literature, current Swedish empirical studies about teacher leadership are hard to find. Except for a few studies in recent years (see Rönnerman et al., 2018; Liljenberg, 2016; Alvunger, 2015, 2016), teacher leadership, as a conceptualisation, seems to have been forgotten among Swedish researchers. With the first-teacher position in mind, much uncertainty still exists in relation to teacher leadership. Are the first teachers seen as leaders by the local school

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actors (including themselves) and do different school actors accept to be led by the first teachers regarding learning and teaching? These questions depend on how the school actors understand first-teacher leadership. Do they view first-teacher leadership as instructional, democratic, managerial, pedagogical, distributed or something else? How does this enable and constrain the possibilities for first teachers to develop professional learning and teaching? In Sweden, these questions remain unanswered. To sum up, there is a need to explore how Swedish school actors understand teacher leadership.

Purpose

The aim of this study is to explore first-teacher leadership perspectives in Swedish schools. In the article, I explore how teachers, first teachers, assistant principals, and principals understand first-teacher leadership and how this understanding relates to teacher leadership for teaching and learning. The term first-teacher leadership is equated with teacher leadership outside the classroom, focusing on leading teacher peers. The research questions for the study are:

- How do Swedish teachers, first teachers, assistant principals, and principals understand first-teacher leadership?

- How may this understanding enable and constrain the construction of first- teacher leadership?

In the first section, I give a brief background on the Swedish school setting and the implementation of 'first teachers'. In the second part, I present the inductive research method followed by a presentation and discussion of the results from the empirical study. Finally, I end the article with some conclusions and suggestions for further research.

The Swedish School Setting: Changing Educational Leadership Relations

In Sweden, teacher leaders are not a new phenomenon. The idea of career paths for teachers can already be found in the Swedish school commission in 1946 (SOU 2008:52) and different forms of teacher leaders have existed since the 1970s, with different assigned tasks outside the classroom. However, their roles have mainly been facilitative and not understood as instructional leadership (Håkansson & Sundberg, 2018). The principal, as 'primus inter pares' (first among equals), has led the schools without interfering with teaching (cf. Berg, 2015; Helstad & Møller, 2013). Swedish teachers have had the autonomy to control their teaching individually (Berg, 2015) within a flat school hierarchy (Møller, 2009).

However, over the past 25 years, the Swedish school system has experienced several educational reforms to handle low student results, increased segregation in and between schools and a lack of educated teachers (e.g., Imsen, Blossing & Moos, 2017; OECD, 2015). There have been regulations, marketisation, decentralisation, and centralisation. Following global neoliberal trends, there has been an increased focus on school improvement and measurable results. The view on the principal has shifted from school leader to a more managerial leadership perspective (Uljens, Møller, Ärlestig & Fredriksen 2013). Policymakers have implemented several national initiatives for teaching improvement through professional learning groups led by teachers (National Agency for Education, 2019b), challenging the individual autonomy of the teacher profession. The principal and teacher roles are changing. With these alterations in mind, the career pathways for teachers (CPT) reform implemented 2013 in Sweden can be viewed as a product of its time.

The First Teacher as A New Potential Leader for Teaching and Learning in Swedish Schools

The 'first teacher' position was created in 2013 as a career pathway for teachers, offering experienced and documented skilled teachers a career path. The CPT reform was intended to attract and retain high-quality teachers in the profession and to enhance teachers' professionalism and status, as well as to strengthen the quality of instruction (Alvehus et al., 2019; Swedish Ministry of Education, 2012). To make the status more attractive, the career ladder offers a salary increase of 5,000 Swedish crowns (about a 15-20% salary-increase). In 2019 1.442 million Swedish crowns (about 144 million Euro) were earmarked by the government for the employment of 15,000 first teachers in Sweden (National Agency for Education, 2019a). As a financier and initiator, the Swedish government has designed some overall guidelines. Certified teachers need to have at least four years of teaching experience and a good pedagogical record and to have shown the capacity to improve students' results. As first teachers, they shall continue to work as regular classroom teachers and may also have specific, additional responsibilities, such as supervision of teacher peers or school development projects (ibid.). Apart from these guidelines, the reform leaves room for interpretation. The main responsibility for the first teachers lies in the hands of the local authorities and the principals who have the responsibility to decide on specific tasks and to choose the applicants (Bergh & Englund, 2016). The prerequisites, working conditions, and assignments vary between and within schools (Adolfsson & Alvunger, 2017; Alvunger & Trulsson, 2016). According to previous studies, the CPT reform is challenging central norms among teachers in the Swedish school contexts (The Swedish Agency

for Public Management, 2017) and has endured criticism from school actors for being unclear and unanchored within schools and for creating discord within the teacher community (The Swedish Agency for Public Management, 2016; National Agency for Education, 2014). This criticism has been distinct among Swedish teachers and principals.

The rather new CPT reform offers some new dimensions regarding teacher leadership in Swedish schools. Even if leadership qualities are not explicitly expressed in the guidelines from the government, it has been suggested that principals can distribute instructional leadership to first teachers (cf. SFS, 2013:70). As described above, the phenomenon of teacher leaders is not new in Swedish school contexts, but the integrated differentiation between first teachers and their classroom teacher peers is new. Several studies have shown that first teachers have assignments connected to subject development or broader school improvement, which suggest that first teachers construct practices that could be interpreted as teacher leadership (e.g., Eriksson & Player Koro, 2019; The Swedish Agency for Public Management, 2017; National Agency for Education, 2015; National Agency for Education, 2014). In this sense, first teachers can be viewed as teacher leaders. However, there is still a lack of research about leadership's relation to first teachers and teacher leadership.

Methods

The empirical material for this inductive study was collected through a study in a larger research project and as a part of a doctoral thesis. The study was conducted in 2019 in two medium-sized (50,000 to 150,000 inhabitants) municipalities in different parts of Sweden.

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The municipalities were situated within the same education system, seemingly having the same prerequisites: funding, local policies, and strategies. The sampling was made on purposeful grounds (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011), where the municipalities shared the same levels of student results, student welfare, and final grades, including the qualification for further studies. Two compulsory elementary and secondary schools were chosen from each municipality to participate in the study (convenience sampling; Bryman, 2012).

In this current study, I analysed 34 of the semi-structured transcribed interviews (39.5 hours). These interviews were made with teachers (n = 29, in groups), first teachers (n = 14, in groups and individually), assistant principals (n = 7, in groups), and principals (n = 4, individually). Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. To capture explicit and implicit understandings of leadership, the interviews were combined with a self-developed mapping method called the EDUORG network analysis-method. Through this method, the participants mapped different functions and relations in their school organisations with sticky notes on a three-level divided paper sheet. This visualisation facilitated the interview for the participants, including the interviewers. All participants were informed about the aim of the study and that they could terminate their participation at any time. They all gave written informed consent.

Data were collected in two phases. In the first phase, during spring 2019, interviews with principals and first teachers were conducted to gain an overall understanding of the contexts. The interview guide was then reshaped. In the second phase, the same participants were interviewed again and teachers and assistant principal functions were added. Through interviews with different

school actors within the same schools, I wanted to grasp fundamental first teacher leadership perspectives and what impact these had on first teachers' possibilities of leading teaching and professional learning. Thus, the aim was not to create a comparative or evaluative study built on cases.

The data were organised and analysed with the qualitative analysis software NVivo 12 Pro. In the first phase, the transcripts were read several times to identify prominent themes and patterns. I also analysed the maps (the EDUORG Network Analysis) created by the participants during the interviews. Focusing on how teachers, first teachers, assistant principals, and principals talked about and mapped the first teacher function and first-teacher leadership I searched for patterns in the material. The combination of visible and oral reflections enabled methodological

triangulation (Cohen et al., 2011). In the first phase, the material was framed in two major sweeping categories: leadership and the first teacher role. Second, I reread the transcriptions several times and reduced the data by identifying salient domains through analytic coding. I summarised repeated patterns and clustered and created subcategories. Third, I reread the transcriptions to verify and rework the existing codes. Finally, I searched for themes across the codes and created a master outline to express relations within and among the codes. I also chose excerpts to support elements in my outline.

Assignments Connected to First Teachers

Before heading on to the results, some clarifications can be made regarding the current school contexts and the first teachers' assignments. The four schools in the study had similar local organisational structures. They had formal school leadership teams,

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consisting of a principal and assistant principals and/or assistant administrators, in some cases combined with teacher team leaders and/or first teachers. All four schools were also organised in teacher teams responsible for a group of students. First teachers and teachers were primarily experienced teachers (teaching experience >10 years), the first teachers were all mainly teaching and were members of teacher teams. Almost all first teachers had additional assignments related to school- and/or teaching development. In one school the first teachers did not have any specific tasks as first teachers, but a majority of them were process leaders, a task equated with the school development assignments of first teachers in the other schools. A majority of the first teachers in the study led organised professional learning groups, where teacher met regularly and focused on a selected theme, such as a teaching method or a particular school subject. A minority had specific areas to develop without responsibilities for specific learning groups. One first teacher was tutoring teachers in another school. In all four schools, the assignments and the first-teacher functions were easier for the principal and the assistant principal to describe than for the first teachers to describe. The teachers found the first-teacher assignments unclear. In the next section, I will describe the results.

Results

The Hidden First Teacher

The teachers in the study expressed that they were unsure about who the first teachers in the school organisations were. In the maps created during the interviews, the first-teacher function was seldom mentioned among almost all school actors, especially among teachers and first teachers. When asked, teachers and first teachers

said that the first teachers were included in the function 'teacher'. The first teachers identified themselves as teachers, not first teachers, and described how they shifted roles depending on the situation. In the classroom and the teacher teams, they were teachers. Most of them only defined themselves as first teachers when carrying out their first-teacher assignments, such as leading professional learning groups. Even in these situations, their relationships to the first-teacher title were ambivalent. Maria described how she avoided using the title first teacher when introducing herself:

But […] then it feels like you are higher ranked than a teacher. I mean in the hierarchy and I don't think I am… or I don't want to be the one looking down. But I am a first teacher, I am, but it is nothing that I introduce myself as, I say teacher. (Maria, first teacher)

Maria talked about how the definition of herself as a first teacher would put her above her teacher peers, a positioning that she could not accept. When asked what would happen if she would introduce herself as a first teacher, Maria said:

Nothing would have happened. I don't think so. It… I am, if I may say, I am a little bit against the system with first teachers. In fact, you should reward experienced skilled teachers. There are many skilled teachers who could call themselves first teachers and it went wrong, like "now we don't have more career appointments to assign on this school" so some got one and some not. […] So that's a little bit wrong, we are equally skilled and so on. (Maria, first teacher)

Maria was not the only first teacher who actively avoided the title 'first teacher' when approaching other teachers. Several of the interviewed first teachers did. The criticised implementation of the CPT reform was often mentioned as one explanation to this phenomenon and teachers, first teachers, assistant principals, and principals stated that they were critical of the reform and the first

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teacher function. One teacher explained why the first teacher function was invisible on a map created in a group interview with teachers:

> *I think it's a national problem that it is like this. I think it was unclear from the beginning [the first teacher position]. Is it an appointment you can apply for, and then you are better than the others? Or get more paid than the others? No, but what do I know? Or did you have a certain training that makes you… I think that is strange. Very strange. (Peter, teacher)*

Several times the problematic implementation of the CPT reform was mentioned as a reason why the first teacher function was invisible in the school organisations. Peter asked for justifications to the designations of first teachers and the specific training that makes first teachers more competent to lead. The school actors in the study were all well informed about the national debate regarding the CPT reform and referred to it while talking about the first teacher function and role. They related to general situations that arose some years ago when the reform was implemented, but when asked about current examples, they stated that the situation had improved.

First Teachers as Pares Inter Pares

The first teachers in the study expressed resistance against putting themselves above other teachers. When mapping the actors and functions in their school organisation almost all first teachers put themselves horizontal to their teacher peers. The first teachers claimed that they were good teachers, so did the principals, but the first teachers also emphasised that they were no better than their teacher peers. The limited number of career appointments was perceived as unfair in an organisation where all teachers were stated as equally skilled. However, according to the school leaders, first teachers needed to have the courage to stand out from their teacher peers. As Elsa, assistant principal, put is:

Regarding all these positions [teacher leaders in general], they are teachers that need to dare to stand out. Because, you leave the crowd, you leave your colleagues by having a leading role. Even if you do not have the authority to make decisions, it is in a way as taking a step away. You are a first teacher or a team leader. Then you stand out from the crowd and you have to dare to do that. (Elsa, assistant principal)

The first teachers resisted putting themselves outside the crowd, but the principals and assistant principals had a different view. The principals found it problematic though to reward the first teachers with a higher salary and at the same time require all teachers to contribute to the common goal that all students should learn. As Stephan, principal, described it:

When you have competent and good teachers in a school organisation but you give a pretty heavy salary increment, for something that should be fulfilled within an assignment, it is not 120%, it is an assignment. And at the same time, you have an organisation where you depend on every single teacher doing such a good job as possible, to do a job that sometimes is outside the basic job, then it gets weird. It gets weird if someone gets 5,000 crowns extra to perform something, even if they are good, and there are other teachers who are very good at doing valuable things. It is important that all bring value to the organisation. Then it gets weird. Because I [as a principal] have to require that from all teachers, so it is a weird relation here. It can be like this: wait a minute, you are the first teacher and gets 5,000 crowns more than me, then maybe you should do it.

[…]

Now I found very skilled first teachers that I employed, but the process was hard. The specification of the requirement that I had for first teachers, from the organisation that we had, it was hard for me to find that competence. (Stephan, principal)

Teachers, first teachers, assistant principals, and principals in the study claimed that the goal to create learning opportunities for all students was dependent on the collective work of all teachers in the school organisation. They claimed that all teachers were equally skilled. A difference was that the assistant principals and principals expected the first teachers to stand out from their teacher peers but the teachers and first teachers did not.

A Balancing and Facilitative Leadership from Within

The first teachers in the interviews usually defined themselves as leaders but did not think the teachers in the organisations would. The interviews with the teachers confirmed this expectation. The assistant principals and the principals, on the other hand, associated first teachers with the term 'leader' more naturally but expressed uncertainty about if and how to construct first teacher leadership in the school organisations. As principals they decided on the theme for the assignments, and the first teachers were then expected to construct first-teacher leadership in relation to the content of the theme.

First teachers engage mainly in practices that could be described as facilitative leadership. They are expected to inspire their teacher peers on more or less formal arenas (e.g., as members in the teacher teams or by leading colleagues in professional learning groups). The first teachers support their teacher peers by presenting materials thought to be useful for their teaching practices. The materials are mainly embodied by literature, chosen because of timeliness and concrete methods. The materials are first approved by the principal and are often recommended by other teachers (e.g., in social media,), or mentioned by Swedish school authorities (e.g., The National Agency of Education). First teachers in the study described the

importance of choosing content applicable and relevant for their teacher peers. Lisa, first teacher, when asked if first teachers were supposed to challenge their teacher peers, said the following:

No, I don't think so. It's more about working with [the theme of the unit], and to see what pops up. Because they [the first teachers] are somehow also participants at the same time as leaders. But, their focus is not to take up space but to make others do the job. More to help them get in the right direction so that they don't… […] get away and start talking about a single student, for example. That you remain focused, it's more about that. We don't have [first teachers] to challenge [their teacher peers] to get further, it's more about awakening thoughts and to get them to explore themselves. What am I doing, what am I doing very well, what do I have to develop? So it's more about helping in that process, I think. (Lisa, first teacher)

This is a description of how first teachers, who are leading professional learning groups, are supposed to distribute material and create democratic and effective meetings built on dialogues in the learning groups. When leading teacher peers, they participate in the meeting as learning colleagues and move in and out of the first teacher role. As Erik, first teacher, put it when asked about what to know when leading colleagues:

Well, I think it's about being a gentle leader because I'm not a leader, I'm not a boss. I should help my colleagues getting as much as possible out of different projects, so it's not about me having a special competence to share with the others, it's more about assuring that everyone has the right to speak and that they all get something out of it. It's more about that, to coordinate and to make sure there is a good atmosphere in the meetings. (Erik, first teacher)

Erik put equal signs between leadership and being a boss and denied being a leader himself. Simultaneously, he said that he had to be a gentle leader. The importance of being a gentle leader horizontally positioned among the teacher colleagues was also

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expressed by other first teachers, such as Lisa. When asked about what would happen if a first teacher would put him-/herself above teacher peers to lead them, she said:

I have no clue. I think it depends on how you do it. If you invite everyone but at the same time are accurate and clear, there is no problem. But if you assume that now I am above anyone, then it's a bit… I think. Because it's about how you do it. You can do it nicely and less nicely, I think. (Lisa, first teacher)

In the schools where first teachers' assignments were less structured, it was harder for the first teachers to describe their leadership. Anna, first teacher, described her ambivalent relation to leadership. When communicating with students within her first teacher assignment, she made decisions, but in relation to her teacher peers as a group, it was harder. She solved it by finding single teachers to inspire:

Well, it is in conversations with others. You notice how they ask: "Do you have something" and… When we have meetings with the whole staff and we have attended a lecture […] we talk a little bit about that and then: "Yes, but do you have any material"? So, like that. (Anna, first teacher)

The strategy to impact through inspiration was present in several first teachers' narratives. The first teachers waited for their teacher peers to ask for advice or material instead of giving them instructions on what to do. To sum up, the first teachers in the study tried to lead horizontally by being facilitators for their teacher peers and without steering their teacher peers in a certain direction by telling them what to do.

Natural Leaders with an Unnecessary Title?

When asked about what a first teacher should know, the competence of teaching was mentioned as important by all functions in the study and included personal traits, such as sensitivity, curiosity

and flexibility. The first teachers described themselves as energetic personalities, with a history of being interested in school improvement and trying new teaching methods. For Susanne, first teacher, the function as a teacher leader was not new:

> *It was the same thing before. Yes, there have been many titles for it: team leader, study leader, and development leader. There have been many names for it, and many pieces in the first leader assignments have been there too and have had other names too.*
>
> *[…]*
>
> *And then, in some way […] because it's an official name, it has become something else for the colleagues maybe, a more important step than when named study leader or development leader. Because this is more of a title. But the work itself is not, I think, not such a big difference, other than that you had to apply and write a little bit.*
>
> *[…]*
>
> *The 5,000 crowns are nice. I shall not hide that, because they are. And I think we work for them [the money], but to be honest, I do as I do anyway. I worked like this before I had the title too. It's like, I'm interested in this. I want this. And I can't help it. So that's why it's nice that you got something for it. (Susanne, first teacher).*

All first teachers in the study described themselves as driven by an interest in developing teaching to make it better for their students. This would not change if they stopped being a first teacher, they said. They would do the tasks anyway, even if the salary supplement was a nice contribution. In this way, the construction of a new teacher leader role, the one as a first teacher, becomes less important. From Susanne's point of view, the difference between other teacher leader roles and the first teacher role was primarily that it was a title with a hierarchal undertone.

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Discussion

An Ambivalent First Teacher Leadership Perspective

When exploring teachers', first teachers', assistant principals', and principals' understandings of first-teacher leadership, several leadership perspectives became visible through the study. At first glance, first-teacher leadership is understood as a gentle, horizontal, and facilitative practice, especially when leading professional development groups. This understanding may enable horizontal first-teacher leadership in professional learning groups, where all teachers collectively are supposed to have the opportunity to improve their teaching practices. First teachers are expected to lead democratic processes where all teachers learn together. In this sense, all teachers could be leaders, which could be interpreted as a distributed leadership perspective (see Spillane, 2006). First-teacher leadership is seen as a relational process where first teachers are expected to have a positive impact on the collective professional development process, that implicit rather than explicit effect individual teachers and how they teach in their classrooms. As Lisa pointed out, it is more about getting the teachers to explore themselves. Every single teacher is set to lead their teaching (i.e. they are instructional leaders for themselves).

By offering relevant literature and methods, first teachers seek to inspire their teacher colleagues, but the decisions about how to construct teaching in the classroom is seen as an individual matter for every single teacher. Leading by inspiring and facilitating teacher peers is a leadership strategy the participants already knew from other teacher leader functions, as teacher team leaders and subject coordinators. The new first-teacher role does not interfere with the existing autonomous and egalitarian norms in the schools. According

to Mangin (2005), the facilitative strategy can be seen as a stepping-stone towards instructional-focused interaction, but, on the other hand, it is time-consuming and unchallenging. This may, according to Mangin, reduce its chances to create professional learning. From this point of view, the concessions made by the first teachers may constrain their impacts on teaching (cf. Mangin, 2005; i.e., their possibility to lead instructionally). The participants' understanding of the facilitative role of the position may constrain the construction of instructional first-teacher leadership by neglecting the need to challenge existing learning and teaching norms. However, on the other hand, it may also be a successful strategy to lead without interfering by using autonomous and egalitarian norms. The effects of first-teacher leadership are still unknown and therefore need more attention and research.

First-teacher leadership seems to be surrounded by implicit prohibitions created within social boundaries. According to the participants, first teachers shall not make decisions, and they shall not claim that they are more skilled than other teachers are. They shall not even call themselves first teachers. By handing over the decision making to the principal and the compass for teaching development to popular pedagogical literature, first teachers try to avoid conflicts between their new middle leader positions and the existing egalitarian norms among the teachers. One of the first teachers, Erik, expressed the ambivalent relation to teacher leadership when he concluded that he was not a leader because he was not a boss. The excerpt signals he understands leadership as traditionally managerial and vertical. This understanding of leadership collides with the egalitarian norms in the teacher community, which makes vertical relations problematic. The first teacher position is, by its design, understood as a way to build in vertical hierarchal structures in the

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flat hierarchy of Swedish schools and, thereby, a threat against the egalitarian norms. The result is that first teachers, such as Erik, try to reject their first teacher positions. The position exists as a career pathway, but the function as first teacher is hidden. Additional assignments are expected due to the higher salaries (cf. Hardy & Rönnerman, 2018). However, the maps created during the interviews show these practices remain hidden or isolated.

The Elephant in the Room

Instead of constructing a new teacher leadership built on their competence as skilled teachers, the first teachers in the study tried to blend in. They kept themselves within the social boundaries of the teacher community, a community they were dependent on in their teaching practices. As Maria pointed out, introducing herself as first teacher would put her above her teacher colleagues. This phenomenon was also found in previous international research about teacher leaders (e.g. Helstad & Mausethagen, 2019; Lillejord & Børte, 2018; Supovitz, 2018; Seland et al., 2017; Liljenberg, 2016; Fairman & Mackenzie, 2015). When leadership usually is understood as vertical, hierarchical, and managerial, it is hard to combine teachers as leaders for their peers.

Fairman and Mackenzie (2015) suggested teachers are uncomfortable with leadership titles because the titles build in hierarchical relationships among peers. This conclusion coincides with the results of my study, indicating the description of first-teacher leadership as a formal *middle* leadership may be problematic in egalitarian school contexts, such as Sweden. Thus, the way the CPT reform was designed may constrain the possibility of constructing as new form of teacher leadership. The excerpts show teachers and first teachers were unfamiliar with talk about teacher leadership, and that

this, in combination with egalitarian and autonomous norms, transformed the first teachers into the elephant in the room. The assistant principals and principals hesitated in distributing instructional leadership to first teachers. If the aim of the career pathway is to improve teaching by first-teacher leadership, researchers and practitioners, should explore ways to have constructive and developing dialogues about first teacher leadership to enable boundary crossing (see Lorentzen, 2019).

Forgotten Leadership Competences in Relation to First Teachers

First teachers were appointed to their positions because they had proven to be skilled teachers. However, in the study, the teachers and first teachers opposed the idea that they had a particular competence. According to them, all teachers were equally skilled. Certain first teacher competences were negated, and their teacher peers did not see first teachers as leaders. For example, one of the principals in the study, Stephan, reflected on the challenges to find first teachers with relevant competences and the teacher Peter, questioned the difference between teachers and first teachers regarding competence. If first teachers are not more skilled to teach, their legitimacy to lead instructionally may be hollowed. Instead, they are expected to lead through facilitation. This is a practice independent of their teaching skills and a practice possible for all teachers, which makes their positions unclear.

Even the first teachers hesitated to call themselves leaders. When they did, they described themselves as leaders with inherent leadership traits. The teachers in the study called for a specific first teacher competence to motivate why some teachers should have specific formal positions and be paid more. Their documented ability as skilled teachers was not seen as enough legitimacy for them to lead

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instructionally. Previous research has shown leadership competence is rarely requested by the appointment of first teachers (The Swedish Agency for Public Management, 2017). No specific leadership training is offered or requested by the first teachers. In conclusion, leadership is forgotten, neglected or counteracted in relation to the first teacher position.

Conclusions

In this article, I conclude that first-teacher leadership is not used in its full potential. Teachers, first teachers, assistant principals, and principals understand first-teacher leadership foremost as facilitative. First teachers lead professional development groups and/or inspire their teacher peers by offering examples of literature and methods. The facilitative leadership is already well known in the school organisations and the first teachers, thereby, do not challenge existing autonomous and egalitarian teaching and learning norms. The participants in the study have an ambivalent relation to first-teacher leadership. Leadership, as a general conception, is understood as vertical and is associated with differentiation, decision-making, management, and single leaders with specific traits or competences. This form of leadership is reserved for the principal. Teacher leadership, on the other hand, is understood as a horizontal and democratic practice where leadership for learning is distributed collectively. The participants' understanding of teacher leadership collides with the first teacher title, which is understood as vertical. The result is that first teachers are transformed into the elephant in the room and that their functions are hidden or isolated. In the introduction, I described the ideal image of teacher leadership, expressed in international research literature, where principals

distribute instructional leadership to teacher leaders. Whether this form of teacher leadership is ideal for the Swedish school contexts and whether first-teacher leadership is a possible way to improve teaching in Sweden is still unknown. However, the analysis of the study indicates that it may be hard to construct first-teacher leadership when the first-teacher function and competence is hidden, the legitimacy of the first teacher is questioned, the egalitarian and autonomous norms reject the need for instructional leadership, and leadership is understood as a vertical and managerial practice reserved for single leaders.

Even if the small sample size does not allow generalisations, it contributes to a discussion about what first-teacher leadership is and can be. In conclusion, when leadership is forgotten in the implementation of new teacher leaders, the construction of teacher leadership may be constrained. To construct first-teacher leadership for teaching and learning, researchers and practitioners should transparently explore how to nuance, visualise and create democratic dialogues about teacher leadership perspectives in Swedish schools. These investments could determine the development of teacher leadership in Sweden in the future, including first-teacher leadership. The suggestion of building more differentiations between teachers (SOU, 2018:17) makes these questions even more relevant.

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